THE PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA

Taken about 1935

Taken at some time during the 1940s

Taken in 1966, at the beginning of the Cultural Revolution

Mao Tse-tung (1893-1976) Founding Father of the People's Republic of China, who led the first armed up-rising of the Chinese Communists (September 7, 1927) and was the *de facto* leader of the Chinese Communist Party since 1934, becoming its official leader in 1943, a position he retained until his death. "Had Mao died in 1956, his achievements would have been immortal. Had he died in 1966, he would still have been a great man but flawed. But he died in 1976. Alas, what can one say?"—Chen Yun (1905-1995), a leading Communist Party official under Mao and Deng Xiaoping (1904-1997, who, after Mao's death became the paramount leader of The People's Republic of China from 1978 until his retirement in 1989).

LITERATURE COMPOSED BY AUTHORS WHOSE BIRTH YEAR MAY BE CONFIDENTLY PLACED IN A DEFINITE TIME FRAME (1934-1949)

1934

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(11)—75.68 The Girl Next Door\fn{by King Tai-hsi (1934-)} Chekiang Province, China (M) 7

(18)—81.73 Operation Excavation\fn{by Ho Hsiao-chung aka Ho Tsu-wu (1934-)} Tsining, Shantung Province, China (M) 11

(29)—83.86 Scaffolding\fn{by Shao Chien (1934-)} Chiangsu Province, China (M) 4

(33)—151.20 Excerpt from **The Corner Forsaken By Love**\fn{by Zhang Xian (1934-)} Shanghai, China (M) 4

(36)—119.76 1. The Fox Fairy's Wedding **2.** To Be The Best **3.** The Foxes **4.** The Pear Tree **5.** Whiskers And Bright Eyes **6.** The Fisher's Tale **7.** The Night Singer **8.** M'lady **9.** The Butterfly: **Nine Folktales**\fn{by Michael David Kwan (1934-2001)} Peking, China (M) 43

1935

(80)—20.75 At Middle Age\fn{by Shen Rong (1935-)} Hankou, Sichuan Province, China (F) 30

(109)—64.1 Kitty Is Dead\fn{by Chao Shu-min aka Lu Ai (1935-)} Peking, China (F) 10

(118)—77.84 & 78.14 1. In The Middle Of The Night 2. The Banyan Tree\fn{by Chou Huey-min (1935-)} Kiangsu Province [at 77.84 he is said he was born in Shantung Province] , China (M) 23

(141)—78.101 Diary Of A Warden\fn{by Qi Ping aka Lu Qiping (1935-)} Nanchang, Jiangxi Province, China (M) 5

(156)—79.1 Death Ray On A Coral Island\fn{by Tong Enzheng (1935-)} Sichuan Province?, China (M) 14

(170)—111.33 Excerpt from Wu Song Fights The Tiger: **A Folktale**\fn{by Li Xintang (1935-)} Yangzhou, Jiangsu Province, China (M) 2

(172)—150.239 Hi Lili Hi Li …\fn{by Shui Ching aka Yang Yi (1935-)} Nantung, Kiangsu Province, China (M) 6

(178)—203.170 Father's Last Two Days\fn{by Shu Yi (1935-)} Qingdao, Shandong Province, China (M) 9

1936

(187)—41.151 & 191.134 1. Excerpt from **The Horse's Mouth 2.** Excerpt from **Grass Soup**\fn{by Zhang Xian-liang (1936-)} Nanjing, Xuyi County, Jiangsu Province, China (M) 15

(203)—77.23 Afternoon In The Study\fn{by Chang Ling-ling (1936-)} Kunming, Yunnan Province, China (F) 1

(203)—83.22 The Big Event Of The Week\fn{by Philip Chou (1936-)} Shanghai, China (M) 9

(213)—188.51 Solace In Action: A Mother's Mission to Publicize The Truth\fn{by Ding Zilin (1936-)} Shanghai, China (F) 3

(217)—256.129 1. A Distracting Sunday 2. A Rose-colored Evening Meal\fn{by Shen Rong (1936-)} Hankou, Sichuan Province, China (M) 12

(229)—73.28 Chant Of Great Grief\fn{by Wang Shang-i (1936-1962)} Honan Province, China (M) 3

(232)—188.144 Was I Really Guilty?\fn{by an unnamed female doctor at a children's hospital (1936-after 1986)} Peking?, China (F) 6

1937

(237)—76.34 A Summer Experience\fn{by Ge Wujue (1937-)} Wenzhou, Zhejiang Province, China (M) 8

(245)—150.245 Li T'ung: A Chinese Girl In New York\fn{by Pai Hsien-yung (1937-)} Kweilin, Kwangsi Chuang Autonomous Region, China (M) 8

(253)—150.253 & 151.13 1. An Unfinished Record **2.** Remorse: **Two Short Stories**\fn{by Zhang Jie (1937-)} Peking, China (F) 9

(262)—180.60 Excerpt from Falling Leaves**: "The True Story Of An Unwanted Chinese Daughter"**\fn{by Adeline Yen Mah (1937-)} Tianjin, China (F) 13

1938

(275)—75.64 Red Gate\fn{by Sung Ching aka Ma Sen-ching (c.1938?-)} Hangchow, Chekiang Province, China (M) 5

(280)—186.199 The Story Of A Brigade Leader Prospecting In The Great North-West \fn{by Mrs. Yu (c.1938-)} Jingxiang Village, Cang'an County, Zhejiang Province, China (F) 9
(288)—77.52 & 82.111 1. Such A Beautiful Sunday **2.** Foolish Eighteen**: Two Short Stories**\fn{by Kang Yun-wei (1938-)} Hopei Province, China (F) 16
(304)—20.104 Between Life And Death\fn{by Su Shu-Yang (1938-)} Hebei [Hopeh] Province, China (M) 7
(310)—83.7 Auntie Yao\fn{by Yang Ming-sien (1938-)} Peking, China (F) 10
(320)—181.6 Autobiographical Statement\fn{by Erin Zeng (1938-)} Kowloon, Hong Kong, China (F) 2
(322)—181.159 Excerpt from **The Middle Heart: A Novel**\fn{by Bette Bao Lord (1938-)} Shanghai, China (F) 12
(334)—194.1 Excerpt from **The Battle Of Sangkumryung**\fn{by Lu Chu-kuo (1938-)} Yiyang, Honan Province, China (M) 5
(340)—150.265 Mother Fish\fn{by Xi Xi aka Cheung Yin [Zhang Yan (1938-)} Shanghai, China (F) 9
(349)—262.128b 1. Sinking **2.** Cloud Dissects Itself **3.** Footpaths Cross In The Rice Field **4.** Vague Apprehension **5.** Woman Wall: **Five Poems**\fn{by Lin Ling aka Hu Yun-shang (1938-)} Sichuan Province, China (F) 2
(351)—41.142 Excerpt from Humanity: **"The Vagabond: He Jingfu"**\fn{by Dai Houying (1938-1996)} Shanghai, China (F) 2

1939

(353)—78.23 The Travels Of Erh Ts'an\fn{by Erh Ts'an aka Joseph S. M. Lau (c.1939?-)} Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, China (M) 6
(359)—39.151 & 113.110 1. Grandma Qi **2.** Chinese Roses**: Two Short Stories**\fn{by Li Tuo (1939-)} Hohhot, Inner Mongolian Autonomous Region, China (M) 4
(368)—78.116 Our Family's Cook\fn{by Mu Guozheng (1939-)} Jinxi, Liaoning Province, China (M) 11
(378)—79.126 Are You A Communist Party Member\fn{by Zhang Lin (1939-)} Faku County, Liaoning Province, China (M) 9
(386)—81.89 Train 257\fn{by Ching Mu aka Ching-p'ing aka Thunder, Wild, Armor, Light-blue (1939-)} Kueichou Province, China 5
(392)—81.110 Tainted Love: Five Parnas\fn{by Lei Hsiang (1939-)} Shanghai, China (M) 2
(394)—83.94 Fog\fn{by Yin Dih aka Ko Ching-hwa (1939-)} Chekiang Province, China (M) 2
(396)—118.219 Flaw\fn{by Wang Wen-Hsing (1939-)} Foochow, Fukien Province, China (M) 5
(402)—188.15 Excerpt from **Hunger Trace**\fn{by Adrienne Poy Clarkson (1939-)} Hong Kong, China (F) 12
(414)—256.76 Excerpt from **Scream Quietly Or The Neighbors Will Hear**\fn{by Erin Pizzey (1939-)} Tsingtao, Shantung Province, China (F) 8
(422)—87.57b Excerpts from **Born In Tibet**\fn{by Chögyam Trungpa (1939-1987)} Kham Region, Tibetan Autonomous Region, China (M) -1
(423)—292.150 Excerpts from Between Worlds: Women Writers Of Chinese Ancestry: **1. "Preface" 2. "Chinese Women In America"**\fn{by Amy Ling (1939-1999)} Peking, China (F) 8

1940

(431)—21.1 The Iron Inspector\fn{by Wang Hsing-yüan (1940?-)} Kwangtung Province, China (M) 5
(436)—20.110 The Moon On A Frosty Morning\fn{by Fang Shumin (1940?-)} Hopei Province, China (M) 5
(440)—83.42 Nausea\fn{by Yen Chu (c.1940?-)} Shantung Province, China (M) 5
(445)—83.76 A Woman Like Me\fn{by Hsi Hsi (c.1940?-)} Canton, Guangdong Province, China (F) 6
(451)—146.32 1. The Filial Son **2.** The Despised Scholar: **Two Folktales**\fn{by Shih Lich (c.1940?-)} Hopeh Province, China (M) 3
(454)—146.22 The Horses Leap Over Tan Torrent Lake: **A Folktale**\fn{by Lu Chi-fang (c.1940?-)} Hupeh Province, China (M) 1
(455)—a186.170 Narrative Of An Earthquake Survivor\fn{by Mrs. Yang (c.1940?-)} Tangshan?, Hebei Province, China (F) 2
(457)—186.172 Narrative Of An Earthquake Survivor\fn{by Mrs. Chen (c.1940?-)} Tangshan?, Hebei Province, China (F) -1
(458)—186.173 Narrative Of An Earthquake Survivor\fn{by Mrs. Ding (c.1940?-)} Tangshan?, Hebei Province, China (F) 1

(459)—83.1 The Water Lilies\fn{by Chen Shao-tsung aka Nora Chen (c.1940-)} Shantung Province, China (F) 3
(463)—187.32 Excerpt from **Grandmother Had No Name**\fn{by Alice Murong Pu Lin (c.1940-)} Chengdu, Sichuan Province, China (F) 9
(472)—73.9 The Consultation\fn{by Lin Yeh-muh (1940-)} Shanghai?, China (M) 9
(482)—73.115 The Hole\fn{by K'ang An aka Jyh-chang Chang, Chang Jhy-chang (1940-)} Peking, China (M) 8
(489)—73.264 Excerpt from **Soul Mountain**\fn{by Gao Xingjian (1940-)} Jiangsi Province, China (M) 11
(500)—75.9 Daughter Of The Yellow River\fn{by Wang Jiada (1940-)} Lanzhou, Gansu Province, China (M) 13
(513)—79.76 The Moon On The South Lake\fn{by Liu Fudao (1940-)} Hanyang County, Hubei Province, China (M) 10

1941

(523)—21.17 The Unexpected Tide\fn{by Dai Qing aka Fu Ning (1941-)} Chongqing, Sichuan Province, China (F) 10
(533)—39.231 Excerpt from **Foundation**\fn{by Jiang Zilong (1941-)} Cangxian County, Hebei Province, China (M) 15
(543)—81.130 1,230 Spots\fn{by Show Foong aka Chang Show-foong (1941-)} Tongshan, Kiangsu Province, China (F) 3
(549)—183.179 Excerpt from **Building Bridges: The Life & Times Of Richard Charles Lee; Hong Kong, 1905-1983**\fn{by Vivienne Poy (1941-)} Hong Kong, China (F) 10

1942

(558)—21.32 & 151.17 1. Black Walls 2. Excerpt from **Overpass**\fn{by Liu Xinwu [Xin-wu] (1942-)} Chengdu, Sichuan Province, China (M) 7
(566)—21.36 The Tall Woman And Her Short Husband\fn{by Feng Ji-cai (1942-)} Tianjin, Hebei Province, China (M) 4
(570)—78.29 & 82.135 1. Vestiges **2.** Thoughts In Privacy: **Two Short Stories**\fn{by Liang-Hsüan aka Ma Kuo-kuang (1942-)} Szechuan Province, China (M) 4
(574)—79.56 The Ivied Cabin\fn{by Gu Hua aka Luo Hongyu (1942-)} Jiahe County, Hunan Province, China (M) 13
(587)—82.57 The Twilight Years\fn{by Ching Chi aka Chu Li-li (1942-)} Hupei Province, China (F) 6
(593)—83.47 The Legend Of Koxinga\fn{by Wang Hsüan aka Wang Hsiao-lien (1942-)} Shantung Province, China (M) 3
(596)—151.28 Trust\fn{by Chen Zhongshi (1942-)} "in a village near Sian," Shanxi Province, China (M) 5
(601)—188.38 Excerpt from **The Chopsticks-Fork Principle: A Memoir And Manual**\fn{by Cathy Bao Bean (1942-)} Ningpo, Zhejiang Province, China (F) 10
(611)—268.152 1. The Story Of The Lotus-Picking Boat **2.** Father, A Stranger **3.** Grandpa And His Canary\fn{by Shen Aiping (1942-)} Wei County, Hebei Province, China (F) 3
(615)—21.27 The Loudspeaker\fn{by Bao Chu-an (1942/48-)} Nanxi County, Sichuan Province, China (F) 5

1943

(619)—16.38 A Dream Of Good Fortune\fn{by Hwang Sogyong (1943-)} Manchuria, China (M) 18
(637)—40.15 The Legend Of The Sun Brigade\fn{by Zhang Lang-lang (1943-)} Yan'an, China (M) 4
(641)—75.141 An Offering Gathered From That Cherished Homeland\fn{by Jia Baoquan (1943-)} Handan, Hebei Province, China (M) 4

1944

(645)—77.42 The Sun In The Pit\fn{by Chiang Ling (c.1944?-)} Fukien Province, China (F) 8
(649)—39.124 Clock\fn{by Zheng Wan-long (1944-)} "rural Heilongjiang Province," China (M) 5
(654)—79.106 A Saleswoman\fn{by Hang Ying (1944-)} Tianjin, Hebei Province, China (F) 8
(661)—41.163 Trial By PROLEDIC\fn{by Xu Wenli (1944-)} Peking?, China (M) 3
(663)—94.191 & 150.291 1. The Amateur Cameraman 2. Earth\fn{by Chang Hsi-Kuo aka, S. K. Chang, Shi-kuo Chang (1944-)} Chungking, Szechwan Province, China (M) 41

1945

(683)—83.71 Just Let Them Not Know\fn{by Hsiao Feng aka Chang Hsiao-feng (c.1945?-)} Kiangsu Province, China (F) 5

(688)—188.65 Not A Single Day Of Peace I\fn{by Yan Huili (c.1945-)} Shanghai?, China (F) 1

(688)—191.99 Excerpt from **Confessions: An Innocent Life In Communist China**\fn{by Kang Zhengguo (c.1945-)} Xi'an, Shanxi Province, China (M)

(700)—21.40 Jingjing Is Born\fn{by Gu Ying (1945-)} Yunnan Province, China (F) 11 13F,

(711)—21.61 Excerpt (untitled) from **Beijing Opera**\fn{by David Su Li-qun (1945-)} Chungking, Szechwan Province, China (M) 4

(715)—76.18 A Broken Promise\fn{by Zhang Zhilu (1945-)} Peking, China (M) 1

(717)—78.74 Locks\fn{by Cao Guanlong (1945-)} "rural Zhejiang," China (M) 5

(722)—79.114 A Soldier In The Tianshan Mountains\fn{by Li Binkui (1945-)} Heyang County, Shanxi Province, China (M) 12

(734)—83.4 The Quadrangle Compound\fn{by Ling Chung (1945-)} Chungking, Sichuan Province, China (F) 3

(736)—83.17 1. Whistle **2.** Retirement: **Two Very Short Stories**\fn{by Ai Ya aka Li Chi (1945-)} Szechwan Province, China (F) 1

(738)—111.40 Excerpt from Chen Yi Crosses The Mountain: **A Folktale**\fn{by Hui Zhaolong (1945-)} Yangzhou, Jiangsu Province, China (M) 2

(740)—186.198 The Story Of A Child, Working Every Day\fn{by "the mother of my friend EH" (1945-)} Hanzghou, Zhejiang Province, China (F) 1

(740)—188.157 Excerpt from **The Jade King: History Of A Chinese Muslim Family**\fn{by Huo Da (1945-)} Peking, China (F) 11

(752)—268.158 1. Eyes **2.** Sleep **3.** The Wave And The Shoal **4.** Fire And Ice\fn{by Xiao Kang (1945-)} Funing County, Jiangsu Province, China (F) 3

1946

(754)—21.65 Hong Taitai\fn{by Cheng Nai-shan (1946-)} Shanghai, China (F) 5

(759)—72.90 Race Day\dn{by Bai Luo aka Bai Lecheng (1946-)} Guangdong Province, China (M) 4

(763)—73.31 No *Cha* In The Investiture Of The Gods\fn{by Shi Song (1946-)} Shanghai, China (M) 7

(770)—79.86 The Woman Who Wears The Trousers\fn{by Wang Runzi (1946-)} "in a village in Wendeng County," Shandong Province, China (M) 8

(778)—82.37 Tale Of Two Strangers\fn{by Yuan Jen aka Wang Li-teh (1946-)} Hupei Province, China (M) 12

(790)—151.36 The Get-Together\fn{by Gan Tiesheng (1946-)} Peking?, China (M) 5

(795)—181.8 Autobiographical Statement\fn{by Gena Chen (1946-)} Hangzhou, Zhejiang Province, China (F) 5

(800)—188.54 Living In A Big Cage\fn{by Fu Jiqing (1946-)} Shanghai, China (F) 2

(802)—268.138 1. I Am An Apple **2.** Sweat **3.** Evening Dewdrops Glimmering **4.** The Sun River **5.** To My Child **6.** I Am A Man **6.** The Last Bus: **Six Poems**\fn{by Fu Tianlin (1946-)} Zizhong County, Sichuan Province, China (F) 3

1947

(805)—79.69 Old Sun Sells His Donkey\fn{by Zhao Benfu (1947-)} Fengxian County, Jiangsu Province, China (M) 7

(812)—81.108 Sand River\fn{by Chung-hing Gosselin (1947-)} Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, China (F) 2

(815)—181.132 Excerpt from **A Generation Lost: China Under The Cultural Revolution**\fn{by Zi-ping Luo (1947-)} Shanghai, China (F) 7

(821)—192.91 Eight Hundred Metres Below\fn{by Sun Shaoshan (1947-)} Shandong Province, China (M) 7

1948

(827)—21.70 The General And The Small Town\fn{by Chen Shi-xu (1948-)} Jiangxi or Kiangsi Province, China (M) 6

(833)—39.160 & 40.21 1. The Nine Palaces **2.** The Way Of Heaven—Beginning Of Autumn: **Two Short Stories**\fn{by Zhang Cheng-zhi (1948-)} Peking, China (M) 3

(847)—41.144 & 186.33 Excerpts from A Chinese Winter's Tale: **"Wedding Night" ; "First Acquaintance" ; "Off To The Northeast—And Into A Marriage!"** \fn{by Yu Luojin (1948-)} Peking, China (F) 11

(858)—72.98 Aunty Li's Pocket Watch\fn{by Liang Bingjun aka Le Si (1948-)} Guandong Province, China (M) 4

(862)—76.1 Traveling Harvesters\fn{by Shao Zhenguo (1948-)} Peking, China (M) 17

(879)—76.98 Little Grass\fn{by Jia Jun (1948-)} Hulun Boir, Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region, China (M) 5

(885)—82.126 Spring Hope\fn{by Li Li aka Bao Li-li, Lily Hsueh (1948-)} Nanking, Jiangsu Province, China (F) 9

(895)—83.96 The Day He Was Fired\fn{by Yu Mo aka Wu Kuo-tung (1948-)} Huian County, Fukien Province, China (M) 11

(905)—186.208 The Story Of A Chinese Acrobat\fn{by Yishujia (1948-)} Jinan, Shandong Province, China (F) 4

(909)—187.88 Autobiographical Statement\fn{by Sue Jean Lee Sutettinger (1948-)} Canton, China (F) 4

(914)—192.163 Excerpt from Wild Cat: Stories Of The Cultural Revolution: **"The Typewriter"**\fn{by Jia-lin Peng (1948-)} Willow Wood Town, "less than one hundred kilometers" from Liuzhou City, Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, China (M) 11

(924)—268.147 1. Three Leaves **2.** The Greens **3.** Where Are Days? **4.** Soft, Soft Her Footsteps **5.** The Bowl-Shaped Heart **6.** *Yin Niu Si*\fn{by Mei Shaojing (1948-)} Chongqing, China (F) 5

(929)—191.168 Excerpt from **Captive Spirits: Prisoners Of The Cultural Revlution**\fn{by Yang Xiguang [Light at Dawn] aka Yang Xiaokai [Little Victory] (1948-2004)} "the caves of Yan'an"; "northeast China", Chana (M) 10

(938)—40.133 The First Day\fn{by Ye Si (1948/49-)} Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, China (M) 3

1949

(941)—39.129 Looking For Fun\fn{by Chen Jiangong (1949-)} Beihei, Guangxi Province, China (M) 22

(964)—39.156 & 94.219 & 192.141 1. The Tree Stump **2.** Festival **3.** Father: **Three Short Stories**\fn{by Ah Cheng aka Zhong Acheng (1949-)} Peking, China (M) 13

(976)—40.164 Wood\fn{by Ng Hui Bun (1949-)} Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, China (F) 9

(985)—41.114 & 63.18 & 151.8 1. Happiness Street **2.** The Homecoming Stranger **3.** Moon On The Manuscript: **Three Short Stories**\fn{by Shi Mo aka Bei Dao, Zhao Zhenkai (1949-)} Peking, China (M) 20

(1005)—74.79 When I think Of You Late At Night, There's Nothing I Can Do: Five Tales Of the Wen Clan Cave Dwellers\fn{by Cao Naiqian (1949-)} Shanxi Province, China (M) 4

(1009)—76.42 A Land Of Wonder And Mystery\fn{by Liang Xiaosheng (1949-)} Harbin, Heilongjiang Province, China (M) 12

(1020)—83.53 A Silhouette Of Life\fn{by Ma Shu-li (1949-)} Mihsien, Honan Province, China (M) 8

(1028)—87.72 Street Sketch\fn{by Chu Lin aka Wang Zuling (1949-)} Shanghai, China (F) 5

(1034)—151.33 At The Denunciation Meeting\fn{by Wang Peng (1949-)} Sian, Shanxi Province, China (M) 3

(1036)—183.37 The Endangered Ones\fn{by Fang Min (1949-)} Chongqing, Sichuan Province, China (F) 22

(1058)—183.91 Scatterbrain\fn{by Su Yi (1949-)} Hunan Province, China (F) 10

(1068)—187.129 Excerpt from **Morning Breeze: A True Story Of China's Cultural Revolution**\fn{by Fulang Lo (1949-)} Neijiang, Sichuan Province, China (F) 12

(1080)—191.146 Excerpt from **A Memoir Of Misfortune**\fn{by Su Xiaokang (1949-)} Zhejiang Province, China (M) 12

(1092)—192.82 The Festival Of Graves\fn{by Zhu Lin (1949-)} Shanghai, China (F) 9

(1101)—194.181 They Don't Mean It\fn{by Lensey Namioka (1949-)} Peking, China (F) 4

1934

20.70 1. The Discommoded Frog **2.** Boiled Eggs And Radio Calisthenics **3.** The Thousand-*Li* Horse In Its Dragon Lair **4.** I Am One Of Your Kind **5.** Pretty At First **6.** The Singer Who Always Won The Day **7.** Comedy Of The Ducks **8.** After Becoming A Swan **9.** Lovelorn Sister Crow **10.** A Story I Heard: **Ten Fables**\fn{by Wang Meng (1934-

)} Peking, China (M) 5

1

A frog contracted dysentery after a binge of eating unripe grapes. Cramps wrung his bowels, and his appetite disappeared. His gorge rose to his chest, and his head spun dizzily. He lay on his belly in a harvested rice field, gasping and sighing as he surveyed the world with bleary, unfocused eyes.

A timid but studious rabbit scampering through the field heard his moans and wondered what philosophical profundities, what breadth of experience, were implied in these sounds. He looked at the frog's slightly shuddering frame and wondered what farseeingness and maturity and restraint such trembling represented. He respectfully asked to be instructed:

"Great teacher, please do not keep your wisdom and learning to yourself. I may not be worth much, but teach me something. Redeem my obstinate, benighted spirit with the brilliance of your all-embracing compassion and thorough enlightenment!" The frog spluttered in outrage:

"The Apocalypse is at hand. You at least are an educable young man. Look at that sky: it must have gorged itself sick. You can see little specks whizzing back and forth, and there are mirages of grapes everywhere. Look how bloated it is and how it sags. And look at this land. It is caving in; it is constipated; it has the runs; it is in spasms; it is racked with cramps that make it shake uncontrollably. And look at the sun: it has lost its brilliance too. It is wavering and will probably fall out of the sky soon. When it hits the ground it will start a big fire and dry up the rivers. And there are no ripe heads on the rice stalks in this field. This field is a wasteland, and it exudes the stench of an animal with loose bowels. Those things flying overhead are nothing but a bunch of flies: measly, lowly, droning, no rhythm, no harmony, no classical training …"

Just then a lark flew through the sky over the field and started to sing.

"Master Frog, look! There is a lark," said the rabbit.

"You think I can't see it? You think I can't recognize it? Do you think it's a lark just because it looks like a lark? What do you know? Even if it looks like a lark, it is really a transformed fly. Can't you tell?"

The frightened rabbit crouched in a foetal position. Suddenly the frog let out a pitiful yell:

"The world is falling apart!"

The rabbit's vision darkened as he plunged into hopeless despair. But only ten minutes later he opened his eyes and discovered that the sky was still the sky; the land was still the land; there was certainly no danger of the sun falling; and on the nearby threshing floor, farmers were threshing the grain. The lark was singing more joyfully than before.

But the honourable dysenteric frog had passed into the void.

2

My father was a man of wide reading and many talents and he never tired of teaching what he knew. For many years he groomed and trained me, hoping to make a genius of me.

He taught me literature. His favourite book was the *Three Hundred Poems of the Tang Dynasty,* and he tutored me until I could recite them straight through. Any time I tried to read a new book he would lose his temper and harangue me irascibly:

"Do you think you have mastered the whole *Three Hundred Tang Poems?* Do you think you can integrate and apply the marvels, the techniques, the rhymes, the antithetical matching, the word choice, the fitness of idea, the poetic imagery, the realms of thought, the shades of meaning and everything else in this book? Do you think your poems are better than Li Bai's, Du Fu's, Meng Haoran's, Wang Wei's, Li Shangyin's or Du Mu's? Have you surpassed the saints and immortals of poetry? Do you think that Tang poetry is outdated?"

He taught me to sing. His favourite song was *Su Wu Tending the Sheep*. Any time I attempted to learn a different song, he would question me angrily:

"So you think your singing of *Su Wu Tending the Sheep* is fine, do you? Do you sing it like a master? Would you be graded 110 per cent on it?"

He taught me calisthenics—Set No.1 of radio calisthenics. Whenever I wanted to study the five new sets, he asked compelling and very logical questions:

"Do you think you've done the first set long enough, and you don't need to improve or keep in form? Isn't the first set good enough for a 160-centimetre runt like you? Do you think …?"

He gave me boiled eggs to eat. When I asked if I could switch to fried eggs or cake made with eggs, he shouted me down:

"Do you think you don't need boiled eggs now? Boiled eggs provide you with calories, animal protein, and vitamins A and C: Don't tell me you want to give them up?"

Due to my father's eloquent rhetorical questions, to this day I have read only one book—*Three Hundred Poems of the Tang Dynasty.* I can sing only one song—*Su Wu Tending the Sheep*. I can do only one routine of calisthenics—the No.1 Set of radio calisthenics. I have eaten only one kind of food—boiled eggs.

3

Five years ago I had the fortune to make passing acquaintance with a thousand-*li* horse\fn{A note reads: *A li is approximately ⅓ of a mile*.} in a cow stall down in the country. Hunger and exposure to cold had left it beaten down, withdrawn, drooping and reticent. It could only run as fast as a cow; even donkeys did not want it among them. Harnessed to a plough, it fell far short of a cow in strength, so even though it was kept in a cow stall, it was a "reject" among cows.

Later a few men came who were good judges of horses, and with their knowing eyes they spotted this thousand-*li* horse. They fed it two scoops of oats, and it immediately showed its strength by galloping a few circles, to the amazement of the cows, donkeys, mules and pigs.

Then it rejoined the horse herd. The horses held an impressive reception to welcome its return to the group.

Later it took first place in a horse race. For this it was asked to leave the stable. A special dragon's lair was made for it—anybody knows a horse that can cover a thousand-*li* in one day is really a dragon exiled from heaven. Instead of oats and grass it ate bodybuilding mix, pearl rice, fish-liver oil and calcium with dextrose. Every summer it was watered from an artesian well of beer, and in the winter it drank Maotai and Five Grain liquor.

Once a common horse went into the dragon's lair by mistake and was driven out with one well-placed kick.

The horse gradually grew fat. Its neighing became loud and coarse, and its stomach was distended. Of course it could not gallop any more.

I can see its future already—smoked horsemeat at the slaughter-house. It makes me shiver at the mere thought of it.

4

As a nightingale was singing his song one evening, a snake read an essay aloud to it, proving that the snake was one of the nightingale's kind. The article stated that the snake's egg had once been lined up in the same row with the nightingale's egg. That is to say, they were from the same district. Besides, the same sun had shone on their eggs prior to hatching, which proved that they were members of the same clan. Thirdly, they both liked to sing at night, and their singing, from the snake's point of view, was quite similar. Fourthly, they both enjoyed doing things in the garden. Fifthly, neither of them liked the snow and ice of winter. Sixthly, they both liked roses, which proved they had common interests. Seventhly …

The nightingale said in exasperation:

"Even if your article had a thousand items of ironclad evidence, 1 would not admit that you are a nightingale instead of a snake!"

Then the snake pulled out another article which proved that he was not a snake, and that other snakes could not be his kind. His evidence was, first of all, that his coloration differed from other snakes. Secondly, his measurements differed from other snakes. Thirdly, his body shape differed from other snakes. Fourthly, his fetishes differed from other snakes …

The poor nightingale grew so drowsy from hearing this line of reasoning that he fell into a rosebed and went to sleep.

The snake slithered over, and with one bite he gulped down his fellow creature.

5

My first impression of my female neighbo'r was not bad. But it was a shame she was so fond of dispensing theories on what is and is not beautiful. For instance she often said to me:

"I just don't like noses that stick out. We're Chinese. People with noses that stick out are nothing but xenophilic lackeys. An elephant's nose is very large, but does that make it look good? Most people with big noses don't give a damn about anything, and they think they're better than everybody else …"

Because she said this over and over, I could not help taking a good long look at her nose, and I discovered that it was really somewhat flat.

She also liked to say:

"Hair that is too black does not impress people. Why do I say so? Dyeing hair is popular now. If your hair is dark and glossy, people might think you dyed it. And overseas you see all sorts of wigs everywhere. Just pay a little money, and you can have any kind of hair you want on your head. You can have it coarse or fine, sparse or thick, red, black or yellow." Then she added in afterthought: "And that's why I say, the time when you could judge a woman's appearance by her hair is already past."

She spoke too much. I could not help focusing my attention on her hair, which was actually on the sparse side. It was dry and had a brownish tinge, like buckwheat infected with rust blight.

Another thing she said was:

"I don't believe the folk saying that says, 'A good pair of shoes beats a shirt.' Shoes are basically secondary to a person's appearance. The Red Army men wore straw sandals during the 25,000 *li* Long March. They didn't have the chance to go to Wangfujing to buy high-heeled leather shoes. The quality of a woman's shoes is not as important as her gauze mask. A snow white mask shows that a woman is civilized, sanitary, thoughtful, concerned for other people, discerning. well-provided for, modern, informed about science, modest, optimistic, judicious, objective, self-restrained and cautious. And what does a pair of good shoes show? It is a sure sign that a woman is banal, superficial, free with money, pretentious, fake and flirtatious."

Her theory made me notice that though she wore a gauze mask as white as snow, her shoes were quite drab and poorly fitting. There was an awkwardness in her walk, probably because she was splay-footed and had fallen arches.

As she held forth with her aesthetic theories, I finally realized that her looks did not deserve much in the way of compliments.

6

Once a singer received no applause after her performance. At a meeting afterwards she said:

"Applause doesn't mean anything. Is the sound of hands clapping beautiful? Is it art? Is it precious like gold? How much can you sell a kilo of it for? Some people get a little applause, and they're walking on air; they forget who they rt:ally are. They are chosen to be singing stars and get to ride on airplanes and to cut phonograph records. What a farce! This is corruption of the soul. If you don't believe me, I'll swing *my* rear end and sing dirty songs: see who gets more applause then!"

She also suggested doing an analysis of the audience and lining it up in groups by category to prove whether or not applause had any value.

At another performance the audience gave her thunderous applause. And so she spoke effusively:

"Songs are for people to listen to. No matter how good the lyrics and melody are, it is useless if people don't like to hear them. The eyes of an audience are crystal clear, and listeners have a balance scale in their hearts. If you depart from what the audience likes to see and hear, you become elitist rather than populist, and you deviate from the proper orientation. This leads to isolation, self-congratulation, narcissism, ivory tower obscurantism, despair and degeneration. It is not just the sound of hands clapping that I hear in the music hall: it is the beating of each passionate heart!"

After a while, musical workers held a meeting to discuss unwholesome trends in musical perfonnances and the need to channel the audience's interest and raise its level of appreciation. She brought up the time that her audience had not applauded her as an example and proclaimed:

"I took a stand! I took a stand! I took a stand!"

More time passed, and the musical workers held yet another meeting, where they spoke of the lack of songs and perfonnances which were welcomed by the masses. This time she made an example of her perfonnance that had received thunderous applause and proclaimed:

"I've already done that! I've already done that! I've already done that!"

7

After the publication of Andersen's story *The Ugly Duckling*, a disturbance arose in the flock of ducks.\fn{Hans Christian Andersen (1805-1875), the Danish author, first published this story of his in 1843.}

"I've been saying for a long time that I'm really a swan, but I've been ignored, looked down on and misunderstood," said an old male duck. "My youth has been wasted. Give me back my youth. Give me my swan's feathers and wings. Give me back my swanly pride and honour!"

"This is all because of the farmer's shortsightedness," quacked a female duck. "And the turkeys are jealous of anyone with ability! Because of them we are poverty stricken, we are down and out, and we are called 'ducks.' And what does 'duck' mean? The Chinese people think that the main characteristic of ducks is stupidity. Are we really stupid? I may not know what one plus two is, but is that my mistake? Has anyone given me training? Has anyone sent me to university?"

"I believe I've already turned into a swan. I'm going to make sure by looking at my reflection in the lake."

A moulting duck walked to the edge of the lake and looked in, but the graceful shape of a swan was not what he saw. He racked his brains for a while, and finally discovered the truth of the matter. He cried loudly to the others:

"The water in the lake is not fair. This water gives special breaks to some birds! This water has accepted a bribe of toad meat from the swans, and that's why their reflections look so wonderful, and ours look so dull!"

"Down with the lakewater! Down with the farmer! Down with the turkeys. Down with the Chinese people!" the ducks cried in unison, getting more and more angry.

The farmer walked over and hit the leading drake with a bamboo pole.

The ducks quieted down immediately.

The swan, who actually had once been an "ugly duckling" flew overhead through the blue sky, conversing with the white clouds.

8

On the other hand, what happens when an ugly duckling transforms into, or perhaps it is better to say, is recognized as a swan?

His life as an ugly duckling was poignant, moving and noble-minded. It drew people to him.

After his reputation was made, and he was given the title and privileges of a swan, was his life still so wonderful and touching?

Suppose he got "puffed up" and looked down on his duck brothers? He would go around with a fat cigar in his mouth and make a habit of shouting at people. He would demand the best food and proclaim everywhere he went:

"I am a swan. I was once treated as an ugly duckling. I am a swan! The bastards thought I was an ugly duckling!"

What would happen then?

Maybe he was an authentic swan, but why did he have to rub it in?

9

Sister Crow fell in love with Brother Crow. They were never apart, flying wing to wing and singing duets as if they were joined by an invisible thread.

"How blue is the sky, how gentle the wind, how buoyant the clouds!" Their song was a delight to the ear.

"How blue is the sky, how gentle the wind, how buoyant the clouds!" A group of young crows flew in circles around the admirable couple, singing happily.

Who would have expected Brother Crow to be influenced by the "new tide" from the West and its "sexual liberation"? He left Sister Crow in the lurch and didn't even say goodbye.

Sister Crow was heartbroken. She sang,

"Gloomy the sky and dark the land, dreary the wind and bitter the rain. His heart is a wolfs and his liver a dogs. He and his hypocrisy. In this whole crow's world there is no beauty, goodness, truth, youthfulness or justice!"

"Gloomy the sky and dark the land. Dreary the wind and bitter …" The young crows sang after her, but not as resoundingly. Though they had plenty of sympathy, they could not completely understand Sister Crow's feelings. Besides that, their increasing years had brought certain subtle Freudian notions.

Soon the young crows were splitting off in pairs, and when they got intimate they started billing and cooing like on the movie screen, all they heard from Sister Crow was a string of curses:

"Damn you, damn you, damn you!"

"Look at this emptyheadedness! Look at this false beauty! Look at you living in a dream. Don't you know that passion is emptiness and emptiness is passion? That is a truth that cuts through everything!!"

"Love is a prostitute! Love is a thief! Love is a were-fox! Love is a witch! You have to be above love if you want enlightenment."

"Love is a demon! Love is a sea of suffering! Love is poisoned wine! Love is a dirty rag! I don't see any worth in such vulgar pursuits"

"So you're flying now; you're pairing off and singing. Do you think your flying and courting and singing are anything special? Don't fool yourselves. I had a grander time then. You've been diddling around all this time, and you haven't come up with anything original. It makes me laugh so hard my molars fall out! It's more of the same old thing. It's all the same delusion I went through years ago!"

"Damn you! Damn you! Damn you!!"

At first the young crows were shocked and puzzled, but later they got used to it. Before this they had not known the bitter taste of love, but now they showed a fair amount of sympathy for Sister Crow. Still they were absorbed in flying, courting, singing, and nibbling, and could not spend time thinking of Sister Crow's affairs. They were too busy.

10

Below is a story I heard. I was told it is a translation of an African fable which appeared in a magazine published in the Sixties. It is so perfect, and it gets across its message so well, that I just had to write it out here. It is not my creation, and I hope the editors will not count this story when they count up the number of words to pay me for.

*

A man who found fault with everything lay beneath a walnut tree, sighing and venting his spleen.

"How unfair this world is! You try to find what sort of justice or right there is, but it's like picking through filth. There is nothing but a load of modem superstitions and primitive ignorance. Look at this tall-standing walnut tree. It has deep roots and a straight trunk; its foliage is luxuriant. It stands here, imposing and dignified, but the walnuts that it bears are not as big as the eggs of a chicken. This is ridiculous! It's moronic! It's an affront to the honor of all trees. An insult is what it is! And look at that pumpkin over there—a limp, spindly vine. It has no spine, no upstanding character. It lacks the distinction of growth rings or a woody stem. A creeping thing like that, down among the mud and dog turds, could never be a rafter or a beam. But somehow the gleaming golden pumpkins that grow on that vine are three times bigger than my head!"

As he cried out at the way fate had treated the walnut tree, and attacked the pumpkin for its upstart plumpness, a slight breeze loosened a walnut, and it fell—"bop," right on his head.

He jerked back in fright and his heart skipped a beat. It was a good while before he regained his wits. He felt his skull, and it was as sound as ever. There was no cavity or concussion or wound. There was not even a little goose egg.

He found himself giving praise from the bottom of his heart:

"Praise to all-knowing and omnipotent heaven; glory to the Lord! In such a just and equable world as ours the wisdom and grace of heaven are everywhere. Just think, if the walnuts on this tree really had grown as large as pumpkins and one of them had fallen down, it would have smashed my gourd. For me that would have been the end to all eternity!"

75.68 The Girl Next Door\fn{by King Tai-hsi (1934-   )} Chekiang Province, China (M) 7

Dear Wang Brother:

Ever since you moved away we have been so quiet and lonely. Sister and I think of you ever day. I had a dream last night, I dreamed of you and me, Sister and also Ho-liang playing together. Just as we were having so much fun, Mother woke me up. I was angry and scolded her.

"I was just talking to Wang brother. What bad luck!" My mother said:

"You have to go to school now. If you are late, you know you'll be punished."

So I put my clothes on, washed my face, brushed my teeth, and after eating my breakfast I shouldered my school bag and went to schoel. Do you know what Sister said?

"If Wang brother was here, he would take us to school."

I had asked Sister to write to you but she said girls cannot write letters to boys, the teacher said so. So I am writing to you. If I make any mistakes please correct them, all right? The end. Goodbye!

Liu Hsiao-ti

Respectfully written on February 16th.

*

Dear Wang Brother:

Your letter and postcard were brought to me by the postman. Thank you. Sister was so happy! She used her whitest handkerchief to wrap up the postcards. I have practiced writing your corrections many, many times and I know I will not make these same mistakes, but we must correct our mistakes, then we are good students.

Ever since you moved away that room has been empty and then Sniffles and Chen Hsiao-hwei came to live. Sniffles is Chen Hsiao-kang. We call him Sniffles because he sniffles all the time, he never washes his face so that his face is all covered with mucus, yellow, black, dried and wet. Hsio-hwei is his older sister.

Chen Mama is beautiful! She has so many pretty new dresses. She also has money. Yesterday morning at breakfast she gave Sniffles and Chen Hsiao-hwei five dollars to go out and eat noodles. Sniffles is awful, he thinks too much of himself.

"My mother has many social engagements, when she doesn't come back to eat she gives us money to eat outside. You don't have any." This is what he said. I said:

"My mother used to give me a lot of money, even New Year's money; she bought apples for me and many, many other things." Then he said:

"You're lying!" His sister Hsiao-hwei heard us talking so she opened the door and dragged Sniffles in so fiercely. His sister does not have mucus on her face, she is very, very white. She likes to bite her lips hard. When she comes home from school she just hides in her room. I never hear her studying, don't know what she does. Then Hsiao-kang runs all over the place.

Chen Mama just puts on her new dresses and goes out every day. She doesn't come back until it is very, very dark. Whenever Sniffles comes to our home he refuses to go back. Mama says:

"Hsiao-kang, why don't you go home, your mother will scold you."He answers:

"Huh, I'm not afraid, my Mama is not at home, my Papa does not come home either." Then he said: "My Papa has many, many engagements, my Mama also has many, many social engagements."

Hsiao-hwei ran over without a sound and pulled hard at Sniffles' arm and insisted he go home. Her face was so very white. My Mama asked her to come in and play but she did not even say a word, just pulled Sniffles away. Mama then said to Sister:

"What is the matter with you, you don't even ask your schoolmate to come in for a while."

Hsiao-hwei and Sister are in the same class. Hsiao- hwei is very bad, she never talks to people, she is much too proud. Sister says the proud must fall. I guess she will fall, Wang Brother, don't you think so?

Yes, I forget to tell you that the little bird that, belongs to the Lee f:amily who live upstairs was bitten to death by a cat, or maybe by a rat, I don't know. Sunday morning we heard Lee Mama shouting and shouting. I ran upstairs and saw that the yellow parrot had fallen on the ground all covered with blood. It's foot was also broken. Feathers were all over the place. I picked one up and Sister said:

"So dirty, don't touch it."

But the feathers were clean and very pretty too.

When we went downstairs again I saw Hsiao-hwei open the door just a little and stick her head out. Then when she saw us coming down the stairs she quickly closed the door. I said to Sister:

"Hsiao-hwei is evesdropping."

Sister told me not to pay any attention to her. Sister said that at school Hsiao-hwei does not study and does not answer even when the teacher asks her question, just bites her lips all the time. After classes she doesn't play around, just stands alone under a tree. Her face is so very white.

I have to go to Sunday school now and if I am late I cannot get a picture. Wishing you goodbye,

Liu Hsiao-ti.

Respectfully written on March 5th.

*

Dear Wang Brother:

You said that I have made progress in my letter writing, and I am very happy. Mama says for me to practice by writing more letters.

Today, I want to tell you something very shameful. On Tuesday we had a holiday and I was in the big kitchen helping Mama with the houswork. Later Chen Mama and Papa came in to do their cooking, then Ho Mama and Lee Mama also came in. We were all cooking there. Chen Papa was very happy and I saw him touch Chen Mama's face. Chen Mama was giggling. I told Mama and Mama pushed me.

"It is too crowded in the kitchen here, you children should not stay here, go out. Go out!" She pretended to be angry with me.

So I went out. Then after we had finished our lunch and Mama and I passed through the hall we saw Chen Mama and Chen Papa eating their lunch in their front room. Chen Papa again touched Chen Mama's face and he also kissed her. My Mama told my Papa and they laughed. Sister also laughed. My Mama said:

"Isn't it disgraceful, right in public!"

Don't you think this is shameful? That day Chen Papa bought some gold melons and Sniffles had one in his hand, taking big bites of it as he ran into our room saying:

"You don't have any gold melon, but I have some." I said:

"I don't want to eat gold melon. My Mama says it's not good to eat too many gold melons." He said:

"Liar, nothing better to eat than gold melon." I said:

"Don't you come to my house again." He said:

"My Mama and Papa are going to a dance, they are going to take me." I said:

"Liar!" He said:

"I am not a liar either!"

Then Chen Mama and Chen Papa went out and they did not take Sniffles either. I told him a poem.

Sniffles, Sniffles
Drink cold water, break a leg—
Cut your lips, take a wife with just one leg!
Sniffles is a liar!

He started crying and his nose ran and ran and he sniffled and sniffled. Then Hsiao-hwei came and dragged him back. The end. Goodbye.

Respectfully wishing you happiness,
Liu Hsiao-ti March 10th.

*

Dear Wang Brother:

I want to ask you a question. Is it right to kill insects? I don't think it is right, is it? But Hsrao-hwei does this. She used sugar in the backyard to attract a whole lot of ants and then she used a match to burn them up. Is this right? Yesterday I sneaked after her into the garden and hid behind the big tree. I saw her burning the ants and she was very happy about it, talking to herself and pointing at them.

"All dead, burn you all up, kill all of you; see if you will listen to me or not."

See how fierce she is! And you tell me not to say bad things about her! Hsiao-hwei and Sniffles must be bad children so Chen Mama does not love them. If children do not listen to what they are told to do then grown-ups will not like them, isn't that right?

One day Chen Papa and Chen Mama were riot at home and even when we were going to have supper, Sniffles would not go home. My Mama said:

"Chen Hsiao-kang, is your mama back?" He answered:

"Of course not." My Mama said:

"You haven't had your supper yet, have you?" He said:

"My Mama and Papa are all out."

My Mama filled a bowl of rice for him to eat, asking him where did his Papa and Mama go to. He stuffed his mouth with vegetables and ate and ate before he answered.

"My Papa and my Mama had a fight last night. My Papa hit my Mama and my Mama hit my Papa … then … then I started to cry and my Mama used a comb to scrape my leg. She rubbed the comb In my leg as hard as she could and she said: 'It is all your fault, you little devil. You have spoiled my life and you cry!' It hurt so badly I cried more." I asked:

"Then what happened?" He answered:
"Then … then I went to sleep."
My Mama looked at Sniffles' leg and there were many, many red spots on it, also splotches and splotches of blue. Mama wanted to put some mercurochrome on it. but he said:
"I don't want mercurochrome. My leg will get well by itself. Last time Papa stuck my leg with a pen and I bled and bled, but after a while it was all right. I am not afraid."
Sniffles was still eating and eating when Hsiao-hwei came softly in saying:
"You have no face, eating at other people's homes again. I will tell Mama. Go home. Go home." My Mama said:
"Hsiao-hwei, you come and have something to eat."
She looked and looked at our dishes of food on the table but shook her head fiercely.
"I have already eaten. Come home!" and they went home.
Hsiao-hwei and Sniffles must be disobedient children, else why should Chen Mama and Chen Papa beat them like that? Wang brother, don't you think I am right?

Respectfully wishing you happiness,
Liu Hsiao-ti March 17th.

*

Dear Wang Brother:
Thank you for your photos and the book named *Heart.* Sister has already covered it with wrapping paper. Why does the author of this book have such a long name, it is so hard to remember.
Last Sunday, Ho-liang, Sister and I went to Sunday school together and I asked Hsiao-hwei if she wanted to go with us but she did not even answer me. She was staring at Lee Mama's little chicks. Lee Mama's little chicks had come out of the eggs she had bought and are so very pretty. When I stick my finger into the cage they bite my finger with their little beaks, so ticklish. Lee Mama said to us:
"When the chicks are grown big and have eggs, I will let each of you have an egg." We all shouted together:
"Yes, Yes!"
Hsiao-hwei, however did not say a word. Lee Mama then asked her:
"Hsiao-hwei, do you want an egg?" Chen Hsiao-hwei answered:
"I want a little chick." Lee Mama said:
"You like little chicks?" She said:
"I don't like little chicks at all." Sniffles broke in:
"I want, I want two little chicks." Sniffles is greedy. He ate one whole gold melon by himself and never gave anyone else a piece. Stingy little snob-nose!
Our Sunday school teacher told us that when we ate breakfast, lunch or supper we must pray to God to thank God for giving us food to eat. I raised my hand and asked what we should do when we eat an egg. Teacher said:
"You don't have to pray when you eat an egg." I then asked:
"Don't I have to thank Lee Mama?"
Sister pulled at my jacket. I couldn't stand up any longer so I sat down.
Ho-liang, Sister and I went home together. We saw Hsiao-hwei squatting by the gate tying up a frog with a piece of string. She put a big piece of wood on the frog's leg and cut it with a razor blade. The skin came off and the flesh was so white. I stood behind her and heard her scolding the frog:
"Egg of a Turtle! I'll kill you!" She then spit on the face of the frog. I said:
"You are really a bad egg!"
She Jumped with fright and then saw it was only me so she said:
"You're the bad egg. I'll kill you—see if I don't." I said:
"Teacher said that the frog is good and helps the farmers. Why should you hurt it? You are a bad egg!"
She raised the razor blade. I was very scared so I ran into the house. Teacher has told us that frogs, eagles and cows are all helpful. Why should she kill them then? Hsiao-hwei is really strange. You don't know how black and shiny her eyes are! Really scary! The end.

Respectfully wishing you happiness,
Liu Hsiao-ti March 20th.

*

Dear Wang brother:
Today in Chinese reading class Hsiao-kang could not memorize his lesson so the teacher said:

"Why don't you do your homework at home. Don't your father scold you?" Hsiao-kang said:

"My father is a politician—he doesn't have time." Everybody laughed. Wang Brother, what is a politician? Then teacher was very angry and said:

"But doesn't your mother scold you?" Hsiao-kang said:

"My Mama has very many social engagements (I got it right this time, didn't I?). Sometimes she has to invite the General's wife to play *mahjongg*."

Teacher was very angry and wanted to punish Hslao-kang. Hsiao-kang started to cry and wanted to go home and tell his father. He said:

"My father is a politician. He's a hair-dresser, so he's very important." Wang Brother, why is a hair-dresser important?\fn{A note reads: *In Chinese a member of the Legislative Yuan is a* li.fa wei-yuan *and a hair-dresser is a* li fa*. The characters are different, but the sounds are similar So it is easy for a child to mistake the two terms*.}

Teacher seemed to be afraid then and did not punish him. After class Hsiao-kang told us:

"I am not afraid of teacher." My Mama said: "What is a school teacher? If the teacher is no good you come and tell me!" Then Hsiao-kang said:

"Teacher's sister is a maid servant at the home of a friend of my father's, Uncle Huang. Huh!"

Then that nasty Kuo-fang, the one we call "Flatterer," said:

"Wonderful, wonderful! Teacher's sister is a maid servant!" You remember I wrote you about Kuo-fang. Really nasty-always has to *p'ai-ma-p'i* even for snob-nose Hsiao-kang!\fn{A note reads: P'ai-ma-p'i, *literally "pat the horse's rear," is slang for flattery*.}

After school was over, Sister and I went home. When we got to the gate we heard sounds of quarreling. Many, many people were crowded around the door of Hsiao-hwei's place. Ho Papa, Ho Mama, Lee Papa, Lee Mama and the new family that had just moved into the room upstairs. Everybody was watching. I could not see anything even when I jumped up, so I stooped down and looked through their legs. I saw Sniffles sitting in a corner crying. Chen Mama was also sitting on the ground crying. Her new dress was torn and my Papa was pulling at Chen Papa. Chen Papa's face had several red streaks. He looked so mad!

"All of you see if this is right. Not at home all day!" Chen Papa was really shouting.

"Day before yesterday, our son fell into that sewer outside the gate. If it hadn't been for Mrs. Liu, he would have drowned, I tell you! What kind of a home is this?"

My Mama dragged Chen Mama into our home. Chen Mama cried and cried and cried, and she cursed Chen Papa.

"Why doesn't he die? He beats me, but he's such a big shot, he can be out the whole day playing with women, going to wine shops. Why can't I go out? Why doesn't he die!"

Ho-liang was standing with me on the side and said in a loud voice:

"Day before yesterday I saw Chen Papa with a woman in a pedicab." My Papa said loudly:

"Hsiao-ti, go out, go out! It's too crowded here in this room."

So I had to jump up and go out.

My Papa and Chen Papa stood by the door talking. Chen Papa saw Hsiao-hwei and said:

"Where is your brother?" Chen Hsiao-hwei answered:

"I don't know."

Chen Papa suddenly jumped over and slapped Chen Hsiao-hwei on the cheek. Hard—it must of hurt.

"All day long you're in the clouds! You don't study and you don't look out for your brother. What do you do, you? If you don't listen to me I'll kill you."

Hsiao-hwei fell on the ground. The whole side of her face was red. She did not cry. You know, I think she must be very brave. She just clenched her teeth. My Papa said:

"She is only a child." Papa lifted her up. "Get up, get up. Hurry and go find your brother. Hsiao-ti, you go with her to find her brother."

So I went with Hsiao-hwei to look for Sniffles. When we reached the back yard Hsiao-hwei took a paper package out of her pocket and opened it up. A little mouse fell out on the ground and she stamped on it. I saw the mouse's leg all covered with blood. Hsiao-hwei put on a very fierce look and she pointed her finger at the mouse.

"See if you'll listen to me or not. I'm not afraid of you. See if I don't kill you!"

Then she spit violently on the face of the mouse. Afterwards we entered the house and saw Sniffles lying on the floor sleeping with a broken doll in his hand. This is terrible, my letter is too long. My hand is already tired. The end.

Respectfully wishing you happiness,

Liu Hsiao-ti March 30th.

*

Dear Wang Brother:

April Four was Children's Day. That night, Papa and Mama took Sister and me to the circus to see the clown. It was so good. I think you must have seen it long ago. That night, everybody went out, Ho-liang and his family, the Lee family also all went out. Only Hsiao-hwei was hiding alone in her room. That day even after we had finished dressing in our new clothes, Sniffles still did not go home. So Mama asked him:

"Hsiao-kang, you are in my home every day. You come and be my son, all right?" Sniffles immediately said.

"Good, really and truly wonderful!" Then he looked at me and asked: "Hsiao-ti, is it all right?" Then he turned and ran home and ran back again with a real little trumpet and handed it to me.

"This is for you. I want give myself as a son to your family. My sister also, can she?" My Mama quickly shook her head.

"No, no—your Mama wouldn't let you go."

He was so disappointed.

"My Mama won't care. She scolds me every day says I have spoiled her life for her. Mama does not want me at all."

Then Mama, Papa and I all went out together. We had such a good time. We came back after ten o'clock that night and saw Sniffles sitting at the gate with the trumpet in his hand. My Mama was very startled.

"Hsiao-kang, what in the world are you still sitting here for? Hurry on and go to bed." He said:

"Can I come to your home to sleep? I don't need any covers. I'm not afraid of the cold and I am not afraid of mosquitoes. I am very good, I don't even cry at nights."

Mama took him back to the Chen's place by the hand and when she returned she sighed and said:

"Really pitiful—I just can't understand people like that!"

Last night I could not go to sleep. Why didn't Chen Papa and Chen Mama know that it was Children's Day? It is so strange.

Respectfully wishing you happiness,
Liu Hsiao-ti, April 5th.

*

Dear Wang Brother:

It is a long time since I have written to you. Every day Sister asks me why I don't write to you, every day she scolds me. She locked that book *Heart* up in the drawer and won't let me take it away. Wang brother, you gave it to both of us, didn't you? Sister is horrible. She makes me sick! "Hsiao-ti, you wash your hands before I let you touch the book." Then she scolds me for dirtying the book. She also says that I can't understand it anyway. The other day, I told Hsiao-kang that you had given me a copy of *Heart*. He didn't believe me and wanted me to show it to him. Sister would not let me. I am not talking to her any more.

Hsiao-kang is very well off. Wang Brother, is a legislature (this time I wrote it right because I looked it up) a business man? Hsiao-kang had twenty dollars today to buy things to eat, he bought peanut candy and ice cream. He says that his father is always at meetings, every day he has meetings. So many people send him gifts. Wang brother, when I am grown up can I be a legislature? Then I will buy a good pen for Papa, a pair of the best rubber shoes for Mama, a pair of long trousers for you so you can give away those old ones you have and I will buy as many copies of *Heart* as I want and I won't give a single one to Sister.

Two of Lee Mama's little chickens got eaten up by the rats. Yesterday when I and Sister came home from school we saw Lee Mama—holding two baby chicks and shouting. I saw that the little chicks were all covered with blood, just like that day the parrot died. Wang brother, why do baby chicks stick out their legs so straight when they die? Did they use a lot of strength? That's what Ho-liang says—it's because they used a lot of strength.

When I entered the gate and went by the Chen's door I heard Hsiao-hwei singing as she jumped around, seeming very happy.

"Kill you, Kill you, you bad thing." This is what she was singing.

I stuck my head in and saw her great big eyes staring at me, very big and very black. Blacker than black ink. I was very scared and ran right home. I thought and thought and then said to my Mama:

"Mama, Hsiao-hwei killed the baby chicks." Mama said:

"It was a rat. Don't make up stories." I said:

"It is, it must be. I even heard her singing: Kill you, Kill you, kill you, you bad thing."

My Mama then started to talk with my Papa and paid no attention to me. I was so upset. I thought and thought

and then ran to ask Hsiao-hwei.

"Hsiao-hwei, did you kill the baby chicks?"

She opened her eyes so big and pulled a little blade from her pocket:

"I'll kill you, you are talking nonsense, I'll kill you." This is what she said.

I was scared and ran back home. I heard her running after me and was so frightened that I fell on the ground. Then I saw that it was Sniffles running towards me. He said:

"I have told my Papa and my Mama to give me to your Mama. Is that all right, Hsiao-ti?"

I did not answer him, I just scrambled up and ran home. Wang Brother, I was scared to death that day.Even now when I am writing about it my hands are shaking. You must think my writing is becoming worse and worse. Goodbye.

Respectfully wishing you happiness,
Liu Hsiao-ti April 15th.

*

Dear Wang Brother:

I have two pieces of sad news. The first is that two more of Lee Mama's little chicks have died. We don't know how they died as there was no blood on their bodies and no bruises. Lee Mama found the bodies of the dead chicks at the side of the sewer by the gate. She was so upset and unhappy.

"How did this happen? There is no bruise. It is very strange." I said:

"Strangled, they must have been strangled." You know, choked.

Lee Mama said quickly: "What strangled them, who strangled them? Hurry up and tell me!"

I was scared to death.

"I won't tell, I don't know." Then when I went in I saw Hsiao-hwei standing beside their opened door staring at me. Her eyes were so black, really blacker than black ink. I was frightened to death. She scolded me.

"Hsiao-ti, if you dare tell any nonsense, I'll cut your leg right off with a razor blade. You don't know how much that'll hurt! So you do what I say!"

Back in my own house I thought and thought and didn't dare say anything.

The other sad news is about Hsiao-kang.

The other day he was late to school again and when he entered the school room he didn't even bow to teacher, just strolled over his desk very casually. Teacher got very angry.

"Hsiao-kang, you are late again. You never listen."

Hsiao-kang did not pay any attention and only stood up when Teacher went over to where he sat. Teacher then said:

"You must not be late again. Sit down."

The next day Hsiao-kang did not come to school. The day after that he didn't come either. The next day when we started Teacher came in and didn't say a word for quite some time. We were all getting scared because whenever Teacher was angry with us he would act like this. Then he said:

"I have to announce some very sad news. Your classmate Chen Hsiao-kang was run over by a car day before yesterday. We will now bow our heads for three minutes in mourning."

We were all very upset. Those three minutes were so very long. I thought of the way Hsiao-kang looked and it seemed that he could not be dead. I raised my head to steal a look at Teacher and saw that there were tears on his face. My heart suddenly hurt me and I started to cry. Many classmates began to cry also.

After class was over I was rather embarrassed. Kuo-fang, Kuo-fang is the "Flatterer," said:

"That day after school I went to play with Hsiao-kang and there were many guests at his home. Many pedicabs and cars at his gate. So very many. He told me that they were having a party. His father gave him ten dollars and told him to go out and play. We went together to buy something to eat. Afterwards I saw that it was getting dark so I went home. Hsiao-kang didn't go home because he said it didn't matter if he went home after seven thirty. Really scary! Luckily I went home or else I would be unlucky too."

All of us were scared. Wang brother, I can't believe that Hsiao-kang is dead. How can a person be dead all of a sudden? Wang Brother, next time I will make sure there are no cars before I cross the street.

Respectfully wishing you happiness,
Liu Hsiao-ti April 18th.

*

Dear Wang brother:\fn{This letter is written by Liu Mei-ying, Liu Hsiao-ti's kid-sister.}

I almost can't hold my pen to write to you. It is too horrible.

Hsiao-ti was hurt by a car. He is now in room ninety-seven in the Surgical Section of Taiwan University Hospital. He has a high fever and talks feverishly all day long. We don't understand what he is talking about. I am so scared. Sometimes he keeps on calling: "Wang brother, Wang brother."

Wang Brother, do you have time? Please will you come to see him?

Two days ago someone hung up Ho Mama's tabby cat in the back yard. The cat's face, especially the eyes, were so cut up that the flesh and blood was all smeared together. The legs were also covered with cuts. Hsiao-ti blurted out that it must be Chen Hsiao-hwei who killed it (Chen Hsiao-hwei is the girl who moved here not long ago and is a classmate of mine). I told him to stop talking nonsense. I don't know how, but Ho Mama began to be suspicious of Hsiao-hwei and went to ask her. Of course, there was no result.

Yesterday morning when we went to school we saw Hsiao-hwei following up. Hsiao-ti kept telling me to walk faster and when we reached school he kept asking me to go home with him after school. I had to practice folk dancing for our school anniversary celebrations, so I had to tell him to go home first. I did not think there would be an accident. If I had only known this would have happened, I would have asked him to wait for me and we could have gone later.

Ho-liang said that as they walked home, Hsiao-ti kept telling him to walk faster. When they were almost home, Hsiao-hwei suddenly came up from behind with something bright in her hand, he didn't know what.

The minute Hsiao-ti saw her he started to fly away. Hsiao-hwei ran after him, and Hsiao-ti was screaming at the top of his lungs, hanging on to his school bag and running with all his strength. Ho-liang said that he started to run too, but before he caught up Hsiao-ti was already hit by a car.

Wang brother, I really hate myself. I should have gone home with him. I feel so bad, I don't know what to do. I have not been in school for three days. The doctor says that most probably there is no danger, but we will have to wait until the X-rays come out before being sure. Please, please, Wang brother, hurry and come. Papa and Mama are so upset they are going around in circles and don't have time to write to you. They ask me to send you their regards.

Respectfully wishing you happiness,
Liu Mei-ying April 25th.

P.S.

Yes, I forgot to tell you that this girl Hsiao-hwei has not come home for the past three days. Chen Papa did not come home all yesterday and Chen Mama was so angry she went in search of him and reported to police. But up till now there is still no news. You have no idea—everything is so upside down in our compound!

81.73 Operation Excavation\fn{by Ho Hsiao-chung aka Ho Tsu-wu (1934-)} Tsining, Shantung Province, China (M)
11

"Hey, stupid! Give it to me!" said Sgt. Liu, standing on a chair.

Accordingly, I handed up to him a tag marked with "250 lbs." on it. Under the melon shed he had decked out one of the squashes that was as big as a vacuum flask, with a propeller blade, a primer, a blasting cap with fuse and other important parts, all made of cardboard. It now resembled a magnificent mock bomb, true to life, with this tag attached to it. Sgt. Liu descended from the chair, admiring what he had done, saying,

"You know why we have built up this melon shed behind the day-room, boy? Folks around here may take a break and get a breath of cool air in here. No one is allowed to pick the squashes until they grow old enough to produce pulps which will be handed out to all the men of this unit. You may then either use them as a sponge when you take a shower or to scratch yourselves when you are itchy. Let the hand of those who steal them rot!"

"You are really something, Sarge," I said, showing thumbs up. "But I wonder how it would be if it were a real 250-lb job?"

"I'll tell you how. When this thing goes off within a hundred meters, you will certainly get killed. But you might keep yourself together if you throw yourself down on the ground right away. Should you fool around, you would surely be blown up piece by piece along with it!"

"Could this be so terrible?" I asked. "I would never guess it!"

"What are you talking about? It's not a scale weight! It could make a very big hole anywhere it is thrown. Furthermore, if it goes off, you'll get much worse than a sore eye if you accidentally come across it!"

As a rule, Sgt. Liu would often exaggerate to impress us. I turned to Sgt. Hu:

"Is that true?"

Sgt. Hu, lounging in a chair, grinned at me and nodded.

I knew why he was grinning. I was just a kid, not knowing much about anything except driving. Besides, I had another weakness: I liked to ask questions. That's why everybody called me "stupid." Though he would make fun of me sometimes, I still liked to come to him whenever I had any questions.

Sgt. Hu had been with the Air Force for most of his life. He was noted for being honest, energetic and reliable; all these virtues being manifested in his tireless work as a veteran mechanic. For all his seniority and experience, he never posed as a big shot in his field, nor said anything against any of us. Everyday, on duty, the Major would put one of the most comfortable chairs in the shadiest and coolest place in the shed, saying, "Sit down and take a rest, Sarge! Nothing is so important as to need you now."

Also as a rule, he would look around and if I were there he would never order anybody else around.

"Hey, stupid! Go and fetch the Sarge a couple of meat patties," said the Major.

"And pour us some tea, will you?" The others would follow suit and call out to me.

Talking about meat patties, folks here presumed that they were paid out of public funds, but as a matter of fact, they were at the Major's own expense. Only Sgt. Liu and I knew this because on pay day each month, I would be sent to the PX to clear the bills. This morning, when the Major, Sgt. Liu and I were passing by the PX, the manager told the Major, "Sir, you owe me twenty five dollars this month."

"Sorry, we must get to the apron right now," the Major said. "Forgot to bring the money. How about tomorrow?"

"The Major will certainly pay you. Don't worry, man!" Sgt. Liu yelled to the manager. "Keep that on your mind just for a while, will you?"

Sgt. Liu had three remarkable features: a huge body, a large mouth and a big voice. His face was always ruddy the year round and he liked to display his quick wit by playing on words. When he was asked how he had built up such strength and energy, he would say, "Fresh water plus optimism equals Vitamin P." I truly admired him! No wonder people said we had four aces in our troop; the Major's learning, Sgt. Hu's experience, Sgt. Chang's agility and Sgt. Liu's strength.

"Hello? Yeah. Yeah. Okay!" Putting down the phone, the Major told us, "Four planes are ready to go on mission. Let's go and fix the bombs."

They left us immediately. Sgt. Hu was still dozing under the shed.

*

"Stupid, pour some tea, will you? The Major and the boys have come back."

It was Sgt. Hu's voice. I thought he was still dozing but it seemed that he was more alert than I was. He threw a pack of "814" cigarettes on to the stone table.\fn{A note reads: *CAF cigarette brand. "814" stands for August 14, the day the Chinese Air Force made a clean score in the first air duel during the Sino-Japanese war in 1937*.}

I poured out two cups of tea.

Across the apron, smooth as a movie screen, two men were coming toward us. They looked so small that it seemed as if they were in a movie scene shot from a distance. Even taking large strides, the Major could still barely keep pace with Sgt. Chang but it showed the Major's determination never to fall behind anyone.

What impressed us most about the major was his mustache. His gray fatigues, well filled with his excess poundage, showed his years of hard work and distinguished service. Greasy and shiny, any pieces torn from it would be welcome by the barber for sharpening his razor blades.

By contrast, Sgt. Chang, walking beside the Major, had three striking features: long face, long neck and long legs, stumbling like a zebra. One of the down-to-earth men in our units, he would bring along with him all kinds of tools such as screw driver, pliers and so on, all jingling in his pockets, ready to get on the job when and if needed.

Four Saber jets, with a black bomb under each of its wings, soared skyward, swiftly and steadily.

Turning around, his hand shading his eyes, the Major looked up at the Saber jets shooting into the clouds.

"Four of them on the way!" the Major said, as he entered the melon shed. He removed his cap and wiped the sweat from his forehead. "Seem a little tired. Much tougher job to hook up bombs than to fix the rockets, and things like that."

"Have some hot water and a cigarette!" Sgt. Hu said, pointing to the tea I just poured for them. "How much does it weigh?"

"Five hundred pounds," said Sgt. Chang, reaching for the tea, but it was snatched by Sgt. Liu. So I poured him another cup and then went to squat down by Sgt. Hu.

"Sarge, is the 500-1b. job twice as powerful as the 250-1b. one?" I asked him.

"Can't you just keep your big mouth shut, kid?" It was Sgt. Liu's voice. Turning around, I saw that he was

using an old magazine as a fan. “Stupid! I'll tell you how good the 500-1b. job is. If you want to dig a swimming pool at your house, you can save a lot of money by firing one as big as that!”

They all laughed at me, making me uncomfortable. A gust of wind blew through the shed. “Wonderful” everyone exclaimed. No one who had never worked hard under the hot sun could quite appreciate this sense of well being. The gourd over Sgt. Chang’s head swung in the breeze. and I could not help but say:

“Sarge, you’d better keep away from it. It is explosive and much worse than a sore eye if it hits you on your head.”

Sgt. Chang did not say anything, just grinned. But Sgt. Liu could not keep quiet: “All right, you can pay off your wet-nurse for good, kid. You have learned to talk now!”

He picked up a cigarette offered by Sgt. Hu, staring at me, while listening to the others laughing. After they stopped laughing he added: “Kid, if that was a real job, you would have been done with even though you had hidden yourself far behind that house.”

I could hardly swallow what he said, so I retorted: “Not exactly. It could as well be a dud. You never know!”

“A dud? Wen, you can get another one sure to go off together. Nobody would dare touch it.”

“You are not scaring me, Sarge!”

“If you don’t believe me, you may ask Sgt. Hu.” Turning around, I saw the Major chatting with Sgt. Hu, so did not have the nerve to interrupt.

As far as I knew, Sgt. Hu had six children, all going to school, ranging from secondary school to sophomore year in college. The Major, always thoughtful and considerate to his men, had been voluntarily conducting a “cram session” for Sgt. Hu’s children, free of charge.

Sgt. Hu was both a respectable and respectful man. He would say, “Respect others as you would like others to respect you.” When talking about the Major, he would say, “I don’t suppose I, in my lifetime, could ever repay the major for whatever he has so kindly done for me. I would like to do a good job both as a faithful subordinate and a good soldier. But the Major has been assigning me to this chair in this comfortable place instead of giving me any other demanding job.”

At first, I thought Sgt. Hu was right: One must try one’s best in getting a job done well. The more able you are, the more you become vexed by idleness. Then I realized the Major was also right when he said to Sgt. Hu, “You have worked very hard and quite enough for the CAF. Now you can benefit us with your advice. Maybe some day, we’ll need you when we have real trouble.”

We had to admit that the Major had a point there.

“Hey, stupid!” said the Major, suddenly thinking of something. “Go to the HQs, and draw the pay and rations for these sergeants. They said they would be issued today.”

“Okay, Sir.” Leaving the key to the three quarter ton truck and my pass to the Major, I borrowed a bicycle from Sgt. Chang. Being long-legged, Sgt. Chang had raised the bicycle seat, much too high for my size. No sooner was I about\fn{The text has: *No sooner than I was about …*} to put a foot on the pedal than I heard Sgt. Liu's loud voice. “Want me to lift you up there?”

*

It took me about 40 minutes to get the pay and rations.

As son as I reached the melon shed, I was stunned to see the Colonel there. The Colonel, corpulent, and jovial, usually reminded us of a laughing Buddha but today, he was quite another man, His face was tense, and he strode back and forth with lowered head and both hands behind his back, making his belly seem even more plump.

I was sure something was brewing. It seemed as if they had been discussing something without any apparent conclusion, each of them holding a cigarette between their fingers, frowning in an absent-minded way.

I wondered what was wrong with Sgt. Liu. He was sitting behind the wheel of the three-quarter-ton truck, leaning against the steering wheel. He seemed to have lost his voice.

“Colonel, Sir, they are on the way!”

When the Major reported this, everybody turned to look at the bamboo grove. There were several farm houses there, with little red flags surrounding them. Near the village, there was a GMC truck. Guards were being deployed, seemingly to encircle the village.

How strange. Soldiers were supposed to love and protect the people. This would certainly scare them instead.

“Major, did you tell them to evacuate all the civilians?”

The Major clicked his heels, his mustache wagging as he answered briskly:

“Yes, Sir. I have phoned the Company Commander that all civilians must be taken to the police station, immediately for transient care there.”

Nodding his approval, the Colonel asked Sgt. Chang, “Have you checked plane No. 6220?”

Usually, Sgt. Chang would slouch when standing, sticking out his neck, as if he didn’t want others to say that he had fenced off the sunshine. Now he came to attention, becoming almost a half foot taller.

“According to the report, Sgt. Hu is right in his judgment. We have found what’s wrong with the circuit.”

Nothing was special about an aircraft having some trouble, but I wondered what was all this about the farmers? I just couldn’t associate the two incidents. The more I thought, the more I was puzzled. But this was not the time for me to say anything.

“Something like this happened to me once before,” said Sgt. Hu, as he sat down on a chair.

“When?” asked the Colonel.

“When you were just a warrant officer.”

Sgt. Hu, holding the moistened cigarette butt between his thumb and index finger, was thinking very hard.

“Tell me about it, Sarge,” the Colonel urged.

“It was back in 1947 at Chengchow, an F-47 came in from a mission, just like this one. The difference was that the pilot didn’t know there was a bomb left in the bomb bay. As soon as he landed, the bomb I dropped on the runway and exploded.”

“What happened to the aircraft?”

“Only minor damage to the tail. Lucky enough,” said Sgt. Hu, shaking his head. “Nowadays, the plane has higher velocity, so a much stronger pull, so it will throw a bomb further.”

Oh no! Now I realized what had happened. One of the incoming planes must have had a bomb left in its bomb bay and the bomb must have dropped in the bamboo grove. No wonder everybody was so nervous and tense, planting little red flags, deploying guards and finally evacuating the civilians! Living with armaments for so many years, the more you hear people talking about them, the more you know about them. This job was no joke! I climbed into the driver’s seat, whispering to Sgt. Liu, “Sarge, who fixed that bomb today?” When he lifted up his head I backed away in fear. His eyes were red and his face ashy. Words seemed to be squeezed out of his teeth. “Son of a gun, are you trying to interrogate me? There is a long way ahead of you before you make a judge!” His spittle flew all over my face. As he leaned over the steering wheel again, I took out my handkerchief to wipe my face. No sooner had I put the handkerchief back into the pocket than I heard the Colonel’s voice.

“Major, do you know who fixed that bomb today?”

Sgt. Liu straightened up abruptly but before he could get up, the Major said: “I did, Sir.”

“No!” Sgt. Liu leaped downward, almost falling, over. He saluted the Colonel while reporting. “I did! Sir.”

“He is my subordinate, Sir. If he does anything wrong, I am to be blamed,” said the Major.

“It’s I who actually carried out the job. Sir.”

“It’s I who made the final check. Sir.”

“ …”

“ …”

Strange! What were they competing for? Not for a trophy, nor for a medal, nor anything like that. It didn’t have to take two to present this case.

Apparently, the Colonel was running out of patience. He was standing with his arms akimbo, his hand trying hard to stay on his waist until he finally hooked his thumb in his belt. Everybody knew that when ever he assumed this stance, he meant business. I was obvious that if anything went wrong, it would mean disaster for these farmers.

Unexpectedly, the Colonel began to smile. He raise his left hand to stop any further arguments.

“Frankly, nobody wanted this to happen. No should anyone be blamed for accidents caused by faulty mechanism. You guys may stop arguing now. There are several things for us to rejoice at. One, we have sunk two Chicom\fn{Chinese Communist.} supply vessels; two, the bomb near the village didn’t go off. Sgt. Hu, see what you can do about it. Let us learn something from this accident.”

What a man! Everyone of us felt much calmer after he had finished. It was so much wiser to give people a chance to make amends than to mete out punishment at every instance. There would be no fear that he would not be more careful the next time, even at the risk of his life.

Sgt. Hu chuckled the furrows on his weather-beaten face creasing up until his eyes were invisible. I guessed that Sgt. Hll was laughing at both Sgt. Liu and the Major for being so nervous. Having been with the Colonel for so many years, he knew the Colonel well and most probably had known all along what his reaction would be.

The Major felt so embarrassed that he got red all over his neck.

“I must attend a very important meeting.” Looking at his watch, he said, “You guys think about it and try to

dispose of that dud. As soon you make a decision, give me a call, will you?”

“Yes, Sir,” we said, saluting him.

The Colonel, touched the brim of his cap with his right hand and left us. He also left us with a difficult problem to solve.

*

“Hey, stupid!”

For Heaven's sake! What was wrong with the Major? He called me at the top of his voice, loud enough to command a whole regiment. Only once in a blue moon could you find him yelling like that, with both eyeballs projecting, his brows raised at a forty-five degree angle, like two writing brushes. I was a little angry with Sgt. Hu. No matter what age or rank, man always had his pride. The Major may be youngerthan he was but he was a Major and Sgt. Hu should not have laughed at such a moment. Besides, the Major had only been trying to save us from any possible punishment.

“Stupid! What are you hiding there for? Go an get us a couple of benches. We are holding meeting.”

“Yes, Sir!”

As hastily as Sgt. Liu a moment ago, I leaped from the car, slipped on a round rock, and fell flat on my face.

Unsympathetically, Sgt. Liu said, “Why are you jumping? No swimming pool down there!”

“Hurt yourself? Better check,” said Sgt. Chan who always was the professional trouble-shooter.

Painstakingly, Sgt. Hu rose from the chair, trying to give me a hand. “This is the way of the unfledged youngster! Be more careful and you would have no trouble.”

“Come on, get up, kid,” the Major yelled and jumped up. “No one at your age should need an help. Take the responsibility for what you do. I a sick of those who make themselves a laughing stock.”

I realized that the latter part of this sentence was not being said to me. I wondered how Sgt. Hu felt. His wrinkled face slackened and became expressionless. The chair creaked as he leaned back in it.

“Major, it is easy to have accidents in our kind of job, being deformed by minor ones, and killed in major ones.” Sgt. Hu, was obviously trying to restrain himself, and went on softly, “So you have to cultivate. a habit of playing it cool and taking it easy.”

“Over-played coolness could turn into impudence.”

“What kind of theory is this?” Nobody would have expected Sgt. Hu to press on. “I doubt this is justifiable. One is a question of will power, the other is a question of judgement. No connection whatsoever between these two.”

“All right, Sgt. Hu,” outspoken Sgt. Liu interrupted. “The more you argue, the more you miss the point. We’ve not as yet dealt with the important problem of digging up so why go on arguing about unnecessary things.”

The Major kept quiet and left for the day room. Sgt. Liu and Sgt. Chang moved swiftly over to Sgt. Hu, the latter saying reproachfully: “Why were you guys talking like that before the Colonel? Are you crazy? I think the Major was really hurt.”

“Who’s crazy?” Sgt. Hu seemed confused.

Sgt. Liu, tuning his voice to a lower key, said, “Why the devil did you chuckle when the Major and I were arguing about hooking up the bomb?”

“Dammit! How can such a big man as you have such a small suspicious mind!” Sgt. Hu was as surprised as one of those heroes in a chivalrous romance—caught in an ambush. “Why did I laugh? You were all standing looking at me, but from where I was sitting I not only could see you, but also that bamboo grove behind you. Men and women, young and old, were climbing on to the truck and one of the farmers insisted on loading his buffalo on it. The guards were trying to stop him and both sides were tugging at the reins.”

“You take a better look. This is nothing but a canvas belt for the plane.”

By coincidence, the Major stepped out of the door with a canvas belt of about one and a half inch wide in his hand and overheard the last three words. Being quick-witted, Sgt. Chang hurried up to the Major and said, “We were not talking about you, Sir. You have misunderstood.”

“All right, all right, let’s get on the job. Sgt. Chang, bring along your tools, will you?”

“What we were talking about was that the truck. were evacuating the farmers—”

Sgt. Liu was trying to explain, but was interrupt by the Major.

“That is very good. Now let’s get do to business and stop talking about irrelevant things.” Standing there, the Major was pulling rank on us trying to recover from his humiliation of a few minutes ago. As a matter of fact, we had never seen the Major like this before. I was thinking that Sgt. Hu had been done an injustice. At his age, he could have retired from the Air Force several years ago, drawing a pension, enjoying himself for the rest of his

life. Instead, he had again and again asked to be re-enlisted. and now to be humiliated like this. If I were him, I would certainly hit back in kind, and sharply. When Sgt. Hu was the chief man in the field of maintenance, the Major had been just raw recruit. No wonder they said that the young will displace the old. What can you say?

Placing the tool set on the stone table, Sgt. Chang took out a screw driver, and pliers from his pockets and threw them into it.

Squatting against one of the poles of the shed, Sgt. Liu was toying with a small rock.

These was no breeze and it was sultry in the shed. It had never been so quiet like this since the melon. shed had been built. Silence did not necessarily mean peace. I could sense the uneasiness in the air.

"Sgt. Chang." Rolling up the canvas belt, the Major put it into his pocket as he said, "What do you think we should do?"

"I guess," Sgt. Chang thought for a while before he continued, "when a bomb falls from the bay, it has to revolve about three hundred to five hundred times before the safety pin breaks off and it explodes. Maybe this bomb did not go off because it was too near the ground and didn't have enough time to revolve after it fell from the plane."

"Theoretically, it could be so." The Major agreed with what he said. He then yelled, "Sgt. Liu!"

Sgt. Liu didn't answer. The small rock in his hand was now well polished. After a while, he raised his head. This tardy reaction obviously irritated the Major.

"I don't think that little rock will tell you the ways and means to dispose of the dud."

"The way to dispose of it should be known by every army mechanic," the words burst from him. "In any country, for any kind of bomb, there is only one most reliable way to handle a dud: blast: it! Let me be responsible for what I did. No need to talk any more. Let me get at it!"

Sgt. Liu may have been right but his attitude toward his superior was certainly wrong. He should have said it in a friendlier and more respectful way. I could see that the Major's patience was running out. They glared at each other for a long while, the tension mounting. Fortunately, Sgt. Liu was the first to drop his head.

I sympathized with Sgt. Liu. There seemed to be a kind of pain gnawing inside of him because it was he who had hooked up the bomb, although nothing was wrong with the bomb itself. Air Force men did not mind when people said they were dandies, but they certainly become irritated when they are accused of being inefficient at their jobs. What had happen today was very upsetting and Sgt. Liu spoke out his feelings without thinking. When he realized that he had been very disrespectful and rude, he immediately stood up and apologized.

"Major, Sir. I'm sorry, please forgive me for having talked out of turn."

"I am partly to blame, too." The Major shook hands with him then turned to Sgt. Hu, saying, "Sarge, you are my senior in terms of age and experience. I'd like to hear what you think."

As a rule, Sgt. Hu would always scratch his head before he started speaking. Unexpectedly, he withheld from this habit by saying crisply, "I've no opinion, I'm sure you won't listen to Sgt. Liu, either."

"How do you know?" asked Sgt. Chang, the lowest ranking of them all.

"I think the Major wants to dig up the bomb. He got a canvas belt which he could use to fasten the bomb in the middle; and he asked you to bring along the tool set, indicating that he's going to disassemble it."

"Dig it up?" I couldn't help crying out. I remembered so well what Sgt. Liu had just said to me: "If it does not go off, get another one that is sure to detonate and let them go off together. Otherwise, nobody would dare to touch it. If you want to dig a swimming pool at your house, you can take one and blast it. You're sure to save a lot of money."

To say nothing of its power, it could make a hole as large as a swimming pool. It might be pretty risky to blast it. Of course it would be even riskier to dig it up and roll it back here.

"What are you screaming for?" the Major snapped at me. "Idiot! I told you to get us a couple of benches, but you just scream."

"Sir. Do you still want me to get some benches?"

"You go to hell!" Sgt. Liu glared at me. "It's all over now."

"No need. But the meeting is not over yet," Sgt. Hu said. "I think I have something more to say. Sgt. Chang just said that maybe the bomb had fallen out too late for it to have revolved enough rounds for it to blast off. That is only maybe! What if only one or a half round more is needed to blow it off. Then, if you just touch it, it would be disastrous. Major, did you think about this?"

"Yes. I've thought of it," the Major answered. "I also thought this could be a test for our ordnance service and for the honor of this unit. The village must not be harmed. This bomb was supposed to destroy the enemy. I certainly do not want it to inflict damage on anything that belongs to us. I'm sure we can remove it."

Hey! Like a shot is the arm these words pulled us together. Everyone of us, including me, nodded in agreement.

"I guess all of us agree with you, Sir." Jumping up from his chair and rolling up his sleeves, Sgt. Hu said, "Stupid! Put my tool set on the truck."

Before I even moved, the Major put a hand on the set and said, "Sgt. Hu, what are you trying to do?"

"Is there any need to ask?"

"No," the Major said; "you don't need to bother with this job."

"What kind of a job do I need to bother with then?"

"Why should I assign you to this job?" the Major said, waving his right hand at the rest of us. "All these guys are much younger than you, Sergeant."

"That's why I'm worried." Sgt. Hu strode over to grab hold of the tool set, elbowing off the Major.

"Please! Sir. I've been fooling around for two years here and I don't think I have many more years to fool around with. I must take this chance. If it means death, it doesn't mean much at my age."

The Major did not let go, and seemed to be getting really upset.

"This is a tough job. Not you, Sergeant. Can't you see that your hands are trembling even when holding a couple of meat-patties?" exclaimed the Major.

Perhaps because of his concern, the Major had not stopped to think that what he had said would probably hurt the old man. It was true that Sgt. Hu had already reached a good age, but he didn't like anyone to remind him of it in such a candid way.

Sgt. Hu's face dropped, so did the corners of his mouth. He slapped his chest hard and demanded rudely, "Tell me who else except I can do this kind of a job?"

This dumbfounded the Major. True, in terms of experience, no one, including the Major, could surpass him. Sgt. Chang was like a small town doctor who could not handle serious cases; Sgt. Liu, a quack doctor who was only good with words. Seeing his advantage, Sgt. Hu pressed on:

"Tell me, which of these guys can do it?"

The Major was being pushed a little too far and pointing to his own nose, he exclaimed:

"Me!"

"You?" Surprised, Sgt. Hu grinned crookedly and coughed, spitting onto the ground. This was very insulting indeed. Maybe the spittle was already there but it certainly was the wrong time to spit it out. The Major, his hands balling up into fists, held on to his anger. Sgt. Hu, as if he didn't care a dime, went on:

"In terms of rank, you are my boss, but in terms of experience, you are far behind me. Some of the aircraft under my care are not only strange to you, but also unknown to you. In those good old days—"

"No more of your bluff, Sergeant. Gone are the good old days! When I come to your age, I'll also be bluffing others!"

Suddenly, the Major got out of hand and rudely pulled at the tool set, causing Sgt. Hu to stumble several steps forward, almost falling over. Sgt. Hu and I jumped over to catch him. The Major said, even more arrogantly, "I have studied in the States and have acquired technical know-how in this field. What I am going to do will be strictly based on technical directives and principles. Tell me, soldier, what directives and principles do you go by? I know you have handled this kind of case before and didn't cause any accident. But I think that's because you were just lucky. That's all."

Sgt. Hu tried to break away from us but we held on tightly. He was trembling all over. He was too angry to utter a word.

At that moment, I felt the Major had turned out to be a hypocrite. He had pushed an old soldier too far. And those last self-satisfied words were even more unnecessary. No matter how well educated you are there is never any need to hurt other people's pride.

I was angry for Sgt. Hu, maybe because he had often been kind to me; maybe because he came from the same town as I did. If it were somebody else who had humiliated him, I would certainly have punched him right on the nose. But, this was the Air Force where military discipline had to be observed. I could do nothing except stay put like the others and watch the Major leave for the dayroom.

*

"Hey, Stupid! Come here!"

"Yes, Sir."

Moving on the double to the quonset hut, I saw the Major standing under the eaves, carrying a small shovel. I warned myself, "Never tangle with that one! Better not to even upset him!" Sgt. Liu and Sgt. Chang strolled over

to give me moral support as the Major continued with his instructions! “Get to the kitchen and bring me a bucket of salt water. Then you go to the maintenance shop and get the crane truck. You are going with me.”

“Major, Sir.” 1 said nervously, “Sgt. Liu and Sgt. Chang are now standing by.”

“I want you to go with me.”

“But …” Knowing that this was a very risky mission, I tried to pull myself together and argued with him. “I only know how to drive Sir. I know nothing about mechanics.”

“Now listen carefully,” said the Major, his face cold. “That’s an order. Do I make myself clear?”

“We are not fighting on the front line. Why should you issue an order, Sir?”

“What do you know about war? Modern war has no front lines. Do you think only the pilots in the MIGs means fighting? You are wrong. Whatever job you do is fighting against the enemy!”

I could say nothing more, merely stand there, my heart beating fast.

Throwing the small shovel onto the ground, the Major signaled me to hurry up. “What are you waiting for? Move!”

Luckily I had moved my right foot or I would have lost my toes.

To tell the truth, I was stalling, hoping something would happen. Even if the Major could be provoked into a rage, slapping me in the face, I would still be grateful. Because in that case, he would stalk off by himself and leave me behind.

“What’s the matter with you? Are you paralyzed? Or are you suffering from polio?”

“The Colonel told us to call him when we have made a decision, didn’t he?”

“You don’t have to worry about that, man.” Maybe the Major thought I was clever enough for his voice became more moderate. “I just telephoned in the day-room. Now, move!”

“Sgt. Chang,” I shouted, pretending to be concerned.

“What the hell are you calling him for?”

“I was going to ask him to bring along the tools for you, Sir.”

“No, No!” The Major cried angrily. “Get me the car. Can’t you just mind your own business? I repeat; I already have all the tools I need long before the conference was held.”

Good Heavens! What else could I do since he had already made up his mind?

Suddenly, Sgt. Liu came over and put his hands on my shoulders.

“Stupid!” Sgt. Liu’s voice was rarely so gentle: “More practice, more experience. As an old saying goes, the nation maintains the army for a thousand days, but deploys it for one day. While you are young do something glorious to remember in your old age. See what I mean?”

I nodded. Sgt. Liu continued, patting me on my shoulder.

“You are as strong as a ramrod. You know you can’t back out now. I know you wont. Lift up your chin and square your shoulders. Get a move on! You’ll be promoted to a Sergeant, no doubt. I wish you every success!”

“Huh. Promoted like hell!”

“You’ll get promoted even if you go to hell. Don’t you worry about that!”

I felt icy cold. Hopelessly, I handed my wallet over to Sgt. Liu and said, “Turn in my ID card to the personnel office. Donate the 100 dollars I have left to the Free China Relief Association for our poor countrymen on the mainland. Mail my insurance card to my parents.”

*

“Hold it!”

Stepping on the brake, I turned off the engine. Looking around, I saw many small triangular red flags, here and there. Behind the mounds and deep in the ditches were guards.

The Major, with arms akimbo, looked at the bomb as though he were enjoying the antiques and treasures at the National Palace Museum.

Bombs were nothing special to us, but never had any looked so fearful as this one. It was stuck at a 45 degree angle in the mud, with only its tail end visible. Buried under were the safety pin, blasting cap and the primer.

The Major knelt down very slowly, and as gently as though he were stroking a cat he scraped away some of the mud around the bomb; his touch more gentle and soft than a girl embroidering. Every time he reached his hands toward the bomb, I felt so tense that my lungs seemed on the point of exploding and I held my breath until he had taken his hands off again.

Suddenly, my stomach revolted, and I felt like vomiting. My eyes darkened, chills went down my spine, and I sweat all over. I held up my head, leaning back on the driver’s seat, with my eyes closed.

Some time passed, then I heard the Major’s voice.

"Hey, Stupid! Bring me the salt water!"
I did what he asked, then hid myself behind him.
"What are you hiding for?" he demanded, throwing the tools onto the ground. "Think I am as bomb-proof as a piece of steel plate?"
Lifting the water bucket, the Major slowly poured the salt water around the bomb.
"I have often seen people salting pickles, but never bombs, Sir."
"Shut up, will you? Now, get in your car."
"Yes, Sir."
I realized how crisp was my answer. I felt there was something unusual in the air, as if the nearer you got to the bomb, the thinner the air had become.
As soon as I had settled myself behind the wheel, I saw the Major coming over, with the canvas belt in his hand, his eyes flashing determinedly. He said to me slowly and carefully.
"I want you to concentrate for only three minutes without thinking of anything else nor looking at anything else. Keep your eyes wide open while I work and listen carefully to my orders. Your reaction must be very prompt. I am sure you can make it."
"What do you want me to do, Sir?"
"When I tie up the bomb in the middle with this belt, you start the engine and lower the crane. As soon as the hook catches hold of the belt, you gently lift up the hook exactly as I say. And as soon as I say okay, you stop immediately; remember, this is most important."
"Sir, in case—"
"Shut up! We have no choice We've got to make it. We can't afford to fail."
He then turned away without another word. "Now. Start the engine, boy!"
At first, my hands were trembling. I looked at the plump Major who was kneeling on the ground with so much difficulty and saw that beads of sweat on his forehead were dripping on the ground. Yes, no use of worrying, cross the bridge when you come to it. Suddenly, I relaxed.
Having fastened the belt around the bomb, the Major ordered me to lower the crane. I did so, slowly and carefully until he signaled me to stop.
"Hey, Stupid!" Holding the already fastened knot. the Major said, "Whether or not we can ask the Colonel to throw a dinner party in our honor this evening entirely depends upon you now."
I knew the Major was trying to ease my tension by joking at this point between life and death. But in fact, I had already relaxed. If he as a Major, wasn't concerned with the problem of life and death, how could I, a mere Corporal, be so chicken-hearted? So I, in order to strengthen his faith in success, answered lightly.
"Don't worry! We will surely have the good fortune of eating a good dinner."
His mustachs twitching, the Major said, "All right. Go ahead, man!"
"Okay!"
Having geared up, I operated exactly according to his signals.
"Stop."
Almost simultaneously, I shut off the power and pulled out the key.
Standing up, the Major let out a deep breath. I went over and shook hands with him, his hands and overalls were all wet. He looked at me excitedly, as if bursting with things to say. But after a pause, he only patted me on my shoulder.
"Now go back to your quarters and take a good rest!"
"Sir?" I said while taking off my coat, "Now that I have been here with you, I don't want to leave you alone."
"Armaments are *not* in your line, man."
"At least I can help by handing you tools and give you some moral support."
"You came here at my order, didn't you? Now you don't have to risk your life when there is no need."
"Sir—"
"Don't try to find any excuse. Now, move!"
Knowing that the Major never stood for any arguments, I could not say anything more and began to put on my coat again.
"All right, Sir. But, before I leave, I must know if there is anything else I can do for you."
"Listen to this: First, tell Sgt. Hu not to be mad at me any more."
"Yes, I'll do that."
"Second, leave your cigarettes here. Mine got wet."

Handing my cigarettes to him, I asked, "What else?"

"Third, now turn around and move immediately. When you go as far as 10 meters away, I'll tell you what to do."

I did just as he ordered and tried to find out what he was going to do next. Not until I had reached a spot 30 meters away did I hear his loud voice: "To to obtain me a free ticket for the troop-cheering movies on Sunday!"

I was between tears and laughter. I never thought he would issue such a funny order. It was indeed something for all the men of his unit to remember for the rest of their lives.

Walking to the hideout near the maintenance truck, I turned back, and saw the Major waving good-bye. My eyes stung and I felt faint. Suddenly, I was lifted up in the air. A large hand was grasping me by the collar and dragged me into the hideout. It was Sgt. Liu, saying, "Come on, get in, boy. All of us are here."

*

In the open space across the runway, on the apron, on the roof of the hangar and on the balcony of the administration building were people watching in silence, waiting to see what was going to happen. The sun was going down, but no smoke puffed up out of the kitchen chimney. On the contrary, Sgt. Hu was puffing smoke furiously, one cigarette after another.

Itching to know what was going to happen, I stuck my neck out, hoping to see something, but there was nothing to see.

"See anything?" asked Sgt. Hu.

"No. Not a thing!"

"Two arid a half hours have passed. Something must happen," said Sgt. Hu, looking at his watch.

"What are you talking about?" Sgt. Chang said angrily. "You know why we are here, we wanted to get a closer look. Do you know why we wanted you to join us here? Because we hoped you could tell us what the Major is doing. But you have not said a word. Hell!"

"Don't you know this is a weakness of us Chinese?" Sgt. Liu remarked sarcastically. "He is trying to keep his know-how to himself."

"What can I say? What the Major does is entirely based on his so-called technical know-how and directives while what I do is considered just good luck." Sgt. Hu said bitterly. "Today, I'd better not talk about my experience since somebody thinks that I don't have to try my luck."

"You are very narrow-minded," Sgt. Liu said to Sgt. Hu, pointing at Sgt. Chang and me. "None of us has offended you. You are throwing mud at the wrong target."

Maybe Sgt. Hu realized what Sgt. Liu had said was reasonable. He continued: "Stupid here has told us very clearly what he did, he used salt water and the bomb is hanging up."

"Yeah," Sgt. Chang asked. "I wonder why he poured salt water and why did he hang up the bomb? And after the bomb—"

"Simple," Sgt. Hu explained. "Salt water has the highest degree of humidity which in turn can easily dampen the blasting cap. First, he hangs up the bomb in a perpendicular position; second, he wipes away the soil around the bomb; third, he removes all the soil right below the bomb, bit by bit, until the bomb is suspended off the ground; lastly, he fixes the safety pin and takes off the blasting cap."

"But what if he slips and moves the—"

"Don't be ridiculous, son! When you hear the explosion everyone of us will be going off along with it!" Sgt. Liu interrupted me reproachfully, as if I was not supposed to say a word during serious discussions.

"Sgt. Hu, if this is the case, the further he goes the greater the danger will be, is that right?" Sgt. Chang asked seriously.

"If my judgment is correct, he is reaching the most dangerous phase now," nodded Sgt. Hu.

After listening to what Sgt. Hu had said, I could no longer contain myself. I felt that, when necessary, I must go over to tell the Major to take a break; to come on over and consult with the sergeants. I felt I must do something before it was too late. I stood up but just as I was about to creep out I heard a loud explosion, really deafening. My left foot was caught by Sgt. Liu and I fell on all fours immediately. With his large hands, Sgt. Liu dragged me back into the hide out.

For a good long while, I couldn't get up from the ground. Technically, I thought Sgt. Hu should have been assigned to that mission. It's experience that counts in the field of technology. Insolence certain1y leads to disaster. Turning to Sgt. Hu, I asked,

"Does the Major have any relatives in Taiwan?"

"What are you talking about? The sound came from the hills. Somebody is blasting rocks up there," Sgt. Liu

said coldly. “Stupid!”

“So are you! Why did you drag me in when you knew it was from the hills?”

“I dragged you,” Sgt. Hu said, “but it’s Sgt. Liu who pulled you back here. I was afraid that your appearance would distract his attention and that would be disastrous.”

“I should never have come back here. If anything happens, I will never know how the Major got killed.”

“Should you have been with him, you would even know much less than now.” Taking out my wallet from his pocket, Sgt. Liu threw it at me. “Boy, you may have your insurance card back now.”

I didn’t catch the wallet because it was thrown outside the hideout.

I went out to pick up the wallet and yelled: “The Major is coming out!”

The three sergeants scrambled out as fast as they could.

The Major was waving both his hands high in the air, with a cap in his right hand and presumably a pair of pliers in his left hand.

“The blasting cap must have been removed,” Sgt. Hu asserted. “It’s a blasting cap all right, in his left hand.”

Sgt. Hu was right. As we were pretty far away, the Major was apparently indicating to us that he had removed the blasting cap by waving his hands. I was standing there thinking while Sgt. Hu, flanked by the two other sergeants, had already started walking. I dashed off at top speed to where the Major stood. As I plunged into his arms, I felt my face was icy cold with his sweat drenched fatigues. He hugged me tightly, then lifting my face with both his hands, the Major said to me.

“Don’t cry, you are a big boy now. You’re Sgt. Hu’s, favorite and it will hurt him to see you like this.”

“That’s why I am crying,” I said. “You and Sgt. Hu have been so kind to me all these years, but I just don’t know how to make up the misunderstanding between you two. He is still angry with you!”

“Don’t worry, boy.” Wiping the tears from my face with his muddy hands, he said, “Like tears, a misunderstanding can be easily wiped out. Here they are now. Try to smile a happy smile.”

People were swarming toward the end of the runway until they were halted by the guards.

The Colonel's jeep appeared at the same time as the three sergeants.

“Wonderful job! Just wonderful!” Everybody, including the Colonel, shook hands with the Major, congratulating him heartily. All except Sgt. Hu. He was walking around the pit with his hands behind his back and then went to stand between the Colonel and the Major. Shaking his head, he said:

“That’s nothing! To me, that has nothing to do with advanced technology. Even Stupid here could have made it if I had taught him.”

“Sgt. Hu, you can’t say that.” The Colonel remonstrated in a kindly voice. “This was really a risky job, wasn’t it?”

“Don’t you think I could handle a risky job too?”

“I know you are better than the rest of us. I am quite sure you could have done it!”

Apparently much flattered by this compliment, Sgt. Hu turned condescendingly to the Major, “Did you hear that, kid?”

“Yeah. I did,” the Major answered sincerely.

“Sgt. Hu, you must not misunderstand your Major,” the Colonel said sternly. “He told me on the phone about what had happened between you two. In terms of experience, I should have sent you. But, don’t you know why he intentionally said things to make you angry so that you would not handle this job?”

“Why? To show off!”

“This proves that you are wrong. You know, at first I refused to grant him permission until he had made repeated requests. He knew this was a dangerous mission with the possibility of death. He justified his request by explaining that in case he got killed, he’s all by himself, while you have five children.”

Sgt. Hu was struck dumb. His lips trembled and there was a sheen of tears in his eyes.

The Major went over to Sgt. Hu and embraced him.

“All right. Let’s call it a day. Leave everything else for tomorrow,” the Colonel said, waving his hands happily. “Everybody get in the car and go to take a shower first. Then we’ll have a nice dinner party in the officer’s club. I’ll be waiting for you there at seven thirty.”

Sgt. Chang and Sgt. Liu got into the jeep, followed by the Major, leaving the front seat for Sgt. Hu. The Colonel called out.

“Hey. Get in, Stupid!”

“Sir.” Standing at attention, I said. “The jeep can only hold five.”

The Colonel laughed.

"Today, we must treat you as a hero. You deserve special treatment."
Hardship and weariness does not matter. Man has to live with love and sympathy.

83.86 Scaffolding\fn{by Shao Chien (1934-)} Chiangsu Province, China (M) 4

Liao Cheng-jung secretly felt that there was a definite difference in the way his father and his uncle (his father's younger brother) handled their wine. After a couple of drinks, his father's face would turn as red as a cock's comb, as if he alone had gulped down all the wine on the entire table. Third Uncle, on the other hand, would look just as usual, and would become even more humorous and sharp in his remarks, as if he were ready to take on anyone and knock a few holes in them.

"Don't be a sissy," Third Uncle insisted, "you've got to finish this cup."

"I still have to work this afternoon."

"Just this one bottle won't make any difference!" Third Uncle vigorously shook the almost-empty bottle. "I'll show you a somersault up on the scaffold when we get back to the job site."

He drew in a deep breath and tightened up his belt. "Haven't gained any weight even after being a manager myself these past few years—still running up the scaffold with the crew to look around at the scenery."

"Third Uncle, I surely admire your spirit."

"Our work is rough; unlike your old man who sits in the office working on the abacus." Third Uncle stuffed another piece of squid into his mouth and continued. "Speaking of your old man, I remember his ulcer. How's he doing these days?"

"Pa quit smoking."

"The old chimney doesn't smoke anymore." Third Uncle drained his cup. "Poor thing."

"Pa wanted me to thank you for the ginseng tonic you gave him. He said it's too expensive a gift."

"It's only a small token of respect for my elder brother, since my business is going so well." Third Uncle pulled out a handkerchief from his pocket and mopped the sweat on his face. "By the way, after being with me for one month, are you getting used to the work?"

"It's all right."

"I'm afraid it's quite different from school! Nowadays, all these young people read and study day and night for the sake of examinations, until their eyes are like goldfish eyes. Good thing you haven't had to wear glasses."

"I loved sports while in school." Liao Cheng-jung laughed.

"What we need is having someone like the Monkey King in *Journey to the West* who can crawl and jump, courageous but careful; and above all, able to handle the scaffold as if walking on the ground."

"That's not easy!"

"Well, just remember *never* to look downward."

Liao Cheng-jung nodded. The first time he had climbed up the four-story scaffolding was when he followed right behind Third Uncle. The simple wooden ladder was roughly made from unplaned boards nailed together with spaces in between looking somewhat like the skeleton of a fish lying across a large plate after a meal. He didn't feel anything unusual after walking up the first two stories on the scaffolding except for a slight rocking motion as if someone were trying to play a trick on a small boat. A few more steps up and for the first time he became apprehensive about the vacillating wooden boards beneath his feet. He fearfully wondered if they had been securely nailed together. What would happen if he should, by chance, step in between the boards? The more he thought about this, the more frightened he became. Both his legs felt weak and rubbery as he moved further up, not as quick and nimble as before.

"What's the matter, Cheng-jung? Can I give you a hand?"

Hearing Third Uncle's voice from above, Liao Cheng-jung felt very embarrassed. Since he was quite an athlete himself back in school, it would really be a laughing matter if he were, to be scared by this narrow wooden ladder. With no further consideration of whether the scaffolding was strong or not, he clambered up, two or three steps at a time. It was not until he stood up at the top of the scaffolding that he stopped to catch his breath. third Uncle looked sharply at him as if he could see through him.

"The world up here is very different." Third Uncle pointed to the people and cars down on the streets. "They surely look small … and this makes us who work up here feel much more important."

Liao Cheng-jung did not say a word; looking at the people hustling and bustling down there, he suddenly felt an out-of-this-world kind of happiness.

One evening, he could not remember exactly when, his father had walked into his bedroom, made him turn off

the noisy rock music he was listening to, then seriously sat down by his bed and said: “It doesn’t seem right to see you idling at home now that you’ve graduated. Of course, it doesn’t make any sense for you to get permanent employment until you’ve completed your military service. I think you might as well find a temporary job with your third uncle.”

Liao Cheng-jung was indeed quite excited over the fact that his father wanted him to go to his uncle’s to learn a few things. In his mind his father was real square like a dictionary while his uncle was active like a swing. Furthermore, he understood Third Uncle to be generous, outspoken and never hampered by the trifling bounds of etiquette. When Third Uncle was young, he had tried many jobs and had been to many places, trying to make a fortune, but his hopes never came true. Perhaps he had gotten tired of leading a gypsy life so he finally settled down doing scaffolding work. The rapid increase in population certainly had contributed to the overall building boom and scaffolding work was a necessity in the construction business. Thus Third Uncle’s business picked up so fast that he could hardly handle it and the dreams of his youth had unexpectedly come true at middle age, like bird droppings falling on his head from the air.

His father’s suggestion of working for Third Uncle was exactly what Cheng-jung had hoped for and maybe his father noticed Cheng-jung’s delighted expression. His father picked up a towel and laid it on Cheng-jung’s pillow, saying:

“One thing you must be very, very careful about: your uncle smokes too much, also drinks too much, much too unrestrained.”

“Oh!” Cheng-jung’s eyes shifted quickly to the messy quilt on his bed as he felt this was a hint at his own smoking habit. But after he left for his uncle’s, his father would not find any more cigarette butts around the house, so would stop nagging him.

As his thoughts came to this point he lifted his glass to toast Third Uncle, feeling how precious it was to be able to drink wine. He tried to imitate the way Third Uncle drank as if gulping down the whole cup. But he was not as experienced as his uncle and some of the wine dribbled out of his mouth down his chin.

Liao Cheng-jung quickly wiped it off with his hand as Third Uncle went to the cashier to pay the bill. He then removed Third Uncle’s jacket from the hanger, walked toward the pick-up parked on the street and stood there waiting. He could not hear what Third Uncle was saying, but he could see how the big-mouthed woman laughed until her neck bent over, like a turkey waiting to have its neck chopped off. People had said Third Uncle had been particularly fond of girls when he was young and he could see that this was true.

Third Uncle lighted another cigarette as he started the pick-up.

“It helps digestion to crack a joke after a meal,” he said. “Let’s go to the job site first.”

“Yesterday afternoon they had built up to about four-story high. Maybe it’s about six-story high by now.”

“If we don’t get ahead in this business, Mr. Hsu of the construction company will get after me, even cursing my ancestors,” declared Third Uncle. “By the way, how’s the crew working?”

“Working hard and full of pep.”

“There are certain things you never can tell on the surface.” Third Uncle became serious; the smile on his face was suddenly flattened as if by a steamroller. “There was some trouble about three months ago.”

“Yeah! Heard about that.”

“No matter how fast this car went, it didn’t help.”

“Death is unpredictable,” Liao Cheng-jung remarked.

“He was a good guy,” Third Uncle continued. “No matter how high he went, he could sing a song from beginning to end.”

“Any relatives?”

“Wife and kids.”

Liao Cheng-jung heaved a sigh. “He must have been your right-hand man.”

“Right arm, for sure,” added Third Uncle. “I’ve got something in the pocket of my jacket. See if it’s still there.”

Liao Cheng-jung stuck his hand into the pocket and a stack of bills fell out onto his knees. He asked with a look of surprise, “Handing out paychecks?”

“We’ll go to the job site first and then swing by Ah-fa’s house.”

Liao Cheng-jung could see clearly how much Third Uncle had been saddened by Ah-fa’s fall from the scaffolding. Ah-fa had been with Third Uncle ever since he was only fifteen years old. For the past ten years, they had worked very closely together; sometimes Ah-fa would help Third Uncle get home when he was so drunk that he could hardly tell east from west, south from north. Many people had guessed Third Uncle would pick Ah-fa to

be his son-in-law; but his daughter, being a well-educated girl, had her own ideas. The possibility of this marriage had collapsed when the daughter finally married a high-school teacher, and later she herself also became a teacher.

After ten minutes or so, the pick-up arrived at the job site. From afar, one could see the high and slender scaffolding. There was also an addition of a huge movie billboard, showing a girl in a bathing suit running along the shore and the billowing white surf was so real it seemed as if it would wash away the thin scaffolding. Liao Cheng-jung got out of the pick-up, and lifted his head to admire the movie billboard, saying:

"The scaffolding has 'borne' some fruit."

"A friend of mine runs an advertising agency and was concerned about having no place for his pet project. I said: 'I'll give you a place, OK?'"

Liao Cheng-jung put on his sunglasses. He felt the sun was too strong, as if it would burn up the retina of his eyes.

"The large colorful picture surely adds some life to both the scaffolding and the building behind."

"You're right!" Third Uncle kicked a piece of wood that lay in the way.

There was a pile of sand in the field. Third Uncle grabbed a handful of sand and threw it away. The scaffolding was like a brown shell, built up one story after the other. Right in the middle of the first story there was a charcoal burner, a rice cooker, a water pot, and two old Japanese *tatamis* lying against the wall together with a couple of quilts. There were no handrails on the ladder. A few steel bars on top of the construction stuck out crookedly into the air.

Third Uncle carefully examined each bamboo pole used in the scaffolding; he used a short steel bar to tap the bamboo poles and the sound was clear and crisp.

"Top quality bamboos from the mountains."

"You'll be concerned to see them change color through wear and tear and the weather."

"Don't worry. They are as strong as these steel bars."

As they walked out of the empty building, they saw three people working atop of the scaffolding. Third Uncle. waved at them as he started to climb the wooden ladder.

"Third Uncle," Liao Cheng-jung called. "Someone told me you could build a two-foot high scaffold with bamboo chopsticks to let people stand on it."

"Huh."

"Is that true?"

Third Uncle turned his head to look at Liao Cheng-jung with his piercingly sharp eyes.

"You don't believe it?"

"Well, I'd have to see it with my own eyes."

"No problem."

Third Uncle lighted another cigarette and handed it to Lao Chen who was straddling on the scaffolding.

"See any dancing recently?" asked Third Uncle.

"Not much."

"Seeing too much of that sort of dancing can make one blind."

"I'm not blind."

"Watch out also for your heart," added Third Uncle. "That's far more dangerous than straddling the scaffolding."

Liao Cheng-jung almost burst out laughing. Third Uncle had a natural-born sense of humor; with just a few words he could manage to break through the wall of reserve which usually exists between people.

When they reached the top of the scaffolding, they saw both Big-head and Ah-hsiung carefully tying the connections with wiring, twisting and turning continuously for quite sometime before stopping. Liao Cheng-jung looked down from the sixth story and noticed all the people and cars on the streets appeared to be particularly tiny. He felt somewhat dizzy after a while so he quickly moved his eyes toward the scaffolding.

"Should be finished today."

"Great!" Third Uncle exclaimed enthusiastically. "Let's go celebrate tonight."

"Maybe some other time," replied Ah-hsiung. "I've got something to do tonight."

Third Uncle pondered for a while, looking toward the sky which was a soft tender blue, and said: "Come over, let's talk."

"Boss, are you giving me a raise?"

"You never know," Third Uncle replied, laughing. Ah-hsiung, holding on to the bamboo poles along the sides, walked quickly toward Third Uncle. Liao Cheng-jung could see clearly Ah-hsiung's muscles beneath his old

undershirt. Third Uncle put his arm affectionately around Ah-hsiung's shoulders. It appeared to Liao Cheng-jung that Ah-hsiung was an honest and sincere fellow.

"Ah-hsiung, I'm on *my* way to visit Ah-fa's family." said Third Uncle.

"The boss's visit will mean a lot to them."

"Ah-fa was our fellow worker," said Third Uncle sorrowfully. "You all have brotherly feelings for each other. Have you been to see his wife, Ah-tsai, these days?"

"A few times."

"Ah-tsai is a good woman and it is our duty to take care of her."

"The children are also very lovable; one of them loves to have me hold him."

"I hope you go to see them often." Third Uncle said seriously. "Let me be straight with you and don't you get angry. The woman needs a husband, and the children need a father. If you don't feel it's too much for you, perhaps you two are meant for each other."

"But …" Ah-hsiung spoke haltingly.

"This is a new age, everyday you can see so many new buildings rising up from the ground." Third Uncle patted him on the shoulder. "Ah-hsiung, we in the scaffolding business sometimes can hardly meet the demand. I think you should also be modern in your thinking."

Ah-hsiung wanted to say something, but Third Uncle did not give him a chance, as he was pushing Liao Cheng-jung to begin descending, "Let's go to the pick-up."

He opened the car door, took out the plastic water bottle, and poured the water straight into his mouth as if he were watering flowers.

"The sun is about to set," said Third Uncle. "It's very beautiful."

"Beautiful like hell!" Third Uncle threw the bottle back on the car seat. "The scorching summer sun is about to peel off the skins of the men working on the scaffolding."

Before getting into the car, Liao Cheng-jung helped Third Uncle load up some unneeded boards and wires. He also gathered from their conversation that the crew would be moving to another job site after one day's break.

As the pick-up drove back through the streets, Third Uncle pointed out those buildings for which he had built the scaffolding. He even gave each of them a nickname such as "fatty," "bamboo-shoot," "twisted-dough fritter" etc. But as soon as the buildings were completed and beautifully finished, the scaffolding was then torn down to be used as fuel for cooking. He continued:

"Cheng-jung, do you know our scaffolding work has made quite a few contributions?"

"That I don't understand," replied Liao Cheng-jung.

"Young men and girls from the city hide themselves behind our bamboo fences to whisper love-talk. Some people finding no toilet nearby even use the place as an outhouse."

The car came to a halt at a stoplight. "Why in the world am I talking so much nonsense?" said Third Uncle.

"I don't think it's nonsense," replied Liao Cheng-jung.

"Something must be bothering me." Third Uncle scratched his head. After making a turn, the car came to a narrow old street along which were many low houses made of brick or wood. Liao Cheng-jung had been to some towns and villages in the country and had seen similar buildings. When it came to a festival day, people could easily over-crowd and burst the seams of a street like this.

Ah-tsai's house was inside a lane. Third Uncle had to park his pick-up outside the lane. He borrowed the pair of sunglasses from Liao Cheng-jung.

"Too small," he said, "but better than none." He cracked his knuckles.

When they walked into the house, Ah-tsai's oldest boy, Little Ping, came to hold Third Uncle's hand and called him, "Grandpa." Third Uncle quickly held the boy in his arms. Ah-tsai heard voices and came running from the kitchen. Liao Cheng-jung could see that Third Uncle knew this family very well.

"Who is it?"

"It's me," replied Third Uncle. "And this is my nephew, Cheng-jung."

"Have a seat," said the woman in a flurry. On the old sofa was a pile of children's clothes, but Third Uncle sat right straight on it. Maybe he didn't even notice what was on the sofa since he was still wearing the sunglasses.

"How are you doing, Ah-tsai?" He asked affably.

"Just missing one person," said the woman, "and fewer clothes to wash."

Third Uncle was toying with the frame of the sunglasses.

"Ah-fa and I had some great days together. We built a large altar for the Buddhist festival in Hsinchu City. For more than a month, some seventy to eighty thousand people walked over that altar and it still held up well."

"He mentioned that to me before." Her voice was becoming hoarse.
Third Uncle brought out the money from his jacket.
"Here is $30,000. Please take it."
"I already took some last time."
"Never mind. Come to me again if you have any difficulties." Third Uncle stood up. "By the way, has Ah-hsiung been here yet?"
The woman nodded and smoothed out her faded dress.
"He is a good fellow," Third Uncle began to walk toward the door as he continued, "diligent and works hard to advance himself, but he is no match to Ah-fa in drinking."
Liao Cheng-jung lowered his head as he walked out of the house. Third Uncle never had much book learning, but he sure admired him. The sun was paling fast and Third Uncle returned his sunglasses. Holding them, Liao Cheng-jung noticed they were moist.

151.20 Excerpt from **The Corner Forsake By Love**\fn{by Zhang Xian (1934-)} Shanghai, China (M) 4

Even though it was the last year of the seventies in the twentieth century, love—in the eyes of the young people of Tiantang Commune—was a strange and mysterious word, embarrassing to mention. That was why, when the new Youth League secretary pronounced the word during a meeting in the commune hall to oppose the "buying and selling of marriages," the entire audience was startled. The young fellows winked mischievously at each other and broke into loud laughter, while the girls, hastily lowering their heads, blushed, giggled, and exchanged bashful glances.
But the delicate young woman, Shen Huangmei, sitting in the corner by the window—the party Youth League group leader of the Ninth Team, Tiantang Brigade—did not smile. Her face was pale. Her large, melancholy eyes gazed aimlessly out the window. She acted as if she heard nothing, as if nothing concerned her. Suddenly, however, her eyelashes quivered, exerting themselves to shake off the crystal-like things that wet them. "Love"—the word she could not understand—was at that moment strongly stirring the heart of this nineteen-year-old girl. She felt humiliated, sad, inexplicably fearful. She thought of her elder sister Cunni, whom she missed terribly, yet would always blame. Ah, if only there had been no Xiao Baozi; if that incident hadn't happened, everything would have been fine! Her sister would have sat beside her, laughing heartily like a boy. After the meeting, her sister would have pulled her along with her strong arms, and together they would have picked out two bundles of orange thread in the commune cooperative and returned home to embroider their pillows. . . .
Of the five sisters, Cunni was the most fortunate. She had come into the world immediately after the bumper harvest of 1955. When she was a month old, her family could easily afford a banquet table.\fn{In China, when a child is one month old, parents who can aford to throw a banquet, the size of which is measured by the number of tables of guests. Very few farmers are able to afford even one table. The fact that this banquet was given for a girl baby shows that her father is very progressive. } The young father, Shen Shanwang, held up the precious little bundle wrapped in a patterned quilt and said in high spirits:
"I took Linghua to the midwives' station and then went off for a moment to deposit some money in the credit cooperative. When I came back, the baby had been born! Nobody could believe that the delivery had been so smooth the first time! Some said that we should name her Shunni.\fn{Smooth Girl.} I thought, 'For poor farmers like us, it was a miracle that we had money to deposit in a bank!' Having had her at this time, we thought we should call her Cunni.\fn{Deposit Girl.} Wait till she grows up; we'll have even better days!"
The happiness that flowed from his heart was infectious; it spread to everyone who came to congratulate the new parents. At the time, he was the deputy leader of Kaoshanzhuang Cooperative.\fn{Literally: "The Cooperative at the side of the Mountain."} Optimistic, competent, he radiated courage and strength. The pear trees he had grafted in the orchard over the hill had produced a bumper harvest the first year they bore fruit. And, as for wheat and corn, they had more than enough, even after taxes. In the little village of twenty-odd households, everyone was as happy as he. Just like him, they confidently looked forward to a bright future.
When Huangmei was born five years later, conditions were very different. Kaoshanzhuang Cooperative had been incorporated into Tiantang Commune as the Ninth Team of Tiantang Brigade. The fine name Tiantang\fn{Paradise.} had been given to the brigade personally by the party secretary at the county level, who had reasoned,
"Communism is paradise, and the people's commune is the bridge."

At the time, all the commune members, including team leader Shen Shanwang, firmly believed that paradise was only a few feet away. All they had to do was wholeheartedly cut down all the collectively owned pear trees together with all the gingko nut and chestnut trees around the houses,\fn{The nut tees around the houses would have been privately owned.} and with the greatest haste deliver the wood to the backyard furnace operated by the commune—\fn{This refers to the attempt to make steel in backyard furnaces during the Great Leap Forward, the campaign begun by Mao in 1958 to catapult China into communism and the position of a major industrial power. Central features of this campaign were the formation of people's communes from agricultural cooperatives that had been established in the early years of the Republic and an emphasis on economic development through "self-reliance" as well as greater collectivization. During the Great Leap Forward, communes were told to produce steel in backyard furnaces, and massive construction and land reclamation projects requiring the labor of vast numbers of peasants were undertaken. For a variety of reasons—among them severe droughts and poor central planning based on inflated reports by local officials—the program was not a success. Today the official view of the Great Leap Forward is that it was overly ambitious.} as if, as soon as that marvelous puffing stove ejected bright, beautiful flowers of steel, they would easily stroll across the "bridge" and enter communism.

But aside from a pile of iron that occupied cultivated fields and turned tons of trees into ashes, there was no other effect. Moreover, due to a drought, they couldn't even collect seedlings for the wheat and corn.

The taro roots that replaced the pear trees were as thin as the tips of Cunni's fingers. When Linghua, who was big with child, returned after begging for food at a nearby village, Shen Shanwang had already been dismissed from his post because he had "attacked the great effort to process steel." When his second daughter was born—a weak little baby—Shen Shan wang gazed at her with a bitter smile on his swollen face and sighed,

"Who told her to arrive in this lean year? What a Huangmeizi!"\fn{Lean Little Sister.}

Perhaps because her mother had been well-nourished when she was born and nursed, Cunni grew and thrived. She could grow just by eating leaves, and generate energy just by drinking cold water! Before her sixteenth birthday, she had already developed into a healthy, robust young woman. With a wooden pole,\fn{For carrying baskets of things, or lumber.} she replaced her sickly mother who had given birth to three more sisters, and helped her father shoulder the responsibility of the family. In the most strenuous activity of the year—carrying lumber down the mountain to the state lumber farm—she ranked third highest in work points among the women workers. She left for the fields before dawn, and returned under the starlit sky. After gulping down a large bowl of taro or corn meal, she would fall off to sleep without a thought. Even when, at the annual distribution of income, the figure for the family's overspending was greater than ever and they could not get a cent of cash, she was still just as optimistic as ever, not knowing what worry was. On the spur of the moment, she would put her arm around Huangmei, pressing her full breast tightly against her sister's frail body and lightly hum an old folk song that had been popular in her mother's day.

There are often strange things in life that happen only once in a great while and yet have obvious origins. They take people by surprise, yet they are not really anything extraordinary. Take deformities, for example. Whatever strange forms they take, there is always a physiological reason for them. People are surprised by them just because their occurrence is so rare. What happened between Cunni and Xiao Biaozi was just that.

Xiao Baozi was the only son of Uncle Jiagui at the east end of the village. His real name was Xiao Bao, and he was the same age as Cunni. This strong young man worked with fearful energy. One time, when he was carrying lumber, a cold rain began. Aunt Jiagui slipped and fell in front of him and broke her pole. Xiao Bao helped his mother to her feet. Then he tied the two piles of wood together over his bare shoulder, and—gritting his teeth and panting and puffing—carried the wood all the way down the mountain. The wood weighed in at three hundred and five *catties*. People were amazed. They said, "That Xiao Bao is really something—just like a little leopard!" So that is how Xiao Baozi\fn{Little Leopard.} became his nickname.

In the early spring of 1974, the team cadres went off to the commune early one morning to criticize Confucius\fn{This took place during the height of the anti-Lin Piao, anti-Confucius campaign.} while the strong labor power\fn{I.e., all strong, able-bodied adults.} went to work at the reservoir. Caretaker Grandpa Xianger kept Cunni behind to help him put the storage room in order. The old man directed the young woman's work, nagging and complaining all the while.

"The cadres come around once and point their fingers: 'There!' We busy ourselves the whole year cutting through mountains and chipping away at rocks and then a flash flood comes along and whoosh! Everything is washed away! Next year, the cadres come again and point their fingers: 'There!' They have no regard for the harmony of wind, water, and earth."

"Isn't that like 'the foolish old man who moved the mountain?'"\fn{A story that was often quoted by Mao to illustrate that with the right motivation and effort, anything can be accomplished.} Cunni asked, disinterestedly continuing the conversation.

"As if moving a mountain will fill bellies! … Come, first sieve this pile—slowly—don't spill it! … Look at this corn grown over the roots of the pear. It is so lean, who knows whether it will sprout?" The old man complained about the corn seedlings.

"Isn't that 'taking grain as the basis?'"\fn{A Party line, meaning that self-sufficiency in grain should be given priority.} the young woman answered, still distracted. Her heart wandered. Though putting the storage room in order was light work, it was a great deal more fun to carry soil with the young men at the reservoir.

At that moment, a sturdy figure appeared in front of the storage room.

"Let me do some work, Grandpa Xianger."

"Xiao Baozi!" Cunni cried out happily. "Didn't you sprain your leg carrying stones yesterday?"

Grandpa Xianger said, "Go back home and rest!"

"I can't stand lying around," Xiao Baozi smiled earnestly. "So long as I don't carry heavy loads, a little light work won't hurt!" While he spoke, he picked up the winnowing spade to help Cunni with the sieving.

Grandpa Xi anger happily squatted on the side and smoked a cigarette. Then, remembering that he needed to ask the carpenter to come and repair the plow, he gave a few orders and left. Activities like cleaning out the storage room and sieving seedlings were really no tasks at all in the hands of two such quick and diligent nineteen-year-olds. In a very short while, the seedlings had been packed, and the taro spread out to dry. Xiao Baozi said,

"Let's rest awhile!"

He spread his cotton jacket out on top of a full sack, and lay down on top of it. Cunni wiped her sweat and sat down on a sack facing him. She had taken off her cotton jacket a long time ago, and was wearing a dark green sweater that had been part of her mother's dowry. Though it had been taken apart and washed many times and patched with several different colors of yarn, and though it was getting too short and too tight for her body, in the eyes of the young women in the Ninth Team, the sweater was still an enviable luxury.

Xiao Baozi stared at her healthy face reddened by the sun; he stared at her full bosom. A strange, itching feeling that he had never experienced before arose in his heart. It excited him, but made him apprehensive. So, distractedly, he tried to make conversation.

"The day before yesterday Wuzhuang showed a movie. Didn't you go?"

"Of course I didn't go. It was too far away!" Trying to avoid his burning stare, she lowered her head and began pulling at the loose ends on her sweater sleeves.

Wuzhuang is a brigade in Linxian County. To get there, you have to go over two big hills. Even young fellows like Xiao Baozi had to walk more than an hour to reach it. It was not regarded as a rich team; the value of ten work points the previous year had been only thirty-eight fen. But this was enough for the members of Tiantang Commune to cluck their tongues in envy.

What attracted the young men most was the train station thirty kilometers west of Wuzhuang. Last spring festival, Xiao Baozi had gotten together with a few fellow workers to go there to see the train. The round trip had taken half a day, and they had waited at the station for two hours. When they had finally seen the dark green passenger train zoom past the station, they were satisfied. Members of the Ninth Team rarely had such an opportunity. As to actually boarding the train, only the commune accountant, "Xu the Blind,"\fn{A nickname; he wasn't really blind.} would have had that enviable experience.

"I didn't want to go anyway," said Cunni. "*Tunnel Warfare*, *Mine Warfare*, *The Battle from North to South*—I've seen them eight hundred times! I can recite every word in the scripts …"

Xiao Baozi stretched and sighed, "If you don't go, what else is there to do? The playing cards are already in shreds. I tried asking a friend to go through the back door at the commune supply cooperative, but he still hasn't been able to get more."

Apart from going to the movies and playing cards, the young people had nothing to do after work. The team subscribed to a provincial paper, but it only came into service when Xu the Blind held a meeting.\fn{Because most of the team members were illiterate.} And even he would always mispronounce "Confucius says" as "Confucius days." Of course, nobody would correct the only intellectual in the team. In the past, it had been popular to sing folk songs about love, but now these were considered "immoral" and forbidden.

Suddenly, Xiao Baozi excitedly sat up.

"Hey, Xu the Blind says that in foreign movies he has seen … Huh! That was really something!" He clucked his tongue and snickered. "There are …"

"What?" Cunni could not help asking, seeing the amused look on his face.

"Hee, hee, hee … I can't say it." Blushing, Xiao Baozi kept laughing to himself.

"What is it? Come on!"

"Okay, I'll tell, but don't you scold me!"

"Come on! Say it!"

"There are—" He stifled his laughter until he was doubled over. Cunni already anticipated the terrible thing he was going to tell. She picked up a clod of soil. Sure enough, Xiao Baozi gathered up his courage and proclaimed:

"There are men and women hugging and kissing! Hee, hee, hee …"

"Yich, disgusting!" Cunni blushed and quickly threw the clod of soil at him.

"It's true! Xu the Blind said so himself!" Xiao Baozi dodged the attack.

"Shameless!" Another clod of soil. The earth, mixed with particles of corn, fell on his shoulders and down his neck. He retaliated. A handful of soil dropped down Cunni;s open collar. The young woman pretended she was cross.

"Damn you!"

Xiao Baozi smiled, embarrassed. He took off his shirt and wiped his muscular chest with it. Cunni stiffened her mouth to show her an- noyance, and began to take off her sweater, intending to shake off the particles of soil sticking to her chest …

That instant, Xiao Baozi froze as if electrified. He stared blankly, his breath stopped, and a gush of warm blood rushed to his head. It was because when the young woman took off her sweater, her shirt was pulled up, exposing half of a pale, full, and bouncing breast.

Like a leopard springing from its cave, Xiao Baozi leaped forward. He embraced her tightly as if he had completely lost his senses. Startled, the young woman tried to lift her arm to block him. But when his burning, quivering lips touched her own moist lips, she was overcome with a mysterious dizziness. Her eyes closed and her outstretched arms were paralyzed. All her intentions to resist disappeared instantly. A kind of primitive reflex burned like a fierce flame in the blood of this pair of materially poor, spiritually barren, but physically robust young people. Traditional morality, rational dignity, the danger of breaking the law, the shame in a young woman's heart—all of these, everything, in a moment were burnt to ashes. …

119.76 **1.** The Fox Fairy's Wedding **2.** To Be The Best **3.** The Foxes **4.** The Pear Tree **5.** Whiskers And Bright Eyes **6.** The Fisher's Tale **7.** The Night Singer **8.** M'lady **9.** The Butterfly: **Nine Folktales**\fn{by Michael David Kwan (1934-2001)} Peking, China (M) 43

1

In the center of the town where I grew up, there used to be a deserted mansion. The place had been abandoned so many years ago that no one remembers the people who once lived there. By day curious passersby would sometimes peep through the cracks of the moldy wooden gate, but nobody ventured near after dark, for the house was said to be inhabited by Fox Fairies.

Magistrate Yinn, who became quite famous as the arbiter of right and wrong in the Emperor's court, came from the same town. We attended the Academy together, and a merry bunch we were, spending more time in taverns than at our books.

I remember it was a month or two before the Imperial Examinations. A group of us gathered at a tavern near the abandoned mansion to calm our pre-examination jitters. Yinn was in high spirits. He was one of those irritating people who excels without any apparent effort. I was quite the opposite and frankly jealous of his confidence. As the afternoon faded into dusk, those who had to make their way home past the haunted mansion were anxious to leave, for Fox Faeries might be abroad.

"Fox Fairies!" scoffed Yinn, rolling his eyes eloquently. "What rubbish! And coming from educated, sophisticated young men!"

That remark caused a great hubbub.

"There are Fox Fairies!" I cried before I could stop myself

"What is a Fox Fairy?" Yinn rounded on me with laughter in his eyes. I summoned up all the old wives' tales I'd ever heard.

“Why, they are very old foxes—”

“How old?” Yinn was already the stickler for detail that would make his name in later life.

“Hundreds of years old—” I countered.

“How can a fox live that long?” mused Yinn.

“By living in harmony with its environment,” I said trying not to sound lame. Though the others were silent I sensed their amusement at my discomfiture. Yinn called for another jar of wine. When it arrived he filled our cups before returning to the debate on Fox Fairies.

“If I live in harmony with my environment,” said Yinn with a gesture that encompassed the room, “I would be a fairy too. In the pickled state one becomes larger than life, therefore, supernatural!”

The others crowed with laughter.

“It’s not that simple,” I plunged on. “The ancient fox acquires wisdom and the gods permit it to take on human form between dusk and daybreak—”

“But to what purpose?” Yinn pursued straight-faced.

“It’s a test to see if the fox is worthy of evolving into a human—”

“Something like the Imperial Examinations!” someone gibed.

Everybody laughed.

“Fox Fairies bewitch people,” I cried, hot under the collar, “and they become creatures of the night too!”

Yinn laughed in my face.

“Since you don’t believe there are Fox Fairies,” I shouted, “spend the night in the haunted mansion and I will buy you a feast like you’ve never tasted before.”

It was a mean-spirited wager, for we all knew Yinn was poor and struggled to keep up with the rest of us. Yinn looked at the gloating faces around him. Those who had been laughing with him a moment earlier had switched sides. He deliberately downed another cup of wine, wiped his mouth on his sleeve, and replied,

“I accept.”

The group grew somber. Another crock of wine helped calm our quiverings.

*

It was completely dark when Yinn threw his cloak around his shoulders and swaggered in the direction of the haunted mansion. The rest of us followed at a safe distance to make sure he went in. When we saw him climb over the wall, we retreated to the tavern to wait for dawn.

I shall do my best to tell the story as I heard it from Yinn years ago. A sliver of moon filled the garden with strange shadows. Small unseen creatures scurried among the underbrush. Ghostly brambles plucked at him out of the dark as Yinn picked his way toward the mansion along a cobbled footpath slick with moss. The door gave with a shriek of rusty hinges, rousing a swarm of bats that flapped noisily about him for an instant. Then there was silence so thick you could cut it with a knife. The mansion was festooned with cobwebs and reeked with decay.

Yinn groped his way up a rickety staircase to a terrace overlooking the garden that had gone to seed. He found a spot that was clear of debris, wrapped himself in his cloak, and with a brick for a pillow, settled down for the night. Although he was determined to stay awake, the wine he had imbibed began to work on him. Lulled by the wind murmurs in the trees, Yinn soon fell asleep.

Hours later Yinn was wakened by the barking of foxes. One at first, answered by many others from far and near. Then he heard the sound of movement hurrying toward the house. In a moment footsteps not unlike his own sounded in the rooms below. Laughter and voices filtered up the staircase, though he could not catch the words. Yinn broke into a cold sweat. At that moment he wished he hadn’t accepted the wager to spend the night in this wretched house. For that matter, he wished he was anywhere but where he was.

Footsteps were coming up the stairs. Yinn huddled deeper into the folds of his cloak. Through slitted eyes he watched the top of the stairs. A young man dressed like a servant appeared, holding high a lamp, turning it this way and that peering into the gloom. Yinn caught a glimpse of a narrow, sharp-featured face crowned with sleek black hair done in a knot at the top of the head. The long, slanted eyes glowed yellow in the lamplight. The nostrils flared as he sniffed the air. The lips pulled back revealing sharp white teeth and the curiously pointed ears convinced Yinn this was no ordinary being. An old man with an imposing mane of silver white hair and a long flowing beard followed.

“What seems to be the matter, Steward?” the old man inquired in a cultivated voice. The servant raised his lamp and surveyed the terrace one more time.

“There!” he hissed pointing in Yinn’s direction.

The old man peered after him.

"It's only a human," he said equably. "Hold the lamp closer so I can see him more clearly."

The Steward approached gingerly and raised the lamp so that the light fell upon Yinn's face. The old man studied it, brows furrowed in thought. The old man had the gentle air of a scholar about him. Whereas his Steward had a cunning, almost mean look.

"Let me get rid of him, Master!" the Steward hissed.

"The human will not harm us," the old man replied in the same gentle tone. "Let us get on with our business."

The Steward started to protest, but the old man motioned him to be silent.

"Our guests will be arriving soon and there is work to do," he reminded the Steward. Seeing the other's crestfallen look, he relented a little.

"Have one of the pageboys watch him, but he mustn't be disturbed," he said. "I'm to be notified the moment he wakens."

Yinn screwed his eyes tight shut. His body ached in every muscle, but he gritted his teeth and forced himself to be still, convinced as long as the Fox Fairies believed he was asleep he would be safe.

The air was suddenly filled with the barking of foxes. Hundreds of them seemed to be converging upon the mansion. As suddenly as it started, the barking stopped. In a moment footsteps were scurrying past him mingled with the murmur of conversation and laughter. Music sounded somewhere in the house. Finally, the tantalizing aroma of food overcame fear.

Yinn opened his eyes.

He found himself on a terrace of gleaming white marble. Splendid red lacquered pillars supported a finely carved ceiling, under a roof of pale green tiles that glowed in the moonlight. In the garden, wonderfully gnarled pines leaned darkly over beds of moss. Red and white carp swam lazily in the pond. Night-blooming flowers scented the air.

This must be the way it used to be, thought Yinn. He was so engrossed that he did not notice the pageboy ordered to watch him, running off to report his waking.

A voice beside him startled Yinn out of his reverie. After introducing himself as Master Hu—a surname that has the same sound as the word for "fox"—the old man, wreathed in smiles, added,

"Kind sir, you must join my guests. It is my daughter's wedding, and a mortal among us on such an occasion is a good omen."

Yinn glanced through the open doors of the great hall, at the brocades, silks, and jewels of the guests assembled within.

"I couldn't," he stammered, more self-conscious of his disheveled appearance than afraid.

The old man seemed to read his mind, for he would not be put off. An elegant lady, slightly younger than the old man, emerged from the hall as they spoke.

"Here is my wife," said the old man by way of introduction. "Perhaps she can persuade you to join us."

The lady beamed. Her fathomless black eyes seemed to reach into his soul, and Yinn's resistance melted. She took his arm and drew him gently to the high table set at the far end of the great hall.

"You shall sit in the place of honor," she insisted.

The table was set with the finest porcelains and ivory, and spread with a dazzling array of food. Yinn thought of the fox's usual diet and shuddered. However, his hostess pressed such delicate tidbits upon him that he soon forgot his qualms. Once he was used to them, Yinn decided he had never been in better company. His fellow guests were not only elegantly turned out but highly intelligent. Indeed, their witty and wide-ranging conversation was worthy of the most fashionable salons in the town. Furthermore, he was accepted as an equal. Yinn forgot his companions were creatures of the night and began to enjoy himself.

A fanfare sounded outside. The guests rose as a body, craning their necks at the door. The old man beamed with pleasure as a handsome youth came striding across the room with all the assurance and grace of a young fox. After they had exchanged salutations, the old man drew the bridegroom to the seat beside Yinn.

"Come, my boy," he said. "Entertain our guest of honor, till the bride arrives."

More food and wine was served. All the niceties of a wedding feast were observed. Presently, the old man leaned toward his wife and in a whisper loud enough to be overheard inquired,

"Is it not time?"

"It is, my Lord," she twinkled and, turning, whispered instructions to her maid. As the servant left the room, laughter stopped and conversations broke off in mid-sentence. A hush of anticipation fell upon the room.

"What's happening?" inquired Yinn. The bridegroom had risen to his feet, flushed and eager.

"My bride is coming," he breathed.

The door to an adjoining room was flung wide. She was small, delicately formed, robed in red silk that enveloped her like a sheath of flame when she moved. The bridegroom bounded across the room to take her hand. A wave of applause swept the hall as the handsome young couple made their way slowly among their well-wishers, exchanging pleasantries. Yinn's heart hammered painfully against his ribs for she was the most exquisite maiden he had ever seen. Indeed, she was his ideal of feminine beauty and grace come to life. He couldn't keep his eyes off her. He almost swooned with joy when she came to sit beside him. He seemed to drown in her eyes, to be privy to her thoughts. The rest of the room faded away. Nothing existed for Yinn except this beautiful young girl. He was only vaguely aware of the old man ordering the Steward to fetch the gold goblets for a toast.

The Bride filled the goblets from a matching beaker.

"This is a very special wine," she said, offering Yinn the first goblet.

"Saved many years for just such an occasion," added her father.

It was a heady, full-bodied vintage with a subtle bouquet that coiled warmly through him. The joy of the new couple filled him with a nameless longing. The room took on the haze of a dream that he wanted to go on and on. With a pang he realized that the bride and groom were leaving and his ideal of beauty and grace would be lost forever. He downed the last of the wine. The goblet that she had handed him was the only tangible evidence of this night. He resolved to keep it as a remembrance of the exquisite girl who had captured his heart.

The other guests were taking their leave. As his host and hostess busied themselves seeing them out, Yinn slumped across the table pretending to be overcome by drink, but stealthily tucking the goblet into the voluminous sleeve of his robe.

The hall was soon empty except for the old couple and the Steward directing the servants cleaning up.

"Everything we borrowed must be returned to their proper owners," the old man reminded his Steward as he sank into a chair at the far end of the room to talk quietly with his spouse.

"My Lord, our guest of honor has fallen asleep!" Yinn heard his hostess remark to her husband.

"It's just as well," murmured the old man with an almost perceptible note of regret in his voice. "If he remembers anything of this night, I hope it will be as a pleasant dream—"

A heated exchange between the Steward and one of the servants cut him short.

"Is something wrong?" asked the old man.

"One of the gold goblets is missing!" cried the servant. The old man rose to his feet.

"That's impossible," he said to the Steward. "It must have been misplaced. Look again."

"We've searched the house—" countered the Steward. "Search again."

"But it's almost daybreak!" cried the Steward.

"Then waste no time!" The old man's tone brooked no argument.

The servants scattered through the house. Yinn remained slumped across the table, forcing himself to breathe evenly, watching the others from behind his eyelashes. In the distance a cock crowed. The old man tilted his head toward the sound. Otherwise, he showed no signs of agitation. His wife traced a fingertip across her cheek, and moistened her lips nervously with the tip of her tongue. The old man laid a comforting hand on her shoulder.

"Don't worry. They'll find it."

But they did not.

The cock crowed again.

The servants clustered fearfully at the door of the room, gibbering at one another.

The Steward's eyes narrowed as they settled on Yinn.

"Master, the human must have taken it!" he cried. His voice had become guttural, and he seemed to have difficulty forming words. "Let me search him."

"No!" The timbre of the old man's voice had also changed. "The human must not be disturbed!"

The Steward's nostrils quivered impatiently.

"Master, I … smell it … on him," he insisted.

"Perhaps he is right," the old man's wife murmured through the handkerchief she held to her face. "You mustn't hesitate, my Lord! It grows light!"

The cock crowed again.

"Please, Master! Before … it's … too … late," growled the Steward. His features were slowly reverting to those of a fox. The old man looked at Yinn long and hard.

"My friend wouldn't steal," he asserted.

"He's not your friend," wailed his wife, "he's a human and humans are greedy!"

Doubt clouded the old man's face. Twice Yinn felt the old man standing over him, as if about to wake him, and

then, sighing deeply, moved away.

"The goblet is lost," he sighed, "but only for a while. It will be returned to its rightful owner when the time comes."

Outside the sky was turning light. One by one the servants, the Steward, and even their mistress were turning into foxes. As the first streaks of sunlight touched the mansion, the old man's features melted into that of a gray fox that disappeared down the stairs.

Yinn kept still a moment longer. When he was sure he was alone he picked himself up. The great hall was heaped with rubble where the roof had caved in. The terrace was littered with broken tiles and the garden choked with weeds. Not a trace of the glittering festivities of the night before remained.

That was Yinn's story when he joined us at the tavern.

"Fox Fairy's wedding, indeed!" I sneered, out of sorts, after a wretched night worrying while Yinn was having the time of his life. I was not a gracious loser. "Let's see the goblet."

From the folds of his cloak Yinn produced a small gold goblet, the likes of which I had never seen before or since. When I finally found my tongue, I croaked rather lamely,

"It's the most beautiful goblet I've ever seen."

A profound change came over Yinn after that escapade. He submerged himself in his studies. He shunned company, preferring solitude. Now and then he would go to the haunted mansion, and gaze at it, lost in thought. It was bandied about that Yinn was bewitched. Nevertheless, he took top honors in the Imperial Examination, just as he said he would. Soon afterwards he was appointed magistrate of Fei and left our town. I failed the examination, went into the family business, and stayed.

*

Two decades would pass before I crossed paths with Yinn again. Meanwhile, he became a famous judge in the law courts. Though I followed his career with interest we did not correspond. Therefore, a note announcing his return to our town, and inviting me to dinner at our old haunt, both surprised and delighted me.

The tavern we knew in our youth had become a fashionable restaurant, and Yinn had reserved its finest private room. I was astonished by his appearance. Whereas I had grown fat and gray, Yinn seemed hardly a day older than when we last met. We passed a pleasant evening reminiscing on the old days. Inevitably the conversation turned to the night he spent in the haunted mansion.

"Do you remember that beautiful goblet?" he asked.

"How can I forget?" I chided. "It cost me a feast."

"It has gone back to its rightful owner," Yinn smiled mysteriously, "just as the Fox Faery said it would …"

Shortly after he had arrived at Fei, a merchant named Chu invited Yinn to a banquet celebrating the birth of a daughter. At the end of the feast, Chu bade his servant bring out a set of gold goblets for a toast. When the servant appeared with the goblets and one was missing, Chu flew into a rage.

"I've been robbed!" he cried. "These are heirlooms that have been in the family for generations!" And rounding upon his hapless servant, threatened him with a sound flogging unless he produced the missing goblet at once. Hearing the commotion, Yinn offered to mediate. When he had both sides of the story, he asked to examine one of the goblets.

"I think I may be able to help," he said. He took paper and brush and wrote a note.

"Take this to my house and bring what my steward gives you."

The servant flew to the magistrate's house and a short while later returned with a brocaded box. Yinn presented it to Chu. To his amazement, the box contained a goblet that exactly matched the others.

"Which brings me to the reason for returning to this town," Yinn added at the end of his recital. "I recently married and plan to buy a certain house and live here."

There was a peculiar twinkle in his eyes as he gazed out the window at the mansion looming darkly down the street.

"Surely … not … that place," I shuddered.

"No other," smiled Yinn. "I've waited a long time."

I couldn't be sure whether he meant he had waited a long time to marry or to buy the house. Yinn pressed a finger to his lips, and then, very deliberately, he winked.

We promised to keep in touch, as people do, but never did. There was talk not long afterward that a stranger had bought the mansion and was actually living in it. However, nothing was done to make it livable, nor was anyone ever seen going in or out. Brave souls who passed it at night claim to have seen lights and heard music and laughter from within. I was curious but never got up the courage to investigate.

During a thunderstorm, one summer's night, the old mansion was struck by lightning and burned to the ground.

I never saw Yinn again.

2

Lao Mu wrestled a bare living from the same few acres of mean earth as his father before him. He was only thirty but seemed older. Too poor to find a wife, he lived alone, with only an old ox for company. Lao Mu grew taciturn, shy, and unsociable. But his love of the earth and his affinity to the wild creatures of the fields, the woods, and the sky sustained him.

Every autumn hunting parties went through the woods that bordered the land he worked, leaving maimed creatures to die in the underbrush in their wake. Lao Mu was cutting down corn stalks one afternoon when a fox streaked out of the woods and disappeared in the direction of his cottage.

"Did you see a fox?" shouted one of the beaters who came pounding after it, ahead of the hunters.

Lao Mu glanced dully at him and went back to what he was doing.

"I say, did you see a fox?" the man roared.

Lao Mu pointed in the opposite direction to where the fox had gone.

"It went that way," shouted the beater, pointing in the direction Lao Mu indicated, as his master joined them.

"Then let's be off before it gets away!" the hunter, who was Lao Mu's landlord, said in a high, affected voice.

Lao Mu watched the hunting party out of the corner of his eye till they were out of sight before sauntering home. A rude fence made of odd bits of wood and sorghum stalks surrounded his cottage. At one side was a lean-to where he kept the ox. Beside it was a haystack, which used to be as neat as a pin. Something had dug a hole in it, causing it to tip forward at a drunken angle. Lao Mu squatted down and peered into the opening partially hidden by whisps of straw. Just as he expected, a large fox was hiding there. Its glossy chestnut-colored coat and muzzle, streaked with gray, indicated it was probably quite old. Its right paw was bleeding.

"You'll be safe here, fox," Lao Mu murmured.

The fox lifted its snout and gave its tail a flick as though it understood.

Lao Mu broke up a *wuowuoto* (a cone-shaped bun made of corn meal) and placed it by the opening in the haystack, together with a dish of water. He didn't know what else he could give the poor creature except what he ate himself

Next morning Lao Mu found a nice fresh cabbage and two oranges on his doorstep. Someone had put them there during the night, for they were wet with dew. He was especially delighted with the oranges, for they did not grow in the north.

In the following days, Lao Mu shared whatever food he had with the injured fox, and mysterious gifts of fruit and vegetables appeared on his doorstep. Sometimes, when he came in at dusk, he found the cottage had been swept. Unseen hands had also lit a fire in the hearth and set a kettle of tea to brew over it. These occurrences did not perturb Lao Mu. He was a simple man who believed one's good or evil deed comes back in an unbroken cycle. He attributed the gifts to the fugitive hiding in his haystack, for he believed foxes could work miracles. He thanked the fox for each gift, and its greenish eyes seemed to respond with pleasure. Thus a friendship began between man and beast.

The fox gradually recovered. One morning when Lao Mu went to the haystack, it was gone. That day Lao Mu went to work with a heavy heart. He had gotten used to the wild creature. He missed talking to it, telling it things he wouldn't dream of revealing to another soul. For under his dull, placid exterior Lao Mu seethed with dreams and aspirations. Though the conversation was one-sided, he sensed the fox understood. Before the fox came into his life, he used to talk to the ox, but the self-absorbed ox had different sensibilities. It was not the same, and Lao Mu felt terribly alone.

Lao Mu spent the day burning corn stalks and returning the ashes to the earth. At dusk he was eager to head home, for he was famished. As he came onto the footpath leading to his cottage, he almost collided with a gentleman dressed in a rich, brown robe topped by a short, gray mantle. The gentleman nodded and smiled.

"Are you lost, sir?" Lao Mu muttered ducking his head.

"Why, no," the other chuckled. "I'm on my way home."

"I've never seen your lordship hereabouts before," stammered Lao Mu.

"I'm not a lordship," the gentleman corrected him with a twinkle. "Call me Mister Huli."

Lao Mu stole a glance at the gentleman whose name sounded like the word for "fox." The man was ageless,

with gold flecks dancing in the depths of his greenish eyes that seemed somehow familiar.

"I live nearby," said Mister Huli, taking Lao Mu by the elbow as though they were old friends. "I've been shopping in the village," he said holding out his basket.

Lao Mu glanced at its contents in spite of himself. He had forgotten the taste of pork and wine!

"Come, dine with me," invited Mr. Huli. Though every fiber in his body yearned to accept, Lao Mu demurred.

"Perhaps your wife is waiting?" asked Mister Huli softly. Lao Mu shook his head, turning quite red.

"Oh dear!" exclaimed Mister Huli momentarily embarrassed; then he brightened. "In that case there's no reason why you shouldn't come." Mister Huli's grasp on Lao Mu's elbow tightened. A puff of wind blew dust in Lao Mu's face, causing him to blink.

Next moment he found himself in a long, narrow room that was simply but elegantly furnished. The wood of table and chairs glowed with warm lights. The scrolls on the walls and the few ornaments scattered about lent the room an air of peace and tranquillity. A delicately carved moon door draped with silk curtains separated it from an inner chamber from which wafted the aroma of food being prepared.

"Welcome to my humble home," said Mister Huli. He seated Lao Mu in the place of honor facing south and, placing a tray of sweetmeats and tea before him, urged his guest to take some refreshments while they waited for dinner.

Lao Mu was overwhelmed. The gentry had always treated him with contempt, so he simply did not know how to react. Mister Huli soon put him at his ease. Presently the curtain separating them from the inner room parted, and Mister Huli led the way to a table that groaned with food. The host picked at the food but pressed the choicest morsels upon his guest. The warm honey-colored wine dissolved the last of Lao Mu's reserve.

"Either I'm dreaming," he babbled, "or I'm tipsy!"

Lao Mu woke on his *kang* (or sleeping platform), not quite sure whether he had dreamed the events he remembered so vividly or whether they had really happened.

It was not till the north wind was blowing that he met Mister Huli again. The old gentleman showed Lao Mu the cache of roots and herbs he had gathered that day, naming each and comfortably describing its medicinal properties.

"I could show you many things. There is wealth in those woods, if one has the knowledge," said Mister Huli, fixing Lao Mu with a meaningful gaze, "and an opportunity to serve one's fellow man too." he concluded, twirling a mysterious looking root between his fingers.

All the blood rushed to Lao Mu's head. Everything he knew, he learned by trial and error. There was so much he longed to know but lacked someone to ask. Mr. Huli seemed approachable, but admitting ignorance to oneself is one thing whereas putting it into words for another's ear is something else. Sensing his hesitation, Mister Huli lowered the hood of his cloak so that only his greenish eyes showed.

"We shall talk again," he said with laughter in his voice. A wind came up, and he disappeared into the swirling dust.

Lao Mu was restless in the short, dark winter days that followed. He went into the woods in search of the herbs Mister Huli had shown him, but it was hard-going, for he did not know where to look. Thus, he was overjoyed when he came upon Mister Huli on a similar errand.

"We are well met indeed," Mister Huli chortled. "You can help me. I need a pair of strong hands to dig some roots," and he held out his scarred right hand to Lao Mu. "It's not much use," he sighed ruefully.

Lao Mu wanted to say something appropriate but couldn't find the words, so he nodded. The two went deep into the woods, Mister Huli pointing out this and that as they went. Lao Mu's mind raced after him, committing every word to memory. As the sun dipped beneath the horizon Mister Huli announced,

"You will dine with me. Afterward we will sample a tea made from roots you helped me gather."

Lao Mu bobbed his head in eager consent. He had learned so much that afternoon, he thirsted for more. Later, over tea, Lao Mu listened, mesmerized, while Mister Huli talked. Out of the blue Mister Huli asked,

"If you could have one wish, what would it be?"

Startled, Lao Mu blurted out the first thing that came to mind.

"To be … the best."

Once spoken, those words made him squirm.

"What do you mean by the best?" Mister Huli asked softly, but his question seemed like an explosion.

Lao Mu searched the room for an answer. Mr. Huli followed his gaze. Watching his parents work themselves to death, Lao Mu swore he would not end up the same way. Being the best was having a life like his landlord, Wang, whose house he visited timidly once every quarter to pay his rent and taxes. Finally he mumbled,

“To have … land … To be … respected. To live decently …”

Mr. Huli’s face clouded momentarily, then his voice sounded in Lao Mu’s brain,

“I will teach you, if you put yourself entirely in my hands. But,” he warned, “knowledge is a two-edged sword that can either enrich or destroy you.”

“Command me, Master!” cried Lao Mu falling on his knees and banging his head against the ground.

Mister Huli raised him gently.

“No need for groveling,” he admonished.

Lao Mu’s education began at once. Mister Huli appeared at dusk each day, and the next instant, Lao Mu would find himself in the older man’s book-lined study.

Mister Huli opened a whole new world to Lao Mu. He discoursed on the past and the present and how that knowledge could be used to gain an inkling of the future. But Mister Huli was also practical. He taught Lao Mu how to nurture the land, to rotate crops, where to dig for water. Lao Mu soaked up everything like a sponge. When winter faded into spring he was eager to put what he learned into practice.

During the season of toil Mr. Huli did not appear. However, a fox came to the edge of the woods from time to time as if to watch him from a distance. Next autumn, Lao Mu’s niggardly scrap of land responded with a bountiful harvest. When the gray pall of acrid smoke from slash burning filled the air, Mister Huli returned.

“Master,” Lao Mu cried, running to greet him. “I have such news!” For the first time in his life he did not worry about paying his rent and taxes. His larder was full. There were even a few strings of coins hidden under a loose brick in a corner of his *kang*, earned from selling herbal remedies.

Mister Huli seemed pleased, but there was still much to learn he told Lao Mu. The lessons began again.

Several winters later, Wang, the landlord, fell on hard times, and Lao Mu bought the land he worked at a good price, plus another small parcel that had been lying fallow. Lao Mu’s life was changing. His success earned him the villagers’ grudging respect. Soon they were going to him for advice on this and that. Even the marriage broker started coming round with offers. Lao Mu took everything in stride. Finally, he thought he was on the way to realizing his dream. However, deep inside there was a nagging feeling that something was missing. He broached the question to his mentor at the first opportunity.

“Master, when will I really be the best?”

Mister Huli’s eyebrows rose so high they almost disappeared into his cap.

“It’s not a question of ‘when,’” he replied, “but how you feel here,” and he lay a hand gently over Lao Mu’s heart.

“How should I feel?” cried Lao Mu. The only model he had was Wang, his former landlord.

Mister Huli pursed his lips in thought. Lao Mu waited with bated breath for him to speak.

“Perhaps you should be introduced to polite society,” Mister Huli finally said.

“When?” inquired Lao Mu eagerly.

“This very evening,” Mister Huli grinned. “We shall attend a banquet, which 1 think you will find. . . instructive—”

“But 1 can’t,” wailed Lao Mu, “I haven’t the clothes and—”

Before he could finish, a whirlwind deposited him in the foyer of a grand house. In a mirror he caught a reflection of himself and he couldn’t believe his eyes. His face was scrubbed, his hair was lacquered, he was dressed in an elegant brown robe, and a full purse made a pleasant bulge in his pocket. Why, he and Mister Huli might have passed for father and son!

“Do not accept a third cup of wine,” said Mister Huli in a low voice, “and do not tarry when 1 bid you to leave.” Before he finished speaking their host was bearing down upon them.

“What shall I do?” stammered Lao Mu in a panic, for their host was none other than Wang.

Mister Huli greeted Wang warmly and introduced Lao Mu as his *protégé*.

“Have I had the pleasure before?” Wang asked searching Lao Mu’s face.

Lao Mu glibly passed himself off as a recent arrival from the south. His impersonation of a gentleman traveling for pleasure was flawless. His manners and his witty *repartée* drew approving smiles all around. Seated between a man of letters and a man of business, Lao Mu realized how little it took to impress those shallow, venal men. He partook of the endless dishes that were placed before him, but he refused the wine.

When a wine from the south was presented, the unctuous businessman, noticing his abstinence, pressed a cup upon him. Lao Mu could not refuse. As the wine trickled down his throat the room filled with a golden glow like sunlight filtered through fog on a winter’s day. Lao Mu saw himself, a few years older, building a new house. Not a mansion but a far cry from the cottage he lived in nevertheless. Squares of red paper with the double happiness

symbol written in gold adorned doors and windows, signifying an imminent wedding. The golden fog cleared, but the happiness lingered.

"This is indeed a wonderful wine!" he heard himself saying.

"Then you must have more," urged his companion.

Mister Huli's warning sounded in Lao Mu's brain. This is only the second cup, he thought, and drank again. Once again a golden mist enveloped him.

This time he saw himself older still, living in the mansion where he was feasting. His wildest dream had come true! Lao Mu saw himself swaggering through the rooms. Everything was his. Flatterers dogged his steps, hanging on his every word. Finally he was the best.

Suddenly the scene changed. Fawning smiles turned into looks of cunning, greed, envy, and hate. Grasping hands plucked at him from all sides like ravenous birds of prey.

He was relieved when the vision faded.

"They've all gone to the gaming tables," murmured his table companion. "The two of us must finish this excellent wine."

Before Lao Mu could refuse, the man had refilled his cup. He downed it shakily, in spite of Mister Huli's warning.

Instantly, choking gray fog enveloped him, filling him with such dread that he began to weep.

"I didn't think you were the sort that weeps in his cups," his companion chuckled nastily. "Come. A spot of gambling will cheer you!"

At that moment Mister Huli's voice sounded loud and clear.

"Come with me!"

Mister Huli was waiting at the door, stern and unsmiling, but the other was equally insistent. Lao Mu was drawn to the noise and gaiety of the gaming tables like a moth to a flame.

"Come at once!" Mister Huli sounded angry.

"Just one throw of the dice!" Lao Mu cried defiantly.

The mist before his eyes dispersed. He watched the dice roll across the table as if through the wrong end of a telescope. A deluge of voices overwhelmed him. He watched helplessly as hands snatched up the coins he threw on the table, then seized his purse.

"No!" he shouted, striking out blindly at those nearest him. "You can't take everything I've got!"

An ominous silence fell upon the crowd.

"Thrash him!" his host was the first to break the silence.

The veneer of civility fell away with horrible swiftness. They gave Lao Mu a sound beating before tossing him out of the house.

Bruised, his fine clothes in tatters, Lao Mu trudged home. The lamp was trimmed, the fire lit, and a kettle of tea simmered over the flames when he arrived. Lao Mu never thought he could be so glad to be beside his quiet hearth. It came to him that all he needed was within his own four walls, and the best that life can offer is a tranquil heart.

3

Wong Shung's troubles began with the war. The invaders left his town in shambles, but he stayed on. Being a good cabinet maker, he was sure of a reasonable living once reconstruction began. While the town was still reeling, stragglers from the warring armies descended upon it like locusts. What they could not carry away they destroyed. Wong Shung watched helplessly as his home and shop were reduced to ashes. Still Wong Shung would not budge from the place generations of Wongs called home.

Misfortune comes in threes. When the plague carried off his family, all he could think of was staying alive. He tied a few possessions he salvaged from the ruins of his home in a bundle, strapped it to his back, and trudged out of the town. Being a frugal man, the cache of coins hidden under the floor of his bed chamber made a comforting bulge in his pocket. A craftsman can make a living anywhere, Wong Shung reassured himself.

The road that led out of the town was crowded with people leaving for the same reason. Wong Shung had no plans except to leave the place that had become too painful to live in. Ten miles out, the road forked. He unstrapped the load from his back and sat down to gnaw a dry bun, and to figure out which way to go.

"Hey, brother!" a stranger shouted. "Come with us! There's a rich town down the road. We'll all make a living there!"

Wong Shung shook his head. Too many people were headed in that direction. He would be better off taking the road that branched off the other way.

The road ribboned through ruined farmland toward a bluish-purple smudge of mountains on the horizon. The farm houses he passed were burned out shells. The light began to fade from the sky. Birds gossiping in the trees fell silent. The wind lowed like a desolate ghost in the black emptiness that engulfed him.

Wong Shung sat down in the lee of a huge boulder at the side of the road. He was discovering how ill-prepared he had been when he set out, for he had eaten all the food earlier in the day. In spite of the rumblings of his stomach, he wrapped himself in his cloak and, pillowing his head on his belongings, tried to sleep.

As he drifted off, a noise woke him. For a moment he lay quite still, until his sluggish brain told him what he heard was the hoof beat of approaching horses dragging some kind of vehicle. Wong Shung quickly hefted his possessions, pulled his voluminous cloak over them, and retreated behind an untidy stack of sorghum leaves and stalks in the field nearby. Within minutes a pair of black horses pulling a carriage, traveling without lights, careened around a bend in the road. It carne to an abrupt stop near the spot where Wong Shung lay shivering with fright.

The driver leaped off as agile as a cat. First he went over to his horses, whose muzzles he stroked tenderly, whispering to them as though they were children. Then he turned to the fields and stood sniffing the air.

"Come out, come out, whoever you are," he called in an odd sing-song. He seemed to stare right at Wong Shung.

Wong Shung scarcely breathed. He screwed his eyes tight, as though by shutting him out the cloaked figure standing at the edge of the road would disappear.

The man chuckled.

"I know you're there."

These days it pays to be cautious, Wong Shung thought. The man might be a heartless brigand who would just as soon rob and kill you as give you the time of day! Wong Shung would have burrowed into the ground if he could. Since he could not, he lay like a limp rag, hoping the other would go away. Behind his tight shut lids, every sound became magnified. The man had stepped back to the coach, talking to someone in a low voice. Just as he thought the coach was about to move on, a foot landed lightly beside his head. Next moment, a hand seized Wong Shung by the hair and hauled him to his feet.

"Well, what have we here?" chortled his captor.

"Just a poor wayfarer, my Lord," quavered Wong Shung. "Please don't hurt me! I can't bear pain!"

"My Lord!" the man mimicked. A woman's tinkling laugh issued from the darkened coach. Wong Shung tried to struggle free, but the other quite easily lifted him off the ground and dragged him on tiptoes toward the coach.

"I won't hurt you," said the coachman in a good-humored voice, "if you promise not to run away."

Wong Shung quickly nodded. The other pinned Wong Shung against the black lacquered side of the coach with his body, blocking any possibility of escape.

"What did you find, brother dear?" the young woman's voice sounded from within the coach.

The man pressed his face close to Wong Shung's.

"A man,"" he replied shortly.

"What is he like?"

"Medium."

"What on earth does that mean?" the young woman's voice rose a pitch.

Wong Shung thought it meant "ordinary," the way people use words such as "nice" and "pretty" when they really mean something could be better. In a flash of anger, he tried to push the man aside, thinking he could bolt into the night. But the man was too strong for him. One long-fingered hand coiled around his neck and the other seized him by the seat of his pants. Next moment, Wong Shung landed on the seat beside the driver's with such a thud that he felt his brain had been jarred loose. In a daze, he realized the coach was careering down the road. The driver whipped his team into a fine froth. Wong Shung hung on to his perch till his knuckles ached. It was all he could do to keep from being flung off The driver shrieked a peculiar sounding song at the sky, which roused flocks of sleeping birds into noisy flight.

Finally the driver allowed the horses to slacken their pace. Wong Shung breathed a sigh of relief

"Who are you, sir?" Wong Shung gasped. Now that his eyes had adjusted to the dark, Wong Shung saw a narrow face with high cheekbones; a long, delicate nose; and a wide mouth.

"You may call me Fox, for Fox Fairy," said the man. Jutting his chin at the coach he added,

"She is my sister, Hu Mei."

"You make sport of me, sir," Wong Shung did his best to sound indignant. Ancient foxes who take human form at night only exist in fairy tales, he told himself Nevertheless, he shot his companion another nervous glance. Except for the eyes that seemed to pierce Wong Shung's very soul, his captor was no different from any other human.

"Where are you taking me?" The driver studied him before answering,

"Anywhere is better than where you came from."

Wong Shung was at a loss for a rebuttal.

"Don't sulk," said the driver over his shoulder. "There is nothing as unappetizing as a balky guest who is expected to stay a while."

Wong Shung's hair stood on end.

"It's no good holding me for ransom," he said breathlessly. "There isn't a soul left in the family to pay. You might as well let me go." The driver shook his head and sighed.

"Wong Shung, you are such a ninny! Relax!"

Wong Shung's eyes went wide. How did the man know his name! The man chuckled.

"I know a lot about you."

Fox shook the reigns, and the coach went barreling through the night again. Wong Shung was glad when it came to a halt in front of a large house. Fox leaped off and hurried inside. Presently he returned with a lighted lamp. He reached up and plucked Wong Shung off the coach.

"Light the way for my sister," he said, handing him the lamp. "I'll see to the horses. The servants are asleep."

He held the coach door open, and a heavily cloaked young woman alighted. For a moment her hood cast a deep shadow across her face. As she paused and turned, the light caught a small, heart-shaped face, dominated by a pair of luminous, amber-colored eyes; a small mouth; and a pert but stubborn little nose. She was a classic beauty. Fox's booted foot, applied firmly to Wong Shung's rump, propelled him into the house ahead of the young woman.

The young woman directed him down a long corridor to a room. The air was stale. The furniture was shrouded in sheets heavy with dust. The young woman surveyed the huge, unlived-in room disdainfully. With an imperious gesture she indicated she wanted a window opened. Wong Shung leaped to comply, conscious of being observed as he wrestled with the rusty latch. The window swung open suddenly. Wong Shung turned almost colliding with the young woman who was right behind him. Holding the lamp high, she examined him as if he were an exotic animal. Just then Fox entered from somewhere in the depths of the house.

"What took so long, dear brother?" the young woman asked petulantly without taking her eyes off Wong Shung. The fingers of one slender hand drumming the top of a table beside her showed her impatience.

"The horses had to be seen to," replied Fox. "I expect you want to retire …" he added.

Hu Mei shrugged impatiently. Fox took the lamp from her.

"You will sleep in here," he said to Wong Shung, raising the lamp above his head, spinning on his heels to show off the room. "Use the *kang* or the *chaise*, whichever you prefer. Do not touch anything else. And don't even think of escape."

He escorted his sister from the room, leaving Wong Shung in the dark.

Now that he had a good look at his strange captors, Wong Shung was less afraid. They certainly fit tales about Fox Fairies who take the form of a beautiful woman or a dashing young man. However, he resolutely dismissed the notion as nonsense. It was easier to believe the pair were merely using superstition to throw him off balance. Meanwhile, having a roof over his head was far better than sleeping in the open. As Wong Shung went to shut the window against the night air, he noticed shadows moving against a lighted pane across the courtyard. Voices carried in the stillness.

"Are you sure this one is suitable?" Wong Shung heard Hu Mei say in a lilting voice. He could hear her brother's voice indistinctly from somewhere further in the room. Whatever he said evidently displeased his sister. Her tone became quite angry, even shrill. The shadows flickering across the patch of light showed that both were agitated. As he came closer, Wong Shung heard Fox say in a placating tone,

" … but he has other qualities. You need someone who …"

They moved out of earshot again. Then the light went out.

Stretched out on the *kang*, Wong Shung pondered what he had overheard. He was certain brother and sister had been discussing him. The man who called himself Fox obviously fancied he knew a great deal about him, but it was Hu Mei's opinion that mattered, and it had to do with his appearance. Instinctively his hand went to his face.

"What is the matter with the way I look?" Wong Shung wondered.

A fortune-teller once said his high forehead and bushy eyebrows that met across the bridge of his nose were signs of talent and intelligence. And he was an excellent craftsman and wood carver, even if he said so himself. It's true his head is squarish, but his heavy jaw indicates strong-mindedness. (So far, so good.) But the squat nose with the flared nostrils, the thick, dark lips, especially the round eyes undid all that. They made him look bovine. The last image in his mind as he drifted off was Hu Mei scrutinizing him, head tilted mockingly to one side.

The sun was high when Wong Shung awoke. A three-tiered food carrier stood on a table with utensils laid out for one. A jug of water and a basin stood just inside the door. For the moment he was too famished to consider anything but food. He wolfed a plate of warm meat dumplings and a bowl of noodles in a rich broth, followed by two bowls of an excellent tea, before he read the note on the table.

"My sister and I hope you will be comfortable in these surroundings. As soon as we decide on a commission, we shall communicate it to you personally. In the meantime, our servants will see to your needs."

A quick look around the room revealed that under the dust covers, the once elegant furniture was dilapidated from long neglect. It was evident that new furniture was needed. However, one does not kidnap a craftsman to furnish one's house, thought Wong Shung indignantly. The more he thought about it, the angrier he got. The door to the room was lightly shut. He opened it and yelled for the servants loudly, but no one came. Undistinguishable sounds sent him darting down the hallway, shouting, opening and shutting doors. The rooms on either side were all dusty and empty. Finally it dawned upon him he was alone.

Who are these people? What do they want? Why do they live in isolation? One question led to another. What if they are Fox Fairies? Fear reared its ugly head again. Wong Shung decided he must make the best of the daylight hours, when Fox Fairies are helpless, to get as far away from this place as he could. He retraced his footsteps to the room where he had slept, picked up his bundle, and went down the corridor in the opposite direction, looking for the entrance foyer he remembered from the night before. In one room Wong Shung came upon a red wood cabinet with shiny brass fittings that looked new but had a broken latch. Curiosity made him look inside. What he saw made Wong Shung's jaw drop. He leaned his head against the cupboard, took a few deep breaths, and looked again.

Inside were gold ingots stacked in a pyramid. There was more gold than he dared dream of, and it was within reach!

"Gold is the key to the future!" flashed through Wong Shung's mind. Suddenly, everything was possible.

Wong Shung tiptoed across the room with his heart in his mouth, and pressed his ear to the window. All he heard was sparrows chirping and wind rustling the trees. He tried a door that led outside and opened it a crack. The narrow strip of courtyard that came into view was as neglected as the rest of the house. There was no sign of another living soul.

Still, he had to be sure. He stole across the courtyard to a large window with an elaborately carved frame that must have been the room where Fox and his sister had been the night before. Silence. He wet a fingertip with spittle and applied it to the rice paper window covering, working it gently until he made a hole large enough to peep through. Two large foxes lay curled on the floor, sound asleep.

Wong Shung broke into a sweat. He hurried back to the cupboard, dumped his precious tools on the floor, rolled up as many gold ingots as he could carry in some clothes, and strapped the bundle on his back. Instead of trying to find the entrance to the house, he clambered up an old chestnut tree in the middle of the courtyard, then swung onto the roof He slithered lizard-fashion onto its peak and looked over the edge. A clump of trees screened the house from open fields beyond. Wong Shung slid down the other side and dropped lightly onto the ground. He had no idea where he was, nor did he care. His only thought was to get as far away as possible from the foxes' house before sunset.

Wong Shung tried to comfort himself with the thought that it was war and its awful aftermath that forced him to steal. Besides, what good is gold to a pair of foxes?

But was he sure Fox and Hu Mei were the sleeping foxes he saw and not rich eccentrics? An inner voice reminded Wong Shung there is one set of laws for the poor and another for the rich. The rich would exact a terrible penalty if he were caught.

Pursued by disquieting thoughts, Wong Shung discovered that a thief is friendless. Afraid of being caught, constantly on guard against those who might try to separate him from his ill-gotten gains, he avoided the main thoroughfares. In spite of the gold, he was cold, and hungry, subsisting on wild berries, sleeping in abandoned fields.

Finally, Wong Shung struck a bargain with a good-natured muleteer. In exchange for loading and unloading his cart along the way, the muleteer agreed to take Wong Shung as far as he was going.

Weeks later, Wong Shung arrived at a depot along the Grand Canal. He exchanged one gold ingot for cash at a merchant house and bought passage on a barge leaving for the south.

The northern plain where he was born was far behind, but Wong Shung was still fearful. He wandered restlessly until he found a quiet little town near Lake Dong Ting and settled. With a small part of his gold, he bought new tools and set up a workshop. The rest he buried under the floor of his house. He worked hard, lived frugally, and did not seek the company of other people.

Wong Shung gradually became renowned not only as a cabinet maker but as a wood carver. Hu Mei's image had been so indelibly imprinted upon his mind that he was compelled to reproduce it in wood carvings of such refinement, beauty, and grace that the pieces seemed to breathe. Before long, his work was in such demand that he had to take apprentices to help fulfill his commissions.

Wong Shung's art became his life. The rewards it brought were only a secondary consideration. He was known as a pleasant man, with a ready smile and a kindly word for everyone. However, a peculiar stillness set him apart. He was hard to know. Wong Shung became a recluse.

Ten years passed. Late one night there was a knock on the door. Wong Shung never received visitors after dark. However, a new apprentice answered the door. A moment later he announced a gentleman to see the master. Wong Shung was about to rebuke the boy, but the visitor had already followed him into the room. Wong Shung stood with his mouth open as the man who called himself Fox crossed the space between them in a few quick strides.

"I am delighted to see you," cried Fox as he pressed a coin into the apprentice's hand and waved him from the room. He waited till they were alone before he picked up a candle to examine Wong Shung's face.

"You've changed," murmured Fox.

Wong Shung's face was lined. The glossy black hair was mostly gray. Furthermore, his eyes were weak, and the tremor in his hands forced him to work less than he liked. On the other hand, Fox looked not a day older than Wong Shung remembered.

"I'm a Fox Fairy," Fox twinkled mischievously, reading Wong Shung's thoughts. "We neither age nor die. However," he added, beaming, "you are exactly the way I hoped to find you! Successful. Respected. Well-to-do."

Wong Shung did not know what to make of that remark. He screwed up his courage and took the plunge.

"I'm sorry I stole your gold," he blurted. "I was desperate. I will pay you back with interest if you will allow me a day or two to make arrangements—"

His visitor let out a short, derisive laugh.

"If I wanted the gold, I would take it," he said hopping nimbly from one spot to the other, landing unfailingly on each of Wong Shung's hiding places under the floor.

Wong Shung blanched. Through a great buzzing in his ears, he heard Fox say the gold was payment in advance.

"What do you want?" quavered Wong Shung. Fox smiled broadly, in no hurry to divulge what was on his mind.

"In exchange for the gold, which is of no use to us," he began teasingly, "my sister and I crave that which is of no use to you."

While Wong Shung pondered that riddle, Fox padded about the room, examining various likenesses of his sister, both finished and in progress. He stopped before a life-size sculpture of the young woman dancing, turning it this way and that to catch the light. It was the first of countless representations of Hu Mei that Wong Shung had made. In his own mind it was his finest. For that reason he guarded it jealously.

"My sister will be flattered," murmured Fox appreciatively.

Wong Shung was dismayed. If his visitor demanded It, he would have to give it up, and its loss would break his heart. .

The conversation took another tack.

"It is time my sister was wed," announced Fox, his gaze traveling from the statue to Wong Shung.

Wong Shung was single. All these years he had pined for an ideal mate, without ever identifying what it was he yearned for. In a flash, he knew. That Fox would bring up the matter at all was a sign that whatever differences might exist were no longer important.

For a brief moment Wong Shung was about to ask for Hu Mei's hand. Then he glimpsed himself reflected in the glass door of a cupboard, and reddened. He was old before his time. He wished he were young and vigorous again, but it was too late. Fox watched him, a knowing smile tugging at his lips.

Wong Shung brusquely thrust that impossible thought from his mind.

"You will need the gold for your sister's dowry," Wong Shung said in an effort to divert Fox's attention from

the statue. Fox settled himself in a chair with a weary sigh.

"It's not as simple as that," he began. "You see me as I was during the period known in your history as the Warring States."\fn{A period of some 500 years, conveniently demarcated from 771-221BC.}

"That was more than a thousand years ago," breathed Wong Shung, "nobody lives that long."

"Fox Fairies do," said Fox. "My sister is a little younger. However, being forever young and beautiful becomes a burden eventually."

"A burden I would give my soul for," muttered Wong Shung.

Fox continued as though he hadn't heard.

"By day we are foxes. At night we are like you, except we are doomed to be mimics and observers. My sister and I have wandered every inch of All Under Heaven, tasted all the pleasures, but we are unfulfilled. We long to be real participants of the human condition."

Wong Shung thought to himself, if I could have youth and an infinite life span, I would ask for nothing more. Fox picked that thought right out of Wong Shung's mind.

"Fear usually separates my kind from yours. Evidently, you are an exception."

Wong Shung was not listening. His thoughts were racing.

"Love will overcome everything," he murmured.

"I believe you are truly devoted to my sister." Fox shook Wong Shung gently by the shoulders. "Eternal youth is yours if you marry my sister."

Fox's last remark sounded like a clarion. Wong Shung did not hesitate to accept.

"You will go with me this very night to where my sister is waiting. There you will be wed. You will live with her and care for her. I shall be away," his gesture indicated his travels were unimportant except to himself. "My sister will help you become a creature of the night like us …"

"What will happen then?" stammered Wong Shung.

"Why, you will have the immortality you crave. Let us seal the pact."

Fox's smile felt like a cold hand clutching his heart.

Fox pulled out a hairpin from his top knot, stabbed his thumb and bade Wong Shung do the same. They pressed their bloody thumbs together, and the deed was done.

Wong Shung's eyes grew heavy. He shut them for an instant. When he opened them he was in a different place. Everything was new and exciting. Instead of his dusty smock he wore a bridegroom's ceremonial robe. He snatched up a mirror and gaped at the reflection. He was as he had been when he was twenty, only his features were softened, more refined.

"Come," Fox chuckled from across the room. "You mustn't keep your bride waiting!"

Wong Shung and Hu Mei were married. Fox departed as soon as was polite after the ceremony.

"You have what you desire," he said, holding his sister's hand in both his, "now I must seek mine."

"Go in peace," she smiled serenely.

Though an uncommon passion bound them, for a while Wong Shung could not adapt to the Fox Fairy's life entirely. During the day, when Hu Mei sank into a deathlike sleep, the newly acquired ability to be somewhere merely by wishing it allowed Wong Shung to visit the house where he had lived and worked. Unrecognizable, he mingled with art fanciers who thronged his studio offering ridiculous prices for works he had left behind. Wong Shung's sudden disappearance was quickly construed as death. Death made him legend, which itself is a kind of immortality.

Wong Shung and Hu Mei lived in the passionate contentment of lovers for whom time had no meaning. As Wong Shung adapted to his new life, like a butterfly emerging from a cocoon, Hu Mei began to age. Imperceptible at first, the process accelerated once it took: hold. Hu Mei was serene. However, Wong Shung was filled with anguish as his beautiful young wife withered before his eyes.

"You made a bargain," Hu Mei reminded Wong Shung gently. "You agreed to take on the burden of endless life that I might find love and everlasting peace."

Hu Mei disappeared into the ether, but Wong Shung lives on … and on … and on …

4

Farmer Chang went into town once a year, and he went in style. For days before, his orchard and farmhouse buzzed with activity. The farmer's shiny pate glowed importantly as he stamped from house to yard to fields and back again, shouting orders left and right, sending his farm hands scurrying in all directions.

“Everything must be just so, or there’ll be the devil to pay!” he shouted.

The mule cart was spruced up with a coat of fresh red lacquer. The mule was scrubbed and curried till its coat glistened. Its harness was polished and hung with copper bells that jingled merrily, and festooned with ribbons that matched the color of the cart. The groom, a boy of twelve, was told to get a haircut and a bath and given a new cotton jacket befitting the servant of a prosperous farmer.

On a crisp autumn day, after his pears were harvested, Farmer Chang loaded his cart and set out for town. As he passed through the streets, harness bells jingle-jangling, the beetle-browed farmer perched high on his cart cracked his whip, while the groom piped in a high, reedy voice,

“Buy Farmer Chang’s pears! Farmer Chang’s pears! Best in the county!”

“Best in the world is more like it,” muttered Farmer Chang, and ordered the boy to shout louder. “Put some feeling into it! And shake that bell harder! People must know Farmer Chang has come to town!”

People stopped on the sidewalks or poked their heads out of windows to watch the bright red cart pass.

“Oooh, look how fat and prosperous Farmer Chang has become,” someone observed.

“What a fine mule and cart,” exclaimed another.

A few waved and shouted greetings, but Farmer Chang looked neither right nor left. His eyes were stony in his expressionless face. He wanted no truck with the townsfolk, for they had not been so welcoming when he was down on his luck. Now he only wanted their money.

Farmer Chang had worked hard for as long as he could remember. He started with a tiny plot of land and a few miserable trees from which he barely made a living, but he dreamed of developing the finest pears in the county. Day and night he thought of nothing but his trees. His wife, a quiet, patient soul, toiled with him, nurturing the trees as if they were children. The years blurred into one another. Poverty and toil took their toll. One autumn just as the pears were turning luscious and golden, Farmer Chang’s wife took ill and did not stir from her bed. Her husband ranted at her furiously. She gazed at him with eyes filled with such indefinable sadness that he finally sputtered into silence.

“Perhaps I will be more help to you from beyond,” she whispered.

Turning her face to the wall, breath left her.

She was buried without ceremony at the foot of the orchard, whence, according to the necromancer, she would continue to oversee Farmer Chang’s little domain. He marked her resting place with a small mound, for ground is precious, and placed before it a blank stone tablet.

“What’s the point of engraving it?” he reasoned. “I know she’s there and so does she. It’s enough.”

The woman’s death did not touch Farmer Chang. Instead he was vexed that she died just when he needed an extra pair of hands, for the crop was heavy that year.

That was the turning point in Farmer Chang's career. From then on each crop was better than the one before. the fame of his pears spread, Farmer Chang grew prosperous. He bought more land, planted more trees, built himself a proper house, and hired farm hands. Though he was successful, his soul shriveled. He cared for no one. He had no friends. His orchard was his life, and the money he earned he hoarded in a secret place under the floor tiles of his room.

Farmer Chang’s mule cart meandered through the town till it reached the market square. There it stopped. The Farmer and the groom raised an awning over the cart to shade the pears from the midday sun.

“I’m ready for business!” the Farmer announced in a loud voice, holding up a pear in each hand for all to see. Many of the townsfolk had followed the Farmer as he made his stately progress through the streets. Business was brisk, though buyers were aghast at the price.

“You want my pears, you pay my price,” sneered Farmer Chang as he snatched the coins from his customers, dispensing his wares as though they were blessings.

A mendicant monk came to the square begging food. He looked at the farmer’s fruit longingly.

“The man’s prosperous,” thought the monk. “Surely he wouldn’t miss one pear.”

He joined the queue. When he finally stood before Farmer Chang, he bowed, saying in a low voice,

“Master, I’m hungry and thirsty. In the name of Buddha would you spare me a pear?”

Farmer Chang’s eyes snapped wide with amazement. Was he hearing things? Clearly not. For there was the monk, repeating what he had just said in a thin, whiny voice.

“What! … “What! …” gasped Farmer Chang. “Give away a pear!”

He had never heard anything so preposterous!

The monk went on bowing and begging. His ragged robe sent up such a stench that people began to back away. Seeing that he might lose customers because of this wretched fellow, Farmer Chang bellowed,

“Go away, you cabbage-faced bundle of misery! Get away from here!”

The monk just went on bowing and muttering.

“Take care how you provoke me,” cried Farmer Chang, “or I’ll thrash you within an inch of your life!”

Farmer Chang meant what he said, but the monk was equally stubborn. Even when the Farmer’s whip came whistling down on his head and shoulders, he stood his ground. The lash drew blood. There was a cry of outrage from the crowd, but nobody tried to interfere. A gentleman passing by in a litter heard the commotion, called out to his bearers to stop, and alighted to see what was afoot. He was disgusted by what he saw.

“Stop!” he shouted.

Farmer Chang’s whip faltered in midair.

“What’s the meaning of this violence?” demanded the gentleman.

A dozen voices piped up immediately. The gentleman pieced together the story as best he could.

“If that’s all the fuss is about,” he said, eyeing Farmer Chang contemptuously, “I’ll buy him a pear.”

He selected a large pear and threw a coin to Farmer Chang. Then, gently leading the monk away from the cart, handed him the fruit.

“Remember me in your prayers,” the gentleman said as he climbed back into his litter and went his way.

The monk took his pear to the opposite side of the square. Sitting on the ground, he wolfed it, stem, core, and all, except for one tiny seed. He found a stick and used it to dig a small hole in the hard packed earth, laid the seed in it, and covered it with loose soil. From a shop nearby he begged a cup of water and poured it over the newly planted seed.

“What are you doing, Master?” asked the shopkeeper.

“This town has been good to me,” replied the monk. “A kind gentleman gave me a pear when I was hungry and thirsty. I planted its seed so that the fruit might refresh other wayfarers.”

“That’s a noble thought,” the shopkeeper scratched his head, “but the ground is hard and barren; nothing will grow in it.”

“It will grow,” smiled the monk. He sat down beside the spot where the pear seed was planted, shut his eyes, and began to chant.

The shopkeeper looked on skeptically. Suddenly he thought he saw movement in the earth, as if something was pushing its way up. He rubbed his eyes and looked more closely. A small, white shoot was poking through the soil. The shoot began to grow before his eyes. In a moment it had grown into a sapling with leaves and branches.

“A miracle! A miracle!” the shopkeeper shouted, beside himself with excitement.

His cries brought people sprinting across the square from every direction to cluster around the monk. Those who were tardy jostled and tried to climb onto the shoulders of the people in front to catch a glimpse of the magic tree. The monk went on chancing, oblivious of the hubbub around him. The tree grew. Buds appeared and burst into bloom. The blossoms fell and fruit began to form. Soon the tree was so laden that the boughs were breaking.

Meanwhile, the altercation with the monk had so upset Farmer Chang that his heart beat painfully and his breath came in short, rapid gasps. He sat down in the shade of his cart, barely able to swallow the cup of tea his frightened groom pressed to his ashen lips.

“Look after the customers,” he gasped. “I’ll rest a while.”

He dozed. He came to with a start, for he no longer heard the boy, ringing his bell and shouting his wares. Worst of all, there weren’t any customers. He got to his feet shakily and called the boy’s name. There was no answer. Then he noticed the crowd at the other side of the square.

“Something terrible has happened,” he thought. “I’d best stay with my cart.”

However, his curiosity was piqued. He stopped the first person who passed his way and asked what was going on.

“A strange monk planted a magical pear tree that grew and bore fruit right before our eyes,” exclaimed the stranger. “Even now he’s distributing the fruit. I swear it was the best pear I’ve ever had!”

“That’s impossible,” scoffed Farmer Chang. “I grow the best pears in the county.” He would have liked to say “the world,” but something made him hold back.

“They’re better, and they’re free,” the stranger gloated.

That remark was enough to send Farmer Chang waddling across the square as fast as his legs would carry him. Sure enough, a pear tree stood where there used to be empty space. All around him happy people were munching pears, dribbling juice down their chins and onto their tunics. The same dirty, ragged monk was handing out the fruit. Farmer Chang hung back for a moment. By then the tree was almost stripped. His curiosity was too much to bear. Farmer Chang sidled up to the monk with an outstretched hand and a sheepish grin.

“Now I can return your kindness, sir,” bowed the monk.

He plucked the last pear and handed it to the Farmer.

Farmer Chang tucked the fruit in his sleeve and beat a fast retreat. He was dying to taste it, but no one must see him. For, didn’t he grow the best in the county, if not the world?

He ducked behind his cart, out of sight of the crowd, and bit into his pear. It was as crisp, sweet, and juicy as his own. In fact, he couldn’t tell the difference. He gobbled it down in a fever of excitement until only the seeds were left. He took them into the light and examined them carefully. They were identical to those he developed through years of trial and error. A dreadful thought entered his mind.

“It’s a trick,” he muttered under his breath.

Then he noticed his mule was loose, for one of the tracers of his cart had been broken off. With a wildly beating heart, he raised himself on tiptoes, and peered into his cart.

“It’s empty!” he cried.

A blinding light flashed before his eyes. The monk had somehow stolen his pears. He shouted for his groom, but the boy was gone.

Farmer Chang trotted angrily back across the square. The crowd had dispersed. The shopkeeper was sweeping up some branches and leaves. Farmer Chang’s eyes went round with amazement.

“Where’s the monk?” he stuttered, “and my groom?”

“He left,” answered the shopkeeper. “The boy who helped him distribute the pears went with him.”

Some said the monk went in one direction, others averred he had gone in another. Actually nobody knew. All that was left was a pear tree standing in the corner of the market square, its branches lifted in prayer toward the sky. If one looked closely, one would find flecks of red lacquer embedded so deep in its bark that neither wind nor rain would ever fade it.

5

She called him “Whiskers” because he had the most dashing pair of mustaches she had ever seen. He called her “Bright Eyes”

Because the laughter in her eyes filled him with joy. They lived in the back of a genera1 store, where the air was always laden with the smell of honey, spices, fruits, and a dozen grains. It was a noisy, dusty, busy place with something going on all the time. But it was warm and dry.

“And food is plentiful,” Whiskers pointed out. “It’s not easy for a couple of mice to find a place to live in the city.”

Bright Eyes agreed everything he said was perfectly true. However, she was a country mouse, who was used to different surroundings. She missed the changing colors and smells of the seasons. Here it was always the same. In the country she came and went as she pleased. Here she had to be careful. Particularly of the giant whom Whiskers grandly referred to as his “pet.” He was huge. Why, his toe was longer than her body! He was so tall that Bright Eyes had never seen his face, for a gigantic paunch that jiggled and swayed whenever he moved hid his face from view. But Whiskers claimed he glimpsed it once.

“For a human, it’s not a bad face,” said Whiskers stroking his mustaches.

“Does the pet have mustaches?” blinked Bright Eyes.

Whiskers glanced at her archly.

“Pets don’t as a rule.”

They always knew when the pet was coming because the ground shook, their furniture rattled, and their wedding picture on the wall promptly went askew.

“Oh dear! Oh dear!” cried Bright Eyes. “There it goes again.” She righted the portrait with a sigh. “Oh how I long for the peace of open spaces.”

For that day, the pet was stomping about and shouting more than usual. In fact, the place was more a-bustle than she had ever seen.

“It’s all right,” soothed Whiskers. “The pet is happy.”

“Happy!” exclaimed Bright Eyes, covering her ears. “Oooh, what ghastly noises he makes!”

“That’s called ‘singing,’” Whiskers wrinkled his nose. “Personally, I don’t much care for it, but humans do it when they’re happy. Aren’t you glad I’m a mouse?”

He drew Bright Eyes to the entrance of their burrow, and together they peered out at the goings-on. Some of the clerks were sweeping and scrubbing. Others were hanging up red bunting. Still others were pasting squares of

red paper with gold squiggles onto the walls. The Pet darted here and there with remarkable swiftness for such a large person, overseeing everything in a great booming voice, bursting into snatches of song from time to time, in a high, shrill voice.

"See those red squares they're putting on the walls?" Whiskers pointed out for Bright Eyes. "That's the symbol for double happiness. It means the pet is getting married."

He put his arm around his little wife and gave her shoulders a squeeze.

"We are going to have a pettess."

"A pettess!" giggled Bright Eyes. "Maybe things will be different from now on."

And things were different. It grew quieter. There was less dust in the air. The pet seemed less heavy footed and didn't shout quite as much as he used to. However, he made it up with his singing, which put the two mice's teeth on edge. The pettess glided about in dainty slippers embroidered with bright red peonies and glossy green leaves. Bright Eyes particularly liked the scent of rose water that followed wherever she went. The pettess spoke with a soft musical voice. She was always unhurried and calm. She had the alcove opposite the mice's burrow cleaned and painted and made into a shrine for the Kitchen God. Every morning she placed little dishes of fruit and cakes on the altar, lit candles and incense, and prayed for the safety and happiness of all those who lived under their roof At night when the store was shuttered, the two mice would venture forth to nibble on the food left for the god.

Bright Eyes was dubious about touching the offerings at first, but it was hard to resist Whiskers' reasoning.

"The pettess will think the Kitchen God ate it," he said, "and she'll be pleased. Humans are not very smart. We know an image drawn on a piece of paper can't eat."

As time went by the two mice got bolder, and then they got care- less. One day the pettess placed a dish of fresh millet cakes on the Kitchen God's altar. They smelled so good that Bright Eyes was on pins and needles waiting for the day to end.

"You mustn't go out until it's dark," cautioned Whiskers, for he could see mischief gleaming in the other's eyes, as he prepared to go out foraging. Bright Eyes gave her head a toss, and retorted,

"You're going out."

"I'm the man of the house," replied Whiskers, deliberately weighting the word 'man.' "It's my job to bring home the bacon—or whatever."

"Then bring some millet cake," Bright Eyes' chin went up at a challenging angle.

"I will," promised Whiskers as he peered out the burrow to see if the coast was clear. "But you must wait till after dark."

"By then they'll be stale," Bright Eyes stamped her foot. "Or maybe the Kitchen God will have eaten them!"

"Don't be silly!" scoffed Whiskers. He gave Bright Eyes a quick peck on the cheek and scurried out before she could say anything more.

Left alone, Bright Eyes tried to concentrate on her chores, but the scent of those millet cakes drove her to distraction. Stealthy footsteps sprinting past the burrow made her peer out, just in time to see one of the boys who did the sweeping up snatch one of the millet cakes off the altar and stuff it whole into his mouth.

Bright Eyes gasped in horror. At this rate there won't be any left by nightfall!

There wasn't a moment to lose. She streaked out of the burrow, scampered up the altar, and just as she was about to sink her teeth into a millet cake, the pettess appeared.

"A mouse! A mouse! Aaaaah!" shrieked the pettess.

The store was turned into bedlam. It was all Bright Eyes could do to dart back into the burrow. She rolled herself into a tiny ball and cowered in a dark corner, as the pet and his staff went about with brooms and sticks hunting for the mouse. Once Bright Eyes had caught her breath, the dreadful thought came to her that Whiskers was out there. He could be in terrible danger, and it was all her fault. Oh, those hateful millet cakes, she thought. I shall never think of them again if only Whiskers is safe!

As a matter of fact, he was. Being wise to human ways, he sauntered home when the commotion died down, as though nothing had happened, with the food he had found, together with a piece of millet cake.

A few days later the pet brought home a gift that delighted the pettess no end. She cooed and gurgled and made silly noises at it. The two mice overheard her say quite distinctly,

"Mimi will keep the mice away!"

"They've got a cat!" cried Whiskers and Bright Eyes in unison.

Mimi was small-boned, sleek, and gleaming black, with four white paws and a bib. Two great eyes with yellow crescents in them dominated her small, crafty face. A white spot like a birthmark over the right corner of her mouth gave her a rakish air. She moved with a fluid, regal grace, her eyes like beacons searching out every nook

and cranny of the store. It did not take her long to discover where her favorite foods were stored, and the coziest corner to sleep in. Of course, she also discovered where Whiskers and Bright Eyes lived, and made the expected cat noises that pleased the pet and the pettess.

But Mimi had a mind of her own. She was careful to keep up appearances, making a great show of taking charge of the mouse situation. So long as the mice kept out of her way, she was content to live and let live. With salted fish and pressed duck to tickle her palate, mice were not even an option on her menu.

Nevertheless, Mimi was a worry. Whiskers was particularly concerned about Bright Eyes, who tended to be flighty and careless. The adventure with the millet cakes could have ended in disaster. Though he scolded and she was contrite, Whiskers knew that when the mood for mischief came upon her there was no stopping Bright Eyes. He decided they had to move.

"But where?" cried Bright Eyes.

"I don't know," replied Whiskers stroking his mustaches thoughtfully. "Perhaps somewhere with a view …"

That last remark was not lost on Bright Eyes.

"Can we go and live in the country?" chirped Bright Eyes, all agog.

"I said 'a view,'" Whiskers tried to sound noncommittal, "nothing about the country. It's mainly to keep you out of harm's way." He pulled a long face.

Bright Eyes sighed, completely deflated. She knew how much Whiskers liked their present home and how he hated to leave it. If only the pet hadn't brought Mimi into the house!

Finally Whiskers found an empty burrow in the far corner of the back garden that was almost perfect. To be sure, it was a bit far to carry home the groceries, but there were advantages. There was plenty of sunlight and fresh air. Flowers from spring to autumn would please Bright Eyes. Best of all, Mimi would be far away because the pettess never let her out of the house.

As summer ripened into autumn Whiskers and Bright Eyes moved into their new abode. That same day a large snake, its scales shimmering with gold flecks, slithered into the garden, dusty and tired after a long journey. Finding a cool spot in a bamboo grove, it coiled itself up for a nap. Its presence was noticed at once by the rooster who patrolled the garden with a majestic gait. He warned his hens, who noisily rounded up their chicks at once. Their clucking startled the frogs sunning themselves by the pond, who leaped onto the lily pads floating in the center, or vanished into the water. The owl perched in the dark branches of a gnarled old pine snapped awake from a deep sleep.

"Who?" he said querulously, swiveling his head this way and that, trying to look alert, except he didn't see well in the light.

Whiskers and Bright Eyes, however, were too excited about their new home to notice.

The snake was heavy with food, for she had dined well on two frogs and a bird's egg on the way. She was faintly annoyed by the flurry that her presence caused. All she wanted was sleep.

"It's the price one pays for being beautiful," she sighed, for she was vain. "Think green," she told herself: and instantly she was the same color as the bamboo leaves that shaded her. With another sigh, she composed herself for sleep, when something made her open one pale eye just a slit. Then wider and wider.

Two mice were coming out of a burrow.

"How convenient," thought the snake as her eye shut again. She could feel the touch of autumn in the air. It was time to find a winter place.

"How delicious!" she murmured as she drifted off. Though she was partial to frogs and eggs, a steady diet of them got tedious. Mouse would be such a nice change! And a place to live afterward. She felt blessed indeed.

One morning after Whiskers had gone out to forage, and Bright Eyes was busily sorting and putting away their provisions for the winter, she was startled by a rustling sound. Someone was coming through the door. Presently a creature stood before her unlike any other she had ever seen.

"Who are you?" shrilled Bright Eyes. "What are you doing in my house?"

"Oh, I am sorry," murmured the snake. Her large, pale eyes quickly took in the room. The hideous furniture and the tasteless pictures will have to go, she thought. But all in good time … all in good time. Instead she smiled, showing a pair of glittering fangs.

"I thought the house was empty," continued the snake. "I was looking for a place to stay."

"Well, it isn't," replied Bright Eyes a little more sharply than she intended. "Whiskers and I just moved in," she added tartly.

The snake slithered in a little further, her sleek body swaying ever so gently while her inquisitive tongue darted this way and that.

"Hmmmm," she hummed softly. "Such a cozy spot you have …"

The stranger was making Bright Eyes nervous. The way that slender tongue glided down her face and body made her tremble. But those pale, pale eyes seemed to nail her to the floor so that she could hardly move.

"I'm called Bright eyes," she stammered. "I'm a mouse."

"I am Fang," cooed the snake. "Madam Fang to you, and I am not a mouse."

"Hello, Madam Fang," murmured Bright Eyes, wondering how to get rid of this unwanted visitor.

"I think I'll stay a while," said Madam Fang haughtily, slithering in a little further, completely blocking the entrance to the burrow.

"Whiskers will be home soon," Bright Eyes quivered.

"How nice," Madam Fang's smile became even wider. "He'll be just in time for lunch!"

She reared up. Her eyes, glowing like a pair of pale moons, seemed to fill the room. Bright Eyes shivered, unable to move or speak. Then with a loud swish Madam Fang swooped down on Bright Eyes and swallowed her whole. Bright Eyes kicked and struggled, but she was inside the snake, and the more she struggled, the deeper she slid down a horrible black tunnel that was squeezing the life out of her.

At that moment Whiskers was happily trotting home when he noticed something black and glistening protruding from his burrow. Tiny gold lights darted off it as it writhed and flicked.

Whiskers' blood ran cold. He dropped the food he was carrying and ran as fast as his legs would carry him toward the burrow.

"Bright Eyes! Bright Eyes!" he cried. But all he could see was the end of the snake's tail turning and flicking. The snake was obviously smacking itself on the ground, forcing something down that it had just swallowed. Whiskers leaped on the tail and sank his teeth into it.

Madam Fangs squealed as a shaft of pain traveled from the tip of her tail up her slender body and exploded in her head. She was being attacked from outside, while inside, the mouse was putting up a fight that really startled her. In a panic, she tried to pull her tail in, while her attacker was trying to drag her out.

"It must be the other mouse," thought Madam Fang. "I'll fix his wheels."

She whirled around only to realize that Bright Eyes made such a bulge in her body that she could no longer get through the narrow opening; Nor could she free her tail from her attacker's grip. Aside from the excruciating pain, her attacker was tearing off the lovely scales she was so proud of. She had to get out of there somehow, she thought desperately.

With tooth and nail, Whiskers tore the scales off the snake's tail and sank his teeth into the flesh. Madam Fangs was shaken by a great spasm of pain. Her jaws flew open, and Bright Eyes plopped out. Madam Fangs gazed at her prey dully. She opened her jaws to swallow the mouse again, but something else was attacking her now. The Rooster, seeing Whiskers' brave efforts, had joined the fray, pecking at the snake's tail with all his might. Madam Fangs was really alarmed, for her attackers were dragging her out of the burrow.

Whiskers darted past her to comfort Bright Eyes, who was dazed and bedraggled but none the worse for wear. Madam Fangs, however, found herself gazing into the Rooster's angry red face.

"It was a mistake," she tried to explain, glancing at her damaged tail out of the corner of her eye. "I'll be on my way now."

She tried to sidle away, but the Rooster shook his head menacingly, blocking her way. The hens, who were never far from him, closed ranks behind him.

"Oh dear! Oh dear!" thought Madam Fang. "What a pickle I'm in!"

Running feet were approaching, and the chickens drew back. Madam Fangs breathed a sigh of relief: which quickly turned to horror. A very large human loomed over her with a broomstick raised ready to strike.

"Don't harm it," she heard a soft, musical human voice say.

"Oh, all right!" grumbled the large one. "Just the same, I don't like snakes. Particularly not in your garden."

With a swipe of his broom, the pet sent Madam Fangs flying through the garden gate to land with a loud plop in a muddy ditch on the other side of the road. The snake lay quite still until the world around her stopped spinning. Nervously, Madam Fangs looked about. She was filthy and smelly. Her beautiful tail, not to mention her pride, was in tatters.

"Nobody must see me in this state," she told herself. When she was sure nobody was watching, she slinked away.

"Oh, Whiskers," hiccuped Bright Eyes, "I was ever so frightened."

"I can't leave you a moment without you getting into trouble," scolded Whiskers, trying to sound stern, but really relieved that Bright Eyes was safe.

"Oh, Whiskers," said Bright Eyes after a while. "I don't like it here anymore. Can we go back to our old place?"

"After all my trouble!" cried Whiskers. "I thought you wanted sunlight and fresh air and flowers and all that!"

"Please, Whiskers," begged Bright Eyes. "I promise to be careful … I promise …"

Whiskers grinned and stroked his mustaches.

"I'll think about it. I'll think about it," he said.

6

Wang Fu had fished the same stretch of the Li River all his life. After an unusually long wet season a dozen years ago, the river changed course. The fish stock dropped so alarmingly that most of the fishers moved with the river while others took up another trade. Wang Fti did neither.

"You are so stupid and stubborn!" his wife complained.

Wang Fu nodded dully. The best way of shutting her up, he discovered, was agreeing with her. But his wife was in no mood to be put off.

"Liu San is learning to be a carpenter," his wife dinned in his ear. "But you! You're shiftless. Why don't you go further downstream instead of trying to catch fish where there aren't any!"

That was not true. Wang Fu would not go on fishing the same stretch of river if there weren't any fish. It was merely that their numbers had dwindled. Also, Wang Fu was careful not to take more than he needed to support his wife and himself Neither did he keep young fish that would mature and propagate their own kind. Thus, he eked out a frugal living. However, he had not caught a thing five nights in a row.

"Oh, what a trial this man is!" wailed Wang Fu's wife, rolling her eyes to heaven. "We shall starve!"

"It will be better tonight," mumbled Wang Fu.

"Better!" That word set his wife off again.

Wang Fu's wife did a quick sum in her head. She had carefully secreted a few strings of coins under a loose brick in her *kang*, but that was for her old age. If Wang Fu's luck did not change, they would be in real difficulties! She ranted till she was quite red in the face, then flapping her arms like a disgruntled hen, retreated to her kitchen to vent her spleen on the pots and pans.

At dusk Wang Fu pulled on his cape woven out of reeds, gathered up the bundle of food his wife prepared for him, and headed for the river. On his way he stopped at the wine shop and bought a small jar of rice wine.

Wang Fu kept his bamboo raft lashed to an old sycamore that leaned over a large, flat rock on a sandbar in a sheltered elbow of the river. Once the river teemed with rafts, and the light of flaming torches bounced merrily off the rippling black surface of the water as night fell. Now only the wind in the trees, the rush of the river, and the cry of an occasional night bird broke the silence. He missed the laughter and the easy camaraderie with the other fishers, but his roots were here, and he was loath to leave it.

He lit a fire beside the flat rock. After he had made his raft and net ready, Wang Fu placed a small dish of food on the flat rock and sprinkled some wine around it. Then he clapped his hands thrice and banged his forehead three times on the ground.

"Oh, River God, accept these unworthy offerings," he prayed, "they are all I have. Bless my labors this night. I do not ask for more than enough to keep body and spirit together. Have mercy, O River God."

He got on his raft and poled it to the middle of the river. Shining his weight from side to side, he nosed the craft into the current, which carried it toward the next bend in the river. There he lit a torch fixed to the raft's prow and cast his net. Sometimes he did not have to wait long for the fish to rise. That night, like the five nights before, his net filled with weeds that grew beneath the surface of the water. He poled the raft back to his camp with a heavy heart. Patiently he picked off the weeds and lay them out on the rock to dry beside the fire. They would eat water weeds the next day, he thought grimly. Then he went back to the river to try again.

Close to dawn Wang Fu returned exhausted but empty-handed. He tossed a handful of twigs on the embers of his fire and settled down to munch his food. It is cold in the hours before daybreak. Wang Fu was grateful for his reed cape and the jar of wine to help ward off the growing feeling of despair. Had there not been a moon he might not have noticed a man gliding soundlessly through the underbrush. It's probably a traveler, thought Wang Fu as he snuggled into his reed cape waiting for sleep.

A few nights later he saw the man again, sitting on a log near his camp. Wang Fu could tell by his long, flowing robe that he was a gentleman. With little imagination and no curiosity, Wang Fu quickly lost interest. That night he had cast his net twice, and twice pulled in nothing but weeds. All he could think about was cleaning his

net and setting out again.

Nevertheless, Wang Fu felt the man's gaze on his back as he worked, and it made him uneasy.

"Excuse me if I don't stop to chat," he said without turning around. "A man has to make a living, and I'm not having much luck tonight."

As he carefully plucked the weeds tangled in his net, he wondered whether he had somehow offended the River God. Perhaps his offerings were too meager for what he took from the river. That thought sent a quiver of dismay rippling through him. What would become of him if the River God refused him fish? The river was not only his livelihood, it allowed him to be his own man. Wang Fu could not bear the thought of living like poor Liu San, who couldn't call his soul his own since he apprenticed himself to a carpenter.

"There are fish in the river, if you go about it the right way," a voice cut across his thoughts.

Wang Fu dropped his net and peered into the dark. The firelight was in his eyes, and all he could make out were the tips of a pair of thick-soled shoes. Wang Fu leaped to his feet.

"What … what …" he stammered.

"I startled you," the stranger smiled reassuringly. "I think I might be able to help." Wang Fu started to say something, but the other gently cut him off.

"Let me explain."

At close range the man looked older than Wang Fu had thought. Indeed, his gown was longer than gentlemen of his class wore nowadays. With the tip of his finger the stranger traced a curved line in the sand.

"Let's say this is the river," he began. "We are here," he made an *X* to mark the place, "and this is where the fish are." He pointed at another spot, pausing while his last remark sank in. "You must go to the fish because they won't come to you."

Wang Fu's chin dropped to his chest. He had never been farther down the river than the next bend.

"But they've always come up here!" Wang Fu insisted, doggedly staring at the crude map in the sand.

"They won't any more," said the gentleman with certainty.

"Why?" Wang Fu searched the other's face.

"Maybe they're bored. Fish need to be treated as intelligent creatures too," was the reply.

Wang Fu never doubted the intelligence of fish. Sometimes he was not sure of his own.

"Take me on the river, and I will show you," said the gentleman with a wink.

"I can't do that," Wang Fu muttered, and his shoulders sagged. "Couldn't you just tell me what to do?"

Fixing Wang Fu with a piercing gaze, the other quickly stripped down to a loin cloth.

"Now we are equal," he chortled. "Come!"

There was nothing for Wang Fu to do except scramble after him. The stranger untied the raft and poled it expertly into the stream, as familiar with the river as if he had been born to it. He knew where every rock, tree stump, or root lay treacherously under the surface, ready to shred the flimsy craft. The river narrowed. Its murmur became an excited babble. They skimmed along faster and faster.

Wang Fu clung to the edges of the raft until his knuckles were white and numb, his teeth chattering with fright. He had never been this far down the river before. The stranger, however, shifted his weight easily with each swell, laughing up at the star-speckled sky. It seemed an eternity before the river broadened, becoming peaceful again. The stranger unlashed the paddles tied to the sides.

"We'll row a little ways," he said, "then you light the torch and cast your net."

Being told what to do did not sit well with Wang Fu. Nevertheless, something about the stranger's tone compelled him to do as he was told. Presently the stranger put up his paddle. They had come to a place where Wang Fu could not touch bottom with his pole.

"Cast when I tell you," said the stranger. Next moment, he slipped off the raft and disappeared into the shiny, black water.

All the blood rushed to Wang Fu's head. What if he drowned! Just as Wang Fu decided to flee that place, the stranger's head broke the surface a few hundred yards ahead.

"Cast!" he shouted.

Wang Fu obeyed as if in a trance. The stranger disappeared again. Suddenly the water in front of the raft was churning as fish raced toward the spot where he had cast his net. In a great sweat, Wang Fu began hauling it in, arms, legs, and back straining against the weight, heart pumping so hard that he thought it would pop out of his chest. Finally the net was secured, and the river was calm.

In the excitement, he had forgotten his companion. With wildly trembling hands Wang Fu trimmed his torch and waved it this way and that, anxiously probing the dark. There was no sign of the man. The thought that he

might have drowned set Wang Fu's teeth chattering again. He wanted to leave that dark stretch of river, but somehow he could not move. Just then a rustle of movement made him turn to the shore. There, at the river's edge, stood the stranger. With a great effort Wang Fu found his voice and shouted,

"Hey! Hey! I thought you drowned!"

The other replied with a clear, ringing laugh.

"Wait! I'll come in for you!" cried Wang Fu, reaching for a paddle.

"No!" the stranger called back as he slipped into the trees beyond.

"Hey!" shouted Wang Fu, "Wait!"

"Go back!" came the reply.

"I haven't even thanked you!" cried Wang Fu, but the stranger had already vanished.

That night's haul was the biggest and the best of Wang Fu's entire life. The next night before he went down to the river, he demanded a few extra coins from his wife for some good wine for the River God.

"River God!" scoffed his wife. "It's my prayers to the Kitchen God that turned things round."

For once, Wang Fu stood up to his wife.

"I earned the money," he reminded her, "and I'm going to spend some of it the way I choose!" The look on his face so startled the wife that she gave Wang Fu the coins he demanded.

"You make sure the River God gets the wine," she yelled after him.

That night after he had made his offering to the River God and prepared to set out, the stranger came strolling by.

"Hey!" shouted Wang Fu, flapping his arms to attract his attention.

"Hey!" the stranger waved back, "I've come to fish with you."

The stranger took charge as he did the night before. Again they came back with a good haul. Afterward, as the two sat by the fire to rest, Wang Fu shyly unwrapped his meager bundle of food.

"It's only fresh leeks and pancakes," he said, "but my woman always puts sesame oil in her pancakes."

The stranger tore off a chunk and chewed it with obvious enjoyment. Wang Fu poured some wine into a bowl and handed it to him.

"No, thank you," the stranger demurred, though his eyes brimmed with longing.

"Don't stand on ceremony," insisted Wang Fu. "There's enough for the two of us."

"No thank you," the stranger replied with infinite sadness.

Wang Fu was abashed.

"I … I … was … only trying to be friendly," he muttered miserably. "You've been so helpful driving the fish into my net … and … I have no way to thank you …"

The stranger clapped him on the shoulder.

"I had fun!" he chortled. "That's enough."

From then on Wang Fu and the stranger fished together. It never occurred to Wang Fu to ask his name or where he lived, nor was it volunteered. The stranger would not touch any part of the money Wang Fu made.

"I have no need for money," the stranger said, "but I will ask two favors. You must never tell anyone about me, or where you fish."

Wang Fu nodded.

Months passed. One night when they met by the river, the stranger seemed preoccupied, not his usual ebullient self Wang Fu was concerned.

"Maybe you shouldn't go on the river tonight," he suggested.

"Nonsense," the other responded. "A bit of exercise will do me good." However, he was moodily silent all the way down the river to their usual destination.

"You haven't told anyone about this place, have you?" the stranger suddenly asked.

"No!" exclaimed Wang Fu, eyes wide. For the moment the stranger busied himself making fast the raft. Then, turning, he said,

"Wang Fu, you drive tonight and I'll cast."

Wang Fu had wanted to try his hand at driving the fish for some time but never had the courage to suggest it. Now he leaped at the chance.

"Why, I'll be glad to!" he cried, but something in the stranger's face—or was it a trick of flickering torch light—gave Wang Fu pause.

He shook it out of his head, filled his lungs with air, and dived into the water. He went down the way the stranger told him. His weightless body glided easily through the black silence, guided by the light of the torch,

glowing like a dozen fractured moons high above. He moved in rhythm with a strange music that seemed to swell around him, pulling him ever deeper until he became one with the river. His movements became slower and slower until they stopped. Calmly he watched air bubbles rising slowly to the surface. A joy so complete engulfed him that all he wanted was to sit at the bottom of the river, surrounded by the music of the deep. Slimy green weeds stealthily creeping up his legs shocked him out of his reverie. Frantically he tore at them, but the harder he tugged, the stronger the weeds kept him anchored. He tried to scream for help, but he had no voice. The lights dancing high above flickered and went out.

Wang Fu came to, face down on the familiar sandbar. A strong pair of hands kneading his shoulders and back made him retch until he was empty.

"Thank you for saving my life," Wang Fu gasped, instinctively knowing it was the stranger leaning over him. "I am … even more … in your … debt."

"Don't be too hasty to thank me," said the stranger. With a great effort Wang Fu turned over to gape blankly at his friend.

"You will understand, presently." The stranger's shoulders sagged with weariness. He covered Wang Fu with his reed cape, and threw a handful of sticks onto the fire.

"Once there was a young daredevil," the stranger's voice sounded strangely hollow. "He wasn't a bad person. Just high-spirited and thoughtless. He liked wine more than he should, and when he was in his cups did silly things. That year the rains didn't stop when they should. The river was rising, ready to flood. He should have been helping the townsfolk pile sandbags along the bank. Instead, this young man was in a tavern playing drinking games with his friends. They were all quite drunk," the stranger sighed ruefully. "By that time, the river was cresting. Someone suggested going down to watch it flood. One of the group offered to give a feast for anyone who dared cross the river by an old wooden bridge that stood swaying over the raging waters. The young man, who was always game for a dare, scrambled onto it. Before he was halfway across, the pilings gave way, sending the bridge crashing down.

"The young man was swept into the Underworld. The Lord of Shades would not accept him before his time, so he sent the young man to the River God. The River God felt vaguely responsible, but the young man had not completed his life's tasks. Neither had he fulfilled his obligations nor realized his potential in the world of the living. Consequently, the River God condemned him to wander until he could lure someone to a watery death to take his place …"

The stranger fell silent.

The two men faced each other without a word. Wang Fu was the first to break the silence with a shudder of recognition.

"How long has it been?" he asked.

"A century is a blink of an eye," replied the other. "Being stuck between two worlds is terrible, so I had to find a substitute," confessed the stranger. "I watched you a long time, before I went to work. First I kept the fish away. Then I pretended to be your friend. Finally I tricked you into diving …"

"I don't have much to live for," muttered Wang Fu recalling that moment of rapture at the bottom of the river. "Why did you bring me back?"

"You trusted me, gave me the unconditional friendship that I never experienced before in your world," said the stranger. "That's why I couldn't let you die. Rest. I will trouble you no more."

With that, he vanished into the night.

Wang Fu slept without dreams. At dawn he woke, and having given thanks to the River God for his bounty, trudged off to market with his haul. At the end of the morning, he went home with his empty baskets slung on his back. As usual his wife was waiting at the door with her hand out. As usual he dropped his purse in it without a word.

Wang Fu's life did not change visibly, yet nothing was the same. For a short time he had a friend who shared his labor and his simple food. Now that friend was gone, and Wang Fu was the poorer for it. He fished, alone as he used to. Often he thought of the deep pool the stranger showed him. He longed for its inviting indigo darkness. Most of all he yearned for the strange, haunting music and the wonderful lightness of being. Since he could not bring himself to go there, he went back to the meager catches he hauled in from his familiar stretch of river.

"You lazy, good-for-nothing!" his wife badgered. "If I were a man, I would show you a thing or two!"

"Maybe you can, anyway," Wang Fu snapped back. "I could have—"

"Could have what?" shouted the wife, arms folded across her chest.

His wife's scorn drove him back to the deep pool. Wang Fu fastened his raft to the stump of a half-submerged

tree jutting out of the water. He did not light the torch. Darkness enveloped him in its velvety embrace. The river lapped invitingly against the raft. Weariness and fear fell away. Peace was only inches from the tips of his toes. A voice hailed him just as he was about to slip into the dark water.

"Hey! Is that you?" cried Wang Fu excitedly.

"Who else?" the stranger guffawed out of the dark.

"I've missed you!" Wang Fu shouted, quickly lighting his torch. "Come closer, so I can see you."

"You can only see me if you leave your world," laughed the stranger. "The River God made me Guardian of the river because I couldn't let you die."

"I'm ready," retorted Wang Fu vehemently. "There is nothing to keep me here."

"Remember what happens to those who leave before their time." the stranger warned. "You must find the strength to endure."

Wang Fu gulped, his eyes suddenly misting.

"Stay where you belong," the stranger's voice rose from the river. "Each full moon, I will fish with you. Go now …"

"How will I know you if I can't see you?" Wang Fu spoke to the river.

His own voice bounced back out of the dark. Nothing more.

They say on nights of the full moon a dust devil would come whirling down the riverbank, and Wang Fu would follow it on his raft wherever it led. When he came ashore before sunrise his baskets would be brimming. Wang Fu's Dust Devil's catches soon became a local legend. When he was buried, a dust devil appeared over the grave and was seen skipping merrily down the river.

Near the place where there is believed to be a deep pool, it disappeared.

7

A stiff wind whipped the fine spring rain into swirling bluish gray mist. The barge appeared like a mirage behind the grunts and shouts of the boatmen on the towpath, dragging her up Chien Tang River. I knew it was Master Tang Hao the moment I set eyes on him, standing alone on the prow. He was a tall, spare man. A writing case slung over one shoulder made an ungainly bulge under his long, gray cloak. A pathetic bundle of belongings lay at his feet. As I picked my way down the slippery embankment to the quay, the barge dropped anchor, and passengers swarmed ashore.

For a moment I lost sight of my master's guest. I found him at the edge of the dock, deep in thought. I hurried over to him, babbling a welcome speech on behalf of my Master that I had memorized the night before.

"I have a carriage waiting," I pointed up the embankment, and snatching the bundle from his hand, quickly proceeded up the slope. Master Tang squished along behind me. Finally, we were settled in the carriage and the driver urged the horse into a lazy clip-clop.

My Master's annual instructions concerning his various properties in Hangzhou arrived as usual on the second day of the new year. He is a meticulous man who leaves nothing to chance. As estate agent, I was expected to execute his orders precisely, and report twice a year. Otherwise, my reclusive Master did not wish to be disturbed. I had worked for him almost a decade, but it was the first time that the villa on West Lake was mentioned.

"You are to reopen Lakeside Villa. Make it livable by the first day of the third month," my Master wrote. "However, the east wing of the main courtyard must remain sealed. Master Tang Hao, a scholarly gentleman, who is recovering from a lengthy illness, will take up residence there for an unspecified duration. He requires rest and tranquillity. You are to engage a reliable servant to see to his comfort. Lay in provisions in keeping with hospitality, without being extravagant." He gave detailed instructions as to which of his accounts kept with local merchant houses were to be used.

"I leave everything to your discretion," he concluded. "Master Tang has the run of the villa with the exception of the aforementioned east wing."

The last sentence was written in bold characters for emphasis.

I stole a glance at Master Tang Hao. In answer to my solicitude, he murmured a few words, whose inflection betrayed the fact he was not a native of our province and probably learned our dialect out of necessity. The brevity of his response showed he did not wish conversation, so we rode in silence.

Lao Liu, the general factotum I hired to oversee Master Tang's needs, had lit a brazier in the main room. Pine cones and needles laid over glowing coals filled the air with a resinous warmth. Having shown Master Tang his quarters, I left, promising to return in a day or two. However, he was to send Lao Liu to me if he required

anything at all.

In all the years I have served him, I have never met my Master or any of his clan. The family had been prominent merchants of Hangzhou for generations, until they suddenly quit the city a dozen years ago. Rumors were rife at the time but died after a while, as they generally do. My Master, who inherited the family fortune soon after, lived in the capital. The others scattered to the four winds. None ever returned. Although Lakeside Villa is listed on the register of my Master's holdings, he never mentioned it. Since he did not tolerate questions, I did not inquire.

Opening the villa, however, proved to be more difficult than I expected. Roof and windows had to be repaired or replaced. A coat of paint was required inside and out. Rooms had to be aired, furniture cleaned and made serviceable. Finding men willing to work there was a problem.

"Unspeakable things were done in that house," the elder of a nearby village growled at me balefully. "Evil never dies."

"What are you talking about!" I bristled.

"Ask your master," the old man rubbed his hands together as though he were washing them and stalked away.

In spite of fear and superstition, I hired a crew by offering outrageous wages. However, nothing would induce workers to stay the moment the shadows lengthened in the afternoon. Nevertheless, the job was done according to my Master's wishes. I persuaded Lao Liu, who cooked for the work crew, to stay on. He went from town to town picking up whatever work he could, and the job meant a roof over his head and three squares a day for as long as Master Tang stayed.

A week or ten days passed before I visited the villa again. I found its tenant dozing in the courtyard. Even in sleep he looked haggard. The fine bones of nose and cheeks were almost visible under the pasty, translucent skin. The eyes were sunken and black rimmed. The only touch of color was in the full-lipped mouth. The long-fingered hands folded on his lap were thick-veined, strong, and callused, unlike the soft, ineffectual hands of a scholar. His clothes, though well kept, were years out of fashion. Round his neck he wore an amber amulet carved in the shape of dragon and phoenix entwined. There was something oddly poignant about that ornament, for half was missing. The state of his shoes showed he walked more often than he rode. Master Tang was probably another failed candidate of the Imperial Civil Service Examinations, in search of a patron. My Master had a soft spot for genteel vagrants.

Master Tang snapped awake, instantly alert. He greeted me without rising. Nor did he offer me the empty chair. After the usual pleasantries, I asked if his quarters were satisfactory.

"Yes, yes," he replied with a wave of the hand. "Except one thing."

Then he told me about the night singer.

"Night singer?" I echoed.

"I hear her late at night," explained Master Tang Hao, "from over there."

I followed his gaze to the sealed east wing that looked forlorn in contrast to the rest of the courtyard. Nothing had been done to it since it was not to be used.

"You must have heard a nocturnal bird," I said, reeling off the names of a few common night-warblers.

"One that also plays the lute," Master Tang shot back sarcastically.

"Or, you might have—"

"Dreamed it," Master Tang snatched the words right out of my mouth. "That might have been the case before; but I'm much better now … much better."

I leaped at the opening to broach the question that was uppermost in my mind.

"What was the matter?" I asked, weighing my words with sympathy. Master Tang Hao dismissed the question with an impatient gesture. Taking another tack I asked,

"Does the singing disturb you?"

There was a faraway look on his face when he said,

"A woman singing, accompanying herself on the lute is very … soothing."

I was sufficiently intrigued to bring it up with Lao Liu.

"Night singer!" croaked Lao Liu in his curious raspy voice. "Why, he accused me of getting drunk and singing late at night! His nibs apologized later." He tapped his temple and winked significantly.

"Were you drinking?" I asked, for I smelled cheap liquor on his breath.

"Just a tiny drop," he rasped. "This place gives me the creeps. But I swear on my ancestors' bones, there isn't any 'Night Singer.' If there was, I would have heard it, wouldn't I?"

I decided the night singer was nothing more than a figment of Master Tang's imagination.

A few days later Lao Liu carne to me in great excitement. That afternoon I rode out to the villa. Master Tang Hao had broken into the east wing. I found the double doors had been pried open, and roughly secured again with a piece of firewood thrust through the looped door handles. Master Tang Hao, who was writing in the main room, waved me into a chair, while his brush glided in a swift, continuous movement down the page. When he looked up I was struck by the change in him. The black circles round the eyes were gone, and so was the haunted look in their depths.

"It's a new poem! I've found my muse again!" he crowed, obviously pleased with himself.

I dragged my mind back to the reason for my visit and stated my business as solemnly as I could. Master Tang heard me out with an amused smile. Realizing I was not making an impression, I blustered,

"I shall have to inspect the rooms, and ascertain—"

Next moment, Master Tang was dragging me to the east wing. As he flung the door open, the rancid smell of disuse smote me in the face. Part of what must have been an antechamber had been crudely walled up, leaving a long, narrow space, bare except for a ruined scroll hanging on the facing wall. It would appear a mischievous child had gone over it with ink and brush. However, the black swirls that covered it had such vitality, it seemed to throb with life. I was mesmerized; lost in a tangle of black tentacles that seemed to reach out for me.

"The Night Singer is in there," Master Tang whispered in my ear. His hand made wild swirling motions in the air.

"Those brambles imprison her."

I blinked hard to rid myself of the tangled black lines that weaved and danced before my eyes. I stumbled out of the room, leaving Master Tang gazing fixedly at the scroll, humming a tune under his breath. For a moment in that stuffy room I was taken in. However, in the light of day, I knew it was just a ruined painting that conjured up strange ideas in a diseased mind. I feared Master Tang was mad. I must make him leave before he does any real damage, I thought.

A handful of coins persuaded Lao Liu to keep an eye on our guest and to report anything out of the ordinary. A few days later Lao Liu came to me with a note. Master Tang Hao requested me to purchase five or six exotic herbs, a clay pot, and several calligraphy brushes of various sizes.

"It is imperative I have these materials as soon as possible," he wrote.

I had to scour the apothecary shops and the stationers of Hangzhou to assemble everything on the list. However, a particularly fine brush Master Tang asked for eluded me. Fate must have guided me to a dingy stationer's shop in the old part of town.

"I might have such a brush somewhere," the shopkeeper murmured, surveying his unkempt premises. He bustled about, opening and shutting cupboards, foraging in mysterious drawers, clucking, and muttering to himself

"I used to bring in this type of brush for a particular customer," said he from behind a partition where I could hear him moving boxes. "A talented young lady who wrote and sang poetry in Soong dynasty style. She wasn't rich, but this is the only type of brush she used. She had such a fine hand that I sometimes let her pay with pieces of calligraphy."

Presently he emerged with a slender box lined with silk on which was nestled a brush whose reddish horse hair tip was fashioned into a bulb ending in a needle-fine point.

"The lady who ordered it was called Xiaoyu—Jade of the Dawn," he prattled. "She was a lovely little thing! Her father sold her as a concubine to the oldest son of a wealthy merchant."

He shook his head and sighed.

The next afternoon I went to the villa with my purchases. Lao Liu greeted me like a fellow conspirator.

"He's in the east wing," he whispered.

I found Master Tang Hao seated cross-legged on the floor, gazing at the ruined scroll. At first he was oblivious of me, then, with a shudder, he came to.

"Have you got the things?" he cried without preliminaries.

I handed over my parcel. He unwrapped it, muttering, "yes … yes …" at each item. His excitement gave me goose pimples. When he had examined everything, he smiled, and it seemed a shaft of sunlight touched his face.

"My lady will be pleased," he breathed.

My ears pricked up. My Master had given run of the villa to him but to no one else. This may be my excuse to rid myself of my Master's peculiar guest.

"Who is the lady?" I asked.

"Lady Xiaoyu, who sings to me in the night," replied Master Tang, with a strange gleam in his eye.

That moment we seemed to inhabit different spheres. It was the second time I heard that name in as many days. Was it coincidence, or had I stumbled onto something beyond my ken?

An inexplicable curiosity compelled me to examine some old ledgers the previous estate agent had left me. I kept turning pages until I came upon the words “Lakeside Villa.” The entry, dated a dozen years earlier, showed bricks, mortar, plaster, whitewash, and tools had been purchased for work done on the east wing. However, there was no record of artisans’ wages. Instead, half a dozen male servants were given sizable stipends and sent to the family’s holdings in distant provinces a few days later. A winding sheet was also purchased without a coffin. Indeed, there was no mention of a funeral. During the same period horses, wagons, and several carriages were acquired, consistent with the family uprooting itself soon after. There the accounts for the villa ended.

A sixth sense drove me back to the villa. It was after nightfall. Lao Liu opened the gate, waved me in the direction of the east wing and scurried for the kitchen, hands clapped over his ears. I followed him.

“What’s going on?” I hissed shaking him by the shoulder.

“Don’t you hear her singing?” whimpered Lao Liu, a wild look on his face.

All I heard was the wind in the trees and the soft lapping of the lake against the shore.

“It’s driving me mad!” groaned Lao Liu. “I won’t stay any longer!” Between chattering teeth he told me how Master Tang Hao had brewed his herbs and applied the liquid to the mysterious painting.

“Slowly those brambles, or whatever he calls them, melted away.” Lao Liu’s tone was filled with wonder. “Then I heard her singing …”

The door and windows of the east wing were wide open, and the light of the waxing moon flooded the room. Master Tang Hao sat before the scroll; an ecstatic smile lit his face. The black lines that obliterated the painting were gone, except for a few tenacious tendrils clinging to the corners. An ethereal young woman gazed out of it, lips slightly parted as if about to sing. One slender hand cradled a lute while the other plucked its strings. In the uncertain light I thought the artist had painted something that appeared to be a fragment of a charm hanging from her neck. Though I had never seen the portrait before, the feeling of recognition made me shudder. I seemed to hear the lady’s voice, barely audible, but warm and insistent. My inner self strained after her words.

“You hear her too,” breathed Master Tang Hao without moving. His words jolted me back to reality. Even as I denied anything of the sort, I felt the eyes in the portrait fixed upon me. The lady’s voice sounding in my brain filled me with exquisite pain. Master Tang Hao’s eyes were on fire when he added,

“She will be free when the moon is full!”

I felt I was drowning. With a huge effort I propelled myself out of the room and fled.

That night I rooted through my Master’s papers. In a bundle of correspondence bearing his father’s seal were a number of letters from Wang Xin, a marriage broker, concerning the acquisition of a concubine for my Master. The young lady in question was the beautiful and talented daughter of a cultured family who had fallen on hard times. There was an impediment. The girl had already been promised to another. However, the father, who was in desperate straits, was willing to overlook certain niceties for a price.

Negotiations dragged on. The Old Master doted on his son. So gifts of money, silks, jewels, and even a small house were made to one Wu Tiansiang as a marriage portion for his daughter Xiaoyu.

There it was again! Xiaoyu! I was delving into matters I instinctively felt should be left alone, yet I was powerless to desist.

Wu Tiansiang’s house was not hard to find, but the family had moved away a long time ago.

“He fancied himself a gentleman, with all the airs and graces,” a neighbor who spoke to me sneered. “But he sold his daughter to the highest bidder. They say the girl tried to escape the rich man’s villa on the lake with her betrothed. Something went wrong—”

He paused. I slipped him a few coins and he continued.

“The young man hired a boat for the night, which he would row himself. There’s nothing unusual about that, except the boat was found capsized the next morning and there was no sign of the young man. There was gossip he had been killed.”

“Wasn’t there an inquiry?” I asked.

“What for?” the man answered my question with one of his own. “They say he was from out of province, one of hundreds who came for the civil service examinations. Without money or connections who would bother! Nevertheless, the rich man pulled up stakes soon afterward. Then Wu Tiansiang quietly sold his house and left too.”

I seemed to have reached a dead end.

I thought of the marriage broker. Wang Xin had also gone from the place where he used to live. The family

was reticent. However, when I mentioned my Master's name, a gleam of interest flashed in the eyes of a nephew.

"My uncle has lived in a monastery for the last ten years," he volunteered. A few coins and he supplied its name. The look in the man's eyes told me nothing more was forthcoming.

Master Wang Xin was one of several old men who lived in the monastery and did menial tasks in exchange for food, shelter, tranquillity, and a decent burial when he dies. The monk who pointed him out working in the garden said,

"We believe he is possessed. By day he is silent, but he sings at night. Always the same tune." He murmured a blessing and withdrew.

Master Wang Xin's face was as wrinkled and dry as a prune. At first he showed neither interest nor surprise at my presence. Suddenly something flickered behind those opaque black eyes. Out of the blue he said,

"He couldn't win Xiaoyu's heart, so he had her portrait painted to enslave her soul." He leaned close to me and whispered,

"That night he was supposed to be away, and the other was coming for her in a boat." For a moment his attention wandered. Then he added,

"Only he never got there." Wang Xin grabbed me by the collar and hissed in my face,

"He was killed!"

"By whom?" I stammered.

"The one you work for," he said quite distinctly. "The girl's father got wind of the plan and told me, and I told your master. I needed money!" His face crumpled into a grotesque mass of crisscrossed lines.

"He walled her up alive in his ancestral shrine. Then he destroyed her portrait so that her soul will never rest in peace."

Wang Xin's eyes went blank. He had forgotten me.

It was a long ride back to the city. I stopped for a jug of wine to calm my nerves. It was dark when I left the tavern. The flower-scented night was pleasant, and I was in no hurry. As I clopped along, the full moon rose. Between the trees a sliver of West Lake gleamed in the distance. Suddenly Master Tang Hao's mysterious remark came back to me. I dug my heels into the horse and galloped toward the lake.

The villa was completely dark, but the gate was open. I shouted for Lao Liu. There was no answer. The door to the kitchen had been torn from its hinges. Inside, smashed furniture and utensils were strewn about, evidence of a fierce fight. The struggle had clearly continued across the courtyard, for I stumbled over a sleeve torn from a cotton tunic like the one Lao Liu wore.

I ran to the east wing. A peculiar stain, like the shadow of another person, defaced Xiaoyu's portrait. A sickening smell of decay came from a hole smashed through the facing wall. I covered my nose and mouth and peered through the opening. Inside was a crumbling ancestral shrine. Shreds of a linen winding sheet and a lute lay in the dust. What else I glimpsed has been blotted from my mind.

Sounds of movement outside startled me but no one was there. I sprinted out the gate and down the path to the lake. Master Tang Hao was poling a skiff away from the shore. A veiled woman sat in its prow. I started to call out to them, but my voice froze in my throat. The woman turned, and as she lifted her veil a cloud drifted across the moon, plunging us in momentary darkness. When it passed, the lake shimmered smooth as glass.

The following morning an overturned boat was found floating on the lake. Nearby, tangled in weeds at the bottom were the skeletons of a man and woman locked in eternal embrace. They crumbled into dust when they were brought to the surface. Each wore half of an amber pendant.

I closed the villa, and my Master accepted my explanation for Tang Hao's departure without comment.

I thought things would be the way they used to be, but that is not the case.

In the dark hour before dawn, I hear a raspy, faraway voice singing a tune imbedded deep in my consciousness. Every note pushes me closer to the edge. There is no escape. I will have to go back to Lakeside Villa.

But not today. Not today …

8

Li Shu leaned back in his chair and tilted his face to the sun streaming through a high window. Behind his tight shut lids, molten globes of light sent rivulets of warmth coursing through his frame. He shuddered as knots of tension in bone and muscle began to unravel. Little sounds filtered through his drowsing brain, detached and far away. For the moment he was at peace.

Lady Chan, seated at her desk across the room, glanced up from the pile of bills and invoices she was

scrutinizing as her husband shifted position. A shadow of concern passed briefly across her face. Satisfied that he was comfortable, she returned to her work. The gallery where she sat afforded a clear view of the bustling general store below, while an ornate screen hid her from those she observed. It was widely known, though never publicly acknowledged, that Lady Chan not only ruled Li Shu's household but ran his business as well. For Li Shu was a clever but indolent young man who would have run it into the ground.

Since his marriage five years ago, his wife brought order if not purpose into Li Shu's life. Under her stewardship, the business prospered. Lady Chan prided herself on knowing who her customers were and anticipating their needs. Furthermore, she knew her staff. A new broom sweeps clean. She quickly weeded out the flatterers and the panderers who buzzed around her husband like bluebottle flies around a honey pot and sent them packing. The rest she won over with her sincerity, her fairness, and her acumen. Her husband had to admit she ran the business better than he ever could.

Hovering between sleeping and waking, a pair of almond-shaped eyes, upward tilted at the corners, floated to the surface of Li Shu's consciousness. Like a reflection in water they beckoned, remote yet tantalizing. He sighed. His wife across the room looked up again.

Lady Chan knew her husband well. The trouble with Li Shu was that he was unfocused. He took the Imperial Civil Servants' Examination but failed to distinguish himself Then he tried painting, for which he had shown some promise. His doting parents had given him a studio in a quiet lane on the other side of town and stocked it with everything an artist needed. For a time, Li Shu went there every day, but he did not produce anything worthwhile. Most of the time was frittered away, in the company of other would-be artists and poets, waiting for a bolt of inspiration to strike. When Lady Chan married him, she knew full well she was not sought after for her beauty or the size of her dowry. It was the qualities she possessed, which Li Shu lacked, that made her the ideal mate for the heir to the family business. She married without illusions, but she was captivated by Li Shu's beauty and easy-going charm and soon came to love him passionately.

Often when Nanny was combing her hair at bedtime, Lady Chan would ask,

"Nanny, have I been a good wife?"

The old servant, who had come with her as a bride, pursed her lips and murmured something inaudible.

"Nanny?"

"Just keep asking," the old woman replied, not missing a stroke.

Lady Chan was asking herself that same question now, but never with more uncertainty. Ever since the last rent day a month ago, she sensed a change in Li Shu. He was usually home from the country by nightfall. That time he did not return until the following morning, weary and out of sorts. When she inquired where he had been, he was short with her for the first time in their married life.

"A man has the right to spend time with friends without having to account for every moment!" he shouted.

The rent money he turned over to her was short.

"I spent some," he said.

"On what, honored husband?" she pressed.

"This and that!" he flayed the air with his arms. "It doesn't matter."

"Oh, but it does," she countered. "The rent money belongs to the business."

"The business! The business!" he cried. "Can you think of nothing else? What about me?"

Those last words reverberated in her mind. In her zeal for her husband's financial well-being, had she lost sight of the man? That thought sent waves of dismay through her. She kept a well-ordered and comfortable home. She was attentive about Li Shu's likes and dislikes. She thought she had left no stone unturned where her husband's happiness was concerned. Evidently something was amiss. She would ask Nanny where she had gone wrong. Nanny always had an answer.

For once Nanny had no ready answer. If she did, she was reticent.

"Nanny!" Lady Chan's tone took on an impatient edge. The two women's eyes locked in the dressing table mirror. Nanny gave her mistress's long, glossy hair a tug before she applied her comb to it again.

"Nanny," Lady Chan softened. The old woman's mouth was pursed into a tight knot. It was a look that Lady Chan knew from childhood. Nanny would speak when she was good and ready. Lady Chan studied her own reflection as she waited. Hers was not an unpleasant face, but somewhat flat. Everything about it was round; the single-lidded eyes set too close together; the curved arches of the painted brows; the small, snub nose. In contrast with the rest, the wide, thin-lipped mouth seemed out of place. However, with her hair worn loose, her face did not seem quite as broad and plain. Surreptitiously, she essayed a smile, hoping Nanny would not notice.

But the old woman obviously did, for she gave her hair another tug and leaning close to her mistress's ear

whispered,

"He has a person living in the studio."

Lady Chan's hands flew to her throat. The color drained from her cheeks one moment, and blazed the next. Nanny went on combing. With an effort Lady Chan asked Nanny's reflection,

"What person?"

"A female person," replied Nanny testily. "Young and quite pretty."

Lady Chan whirled about and seized Nanny's hand.

"How do you know?"

"I followed him," said Nanny. To justify herself she added, "He has been acting strangely ever since he came back from the country last rent day."

Her husband had indeed been behaving strangely. He was lethargic all day but seemed filled with feverish restlessness when the sun went down. He slipped out of the house as soon as the evening meal was over and did not crawl into bed until almost daybreak. He slept badly; grinding his teeth and muttering. Once or twice Lady Chan thought she heard him murmur in his sleep,

"M'lady … M'lady …"

She was touched, thinking he was dreaming of her. Now she wasn't sure.

Lady Chan examined her husband's face from across the room. He did not look well. Come to think of it, he had not looked well since she discovered the two tiny punctures on his neck.

"It's nothing," Li Shu had reassured her. "Probably some insect bite."

Nevertheless, he quickly pulled up his collar to hide them. As he slept with his head turned to one side exposing his neck, she could see quite plainly the punctures had not healed. In fact they were oozing, the flesh around them purplish and bruised.

Another sigh from the sleeper snapped Lady Chan out of her reverie. She cleared her throat just loud enough to wake Li Shu. He came to, dazed and disoriented.

"You were dreaming, honored husband," Lady Chan smiled with her lips, but her eyes quickly registered Li Shu's discomfiture. He mumbled something as he rearranged his robe, shifted his body in his chair, ready to doze again.

"Honored husband, the parchment you ordered has arrived," she said, holding up the bill.

Li Shu's eyes snapped wide. He knew Lady Chan was waiting for him to say something, but he didn't trust his voice.

"I would have ordered it for you, if you told me." There was an unmistakable note of reproach in Lady Chan's tone. "I will have it sent to the studio," she added.

"There's no need," Li Shu said quickly. "I will attend to it myself."

"One of the delivery boys can take it."

"I said I will attend to it myself!" Li Shu cut her short.

Their glances clashed. Li Shu was the first to look away.

"It's a present for a friend," he explained.

It was the opening she had been waiting for.

"Who is she?" asked Lady Chan.

His stricken look cut her to the quick. Li Shu ran his hand wearily across his face. There was a feeling of relief: now that the moment he had been dreading was upon him.

It was Indian summer and hot the day he rode out to the country to collect his rent. Li Shu was a city dweller for whom the countryside held no enchantment. The landscape behind a scrim of yellow dust was monotonous. The people were dirty and uncouth, always whining about their appalling living conditions, which he could do nothing about. His Steward used to do this chore until Lady Chan dismissed him because some of the rent money stuck to his pockets. Li Shu would have overlooked it, but Lady Chan had to make an example of the poor fellow. From then on rent collecting became his responsibility.

"A monthly excursion to the country would be a pleasant change, honored husband," Lady Chan was always reasonable. "Besides, a landlord must keep track, or those peasants will cheat him blind."

As usual he could not. fault her. Nevertheless, trips to the country were not his idea of a pleasant pastime, and he made sure his wife was aware of it.

"I shall have a special dinner prepared for you when you return," she said to mollify him, reeling off a list of his favorite foods. It would have been the same uneventful trip as usual if his horse hadn't lost a shoe on the way home. The village smithy had to be cajoled out of the tavern in the midst of a boisterous drinking game, to restart

the fire and shoe the animal. Li Shu swallowed a few bowls of raw sorghum wine while he waited, which put him in a somnolent mood. Matching its master's humor, the horse ambled on at an easy pace, till, with a start, Li Shu noticed the shadows had grown long and the sun was rapidly dipping toward the horizon. The city gates would close for the night and he would be shut out if he didn't hurry. He urged the horse into a gallop. As he rounded a bend, a figure muffled in a long, black cloak darted across his path. The horse shied and would have thrown a less skillful rider. As it was, it took all Li Shu's strength and willpower to bring it to heel.

"Are you hurt, idiot?" Li Shu shouted angrily as he circled back.

A quivering mound of black cloth lay on the road, whimpering. The horse rolled its eyes and snorted, as the cloaked figure struggled to its feet.

"Are you hurt?" bellowed Li Shu. "I have no time to lose!"

The figure stood before him quivering without a word.

"Let's have a look at you."

With the tip of his whip Li Shu flicked aside the hood that hid the other's face. A pair of enormous almond-shaped eyes, tilted upward at the corners gazed up at him. The face, framed by glossy black hair, seemed to glow in the fading light. It was a face that he had never seen before, yet somehow he knew its every line. It was the most beautiful face he could ever hope to find. But it was the eyes that mesmerized him, that drew him into a whirlpool of unaccustomed emotions to which he abandoned himself without any scruples.

"Where are you going, unattended, so late in the day?" he asked gently.

The girl's lips parted as if to speak, but didn't. Instead, the eyes suddenly brimmed.

"Please don't cry," Li Shu stammered. "I didn't mean to be harsh back there. Are you hurt?"

"I'm all right," she murmured, burrowing into her cloak so that only her eyes showed. "Please go."

"I can't leave you here," he glanced quickly at the empty expanse around them. "The countryside is full of brigands. You'll never reach the city gates before they close."

"I'll be all right," said the girl from behind the folds of her cloak, fighting the quaver in her voice.

On an impulse, Li Shu reached down and swept her onto the saddle before him and spurred his horse into a gallop. She cried out and struggled at first. But he held her fast. Suddenly the fight went out of her, and she nestled against him like a captive bird. They rode in silence. Everything passed before Li Shu's eyes in a blur. A curious scent like bitter almonds sent the blood roaring through his veins. Every fiber in his body was singing. Never had he felt so alive. Instinct took him to the studio.

"And that is all?" Lady Chan asked equably.

Li Shu nodded, but the look on his face was like a knife thrust through her heart.

That night was a flashing kaleidoscope of sensations and emotions in which Li Shu drowned, died, and was reborn. Nervously he adjusted his collar to hide the two little punctures that were the marks of indescribable ecstasy. Through the ringing in his ears he heard Lady Chan say,

"Since this person is essential to my honored husband's happiness, she should be brought into the household. I shall make arrangements today."

"You mustn't," cried Li Shu. "She does not wish to be a part of anyone's household. She is like a … like a …" he fumbled for words.

"She is a butterfly that cannot be caged?" suggested Lady Chan.

She was so small, delicate, and beautiful that all Li Shu wanted was to hold her and protect her from whatever it was that made her take flight.

"I will stay if that is your wish," she had said with surprising resiliency and strength when they spoke of the future the morning after. "However, nothing in your life must change."

Li Shu started to protest, saying the studio was not a suitable place to live in. She countered by saying she would turn it into a place where he could take his ease whenever he wished. Besides; she was also an artist. Indeed, the pathetic bundle of clothes she carried also contained an ancient box of paints and brushes.

"They are the only things I value from the past," she murmured. She would not hear of formalizing their relationship.

"I must be free," she said, fixing Li Shu with her eyes. "Otherwise I shall die."

She came from a background of genteel poverty. Her father had sold her as a bride to the local warlord, known for his capricious cruelty. However, before she was delivered to her lord and master, she had escaped.

"So, she is a runaway," sighed Lady Chan, "and betrothed to the warlord, no less." She waved aside her husband's rebuttal. "We all know he is a monster, but do you realize the consequences of what you have done? When he finds her—and he will—he will kill the lot of us. Including your revered parents," she added for

emphasis.

"What is her name?" Lady Chan was suddenly businesslike.

"I don't know," mumbled Li Shu reddening. It was the truth. When he asked her name, she replied,

"The name I was born with is dishonored. The one I am destined to bear, I despise. Therefore, I have no name."

"What shall I call you?" he whispered, cupping her face between his hands.

"Whatever you wish," she said. He thought a moment.

"I shall call you … M'lady."

He repeated it several times, rolling it off his tongue with infinite tenderness.

She laughed, and it was like the tinkling of a little silver bell.

Lady Chan stiffened. Her worst fear was confirmed. Her husband was smitten with the girl. But her voice was calm when she spoke again.

"For all our safety, she must leave the studio. Hide her where she can't be traced back to you."

"I will think about it," said Li Shu without much conviction. Inwardly he knew he would do nothing for the time being, no matter the consequences. For he noticed that M'lady had grown wan and listless.

"It's being cooped up," she said with a languid smile. "I wish I could walk about the streets in broad daylight like any ordinary person!"

"But you can!" cried Li Shu. "I shall accompany you, and no one will dare harm you. I promise!"

She shook her head.

"That will put you in danger. I couldn't bear it if harm came to you. I must go away."

Li Shu's heart lurched within him at those last words. Frantically I he cast about for something to relieve her boredom. He smacked his forehead, when he looked about him.

"You could paint here!" he cried. Eagerly he flung open cupboards and drawers to show her their contents. "Everything you need is here!" he cried. "Use them!"

"I have," she countered. "It's only a poor effort." Shyly she produced a small ink and brush sketch of Li Shu. He complimented her for the likeness, but when he begged to have it she refused.

"I did it for myself. That way a little of you remains with me when you are absent," she said. Seeing his crestfallen look she added,

"I will do one of myself before I go."

"You must not speak of leaving," cried Li Shu.

"But go I shall," she replied, stroking his cheek with her thin, birdlike hand. "It's inevitable. When I am gone the portrait will remind you of me."

Then taking a more cheerful tack, she asked him to buy her some parchment, as fine as human skin, for her portrait. She smiled, and the tiny greenish lights dancing in the depths of her eyes dazzled him so that he had to shut his own. A red mist engulfed him that left him chilled to the bone, weary, and disoriented when it receded. He remembered vaguely writing an order for the parchment before stumbling to his living quarters in a courtyard behind the shop. The rest was a blank.

Now that the parchment had arrived, Li Shu chafed to deliver it, but M'lady had insisted he must not alter his daily routine on her account and that he was not to go to the studio until after dark.

"If you love me as you say, then you will abide by this simple request," she said earnestly.

"Why?" cried Li Shu. She tweaked his nose and chuckled.

"Because it's best for all of us," she said.

So he waited till dark before he hurried to the studio with the roll of parchment under his arm. M'lady was pathetically grateful for his gift. She unrolled it carefully on the long table used for painting, examining it carefully inch by inch. Her breath came in short, sharp gasps, and the finger tip that glided down its length trembled with excitement.

That evening M'lady was more animated than she had ever been, darting about the room, chattering all the while. Yet in the flickering candlelight, Li Shu was startled at how changed she was. She looked haggard. He thought he detected the beginning of lines across her forehead and around her eyes that he had not noticed before. Nothing she said penetrated, until suddenly he found himself in the street with the gate locked in his face. A flash of annoyance faded to disappointment, then to resignation. He leaned his head wearily against the jamb. His feet seemed too heavy to lift, his legs too wobbly to carry him away from there.

By and by when he was himself again, he trudged home. The streets were empty. The shops all shuttered and most of the houses dark. He was aware time had passed, but he had no recollection how. Only M'lady's parting

words stayed with him.

"You must not come here until I send for you," she said. "I must be left alone a while to paint."

"How long will it take?" he cried.

"It takes time," M'lady smiled.

Li Shu did as he was bid. He stayed away from the studio though he seethed with impatience.

Lady Chan watched his misery helplessly. He was by turns irascible then apologetic for his rudeness. He seemed to shrink before her eyes until he was a shadow of himself.

In spite of the terrible fatigue, Li Shu roamed the streets aimlessly. Lady Chan did not try to stop him, but she had Nanny dogging his footsteps at a safe distance. Li Shu receded into himself A transparent veil separated him from the rest of the world.

Thus, he was dazed and bewildered when a pair of hands suddenly shot out from the throng in the street and slammed him against a wall. The back of his head striking a hard surface shocked him back to reality. Li Shu found himself staring into the angry face of a mendicant monk.

"You are bewitched!" thundered the monk, white whiskers bristling and spittle flying in all directions. "An aura of evil surrounds you! You are damned!"

Li Shu stared at his attacker, too overcome to speak. The monk seized the collar of his robe and pulled it down. To the crowd that gathered around them, the monk said in a quieter voice,

"Just as 1 thought. The evil one has been draining your blood."

He pointed at the two festering wounds on Li Shu's neck. The crowd let out an audible gasp and backed away.

"I have pursued this evil creature for a long time." The monk pressed his face close to Li Shu's and whispered urgently into his ear.

Li Shu shuddered. His mouth opened and shut like a fish out of water.

"You're mad!" he finally croaked, struggling free from the monk. The monk's face was grim, but he did not try to detain Li Shu.

"You have the choice between life and death, but you choose death. So be it."

He sauntered down the street, leaving Li Shu clinging to the wall for support, gasping for air. Had he been alert he might have noticed his wife's Nanny hurrying after the monk.

Li Shu could hear his own heart beating as he hurried toward the studio at a half-trot, propelled by what he had just heard. The gate was bolted from within as he expected. He went around to the back where part of the wall had crumbled, which he had meant to repair but never did. Breathless with excitement, he squeezed himself through the breach into the small courtyard at the back of the studio. On hands and knees he crept up to the window. There was a faint sound of movement within. Once or twice he thought he heard someone gibbering and chuckling. He wet a fingertip with spittle and applied it to the rice paper that covered the window, working it gently until there was a hole to peer through. What he saw made his blood curdle. Dizzily he scrambled through the hole in the wall again, hailed a carriage for hire, and headed home.

Li Shu's teeth were chattering when Lady Chan helped him into bed. He clung to her, wild-eyed with terror. Lady Chan made him comfortable with her usual quiet efficiency.

"There, there," she soothed, stroking Li Shu's feverish forehead, "you've caught a chill wandering the streets without a cloak in this weather."

Lady Chan's presence was a comfort. She was constant, unchanging no matter what happened. He clutched her hand in both his.

"Help me!" he gasped, "I'm afraid!"

"Of what, honored husband?" cooed Lady Chan. "You're home, lying in your own bed."

He wanted to tell his wife about the monk; then he caught sight of Nanny standing behind her with a bowl of something hot in her hands, and he stopped. He did not like Nanny. Worse than that, he did not trust the woman. He would wait till they were alone. In the meantime, he allowed himself to be propped up with pillows, and Lady Chan spooned a brackish, brown liquid into him.

"The nastier it tastes, the more effective it is," said Lady Chan, as though she were coaxing a child. Li Shu tried to respond, but his tongue was so numb it would not form the words. He lay back and shut his eyes. He dozed. Once more he was peering through the tear in the window screen of the studio, hungry for truth. His heart refused to believe that the hag with the stringy hair and burning eyes he saw drooling over a painting spread out on the long table was M'lady. It had to be an impostor in her clothes, for M'lady is young and beautiful.

"You live because she needs you," the monk's implacable voice sounded again in his ear. "From time to time she must rejuvenate herself by painting a portrait of herself on parchment, which will become her new skin. But to

go on living she must also have a new heart. She will take yours when it suits her. Then you will join her as a creature neither dead nor alive, but forever damned. Lead me to her while there is still time!"

Li Shu thrashed about in his delirium. He tried to cry out, "She is not an ancient vampire," but he could not. The monk faded into a gray void. Li Shu sighed. Suddenly his clothes felt so tight he had to struggle out of them. Free at last, he stood beside the bed, light and insubstantial, gazing down without surprise at his other self lying there.

Lady Chan was slumped in a chair nearby, eyes shut. He followed the path of a pearl-like tear trickling down her cheek unheeded. When he tried to brush it away, he found he could not. Nor did she hear when he called her name. He moved with the long loping strides of an antelope. A sensation that filled him with childish delight. He did not have to open the door. He simply went through it. Once outside, he bounded lightly across rooftops, his shouts of joy rang to the skies.

"M'lady! M'lady!"

The cry from his heart found an echo. She came to him with the greenish flecks dancing in her eyes, and eagerly he surrendered to the red mist that enveloped him.

A force, stronger than anything he had ever experienced, suddenly reeled him back, and he lay once more in his bed. A painful weight pressed down on his chest so that he could hardly breathe. Through slitted eyes he took in the room flooded with daylight. He sensed there were people about, though they were beyond his field of vision. The fire door of the potbellied stove in the center of the room must have been open, for his nostrils twitched at the smell of burning paper. Presently it clicked shut.

"I hope that's the last of her letters."

Li Shu recognized his wife's voice, but his head was so heavy he could not shift it to see who she was addressing.

"Surely she must realize by now that he will not go to her," Lady Chan continued. "A sensible person would leave."

"Ah, need I remind you, dear lady, she is not," a man's voice held low, answered.

The voice sent ripples of fear through him. With an effort he made a sound that was half groan and half bleat. A finger pried open one eye. At the same time a hand grasped his wrist firmly but gently. In that instant Li Shu recognized the monk.

"Is he coming to?" asked Lady Chan. "He looks as though life is draining out of him."

"Perhaps it is, dear lady," whispered the monk as he released Li Shu's wrist, "in spite of our efforts."

"But these … things," cried Lady Chan, "were supposed to keep her at bay!"

Li Shu forced his eyes open a crack wider. Bunches of herbs festooned his bed. Now he understood where the strange pungent smell wafting through the air was coming from. Instinctively, he knew it had something to do with M'lady. He would have torn them down if he had the strength.

"They will stop her for a while," the monk responded. "Right now she communes with his spirit," he paused as if to forestall something Lady Chan was about to say. "We can control the body but not the spirit. The creature will become desperate, for her new skin will wither without a new heart."

That last remark filled Li Shu with loathing for the speaker. He had to admit M'lady puzzled him. For instance, she had quickly ferreted out his favorite foods and prepared them for him, but she never partook. Nor would she allow him in the house till nightfall. There had to be a logical explanation, if only he had the strength to pursue it.

Lady Chan let out a low groan.

"I've heard her pacing and whimpering in the courtyard at night."

"Ah!" there was a note of triumph in the monk's voice, "we are drawing her out."

Li Shu was sure now some diabolical plot was being hatched against M'lady while he lay helpless. He must warn her somehow. Li Shu stirred. The monk's hand seized his wrist again.

"Our sleeper wakes," he whispered.

Lady Chan's plain, round face blocked out everything else. Li Shu hadn't the strength to refuse the brown, brackish liquid she fed him. Presently she laid him back, and he drifted off. The shadows were stretched long across the courtyard when Lady Chan emerged from Li Shu's chamber with Nanny close on her heels. Muffled in long cloaks, the two slipped out of the house, walking briskly toward the city gate.

"Oh, my pet, let me go instead. It's no place for a lady," pleaded Nanny.

Lady Chan never flinched from anything unpleasant she had to do.

"No!" she shot back. "It's a matter of life and death for my husband. It concerns no one else but me. Let us press on!"

Nanny glared at her mistress's back balefully, knowing better than to contradict her. Once through the city gate, they turned onto a dirt road that branched off the main highway. Even before they reached it they could smell the garbage dump. Fumes writhed from it, gyrating in a mocking dance in the afternoon sun.

"Wait here," Lady Chan commanded the disgruntled Nanny over her shoulder.

Fighting down waves of nausea, Lady Chan scrambled up the hillock of rotting matter. Inwardly she railed against the monk for having sent her on this mission. She would have turned back except for the monk's challenging words reverberating in her mind.

"I can be of no further help, but one wiser than I can. Ultimately, only you can conquer this ancient evil," said the monk. "It will take all the strength you can muster. Most of all, it requires limitless and unconditional love."

The look he gave her made her quake. She gritted her teeth and swore she would do whatever he commanded,

"Even at the cost of my life!" she cried.

Clawing her way up the slippery, shifting side of the hillock, a stubborn streak that would not let her admit defeat drove her on. Lady Chan wondered dully if pride alone was enough to conquer this wretched hill? With every step she sank deeper into the slime. Already she had lost her shoes to the evil smelling muck. Now her petticoats and robe, saturated with moisture, weighed her down. She lost her footing, pitched forward and slid down the slope. She picked herself up, dazed and blinded momentarily by the low-lying sun, and started again. Sweat mixed with tears of desperation and humiliation bathed her cheeks.

A barking laugh from somewhere high above her jerked Lady Chan's face in that direction. Shading her eyes against the sun, she saw a grotesque figure perched on the top of the hillock, more like a gigantic spider than a human being. Her heart missed a beat, but she fought the quaver in her voice and called out,

"I seek the holy hermit."

The creature leaped in the air, did a wild jig, and chortled mockingly,

"She seeks the Holy Hermit!" Coming to a stand still, he added in a high-pitched squeal,

"Doesn't everyone?"

Lady Chan swallowed hard, for as her eyes grew accustomed to the light she could see the man was as filthy as his surroundings and probably mad. She drew a deep breath and asked,

"Are you the holy hermit?"

"Who else might I be in this hallowed place?" the man shot back. "Come closer that I might see you!"

Lady Chan looked dubiously at the way ahead, and her heart sank. A mocking laugh from above made her clench her teeth. She hoisted up her skirts and bare legged, attacked the slimy slope again. The human spider watched her, laughing, shouting insults and encouragement between snatches of weird incantations barked at the indifferent heavens.

Lady Chan fell again. Her hair, which had come undone, was a mass of sticky tendrils that fell across her face, blurring her vision. Indeed, her face was so covered with grime that only the whites of her eyes showed. She struggled on blindly, step by painful step, her heart fluttering like a captive bird in her chest. At times earth and sky seemed to change places. Then the light was in her eyes and the wind upon her face.

"So!" cried the holy hermit from beneath his thatch of stiff; grime-spiked hair. "What do you seek?" Then, adopting a teasing manner, he answered his own question.

"Methinks you have come to marry me!"

Lady Chan felt her cheeks burning. Before she could let loose an angry retort, the holy man leaped to his feet and closed the distance between them in one bound. He took her chin in one hand and jerked her face to the light.

"Not pretty," he pronounced letting his hand drop. "No matter. I am not the marrying kind."

"I am already married," stammered Lady Chan.

"More is the pity," returned the Hermit, "for the husband."

Hot tears scalded Lady Chan's eyes. She fought them back, determined not to give this rude creature the satisfaction of seeing her cry.

"Well, what is your errand?" shouted the Hermit. He seized her by a handful of hair and dragged her to the edge of the slope. "If you have no errand be gone!"

Lady Chan twisted free. The shifting slime underfoot brought her crashing down upon her knees. The last vestiges of pride shattered. In great wrenching sobs she told her story. The hermit listened, dancing a jig and shouting wild incantations all the while. Then turning serious at the end of Lady Chan's recitation, he said in an almost gentle voice,

"Gather me some white fungus, and some black."

"Where will I find them?" hiccuped Lady Chan.

The hermit seized her by the hair again and dragged her around the top of the hillock, pointing here and there, shouting,

"Look! Hither and yon! Here and there! Everywhere!"

He let go of her abruptly, plopped himself down and, assuming the lotus position, was completely still. Neither tears nor entreaties could move him to utter another word. The sun was rapidly racing toward the horizon. Lady Chan got down on hands and knees, foraging in the filth for the fungus. To her amazement, she found them growing from the rankest filth, gleaming with a strange iridescent beauty. She tore off a strip of her petticoat to hold them.

"A dozen of each will do," said the hermit as if he spoke to the wind. "Then go!"

"But what shall I do with them?" Lady Chan quavered.

"You will think of something," the hermit muttered. His head fell forward, and he began to snore.

Lady Chan stood shaking with exasperation. She would have stamped her feet in rage if the mush were not slowly sucking her under. The hermit was sound asleep, and daylight was waning fast.

Nanny cried out in dismay when her mistress stumbled off the noisome hillock clutching her cache of fungus. Lady Chan found Nanny's horror unaccountably amusing. Filthy and barefooted, she felt liberated. Without a word, she strode purposefully toward the city gate, head held high. It was Nanny who slinked behind hiding her face in shame.

Bathed and dressed in fresh clothes, Lady Chan examined her precious handful of fungi. The white ones were shaped like clusters of stars, while the black ones were curled and corrugated like cock's combs. Away from their natural habitat they emitted a sweetish, faintly steamy smell. In fact she found it rather soothing. She sent: Nanny to the temple to ask the monk what she was supposed to do with them, but he had gone away. However, the hermit had said she would think of something.

She sat down beside her husband's sickbed to ponder that. Gazing at Li Shu's ashen cheeks, she fancied she saw him laid out in his coffin. Perhaps the fungus was an elixir to break M'lady's spell. Once that idea took root, Lady Chan flew into action. She set a kettle of water on the potbellied stove to boil and dropped the fungi into it. They hissed when they hit the water, quickly turning into a gelatinous mass that dissolved. Soon a sweet, heady perfume that made Lady Chan's head spin filled the room. She shut her eyes, and was instantly asleep.

There must be a windstorm, thought Li Shu, for the rattling of the window brought him out of a deep sleep. By the light of the guttering candles he could see something was cooking on the stove. Another odor, stronger than the herbs that festooned the room, tickled his nostrils and made his eyes water. His wife stirred in her chair. She too had been wakened by a noise.

A scratching sound came from the window. A nocturnal bird must be pecking at the rice paper thought Li Shu. Then his eyes went wide with fright. He could hear someone breathing outside. The window paper broke with a loud tearing noise. A woman's hand reached in, groping for the latch, encountered a bunch of herbs fastened to it, and drew back with a cry of surprise and pain. Sweat beaded Li Shu's brow. He tried to heave himself out of the bed, but something held him down. He could not move, nor did he have the strength to cry out. Whoever it was hovered outside muttering, pacing rapidly up and down. Suddenly, the window burst open, and a disheveled woman climbed through it giggling and gibbering. The candles had gone out. Li Shu could not see the woman's face, but recognized the scent of bitter almonds.

"M'lady! M'lady," he gasped.

"I have come for you, Li Shu," she replied in a voice that dripped honey. "Why have you abandoned me?"

Li Shu tried to answer, but his wooden tongue would not shape the words.

She approached the bed cautiously, uttering irritated sounds at the bunches of herbs that barred her way.

"Come to me," she pleaded stretching out her arms. "You promised me your heart, but you are false like all men!"

Li Shu shook his head feebly. M'lady's arms dropped to her sides. Her body coiled like a cat's and she leaped upon the bed, bringing down bunches of the herbs as she landed. For a moment an invisible web seemed to fall upon her, causing her to cry out.

Lady Chan shot to her feet. In the dark she could barely make out a figure straddling her husband, one hand clutched around his throat, the other tearing at his nightshirt. Blind with terror Lady Chan reached for the pot simmering on the stove. Distracted by the movement, the crouching figure turned, whereupon Lady Chan flung the contents of the pot in M'lady's face.

M'lady's piercing shrieks were horrible to hear. When the sound subsided, Nanny crept into the room. She found it in shambles. The air was foul with the acrid smell of something burning. Her master and mistress were in

a dead faint but apparently unharmed. No one else was there.

Months passed before Li Shu fully recovered from his mysterious illness. Neither he nor Lady Chan ever mentioned the events of that night or M'lady. They blocked it from their minds. It was as though nothing had happened.

A year later Lady Chan persuaded Li Shu to sell the studio. He did not object since he never used it. However, before showing it to a prospective buyer, Li Shu decided to visit the place, to be sure there was nothing he wanted to keep. He found a roll of parchment tied with a red ribbon. He recognized the clumsy double knot with which it was tied at once. His own handiwork stirred memories. He threw it in the fire with the rest of the rubbish without looking at it.

The truth is Li Shu was no longer sure M'lady ever existed. Nor could he conjure up the face that was once so dear, except the upward tilting eyes, black as the night, with curious green flecks flickering in their depths.

However, two tiny scars remained on his neck for the rest of his life.

9

At the age of thirty, Ning had already failed the Imperial Civil Service Examination twice. His father, who wanted him in the family business, did not encourage a third attempt.

"We have been tea growers for generations," coaxed the Father. "That continuity must not be interrupted by whim!"

"Surely, the Ancestors would be just as honored if I were a Minister, or the local Magistrate!" Ning argued. In the end his Father gave in to Ning's wheedling, but not without conditions.

"You must swear before the Ancients," said the Father with a deep frown, "if you do not succeed, you will settle into the family business, marry, and produce offspring to carry on the family name."

Ning grudgingly took the oath. This time he passed the preliminary examination and was summoned to the provincial capital to write his final thesis. Ning was elated, convinced it was a sign the Ancients were on his side. He arrived at Hangzhou in a buoyant mood and tramped the city from one end to the other seeking lodgings. Every square inch of space was taken. Footsore and dispirited, he was in despair. Maybe the Ancients were trifling with him, bringing him so close to his goal, only to thwart him. How could he write the thesis that would make his fortune without a place to live?

He was drowning his troubles in a tavern when he overheard a conversation about an abandoned house in the hills overlooking Chien Tang River. Ning decided to find it. He lost his way several times, but persistence eventually paid off

The house was almost in ruin. Beyond the entrance courtyard was another with rooms built facing each other on the east and west sides. A slip of paper with the words **KEEP OUT** inked on it was pasted to the door of the one facing east. So Ning took the other.

Ning settled in. From time to time he glimpsed a shadowy figure moving in or out of the room facing his. Whoever it was chose to stay aloof, which suited him. He was glad of a roof over his head and solitude to write his thesis.

For the first few days he struggled fruitlessly. On a grim, rainy day he suddenly tapped into a wellspring of inspiration that seemed endless. The steady drumming of rain on the roof merged with the stream of thoughts that spilled from the well-formed tip of Ning's brush. Later in the day the rain stopped. Silence severed the thread of concentration. Ning stretched, easing the ache in his shoulders. He was thirsty. Reaching for a bucket, he headed out to the well.

The garden beyond the courtyard had gone to seed long ago. Weeds and brambles obscured everything except a path to the well that seemed to have been trampled through the rough growth quite recently. The well stood at the edge of a terrace that had partly crumbled away. The rope fastened to the rusty winch was worn but serviceable. As he bent down to draw water, a movement at the corner of his eye made Ning look up. A butterfly gently opening and folding its mottled wings of gold and purple, perched on the cobblestones, poised for flight. Ning watched it lift into the air, gliding and dipping around him as though observing him from every angle. Suddenly it veered away and disappeared into a dense grove of green-black pines that screened the lower half of the garden from view.

The butterfly's departure left Ning strangely bereft. He tried to settle down to his thesis again, but he could not pick up where he left off. There was a strange fluttering in his breast, as though a butterfly were imprisoned there. He could not sit still. The squeaking of a rusty hinge across the courtyard was an excuse to lay down his brush. He

opened his door just as the occupant of the room across was about to go in.

He was a grim-faced man. Deep-etched lines from the corners of his eyes to the curve of his chin gave him a sardonic look. The haughty, aquiline nose and the wide, thin-lipped mouth added a dash of brooding remoteness. The long, lank hair pulled back and tied with a ribbon at the nape of the neck, the tunic, pants, and thick-soled boots he wore were in keeping with a man of action. Ning introduced himself eagerly.

"No doubt you are writing the Imperial Examination," the stranger said in a surprisingly cultivated accent.

Ning babbled when he was nervous. The other hushed him with an impatient gesture.

"Have a bowl of wine with me, an hour hence." The invitation sounded more like a command. "An hour hence," repeated the stranger as he shut his door firmly in Ning's face.

"Who does he think he is!" thought Ning angrily. He resolved to stay away. Soon the smell of cooking wafted through his window. What is wine without food! Ning's rumbling stomach overcame his pique. He splashed some water on his face, ran a comb through his hair, changed into a fresh robe, and crossed the courtyard precisely an hour later.

The stranger's room was identical to Ning's, except it was festooned with bunches of herbs whose various aromas mingled dizzily in the air. Charms to ward off evil spirits, written in a bold, fluid hand, covered the walls. A dilapidated bench stood to one side heaped with scrolls. Several appeared to be charts of the constellations. The only object not covered in dust was a sword in a leather scabbard hanging over the *kang*.

The two men sat crossed-legged on the *kang* with food and wine laid out between them. Ning's host had not introduced himself earlier, nor did he trouble to do so now. Conversation came in short, disjointed spurts, as it usually does between strangers. When they had polished off the plain but hearty fare and a passable wine, the silences became tedious. Ning was tempted to make his excuses and leave. However, too much wine and the overlapping perfumes of herbs fogged his brain. Everything blurred.

Ning woke with a throbbing head. It was dark and raining again. He fumbled in the dark until his hand encountered a candle, which took real concentration to light. The evening was a jumble of ambiguous impressions, bits of which flashed sharp and clear in his mind. He lay back trying to piece together what he could remember about his neighbor.

"He's too old to be seeking a position in the civil service," Ning muttered to himself. Since he had been living in this lonely place, he had started talking to himself.

"He could be a necromancer." The charts in his room seemed to point in that direction. Ning brushed that notion aside when he remembered the sword hanging on the wall.

"He's a paladin!" he said out loud. That did not add up either, for the man carried himself like a gentleman.

"So where does that leave us?" Ning answered his own question. "Nowhere."

Ning remembered only one remark from their conversation. His host had warned him not to venture out of his room after dark. Ning had laughingly asked why.

"For your own good," was the answer repeated several times. Ning could have kicked himself for not pursuing the subject. No matter. He had no intention of venturing out into the dark, wet night. He snuggled into his quilt and prepared to go back to sleep. A scratching sound outside the door gradually insinuated itself into his consciousness.

"Who is there?" Ning called out.

The sound stopped. As Ning lay back it started again.

"Is someone there?" Ning called again, his throat oddly dry.

The sound stopped again. Ning heaved himself off the *kang*, and flung the door open.

A girl stood on the threshold, her tiny frame drooping with weariness. Rainwater trickled off her hair and down her heart-shaped face. Her almond eyes, fringed with long, graceful lashes, brimmed with fear. Ning softened instantly.

"Come in," he said gently. She sidled past him, eyes demurely averted. The guttering candle ruled the room with darting shadows.

"Please sit," Ning said, indicating the *kang* where he slept, ate, and worked. "As you can see, I don't have much." Noticing a faintly condescending smile cross the girl's face, he added, "This is only temporary." His nervousness made her giggle.

"You'll be an official at court one day," the girl said.

"You're laughing at me again," Ning blurted, and instantly felt foolish.

"Not at all," said the girl, who could not have been more than seventeen or eighteen. "I can tell by the curve of your brow, the arch of your nose, the shape of your mouth," her gesture encompassed Ning's person, "your

bearing."

Ning chuckled all aquiver. He loved flattery.

"I shall light the brazier and make tea," he stammered, busying himself.

The girl seated herself on the edge of the *kang*, her tiny feet barely touching the ground. She had removed her wet traveling cloak. Under it she wore a robe of pale yellow silk splashed with purple flowers befitting a lady of rank. However, at that moment, she was more like a wet butterfly, spreading her wings out to dry.

Ning had the brazier lit and the tea kettle humming in a trice. The girl prattled merrily. She said she was on her way to her grandmother's and got caught in the rain.

"Lightning frightened the poor horse and it bolted. I'm a good equestrian," she said emphatically. "Anyway, I am safe now." She sipped her tea, smiling at Ning with her eyes.

They talked desultorily for a while.

"I am so weary," said the girl, eyeing Ning's rumpled quilt. "May I sleep here?"

Ning was thunderstruck.

"That's impossible," he blustered, his arms flapping in agitation.

The girl's tinkling laugh made him bristle. What do I know about her? he asked himself Suppose she is a great lady! In that case, her mere presence would spell doom not only for him but his entire family and their servants too.

"Woe betide me!" Ning groaned in spite of himself

"And all because I want to spend the night in your room!"

The derisive gleam in the girl's eyes convinced Ning she was making fun of him.

"My lady had better leave," he muttered stiffly.

"Leave!" the girl's eyes went wide, "just when I was getting comfortable!"

Ning picked up her cloak, which he had spread on the floor near the brazier to dry, and held it out to her, his eyes fixed to the ground. He knew that if he looked at her his resolve would crumble. She had to go!

"Perhaps a little something will change your mind," the girl murmured. From the folds of her robe she drew a silk purse and jingled it under Ning's nose.

"Now, can I stay?"

Ning gulped, and shook his head. The girl returned the purse to its hiding place, snatched the cloak from Ning's hands, and headed for the door. She stopped on the threshold, one hand on the latch.

"Look at me," she commanded. "I want you to look at me."

She stamped her foot. Ning hung his head

"You are a hard man," sighed the girl. "Maybe that's why I like you."

A gust of wind blew out the candle as she let herself out. An elusive but distracting fragrance remained in the room after she was gone. The mysterious young girl who briefly had intruded upon his solitude created a disturbance he had never experienced before.

In the days that followed, Ning forced himself to write, but he produced only words without art or content. The thought of coming so close to his goal and having it slip through his fingers filled him with self-loathing.

The stranger also seemed restless. He practiced with his sword long, strenuous hours, until the weapon became an extension of the man. He ignored Ning, as though they had never met. However, one evening as he was going to his room, he said loud enough to be heard,

"The path of righteousness is narrow, fraught with danger. Be watchful."

Ning was about to ask what he meant, but the stranger had shut his door.

Later, as he struggled with his thesis, the girl stole into his room, smiling with her eyes. The gush of words that rose from his heart, died on his trembling lips. Ning watched transfixed as she dipped a new brush in water to soften its bristles, rinsed his stone, and ground fresh ink. When the ink was ready, and she had tested the point of the brush for the correct softness, she placed the implements before him on the rough planks laid across bricks that served as a writing surface.

"Write," she whispered gently. "I will sit here and watch."

Ning took a deep breath and picked up his brush. Miraculously, ideas began to flow again. He lost track of time. She unobtrusively kept his ink fresh, a clean brush close at hand, and a new candle ready. Ning worked through the night. When the first rays of sunlight touched his window, he laid down his brush, expecting to find her curled up under his quilt on the other side of the *kang*. Instead, the tea kettle spewing steam was the only sign that someone else had been in the room.

Ning's life took a new turn. Day became night. During the day, he slept the dreamless sleep of exhaustion. The

girl woke him at dusk. There was no need for words between them. Their souls communed in perfect harmony. He wrote till daybreak without noticing when she slipped away.

Finally the thesis was done. Dressed in his best formal gown, his hair done in a scholar's knot on the top of his head, tied with a sober black ribbon, Ning hurried into the city to submit it, confident he would pass. He was also sure he could not live without the girl. On the way back, he stopped at a shop and selected a hairpin fashioned out of mother-of-pearl. Though he knew nothing about her, not even her name, he would propose marriage that very evening.

However, that evening the girl did not appear. Nor for several evenings thereafter. As daylight faded into another dismal night, the fluttering of a butterfly outside his window startled Ning out of his despair.

"Butterflies aren't nocturnal," he thought, but there it was. The butterfly lighted on the edge of the terrace flexing its wings, as if waiting for him. On an impulse, he went outside. However, the moment he drew near it darted away. Ning followed it into the pine grove. The trees grew so close that their branches shut out what was left of the light. Just when he thought he had lost it, the butterfly appeared, almost close enough to touch. Ning plunged after it again, not knowing or caring where he was going, until his forehead struck something cold and hard.

He had run into a wall that marked the lower boundary of the garden. The sound of voices came from the other side. Ning groped his way along, for it was completely dark. Finally he came to a gap where part of the wall had fallen down. On the other side was a stand of ancient bamboo between whose leaves and branches he could make out a cobblestone terrace lit by a dozen lanterns. Two women were seated there, surrounded by pots of yellow and white chrysanthemums that glowed like stars against the dark shrubbery beyond. The younger of the two was dressing the older one's hair.

"What a ruin this face has become!" complained the crone in a high cracked voice, examining herself in a mirror she held in her hand. "Once upon a time I even turned the Emperor's head."

"Be still, Granny," soothed the other, who looked to be in her late thirties. "When I finish you will look the way you used to!"

"I will soon die!" the old crone's voice rose almost to a shriek. Suddenly she seized the other's hand.

"Granny, don't." The younger woman snatched her hand away and hid it behind her back.

"I knew it, Crystal!" cried the old crone. "You are withering too!"

Crystal averted her face.

"When you could have finished him off, you went soft," the crone shrilled. "Now we are doomed! Oh, the incompetence!" The old crone was working herself into a rage. "The ingratitude! After all I lavished upon you!" Her last remark was heavy with contempt.

The woman called Crystal crumpled to her knees, whimpering.

"Fortunately the girl will save us," quavered the crone. Her head drooped onto her breast as if it were too heavy for her scrawny neck to hold up. A moment later she lifted her head, nostrils quivering.

"I think I smell something," she whispered. "Can you smell it?" she demanded.

"Perhaps the child is back," murmured the other.

"That child!" the crone whined, "I shall whip her!" She flayed the air angrily. The effort exhausted her, for she slumped again in her chair.

A light footstep sounded on the flagstones.

"There you are, naughty child," Crystal scolded. "Granny grows restless when you're tardy."

"It's hard to find the right stuff," replied a young girl. Ning could not see the speaker, but he recognized her voice.

"Give it to me quickly!" cried the crone.

Ning caught the click of a lid against a bowl. The crone made gurgling sounds as she drained its contents in one draft.

"Granny, you didn't leave me any," whined Crystal.

"You don't deserve any," the old woman cackled. To the girl she said in a commanding voice, "Hold up the mirror for me." She examined herself, gesturing for the girl to turn the mirror this way and that.

"See, some of the lines are fading." She leaned back with a sigh. In an imperious voice, she order the girl to fetch more!

"Yes!" Crystal chimed in, "I must have some too!"

The girl took a step forward, fell on her knees, and pressed her forehead against the ground. Now Ning was sure it was the object of his affections.

"Please don't send me out again," the girl whimpered. "I'm frightened."

"There is nothing to fear," the old crone cooed. "All you have to do is separate the man from his sword. Then!" She snapped her fingers meaningfully and cackled.

"I can't!" wailed the girl, wrapping her arms around the old one's legs.

"Then take the other one," snapped Crystal.

"What other one?" asked the old crone sharply. "Have you been keeping something from me?" Her eyes darted fire as her gaze swept from Crystal to the girl and back again.

Crystal seized the girl by the scruff of her neck.

"Look at that face, Granny! She has betrayed us!"

The girl tried to cover her face with her hands, but the woman pried them loose.

"There is another man in the house," cried the woman vehemently, "young and vigorous." She held the girl's face close to the crone's. "She has been hiding him from us because she fancies him!"

Ning bristled with rage. It was all he could do to keep from leaping over the wall and confronting the women.

The old crone's bony fingers cupped the girl's face.

"I see it's true," she murmured disconsolately. She whirled around and struck Crystal across the face.

"First, it was you. Now, this one! I am surrounded by traitors!" she cried.

Ning could not bear to watch any more. Blindly he groped his way out of the pine grove. The light in his window made his breath catch. He sprinted across the terrace and flung open the door. She was seated on the *kang*, her chin propped on her knees. He stood on the threshold unable to move. She chuckled, and ran to him. He lifted her in his arms and carried her back to the *kang*.

In the languorous hour after love she whispered,

"Tomorrow night I will not be with you." Ning started to protest, but she made him listen.

"Don't be alone," she said. "Buy some wine and drink with your neighbor."

He objected saying he scarcely knew the man and didn't care for his company. She laid a playful fingertip on his lips.

"Do it for me. Make him drunk; then take his sword."

"Why, that's stealing!" exclaimed Ning.

She kissed him softly.

"He is an evil sorcerer," she whispered, her lips against his. "The sword will separate us forever."

He clutched her to him fiercely, vowing nothing could take her from him.

"The sword will destroy me," she sobbed. "In time you will understand! Only it will be too late."

She pushed herself away from him. Ning's qualms vanished.

"I will do it," he cried, gathering her into his arms.

Ning woke with the sunlight in his eyes. An earring on his pillow told him the passion of the night before was not a dream. He lay back content. Their vows of love hovered like dust motes dancing in the air.

Ning hurried into town. He bought a jar of good wine and some cooked meats to go with it. When he returned with his purchases late in the afternoon, his neighbor's door stood wide.

"I was expecting you," said the stranger from within.

Ning stammered, shifting his weight from one foot to the other.

"You'd better come in," said the stranger grinning at his discomfiture, "before good food and drink go to waste!" With a sweep of his hand he cleared a space on the *kang*.

"There! Not very elegant but it will do," he said, deftly lifting the jar of wine from Ning's grasp.

They ate and drank merrily. Ning never allowed the stranger's cup to go empty. His capacity was astounding. As the level of the wine in the jar dropped, their conversation became more rambling.

"Good and evil take on the weight and form we assign them," began the stranger without preamble. Ning was finding it hard to keep up with the stranger's tirade. The room began to curl at the edges, the *kang* heaved like a boat on a rough sea, and he longed for sleep.

"This sword is the only weapon against an ancient evil I have pursued for a long time," said the stranger.

Ning snapped to at that remark. For the moment, the *kang* stopped heaving. The stranger had taken the sword off the wall. Now it lay unsheathed and gleaming across its owner's lap. Blearily Ning remembered his errand.

"May I hold it?" Ning asked.

"You may not," the stranger rumbled.

Ning reached for it nevertheless. The stranger seized his wrist.

"Next time I will take your hand off!" warned the stranger.

A quick glance told Ning the man did not make idle threats. The stranger was launched on another rambling speech when a raven came through the open window and lighted on a beam overhead. The stranger followed its flight without interrupting himself. Only his grip on the sword tightened. Suddenly the room shuddered, scattering remnants of food and wine across the *kang*. The next shock bowled Ning over. A howling wind roared through the room. Before his astonished eyes the raven grew to an enormous size, eyeing the two men below, emitting clicking sounds. With a wild cry it swooped down upon the stranger, but the smallness of the room and the bunches of herbs festooning it hampered the bird's movements. Its prey easily rolled out of its reach. Ning wedged himself into a corner, scared sober. The stranger slid off the *kang*, chanting an incantation, sword at the ready. The bird hopped across the floor, its baleful eyes darting from side to side. The distance between the combatants quickly shortened. With a desperate cry the bird lunged, drawing blood. The stranger whirled about, his sword tracing a shining circle around him. The bird attacked again with deadly precision. The stranger stood his ground, fending off the blood-crazed creature with punishing blows. The battle see-sawed, with the advantage shifting from one to the other. Both man and bird were soon drenched in blood.

Reeling with weariness, the stranger hefted his sword with both hands. With a terrifying squeal the bird, dragging an injured wing, hobbled in for the kill. Mustering what strength he had left, the stranger charged. They met head on. The bird let out an almost human scream and fluttered to the ground, impaled on the stranger's sword. For a moment the woman called Crystal lay where the bird had been. A sickening odor of burning flesh filled the air as she crumbled.

Ning was glad to be behind the bolted door of his own room again. He was shaking so hard he could not light the candle, so he sat shivering in the dark. When a hand reached out and touched his, he cried out in terror.

"It's only me," whispered the girl. They clung to each other, muttering incoherent words of comfort.

"The Old One will come to wreak vengeance," the girl trembled. "If you love me, do me one last favor."

"The sword!" Ning whispered in despair.

"It does not matter now," said the girl, struggling from his arms. "The Old One is a witch who has lived for centuries. Those whom she enslaves drain the blood of humans for her to drink. That is how she stays alive. In return she promises her minions eternal youth and beauty. I was vain and foolish, so I became her slave."

Ning cried out for he could not believe what he was hearing. But the girl made him listen.

"I came to kill you that rainy night. Had you allowed me to stay, or accepted the gold I offered you, the Old One would have drunk your blood. But you did not take advantage of me. Your generosity saved you."

Ning shook his head in disbelief

"A bundle of bones is buried between two elm trees in a clearing in the woods nearby," she continued breathlessly. "That is where I lie. If you love me, take my bones across the river. Give them a decent burial and I shall be free. You will be safe too on the farther shore, as the Old One cannot cross water."

"What about us?" cried Ning. "I want to marry you—"

"That cannot be," replied the girl sadly, "for I do not belong in your world."

"Were our vows of love mere illusion?" Ning persisted.

The girl shook her head miserably.

"We will meet again in another time … another place."

Ning started to say something, but his voice ricocheted off the walls. He was alone. He crept to the door, opened it a crack. The stranger's window was a square of light. From within came the sound of chanting. Ning ran from the courtyard into the woods.

Ning had no idea where he was going. It was pitch dark. A force stronger than he propelled him. He plunged on, crashing through the underbrush, tripping, falling, picking himself up and continuing, till he came to a clearing where two elms stood. He found a stout stick and began to dig between them. He did not have to dig long before his stick struck something that did not feel like earth. He widened the hole with bare hands. Just as the girl had said, his fingers encountered a bundle of coarse fabric. Carefully he pulled it out of the earth and clutched it to his breast. The instinct or prescience that guided him evaporated. He stood listening to the night sounds not knowing what to do. Over the thundering of his heart, he heard the sound of water and remembered. The river!

He tied the amazingly small bundle of bones across one shoulder and plunged headlong in the direction from which the sound came.

The starless night was thick and black. The trees and the underbrush tore at him. Treacherous vines clutched at his ankles. It was as though the woods were trying to hold him fast. Ning's breath came in harsh rasps. The pain in his chest spread like a slow-burning fire, turning his legs to putty. When he could run no more, he scrambled on all fours. Sometimes the sound of the river was on his right, then on his left, but never nearer. He was going

around in circles.

Overcome by weariness, he fell face down on the dew-wet ground. All he wanted was to lie there, never to move again. A faint fluttering in the air close to his face made Ning open his eyes. A butterfly hovered inches from his nose, its frantic fluttering seemed to convey something. Ning struggled to his feet. The butterfly flew up, dancing in the air. Too weary to think, Ning let his feet carry him wherever the butterfly led, pushing himself through the blackness, arms churning the air like a windmill. As suddenly as it had appeared the butterfly vanished, but he could feel moisture in the air, and the rush of water was loud in his ears. He had found the river.

The sky was turning a deep indigo. The night was almost over. In the faint light the river did not seem wide, but the current was swift. He could just make out the slick, wet stones of a ford going across.

He started toward it, each step making a sucking sound as he sank into thick, clinging mud. Suddenly an old woman's voice called from the dark woods behind.

"Young man, I am lost. Won't you please give me a hand?"

Ning gritted his teeth and pressed on. The mud made every step an effort.

"Young man," the old woman's voice was full of pleading, "I will perish!"

Ning's heart was lodged in his throat. He dared not stop, for with every step he sank a little deeper.

"Young man, I am utterly alone," cried the old woman, "Help me!"

With a loud splash Ning fell forward into the river.

The old woman on the bank let loose a fearful howl of rage. The trees thrashed. The rocks trembled. The river, churning with fury, dragged him under. Twice Ning bobbed to the surface, gasping for air, and twice he was sucked under again. The river was carrying him back to shore.

"Give me what is mine," the old woman laughed triumphantly, or you die."

"Never!" cried Ning as another wave pulled him under. The next time he came to the surface, Ning was thrown against a half-submerged rock. Though the river continued to buffet him, he wrapped his arms around it as tight as he could, and the rock held him up. The old crone was out of breath. As her howling subsided, the woods gradually became still, and the river calmed. Leaning heavily on her cane the old crone tottered toward where the reeds grew. Instantly her cane became stuck in the mud, She grasped it with both hands trying to free it, but the mud would not let go. The more she worried it, the tighter it held. She lost her footing and slid into the mud. Her shrieks set the river churning again, but only for an instant, The old crone had sunk knee deep in mud. Though her mouth opened and shut, not another sound came out of her.

There was a sudden movement. The stranger emerged from the dark, his sword flashing ominously. The old crone hissed and spat, clawed the air like an angry cat, but she was stuck fast.

Ning let go of the rock, and struck out for the farther shore. The old crone let out a despairing howl. There was a flash of light followed by a loud crack. When Ning looked back from across the river, the stranger stood wearily clutching the blade-less hilt of his sword. All that was left of the old crone was a tattered robe floating slowly down stream. The stranger raised his hand in farewell and disappeared into the woods.

*

Weeks later, Ning arrived home, having first buried the bundle of bones he had carried all that way in a corner of an orchard nearby. His father pulled a long face, convinced Ning's tattered and dirty condition meant he had failed again.

"At least you're none the worse for wear," growled the old man.

Months later, just when the father was about to press him into joining the family business, Ning was notified that he had not only passed the Imperial Civil Service Examination but he had been appointed magistrate of his hometown, replacing the incumbent, who was too old to preside over the court.

Ning became renowned for the wisdom and fairness of his judgments. While the father had ample reason to be proud of his achievements, he was chagrined by Ning's refusal to marry. Years later Ning bought the orchard, to which he had become attached. He planted two elms in a corner and placed two stone benches in their shade. It became his retreat, where he went to read and meditate. When he died, he was buried there according to his wishes.

It is said that two butterflies appeared, danced a while over the new grave, then disappeared into the sunlight.

1935

20.75 At Middle Age\fn{by Shen Rong (1935-)} Hankou, Sichuan Province, China (F) 30

1

Were the stars twinkling in the sky? Was a boat rocking on the sea? Lu Wenting, an oculist, lay on her back in hospital. Circles of light, bright or dim, appeared before her eyes. She seemed to be lifted by a cloud, up and down, drifting about without any direction.

Was she dreaming or dying? She remembered vaguely going to the operating theatre that morning, putting on her operating gown and walking over to the wash-basin. Ah, yes, Jiang Yafen, her good friend, had volunteered to be her assistant. Having got their visas, Jiang and her family were soon leaving for Canada. This was their last operation as colleagues.

Together they washed their hands. They had been medical students in the same college in the fifties and, after graduation, had been assigned to the same hospital. As friends and colleagues for more than twenty years, they found it hard to part. This was no mood for a doctor to be in prior to an operation. Lu remembered she had wanted to say something to ease their sadness. What had she said? She had turned to Jiang and inquired, "Have you booked your plane tickets, Yafen?"

What had been her reply? She had said nothing, but her eyes had gone red. Then after a long time Jiang asked, "You think you can manage three operations in one morning?"

Lu couldn't remember what she had answered. She had probably gone on scrubbing her nails in silence. The new brush hurt her fingertips. She looked at the soap bubbles on her hands and glanced at the clock on the wall, strictly following the rules, brushing her hands, wrists and arms three times, three minutes each. Ten minutes later she soaked her arms in a pail of antiseptic, 75 per cent alcohol. It was white—maybe yellowish. Even now her hands and arms were numb and burning. From the alcohol? No. It was unlikely. They had never hurt before. Why couldn't she lift them?

She remembered that at the start of the operation, when she had injected novocaine behind the patient's eyeball, Yafen had asked softly, "Has your daughter got over her pneumonia?"

What was wrong with Jiang today? Didn't she know that when operating a surgeon should forget everything, including herself and her family, and concentrate on the patient? How could she inquire after Xiaojia at such a time? Perhaps, feeling miserable about leaving, she had forgotten that she was assisting at an operation.

A bit annoyed, Lu retorted, "I'm only thinking about this eye now."

She lowered her head and cut with a pair of curved scissors.

One operation after another. Why three in one morning? She had had to remove Vice-minister Jiao's cataract, transplant a cornea on Uncle Zhang's eye and correct Wang Xiaoman's squint. Starting at eight o'clock, she had sat on the high operating stool for four and a half hours, concentrating under a lamp. She had cut and stitched again and again. When she had finished the last one and put a piece of gauze on the patient's eye, she was stiff and her legs wouldn't move.

Having changed her clothes, Jiang called to her from the door, "Let's go, Wenting."

"You go first." She stayed where she was. "I'll wait for you. It's my last time here." Jiang's eyes were watery. Was she crying? Why?

"Go on home and do your packing. Your husband must be waiting for you."

"He's already packed our things."

Looking up, Jiang called, "What's wrong with your legs?"

"I've been sitting so long, they've gone to sleep! They'll be OK in a minute. I'll come to see you this evening."

"All right. See you then." After Jiang had left, Lu moved back to the wall of white tiles, supporting herself with her hands against it for a long time before going to the changing-room.

She remembered putting on her grey jacket, leaving the hospital and reaching the lane leading to her home. All of a sudden she was exhausted, more tired than she had ever felt before. The lane became long and hazy, her home seemed far away. She felt she would never get there.

She became faint. She couldn't open her eyes, her lips felt dry and stiff. She was thirsty, very thirsty. Where could she get some water? Her parched lips trembled.

"Look, Dr. Sun, she's come to!" Jiang cried softly. She had been sitting beside Lu all the time.

Sun Yimin, head of the Ophthalmic Department, was reading Lu's case-history and was shocked by the diagnosis of myocardial infarction. Very worried, the greying man shook his head and pushed back his black-rimmed spectacles, recalling that Lu was not the first doctor aged about forty in his department who had fallen ill with heart disase. She had been a healthy woman of forty-two. This attack was too sudden and serious.

Sun turned his tall, stooping frame to look down at Lu's pale face. She was breathing weakly, her eyes closed,

her dry lips trembling slightly.

"Dr. Lu," Sun called softly.

She didn't move, her thin, puffy face expressionless.

"Wenting," Jiang urged.

Still no reaction. Sun raised his eyes to the forbidding oxygen cylinder, which stood at a corner of the room and then looked at the ECG monitor. He was reassured when he saw a regular QRS wave on the oscillometer. He turned back to Lu, waved his hand and said, "Ask her husband to come tn. A good-looking, balding man in his forties, of medium height, entered quickly. He was Fu Jiajie, Lu's husband. He had spent a sleepless night beside her and had been reluctant to leave when Sun had sent him away to lie down on the bench outside the room. As Sun made way for him, Fu bent down to look at the familiar face, which was now so pale and strange.

Lu's lips moved again. Nobody except her husband understood her. He said, "She wants some water. She's thirsty."

Jiang gave him a small teapot. Carefully, Fu avoided the rubber tube leading from the oxygen cylinder and put it to Lu's parched lips. Drop by drop, the water trickled into the dying woman's mouth.

"Wenting, Wenting," Fu called. When a drop of water fell from Fu's shaking hand on to Lu's pallid face, the muscles seemed to twitch a little.

*

Eyes. Eyes. Eyes …

Many flashed past Lu's closed ones. Eyes of men and women, old and young, big and small, bright and dull, all kinds, blinking at her.

Ah! These were her husband's eyes. In them, she saw joy and sorrow, anxiety and pleasure, suffering and hope. She could see through his eyes, his heart. His eyes were as bright as the golden sun in the sky. His loving heart had given her so much warmth. It was his voice, Jiajie's voice, so endearing, so gentle, and so far away, as if from another world:

I wish I were a rapid stream,
If my love
A tiny fish would be,
She'd frolic
In my foaming waves.

Where was she? Oh, she was in a park covered with snow. There was a frozen lake, clear as crystal, on which red, blue, purple and white figures skated. Happy laughter resounded in the air while they moved arm in arm, threading their way through the crowds. She saw none of the smiling faces around her, only his. They slid on the ice, side by side, twirling, laughing. What bliss!

The ancient Five Dragon Pavilions shrouded in snow were solemn, tranquil and deserted. They leaned against the white marble balustrades, while snowflakes covered them. Holding hands tightly, they defied the severe cold.

She was young then. She had never expected love or special happiness. Her father had deserted her mother when she was a girl, and her mother had had a hard time raising her alone. Her childhood had been bleak. All she remembered was a mother prematurely old who, night after night, sewed under a solitary lamp.

She boarded at her medical college, rising before daybreak to memorize new English words, going to classes and filling scores of notebooks with neat little characters. In the evenings she studied in the library and then worked late into the night doing autopsies. She never grudged spending her youth studying.

Love had no place in her life. She shared a room with Jiang Yafen, her classmate, who had beautiful eyes, bewitching lips and who was tall, slim and lively. Every week, Jiang received love letters. Every weekend, she dated, while poor Lu did nothing, neglected by everyone.

After graduation, she and Jiang were assigned to the same hospital, which had been founded more than a hundred years earlier. Their internship lasted for four years, during which time they had to be in the hospital all day long, and remain single.

Secretly, Jiang cursed these rules, while Lu accepted the terms willingly. What did it matter being in the hospital twenty-four hours a day? She would have liked to be there forty-eight hours, if possible. No marriage for four years. Hadn't many skilled doctors married late or remained single all their lives? So she threw herself heart and soul into her work.

But life is strange. Fu Jiajie suddenly entered her quiet, routine life.

She never understood how it happened. He had been hospitalized because of an eye disease. She was his

doctor. Perhaps, his feelings for her arose from her conscientious treatment. Passionate and deep, his emotions changed both their lives.

Winter in the north is always very cold, but that winter he gave her warmth. Never having imagined love could be so intoxicating, she almost regretted not finding it earlier. She was already twenty-eight, yet she still had the heart of a young girl. With her whole being, she welcomed this late love.

I wish I were a deserted forest,
If my love
A little bird would be,
She'd nest and twitter
In my dense trees.

Incredible that Fu Jiajie, whom Jiang regarded as a bookworm and who was doing research on a new material for a spacecraft\fn{Approximately two months from today (01/12/03), China plans to launch her first manned spacecraft, thus becoming the third nation in the world to have accomplished this feat.} in the Metallurgical Research Institute, could read poetry so well!

"Who wrote it?" Lu asked.

"The Hungarian poet Petöfi."\fn{Sándor Petöfi, *nee* Sándor Petrovics (1823-1849), successively a Hungarian poet, actor and soldier, was born in Kiskõrös in Pest County. He published his first poem in 1842, and died in battle in Roumania, having secured his fame with a volume of poems which he published in 1844; a long epic poem about peasant life in Hungary, *János the Hero* (1845); and the poem, *Rise, Magyar* (1848, which became the Hungarian National Anthem).}

"Does a scientist have time for poetry?"

"A scientist must have imagination. Science has something in common with poetry in this respect."

Pedantic? He gave good answers. "What about you? Do you like poetry?" he asked.

"Me? I don't know anything about it. I seldom read it." She smiled cynically. "The Ophthalmic Department does operations. Every stitch, every incision is strictly laid down. We can't use the slightest imagination—"

Fu cut in, "Your work is a beautiful poem. You can make many people see again …"

Smiling, he moved over to her, his face close to hers. His masculinity, which she had never experienced before, assailed, bewildered and unnerved her. She felt something must happen, and, sure enough, he put his arms round her, embracing her tightly.

It had occurred so suddenly that she looked fearfully at the smiling eyes close to hers and his parted lips. Her heart thumping, her head raised, she closed her eyes in embarrassment, moving away instinctively as his irresistible love flooded her.

Beihai Park in the snow was just the right place for her. Snow covered the tall *dagoba*,\fn{Apparently the Temple of the White Dagoba, built to commemorate the visit of the fifth Dalai Lama, the spiritual leader of tibetan Buddhism, in 1651, is meant.} Qiongdao Islet with its green pines, the long corridor and quiet lake. It also hid the sweet shyness of the lovers.

To everyone's surprise, after her four-year internship had ended, Lu was the first to get married. Fate had decided Fu Jiajie's intrusion. How could she refuse his wish that they marry? How insistently and strongly he wanted her, preparing to sacrifice everything for her!

I wish I were a crumbling ruin,
If my love
Green ivy would be,
She'd tenderly entwine
Around my lonely head.

Life was good, love was beautiful. These recollections gave her strength, and her eyelids opened slightly.

After heavy dosages of sedatives and analgesics Dr. Lu was still in a coma. The head of the Internal Medicine Department gave her a careful examination, studied her ECG and her case-history, then told the ward doctor to keep up the intravenous drip and injections of opiate and morphine and to watch out for changes in her ECG monitor to guard against more serious complications due to myocardial infarction.

On leaving the ward he remarked to Sun, "She's too weak. I remember how fit Dr. Lu was when she first came here."

"Yes." Sun shook his head with a sigh. "It's eighteen years since she came to our hospital, just a girl."

*

Eighteen years ago Dr. Sun had already been a well-known ophthalmologist, respected by all his colleagues for

his skill and responsible attitude to work. This able, energetic professor in his prime regarded it as his duty to train the younger doctors. Each time the medical college assigned them a new batch of graduates, he examined them one by one to make his choice. He thought the first step to making their Ophthalmology Department the best in all China was by selecting the most promising interns.

How had he chosen Lu? He remembered quite distinctly. At first this twenty-four-year-old graduate had not made much of an impression on him. That morning Department Head Sun had already interviewed five of the graduates assigned to them and had been most disappointed. Some of them were suitable, but they were not interested in the Ophthalmology Department and did not want to work there. Others wanted to be oculists because they thought it a simple, easy job. By the time he picked up the sixth file marked Lu Wenting, he was rather tired and not expecting much. He was reflecting that the medical college's teaching needed improving to give students a correct impression from the start of his department.

The door opened quietly. A slim girl walked softly in. Looking up he saw that she had on a cotton jacket and slacks. Her cuffs were patched, the knees of her blue slacks were faded. Simply dressed, she was even rather shabby. He read the name on her file, then glanced at her casually. She really looked like a little girl, slightly built, with an oval face and neatly bobbed glossy black hair. She calmly sat down on the chair facing him.

Asked the usual technical questions, she answered each in turn, saying no more than was strictly necessary.

"You want to work in the Ophthalmology Department?" Sun asked lethargically, having almost decided to wind up this interview. His elbows on the desk, he rubbed his temples with his fingers.

"Yes. At college I was interested in ophthalmology." She spoke with a slight southern accent.

Delighted by this answer, Sun lowered his hands as if his head no longer ached. He had changed his mind. Watching her carefully he asked more seriously, "What aroused your interest?"

At once this question struck him as inappropriate, too hard to answer. But she replied confidently, "Ophthalmology is lagging behind in our country."

"Good, tell me in what way it's backward," he asked eagerly.

"I don't know how to put it, but 1 feel we haven't tried out certain operations which are done abroad. Such as using laser beams to seal retina wounds. I think we ought to try these methods too."

"Right!" Mentally, Sun had already given her full marks. "What else? Any other ideas?"

"Yes … well … making more use of freezing to remove cataracts. Anyway, it seems to me there are many new problems that ought to be studied."

"Good, that makes sense. Can you read foreign materials?"

"With difficulty, using a dictionary. I like foreign languages."

"Excellent."

That was the first time Sun had praised a new student like this to her face. A few days later Lu Wenting and Jiang Yafen were the first to be admitted to his department. Sun chose Jiang for her intelligence, enthusiasm and enterprise, Lu for her simplicity, seriousness and keenness.

The first year they performed external ocular operations and studied ophthalmology. The second year they operated on eyeballs and studied ophthalmometry and ophthalmomyology. By the third year they were able to do such tricky operations as on cataract cases.

That year something happened which made Sun see Lu in a new light.

It was a spring morning, a Monday. Sun made his round of the wards followed by white-coated doctors, some senior, some junior. The patients were sitting up in bed expectantly, hoping this famous professor would examine their eyes, as if with one touch of his hand he could heal them.

Each time he came to a bed, Sun picked up the case-history hanging behind it and read it while listening to the attending oculist or some senior oculist report on the diagnosis and treatment. Sometimes he raised a patient's eyelid to look at his eye, sometimes patted him on the shoulder and urged him not to worry about his operation, then moved on to the next bed.

After the ward round they held a short consultation, at which tasks were assigned. It was generally Dr. Sun and the attending oculists who spoke, while the residents listened carefully, not venturing to speak for fear of making fools of themselves in front of these authorities. Today was the same. All that had to be said had been said and tasks were assigned. As he stood up to leave, Sun asked, "Have the rest of you anything to add?"

A girl spoke up in a low voice from one corner of the room, "Dr. Sun, will you please have another look at the photograph of the patient in Bed 3 Ward 4?"

All heads turned in her direction.

Sun saw that the speaker was Lu. She was so short, so inconspicuous, that he had not noticed her following

him in the wards. Back in the office where they had talked at some length, he had still not noticed her presence.

"Bed 3?" He turned to the chief resident.

"An industrial accident," he was told.

"When he was admitted to hospital a picture was taken of his eye," Lu said. "The radiologists' report said there was no sign of a metal foreign body. After hospitalization the wound was sewn up and healed, but the patient complained of pain. I had another X-ray taken, and I believe there really is a foreign body. Will you have a look, Dr Sun?"

The film was fetched. Sun examined it. The chief resident and attending oculists then passed it round.

Jiang looked wide-eyed at her classmate, thinking, "Couldn't you have waited until after the meeting to ask Dr. Sun to look at that? If by any chance you're wrong, the whole department will gossip. Even if you're right, you're implying that the doctors in the Outpatients Department are careless, and they are attending oculists!"

"You're right, there's a foreign body."

Sun took back the picture and nodded. Looking round at the others he said, "Dr. Lu has not been long in our department. Her careful, responsible attitude is admirable, and so is her hard study."

Lu lowered her head. This unexpected praise in public made her blush. At sight of this Sun smiled. He knew it took great courage and a strong sense of responsibility for a resident oculist to challenge an attending one's diagnosis.

Hospitals have a more complex hierarchy than other organizations. It was an unwritten rule that junior doctors should defer to their seniors; residents should obey the attending doctors; and there could be no disputing the opinions of professors and associate professors. So, Sun attached special importance to Lu's query, since she was so very Junior. From then on his estimate of Lu was, "She's a very promising oculist."

Now eighteen years had passed. Lu, Jiang and their age group had become the backbone of his department. If promotion had been based on competence, they should long ago have had the rank of department heads. But this had not happened, and they were still not even attending doctors. For eighteen years their status had been that of interns, for the "cultural revolution" had broken the ladder leading to promotion.

The sight of Lu at her last gasp filled him with compassion. He stopped the head of the Internal Medicine Department to ask, "What do you think? Will she pull through?"

The department head looked towards her ward and sighed, then shook his head and said softly, "Old Sun, we can only hope she'll soon be out of danger."

Sun walked back anxiously to the ward. His steps were heavy, he was showing his age. From the doorway he saw Jiang still beside Lu's pillow. He halted, not wanting to disturb the two close friends.

In late autumn the nights are long. Darkness fell before six. The soughing wind rustled the phoenix trees outside the window. One by one their withered yellow leaves were blown away.

Sun, watching the whirling yellow leaves outside and listening to the wind, felt gloomier than before. Of these two skilled ophthamologists, two key members of his staff, one had collapsed and might never recover, the other was leaving and might never return. They were two of the mainstays of his department in this prestigious hospital. Without them, he felt his department would be like the phoenix trees buffeted by the wind. It would deteriorate from day to day.

*

She seemed to be walking along an endless road, not a winding mountain path which urged people on, nor a narrow one between fields of fragrant rice. This was a desert, a quagmire, a wasteland, devoid of people and silent. Walking was difficult and exhausting.

Lie down and rest. The desert was warm, the quagmire soft. Let the ground warm her rigid body, the sunshine caress her tired limbs. Death was calling softly, "Rest, Dr. Lu!"

Lie down and rest. Everlasting rest. No thoughts, feelings, worries, sadness or exhaustion.

But she couldn't do that. At the end of the long road, her patients were waiting for her. She seemed to see one patient tossing and turning in bed with the pain in his eyes, crying quietly at the threat of blindness. She saw many eager eyes waiting for her. She heard her patients calling to her in despair, "Dr. Lu!"

This was a sacred call, an irresistible one. She trudged on the long road dragging her numb legs, from her home to the hospital, from the clinic to the ward, from one village to another with a medical team. Day by day, month by month, year by year, she trudged on …

"Dr. Lu!"

Who was calling? Director Zhao? Yes. He had called her by phone. She remembered putting down the receiver, handing over her patient to Jiang, who shared her consulting-room, and heading for the director's office.

She hurried through a small garden, ignoring the white and yellow chrysanthemums, the fragrance of the osmanthus and the fluttering butterflies. She wanted to quickly finish her business with Zhao and return to her patients. There were seventeen waiting that morning, and she had only seen seven so far. Tomorrow she was on ward duty. She wanted to make arrangements for some of the out-patients.

She remembered not knocking but walking straight in. A man and woman were sitting on the sofa. She halted. Then she saw Director Zhao in his swivel-chair.

"Come in please, Dr. Lu," Zhao greeted her.

She walked over and sat down on a leather chair by the window. The large room was bright, tidy and quiet, unlike the noisy clinic, where sometimes the children howled. She felt odd, unused to the quietness and cleanliness of the room. The couple looked cultured and composed. Director Zhao was always erect and scholarly looking, with well-groomed hair, a kind face and smiling eyes behind gold-rimmed spectacles. He had on a white shirt, a well-pressed light grey suit and shining black leather shoes.

The man sitting on the sofa was tall and greying at the temples. A pair of sun-glasses shielded his eyes. Lu saw at a glance that he had eye trouble. Leaning back against the sofa, he was playing with his walking-stick. The woman in her fifties was still attractive, despite her age. Though her hair was dyed and permed, it did not look cheap. Her clothes were well-cut and expensive.

Lu remembered how the woman had sized her up, following her about with her eyes. Her face showed doubt, uneasiness and disappointment.

"Dr. Lu, let me introduce you to Vice-minister Jiao Chengsi and his wife Comrade Qin Bo."

A vice-minister? Well, in the past ten years and more, she had treated many ministers, Party secretaries and directors. She had never paid attention to titles. She simply wondered what was wrong with his eyes. Was he losing his sight?

Director Zhao asked, "Dr. Lu, are you in the clinic or on duty in the ward?"

"Starting from tomorrow, I'll be on ward duty."

"Fine," he laughed. "Vice-minister Jiao wants to have his cataract removed."

That meant she was given the task. She asked the man, "Is it one eye?"

"Yes."

"Which one?"

"The left one."

"Can't you see with it at all?" The patient shook his head.

"Did you see a doctor before?"

As she rose to examine his eye, she remembered he named a hospital. Then his wife, who was sitting beside him, politely stopped her.

"There's no hurry, Dr. Lu. Sit down, please. We ought to go to your clinic for an examination." Smiling, Qin Bo turned to Director Zhao. "Since he developed eye trouble, I've become something of an oculist myself."

Though Lu didn't examine him, she stayed a long time. What had they talked about? Qin had asked her many personal questions.

"How long have you been here, Dr. Lu?"

She hadn't kept track of the years. She only remembered the year she had graduated. So she answered, "I came here in 1961."\fn{The year I turned eighteen.}

"Eighteen years ago." Qin counted on her fingers.

Why was she so interested in this? Then Director Zhao chipped in, "Dr. Lu has a lot of experience. She's a skilled surgeon."

Qin went on, "You don't seem to be in good health, Dr. Lu."

What was she driving at? Lu was so busy caring for others, that she had never given any thought to her own health. The hospital didn't even have her case-history. And none of her leaders had ever inquired after herhealth. Why was this stranger showing such concern?

She hesitated before answering, "I'm very well."

Zhao added again, "She's one of the fittest. Dr. Lu's never missed a day's work for years."

Lu made no answer, wondering why this was so important to this lady, and fretting to get back to her patients. Jiang couldn't possibly cope with so many alone.

Her eyes fixed on Lu, the lady smiled and pressed, "Are you sure you can remove a cataract easily, Dr. Lu?"

Another difficult question. She had had no accidents so far, but anything could happen if the patient didn't co-operate well or if the anaesthetic was not carefully applied.

She couldn’t recollect whether she had made a reply, only Qin’s big eyes staring at her with doubt, unsettling her. Having treated all kinds of patients, she had got used to the difficult wives of high cadres. She was searching for a tactful answer when Jiao moved impatiently and turned his head to his wife, who stopped and averted her gaze.

How had this trying conversation finished? Oh, yes, Jiang had come to tell her that Uncle Zhang had come for his appointment.

Qin quickly said politely, “You can go, Dr. Lu, if you’re busy.”

Lu left the big bright room, which was so suffocating. She could hardly breathe. She was suffocating.

*

Shortly before the day ended, Director Zhao hurried over to the internal medicine ward.

“Dr Lu’s always enjoyed good health, Dr. Sun. Why should she have this sudden attack?" his hands in his pockets, Zhao asked Sun as they headed for Lu’s ward. Eight years Sun’s junior, Zhao looked much younger, his voice more powerful.

He shook his head and went on, “This is a warning. Middle-aged doctors are the backbone of our hospital. Their heavy responsibilities and daily chores are ruining their health. If they collapse one by one, we’ll be in a fix. How many people are there in her family? How many rooms does she have?”

Looking at Sun, who was depressed and worried, he added, “What? … Four in a room? So that’s how it is! What's her wage? … 56.50 *yuan*! That’s why people say better to be a barber with a razor than a surgeon with a scalpel. There’s some truth in it. Right? Why wasn’t her salary raised last year?”

“There were too many. You can’t raise everyone’s,” Sun said cynically.

“I hope you’ll talk that problem over with the Party branch. Ask them to investigate the work, income and living conditions of the middle-aged doctors and send me a report.”

“What’s the use of that? A similar report was sent in in 1978,” Sun retorted politely, his eyes on the ground.

“Stop grumbling, Dr. Sun. A report’s better than nothing. I can show it to the municipal Party committee, the Ministry of Health and whomever it concerns. The Central Party Committee has stressed time and again that talented people and intellectuals should be valued and their salaries increased. We can’t ignore it. The day before yesterday, at a meeting of the municipal committee, it was stressed that attention should be paid to middle-aged personnel. I believe their problems will be solved.”

Zhao stopped when they entered Lu’s room.

Fu Jiajie stood up as Zhao entered. He waved his hand in greeting and walked over to Lu, bent down and examined her face. Then he took her case-history from her doctor. From a director he had turned into a doctor.

Zhao, a noted thorax expert, had returned to China after Liberation. Very enthusiastic politically, he was praised for both his political consciousness and his medical skill, joining the Party in the fifties. When later he was made director, he had to take part in so many meetings and do so much administrative work, that he seldom found the opportunity to see patients except for important consultations. During the “cultural revolution,” he had been detained illegally and made to sweep the hospital grounds. The last three years, as director again, he had been so tied up with daily problems that he practically had no time or energy for surgery.

Now he had come specially to see Lu. All the ward doctors had gathered behind him.

But he didn’t say anything startling. Having read the case-history and looked at the ECG monitor, he told the doctors to note any changes and watch out for complications. Then he asked, “Is her husband here?”

Sun introduced Fu. Zhao wondered why this charming man in his prime was already going bald. Apparently, a man who didn’t know how to look after himself couldn’t look after his wife either.

“It won’t be easy,” Zhao told him. “She needs complete rest. She’ll need help for everything, even to turn over in bed. Help twenty-four hours a day. Where do you work? You’ll have to ask for leave. You can’t do it all by yourself either. Is there anyone else in your family?”

Fu shook his head. “Just two small children.”

Zhao turned to Sun, “Can you spare someone from your department?”

“For one or two days, maybe.”

“That’ll do to begin with.”

His eyes returning to Lu’s thin pale face, Zhao still couldn’t understand why this energetic woman had suddenly collapsed.

It occurred to him that she might have been too nervous operating on Vice-minister Jiao. Then he dismissed the thought. She was experienced and it was highly improbable that an attack had been brought on by nervousness. Besides, myocardial infarction often had no obvious cause.

But he couldn't dismiss the notion that there was some kind of a link between Jiao's operation and Lu's illness. He regretted having recommended her. In fact, Jiao's wife, Qin Bo, had been reluctant to have her right from the beginning.

That day, after Lu's departure, Qin had asked, "Director Zhao, is Dr. Lu the vice-head of her department?"

"No."

"Is she an attending doctor?"

"No."

"Is she a Party member?"

"No."

Qin said bluntly, "Excuse my outspokenness since we're all Party members, but I think it's rather inappropriate to let an ordinary doctor operate on Vice-minister Jiao."

Jiao stopped her by banging his walking-stick on the floor. Turning to her he said angrily, "What are you taking about, Qin Bo? Let the hospital make the arrangments. Any surgeon can operate."

Qin retorted heatedly, "That's not the right attitude, Old Jiao. You must be responsible. You can work only if you're healthy. We must be responsible to the revolution and the Party."

Zhao quickly butted in to avoid a quarrel, "Believe me, Comrade Qin, although she's not a Communist, Lu's a good doctor. And she's very good at removing cataracts. Don't worry!"

"It's not that, Director Zhao. And I'm not being too careful either."

Qin sighed.

"When I was in the cadre school, one old comrade had to have that operation. He was not allowed to come back to Beijing. So he went to a small hospital there. Before the operation was through his eyeball fell out. Jiao was detained by the followers of the gang\fn{The Gang of Four, as the four leading directors of the Cultural Revolution were called after their downfall in 1976 and subsequent imiprisonment.} for seven years! He has just resumed work. He can't do without his eyes."

"Nothing like that will happen, Comrade Qin. We've very few accidents in our hospital."

Qin still tried to argue her point. "Can we ask Dr. Sun, the department head, to operate on Jiao?"

Zhao shook his head and laughed. "Dr. Sun's almost seventy and has poor eyesight himself! Besides, he hasn't operated for years. He does research, advises the younger doctors and teaches. Dr. Lu's a better surgeon than he."

"How about Dr. Guo then?"

Zhao stared. "Dr. Guo?" She must have made a thorough investigation of the department.

She prompted, "Guo Ruqing."

Zhao gestured helplessly. "He's left the country."

Qin wouldn't give up. "When is he coming back?"

"He's not."

"What do you mean?" This time she stared.

Zhao sighed. "Dr. Guo's wife returned from abroad. When her father, a shopkeeper, died, he left his store to them. So they decided to leave."

"To leave medicine for a store? I can't understand it."

Jiao sighed too.

"He's not the only one. Several of our capable doctors have left or are preparing to go."

Qin was indignant. "I don't understand their mentality."

Jiao waved his stick and turned to Zhao. "In the early fifties, intellectuals like you overcame many difficulties to return here to help build a new China. But now, the intellectuals we've trained are leaving the country. It's a serious lesson."

"This can't go on," said Qin. "We must do more ideological work. After the gang was smashed, the social status of intellectuals was raised a lot. Their living and working conditions will improve as China modernizes."

"Yes. Our Party committee holds the same view. I talked with Dr. Guo twice on behalf of the Party and begged him to stay. But it was no use."

Qin, who was about to continue, was stopped by Jiao who said, "Director Zhao, I didn't come to insist on having an expert or a professor. I came because I've confidence in your hospital, or to be exact, because I have a special feeling for your hospital. A few years ago, the cataract in my right eye was removed here. And it was superbly done."

"Who did it?" Zhao asked.

Jiao answered sadly, "I never found out who she was."

"That's easy. We can look up your case-history." Zhao picked up the receiver, thinking that Qin would be satisfied if he got that doctor. But Jiao stopped him.

"You can't find her. I had it done as an out-patient. There was no case-history. It was a woman with a southern accent."

"That's difficult." Zhao laughed, replacing the receiver. "We have many women doctors who speak with a southern accent. Dr. Lu also comes from the south. Let her do it."

The couple agreed. Qin helped Jiao up and they left.

Was this the cause of Lu's illness? Zhao couldn't believe it. She had performed this operation hundreds of times. She wouldn't be so nervous. He had gone over before the operation and found her confident, composed and well. Why this sudden attack, then?

Zhao looked again at Lu with concern. Even on the brink of death, she looked as if she were sleeping peacefully.

*

Lu was always composed, quiet and never flustered. Another woman would have retorted or shown her indignation at Qin's insulting questions or, at very least, felt resentful afterwards. But Lu had left Zhao's office as calm as ever, neither honored to be chosen to operate on Vice-minister Jiao nor humiliated by Qin's questions. The patient had the right to decide whether or not he wanted an operation. That was all there was to it.

"Well; what big official wants you this time?" Jiang asked softly.

"It's not definite yet."

"Let's hurry." Jiang steered her along. "I couldn't persuade your Uncle Zhang. He's made up his mind not to have the operation."

"That's nonsense! He's traveled a long way to get here and spent much money. He'll be able to see after the transplant. It's our duty to cure him."

"Then you talk him round."

Passing by the waiting-room, they smiled and nodded at the familiar patients who stood up to greet them. Back in her room, while Lu was seeing a young man, she was interrupted by a voice booming,

"Dr. Lu!"

Both Lu and her patient looked up as a tall sturdy man advanced. In his fifties, he was broad-shouldered, wearing black trousers and a shirt and a white towel round his head. At his cry, the people in the corridor quickly made way for him. A head above everyone else and almost blind, he was unaware that he attracted so much attention as he groped his way in the direction of Lu's voice.

Lu hurried forward to help him. "Sit down, please, Uncle Zhang."

"Thank you, Dr. Lu. I want to tell you something."

"Yes, but sit down first." Lu helped him to a chair.

"I've been in Beijing quite a while now. I'm thinking of going home tomorrow and coming back some other time."

"I don't agree. You've come such a long way and spent so much money—"

"That's just it," Uncle Zhang cut in, slapping his thigh. "So I think I'll go home, do some work and earn some more workpoints. Although I can't see, I can still do some work and the brigade's very kind to me. I've made up my mind to leave, Dr Lu. But I couldn't go without saying goodbye to you. You've done so much for me."

Having suffered from corneal ulcers for many years, he had come to the hospital to have a transplant, a suggestion proposed by Lu when she had visited his brigade with a medical team.

"Your son spent a lot of money to send you here. We can't let you go home like this."

"I feel better already!"

Lu laughed. "When you're cured, you can work for another twenty years since you're so strong."

Uncle Zhang laughed. "You bet I will! I can do anything if my eyes are good."

"Then stay and have them treated."

Zhang confided, "Listen, Dr. Lu, I'll tell you the truth. I'm worried about money. I can't afford to live in a Beijing hotel."

Stunned, Lu quickly told him, "I know you're next on the list. Once there's a donor, it'll be your turn."

He finally agreed to stay. Lu helped him out.

Then a little girl of eleven accosted her. Her pretty, rosy face was marred by a squint. Dressed in hospital pyjamas, she called timidly, "Dr. Lu."

"Why don't you stay in the ward, Wang Xiaoman?" She had been admitted the previous day.

"I'm scared. I want to go home."

She began to cry.

"I don't want an operation."

Lu put one arm around her. "Tell me why you don't want an operation."

"It'll hurt too much."

"It won't, you silly girl! I'll give you an anaesthetic. It won't hurt at all." Lu patted her head and bent down to look with regret at the damaged work of art. She said, "Look, won't it be nice when I make this eye look like the other one? Now go back to your ward. You mustn't run around in a hospital."

When the little girl had wiped away her tears and left, Lu returned to her patients.

There had been many patients the last few days. She must make up for the time she had lost in Zhao's office. Forgetting Jiao, Qin and herself, she saw one patient after another.

A nurse came to tell her she was wanted on the phone.

Lu excused herself. It was the kindergarten nurse informing her, "Xiaojia has a temperature. It started last night. I know you're busy, so I took her to the doctor, who gave her an injection. She's still feverish and is asking for you. Can you come?"

"I'll be there in a minute."

She replaced the receiver. But she couldn't go immediately since many patients were waiting. She rang her husband, but was told that he had gone out to a meeting.

Back in her office, Jiang asked, "Who called? Anything important?"

"Nothing." Lu never troubled others, not even her leaders. "I'll go to the kindergarten when I'm through with the patients," she thought as she returned to her desk. At first she imagined her daughter crying and calling her. Later she saw only the patients' eyes. She hurried to the kindergarten when she had finished.

"Why did it take you so long?" the nurse complained. Lu walked quickly to the isolation room where her little daughter lay, her face flushed with fever, her lips parted, her eyes closed, her breathing difficult.

She bent over the crib.

"Mummy's here, darling."

Xiaojia moved and called in a hoarse voice, "Mummy, let's go home."

"All right, my pet." She first took Xiaojia to her own hospital to see a pediatrician.

"It's pneumonia," the sympathetic doctor told her. "You must take good care of her."

She nodded and left after Xiaojia had been given an injection and some medicine.

In the hospital everything stood still at noon, the out-patients having left, the in-patients sleeping and the hospital staff resting. The spacious grounds were deserted except for the chirping sparrows flying among the trees. Nature still competed with men in this noisy center of the city, where tall buildings rose compactly and the air was polluted. In the hospital all day, Lu had never been aware of the birds before.

She couldn't make up her mind where to take her daughter, hating to leave the sick child alone in the kindergarten's isolation room. But who could look after her at home? After some hesitation she steeled herself and headed for the kindergarten.

"No. I don't want to go there," Xiaojia wailed on her shoulder.

"Be a good girl, Xiaojia …"

"No. I want to go home!" She began kicking.

"All right. We'll go home."

They had to go along a busy street with recently pasted advertisements of the latest fashions. Lu never so much as glanced at the costly goods in the shop windows, or the produce the peasants sold in the streets. With two children, it was hard to make ends meet. Now, carrying Xiaojia in her arms and worrying about Yuanyuan at home, she was even less eager to look around.

Arriving home at one o'clock, Lu found a pouting Yuanyuan waiting for her.

"Why are you so late, mummy?" he asked.

"Xiaojia's ill," Lu answered curtly, putting Xiaojia on the bed, undressing her and tucking her in.

Standing at the table Yuanyuan fretted, "Please cook lunch, mummy. I'll be late."

In frustration, Lu shouted at him, "You'll drive me crazy if you go on like that!"

Wronged and in a hurry, Yuanyuan was on the point of tears. Ignoring him, Lu went to stoke up the fire, which had almost gone out. The pots and the cupboard were empty. There were no left-overs from yesterday's meals.

She went back into the room, reproaching herself for having been so harsh on the poor boy.

In the past few years, keeping house had become an increasing burden. During the "cultural revolution" her

husband's laboratory had been closed down and his research project scrapped. All he had needed to do was to show his face in the office for an hour in the morning and afternoon. He spent the remainder of his day and talents on domestic chores, cooking and learning to sew and knit, lifting the burden entirely from Lu's shoulders. After the gang was smashed, scientific research was resumed and Fu, a capable metallurgist, was busy again. Most of the housework was shouldered once more by Lu.

Every day at noon, she went home to cook. It was an effort to stoke up the fire, prepare the vegetables and be ready to serve the meal in fifty minutes so that Yuanyuan, Fu and herself could return to school or work on time. When anything unexpected cropped up, the whole family went hungry.

She sighed and gave her son some money.

"Go and buy yourself a bun, Yuanyuan."

He turned back half-way.

"What about you, mummy?"

"I'm not hungry."

"I'll buy you a bun, too." Yuanyuan soon came home with two buns and gave one to his mother. He left for school immediately, eating his on the way.

*

Biting into the cold hard bun, Lu looked around at her small room, which was twelve metres square. She and her husband had been content with a simple life, living in this room since their marriage, without a sofa, wardrobe or a new desk. They had the same furniture they had used when they were single.

Though they owned few material possessions, they had many books. Aunt Chen, a neighbour, had commented, "What will the two bookworms live on?" But they were happy. All they had wanted was a small room, some clothes, and three simple meals a day.

Treasuring their time, they put their evenings to good use. Every night, when their neighbors' naughty children peeped into their small room to spy on the new couple, they invariably found them at work: Lu occupying their only desk studying foreign material with the help of a dictionary and taking notes, while Fu read reference books on a stack of chests.

The evening was not wasted when they could study late quietly and undisturbed. In the summer, their neighbours sat cooling themselves in the courtyard, but the smell of tea, the light breeze, bright stars, interesting news and conversation—none of these could lure them from their stuffy little room.

Their quiet life and studious evenings ended much too soon. Lu gave birth to Yuanyuan and then to Xiaojia. Their lovely children brought disorder and hardship as well as joy to their lives. When the crib was later replaced by a single bed and the tiny room filled with children's clothes, pots and pans, they could hardly move about. Peace was shattered by their children laughing and crying.

What could an oculist achieve without keeping up with foreign developments in the field? Therefore, Lu often sat reading behind a curtain in the room late into the night.

When Yuanyuan began school he had to use their only desk. Only when he had finished doing his homework was it Lu's turn to spread out her notebook and the medical books she had borrowed. Fu came last.

*

How hard life was! Lu fixed her eyes on the little clock: One five, one ten, one fifteen. Time to go to work. What should she do? Lots of things needed winding up before she went to the ward tomorrow. What about Xiaojia? Should she call her husband? There was no telephone booth near by and, anyway, she probably could not get him. As he had wasted ten years, better not disturb him.

She frowned, at a loss what to do. Perhaps she shouldn't have married. Some claimed that marriage ended love. She had naïvely believed that, though it might be true for some, it could not happen to her. If she had been more prudent, she would not have been weighed down by the burdens of marriage and a family.

One twenty.

She must turn to her neighbour Aunt Chen, a kind-hearted woman who had helped on many occasions. Since she would not accept anything for her services, Lu was reluctant to trouble her.

Still she had to this time.

Aunt Chen was most obliging.

"Leave her to me, Dr. Lu."

Lu put some children's books and building blocks beside Xiaojia, asked Aunt Chen to give her the medicine and hurried to the hospital.

She had intended to tell the nurse not to send her too many patients so that she could go home early, but once

she started work, she forgot everything.

Zhao called her up to remind her that Jiao was to be admitted the following day. Qin called twice asking about the operation and how Jiao and his family should prepare mentally and materially. Lu was hard put to it to give an answer. She had performed hundreds of such operations and no one had ever asked her that before. So she said, “Oh, nothing special.”

“Really? But surely it’s better to be well prepared. What if I come over and we have a chat?”

Lu quickly told her, “I’m busy this afternoon.”

“Then we’ll talk tomorrow in the hospital.”

“OK.”

When the trying conversation had ended, Lu had returned to her office. It was dark before she had finished her clinic.

Arriving home she heard Aunt Chen singing an impromptu song:

Grow up, my dear,
To be an engineer.

Xiaojia laughed happily. Lu thanked Aunt Chen and was relieved to find Xiaojia's temperature down. She gave her an injection. After Fu returned, Jiang Yafen and her husband, Liu, called.

“We’ve come to say goodbye,” said Jiang.

“Where are you going?” Lu inquired.

“We’ve just got our visas for Canada,” replied Jiang, her eyes fixed on the ground.

Liu’s father, a doctor in Canada, had urged them to join him there. Lu had not expected them to go.

“How long will you stay? When will you come back?” she asked.

“Maybe for good.” Liu shrugged his shoulders.

“Why didn’t you let me know earlier, Yafen?” Lu turned to her friend.

“I was afraid that you’d try to stop me. I was afraid I’d change my mind.” Jiang avoided her eyes, staring hard at the ground.

From his bag, Liu produced some wine and food and said in high spirits, “I bet you haven’t cooked yet. Let’s have our farewell banquet here.”

It was a sorrowful farewell party that evening.

They seemed to be drinking tears instead of wine. To be tasting the bitterness of life instead of delicious dishes.

Xiaojia was asleep, Yuanyuan watching TV next door. Liu raised his cup, eyeing the wine in it, and said with feeling:

“Life—it’s hard to tell how life will turn out! My father was a doctor with a sound classical education. As a child I loved old poetry and longed to become a writer, but I was fated to follow in his footsteps, and now over thirty years have gone. My father was extremely circumspect. His maxim was ‘Too much talk leads to trouble.’ Unfortunately I didn’t take after him. I like talking and airing my views, so that landed me in trouble and I got bashed in each political movement. When graduated in ’57, by the skin of my teeth I missed being labeled a Rightist. In the “cultural revolution,” it goes without saying, I was flayed. I’m Chinese. I can’t claim to have high political consciousness, but at least I love my country and really want China to become rich and strong. I never dreamed that now that I’m nearing fifty I’d suddenly leave my homeland.”

“Do you really have to go?” Lu asked gently.

“Yes. Why? I’ve debated this with myself many times.” Liu shook the half-full cup of red wine he was holding. “I’ve passed middle age and may not live many years longer. Why should I leave my ashes in a strange land?”

The others listened in silence to this expression of his grief at leaving. Now he suddenly broke off, drained his cup and blurted out, “Go on, curse me! I’m China’s unfilial son!”

“Don’t say that, Liu. We all know what you’ve been through.”

Fu refilled his cup. “Now those dark years are over, the sun is shining again. Everything will change for the better.”

“I believe that,” Liu nodded. “But when will the sun shine on our family? Shine on our daughter? I can’t wait.”

“Let’s not talk about that.” Lu guessed that Liu felt impelled to leave for the sake of his only daughter. Not wanting to go into this, she changed the subject. “I never drink, but today before you and Yafen leave I want to drink to you.”

"No, we should drink to you." Liu put down his cup. "You're the mainstay of our hospital, one of China's up-and-coming doctors!"

"You're durnk," she laughed. "I'm not."

Jiang, who had been keeping quiet, now raised her cup and said, "I drink to you from the bottom of my heart! To our twenty-odd years of friendship, and to our future eye-specialist!"

"Goodness! You're talking nonsense! Who am I?" Lu brushed aside this compliment.

"Who are you?" Liu was really half tipsy. "You live in cramped quarters and slave away regardless of critiicism, not seeking fame or money. A hard-working doctor like you is an ox serving the children, as Lu Xun said, eating grass and providing milk. Isn't that right, Old Fu?"

Fu drank in silence and nodded.

"There are many people like that, I'm not the only one," Lu demurred with a smile.

"That's why ours is a great nation!" Liu drained another cup.

Jiang glanced at Xiaojia sound asleep on the bed, and said sympathetically, "Yes, you're too busy attending to your patients to nurse your own little girl."

Liu stood up to fill all the cups and declared, "She's sacrificing herself to save mankind."

"What's come over you today, boosting me like this?"

Lu wagged a finger at Fu.

"You ask him if I'm not selfish, driving my husband into the kitchen and turning my children into ragamuffins. I've messed up the whole family. The fact is, I'm neither a good wife nor mother."

"You're a good doctor!" Liu cried.

Fu took another sip of wine, then put down his cup and commented, "I think your hospital is to blame. Doctors have homes and children like everyone else. And their children may fall ill. Why does no one show any consideration for them?"

"Fu!" Liu cut in loudly. "If I were Director Zhao, I'd first give you a medal, and one each to Yuanyuan and Xiaojia. You're the ones victimized to provide our hospital with such a fine doctor—"

Fu interrupted, "I don't want a medal *or* a citation. I just wish your hospital understood how hard it is to be a doctor's husband. As soon as the order comes to go out on medical tours *or* relief work, she's up and off, leaving the family. She comes back so exhausted from the operating theatre, she can't raise a finger to cook a meal. That being the case, if I don't go into the kitchen, who will? I should really be grateful to the "cultural revolution" for giving me all that time to learn to cook."

"Yafen said long ago that your 'bookworm' label should be torn off." Liu patted his shoulder and laughed. "You can study one of the most advanced branches of science for space travel, and put on a stunning performance in the kitchen—you're becoming one of the new men of the communist era. Who says the 'cultural revolution's' achievements were not the main aspect of it?"

Fu normally never drank. Today after a few cups his face was red. He caught hold of Liu's sleeve and chuckled, "Right, the 'cultural revolution' was a great revolution to remould us. Didn't those few years\fn{ 1966-1976.} change me into a male housewife? If you don't believe it, ask Wenting. Didn't I turn my hand to every chore?"

This embittered joking upset Lu. But she could not stop them. It seemed this was now the only way to lessen their grief at parting. She forced herself to smile back at her husband.

"You learned to do everything except sew cloth shoe-soles. That's why Yuanyuan keeps clamouring for a pair of gym shoes."

"You expect too much," said Liu with a straight face. "However thoroughly Fu remoulds himself, he can't turn into an old village woman carrying a shoe-sole around everywhere!"

"If the 'gang of four' hadn't been smashed, I might really have carried a shoe-sole to the criticism meetings in my institute," said Fu. "Just think, if things had gone on like that, science, technology and learning would all have been scrapped, leaving nothing but sewing cloth shoe-soles."

But how long could they keep up these wry jokes? They talked of the springtime of science since the overthrow of the gang, of the improved political status of intellectuals although they were underpaid, of the difficulties of middle-aged professionals. The atmosphere became heavy again.

"Old Liu, you have lots of contacts, it's too bad you're leaving." Fu roused himself to slap Liu on the back. "I hear home helps get very well paid. I'd like you to find me a place as a male domestic."

"My leaving doesn't matter," Liu retorted. "Just put an ad in that new paper *The Market.*"

"That's a good idea!"

Fu adjusted his thick-rimmed glasses. "The advertiser is a university graduate with a mastery of two foreign languages. A good cook, tailor and washerman, able to do both skilled and heavy work. His health is sound, his temper good, he's bold, hard-working and willing to accept criticism. And, last of all, his wages can be settled at the interview." He laughed.

Jiang was sitting quietly, neither eating nor drinking. Watching them laugh, she wanted to join in but could not. She nudged her husband.

"Don't talk like that, what's the point?"

"This is a widespread social phenomenon, that's the point." Liu made a sweeping gesture. "Middle age, middle age. Everyone agrees that middle-aged cadres are the backbone of our country. The operations in a hospital depend on middle-aged surgeons; the most important research projects are thrust on middle-aged scientists and technicians; the hardest jobs in industry are given to mIddle-aged workers; the chief courses in school are taught by middle-aged teachers—"

"Don't go on and on!" Jiang put in. "Why should a doctor worry about all that?"

Liu screwed up his eyes and continued half tipsy, "Didn't Lu You say, 'Though in a humble position I remain concerned for my country?' I'm a doctor no one has ever heard of, but I keep affairs of state in mind. Everyone acknowledges the key role of the middle-aged, but who knows how hard their life is? At work they shoulder a heavy load, at home they have all the housework. They have to support their parents and bring up their children. They play a key role not just because of their experience and ability, but because they put up with hardships and make great sacrifices—as do their wives and children."

Lu had listened blankly. Now she interposed softly, "It's a pity so few people realize that."

Fu, who had been speechless, filled Liu's cup and declared cheerfully, "You should have studied sociology."

Liu laughed sarcastically. "If I had, I'd have been a big Rightist! Sociologists have to study social evils."

"If you uncover them and set them right, society can make progress. That's to the left not the right," said Fu.

"Never mind, I don't want to be either. But I really am interested in social problems. For instance, the problem of the middle-aged." Liu rested his elbows on the table, toying with his empty cup, and began again. "There used to be a saying, 'At middle age a man gives up all activities.' That was true in the old society when people aged prematurely. By forty they felt they were old. But now that saying should be changed to 'At middle age a man is frantically busy!' Right? This reflects the fact that in our new society people are younger, full of vitality. Middle age is a time to give full play to one's abilities."

"Well said!" Fu approved. "Don't be in such a hurry to express approval. I've another crazy notion." Liu gripped Fu's arm and continued eagerly, "Looking at it that way, you can say our middle-aged generation is lucky to be alive at this time. But in fact we're an unlucky generation."

"You're monopolizing the conversation!" protested Jiang.

But Fu said, "I'd like to hear why we're unlucky."

"Unlucky because the time when we could have done our best work was disrupted by Lin Biao and the 'gang of four,'" Liu sighed. "Take your case, you nearly became an unemployed vagrant. Now we middle-aged people are the ones chiefly responsible for modernization, and we don't feel up to it. We haven't the knowledge, energy or strength. We're overburdened—that's our tragedy."

"There's no pleasing you!" laughed Jiang. "When you're not used, you complain that your talents are wasted, you live at the wrong time. When you're fully used, you gripe that you're overworked and underpaid!"

"Don't you ever complain?" her husband retorted.

Jiang hung her head and did not answer.

All Liu had said had given Lu the impression that he felt impelled to leave not entirely for his daughter's sake, but also for his own.

Once more Liu raised his cup and cried, "Come on! Let's drink to middle age!"

*

After their guests had gone and the children were asleep, Lu washed up in the kitchen. In their room, she found her husband, leaning against the bed, deep in thought, his hand on his forehead.

"A penny for them, Jiajie." Lu was surprised he looked so depressed.

Fu asked in reply, "Do you remember Petöfi's poem?"

"Of course!"

"'I wish I were a crumbling ruin …' Fu removed his hand from his forehead. "I'm a ruin now, like an old man. Going bald and grey. I can feel the lines on my forehead. I'm a ruin!"

He did look older than his age. Upset, Lu touched his forehead.

"It's my fault! We're such a burden to you!"

Fu took her hand and held it lovingly. "No. You're not to blame."

"I'm a selfish woman, who thinks only about her work." Lu's voice quivered. She couldn't take her eyes away from his forehead. "I have a home but I've paid it little attention. Even when I'm not working, my mind is preoccupied with my patients. I haven'' been a good wife or mother."

"Don't be silly! I know more than anyone how much you've sacrificed!" He stopped as tears welled up in his eyes.

Nestling up against him, she said sadly, "You've aged. I don't want you to grow old …"

"Never mind. 'If my love green ivy would be, she'd tenderly entwine around my lonely head.'" Softly he recited their favourite poem.

In the still autumn night, Lu fell asleep against her husband's chest, her lashes moist with tears. Fu put her carefully on the bed. Opening her eyes she asked, "Did I fall asleep?"

"You're very tired."

"No. I'm not."

Fu propped himself up and said to her, "Even metal has fatigue. A microscopic crack is formed first, and it develops until a fracture suddenly occurs."

That was Fu's field of research, and he often mentioned it. But this time, his words carried weight and left a deep impression on Lu.

A dreadful fatigue, a dreadful fracture. In the quiet of the night, Lu seemed to hear the sound of breaking. The props of heavy bridges, sleepers under railways, old bricks and the ivy creeping up ruins—all these were breaking.

2

The night deepened. The pendent lamp in the room having been turned off, the wall lamp shed a dim blue light.

Before her eyes flitted two blue dots of light, like fireflies on a summer night or a will-o'-the-wisp in the wilderness, which turned into Qin's cold stare when she looked carefully.

Qin, however, had been warm and kind when she summoned Lu to Jiao's room the morning he entered the hospital.

"Sit down please, Dr. Lu. Old Jiao has gone to have his ECG done. He'll be back in a minute."

All smiles, she had risen from an armchair in a room in a quiet building with red-carpeted corridors reserved for high cadres.

Qin had asked her to sit in the other armchair, while she went over to the locker beside the bed and got out a basket of tangerines, which she placed on the side table between the chairs.

"Have a tangerine."

Lu declined. "No, thank you."

"Try one. They were sent to me by a friend in the south. They're very good." She took one and offered it to her.

Lu took it, but held it in her hand. Qin's new friendliness sent a chill down her spine. She was still conscious of the coldness in Qin's eyes when they had first met.

"What actually is a cataract, Dr Lu? Some doctors told me that an operation is not suitable for all cases." Qin's manner was humble and ingratiating.

"A growth which progressively covers the eyeball, destroying the sight." Looking at the tangerine in her hand, Lu explained. "It can be divided into stages. It's better to have the operation done when the cataract is mature."

"I see. What happens if it isn't done then?"

"The lens shrinks as the cortex is absorbed. The suspensory ligament becomes fragile. The difficulty of the operation increases as the lens is liable to be dislocated."

Qin nodded. She had not understood nor tried to understand what she had been told. Lu wondered why she had bothered to ask questions. Just passing time? Having started her ward duty only that morning, she had to familiarize herself with the cases of her patients and attend to them. She couldn't sit there, making small talk. She wanted to check Jiao's eyes if he returned soon.

Qin had more questions for her.

"I heard there was an artificial lens abroad. The patient needn't wear a convex lens after an operation. Is that

right?”

Lu nodded. “We’re experimenting on that too.”

Qin inquired eagerly, “Can you put one in for my husband?”

Lu smiled. “I said it’s still at the experimental stage. I don’t think he’d want one now, do you?”

“No.” Of course she didn’t want him to be a guinea pig. “What is the procedure for his operation?”

Lu was baffled. “What do you mean?”

“Shouldn’t you map out a plan in case something unexpected crops up?” As Lu looked blank, she added, “I’ve often read about it in the papers. Sometimes surgeons form a team to discuss and work out a plan.”

Lu couldn’t help laughing. “No need for that! This is a very simple operation.”

Disgruntled, Qin looked away. Then she turned back and pressed her point patiently with a smile, “Underestimating the enemy often leads to failure. This has happened in the history of our Party.” Then she got Lu to describe certain situations which could cause the operation to fail.

“One has to think twice about patients with heart trouble, hypertension or bronchitis. Coughing can create problems.”

“That'’ just what I feared,” Qin cried, striking the arm of her chair. “My husband’s heart isn’t good and he has high blood pressure.”

“We always examine the patient thoroughly before an operation,” Lu consoled her.

“He has bronchitis too.”

“Has he been coughing lately?”

“No. But what if he does on the operating-table? What shall we do?”

Why was she so anxious, Lu wondered, looking at her watch. The morning was almost gone. Her glance fell on the white lace curtain hanging beside the French windows and tension gripped her when the footsteps approaching the door moved away again. After a long time, Jiao, a blue and white dressing-gown round his shoulders, was helped in by a nurse.

Qin commented, “It’s taken you a long time!”

Jiao shook Lu’s hand and flopped down exhausted in the armchair. “There were lots of examinations. I had a blood test, an X-ray, and an ECG. The staff were all very kind to me. I didn’t have to wait my turn.”

He sipped the cup of tea Qin handed him. “I never thought an eye operation involved so many tests.”

Lu read the reports. “The X-ray and the ECG are normal. Your blood pressure’s a bit high.”

Qin piped up. “How high?”

“150 over 100. But that doesn’t matter.” Then she asked, “Have you been coughing recently, Vice-minister Jiao?”

“No,” he answered lightly.

Qin pressed, “Can you guarantee that you won’t cough, on the operating-table?”

“Well …” Jiao was not so sure.

“That’s important, Old Jiao,” Qin warned him gravely. “Dr. Lu just told me that if you cough, the eyeball can fall out."

Jiao turned to Lu.

“How can I be certain I won’t cough?”

“It’s not that serious. If you are a smoker, don’t smoke before the operation.”

“OK.”

Qin pressed again. “But what if you should cough? What will happen?”

Lu laughed. “Don’t worry, Comrade Qin. We can sew up the incision and open it again after he stops coughing.”

“That’s right,” said Jiao. “When I had my right eye operated on, it was sewn up and then opened again. But it wasn’t because I coughed!”

Curiosity made Lu ask, “Why then?”

Jiao put down his cup and took out his cigarette case, but put it away again remembering Lu’s advice. With a sigh he related, “I’d been labelled as a traitor and was having a difficult time. When the sight went in my right eye I had an operation. Soon after it started, the rebels came and tried to force the surgeon not to treat me. I nearly choked with indignation, but the doctor calmly sewed up the incision, threw the rebels out and then removed the cataract.”

“Really?” Stunned, Lu asked, “Which hospital was that?”

“This one.”

A coincidence? She looked at Jiao again to see whether she had seen him before, but could not recognize him.

Ten years ago, she had been operating on a so-called traitor when she had been interrupted by some rebels. That patient's name was Jiao. So it *was* he! Later, the rebels from Jiao's department, collaborating with a rebel in the hospital, put up a slogan claiming that "Lu Wenting betrays the proletariat by operating on the traitor Jiao Chengsi."

No wonder she hadn't recognized him. Ten years ago, Jiao, sallow and depressed, dressed in an old cotton-padded coat, had come to the hospital alone as an ordinary patient. Lu suggested an operation and made an appointment, which he kept. When she began operating she heard the nurse saying outside, "No admittance. This is the operating theatre."

Then she heard shouting and noises.

"Shit! He's a traitor. We're against treating traitors."

"We won't allow stinking intellectuals to treat traitors."

"Force open the door!"

Jiao, indignant, said on the operating-table, "Let me go blind, doctor. Don't do it."

Lu warned him against moving and quickly sewed up the incision.

Three men charged in, while the more timid ones hesitated at the door. Lu sat there immobile.

Jiao said the doctor had thrown them out. As a matter of fact, Lu had not. She had sat on the stool by the operating-table in her white gown, green plastic slippers, blue cap and mask. All that could be seen of her were her eyes and her bare arms above the rubber gloves. The rebels were awed perhaps by her strange appearance, the solemn atmosphere of the operating theatre and the bloody eye exposed through a hole in the white towel covering the patient. Lu said tersely from behind her mask, "Get out, please!" The rebels looked at each other and left. When Lu resumed work, Jiao told her, "Don't do it, doctor, they'll only blind me again even if you cure me. And you may get involved."

"Keep quiet."

Lu worked swiftly. When she was bandaging him, all she had said was, "I'm a doctor." That was how it had happened.

The rebels from Jiao's department, coming to the hospital to put up a big-character poster denouncing her for curing a traitor, had created quite a sensation. But what did it matter? She was already being criticized for being a bourgeois specialist. These charges and this operation had not left much impression on her. She had forgotten all about it, until Jiao had brought it up.

"I really respect her, Dr. Lu. She was a true doctor."

Qin sighed.

"Pity the hospital kept no records then. I can't find out who she was. Yesterday I expressed my wish to Director Zhao to have her operate on my husband." Lu's awkward expression made her add, "I'm sorry, Dr Lu. Since Director Zhao has confidence in you, we will too. I hope you won't let him down. Learn from that doctor. Of course, we've a lot to learn from her too, don't you agree?"

Lu had no alternative but to nod.

"You're still young," Qin said encouragingly. "I heard you haven't joined the Party yet. You must strive for it, comrade."

Lu told her frankly, "I don't have a good class background."

"That's not the way to look at things. You can't choose your family but you can choose what you do with your life." Qin was eloquent and enthusiastic. "Our Party does pay attention to class origins, but not exclusively. It's your attitude that counts. When you draw the line between yourself and your family, get close to the Party and make contributions to the people, then the Party will open its doors to you."

Lu crossed the room to draw the curtain and examined Jiao's eye. Then she told Jiao, "If it's all right with you, let's do the operation the day after tomorrow."

Jiao answered briskly, "All right. The earlier the better."

It was already after six when Lu took her leave. Qin hurried out after her.

"Are you going home, Dr Lu?"

"Yes."

"Shall I arrange for Jiao's car to take you?"

"No, thank you." Lu declined with a wave of her hand.

*

It was almost midnight, the ward was very quiet. A single wall lamp cast a pale blue light on an intraven- ous

drip, from which the medicine was dropping, as if the only sign of Dr Lu's life.

Fu, sitting at the side of the bed, stared blankly at his wife. It was the first time that he had sat alone with her since her collapse, probably the first time that he had looked at her so intently for the past dozen years.

He remembered that once he had fixed his eyes on her for a long time, and she had asked, her head on one side, "Why do you look at me like that?" Sheepishly he had turned his eyes away. That was when they were courting. But now she could neither move her head nor speak. Vulnerable, she was unable to raise a protest.Only then did he notice that she looked surprisingly frail and old! Her jet-black hair was streaked with grey; her firm, tender skin, loose and soft; and there were lines on her forehead. The corners of her mouth, once so pretty, were now drooping. Her life, like a dying flame, was petering out fast. He could not believe that his wife, a firm character, had become so feeble overnight!

She was not weak, he knew that well. Slim in build, she was in fact fit and strong. Though her shoulders were slight, she silently endured all hardships and sudden misfortunes. She never complained, feared or became disheartened.

"You're a tough woman," he had often said to her.

"Me? No, I'm timid. Not tough at all."

Her answer was always the same. Only the night before she had fallen ill, she had made, as Fu put it, another "heroic decision:" that he should move to his institute.

Xiaojia had quite recovered by then.

*

After Yuanyuan had done his homework, the children went to bed. At last there was peace in the small room.

Autumn had come, the wind was cold. The kindergarten had asked parents for their children's winter clothes. Lu took out the cotton-padded coat Xiaojia had worn the previous year, ripped it apart, made it bigger and sewed on a new pair of cuffs. Then she spread it out on the desk and added a layer of new cotton padding.

Fu took his unfinished article from the bookcase and, hesitating for a brief second beside the desk, sat down on the bed.

"Just a moment," Lu said without turning her head, hurrying, "I'll soon finish."

When she removed the coat from the desk, Fu remarked, "If only we could have another small room. Even six square metres, just big enough for a desk."

Lu listened, lowering her head, busy sewing. After a while, she hastily folded up the unfinished coat and said, "I've got to go to the hospital now. You can have the desk."

"But why? It's late," he queried.

She said, while putting on her jacket, "There will be two operations tomorrow morning and I want to check how the patients are. I'll go and have a look at them."

She often went to the hospital in the evening in fact. So Fu teased her, saying, "Though you're here at home, your heart's still in the hospital."

"Put on more clothes. It's cold," he urged.

"I won't be long," she said quickly. With an apologetic smile, she continued, "Two funny patients, you know. One's a vice-minister. His wife's been worrying to death about the operation and making an awful fuss. So I must go to see him. The other's a little girl. She told me today that she had a lot of nightmares and slept badly."

"OK, doc!" He smiled. "Get going and come back soon!"

She left. When she returned he was still burning the midnight oil. Not wanting to disturb him, she said after tucking up the children's quilt, "I'm going to bed first."

He looked round, saw she was in bed and again buried himself in his papers and books. But soon he sensed that she had not fallen asleep. Was it perhaps the light? He bent the lamp lower, shielded the light with a newspaper and carried on with his work.

After a while, he heard her soft, even snoring. But he knew that she was faking. Many times, she had tried to pretend she slept well, so he could feel at ease studying late. In fact he had long since seen through her little trick, but had no heart to expose it.

Some time later, he got to his feet, stretched and said, "All right! I'll sleep too."

"Don't worry about me!" Lu said quickly. "I'm already half asleep."

Standing with his hands on the edge of the desk, he hesitated, looking at his unfinished article. Then he made up his mind and said, closing all the books, "I'll call it a day."

"How about your article? How can you finish it if you don't make full use of your nights?"

"One night can't make up for ten years."

Lu sat up, threw a sweater over her shoulders and said in earnest, her head against the bed board, “Guess what I’ve been thinking just now?”

“You oughtn’t to have thought of anything! Now close your eyes. You’ll have to cure other people’s eyes tomorrow.”

“It’s no joke. Listen, I think you should move into your institute. Then you’ll have more time.”

Fu stared at her.

Her face was glowing, her eyes dancing. Obviously she was very pleased with the idea. She went on, “I’m serious. You’ve things to do. I know, the children and I have been hampering you.”

“Come off it! It’s not you—”

Lu broke in, “Of course it is! We can’t divorce. The children need their father, and a scientist needs his family. However, we must think of some way to turn your eight working hours into sixteen.”

“But the children and the housework will all fall on you. That won’t do!”

“Why not? Even without you, we can manage.”

He listed all the problems, to which she answered one by one. Finally she said, “Haven’t you often remarked that I’m a tough woman? I can cope. Your son won’t go hungry, your daughter won’t be ill-treated.”

He was convinced. So they decided to have a try the next day.

“It’s so very difficult to do something in China!” Fu said, undressing. “During the war, many old revolutionaries died for a new China. Now to modernize our country, again our generation has to make sacrifices though hardly anyone notices it.”

He kept talking to himself like this. When he put his clothes on the back of a chair and turned to get into bed, he saw that Lu had fallen asleep. With a faint smile on her face, she looked pleased with her proposal, even in her dreams.

*

But who would imagine their trial would fail on the very first day?

The operations were sucessful, though Lu’s private plan failed.

That morning when she had entered the ward ten minutes early as usual, Dr. Sun was already there waiting for her.

“Good morning, Dr. Lu,” he greeted her, “we’ve got a donor’s eye today. Can we fit in the corneal transplant?”

“Excellent! We’ve got a patient who’s anxious to have the operation done as soon as possible,” Lu exclaimed in delight.

“But you already have two operations scheduled for this morning. Do you think you can manage a third?”

“Sure,” she replied, straightening up as if showing him that she was perfectly capable.

“OK, it’s settled then.” He had made up his mind. Holding the arm of Jiang, who had just arrived, Lu headed for the operating theatre. She was in high spirits, walking with a spring in her step, as though on an outing.

The operating theatres of this hospital, occupying a whole floor, were large and impressive. The big characters **OPERATING THEATER** in red paint on the beige glass door were striking. When a wheeled stretcher bearing a patient was pushed through this door, his relatives remained outside, anxiously looking at the mysterious, perhaps even frightening place, as if Death were lurking about inside.

But in fact, the operating theatre was a place of hope. Inside, the walls along the wide corridor were painted a light, agreeable green. Here there were the operating theaters for the various departments. The surgeons, their assistants, anaesthetists and theater nurses scurried to and fro lightly. No laughter, no chatter. This was the most quiet, most orderly area of the large hospital, into which more than a thousand patients poured every day.

Vice-minister Jiao was brought into one of these theaters, and then put on a high cream-coloured operating table. His head was covered by a sterilized white towel. There was an olive-shaped hole in it revealing one of his eyes.

Lu already in her overall sat on a stool near the operating table, her gloved hands raised. The height of the stool was adjustable. Lu, being small, had to raise it whenever she operated. But today, it had already been adjusted. She turned and glanced at Jiang gratefully, realizing she had done it.

A nurse pushed the surgical instrument table nearer to Lu. The adjustable plate was now placed above the patient’s chest, within the surgeon’s reach.

“Shall we start now?” Lu asked watching Jiao’s eye. “Try to relax. We’ll first inject a local anaesthetic. Then your eye will feel numb. The operation won’t take long.”

At this, Jiao suddenly cried out, “Steady on!”

What was wrong? Both Lu and Jiang were taken aback. Jiao pulled away the towel from his face, striving to

raise his head. He inquired, pointing at Lu:

"It was you, Dr. Lu, who operated before on my eye?"

Lu quickly raised her gloved hands lest he touch them. Before she could speak, he went on emotionally, "Yes, it was you. It must have been you! You said the same words. Even your tone and intonation are the same!"

"Yes, it was me," Lu had to admit.

"Why didn't you tell me before? I'm so grateful to you."

"Never mind …" Lu could not find anything else to say. She cast a glance at the towel, beckoned the nurse to change it. Then she said again, "Shall we start, Vice-minister Jiao?"

Jiao sighed. It was hard for him to calm down. Lu had to say in a commanding tone, "Don't move. Don't speak. We'll start now."

She skilfully injected some novocaine into his lower eyelid and began the operation. She had performed such operations umpteen times, but every time she picked up her instruments, she felt like a raw recruit on the battlefield. Lu held out two tapering fingers to pick up a needle-holder which looked like a small pair of scissors. She fixed the needle to the instrument.

"What's the matter?" Jiang asked softly. Instead of answering, Lu held the hook-shaped needle up to the light to examine it.

"Is this a new one?"

Jiang had no idea, so they both turned to the nurse. "A new needle?"

The nurse stepped forward and said in a low voice, "Yes, a new one."

Lu had another look at the needle pin and grumbled, "How can we use such a needle?" Lu and some other doctors had complained many times about the poor quality of their surgical instruments. However, faulty ones appeared from time to time. Lu could do nothing about it. When she found good scalpels, scissors and needles, she would ask the nurse to keep them for her for later use.

She had no idea that all the surgical instruments had been replaced by new ones that day, but unfortunately there was a bad needle among them. Whenever such things occurred, Lu's good-natured face would change, and she would reprimand the nurse. The young nurse, though innocent perhaps, could not defend herself. There was nothing to say in the circumstances. A blunt needle not only prolonged the operation, but also increased the patient's suffering.

Frowning, Lu said quietly, so that Jiao could not overhear, "Bring me another!"

It was an order, and the nurse picked out an old needle from a sterilizer.

The theatre nurses respected Lu, while at the same time being afraid of her. They admired her skill and feared her strictness. A doctor's authority was established through his scalpel. A good oculist could give a blind man back his sight, while a bad one might blind him permanently. Lu had no position, no power, but through her scalpel she wielded authority.

The operation was almost complete, when Jiao's body jerked suddenly.

"Don't move!" Lu warned him.

"Don't move!" Jiang repeated quickly. "What's the matter?"

"I … want to … cough!" a strangled voice sounded from under the towel.

This was just what his wife had feared would happen. Why choose this moment to cough? Was it psychological? A conditioned reflex?

"Can you control it for a minute?"

"No, I … I can't." His chest was heaving.

There was no time to lose! Lu hurriedly took emergency measures, while calming him down. "Just a second! Breathe out and hold your cough!"

She was quickly tying up the suture while he exhaled, his chest moving vigorously as if he would die of suffocation at any moment. When the last knot was done, Lu sighed with relief and said, "You can cough now, but not too loudly."

But he did not. On the contrary, his breath gradually, grew even and normal.

"Go ahead and cough. It won't matter," Jiang urged again.

"I'm awfully sorry," Jiao apologized. "I'm all right now. Carry on with the operation please."

Jiang rolled her eyes, wanting to give him a piece of her mind. A man of his age should know better. Lu threw her a glance, and Jiang bit back her resentment. They smiled knowingly at each other. It was all in the day's work!
Lu snipped off the knots and started the operation again. It continued without a hitch. Afterwards Lu got off the stool and sat at a small table to write out a prescription, while Jiao was moved back on to the wheeled stretcner.

As it was being pushed out, Jiao suddenly called to Lu, like a kid who has misbehaved, his voice trembling slightly.

Lu stepped over to him. His eyes had been bandaged. “Anything I can do?” she stooped to ask.

He reached out, groping. When he caught hold of her hands, still in their gloves, he shook them vigorously. “I’ve given you much trouble on both occasions. I’m so sorry …”

Lu was stunned for a brief moment. Then she consoled him, looking at his bandaged face, “Never mind. Have a good rest. We’ll take off the bandage in a few days.”

After he was wheeled out, Lu glanced at the clock. A forty-minute operation had lasted an hour. She took off her white gown and rubber gloves and immediately donned another. As Lu turned to let the nurse tie the gown at the back, Jiang asked, “Shall we continue?”

“Yes.”

“Let me do the next operation,” Jiang begged. “You take a short rest, then do the third.”

Lu shook her head and said smilingly, “I’ll do it. You’re not familiar with Wang Xiaoman. The child’s scared stiff. We became friends during the last few days. Better leave her to me.”

The girl did not come into the operating theater on a wheeled stretcher, but was almost dragged in. In a white gown, which was a bit too large for her, she was reluctant to go anywhere near the operating-table.

“Aunt Lu, I’m scared. I don’t want the operation. Please go and explain to my mother.”

The sight of the doctors and nurses in such strange clothes terrified her. Her heart was pounding, as she tried to wrench away from the nurses, pleading with Lu for help.

Lu walked towards the table and coaxed her with a grin, “Come on, little girl. Didn’t you promise to have this operation? Be brave! There’s nothing to fear. You won’t feel any pain once you’ve been given some anaesthetic.”

Xiaoman sized up Lu in her funny clothes and gazed at her kind, smiling, encouraging eyes. Then she climbed up on to the operating-table. A nurse spread a towel over her face. Lu motioned the nurse to tie up her hands. As the little patient was about to protest, Lu said, perching on the table, “Xiaoman, be a good girl! It’s the same for all patients. Really, it won’t take long.” She gave her an injection of the anaesthetic while telling her, “I’m giving you an injection and soon your eye will feel nothing at all.”

Lu was both doctor, devoted mother and kindergarten nurse. She took the scissors, forceps and other instruments which Jiang handed to her while keeping up a running commentary for the benefit of the girl. When she severed the straight muscle which caused the squint, Xiaoman’s nerve was affected and she became nauseous.

“You feel a little sick?” Lu asked. “Take a deep breath. Just hold on for a minute. That’s better. Still sick? Feeling any better? We’ll finish the operation very soon. There’s a good girl!”

Lu’s words lulled Xiaonian into a trance while the operation continued. When she had been bandaged and wheeled out of the room, she remembered what her mother had told her to say, so she called out sweetly, “Thank you very much, Aunty.”

Everyone burst out laughing. The minute hand of the clock on the wall had just moved half an hour.

Lu was wet with sweat, the perspiration beading on her forehead, her underwear soaking. Wet patches showed under her armpits. She was surprised at this because it was not hot. Why had she perspired so profusely? She slightly moved her numb arms, which had ached from being raised for the duration of the operation.

When she removed the operating gown again and reached out for another, she suddenly felt dizzy. She closed her eyes for a minute, shook her head several times and then slowly eased one of her arms into a sleeve. A nurse came to help her tie the gown.

“Dr. Lu!” the nurse exclaimed suddenly. “Your lips are so pale!”

Jiang, who was also changing, turned to look at Lu.

“Goodness!” she said in astonishment. “You do look very pale!”

It was true. There were black rings under her eyes, even her lids were puffy, She looked a patient herself!

Seeing that Jiang’s startled eyes remained fixed on her, Lu grinned and said, “Stop fussing! It’ll soon be over.” She had no doubt that she could carry on with the next operation. Had she not worked like this for years?

“Shall we continue?” the nurse queried.

“Yes, of course.”

How could they afford to stop? The donor’s eye could not be stored too long, nor the operation be delayed. They had to go on working.

“Wenting,” Jiang stepped over to Lu and suggested, “Let’s have a break for half an hour.”

Lu looked at the clock. It was just after ten. If they postponed it for half an hour, some colleagues would. be late for lunch, while others had to rush home to prepare a meal for their children.

“Continue?” the nurse asked again.

“Yes.”

Doctors of this and other hospitals who were undergoing further training thronged the door talking to Lu. They had got special permission to see her operate.

Uncle Zhang, helped by a nurse, clambered on to the operating-table, still talking and laughing.

The table was a bit too small for him and his feet and hands dangled over the sides. He had a loud voice and talked incessantly, joking with a nurse, “Don’t laugh at me, girl. If the medical team hadn’t come to our village and persuaded me to have this operation, I’d rather die than let you cut my eye with a knife. Just imagine! A steel knife cutting into my flesh, ugh! Who knows if it will do me some good or not? Ha Ha …”

The young nurse tittered and said softly, “Uncle, lower your voice please.”

“I know, young lady. We must keep quiet in a hospital, mustn’t we?” he still boomed. Gesticulating busily with one hand, he went on, “You can’t imagine how I felt when I heard that my eye could be cured. I wanted to laugh and, at the same time, to cry. My father went blind in his old age and died a blind man. I never dreamed that a blind man like me could see the sun again. Times have really changed, haven’t they?”

The nurse giggled while covering him with a towel. “Don’t move again, Uncle!” she said. “This towel’s been sterilized, don’t touch it.”

“All right,” he answered gravely. “Since I’m in hospital, I should obey the rules.” But he was trying to raise his strong arms again.

Worrying about his restlessness, the nurse said, holding a strap, “I’ll have to tie your arms to the table, Uncle. That’s the rule here.”

Zhang was puzzled, but soon chortled. “Truss me up, eh?” he joked. “OK, go aheadl To be frank, lass, if it were not for my eyes, I wouldn’t be so obedient. Though blind, I go to the fields twice a day. I was born a lively character. I like to be on the go. I just can’t sit still.”

This made the nurse laugh, and he himself chuckled too. But he stopped immediately when Lu entered. He asked, cocking up his ears, “Is that you, Dr. Lu? I can recognize your steps. It’s funny, since I lost my sight, my ears have grown sharp.”

Seeing him full of beans, Lu could not help laughing. She took her seat, preparing for the operation. When she picked up the precious donor’s cornea from a phial and sewed it on to a piece of gauze, he piped up again, “So an eye can be replaced? I never knew that!”

“It’s not replacing the whole eye, just a filmy membrane,” Jiang corrected him.

“Can’t see the difference.” He wasn’t interested in details. With a sigh, he continued, “It needs much skill, doesn’t it? When I return to my village with a pair of good eyes, the villagers will say I must have met some kind fairy. Ha Ha! I’ll tell them I met Dr. Lu!”

Jiang tittered, winking at Lu, who felt a little embarrassed. Still sewing, she explained, “Other doctors can do the same.”

“That’s quite true,” he agreed. “You only find good doctors in this big hospital. No kidding!”

Her preparations over, Lu parted his eyelids with a speculum and said, “We’ll start now. Just relax.”

Zhang was not like other patients, who only listened to whatever the doctors said. He thought it impolite not to answer. So he said understandingly, “I’m perfectly all right. Go ahead. I don’t mind if it’s painful. Of course, it hurts to cut with a scalpel or a pair of scissors. But don’t worry about me. I trust you. Besides—”

Jiang had to stop him, still smiling. “Uncle, don’t talk any more.”

Finally he complied.

Lu picked up a trephine, small as a pen cap, and lightly cut out the opaque cornea. Cutting a similar disc of clear cornea from the donor’s eye, she transferred it to Zhang’s eye. Then she began the delicate task of stitching it with the needle-holder. The suture was finer than a hair.

The operation went smoothly. When she had finished, the transplanted cornea was perfectly fixed on the surface of the eye. But for some little black knots, one could never tell it was a new cornea.

“Well done!!” the doctors around the operating table quietly exclaimed in admiration.

Lu sighed with relief. Deeply touched, Jiang looked up at her friend with feeling. Silently, she put layers of gauze over Zhang’s eye.

As he was wheeled out, Zhang seemed to awaken from a dream. He became animated again. When the wheeled stretcher was already out of the door, he cried out, “Thanks a lot, Dr. Lu!”

The operations had ended. As Lu was pulling herself to her feet, she found her legs had gone to sleep. She simply could not stand up. After a little rest, she tried again and again, till she finally made it. There was a sudden

pain in her side. She pressed it with her hand, not taking it seriously for it had occurred before. Engrossed in an operation, sitting on the little stool, for hours at a time, she was aware of nothing else. But as soon as this operation had ended, she felt utterly exhausted, even too tired to move.

*

At that moment, Fu was cycling home in haste. He had not intended to return that day. Early that morning, Fu, at his wife's suggestion, had rolled up his bedding, put it on his bicycle carrier and taken it to his office to begin his new life.

By noon, however, he was wavering. Would Lu finish her operations in time? Imagining her dragging herself home to prepare lunch for the children, he suddenly felt a pang of guilt. So he jumped on his bicycle and pedalled home.

Just as he turned into their lane, he caught sight of his wife leaning against a wall, unable to move.

"Wenting! What's wrong?" he cried out, leaping off to help.

"Nothing. I'm just a bit tired." She put an arm round his shoulder and moved slowly towards home.

Fu noticed that she was very pale and that beads of cold sweat had broken out on her forehead. He asked uneasily, "Shall I take you to hospital?"

She sat down on the edge of the bed, her eyes closed, and answered, "Don't worry. I'll be all right after a short rest." She pointed to the bed, too weak to say anything.

Fu took off her shoes and coat.

"Lie down and get some sleep. I'll wake you later."

He went to boil some water in a saucepan. When he came back to fetch noodles, he heard her say, "We ought to have a rest. Shall we take the children to Beihai Park next Sunday? We haven'' been there for more than ten years."

"Fine. I'm all for it!" Fu agreed, wondering why she should suddenly want to go there.

He gave her an anxious glance and went to cook the noodles. When he returned, food in hand, she had already fallen asleep. He did not disturb her. When Yuanyuan came home, the two of them sat down to eat.

Just then, Lu began groaning. Fu put down his bowl and rushed to the bed. Lu was deathly white, her face covered in sweat. "I can't fight it," she said in a feeble voice, gasping for breath.

Frightened, Fu took her hand asking, "What's wrong? Have you any pain?"

With a great effort, Lu pointed to her heart. Panicking, Fu pulled open a drawer rummaging for a pain-killer. On second thoughts, he wondered if she needed a tranquilizer.

Though in great pain, she was clear-headed. She signed to him to calm down and said with all her remaining strength, "I must go to hospital!"

Only then did Fu realize the seriousness of her illness. For more than ten years she had never seen a doctor, though she went to the hospital every day. Now she was obviously critically ill. As he hurried out, he stopped at the door and turned to say, "I'll go and get a taxi."

He rushed to the public telephone on the corner. He dialled quickly and waited. When someone answered, he heard a cold voice saying, "No taxis at the moment."

"Look, I've got a very sick person here!"

"Still, you'll have to wait half an hour."

Fu began to plead, when the man rang off. He tried to call Lu's hospital, but no one seemed to be in the office of the Ophthalmic Department. He asked the operator to put him through to the vehicle dispatch office.

"We can't send you a car without an offical approval slip," was the answer.

Where on earth could he track down the hosiptal leaders to get an approval slip?

"But this is urgent! Hello!" he shouted into the receiver. But the line had already gone dead.

He phoned the political department which, he thought, ought to help him out. After a long time, a woman picked up the receiver. She listened patiently and said politely, "Would you please contact the administration department?"

He had to ask the operator to put him through to the administration department. Recognizing his voice, the operator demanded impatiently, "Where exactly do you want?"

Where? He was not sure himself. In a begging voice, he said he wanted to speak to anyone in the ad. ministration department. The telephone rang and rang. Nobody answered.

Disappointed, Fu abandoned the idea of finding a car. He headed for a small workshop in the lane making cardboard boxes, hoping to borrow a tricycle and trailer. The old lady in charge, hearing of his predicament, sympathized with him, but unfortunately could do nothing, for both her bicycles were out.

What was to be done? Standing in the alley, Fu was desperate. Sit Lu on the bicycle carrier? That was impossible. Just then, Fu saw a van coming. Without muchthought, he raised his hand to stop it. The van came to a. halt, and the driver poked his headout, staring In surprise. But when he heard what was happening, he beckoned Fu to get into the van.

They went straight to Fu's home. When the driver saw Lu being dragged towards the van supported by her husband, he hurried to help her get into the cabin. Then slowly he drove her to the casualty department of the hospital.

*

She had never slept so long, never felt so tired. She felt pain all over her body as if she had just fallen from a cloud. She had not the slightest bit of strength left. After a peaceful sleep, her limbs were more relaxed, her heart calmer. But she felt her mind go blank.

For years, she had simply had no time to pause, to reflect on the hardships she had experienced or the difficulties lying ahead. Now all physical and mental burdens had been lifted. She seemed to have plenty of time to examine her past and to explore the future. But her mind had switched off; no reminiscences, no hopes. Nothing.

Perhaps it was only a dream. She had had such dreams before …

One evening when she was only five, a north wind had been howling. Her mother had gone out, leaving her alone at home. Soon it was very dark and her mother had not returned. For the first time, Lu felt lonely, terrified. She cried and shouted, "Mama! … mama! …" This scene often appeared later in her dreams. The howling wind, the door blown open by a sudden gust and the pale kerosene lamp remained vividly in her mind. For a long time, she could not tell whether it had been true or a dream.

This time, it was not a dream but reality. She was in bed, ill, and Jiajie was attending her. He looked flaked out too. He was dozing, half lying on the bed. He would catch cold if not awakened. She tried to call him, but no sound came out of her mouth. There was a lump in her throat choking her. She wanted to pull a coat over him, but her arms did not seem to belong to her.

She glanced round and saw she was in a single room. Only serious cases were given such special treatment. She was suddenly seized by fear. "Am I …"

The autumn wind rattled the door and windows. Darkness gathered, swallowing up the room. Lu felt clearer after a cold sweat. It was real, she knew, not a dream. This was the end of life, the beginning of death!

So this was dying, no fear, no pain, just life withering away, the senses blurring, slowly sinking, like a leaf drifting on a river.

All came to an end, inevitably. Rolling waves swept over her chest. Lu felt she was floating in the water "Mama … mama …"

She heard Xiaojia's call and saw her running along the bank. She turned back, reaching out her arms.

"Xiaojia … my darling daughter …"

But waves swept her away, and Xiaojia's face grew vague, her hoarse voice turned into sobbing.

"Mama … plait my hair …"

Why not plait her hair? The child had been in this world for six years, and her one desire was to have pigtails. Whenever she saw other girls with pigtails adorned with silk ribbons, admiration overwhelmed her little heart. But such requests were ignored. Mother had no time for that. On Monday morning, the hospital was crowded with patients and, for Lu, every minute counted.

"Mama … mama …"

She heard Yuanyuan's calling and saw the boy running after her along the bank. She turned back, stretching out her arms.

"Yuanyuan … Yuanyuan …" A wave swept over her. When she struggled to the surface, there was no sign of her son, only his voice in the distance.

"Mama … don't forget … my white gymn shoes …"

A kaleidoscope of sports shoes whirled around. White and blue sneakers, sports boots, gym shoes, white shoes with red or blue bands. Buy a pair for Yuanyuan, whose shoes were already worn out. Buy a pair of white gym shoes and he would be in raptures for a month. But then the shoes disappeared and raining down were price tags: 3.1 *yuan*, 4.5 *yuan*, 6.3 *yuan* …

Now she saw Jiajie chasing after her, his running figure mirrored in the water. He was in a great hurry, his voice trembling as he called, "Wenting, you can't leave us like this!"

How she wished that she could wait for him! He held out his hand to her, but the ruthless current raced forward

and she drifted away helplessly.

"Dr. Lu … Dr. Lu …"

So many people were calling her, lining the banks. Yafen, Old Liu, Director Zhao, Dr Sun, all in white coats; Jiao Chengsi, Uncle Zhang and Wang Xiaoman in pyjamas. Among the other patients, she only recognized a few. They were all calling her.

I oughtn't to leave. No! There are so many things I still have to do. Xiaojia and Yuanyuan shouldn't be motherless. I mustn't bring Jiajie more sorrow. He can't afford to lose his wife so young. I can't tear myself away from the hospital, the patients. Oh no! I can't give up this miserable, yet dear life! I won't drown! I must fight! I must remain in the world. But why am I so tired? I''ve no strength to resist, to struggle. I'm sinking, sinking …

Ah! Goodbye, Yuanyuanl Goodbye, Xiaojia! Will you miss your mother? In this last moment of my life, I love you more than ever. Oh, how I love you! Let me embrace you. Listen, my darlings, forgive your mummy who did not give you the love you deserved. Forgive your mummy who, time and again, refrained from hugging you, pushing away your smiling faces. Forgive your mummy for leaving you while you're still so small.

Goodbye, Jiajie! You gave up everything for me! Without you, I couldn't have achieved anything. Without you, life had no meaning. Ah, you sacrificed so much for me! If I could, I would kneel down before you begging your pardon since I can never repay all your kindness and concern. Forgive me for neglecting you. I often thought I should do something more for you. I wanted to end my work regularly and prepare supper for you. I wanted to let you have the desk, hoping you would finish your article. But it's too late! How sad! I've no time now.

Goodbye, my patients! For the past eighteen years, my life was devoted to you. Whether I walked, sat or lay down, I thought only of you and your eyes! You don't know the joy I felt after curing an eye. What a pity I shall no longer feel that …

*

"Arrhythmia!" the doctor monitoring the screen exclaimed.

"Wenting! Wenting!" Fu cried out, fixing his eyes on his wife, who was struggling for breath.

The doctors and nurses on duty rushed into the room.

"Intravenous injection of lidocaine!" the doctor snapped an order.

A nurse quickly injected it, but before it was finished, Lu's lips went blue, her hands clenched, her eyes rolled upwards.

Her heart stopped beating.

The doctors began massage resuscitation. A respirator was applied to her head, which made a rhythmic sound. Then a defibrillator went into operation. When her chest was struck by this, her heart began to beat again.

"Get the ice cap ready!" the doctor in charge ordered, the sweat on his forehead.

An ice cap was put on Lu's head.

*

The pale dawn could be seen outside the window. Day had broken at last. Lu had lived through a crucial night. She now entered a new day.

A day nurse came into the room and opened the windows, letting in fresh air and the birds' merry singing. At once the pungent smell of medicine and death were dispelled. Dawn brought new hope to a frail life.

Another nurse came to take Lu's temperature, while a medical orderly brought in breakfast. Then the doctor on duty dropped in on his ward round.

Wang Xiaoman, still bandaged, pleaded with a nurse, "Let me have a look at Dr. Lu! Just one peep."

"No. She nearly died last night. No one's allowed to see her for the time being."

"Aunt, perhaps you don't know, but she fell ill because she operated on me. Please let me go and see her. I promise not to say a word to her."

"No, no, no!" The nurse scowled.

"Oh please! Just one glance." Xiaoman was close to tears. Hearing footsteps behind her, she turned and saw Old Zhang coming, led by his grandson.

"Grandpa," she rushed to him, "will you have a word with this aunt? She won't let me …"

Zhang, with his eyes bandaged, was dragged over by the little girl to the nurse.

"Sister, do let us have a look at her."

Now with this old man pestering her too, the nurse flared up, "What's the matter with you people, fooling about in the wards?"

"Come off it! Don't you understand?" Zhang's voice was not so loud today. He went on humbly, "We've a good reason, you know. Why is Dr. Lu ill? Because she operated on us. To be frank, I can't really see her, but to

stand beside her bed for a while will calm my nerves."

He was so sincere that the nurse softened and explained patiently, "It's not that I'm being mean. Dr. Lu's seriously ill with heart trouble. She mustn't be excited. You want her to recover very soon, don't you? Better not disturb her at the moment."

"Yes, you're quite right."

Zhang sighed and sat down on a bench. Slapping his thigh, he said regretfully, "It's all my fault. I urged her to do the operation as quickly as possible. But who would've thought …" What shall I do if anything happens to her?"

He lowered his head in remorse.

Dr. Sun hurried to see Lu too before starting his work, but was stopped by Xiaoman.

"Dr. Sun, are you going to see Dr. Lu?" she asked.

He nodded.

"Will you take me along? Please."

"Not now. Some time later. OK?"

Hearing Sun's voice, Zhang stood up and reached out for him. Tugging Sun's sleeve, he said, "Dr. Sun. We'll do as you say. But can I have a word with you? I know you're extremely busy. But I still want you to listen to what's been bothering me."

Sun patted Zhang on the shoulder and said, "Go ahead."

"Dr. Lu's a very good doctor. You leaders ought to do your best to cure her. If you save her, she can save many others. There are good medicines, aren't there? Give her them. Don't hesitate. I hear you have to pay for certain precious medicines. Lu's got two children. She's not well off. Now she's ill. I don't expect she can afford them. Can't this big hospital subsidize her?"

He stopped, holding Sun's hands, slightly cocking his ear towards him, waiting for his answer.

Sun had a one-track mind. He never showed his feelings. But today he was moved. Shaking Zhang's hands, he said emotionally, "We'll do everything possible to save her!"

Zhang seemed satisfied. He called his grandson to come nearer, and groped for a satchel which was slung across the boy's shoulder.

"Here are some eggs. Please take them to her when you go in."

"It's not necessary," Sun replied quickly.

This put Zhang's back up instantly. Gripping Sun's hands, he raised his voice, "If you don't take them to her, I won't let you go!"

Sun had to accept the satchel of eggs. He decided to ask a nurse to return it and explain later. As though guessing what was in Sun's mind, Zhang continued, "And don't ask someone to bring them back."

Forced to acquiesce, Sun helped Zhang and Xiaoman down the stairs.

Qin, accompanied by Director Zhao, approached Lu's room.

"Zhao," the woman talked while walking, rather excitedly, "I was like a bureaucrat. I didn't know it was Dr. Lu who had operated on Old Jiao. But you should have known, shouldn't you? Luckily Jiao recognized Lu. Otherwise we'd still be in the dark."

"I was sent to work in the countryside at that time," Zhao replied helplessly.

Shortly after they had entered the room, Sun arrived. The doctor on duty gave a brief report of the emergency measures taken to save Lu the previous night. Zhao looked over the case-history, nodding. Then he said, "We must watch her carefully."

Fu, seeing so many people entering, had stood up. But Qin, unaware of his presence, quickly sat down on the vacant stool.

"Feeling better, Dr. Lu?" she asked.

Lu's eyes opened slightly but she said nothing.

"Vice-minister Jiao has told me all about you," Qin said warmly. "He's very grateful to you. He would have come himself if I hadn't stopped him. I'm here to thank you on his behalf. Anything you fancy eating, anything you want, let me know. I can help you. Don't stand on ceremony. We're all revolutionary comrades."

Lu closed her eyes.

"You're still young. Be optimistic. Since you're sick, it's better to accept it. This—"

Zhao stopped her by saying, "Comrade Qin Bo, let her have some rest. She's only just regained consciousness."

"Fine, fine. Have a good rest," Qin said, rising to her feet. "I'll come again in a couple of days."

Out of the ward, Qin complained frowning, “Director Zhao, I must give you a piece of my mind. Dr. Lu’s a real treasure. If you had been more concerned about her, she wouldn’t have become so ill. The middle-aged comrades are the backbone of our country. It’s imperative to value talented people.”

“Right,” was Zhao's reply.

Gazing after her receding figure, Fu asked Sun in a small voice, “Who’s she?”

Sun looked over the frame of hisspectacles at the doorway and answered, frowning, “An old lady spouting revolutionary phrases!”

*

That day, Lu was slightly better and could open her eyes easily. She drank two spoonfuls of milk and a sip of orange juice. But she lay with her eyes blank, staring at the ceiling. She wore a vacant expression, as if indifferent to everything, including her own critical condition and the unhappiness of her family. She seemed weary of life.

Fu stared at her in mute horror for he had never seen her like this before. He called her again and again, but she only responded with a slight wave of her hand, as though not wishing to be disturbed. Probably she felt comfortable letting her mind remain suspended.

Time passed unheeded. Fu, sitting at her bedside, had not slept for two nights. He felt exhausted. Dozing, he was suddenly awoke by a heart-rending scream, which shook the whole ward. He heard a girl wailing next door, “Mama! Mama!” and a man’s sobbing. Then there came the sound of footsteps as many people rushed to the room.

Fu hurried out too. He saw a wheeled stretcher being pushed out of the room, on which lay a corpse covered with a sheet. Then the nurse in white pushing the stretcher appeared. A girl of sixteen with disheveled hair stumbled out, shaking, and threw herself at the stretcher. Clutching at it with trembling hands, she pleaded, tears streaming down her cheeks, “Don’t take it away! Please! My mother’s asleep. She’ll soon wake up! I know she will!”

Visitors made way for the wheeled stretcher. In silence, they paid their respects to the deceased.

Fu stood rooted amid the crowd. His cheekbones stuck out prominently in his haggard face. His bloodshot eyes began to fill with tears. Clenching his fists, he tried to pull himself together, but shook allover. Unnerved by the girl’s shrill cries, he wanted to cover his ears.

“Mama, wake up! Wake upl They’re taking you away!” the girl screamed madly. Had she not been held back by others, she would have pulled off the sheet. The middle-aged man following the stretcher repeated, sobbing, “I’ve let you down! I’ve let you I down!”

His desperate cries were like a knife piercing Fu’s heart, as he stared at the stretcher. All of a sudden, as if electrified, he dashed towards his wife’s room. He went straight to her, threw himself on the bed. He murmured with closed eyes, “You’re alive!”

Lu stirred, awakened by his heavy breathing. She opened her eyes and looked at him, but her eyes didn’t seem to focus.

He felt a shiver of fear and cried out, “Wenting!”

Her eyes lingered on his face coldly, and this made his heart bleed. Fu did not know what to say or do to encourage her to hold on to life. This was his wife, the dearest person in the world. How long ago was it since he had read poems to her in Beihai Park that winter? During all these years, she had always been his beloved. Life would be unthinkable without her! He must keep her with him!

Poetry! Read a poem to her as he had done then! It was poetry which had helped him to win her before! Today, he would recite the same poem to remind her of sweet memories, to give her the courage to live on. Half-kneeling beside her bed, he began to recite with tears in his eyes:

I wish I were a rapid stream,
If my love
A tiny fish would be,
She’d frolic
In my foaming waves.

The verses seemed to have touched her. She turned her head towards him, her lips moving slightly. Fu leaned over and listened to her indistinct words: “I can no longer … swim …”

Choking back his tears, he continued:

I wish I were a deserted forest,

If my love
A little bird would be,
She'd nest and twitter
In my dense trees.

She murmured softly, "I can no longer … fly …"

His heart ached. Steeling himself, he went on, in tears:

I wish I were a crumbling ruin,
If my love
Green ivy would be,
She'd tenderly entwine
Around my lonely head.

Tears, blind tears silently poured down her cheeks and fell on the white pillow. With an effort, she said, "I can't … climb up!"

Fu threw himself on to her, weeping bitterly. "I've failed you as a husband …"

When he opened his tearful eyes, he was astonished. Again she remained with her eyes fixed on the ceiling. She seemed unaware of his weeping, his appeals, unaware of everything around her.

On hearing Fu's sobbing, a doctor hurried in and said to him, "Dr. Lu's very weak. Please don't excite her."

Fu said nothing more the whole afternoon. At dusk, Lu seemed a little better. She turned her head to Fu and her lips moved as if wanting to speak.

"Wenting, what do you want to say? Tell me," Fu asked, holding her hands.

She spoke at last, "Buy Yuanyuan … a pair of white gym shoes …"

"I'll do it tomorrow," he replied, unable to check his tears. But he quickly wiped them away with the back of his hand.

Lu, still watching him, seemed to have more to say.

But she only uttered a few words after a long time, "Plait … Xiaojia's hair …"

"Yes, I will!" Fu promised, still sobbing. He lookedat his wife, his vision blurred, hoping she would be able to tell him all that was worrying her. But she closed her lips, as if she had used up her energy.

*

Dear Wenting,

I wonder if you will ever receive this letter. It's not impossible that this won't reach you. But I hope not! I don't believe it will happen. Though you're very ill, I believe you'll recover. You can still do a lot. You're too young to leave us!

When my husband and I came to say goodbye to you last night, you were still unconscious. We'd wanted to see you this morning, but there were too many things to do. Yesterday evening may be the last time we will meet. Thinking of this, my heart breaks. We've been studying and working together for more than twenty years. No one understands us as well as we do each other. Who would imagine we would part like this?

I'm now writing this letter in the airport. Can you guess where I'm standing at this moment? At the arts and crafts counter on the second floor. There's no one about, only the shining glass counter in front of me. Remember the first time we traveled by air, we came here too? There was a pot of artificial narcissuses with dew on their petals, so lifelike, so exquisite! You told me that you liked it best. But when we looked at the price, we were scared off. Now, I'm before the counter again, alone, looking at another pot, almost the same colour as the one we saw. Looking at it, I feel like crying. I don't know why. Now I realize suddenly, it's because all that has gone.

When Fu had just got to know you, I remember once he came to our room and recited a line by Pushkin, "All that has happened in the past becomes a sweet memory." I pursed my lips and said it wasn't true. I even asked, "Can past misfortunes become sweet memories?" Fu grinned, ignoring me. He must have thought inwardly. that I knew nothing about poetry. But today I understand. Pushkin was right. It exactly reflects my mood now. It's as if he wrote the line for me! I really feel that all the past is sweet.

A jet has just taken off, its engines roaring. Where is it going? In an hour, I'll be climbing up the steps into the plane, leaving my country. With only sixty minutes to go, I can't help weeping, and my tears wet this letter. But I've no time to rewrite it.

I'm so depressed, I suddenly feel as if I've made the wrong decision. I don't want to leave everything here. No! I can't bear to leave our hopsital, our operating theatre, even that little desk in the clinic! I often grumbled that Dr. Sun was too severe, never forgiving a mistake. But now I wish I could hear his criticism again. He was a strict teacher. If not for him, I wouldn't be so skilled!

The loudspeakers have just wished passengers bon voyage. Will mine be good? Thinking of boarding the plane in a moment, I feel lost. Where will I land? What lies in store? My heart's in my boots. I'm scared! Yes, scared stiff! Will we get used to a strange country, which is so different from ours? How can my mind be at peace?

My husband's sitting in an armchair brooding. Busy packing the last few days, he had no time to think. He seemed

quite firm about the decision. But last night, when he stuffed the last coat into the suitcase, he said all of a sudden, "We'll be homeless from tomorrow!" He's not spoken since then, and I know his mind is still divided.

Yaya was most happy about this trip. She was nervous and excited, and sometimes I felt like hitting her. But now she's standing at the glass door watching the planes landing and taking off, as if reluctant to leave.

"Won't you change your minds?" you asked that night when we were at your place.

I can't answer that question in one sentence. Liu and I have been discussing it almost every day for the past few months. Our minds have been in a turmoil. There are many reasons, of course, urging us to leave China. It is for Yaya, for Liu and myself. However, none of those reasons can lessen my pain. We shouldn't leave, when China has just begun a new period. We've no excuse for avoiding our duties. Compared with you, I'm a weaker character. Though I had less trouble than you in the past ten years. I couldn't bear it as you did. I often burst out when viciously slandered and attacked. I wasn't stronger than you. On the contrary, it shows my weakness. Better to die than be humiliated, I thought. But there was Yaya. It was surprising that I was able to brazen it out in those days, when Liu was illegally detained as an "enemy agent."

All these are bitter memories of the past. Fu was right in saying, "Darkness has receded, and day has dawned." The trouble is, the evil influence of many years can't be eradicated overnight. The policies of the government take a long time to reach the people. Resentment is not easily removed. Rumours can kill a person. I dread such a nightmare. I lack your courage!

I remember that you and I were cited at that meeting as bourgeois specialists. When we left the hospital afterwards, I said to you, "I can't understand all this. Why should people who have worked hard in their field be crushed? I'll refuse to attend such meetings as a protest!" But you said, "Forget it! If they want to hold a hundred such meetings, let them. I'll attend. We'll still have to do the operations. I'll study at home." I asked you, "Don't you feel wronged?" You smiled and said, "I'm so busy, I've no time to care." I admired you very much. Before we parted, you warned me, "Don't tell Fu about such things. He's in enough trouble himself." We walked a block in silence. I noticed that you looked very calm, very confident. No one could shake your faith. I knew that you had a strong will, which enabled you to resist all kinds of attacks and go your own way. If I had half your courage and will-power, I wouldn't have made such a decision.

Forgive me! This is all I can say to you now. I'm leaving, but I'm leaving my heart with you, with my dear homeland. Wherever I go, I'll never forget China. Believe me! Believe that I'll return. After a few years, when Yaya's grown up and we have achieved something in medicine, we'll come back..

I hope you'll soon recover! Learn a lesson from your illness and pay more attention to your health. I'm not advising you to be selfish. I've always admired your selflessness. I wish you good health to make full use of your talents!

Goodbye, my dearest friend!

Affectionately,

Yafen

*

A month and a half later, Dr. Lu had basically recovered and was permitted to go home.

It was a miracle. Ill as she was, Lu, several times on the brink of death, survived. The doctors were greatly surprised and delighted.

That morning, Fu jubilantly helped her put on a cotton-padded jacket, a pair of woollen trousers, a blue overcoat, and wrapped around her neck a long fluffy beige scarf.

"How are things at home?" she asked.

"Fine. The comrades of your Party branch came yesterday to help clean the room."

Her thoughts immediately turned to that small room with the large bookcase covered with a white cloth, the little alarm-clock on the window-sill and the desk …

She felt feeble and cold, though so warmly dressed. Her legs trembled when she stood up. With one hand gripping her husband's arm, the other touching the wall, she moved forward leaning heavily on Fu. Slowly, she walked out of the ward.

Zhao, Sun and her other colleagues followed her, watching her progress along the corridor towards the gate.

It had rained for a couple of days. A gust of wind sighed through the bare branches of the trees. The sunshine, extraordinarily bright after the rain, slanted in through the windows of the corridor. The cold wind blew in too. Slowly Fu, supporting his wife, headed for the sunlight and the wind.

A black car was waiting at the steps. It had been sent by the administration department at Zhao's request.

Leaning on her husband's shoulder, Lu walked slowly towards the gate …

64.1 Kitty Is Dead\fn{by Chao Shu-min aka Lu Ai (1935-   )} Peking, China (F) 10

She is crying, it really is she who is crying, deep and hard, suppressing the sound of unparalleled grief. Could this be her crying? It must be she! Although the bedroom light isn't on, she is surely inside.

"Madame! Director!"

No one answered, but the sound of crying went on as before. But why? I was only gone a little more than two hours, what could have happened? Could it be one of her parents? No, it couldn't be. If that was it she would have gone back to her own family. Maybe it's her husband … oh no! Ten …

"Madame! Director!"

"The mournful sound of crying began again and the chair moved. I was right! She is inside, but isn't willing to let me help her. It doesn't matter then: she's at home, I've called to her many times, so if anything happens it's not my responsibility. Now I'm wary of anything, anything that could happen that night implicate me. Living on the inside for more than two years was already enough, more than enough. Two such long, long years, such insufferable years, that I never want to return. So, as I was leaving no one said the tabooed, "See you again."

And the husband? He was here at dinnertime, but where has he wandered off to now? No, it couldn't have anything to do with him. In spite of the fact that she's usually a little bit cold, if anything actually had happened with her husband she would have early on gone to the place where she should go. Even if she stays at home friends of theirs would come to see her and stay with her. What is so nerve racking is that there's no way to help her. What she is doing is so unlike her—too unlike her. Normally she is not very easily moved, which means whatever it is that has happened she must consider to be very serious.

Standing outside her door like a fool was pointless. The bedroom, study, and guest room doors were all closed: pitch black inside and out, it was suffocating. Go downstairs! Though both upstairs and downstairs were as lonely as death, at least there were still a couple of lights on the living room. I flipped through the newspaper, through a magazine—stop! The sound of turning the pages was so grating. Kitty! Kitty! Where have you run off to? Usually she loves to meow, but now I just don't know where she's skittered off to. And the husband? The husband is in the wrong too: something has happened at home, his wife has been hurt this way but once again he's unyielding, unmanageable, and awkward. At a time like this he shouldn't have gone out to wander in the night.

I had vowed that I would repay Madame, but now I can't help her at all. Being a very nervous person, I really wanted to go and say: Director! You're usually so open minded, you can usually endure so much normal people can't stand, what is worth making you act like this?

But she wouldn't listen to me. What did I expect? After all. I'm a convict who she has helped look after. Taking in a female convict just out of prison to manage your house isn't something any ordinary person would do. What she really needed at the time was a relatively high class maid—but she didn't have to hire me. I believe that only because she's a good hearted soul who is concerned about the destiny of mankind did she request the New Life Protection Committee for a female convict, just released on a commuted sentence, that she could hire as "house manager." Although I just fit those qualifications, I still felt it was an act of kindness as well as purpose. Otherwise, where would I, a girl. all alone on Taiwan whose family is entangled in Vietnam, go? Before being released, the judicial authorities had corresponded with the relatives and friends of each of those whose sentences had been commuted, telling them to take these people back and accept them. But since I had done those crazy things my classmates and friends had repeatedly admonished me not to do, they already cut off all contact with me. My family had fallen into enemy territory: I wasn't sure if they were dead or alive, and I had no one to notify. I know they thought of contacting the Overseas Chinese Association but I opposed it. Having done something wrong myself was my own responsibility; how could I bother anyone else? So, that's why I went and applied when I heard that Director Hao was looking for a house-hold manager. To be honest, a household manager is what is normally called a maid, but what's wrong with being a maid? Anyway, the first thing I had to do was find a place to hang my hat any tune up my disposition before I could re-enter this society. All my prison buddies thought it strange—a university student! Why was I willing to be a servant? What's wrong with being a servant? You have to depend on your own strengths and capabilities to earn a living, moreover, there was this attitude of Director Hao's: that she was willing to let a convict, fresh out of prison, into her family was, needless to say, an expression of confidence in my resources as well as a gesture of magnanimity and trust. Because of this, I was willing to do anything for her; I'll never forget that day! It was July fourteenth! Early in the morning I picked up my simple luggage and went straight to her h0use to start work. She said:

"You've come! I really regret that I didn't go to meet you but I wasn't willing to let anyone—including my chauffeur—know where you've come from. Only this way will you feel completely natural and composed when you meet them face to face. From here on in there's no need for you to demean yourself because of the past; you've already paid an appropriate price for your impulsive moment. Though it wasn't worth it, you've already paid. Enough! After you've been here a while you can resume your studies or find a more suitable profession."

Wonderful! No scathing statements to make me feel insecure, she made me calm down immediately and want to repay her kindness in full. The first thing I thought of telling her in repayment was that to present this untidy,

haggard countenance of hers to people was very unwise. But no! I had learned not to overstep my bounds so I didn't say anything. She had already perceived my doubts and said:

"You came early today, I haven't even had a chance to wash my face! Wait until I get washed and I'll tell you what to do, starting with breakfast."

She picked up a small notebook covered with grease and handed it to me to look at. The work which needed to be done was scribbled down in the notebook. The first was making breakfast; Mr. Chuang, her husband, eats two poached eggs, one cup of coffee, and two pieces of toast every morning. I'm really good at brewing coffee; the boss of the company I used to work for liked best to drink the coffee I had brewed. If we hadn't been drinking coffee together so often, how could …?

I picked up the coffee pot and glanced at the coffee.

"Today you don't have to make any coffee. He's … not at home."

My doubtful, questioning eyes locked with the expression in hers. You can't know the significance and understanding which flowed between us in that instant. I almost blurted out, woman! This is a woman! I don't know how many questions were camouflaged by that *façade* of professional achievement. Was it possible that Director Hao, famous and over thirty, had this haggard expression?

She told me the last and most important job was taking care of Kitty, Kitty being a small white cat with black paws and, unluckily, a patch of black between her eyes, which gave her a fierce look. Northerners\fn{People from North China.} describe an appearance which people don't tend to like by saying,

"If grandma isn't fond of it, uncle won't like it at all."

In the cat world, Kitty surely belonged to this category. But the Director—oh no! I have to call her Mrs. Chuang—because her husband doesn't like to hear that word. As soon as Madame mentioned Kitty her eyes lit up. She gladly explained Kitty's preferences to me.

"Kitty likes to eat whole fish. She doesn't like it in fish soup or mixed with rice. If the fish isn't fresh enough it just won't do—she would rather have beef as a substitute. She will only drink canned whole milk, and it must be the "Carnation" brand—diluted milk powder won't do either, and you can't fool her. She has a bath once every two weeks. Because you have to use special flea powder, it takes two people to bathe her. And you must watch the weather: when you've finished bathing her, use a hair dryer to dry her fur. The red towel on the back of the bathroom door is hers."

Having passed on the duties of the first day, we closed with the discussion of Kitty's everyday life. Madame washed her face, but before she had finished eating breakfast there was already a black car waiting for her outside. She bolted breakfast down, took time out to laugh at Kitty who was squatted on the table drinking milk, and quietly murmured something to her, but Kitty only paid attention to lapping her milk. When she unexpectedly lifted her head and let out two peeps, "meow, meow," a tender expression drifted onto Madame's face. I reminded her that there was a car waiting, so, glancing at her watch, she pushed away her glass and bowl and ran upstairs. When she came down the stairs a while later she was a completely different person: no wonder it's written in Liang Shih-chiu's book, God gave woman one face, and she paints on another. This time Madame was the same one seen in the newspapers and on the news on television: after she is made up it's not right to call her Madame, she should be called Director. Even her manner of speaking was different from the one she had just had; she said:

"Miss Ho, due to your coming today, my whole timetable is running late. Of course there's quite a bit I've yet to explain thoroughly to you, but let's just take it slowly! I think we'll get along very well. At noon I have to receive a foreign guest so I won't be back. Now, as to what you should do, why don't you just do what I told you according to the book."

Then she left, clickety-click.

Gluttonous Kitty didn't even lift her head. To tell the truth, I really didn't like this cat, but because Madame was fond of her I was prepared to learn to be fond of her too. From the look of things, Kitty didn't consider me much of a friend either: as soon as she finished drinking her milk, she walked off, minding her own business. Good riddance! As long as she doesn't get lost, then I've no other responsibility.

Madame had gone and an uncertain me was left. I felt she hadn't been detailed enough: she'd barely instructed me to clean the house, do the laundry, cook, feed the cat, answer the phone, moreover she hadn't said a word about what time her husband would probably come home, how to look after him, or what he does and doesn't like to eat. All I could do was to pick up that oil splattered notebook and take a look. There were two pages which were covered with the names of dishes, there was a page where all the items concerning the running of the house were listed, and one page was the record of the emperor Kitty's daily life. Several other pages were very sloppily written; some restaurant addresses, Ah Ch'iao, Ah Mei, and other people's I. D. numbers, the prices of meat and

vegetables, the phone numbers of the gas company and the water service station—all was recorded in the notebook. It even included those kind of 119, 110 emergency te1ephone numbers. I had some serious doubts: if those misses who helped manage the house ran into an urgent situation, would they have the presence of mind to flip through this notebook?

Having skimmed through this notebook, I still had only a vague idea of what I should do. Nevertheless, I groped around, determined not to be undone: in English and French classes in school I always got eighties and nineties. The economic analysis which my classmates were so afraid of I always passed, so what difficulty could there be in managing a family of two adults and one cat?

In thinking about it now I realize I overestimated myself: although the job itself wasn't difficult, it was impossible for me not to be influenced by the conflicts caused by the complicated psychology and subtle emotions which were involved. It made me so tired, so nervous! A good night's sleep doesn't alleviate this kind of fatigue and worry.

That day I picked up the rooms upstairs and brought the dirty clothes downstairs to wash. I kept thinking about how compelling Madame's assurance in me was. Although she knew I wasn't a murderer or robber, I had no relatives and no background in Taiwan. Though previously my family had been quite prosperous living overseas, and though she had studied my references, I still felt that anyone who would be willing to place her entire home in my hands was certainly an unparalleled and extraordinary person. Her success in the professional world depended not as what the rumors said, on luck and opportunity. While thinking, thinking all this over, the sound of footsteps rang out outside. I didn't even have time to dry my hands, but hurried to the front to take a look. I remember asking the most stupid question!

"Sir, who are you looking for?"

Really, so stupid! From looking at Madame I had imagined her husband to be the kind of middle aged gentleman who can get anything done with a tilt of his hat, a flick of his wrist. He might either be retiring or maybe witty, but in any case, a so-called scholar, probably a scholar with a manner tinged with self importance. But he had none of this kind of studious air: he looked like a pre-pubescent boy! Really, according to today's standards he would still be considered a youth!

He was cornered by me in the living room, noted my dripping wet hands and spent a considerable time looking me up and down, lowering his eyebrows which had jumped out of place.

"Another new one, so you're called 'Ah' what?"

I'm called "Ah" what? Obviously Madame didn't explain my situation to him. Why didn't she say anything? He's the male head of the house, he should understand!

"So you're the master! My name is Ho Pao-ch'ang."

"Oh! Ho Pao-ch'ang! Ah China has gone and you've come. Okay! Okay!"

Okay! What was that supposed to mean? Strange way of talking, and completely different from Madame in that his genuine inclinations were unfathomable. At that point I realized immediately that I should stop philosophically analyzing his character and get down to reliably carrying out my duties.

"Sir, would you still like a cup of coffee with two pieces of toast and two poached eggs?"

"No! I don't need anything. I've eaten—sat up talking last night at a friend's so now I want to sleep a while."

Having said this he headed upstairs. As Kitty fled down the stairs he rudely kicked at her and Kitty let out a frightened howl. This horrified me: though Kitty wasn't the most lovable animal in the world she was his wife's pet! How could he treat her this way? Neither my startled expression nor Kitty's shocked appearance seemed to phase him at all: he unsteadily continued up the stairs.

"Sir. what would you like to eat? Madame won't return at noon, so I'll fix whatever you'd like to have."

"Anything, anything will do."

Anything! A totally disinterested, impatient tone of voice is demoralizing. He stays up talking at a friend's all night, brutally kicks at Madame's dearly beloved little white cat: what kind of attitude is that? I could barely resist calling him on it for Madame's sake, but what good would appealing to him do? It wouldn't help anything; all I can do for her is to manage the various tasks of the household well. So, when I finished the laundry, I took the vegetables from the refrigerator and prepared them, then straightened up the downstairs, fed the cat, and even polished the refrigerator. Yet, by the time I'd finished cooking, Sir still hadn't gotten up.

Everything was done, all that was left to do was to take care of Sir's lunch, but he hadn't gotten up yet so I had nothing to do. Having gotten quite bored I suddenly discovered that underneath the tea table was a total mess. Oh! What a treasure chest that was! Chinese and foreign magazines were stashed in a pile all together. Trying to put

them in order I found a lot of them straight through until twelve twenty when Sir came downstairs. When he saw the magazine in my hand it was his turn to be surprised.

"Well! I can see you aren't like 'Ah' whatever her name was. I guess you went to high school? You can read *Newsweek*?"

"College! Junior in college!"

"Are you putting yourself through?"

"No, no, I'm not in school right now."

I know that some families don't like to use work-study students so I quickly started me—thinking up an excuse.

"That's a pity. Why aren't you in school anymore?"

"I … I …"

How could I answer? Should I tell the whole story to this man who doesn't know any of my past history?

"From your accent it sounds like you're an Overseas Chinese."

"Yes! I'm an Overseas Chinese—my family is in Vietnam."

"Oh! You're a Vietnamese Overseas Chinese. Well, don't be sad, just take it easy. We'll help you get back to your studies—at the very least you can take some night classes."

He had perceptively guessed another aspect of it. This man wasn't the insensitive person I had thought he was at first, and the way he used the word "we" was so cute. He didn't seem at all like a person who would kick Kitty. And what about Kitty? She had already dodged him by going way far away behind the big sofa.

It's never very pleasant to eat alone. From the look on his face as he sat faced with bowls and dishes he didn't want to reach for, it just might be misconstrued that they were all things that would choke him to death. Afraid to watch, I avoided it by darting into the kitchen.

"Hey!"

Hey? Is he calling me?

"Sir, what is it?"

"Please turn on the TV for me."

Dinner in front of the TV, the most popular thing going now.

Why did the news have to be just starting when I turned the set on? At that moment they were broadcasting the news about releasing the prisoners with commuted sentences. I was sure I wasn't on that film clip, I didn't have to worry. I always did my best to avoid the camera and I'd already changed my appearance. I kept on reassuring myself this way.

"Ah whatever your name is, besides these dishes what else can you make?"

He scared me to death! I still thought he might have discovered me on the news, but as it turned out he hadn't. Watching him placidly picking at the dishes, I relaxed.

"My name is Ho Pao-ch'ang, but you can call me either Pao-ch'ang or Ah Ch'ang, Sir. I can make any ordinary dish, but I'm not too confident about fancy banquets."

"Dishes like this are fine. So, if I invite a few friends back here for a party it wouldn't be any problem for you to fix a few things to eat?"

"If you let me know beforehand, putting together some regular dishes won't be any problem."

"Ordinary dishes are fine."

After this he sat watching TV intently, munching on spicy chili chicken.

I didn't cook according to the recipes in Madame's little notebook. The dishes in it were all things like fried pork and sweet and sour fish which he was probably sick of eating. I took the chance of making a small change in style and just happened to hit upon the husband's taste. I don't know if that will turn out to be a way to help Madame.

"Turn it off! Turn it off!"

Turn it off? Oh's pointing at the television. The news was just broadcasting a film clip of his wife chairing a committee, and the reporter had aimed the camera at Madame for several seconds. Although I turned off the television immediately, Sir's face had already frozen over: he quickly pushed away his bowl and stormed upstairs.

By the time Sir came back downstairs it was already five thirty, but the warmth of the sun had yet to diminish, so he went out again.

"Pao-ch'ang, I won't be back for dinner."

"All right!"

What could I say besides all right? I couldn't say: your wife will be getting home from work soon, you shouldn't go out. I also couldn't ask, Sir what time he'd be home—what would I tell Madame? There was nothing I could do and the thought I'd especially put into what I should prepare the couple for dinner had lost whatever significance it had had.

The black car brought Madame home: her whole face was a pallet of make up and grease and she looked terribly weary—one of the prices of being famous. She didn't take the time to say anything to me, but scampered upstairs. She came downstairs after a while, looking much more relaxed, having changed out of the constricting Chinese dress and removed all her makeup. She looked at her watch, then at the clock on the wall, but checked whatever it was she was about to ask. I still had perceptive power about things like this, and remembered to do all I could to choose the least provocative words to report to her.

"Director, your husband came home shortly after you'd left. He said he'd been talking at a friend's and had already eaten breakfast, so he just went upstairs to sleep. He slept until noon, when I made lunch for him. Sir went out again at five thirty. He said he wouldn't be back for dinner."

"Oh!"

What a complicated 'Oh'! She picked up the paper without making a sound, undecorously flopped back on the sofa with her legs dangling. This picture of her would surely shock the reporters that are used to seeing her. Kitty skittered out from I don't know where and climbed into Madame's lap. It didn't make Madame feel too warm and she let a purring Kitty rub against her anywhere. Occasionally she reached out to pet her with an expression of complete satisfaction and enjoyment on her face.

There was still only one person at the dinner table, but this time Madame had changed places with her husband: the fine food didn't give her even a tinge of delight. It was fortunate that Kitty was there pacing back and forth, meowing. Madame told me to pick up Kitty's dish, in which she placed the fish head and tail for Kitty to eat.

"Madame, Kitty's already been fed."

"Can't you see? She still wants to eat! Naughty Kitty, everything I eat you think is. good. Hey little Kitty, I guess you slept all day again! You're so full of spirit, but just calm down a while and let me eat!"

The conversation was gradually directed away from me and toward Kitty; I wanted to protest, but not because she was neglecting my existence as a "maid," but rather because she shouldn't be the kind of person who murmurs to cats—this would be unacceptable were it ever discovered.

The phone rang.

"Hello, who would you like to speak to?"

"Has Director Hao gotten home yet? I need to ask her advice about a few things."

I handed the phone over to her.

"Hello, this is Director Hao. Oh, we should have talked about this at the office. I'm sorry, I had a meeting to go to this afternoon as well as a commencement ceremony—well, there is no problem in principle. You just have to make sure it tallies with the general regulations. We don't want any conflict with the law. If I can help of course I will. Why don't you stop by the office tomorrow afternoon! If I'm not there check with my secretary. I'll turn everything over to him."

Her tone of voice was totally different from the one she used in chatting with Kitty—makes you wonder if what she says is only lip service. This kind of talk doesn't come from the heart, and with the added layer of a professional tone and that laugh, it was really discomforting. At least it doesn't belong in the family niche. If I were her student or her friend, that kind of intonation would make me fidget, but if I was her daughter or her husband I would feel out of touch and distant. It's a good thing she has no children.

Having finished the call Madame went back to the table to eat dinner. Gathering up a few mouthfuls with her chopsticks she said:

"Pao-ch'ang, you cook pretty well!"

"Before … I had specially studied cooking because my cousin and I had planned to open a restaurant in the States after I graduated."

"Is that so! Do you still plan to go?"

What could I say? It had already been more than two years since I'd had a letter from my cousin, and all contact with my family in Vietnam had been lost, hence I'd lost the possible financial backing. But more than that, these two years had turned me into another class of person in this society: would my cousin and the others accept me? Isn't it that only if they're willing to accept me can I receive a law abiding citizen ID card which I would need to operate? Though our government had forgiven me and acknowledged that a person who had committed a

crime because of one false move could start again and be an upstanding citizen, would a foreign gov-ernment be willing to recognize this? Since I had made up my mind to accept no pity and not become a burden, this road was absolutely out of the question.

"No! I decided that after things have settled down I'd like to find a night class to finish my studies, so I can depend on my own ability to make a living."

"Good! I'll be willing to help you."

Madame, your husband used "we"; what you said was "I." Your hearts are similarly generous, but if you always have this kind of attitude you're going to suffer in the long run. Suddenly I thought of something Sir had said.

"Madame, Sir said that later he wanted to bring some friends back for a little party, and asked me to cook something up."

"Really? All right!" An unintentional enjoyment played at the corner of her smiling mouth, also at the smile wrinkles around her eyes:

"Pao-ch'ang, do it well, don't be afraid of any extra work. Whenever we have guests I'll give you a bonus beyond your regular salary."

Madame, I'm willing to do it, and not because of any bonus. My only hope is that you and your husband can go back to being happy, having a home that feels like a home.

"Madame, I don't want any bonus, I'm happy to do it. I told your husband that cooking ordinary dishes is no problem, but I'm not ready for a large banquet. Madame, it's only that I'm not quite clear on what your husband's friends would like, so when the time comes I'll have to got to you for instructions."

I though I had stated this gently enough, but Madame glared at me. At the time I thought: Madame, why is this necessary? My intentions are good, it's my first day and I've already run into a batch of problems. I've been through a lot, and to be honest, though I may be much younger than you, it's just possible that I have a deeper understanding of men than you do. I know the type of creature that men are. Even if they can find a hundred different reasons to go out and play around, they are not willing to light on their own doorstep. Moreover, power and fame have left a gulf between you, and you lack children to strengthen the bond and dilute the loneliness in the house.

The comedy series was over and the TV news began: a film clip of what was on at noon was rebroadcast, and Madame's face appeared once more on the screen. Madame put down her chopsticks and her eyes, riveted in attention, were filled with a strange hue of enjoyment. When this piece of news was over, Madame finished the last few bites of dinner, stood up, and lightly hummed some nameless song. Ostensibly watching television, she gently caressed Kitty when she strolled by; so relaxed, so happy.

From the looks of things, Madame was certainly well satisfied with her life as "Director Hao," but I also sensed that Sir was repressing a hefty resentment toward their present lifestyle which bordered on being intoler-able. Before I had even been there for one full day I'd already witnessed several manifestations of the buried discordance. The incidents suggest that it's not that Madame wouldn't like to do welt, but she couldn't think of a way to please both of them, which compels her husband to use every attitude of indifference he can muster to boycott his wife. It may be that he isn't doing it intentionally, but all the spite in his heart which he can't articulate him unconsciously inflict pain on her. For Madame, bouncing along on the sea of officialdom just may have gotten too easy going, and the complacence in her mind may have diluted the seriousness of these family crises.

Because I'd been living with them under the same roof, in the past months I had an even deeper understanding of them. I know that they were classmates throughout college, though, surprising enough, Sir was two classes higher than she, and after he'd gotten his advanced degree they went back home to get married. Both husband and wife had similar ambitions to public service, but due to the limitations imposed by natural endowments and per-sonality, their careers took different paths. Especially due to the advantages that Madame had as a woman, their opportunities were different too, Gradually, when Dr. Chuang appeared in public he came to be referred to as "Director Hao's husband."

It's funny, but ninety five percent of the women who have independent careers don't care at all if they are referred to as someone's wife, but men are very insecure when called X's husband. Naturally, Mr. Chuang was no exception, especially because all the speeches, meetings, contract signings, christening and commencement exercises, ceremonies, chairmanships, and activities abroad which the Director had in connection with her work not only took up her office time but also infringed on after office hours, At first Madame had no alternative but to be absent from lunch and dinner, but later her husband avoided meals purposely. On weekends and holidays he would visit his friends, even willing to sleep on the rug and eat plain noodles. Some of this I discovered myself,

some was reported to: me by the old woman doing odd jobs who lived behind us. She said the husband and wife used to argue loudly, but recently it had stopped, which in itself is cause for exceptional worry. When heated arguments go on between a husband and wife at least it indicates that there are mutual demands being made—mutual hope. When the surface presents the calm of a cold war, one of them has already given up hope, and one of them is deliberately inflicting pain. Madame, oh Madame! You seem to have already gotten used to finding satisfaction with your public prominence and fine deportment: at home you pass your time with an understanding cat, hence there is always something to fill the gaps in your mind, your time, and your feelings. Therefore, you disdain reality.

So many times I've looked at you imploringly, hoping you'd stay at home like so many other wives, rid yourself of the professional, collegial tone you bring home from your various occupations, and change into some casual loose-fitting clothes; sit next to your husband and babble incessantly, amuse him, or say nothing at all, just be with him. But no! Madame, you change from fancy dress into a Chinese dress, so busy posing for everyone's admiration at the various occassions and social appointments, leaving a furious man at home. Sometimes I hear him give Chang or Li a call, hoping for some place to go. When he's looked everywhere and there's still no place, he sits a while, stands a while; he reads a book, or the papers, writes something—but I know nothing sinks in, and he never finishes writing. This is the way he spent his vacation. Sometimes he even got to the point of thinking about chatting with me, but I would dodge him by hiding in the pantry off the kitchen. I understand he's just bored and lonesome nothing in his mind at all, yet lots of things are not intended at the beginning. I don't intend to ever hurt myself again by hurting someone else. Though that little room was hot, it was still better that I hide. I would sit there fretting and fuming: I sympathized with Madame, but afterwards I began to sympathize with Sir as well, a perfectly nice man having been driven to this. Had he been a run-around there'd have been plenty of places to go for entertainment, and if that ever comes to be, Madame, not even nine oxen could drag his heart back!

From the time I knew that Madame hoped that her husband would stay home peacefully, several times during the ninety five degree summer vacation weather I was busy in the kitchen from morning till night, and after finishing with that I still had to wait for the guests to leave to pick up the shambles, all to help the Madame keep her husband at home. Madame also outdid herself receiving the guests, and sometimes friends would bring their wives, children and whole families with them which meant I was even busier and more exhausted, and spent that much more effort and energy, so Madame gave me a bonus above and beyond my regular pay. Female guests tipped me, Sir and his friends would thank me, some would politely call me Miss Ho, and it went so far that really close friends called me Miss Ho too. But none of this was the real reward: the real reward was the the gradual melting of the icy curtain which hung between husband and wife. This was the result I was most pleased with: my heart was full of gratitude.

Unfortunately, just at the time when Madame was scheduled to visit Korea by an invitation she had accepted two weeks before her husband was still suffering from a cold. Madame had no choice but to go, so the frosty season resumed. For Madame's sake, I laid aside my theory of avoiding suspicion by never being in a position which implies suspicion in order to serve Sir. I asked his friends to come and have some fun willl him, keep him company. But it was no use, Sir's heart had frozen solid again. Madame made two long distance calls home; when I answered, once he pretended to be asleep when I called him to the phone, and once he refused to answer. When his cold was better, once again he often stayed out all night. When he was home Kitty was so pitiful: when Sir was upstairs, she couldn't go upstairs; when he was in the dining room, she didn't dare go in the dining room. She couldn't make a sound either: once when she kept on crying, Sir hauled her by the tail and hurled her outside into the storm. From then on Kitty loved to roam outside which provided me with yet another job every morning: to hunt high and low for Kitty. But it was to no avail: every time I found her and brought her back she would just wander off again. When Madame came back and discovered what had actually happened she planned to use gentle affection to reclaim Kitty's heart, but it was already too late. Kitty had discovered that the outdoors was not only free and not at all terrifying, but it was a lovable world replete with companions. As far as I was concerned, Kitty had gotten even less endearing, and I need not mention how Sir felt. Only Madame was left to pamper and indulge her.

Madame had been gone almost ten days. After she got back their life resumed as it had been when I had first come. On the surface all seemed "quiet on the western front," but it was an unnatural calm: two people facing each other at meals, the husband's face rigid, the Madame's air insipid. It was only when Madame's face appeared on the screen would Sir hatefully shout, "Turn it off!" or when Kitty was reprimanded would Madame's face temporarily cloud over; but a word was never uttered. This atmosphere of internal tension and external calm was really insufferably stifling: if it wasn't that I had nowhere else to go, I would never have stayed on. Days here

seemed to be even more intolerable than those inside the prison. To mention repaying Madame was ridiculous: how could a humble third party ever manage that? How could I show my gratitude?

I really couldn't understand: here were two people who hadn't gotten to the point of breaking off all rela-tions — they didn't even seem to have considered it—yet why did they want to go on hurting each other like that? Sir used a cold shoulder to avenge his wife's careless neglect and superior reputation. Thus, Madame intensified her "I couldn't care less, happy as a lark" attitude to avenge her husband's boycotting her. The situation got worse and worse: I wanted so much to tell them that revenge is a horrible ploy. Not only does it hurt other people, but it hurts yourself even more. I've been through it! I'm the louse who stabbed a person who cheated with both feelings and money, yet his wound healed and he won a reputation as the "prodigal son returning home," wecomed by his wife and children to pass his days peacefully. On the other hand, I sacrificed my reputation and my studies, I hurt my family, but more than all of that, I lost two years of freedom. Thinking it over now, no matter how I look at it—rationally, emotionally, or from my concept of values—it still measures up as stupid and not worth it from any of the three perspectives.

Living on the inside those two years I searched every corner of my mind for an answer, always thinking I'd see the light. Never again would I harbor rancor in my heart for the heartless man who profited from my misfortune. never again would I set a fire of hatred on the body of a doll in processing, never again would I pessimistically resist the regulations and measures of the inside of a prison, and never again would I think of somehow trying to get even with that bastard once I got out of jail.

After my peaceful awakening I became the most cooperative "classmate" of the woman's prison: I became the voluntary teacher outside of class for the students of the Hung Teh Supplementary School. That's when I discovered that the world could be very different: some people shared food with me that had been sent by their families, others shared useful articles with me that had been bent by their relatives. Even that spiteful, fierce old lady opium dealer didn't dare bully me any more because of everyone's attitude. I began to regret it: why did I want revenge in the first place? If I hadn't stabbed him, if his conscience never stopped tormenting him, if he felt the discomfort of shame for the rest of his life because of me, why was it necessary for me to punish him? Due to that stab he considers that every mistake he had made had been nullified by the injury I inflicted on him. Oh, I was so stupid!

Anyway, I should be grateful that God let his wound heal without any complications, otherwise I … Madame! Do you have to pay the same price before you can realize this? How did what happen tonight come to be? After dinner I washed my hair because I wanted to go mail a letter. But when I got back two hours later, how could the world have changed so completely? How could Madame, who never changed her tone of voice or the expression on her face, be locked ill her room, weeping bitterly? Why? What had Sir said after all, what had he done? Or what had Madame said or done to lead to this frightful outcome? No! It's unsettling! I still have to go upstairs and find out what really happened!

"Madame! Madame!"

There was no answer. She wouldn't answer—what did I expect? If Madame's feelings had been hurt only her husand's consolation would do any good, especially if a collision with him was what caused the disaster in the first place. But Sir? He couldn't have—after all, it's his wife, how could he have gone out?

"Madame, why are you so sad? Why don't you tell me? Tell Pao-ch'ang, you'll feel better if you get it out, I won't tell anyone!"

The sound of crying got even louder, and as before there was no answer.

It was hard to bear to hear her choking with sobs. I've said that I wanted to repay her: there's no way for me to resolve the other problems, but can't I make her stop wasting herself like this, even temporarily? I kept searching my mind for the reason: is her husband having an affair? Is that what made this happen to her? Did they argue, and did her husband mention splitting up? Could that be it? Could it?

"Madame, Why? Nothing is worth such heartache. Your husband couldn't be having an affair, if he'd wanted one he'd have done it long ago. Everyone I've seen him with are upstanding men. Did you have a fight with your husband? Don't think its such a horrible thing. Your husband is at home alone and lonely all day, suffering pitifully enough. If he said a few sentences to vent it out that's all right—it's better to argue a few tines than be deadlocked in silence every day. Or did something disturbing happen outside? Outside concerns are even less worth acting like this. Your sacrifice is already big enough. It's not worthwile to tote back your heartbreak. Madame! Don't cry! Madame!"

After all this Madame just cried even louder. Suddenly there was the sound of something falling. Oh no! Madame can't get hurt, I've got to go see what's happened.

Pushing the door open I went in: Madame was prostrate on the bed, her dresser lamp kicked to the floor. I was shocked! This is Madame? This is Dr. Hao? This is Director Hao?

"Madame, don't do this, Madame!"

"Pao-ch'ang! Pao-ch'ang! What am I going to do? Kitty's dead, Kitty was hit by a motorcycle and killed!"

Oh God! So that's it—Kitty is dead. When the cat you love so much dies of course it's sad, but to cry so bitterly with grief as excessive as if your parents had died is wrong! It's contrary to nature!

"Pao-ch'ang, you see, what am I going to do? What am I gojng to do? Kitty is dead!"

"What are you going to do? What kind of talk is that? You are Dr. Hao, Director Hao, you have a profession, a home, a husband how can you talk like that? Madame, Kitty is dead. I know you're sad, but you don't have to go on like this, you'll hurt yourself. This isn't a bit like the regular you."

"No! No! I want Kitty! Without Kitty what other joy do I have in my life? No! No!"

"Madame!"

I couldn't abide this hysteria. I said, almostt harshly:

"Aside from Kitty you should have a great deal jou in your life: you have a father, a husband, a profession, a home, as well as friends and students—you have everything! Kitty is no match for all this! It's a good thing thing Kitty is dead!"

"You — — !"

A disheveled Madame irately picked herself up.

Damn! I had acted on impulse again, but Madame, I just couldn't resist. You're wrong! Wrong! If you ask me again I'll say it again. Nothing could be better than to have that cat die.

"You, you evil hearted woman, how could I have treated you as I have. I misjudged you, you … you're a depraved, evil person!"

Madame! What you say is unfair. You're a person of erlucation and position—you shouldn't hurt people like this. You should be grateful for what I said. I won't haggle about it, but your attitude is abnormal. I still have to say it!

"Madame, I'm sorry, I acted impulsively again, I offended you. It doesn't matter, firing me will be fine, but I still want to say that Kitty is no substitute for a husband, just as friends are no substitute for a wife. No matter how much you hate me for saying it, I still have to say that it's good not to have that urgly cat around."

Leaving a shocked Madame behind, I walked out. The first thing I'll have to think about is finding someplace to go, but the world is large, I guess there'll always be room for me someplace! But I don't plan to go to the New Life Protection CuInmittee; I'm afraid they'd ask too many picky questions about this secret, this affair which is so bitter and painful for the people involved, but such a hilarious story to spread a round for normal people.

A ghost floated out from the library which nearly planted me downstairs with fright. Oh! So Sir hadn't ever gone out in the first place!

"Pao-ch'ang, why don't you go take a rest. I'll take care of this."

He said this ten times more nicely than anything he'd ever said in the past, and even went so far as to pat my hand which was resting on the banister. He stepped toward the bedroom, pushed the door open, and went in. Before I'd gotten down to the bottom of the stairs I heard an even louder explosion of crying come from the bedroom, that kind of a thorough release. I, who had tasted a hundred different flavors of life, understood completely.

"It's a good thing that Kitty's dead!"

I insisted on saying this, though tommorrow I'd have to pack up for good for this sentence; although I'd already endured insults for this sentence I'd say it again!

77.84 & 78.14 1. In The Middle Of The Night 2. The Banyan Tree\fn{by Chou Huey-min (1935-)} Kiangsu Province, China (M) 23

1

What was that noise? She couldn't say. Still half asleep, her eyelids felt heavy. She wanted to open them but it seemed too much effort. She was aware that she had awakened—from sleep but not from a dream: she seldom dreamt.

Although her life wasn't as regular as a clock it did fall into a standard pattern. For example, she was always in bed before eleven o'clock. She lightly extended her hand, groping toward the other side of the large double bed. It

was still empty; evidently it was still not very late. As she drew back her hand, she forced her eyes open a crack. The alarm clock on the bed-stand pointed to exactly twelve thirty.

She had no idea what had awakened her. Occasionally she was awakened by his entry when he came into the bedroom: but very, very rarely. Besides, most of those occasions were back when he first began to stay up all night. She used to worry about his working so hard and slept rather fitfully. He stayed up all night because he had to but he wanted her to sleep well. She'd been married to him ten years and thoroughly understood his temperament: since he didn't want to disturb her, all she could do was do her best not to be disturbed. Sometimes she was actually awakened by his careful entry but said nothing and pretended she was still asleep.

Now, she ought to go back to sleep. She yawned a few times and rubbed the sleep from her eyes, but she no longer felt sleepy. Without her noticing it, the heaviness in her eyelids had dissolved and the eyelids themselves were now able to open freely.

When she had turned off the lamp, the room was in complete darkness. Now, however, once her eyes had grown used to the dark she was aware of a slight glow of light diffused through the room. This was due to the light that crept through a few cracks in the door from the next room. She had lived in this apartment two years and knew the entire layout even with her eyes closed. Outside the door was the hallway. The opposite door was the child's bedroom. The next door down the hall was the living room and opening out of the living room was his study.

There was no sound. Probably he was just getting deep into his work. She seemed to see a curling wisp of smoke slip in through a crack in the door and diffuse itself through the bedroom. She had grown used to the smell of cigarette smoke. She couldn't do anything about his habit of smoking, just as she couldn't do anything about his habit of working all night. It was only in the last few years he'd begun doing that and as time went on, he kept at it later and later. He claimed that at night the faculties were most alert.

Her position in the household was hardly that of a parasite. She was a thrifty and industrious housewife, but her work was not productive; she could do nothing that would bring in more income. She felt wholly dependent on her husband and, accordingly she felt a profound respect for his profession. If he saw fit to turn night into day because of it she would not venture to express any dissatisfaction.

Despite the distance that made it impossible to hear any sound of activity from the study, she nevertheless imagined she could hear the scratching sound of his pen as he swept it over the paper in rapid strokes. Ever since they had been married he had always written in the evening. Immediately after their marriage, due to their straightened circumstances, they had occupied only a single room. His desk was not far from the bed and, in the evening, as she listened to the scratching of his pen as it scattered words across the page, she could not have said whether the sound gave her more anguish or more consolation.

For the ten years during which he had been anxiously groping for the right vehicle for his writing he had passed through many stages: when he found he was getting nowhere in one genre he would switch to another. He had given up free verse to write prose articles: from prose articles he had switched to literary essays; from literary essays to fiction and finally to writing scripts—movie scripts. He had finally found the path to glory. The night was profoundly still. Of all the multifarious daytime noises only one kind was left; occasionally an automobile passed down the street. In the absence of any other allusion a strict monotony prevailed. Wasn't this the best time for sleeping? And yet he specifically chose to be wide awake; he wanted to use the time when other people are asleep to write his scripts. He had always preferred to write in the evening but at first he never continued very late. She used to sit beside him keeping him company, in winter knitting a sweater, in summer crocheting a tablecloth. In silence she shared his joys and sorrows. In spite of their poverty there was happiness in their life together.

She was still happy of course—and no longer poor. But life had drawn them apart, had interposed a certain distance between them. The exigencies of life had forced him to use the daytime for appointments and transfer his writing wholly to the evening hours. His increased income had enabled them to improve their standard of living. They had bought this apartment on the installment plan, and now the study was some distance from the bedroom. She could only get a whiff of the wispy cigarette smoke but could no longer hear the scratching of his pen.

When you stopped to think of it, poverty had its good points. Now if they only had one room she would be able to observe his figure bent over the desk. She would be able to tell from his manner whether the springs of inspiration were blocked or flowing freely. She would be able to call to him:

"Come to bed, now. You can write more tomorrow."

He would always agree and not be stubborn. But now he shut himself in his room and she didn't dare disturb him without permission. Otherwise she would be inviting unpleasantness. Even if he gave her a chance to get a

word in she could no longer talk to him that way. How could he write it tomorrow? Didn't she know the studio was anxiously awaiting this script? Didn't she know that tomorrow he had to see an independent producer about another script? She had better go back to bed. These were matters she didn't understand.

It was true that she didn't understand. She sighed softly and turned slightly in the bed, seeking a more comfortable position. What he said was true. It was better for her to get her sleep and mind her own business. She knew nothing about scripts, nothing about writing. Just the same, he used to ask her opinion. When he had a problem with his work he used to consult her freely and sometimes even take her advice. Although she knew nothing he would listen to her and praise her and it seemed she had sometimes helped him solve his problems.

Nonetheless she had nothing to resent. That had been a long, long time ago. As time went by his knowledge and hers had progressively less and less in common. He had been making progress all these years. From being obscure and unheard of he had developed into a well known writer of movie scripts while she continued to be an ordinary housewife. If she wanted to read one of his scripts she had to go buy a ticket when the movie was playing. Once she had been his only reader; now his audience numbered thousands, tens of thousands. He no longer needed her criticism. He no longer attached any importance to her point of view. Once he had invited some friends to the house and they talked about the art of writing. She sat quietly on the side, listening without saying a word. It came to her then very deeply that he was already an authority while she understood nothing.

Their standard of living had certainly and steadily improved but she retained her old habit of economy. Every day she did her own housework. There wasn't a speck of dust in the whole house. She got up very early and worked hard all day. As a result, when evening came she was as tired as could be. She never lost any sleep. She fell asleep as soon as she went to bed. He often made fun of the way she slept and envied her ability to sleep so soundly. He couldn't manage it. The longer he stayed awake the more alert he became. He was tall and thin which made him prone to nervous tension and insomnia. In the drawer of his desk was a bottle of tranquilizers prescribed by his doctor. She didn't like to see him use such things. She had heard they could be habit-forming, She had tried to persuade him of this but he paid no attention. His drawer contained other remedies also: he depended heavily on various kinds of vitamins to keep up his energy.

As for her she'd never had anything to do with medicines: had never been sick a day in her life. If she had an occasional ache or pain she would bear it without any medication until it cured itself. In the last two years that had changed. She was always suffering from upset stomach and headache. But she bore it as usual and didn't want to complain to him. Her apparent robust condition made it impossible for her to get any sympathy from him anyway. Once she had told him she wasn't feeling well. To avoid worrying him she had expressed it in a careless and indifferent tone. He showed no concern when he heard this but merely laughed and said:

"Look how husky you are! How could you be sick?"

"Husky." Not a very appropriate word. She wasn't a piece of livestock—a cow or a horse. Yet he described her almost as if she were a domestic animal to be attached to a wagon or plow. Well, it was true enough. Over the years she had lost her willow-waist, her slender figure. Her waistline was already twenty-nine inches. And that was last year's measurement. By now it might be even larger. Not only her waist. From many standpoints she was constantly getting evidence that she was no longer as young as she used to be. Her skin was slack, her eyes blurry and two of her teeth had been replaced by false teeth. When she was young she had not been lacking in beauty but: now it was her turn to find beauty only in others.

She wasn't by nature prone to jealousy. Tolerance and magnanimity were highly developed traits in her character. Yet there was a certain area of her consciousness that was inflexibly hardened. There were plenty of young and beautiful girls in the world and toward them she felt no random jealousy; but as for those movie stars who were constantly coming into contact with him—against them she bore a deep grudge. It wasn't that she lacked confidence in him, she only had some misgivings: when a man came into daily contact with heavily made up, glamorous and enticing movie stars, was it possible for him to remain completely unmoved?

He had already guessed her attitude. He had repeatedly explained that his contacts with them were unavoidable: that they were strictly business and nothing more.

Business. Was it more of a loss or a gain for him to have chosen such a business? She really couldn't say. Certainly his income had increased but then so had his personal expenditures. He bought one suit after another: he had so many interviews with important people he couldn't afford to neglect his personal appearance. Cigarettes were part of his standard equipment; and when he invited guests to the house he served them bottle after bottle of imported wine. In the daytime he always had business which kept him away from home. In the evening he worked and worked instead of sleeping. All this was a loss to her: a tremendous loss of time that they might have spent together.

But after all what did she have to complain of? Didn't all her friends envy her? She and her husband got along well, they never quarreled. Their son in junior high school was diligent and well-behaved. He gave her no trouble. Her husband worked hard at his profession. She kept busy with her housework. To pass one's life in this way, wasn't it what most people dreamed of? For her to try to get him to cut down on his work and restrict his outside contacts—wouldn't that be asking too much?

To be satisfied with enough is the key to happiness. Having reached this conclusion she again shifted her attitude in the bed. Normally she slept well and thought about things as little as possible. Tonight was just the opposite: she went on thinking of one thing after another and seemed to have banished sleep to a remote distance.

Let him write his scripts! Meanwhile she should have a nice, long, peaceful sleep for herself. Although her life was ordinary there were many enjoyable things about it. In the morning she would slip on some clothes and tiptoe out (just as he, a few hours earlier, had tiptoed in). Her toilet articles were all in the bathroom. After getting washed and dressed she would start sweeping the apartment. His study was all but sacrosanct. She didn't dare touch his manuscripts, but she could carefully empty the ashtrays and make his desk clean and tidy. Afterwards she would slip quietly out to the market where she employed all the resources of her ingenuity. Not only did she try to buy only things he would find delicious but aimed at variety, trying never to repeat herself. After she got back and lunch was cooking, then there would begin to be signs of life from the bedroom. Often he would recall some pressing engagement and dash out. Sometimes there would be a phone call. The party at the other end of the line would invite him so insistently he could hardly refuse. So he would go off and leave her. If only he could eat his lunch in peace at home, even if they didn't find anything to talk about, it would have been a great consolation to her.

As time went by he had become more taciturn. When she tried to get him to talk she could succeed in eliciting only the most laconic of replies. Quite often he would say "I don't know" regarding matters she knew very well herself. If it happened once it happened a hundred times. He seemed to feel that the three little words "I don't know" would stave off any further trouble as far as he was concerned. She had nothing to say. What answer was there to "I don't know."?

When he behaved so indifferently she couldn't help feeling annoyed. When had he begun to change? She couldn't remember any more. He used to be quite talkative. Especially before they were married. He would tease her about everything and make her laugh. Afterwards, it seemed that, year by year, they had talked out everything there was to say. He gradually grew silent. What should take a sentence he said in a few words. What should take a few words he was content to signify by a gesture. He seemed to emphasize his own dignity by his silence. Because of this, feeling wronged and resentful, she had one day asked him earnestly:

"Do you know what it's called when a man and woman care very much for each other?"

He looked at her with a slight frown and the words "I don't know" fell lightly from his lips. The tight corners of his lips seemed to be suppressing a smile as though he thought it odd she should still ask him such a romantic question.

She turned over again. Strange that she still hadn't gotten to sleep. One shouldn't think. Thought is the worst enemy of sleep. Her mistake had been starting to think while still in that half-asleep, half-awake stupor. Otherwise she wouldn't have woken up and lost so much sleep. It had only been ten or fifteen minutes but she considered sleep very important and even such a short period counted for her.

Now she understood how people developed insomnia. The more you thought you ought to get to sleep the harder it was to do so. What did it really matter if one missed a little sleep occasionally? Actually it would be better if she slept a bit less. Even if her weight dropped from a hundred thirty pounds to a hundred twenty-five, she would still be about ten pounds overweight. When she was a young girl she had only weighed ninety-seven pounds. Light as a feather, small-hipped and slender, her tiny waist but one span. A sobering thought! Heaven only knew when she began to put on weight. If those thirty pounds had been added to her all at once she would have been frightened out of her wits. Like everything else we get used to; day by day, little by little it becomes established. Come to think of it, her increase in weight was probably due to the baby. After that none of her old clothes fitted any more and she had never returned to her previous measurements. Her twenty-two inch waist was like something remembered from a dream.

So she had lost her twenty-two inch waist and gotten that lovable little baby: she was more than satisfied with that exchange! Ten years is not a short stretch of time and usually contains a considerable amount of hardship and trouble: having the baby, his several bouts of sickness had worn her down but now he had become a healthy child and everyone said he was adorable. Life had its losses and its gains. Certainly in the last ten years she had lost a great deal that was of value but what she had gained more than made up for what she had lost. On the whole she

was quite satisfied with what she now had.

The wind had again pushed open the window that didn't close properly. At regular intervals she heard it clatter though not too strongly. Apart from the noise that didn't matter much she was also aware of the wind whirling its way in through the window.

Pulling herself out of bed and exploring with her foot before each step she groped her way to the window. She had intended only to close the window and go back to bed but after she opened the curtains she lingered, looking at the glass which was glistening and wet. It was raining out.

The rain was fine as silk. By the dim light of the street lamp she could see it slanting against the window panes. It was always like this in winter. Before you knew it, it had stopped raining. Raining and clearing, raining and clearing: sometimes it went on for several days and brought unseasonably cold weather that never occurred when the sky was clear.

The damp and glistening evening gave her a cold feeling. She picked up a bathrobe and drew it over her. She was very sensitive to heat and cold—especially after she had suffered from an attack of backache and headache.

He didn't take nearly as good care of himself as she did. For this reason he caught cold much more often. She couldn't tell how many times he caught a cold every winter! For example when the weather was cold and rainy like this he never bothered to put on any warm clothing. Right now he probably didn't even know it was raining. In his stuffy room with all the windows closed, was the inspiration flowing or was he struggling to eke out one word after another?

She really ought to go back to bed but she couldn't bear to. She couldn't bear to be warm and comfortable while he toiled alone in his study. She turned on the light and picked up a sweater. She must go and have a look at him. If he seemed pale and worn she would try to persuade him to come to bed. If he frowned and seemed to disapprove of her suggestion she would tactfully try to get him to put on the sweater. If he didn't object too much she would try to persuade him to let her prepare a snack for him. If he told her impatiently, "If I'm hungry I'll fix something myself," she would show no disappointment. What could he "fix?" In the kitchen he never made anything but a few crackers and milk.

She softly opened the door. She hesitated a little before going out. The floor lamp in the living room was on. He turned it out only when he went to bed. The floor lamp stood beside the sofa. When he got up in the morning or after dinner he used to lie on the sofa and read the newspaper. At present his tall lean figure was not to be found on the sofa. There was nothing but a few newspapers strewn carelessly upon it.

As she went across the room she picked up the sheets of newspaper and carefully folded them. Today the newspapers all carried the news of his movie companies projected films for the coming year. There would be twelve in all: six modern and six historical. All would be in technicolor. Naturally they would star the company's most famous actors and actresses. This news interested her and she would have liked to talk to him about it but he withheld all comment: he had no time to talk about it. A full schedule for the studio meant he would be kept busy. The studio relied on him a good deal; of the twelve films several would certainly be assigned to him. This year again they could count upon having a considerable income.

Since he would be busy it was all the more necessary for him to take care of his health. She walked rather gravely and firmly toward the study. She was his wife: if she didn't take care of him, who would?

The door of the study was closed. She cleared her throat and then called to him but he didn't answer. That's the way he was.

Even if he wouldn't go to bed, or put on the sweater or eat a bite she still had to see him. She sighed and turned the doorknob. She put on a bashful smile and got ready to say "Excuse me" as soon as the door was open.

The door slowly opened to her pressure. She opened her lips but the words "Excuse me" didn't come out. There was no occasion for it. Her smile froze. Her eyes, as they stared into the interior of the study, filled with distress.

The study was actually empty.

The lamp was turned on. The desk was littered with manuscript but there was no one in the swivel chair.

Where could he be?

She stared dumbly. Everything seemed to stand still: her breathing, her pulse. After a time she recovered but still didn't come back to normal. Her breathing and her pulse continued to be much faster than usual. Fast and irregular. Heat seemed to emanate from her heart and flow upward as far as her throat which became quite dry.

She swallowed hard. She was aware of the beating of her heart which sounded louder than the ticking of the grandfather clock. It was too strange!

There was nobody in the study! Who can encounter the wholly unexpected without a sense of shock? Especial-

ly a person like herself who lived such a humdrum everyday life would naturally be very much upset. Nonetheless her nerves were steady enough. She neither fainted nor screamed. Moreover, in spite of the shock to her confidence in him, she was unwilling to believe the worst.

When she turned around it was in the hope of a miracle. With bewildered and unsteady steps she made her way to the bathroom. The bathroom door was open, the interior dark. Well then the kitchen? Perhaps he was quietly raiding the icebox.

She ran to the kitchen as she would have if she had smelt something burning. She leaned on the kitchen table and panted for breath. Here too, she had failed to find the anticipated miracle.

Their son's room? She flicked on the light and looked around. In her troubled state of mind she wasn't even able to appreciate the adorable expression on the child's face as he slept.

She returned to the bedroom, completing the circuit.

Could he be playing hide and seek with her? As she looked down at the cold blanket lying on the bed she had to admit she was completely at a loss and without a clue.

Her breathing was forced and heavy. She couldn't stand here gaping forever. She was still clinging to that sweater so that it almost seemed to be imbedded in the flesh of her hand. She put down the sweater. She noticed the palm of her hand was moist; her spine was also moist with perspiration. She was no longer worried about catching cold, or about anything else in this world. For her there was only one problem. Where was he?

She again left the bedroom but not with the light footsteps of a short while before. Her steps now were heavy and uncertain. She stared vacantly about her, not knowing what to do. She desperately needed to know where he had gone but she had no way of finding out, no place to look. All she knew was that, in the dead of night, while she was asleep, he had stolen out of the house.

Where in the world could he have gone? She opened the front door which he had left locked. How wonderful it would be if, as soon as she opened it he came hurrying back in and gave her a rational explanation for his excursion. When she opened the door there was no one in sight. Only a gust of cold wind came bursting in. The night was very still. The trees along the street formed dark patches amid the illumination. She gave up hope. Hastily she slammed the door shut. In this world there are no such happy coincidences as the one she had hoped for.

However, coincidences do happen. Wasn't it in fact a coincidence that she had happened to wake up tonight and find that he'd gone out?

This thought struck her with peculiar force and was accompanied by physical symptoms. Again heat began to generate in her heart and surge upwards—to her throat and even to her head. A buzzing sound began in her ears and her head felt as if it were about to explode. Was it such a coincidence? Who knows whether he did this every night? Perhaps he had at least already done it many times. Once among all those times she had happened to catch him, that's all.

Why was she jumping to such conclusions? She soothed her bosom with her hand, breathing heavily. The worse things she suspected the more she tormented herself. But what ground did she have for any more optimistic interpretation? On her faith in him? This faith which she had preserved intact so many years had suddenly been swept away. She dropped limply onto the sofa. After undergoing such intense excitement her body felt drained of all energy. She had to rest. Although the living room was enclosed on all four sides she felt as if she were in a boundless desert, all by herself, with the sensation of being abandoned.

She leaned her head on the back of the sofa. She felt like a wounded animal pausing briefly to rest. Quite as a matter of course her eyes came to rest on a photograph hung on the opposite wall. She knew it only too well; she had been looking at it for ten years. It was their wedding picture. The photographic style of the picture was already outmoded. The style of their wedding costumes was also outmoded. Just ten years out of date. Only the face in the picture was much fresher and smoother than it was now. As she smiled the corners of her eyes and mouth had tilted graciously upward. Her chin had been round and smooth as an eggshell. And now? She unconsciously rubbed her hand across her face. Even without looking in a mirror she knew that her former glory had all passed away. The corners of her eyes and mouth now drooped downward. Her jaw was now creased by a double chin. Her skin was no longer smooth as satin. She really had no idea when all those wrinkles had made their imprint. Neither did she have any idea when her pores had become so enlarged. In the daytime she usually covered her skin with powder. In the evening this was no longer necessary and she washed it all off before going to bed, restoring her natural appearance. Like a withered blossom, her original pink complexion had become dry and yellow. On her cheekbones dark spots had broken out. As she moved her hand over her face she felt a pang of regret. Even if he hadn't gone out. Even if he were still in the study, what good would it do? She was so ugly now!

She had been so for a long time and had never had any feeling of insecurity. In everyday family life how could one put on make up and be glamorous? Even actors on the stage had to take off their make up some time. Even if one treated life as a stage, still the family was behind the scenes. When husband and wife were together there could be no curtain between them. For ten years they had been growing accustomed to every aspect of one another: the mistakes, the ugliness, the good, the bad. She had no way to preserve what couldn't be preserved. So why hide from him her ungroomed appearance?

Suddenly she realized the fallacy of this attitude.

She had thought that when two people had lived together for a long time there was no need to care about appearance. Wasn't it so? He hardly ever looked at her and when he did it was only a passing glance, completely indifferent. The ardent looks and the long passionate gazing into one another's eyes which had been so prominent in the days of their courtship and early in their marriage had long since ceased. Sometimes she thought back on those things with wistful nostalgia but they still seemed very far away. Perhaps he had the same feeling. Perhaps, without her being aware of it, he had been conscious of the growing staleness of her glances as they lost their former softness and sweetness. That's how life was. One couldn't be eternally young nor could one be eternally head over heels in love. She had consoled herself with these reflections until she no longer minded. Since she could no longer attract his notice she had given up making herself pretty. Now, in an instant, she had reversed her previous opinion. How stupid she had been! Of course the real reason she hadn't been able to attract his notice was that she was no longer worth noticing. Everyone likes to appreciate rare and beautiful objects. Naturally, they hardly cast a glance at what is old and worn out. Although her looks had been fading year after year, the world was still fresh and glamorous. In the circles in which he moved how many fresh and glamorous faces there were, alluring and seductive, attracting the eye and agitating the heart! Especially those movie stars he was always meeting; they changed their dresses several times a day; they constantly put on fresh make-up so that they were lovely as butterflies; hair-dos and facials were more important to them than eating. With all their make-up washed off, she might well be more attractive than they. If any of them were as good as her that was because they were younger. Wait till they got to be her age, they wouldn't be much to look at without their external finery.

The problem was that he only looked at their external glamour and had no chance to see them as they really were. By contrast, seeing her as she really was, he found her ugly. To get to the heart of the matter, wasn't it her own fault he found her ugly? Ten years of marriage had worn down her loveliness till she looked as haggard as she did today. As she looked at the picture on the wall, self pity brought tears to her eyes. All the happiness which she had been cherishing had suddenly vanished. It had left her heart as he had stealthily left the house. Her heart was left in a hopelessly inextricable tangle. Doubt and suspicion had kindled a bonfire which had burned all her harvest. She couldn't help feeling that the ten years of her life she had shared with him had been nothing but giving and sacrifice. All her giving, all her sacrifices had led only to this result. It certainly hadn't been worth it.

This question—the one of whether or not it would prove "worth it"—was one to which her parents had given careful thought ten years before. Fate certainly played tricks on one! At that time when she had been in all the bloom and loveliness of her youth, there had been many young men besides him who had shown an interest in her. But she, without the least hesitation, had chosen him. Now when the flower had reached the time when it must wither and had discovered its mistake—what could be salvaged from its ruin, now?

In those days, when she was still a young girl, she had thought her parents point of view materialistic and out of date. Only now when she had a child of her own did she realize that children owe everything to their parents. The year when she had first met him she was only twenty years old, *naïve* and innocent, able to think, of nothing but romantic dreams of love. Her parents who were mature and experienced people had objected to her choice. They had objected to his humble origins, his uncertain occupation, his frail stature, his self-assured and self-deprecating conceit. By remaining firm for two years she had finally triumphed over her parents objections. Afterwards, observing their happy married life, her parents regretted their earlier interference. Especially in the last two years, now that her husband had risen in his profession and their standard of living had risen, her parents were especially gratified by the success of her marriage. If they knew how she was suffering now, abandoned and alone in the middle of the night, how astonished they would be!

Tears obscured her vision with a thin mist. Through the mist she stared at the bridegroom pictured by the side of his lovely bride. Suddenly she winked her eyes as a feeling of indignation swept over her. This feeling of indignation, this sense of injustice arose from the perception that time, which proverbially spared no one had spared him so much. It wasn't that he hadn't changed since the picture was taken but compared to her he had changed so little. Time had even repaired many of his earlier flaws. Previously he had been excessively thin with sunken cheeks and tousled hair. His present appearance no longer exhibited these shortcomings. He had now

come up to standard weight and this gave his tall stature a dashing appearance. His hair was now well-groomed. Although some gray hairs were beginning to appear they only emphasized his professional success and added to his air of distinction. The skin of a man seemed to be as durable as a pine tree that remains ever green, ever flourishing. Although lines might be deeply carved in it, the complexion remained smooth and clear unlike the mottled skin of an aging woman. Originally it had not been for his handsome appearance that she had loved him but for the strength of his fighting spirit. Through the years she had grown too used to him to perceive how much his manner had improved. His grave and profound air in both speech and behavior had great dignity. A slight astigmatism had forced him to begin wearing broad-rimmed glasses which made his eyes appear larger and added a certain brilliance to them when he looked at anything. Chronologically he was five years older than she but she felt he looked younger than she did—especially as she was right now.

Why couldn't she force herself to take a brighter view of this matter? After all writers were very nervous people. Maybe he had run into some problem arid gone impulsively off to consult a friend about it. Perhaps he had just felt a need to get out and breathe some fresh air. But then she remembered that it was raining out. Even if he'd felt nervous and wanted to get out he would certainly have hesitated to do so in the middle of a cold and briny night like this. If he had ignored the inclement weather he must have had a strong motive.

Her face became shadowed with her forebodings. She sighed heavily. Try as she might to take an optimistic view, she couldn't help returning to her darker suspicions. Maybe the rain had just begun? Maybe he had found the rainy night poetic and had gone out to enjoy its atmosphere? Maybe it hadn't been his own idea to go out; perhaps a friend had telephoned and asked him to go over?

Rousing her torpid body she forced herself up from the sofa and went into the study. A shiny black telephone stood on the side of his desk. As soon as it rang he had only to put out his hand and pick up the receiver. Perhaps that was what had happened tonight.

Not only was this thought unable to relieve her feelings but it even gave birth to a new suspicion in her mind. Suddenly all the previous phone calls which she had thought nothing of at the time, gave her a great deal to think about. Who knew who it might be who had called him?

Of course there were! Even at the time she had known some of them were women! Sometimes when she had answered the phone she had heard women's voices. Some familiar, some strange; some sultry, some low and soft; all of them had made her feel a little uncomfortable.

His having sneaked out this evening was proof that he had many things he was hiding from her. Anyone can change, especially a man who has become successful. Previously he had never cared for dancing. Perhaps now he was going from bad to worse; perhaps right now he was holding the slender waist of a dance-hall girl and dancing with passion!

Suddenly her breathing became irregular again. Could those haunts of sirens and his sneaky, low-classed friends be corrupting him? Oh no! It was quite impossible! Why did she invent such problems to make herself unhappy? He had never had any bad habits of gambling or dissipation. Not only that but before he'd met her he had never had a girl friend or any experience of love. For this reason she had always considered him as simple as a blank sheet of paper. And now the white paper had been dyed black by the night. People are naturally curious. Maybe it was because he had never tried this sort of thing before that he had now succumbed to the temptation to see what it was like.

Was he mingling with women who sell their bodies? Even at the thought of such degradation her bosom seemed to explode and she felt nauseated. She really couldn't understand men. They seemed to be human but they acted in a way that was unworthy of human beings. That class of women were to be found in every city and every generation had produced them—a proof that the majority of men found them necessary. He, too, was a man. What would prevent him from doing what other men did?

If she wanted to blame somebody she should blame herself for being too careless and easy-going, for putting too much faith in him and giving him too much freedom. She had furnished him with the opportunities of which he had taken advantage. If his clothes had all been kept in the bedroom he wouldn't have been able to go out at will like this.

Still plunged in regretful meditation she walked resolutely across the room and opened his closet. She had always considered his closet as an inviolable sanctuary. Many of the objects he kept there were things he valued as souvenirs. He kept them neatly ranged in separate categories and there was no need for her to tidy them up. Whenever she happened to open it to put something in or take something out he always protested, "Don't disturb my closet!" as if he had gold stored in there that he was afraid she would steal. Gradually she had come to feel that it was a place she must not enter. Now she broke into the forbidden territory. Not only had she lost all feeling

of its sacred inviolability but she even viewed it with a peculiar loathing. Without a glance at the rest of the closet she looked at the side where his suits were hung. At first she hadn't been conscious of anything wrong with this arrangement. He had suggested that if he kept the clothes he was always using in the study it would be more convenient. In the house he always wore pajamas and a bathrobe. If he were to get a sudden phone call, requiring his immediate departure it would be more convenient, for a man of his lazy habits to have a change of clothes close at hand. It hadn't occurred to her that too much convenience might lead to abuses. Otherwise he would never have been able to pull the wool over her eyes so long. His bathrobe and pajamas were hastily thrown in a corner of the closet. Examining his suits she found that the gray one was missing; it just happened to be his newest suit.

The fact that he had gone out wearing his newest suit only added to her suspicions. Normally he was very careful with his suits and only wore a new one for very important engagements. What could be so important to make him wear one on a rainy night like this? Every thing pointed to the conclusion which she most dreaded but kept inevitably recurring. There must be a woman involved.

A woman. What sort of woman? Someone she knew or someone she didn't know? She felt something pressing on her heart and smothering her. At this moment of inconclusive speculation she felt stirring in her an anger against every woman in town.

The more she considered, the more complicated the problem became. The more she analyzed it the more serious it appeared. If he had gone with some friends to make a night of it or if he'd set out on the spur of the moment to pick up whatever girl he could find, that would be comparatively simple. But she was afraid he had gone to keep a rendezvous with a girl friend.

As she closed the closet, her hand trembled slightly she felt a cramp in her stomach and her legs grew rubbery His image occupied her heart; but now that her heart was being torn asunder by fearful speculations, his image was also becoming dismembered. She had given him all her love and had taken for granted that he gave her all of his in return. So he had really given her only bits and pieces, odds and ends of his affection. She gasped out a few sobs. She ought to be crying but she had no tears. Certainly it was something to cry about: to have had the wool pulled over her eyes and to have been deceived—and probably for a very long time. This certainly wasn't the first time he had gone to meet that woman, and she had known nothing about it all along, and all that time they had been laughing at her behind her back.

She was staggering as she turned around. If she hadn't grabbed the back of the swivel chair she might well have fallen to the ground. Never in her life had she felt such tension and anguish. The most intense suffering in a woman's life was supposed to be childbirth. She remembered that when she had given birth to the baby she had gone through ten hours in the delivery room. She'd thought she might die. Even if she had died she could hardly have suffered any more. But that was over and once over, although a little painful to recall, it seemed like nothing compared to her present suffering. Physical suffering soon dissolved but what remedy was there for mental anguish?

She sat down in the swivel chair, panting for breath. Once in her life she had been as desperately helpless as she was now. It was the second year after her marriage. He was teaching in a high school and had been assigned to a room in a teacher's dormitory where the kitchen was shared with their neighbors. It's a good thing they did share the kitchen; otherwise there would have been a major fire. They were using a kerosene stove. Being young and inexperienced, she had turned up the kerosene when it was about to give out without extinguishing the flame. The whole stove went up in flames. The sight of the terrible conflagration held her speechless a few seconds; then she began to scream. If another teacher's wife hadn't come and put out the fire with a blanket— [it] was too terrible to think what might have happened. Afterwards she had sat down as if paralyzed, as she was doing now, patting her bosom and panting incessantly; more deeply impressed by the danger she had been in the more she thought about it. A more ludicrous aspect of the episode was that her idea at the time had been to splash the fire with water from a basin, a project which had she carried it out could only have resulted in the entire building going up in smoke.

In her past experience of anguish and tension she had always screamed or cried out. This time the experience was more excruciating than any she had ever had before but she remained silent. At most, the sound of a few half-suppressed sobs, echoing in the empty silence of the room, gave a slight indication of her intense feeling. In the past, no matter what had happened, she had always had him at her side. His solace had always given her strength! Even if he scolded her she had felt happy. But now he had gone God knows where and left her here alone. Every minute, every second was unendurable.

She shook her head in a dispirited way, reflecting the troubled state of her body. The swivel chair gave a

corresponding swing. Usually he would sit in this swivel chair, swinging gently to and fro with a light rhythmic motion, at the same time, deeply meditating. Sometimes leaning his cheek against his hand, sometimes puffing at a cigarette, his attitude of deep meditation was quite striking. .

A man's working efficiency depends to a large extent on his surroundings. His ten scripts had all been completed in this room. She spun slowly through the full cycle of the swivel chair. The study had the best location of any room in the apartment. Outside the window there was nothing to obstruct the view and the noise coming up from the street was relatively remote. In this room, at the dead of night, all was still. Even the walls contributed something to the stillness. They were painted a dark shade of blue which he had chosen himself: not only still, but solemn like his face which was so hostile to light conversation or laughter. How could one be happy without light conversation and laughter?

The books in his bookcase were quite numerous. As befitted a professional writer, every type of book was represented. A few were books he had borrowed from friends and never returned but most were the result of his steady acquisition. When they were poor he had bought books to read; when they became more wealthy he acquired them for show. In her spare time she also read for relaxation but only novels and drama. She never looked at poetry or essays. There were also works of foreign literature which interested her even less.

He didn't read them either. Where could he find the time? He had no time for anything. Turning night into day didn't help. The morning is a good time to get things done. The time of day that should be used for business he had converted into his time for sleeping; the time that should be spent sleeping he spent on his work. Work! work! Were nocturnal rendezvous also part of his work?

Ranged along the wall above the bookcase were a row of framed pictures. One was outstanding: high collar, long beard, collar ornamented with elaborate ruffles that, to her mind, resembled some instrument of torture. That was the object of his worship, Shakespeare. He had begun worshipping Shakespeare when he switched to writing scripts. Previously he had worshipped Turgenev and Gide. There had also been Shelley and Doyle, Hegel and Nietsche. Still he had never hung up their portraits. It wasn't hard to find artistic portraits of them, the problem was getting them framed. It was best to do without anything they didn't really need. She didn't know where in the world he had picked up this picture of Shakespeare. His mind was set on becoming the "Shakespeare of China;" only he would be in advance of Shakespeare as since Shakespeare's time the stage had been replaced by a more advanced medium, the moving picture.

In spite of her present bitterness toward him she couldn't deny his intellectual ability. In the picture-frame next to that holding Shakespeare's portrait was a photograph of him receiving an award for the best film drama of the year before last. He was dressed in new, white evening clothes and holding the gold statuette in his hand. He was beaming with satisfaction. The statue had been taken by the company to be put on exhibition. It should belong to the company; if the company hadn't spent so much money on promotion and public relations it never would have won the two Oscars, one for the best direction and one for the best screenplay. These things weren't really important but it was better than getting nothing. This had been the beginning of a run of good luck for him.

The newspapers competed with one another to get interviews with him. They called him "an astounding new voice" among the younger writers. She clipped all these interviews for him with deep appreciation and gratification. Lord knew how many years his "astounding new voice" had been crying in the wilderness before anyone noticed it.

The award had certainly brought him luck. People seemed to have a kind of herd instinct that led them to follow blindly whatever was the current fashion. It seemed that now nobody else but him would do for the most important scripts of the company and independent producers also often sought him out to consult him about new scripts. His old movies which had been failures were now re-released and hailed as masterpieces.

As far as his writing was concerned she had the utmost confidence and trust in him. Still as time went on she had discovered that he didn't have so much creative genius as ingenuity. It wasn't that he was so prolific that she had come to accept his productions as a matter of course; no, the problem was that everything he wrote seemed to come from some "source:" either from folk stories or from classical or modern fiction or from something he had found in foreign films or literature. Although she knew nothing about art, still she felt sure that the important thing in art was invention. And there was nothing in his scripts that he had invented. Actually she didn't know whether he should be considered a dramatist or a dramatic craftsman.

The swivel chair slowly turned and faced the desk. The manuscript of his work in progress lay on its broad surface. A book he was consulting lay open beside it with a passage clearly underlined in red ink. The passage had been transcribed, word for word, into his manuscript. She remembered that last night he had already gotten this far. Evidently he had done no work at all this evening. What he had done was made evident by the empty tea glass

he had finished and the cigarette butts lying in the ash tray. Evidently he had sat here vacantly for some time before going out. Since he wasn't working, what in the world could he have had on his mind?

When they had been poor, he had little time but managed to accomplish a great deal. Now it was just the opposite. His accomplishment was minimal and he wasted a great deal of time. During the years when he was teaching school, he was in the classroom all day and busy correcting the students' assignments and preparing the material for his courses in the evening. He had very little free time and yet he never stayed up too late. All the teachers in the school had to attend the flag-raising ceremony each morning and getting up in time for it was a major difficulty for him. He then used to write with lightning swiftness, his hand fairly flying across the page. Often he would finish a whole short story in one evening and have it in the mail, return postage and all. After that he would mail it again and again, each time leading only to disappointment, until finally he would put is aside and forget it. At that time his desk was the property of the school. It was a very old fashioned type, small and old with the varnish flaked and peeling off. There were only three drawers, very shallow, the contents of which were too numerous, stuffed to the brim. Several times she had wanted to burn part of this material but he insisted on keeping it. When the baby became old enough to walk he once crumpled and tore one of his manuscripts. Although he was very angry, he couldn't blame a baby too young to know any better. All he could do was complain that the desk was too low. He had finally gotten a specially high desk, with drawers on both sides going all the way down to the floor. It could accommodate almost any amount of things. It was made out of *pumelo* wood and was brightly polished. The drawers were specially made of camphor wood and gave off a special fragrance when opened. Still she appreciated the old desk more. Although they were poor then they enjoyed a simple happiness of spirit. He had no secrets from her.

Before she opened the drawer, she held her breath for a fraction of a second and listened. Although she knew perfectly well that he could not appear suddenly, she still felt a little apprehensive. He had expressly forbidden her to go peeking into his things when he wasn't there and had become quite angry on the two or three previous occasions when she had violated this prohibition. She had only taken a curious glance without any particular motive but he had severely reprimanded her that it was unethical to pry into the personal belongings of another person. She self-consciously gave way on the point and accepted this with a smile without contesting his opinion; in her heart, however, she felt he was wrong. Man and wife are one flesh—why should he consider her as "another person?" The fact was he had long ceased to be one with her in heart and mind.

Had they been one in heart and mind he wouldn't have locked the drawers. She pulled vigorously a few times but they didn't budge. Then, for lack of any better approach she knocked tentatively on the outside of the drawer hoping the sound would somehow reveal the secret of what was within. She had sometimes caught a glimpse of the contents of the top drawer when he opened it momentarily for some casual purpose. She had seen only glue, scissors, pieces of paper: perfectly ordinary objects. But she had never had a good look. Perhaps it might also contain pictures of girls, love letters, perhaps even love-tokens or souvenirs such as a lock of hair. She had once cut a lock of her own hair to give to him. It was during the period when her parents disapproved of his courtship and they sometimes went so far as to forbid her to see him. With careful forethought she had snipped off a lock of her hair and sent it to him enclosed in a letter in which she told him that when he looked at this lock of hair it would be as if he were looking at her herself. He had kept it thereafter right up to the time they were married; then he had taken all such keepsakes and turned them over to her. Most of them she had kept for him. During these years of their married life, they had moved several times; where had she put those keepsakes? She wasn't sure anymore. Anyway, he had never asked her. Apparently he had completely forgotten about it. Probably his attitude was: now that she belonged completely to him, why should he be concerned about just one lock of her hair.

With a cold smile she pulled at the lock. Who could say what might be in that drawer? How stupid she had been! Why hadn't she ever stolen his key? That's what she would do now. Tomorrow morning while he was still fast asleep she would very quietly have a look at the inside of the drawer. Then, with the evidence in her hand, she;d see what he had to say.

She went on to the next drawer and found it unlocked. This was proof that it contained no secrets; and yet there might be a few clues. He was an indifferent husband but his attitude toward his desk was far from indifferent. Although not too neat, the contents of the drawer were arranged in layers. After digging through one layer you arrived at another. She hastily glanced through the piles of manuscripts and letters. Her feelings were tense, her thoughts conflicting. She hoped to find something and yet she hoped she wouldn't find anything.

The scrapbook containing the clippings she had made was also in the drawer. It was thoroughly familiar to her so there was no need to examine it—and yet, the thought suddenly struck her that if she were to go through it with a new awareness she might, in fact, uncover some clues. When his name first began to appear in the newspapers

she had thought it well worth while to clip and preserve all references to him as souvenirs. From both newspapers and magazines she would clip the relevant portions and also a strip giving the date of the issue to place next to the item as a caption. It made a fine display.

Once impaled on the horns of the monster of jealousy it was difficult to break free. As she went through the scrapbook this time every photograph filled her with anxiety and anguish. She felt as if every person pictured there might be the cause that had impelled him to leave her. She studied the photograph on the first page for a long time. It had been taken at a studio party. At that time he hadn't yet been assigned to any script and so he was a very inconspicuous item in the picture. He was standing in the background where neither the lights nor the focus of the picture were directed upon him. His face was dark and blurred. Unless you looked very carefully, you couldn't tell it was he. The glance of a viewer was much more drawn toward the figures in the front row. On the right was the obese studio manager with his pot-belly and the face of a laughing Buddha. Much more attractive to the eye were the two glamorous faces next to him.

She blinked her eyes. The sight of Chiang Chu and Ting Ni seemed to hurt them. Without reading the caption she knew the occasion was the fifth anniversary of the studio. On hand were the outstanding stars of the studio including Chiang Chu, Ting Ni and many others.

In the accompanying news stories there was no mention of him. Why had she kept it as a souvenir? And she'd even put it on the first page! Although she knew it had nothing to do with her, still she had decided to clip it; the thought made her feel more and more unhappy. That was four years ago. He had just begun to break into the movie world. This had been a rare chance for a little publicity, especially to be seen in the company of the studio manager and famous stars. He held a glass of champagne in his hand and seemed unaware his picture was being taken since his eyes were not on the camera.

What was he looking at? She bent attentively over the picture. The light was reflected from his eyes in a way that made it impossible to follow his gaze. Still, her sensitivity assured her he was obliquely glancing at the two lovely movie stars in the front row. Could it be that he had a special relation with one of them? Though inundated by an overwhelming wave of jealousy, she retained a degree of reason. Admiring beautiful women was a favorite occupation of all men. Whenever she glanced at this album she also had inadvertently noticed the two beautiful movie stars. From his place in the picture it was clear that he was separated from them by an immense gulf in status. At that time not one of his scripts had yet been accepted while they were the glamorous idols of an adoring public. Still, she had heard titillating rumors about the private lives of movie stars before they achieved stardom, and even after they became famous there were often traces of romantic scandal. Could one of them have costarred with him in some back-stage drama?

She vehemently flipped over the page. The photos that followed did nothing to ameliorate her ill humor. On the contrary, it deepened and deepened the further she went. The texts and photographs she had clipped became more appropriate. The texts referred to his screen dramas. In the pictures he was no longer standing in a corner.

Ignoring the pictures in which he posed with other men she relentlessly sought out those where he was accompanied by a woman. She was astonished at the extent of her previous blindness. There was a picture with Lin Ju-pao. Why hadn't she ever noticed before that he had his arm around her? Her eyes opened wide, she fixed her attention on his detestable arm. Actually there was nothing out of the ordinary. His arm wasn't actually touching her shoulder but only resting on the back of the chair. Still, why, when they were sitting quite properly, did he have to extend his arm like that. Clearly he was up to no good.

And look at his eyes! Wasn't there a romantic gleam in the corner of his eye and a romantic twist in his smile? Previously she had interpreted his look as a smile of satisfaction. He had been chosen best screen-writer. He was at a banquet in celebration of the occasion, sitting next to the star of his prize-winning screenplay. Naturally he felt this the climax of success. There had been nothing in it that should disturb her. Now, however, seen in the light of her new uncertainty it embodied a very disturbing problem indeed. She had never had anything against Lin Ju-pao, but as she gazed at the photo she was completely stupefied. Could there be a secret liaison between the best screen-writer and his leading lady?

Her suspicions didn't stop at Lin Ju-pao. There were plenty of other suspects in the pages which followed. The flock of young starlets that surrounded him, their smiling faces fresh as spring blossoms, were all newcomers being groomed by the studio. Each of them had a chance to become a great star. Getting ahead in the movies was no simple matter and those girls had a lot of tricks up their sleeves. They not only knew how to be nice to the manager and how to attract the director; they also realized the value of good personal relations with the script writer. When they smiled at him and called him "big daddy" wasn't that because they realized he was worth buttering up and in the hope that he would add a few lines to their part or build up the importance of their role?

She made a face at the picture. Those little imps were supposed to be schoolgirls but in fact they were over twenty. The new generation of young girls was really appalling! From childhood they became adept at concealing their real age. Hung Ying, who wore her hair trailing down over her shoulders, was already married and had a child. Yet she continued to play the role of a sixteen-year-old. From the look of Wu Mei's well-shaped behind you'd think she couldn't be more than seventeen. She had heard that Hung Ying had had a tough life. She had lost both parents while very young and been brought up by her uncle. He was very avaricious and arranged for her to become the concubine of a wealthy business man. Finding it impossible to win her affection, the businessman finally agreed to her constant pleas and allowed her to fulfill her life-long ambition of becoming a movie star. A girl who so early in life had been forced to live with a man she didn't love would not feel strongly committed to fidelity. In view of this aspect of Hung Ying's background, wasn't it possible she was having a secret affair with him?

Besides Hung Ying, Wu Mei was also a possibility. Though she played the ingenue both on and off the screen and seemed as if butter wouldn't melt in her mouth, her mature body was a bombshell. The two scenarios he had written this year both starred Wu Mei. She was very earnest about her work and was constantly consulting him about the correct interpretation of her roles. Could he come into constant contact with such a girl without being affected?

Danger! Danger! Every woman she considered seemed to be dangerous in one way or another. She closed the album. She regretted she couldn't throw it on the floor and stamp on it. She wanted to stamp on the faces of all those glamorous girls. But then she thought better of it. Of course she couldn't really do that. Even if she were to destroy this scrapbook of clippings it had cost her so much trouble to collect, that wouldn't harm a single hair on the heads of those women.

From hating glamorous movie stars she went on to hating the whole movie industry. Her hatred for the movie industry made her hate the scripts her husband wrote. She regretted that she couldn't crumple up all the manuscripts on the desk. If it weren't for those manuscripts what could he use for a cover? If he hadn't had the excuse of sitting up to get his work done, how could he have slipped out?

She picked up the manuscript and held it in her hand, hesitated a moment and then put it down again. Crumpling his manuscripts would not only not solve their problem but would lead to new problems. Their daily subsistence depended on his screen-writing. To destroy his manuscripts would be like throwing out the bread in the bread box or demolishing their apartment. Besides that, destroying his manuscripts would do nothing toward finding the real reason he had gone out and left her in the middle of the night.

She listlessly rose from the swivel chair. This study was now the site of her agony. Really, a comfortable life caused more estrangement between man and wife than a life of poverty. She remembered the first time they had come to watch the construction of the apartment. The outer shell had just been completed and the interior had not yet been divided up into rooms. All these walls and doors that now filled the apartment served as barriers and helped him in his bad behavior. For all she knew, it had been like this every night. She never knew when he slipped out. She never knew when he came back.

Again she was overcome with agitation and slumped onto the sofa. In spite of her grief, it seemed funny when she thought it over. He had gone out to have a good time and here she was sitting up all alone waiting for him and losing a lot of sleep.

Well, just the same, she'd rather die than go back to bed. This was his home and sooner or later he'd come back like a bird to the nest. She wanted to observe how he turned the key noiselessly in the lock and tiptoed into the room only to be stopped cold when he saw her.

Suddenly a shiver ran through her. Her whole body shrunk as if with cold. She felt as if he had already entered and were standing before her, distress showing in his stiffened features. When that time actually came, what would she do?

"Why are you sitting here?" Anticipating a quarrel, he would begin by asking her.

Perhaps his expression would be apologetic. Perhaps he would feign innocence. She would fix him with an intent and hostile stare.

"Need you ask? I'm waiting for you. Tell me where you've been off to."

If she mobilized her feelings for such a direct confrontation as soon as he entered, how would he reply?

"I've been taking a walk."

"A walk! What nonsense!" Should she say this with an ironic smile or with a roar of fury?

"Really! The longer I sat here the staler I got. I couldn't write a word. I was hoping a walk might bring me some inspiration."

"You went out for a walk in the middle of the night hoping to find inspiration! Do you think I'm so easy to fool?"

The male animal is very irritable and easily aroused to anger. His face would redden, his cheek muscles tense downwards, his eyelids blink and his eyes set in a cold glare. She could easily imagine his anger. He seldom became angry but when he did his aspect was really terrifying.

"Fool you? Why should I try to fool you? Do you mean to say that I should have woken you up after you'd gone to sleep?"

"You shouldn't have gone out at all."

"Have you chained my ankle so that I can't go out? What nonsense! If I feel like going out, I'll go out."

"Of course you have your freedom. But you didn't need to say you were looking for inspiration."

"What do you think I was looking for, then?"

"A woman!"

She soothed her trembling lips with her hand. Her breathing had suddenly grown heavy. If she actually brought all her suspicions out into the open like this, what response would she get?

"Rubbish! What ideas you have!" he would argue vigorously. In idle chatter with her friends they had once joked that "Never admit anything" was the strategy usually adopted by men against the accusations of their wives. But he didn't have the patience to employ strategy. Given his character, chances were one would have to face his anger instead.

"Looking for a woman? Suppose I were looking for a woman, what have you got to say about it?"

A shiver ran through her. Her eyes stared. Her breathing stopped. No. She must not directly express the suspicions she harbored in her mind. A direct attack would be the most stupid approach. She would trap herself in an unfavorable position, turning an advantage into a disadvantage. If he were to answer her in this way what could she do? If she gave a meek and soothing answer it would be a sign of weakness. If she remained firm and determined, their quarrel would develop into a situation of permanent incompatibility.

Among her friends and relatives there was no lack of examples. There was her distant relative Mr. Fei who had been the most hen-pecked of husbands. Once, as part of a business deal, he had gone with some companions for a night on the town. Mrs. Fei found out and raised the devil of a rumpus about it. The worm turned. Mild Mr. Fei exploded and divorced her the next day. Mrs. Fei had complained and wept to her about it. Although she had felt very sorry for her there was nothing to be done. In a way she couldn't help blaming her. From the beginning she had tried to tell her that raising a fuss and quarreling wasn't the way to solve the problem. But she wouldn't listen—until finally the honor of being Mrs. Fei was transferred to another and, on the whole, less worthy person.

She herself had enjoyed, for ten years, the honor of being the wife of a screen-writer, first a struggling, then a prominent one. She had no intention of giving that up. If she didn't remain cool and calculating she might follow the footsteps of Mrs. Fei in forcing a bitter quarrel and might even suffer her ultimate fate. What Mrs. Ch'iang said the other day was true: that when men are comfortable and well fed they become lascivious. The love and warmth of their early years of marriage were only burnt-out ashes. His desire for novelty made him despise the wife he had grown used to. He could hardly wait to find an excuse to get rid of her. He wanted to incite her to jealousy, quarrels, separation. Those were the three stages of his plan. After he had gotten rid of her he could take a young and beautiful wife. Now that he enjoyed financial security he no longer valued a wife who was a good housekeeper. Now that he had such ample opportunities for meeting them he could easily marry a movie star. A very cozy arrangement for both of them! Ah ha! I'm afraid it won't be quite that easy! After all her work and suffering! She certainly wouldn't fall for their trick!

She had once seen in a newspaper a translation of a foreign article on marital problems. It had been a long time ago and she hadn't paid too much attention to it at the time, anyway. In her overconfidence she had never guessed it might one day be applicable to her own life. Although she didn't remember it very clearly she could recall it in vague outline. The article had maintained that far from "clearing the atmosphere" arguments between husband and wife had a very unwholesome effect. That it increased the husband's bad impression and stiffened attitudes on both sides. If you wanted to recapture his heart, it argued, the best approach was to move him by your calm and gentle understanding. Without accusations or reproaches one should welcome him with a warm and gentle smile and be anxious to make him feel cozy and comfortable.

"Huh, why are you sitting here?"

"I woke up. Couldn't sleep. Thought I'd sit for a while and have a look at the newspaper."

She picked up the evening paper and smiled. It was a very unnatural smile; still, it was a smile. To receive your enemy with a smile is the highest type of conduct. When he returned she would act like this. Concealing her

feelings and asking no questions she would merely welcome him as she always did when he came in.

"Oh, so you're back. Is it cold out? Still raining?"

Then she would come forward and help him off with his coat. After all, he was only human. If his wife received him this way, wouldn't he feel shame and regret?

She put down the newspaper. Her emotions were in a hopeless tangle. She had no talent as an actress. She couldn't repress her anguish and pretend to be happy. In her present state of feeling, as soon as he appeared she would probably break out weeping and begin to scold him. Weeping and scolding, she would be reminded of all their years of happiness—with results that were unforeseeable. Not to mention the response it might evoke in him, it might also wake their son. Hearing his parents quarrel might have an unfavorable psychological effect on the child. Then there were the neighbors. Perhaps they would laugh at them. Why wash one's dirty linen in public? It only lost one's dignity and self-respect.

The sound of soft footsteps from outside triggered the rapid beating of her heart. She held her breath as the footsteps passed on to the next door. As the sound faded away she remained grimly staring straight ahead. She wondered what time it was. Although her thoughts had been galloping very swiftly, time had been passing much more slowly than usual. Only a little while ago she had been hoping he'd hurry home.

Now, her attitude had already changed and she was rather afraid of his return.

When one is in a hopeless position one tends to blame others and at the same time to blame oneself. Instead of discovering his callous infidelity, wouldn't it have been better if she had remained unconscious of the whole thing? Why did she have to wake up? And why did she have to get up and go to look after him? If she could have gotten back to sleep right after waking up she would never have discovered the secret of his nocturnal exodus. Following the philosophy that "a lie is as good as the truth if you believe it completely" she could have gone on living in a fool's paradise.

She gave a melancholy yawn. This protracted tension had left her a bit weary. She knew very well she wouldn't be able to get to sleep but still anything would be better than this intent waiting as if to catch a thief.

The thief in this case was a clever one. To catch a clever fellow it was necessary to have a plan; and she was like a completely untrained policeman who when it came to the test would be frightened out of his wits and make a mess of everything.

The urge to flee took possession of her. She staggered out of the living room and made a dash for the bedroom. The problem was an important one. There was no hope for a hasty solution.

Curled up in bed, she closed her eyes. It was best to imagine that all this had never happened; that what she had just gone through had been only a dream. If only that were true! She heaved a sigh. She wondered whether human life, on the whole, contained more happiness or more suffering. Sometimes, when she didn't want it to be a dream, it turned out that she was actually dreaming. At other times, when she fervently hoped that what she was experiencing was only a dream it proved to be only too real.

She began to sob softly and gradually the sound became more intense. It would have been inaccurate to say this was because he had abandoned her. More precisely it was because she felt that all her happiness was gone forever. With the entry of this unhappiness into her heart she felt that something had gone out of her life which could not be replaced.

As for him, he'd be back.

2

As Yao-ah was about to leave, Mr. Wu, the owner of the shop, was looking over the engine of a Ford that would need bumper repairs the next day. Mr. Wu looked up and reminded him again:

"I want you to be back by tomorrow night, at the latest. Ah-tung and Chiu-shan can't finish the job without you."

Chiu-shan and Ah-tung lay beneath the car that they were repairing. He kicked their feet, the only parts of them that were visible. They poked out their heads to see what he wanted.

"I'm going now. Don't bother to bid for either of the *hui*\fn{A note reads: *A hui is one of the most common ways to borrow money in Taiwan for little or no interest. It consists of a group of people who each pay a fixed amount of money into a group fund each month. Every member of the hui takes a turn every month to collect the total amount of money in the hui There are a variety of ways to determine whose turn it is to collect the money each month. In this case, one must bid for it. The amount one bids is the amount of interest one is willing to pay each member of the hui. The person who bids the highest amount receives the money first. The person who bids the smallest amount receives the money last. The longer one waits to collect the money in the hui the lower one's rate of interest is. Thus it is*

more profitable to wait.} day after tomorrow. We'll just forget about it for now."

In a burst of happiness over Yao-ah's decision Ah-tung waved his arms above his head. Chiu-shan kicked him and said:

"Don't let the evil spirits lead you astray!"

As the public bus sped along the Kaoping Highway, mango and coconut trees rushed toward him and then flew off at angles on both sides. He counted one farmhouse after another and every rice paddy. He felt an intense sadness which was probably the feeling that is called "nostalgia." In the distance he saw narrow rows of betel-nut trees. He saw an old hunchbacked farmer returning home late from the fields carrying a hoe. It was like the image of his father which had been entering his dreams so often recently. Every time his elder brother Ah-hsiung wrote a letter to him he always said such things as:

"Dad has really become thin and he's just a little over sixty," and "Dad has had a relapse of that bad cough and he won't go to the doctor."

He would then dream of his father at night and the father in his dreams became weaker and weaker each day. He was afraid he would never resemble that sturdy broad-backed farmer again.

This was the first time he had returned home in two years. The vacation over the Chinese New Year lasted five days and Ah-tung and Chiu-shan both went home to Chiayi. He voluntarily gave up his own vacation time in order to help Mr. Wu with the shop and to allow him to take a trip around the island with his family. He said it was because Mr. Wu and his family had treated him so well. On the fifth day of the New Year his elder brother came to see him. He mentioned nothing of his father's recriminations, saying only that his mother missed him very much. As Ah-hsiung was about to leave he relayed another message from his mother:

"Your father's condition is getting worse and worse every day and it's all caused by worry. Don't upset him like this. Come home when you have a chance."

That evening Mr. Wu and his family came back from their trip. In spite of all of the talk and laughter and the many gifts they brought for him, he didn't sleep well that night. A city is something which knows no fatigue; it wasn't until three or four in the morning that things grew quiet. When he heard the sound of several crickets chirping in the corner of the room he could not hold back the tears in his eyes. He couldn't stop thinking about his mother's message to him.

On the sixth day of the New Year the shop reopened and they were busy until dusk. When the grayish sky grew dark he couldn't help but look up and gaze blankly into the distance. As he gazed he stopped the work he had at hand. A customer asked him what he was looking at.

"Smoke," he said.

To his surprise the customer pulled out a cigarette and offered it to him. He shook his head and started working again. They didn't understand.

He had an indelible image in his mind. It was in the deep green evening mists above the thick forests of bamboo a thread of smoke curling from the chimney of his old house or from the wood fire in the big stove. Now thin and fine, and then in puffs; now whirling masses, and then stretching out wide into the distance. He loved most of all the scent of the earth and the fragrance of the grass that was mixed with the smell of the smoke.

A long time had passed since he had smelled that familiar scent. What entered his nostrils daily now was the offensive smell of exhaust fumes. He was preparing to invest in an auto repair shop with Ah-tung and Chiu-shan next year. Half of his wages were invested in two reliable *hui* thai Mrs. Wu had organized, the other half he sent home. Each time the money arrived home he would get a letter the following day from Ah-hsiung, but only because his mother had pressed him to write. His mother asked his brothel to tell him not to send home too much money, to save a little for himself, and to make sure he was eating properly and keeping warm. When he read her letters, his mood was one of sentimentality mixed with discouragement. After he left home his father had never sent as much a word to him.

He had received a letter from Ah-hsiung today. Originally he had planned to ask Chiu-shan to bid for both of the *hui* the day after tomorrow, but he couldn't stand arguing with Chiu-shan and Ah-tung about it any longer and gave in to them. The situation was already beyond hope anyway.

When he got off of the bus the sky was completely black and the people in the village were engrossed in a television soap opera. He didn't know any of the people he passed along the road. He walked up to the old banyan tree and couldn't help but sit upon its trunk. This ancient tree was on the road that led to the train station. The shape of the tree was quite extraordinary. The roots were twisted into the shape of a little throne. The whole thing looked like someone who had fallen down with his backside firmly planted on the ground while his upper torso remained stubbornly erect. According to what his father said, when the banyan tree was young a typhoon had torn

it up out of the ground, roots and all, but it struggled through and continued to live. That is how it had grown into its present shape. The leaves of the banyan were like big sunshades. When he was little he had swung on the aerial roots that hung down from the tree. In elementary school he had played hide-and-seek around the tree while waiting for sweet potatoes\fn{A note reads: *Roasted sweet potatoes are a favorite treat among children in Taiwan's countryside*.} to bake. By the time he was in middle school he had often sat beneath the banyan tree and sang *The Bodhi Tree*:

I have dreamed many a sweet dream,
Under the shade of this tree.
All of my favorite sayings
Have I carved on the trunk of this tree.
When I am sad or happy
To this tree I often come,
Just like I have come today
And have lingered on 'til dawn.

Once he dreamed that the banyan tree wandered off to the city with him, but it couldn't stand all of the noise and finally withered up and died.

Moonbeams were scattered on the new asphalt road which was like a country maid dressed in new clothes whose simple beauty is a delight to behold. The road was in the midst of change, as were the people in the village. There was only the banyan tree which possessed an unchanging intimacy. He felt the smooth knots on the trunk of the tree which glowed in lustrous brown hues. He called softly to the tree:

"Banyan, old banyan."

In the dreams he had while away from home the aerial roots of the banyan tree looked like arms beckoning to him.

On the main road directly opposite the banyan tree was one of the rice paddies of his ancestral estate, which was separated from the road by an irrigation ditch. Everyday at noon the, farmers would rest from their labor in the shade of the tree. His father was always there among them changing gossip. The fertile land three fields over also belonged to his family which was well irrigated because it was next to the pump. After the plowing was done, large groups of men and women would go there to wash their faces and rinse off their feet. His mother and the other farm women would take their laundry there and stand all along the cement bank in the water and wash clothes and chat. His mother and father became quite well respected members of the village because they possessed such good land. Not long ago Ah-hsiung wrote to him saying:

"We've been offered a good price for the land already. Ch'ing-shu wants the land beside the road, and since Shui-chi has offered the highest amount for the land near the pump, we can probably count on his buying it."

He sat beneath the tree and when he considered the fact that they would, after all, sell the last two pieces of land in the ancestral estate\fn{A note reads: *According to Chinese tradition, property which has been passed down to one by one's ancestors cannot be sold without seriously offending the ancestors with whom one must deal in the "other world." In doing such a thing one also disgraces the living members of the family and deprives future generations of property which should rightfully be theirs*.} he couldn't help but feel heavy at heart.

When he had originally suggested selling the land they would only have had to sell the banana grove and the field with the stream running through it. But now they would have to sell the only two remaining pieces of land. Although it was no fault of his own, it still troubled him and he didn't know how his father could bear it.

The splashing sound of water—he delighted in it. He walked to the edge of the irrigation ditch and drew up a handful to wash his hands. He loved its bracing chill and its green grassy scent. The rice seedlings in the field were already half a foot high. They swayed in the breeze looking as though they were teasing each other. If one listened carefully one could hear that plants too have a language of their own. The night, this field, the splashing water, the croaking frogs and the chirping insects were all things that had nurtured a part of him.

*

He walked beneath the grapefruit tree near the shed where his uncle dried tobacco. He hesitated for a moment. Not far away, a pallid light poured out from the door of his house onto the cement of the winnowing square. Mountains of rice straw were stacked at the edge of the winnowing square, so that the evening wind carried with it the fragrance of straw. The moon shone in the sky; it was a very peaceful night. Finally he took a deep draught of the air that was heavy with the scent of grapefruit blossoms and slowly walked up to the house. The winnowing square was surrounded by the noise of the family's television which covered the sound of his footsteps. Just as he entered the door his father looked up from his desk. He took off his glasses, put down his abacus and with

restrained excitement nodded and said indifferently:
“You’re back.”
He went toward him awkwardly. “Dad …” he said haltingly.
He became choked with emotion as soon as the words left his mouth. The hair on his father’s temples had turned completely white. His cheekbones were hewn into sharp angles. In less than two years he had become an entirely different person. There was nothing left of the spirit and drive with which he had trained people to perform the Sung Chiang martial dance in front of the temple two years ago. Was this the man who had pushed ahead of everyone else and with a thunderous voice had declared himself to be the official in charge of the ceremonies at the temple? His father’s silence made him think of stagnant water and dry, brittle wood. It made him sad. He would rather have seen his father pointing to the door in a violent rage as he had done two years before, cursing him saying:
“Get out! Get out! You were born as a punishment to me. Go far away so you don’t disgrace your ancestors anymore.”
Now all that he said was:
“Go see your mother, she’s in the kitchen. I have to figure this bill all over again.”
The voltage was weak and they still hadn’t installed a fluorescent light in the kitchen where the light from a small twenty watt bulb glowed dimly. His mother was cooking up some pig feed when she heard his call. She got up from her place at the stove and clasped his hand, beginning to cry. When she lowered her head to wipe her tears on her sleeve, he saw white hairs combed back into the loose knot of hair at the back of her head. She persistently wiped away the tears that stopped and then eventually started to flow again.
“Have you seen your father?”
“Yes.”
“What did he say?”
“He didn’t say anything, he was adding up some bills.”
“Bills …” she sighed. “It’s a real pity he’s been worn down like this until … and you can’t blame him.”
“I don’t blame him. Where is Ah-hsiung, Mom?”
“He took Li-o back to the sanitarium; we don’t want her to find out about tomorrow.”
“Where’s it going to be tomorrow?”
“At Uncle Meng-ho’s house.”
“How can Dad stand all of this?”
‘He finally realized that he has no other alternative. If he had realized it before, then we wouldn’t have the troubles we have now.”
What his mother muttered was not out of ill will but more out of resignation.
“And you can’t blame your father entirely …”
He already had some idea of what his father must be going through. Never again would he think that his father was foolish and vain to believe that each generation must struggle to bring honor and glory to the family and the ancestors. His father was of a different era and had his own way of living. Unfortunately he had met with an irrevocable fate and like a wild beast that has been bound fast, he struggled with his last ounce of strength before he would yield an unwilling assent to the situation.

*

When he woke up in the middle of the night and went outside to go to the outhouse, he discovered that the night was very beautiful. The faint sound of snoring came from all sides. While he enjoyed the cool breeze and the freshness of the dew he felt an inexpressible longing and affection for his home. City nights made him want to sleep from the minute he got into bed until daylight.
He returned to his bedroom, but now it was impossible for him to sleep. He could hear the sound of restless tossing and turning and the grating noise of his father’s dry cough coming from his parents’ bedroom.
After a long while, when he was in a half-dreaming, half-waking state, he heard the faint sound of an opening door and light footsteps. In the silence he could hear the sound of the footsteps moving farther and farther away.
He was puzzled by this and opened his eyes. A thought suddenly flashed through his mind. He leapt out of bed, threw on his coat and groped his way in the: darkness past the doorway of the bedroom and went through the living room door which squeaked when he opened it. As he was just about to step out his mother called him.
“Yao-ah, where are you going?”
“I heard Dad go outside and it’s the middle of the night. Where is he going? He wouldn’t …?” He shivered, unable to finish his sentence.

"No, he wouldn't. Don't worry about him. He hasn't been able to sleep very well these past two months. He often goes outside for a walk in the middle of the night."

"Well, I think I'd like to go out there to check on him anyway."

"All right. Do you know where to find him?"

He nodded that he did. When he walked out of the door he was greeted with the coolness of the night air that he found so refreshing. The earth was still fast asleep and the sky was vast. The mid-autumn moon and a few stars shimmered with a cool brightness. Unless one lives in the country it is impossible to comprehend the mystery and the beauty of night. Without the soothing calm of night where could one find the spirit and energy to struggle through the day? He walked quietly, afraid that he might disturb his neighbors. The only noise that he heard along the road was the faint grunting of sleeping pigs.

Near the fields the sounds of frogs and insects became louder. He knew where his father had gone. Last night he had told him that the rice seedlings in the field beside the road were growing beautifully. His father's only comment was:

"Good land produces good crops. If you were to plant hulled rice in this field it would grow. It's really—"

At this she purposely interrupted his father and asked:

"Are they still growing bananas in the two parcels of land at the back of the village?"

"No. You-shu bought the land and then made a fish pond of it. He's breeding *wu-kuo* fish. They may be cheap fish, but I hear he's making a lot of money. The land that Ah-ken bought will also be turned into a fish pond as soon as he harvests the banana crop. There are a lot of people breeding fish now. If one person makes a lot of money then everyone else wants to follow along. I'm afraid they might end up like we did the year we planted bananas."

His father suddenly stopped talking about that difficult year. The money that they borrowed to build their home was to have been repaid with the money they were to have made on the banana harvest. Unfortunately the banana crops were destroyed by a typhoon that year. Aside from their own banana orchard they had also invested in futures in all of the banana orchards in the area, but they didn't harvest even half of what they had planned on.

The house that they built was really too luxurious, and they spent too much on his sister's wedding and her dowry. Their financial state was like a torn net: one hole can easily be repaired, but if there are many holes, repairing one will pull open another. In such a case it's not merely that the net can't be fixed any more, but that it is absolutely useless.

Way off in the distance he saw his father bent over in the field digging up the earth here and moving it there and then tamping it down. He walked up to his father's side without the old man's knowing it.

"Dad!"

His father looked up with a start. He was as embarrassed as if someone had just discovered some great dark secret about him.

"You're up early. The paddy dikes are leaking in these two fields. If it's not pressed down firmly enough all of the water in the paddy is going to leak out."

"Why bother with it? This field isn't even ours any more."

His father stood up straight and looked off into space for a long time, and then walked over to the side of the irrigation ditch and rinsed off his hands. He went over to the smooth flat rock where the women washed clothes, sat down and lit a cigarette. The tip of it glowed brightly and then was dark again.

A suffocating silence filled the air. He silently followed him, not daring to say a word and deeply regretting what he had just said.

"It's like the way you feel toward your own children. Even if you have to give them to someone else to take care of, you still want to do as much as you can for them," said his father suddenly in a low voice.

Why had he never, until now, thought of these fields as another set of his father's children, his flesh and blood? If one's only alternative is to give one's children away to someone else to raise, how could a parent bear to do so without great difficulty? He thought of the last several years, of his own arrogance, he always knew best. He couldn't begin to count all of the times he had opposed and offended his father. He looked at him guiltily.

"Let's go," said his father stubbing out his cigarette, standing up and starting back on his own. He looked intently at his father's stooped-over frame and the slight limp in his walk. He wanted to superimpose this unfamiliar image onto the familiar one in his mind, but his vision became more and more blurred.

The most violent argument he had ever had with his father was just after the Chinese New Year. He had returned home the day after he had been discharged from the army, and had slept straight through until noon. He had been awakened by the sound of a familiar voice in the living room. At first he couldn't recall who it was, but

as he was about to go out and say hello he suddenly heard the voice say:

"Everyone knows that if anyone can do it, it's you. But I will definitely have to inconvenience you at the beginning of the next month. You don't want to see our daughter Mi-hsueh go without a dowry, do you? Even if she doesn't have a motorcycle, at least she needs a television, a refrigerator, a washing machine, and a sewing machine with all of the special attachments. Do you know how much money we need to buy all of these things? Just think, if I don't collect a little bit here and a little bit there … and we have to consider all the cakes that were sent out.\fn{A note reads: *It is customary for the family of the groom to send cakes to the bride's family for distribution to their friends and relatives at the time of the engagement. The bride's family must subsequently take this expense into consideration when planning the dowry*.} We're not rich by any means, but how else can we maintain our self respect? You've been through this before so you must certainly understand. It's like being on the verge of starvation and slapping yourself in the face until you're swollen just to make people think you're well fed."

"Yes, I understand the problem. Weddings are always better if you're a little extravagant, but please give me a little longer. The beginning of next month is too soon. We still haven't harvested the rice crop. How can you expect us to find so much money in such a short time?"

"All right, let's say the end of next month. But don't make me wait any longer."

"I won't, I won't. I'm not the kind of man to go back on a promise. It's just that the interest on our debts keeps getting higher and higher and our medical expenses are so heavy. Otherwise we wouldn't make you wait so long."

"That's true, I know. How has Li-o been recently?"

"She's a lot better, but she hasn't entirely recovered yet. She has to convalesce for a while longer, otherwise I'm afraid she'll have a relapse. If she has any sort of emotional upset it will start up all over again."

"Has her husband or her mother-in-law gone to see her?"

"Do you think people like that are capable of compassion? They left her in a grass hut in the very back of their land. If some friends from this village hadn't noticed her she probably would have died there."

"Li-o certainly isn't the type to complain. She suffered through all of that and never uttered a word to you."

"It's a pity she didn't complain. Tell your daughter Mi-hsueh that if something is troubling her to talk about it and not to keep it all bottled up inside. You have to let people know you're in trouble if you want them to help."

"It sure takes all kinds. Who would have thought that this would have happened to Li-o. She was the prettiest girl in our village. All of the things in her dowry were certainly the best and the most modern electrical appliances. The only thing lacking was a car, but they just weren't satisfied. They beat her until she was black and blue. Only someone from their village would do something like that."

"Every time I think of it my heart aches. In the beginning we thought they were nice people. His mother is a mid-wife and he's a pharmacist. They're both educated people so we let Li-o marry him. I never would have imagined it, but a widow with an only son can really make life unbearable."

"Well, you shouldn't think that a good education makes a good person. The more education you have the more wicked you become. If simple people like us were to do such things we'd be afraid of being struck down by lightning. The only son of a widow has a lot of responsibility. If he's the only thing his mother has, what makes you think she's going to sit back and watch your daughter take him away from her?"

"That's not always the case. What about Sheng-shu? Do you think he's uneducated? He's a doctor and also happens to be a very nice person. Or take Aunt Mu: she's a widow and she loves her daughter-in-law as if she were her own daughter."

"I know, I know, it all depends on the individual person. Li-o used a lot of money too, didn't she?"

"We gave her as much money as she wanted. If she hadn't been so afraid of troubling us, then she would never have lost her mind. It was enough to break my heart when I saw my own daughter didn't even recognize her own parents. The poor thing."

"I heard that Chih-ah and Hsiang-ah need their money now too. Why don't you sell one or two pieces of your land, otherwise the interest on your debts is going to kill you."

"What? You, you … that's our ancestral estate. How can I sell it?"

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean anything by that. Don't take it seriously. But please keep my request in mind. I'm really sorry. I'd better go now."

After the guest had gone out the door, Yao-ah entered into the living room looking pale. His father was on his way out.

"Dad," he said.

"What do you want?"

"Are you going to borrow more money?"

“I’m going to find your uncle. He’ll help me to find enough to make ends meet for a while.”

“How long do you intend to keep scrounging around for money like this? Dad, you might as well sell some land. It will clear up all of debts and you won’t have to pay so much interest.”

“Sell land?” His father hesitated for a moment, sighed and said, “we’ll talk about it later. I have to go out now.”

“We’ll talk about it later.” He had thought happily scratching his short-hair. Maybe his father would change his mind after all. He thought it over as he ate. He didn’t know how much his father’s debts amounted to, but if they were to sell two rice paddies, two banana groves and the land with the stream running through it, that should be enough to pay back all of their debts, his sister’s medical expenses, and there would even be some left over. Then they could move to the city, buy a store front and with his three years of technical school and the two years of training he got in the army he could open up an auto repair shop. If he could hire two skilled workers, then his dream would be complete. If there was still not enough money, they could sell the house to make up for the difference. If his parents and his brother were going to move to the city anyway, who would be left to live in it? This building was the pride of the compound; the tiles were porcelain and the beams were carved and painted. It was a good combination of Chinese and western architectural styles. If there was anything unsatisfactory about the place it was the antique stove in the kitchen. They didn’t have a gas stove, but this small defect was hardly enough to detract from its value.

The biggest debt that year had been the cost of building the house; one usually spent twice as much on it as they had planned. Great care was taken in the construction of the house and the cost of it was even more than they had originally expected. When it was finished, they had a housewarming party and invited enough people to fill twenty-eight tables. Half a year later when his sister was married they invited what seemed like half of the village to the wedding reception. His father claimed that since he was in charge of all of the ceremonies at the temple and the instructor of the Sung Chiang martial dance, and since half of the village always came to him for help of one sort or another, it wouldn’t do for someone of his social standing to throw just an ordinary wedding party. He also claimed that since the price of bananas was high at that time and there would be a harvest in another six months, why should they worry about paying back the money? Unfortunately there was a big typhoon that year and the interest on their debts piled up, as did the amount of their debts.

His sister’s mental illness began just before he was about to go into the army. It was then that he broached the subject of selling land with his father for the second time. His father shouted at him in an angry voice:

“So you’re talking about selling my land again, you damned wastrel! You haven’t even inherited it yet and you’re all ready to sell it. The next thing you know, you won’t even want to hold onto the land where your mother and I want to be buried. It never occurred to you to get a job, did it? You’re too busy trying to figure out the value of my property. You’re going to be the death of me yet.”

“All I’m saying, Dad, is that if you have debts, pay them back so you don’t end up owing more and more.”

“If you want to repay debts, you should earn the money to repay them. Who ever heard of selling land to repay debts?”

“How long do you plan to take to earn this money? Weren’t the banana crops completely destroyed two years ago; all you did was send them right back to Heaven. That was nothing but a waste of energy. If you sell the land now you can always buy more later. Otherwise these interest rates are going to finish you off.”

His father made no reply.

“And furthermore, who says you have to work the land? I can earn more money in the city just as easily, and I don’t have to work from dawn until dusk or expose myself to the weather. And I don’t have to worry about: crop failures. Ah-fu and Ah-bin got jobs in the city. They looked so good when they came back here that everyone was gawking at them. Feng-ah and Ho-ah only worked as laborers, but they’re wearing brand new clothes now, too. Aunt Wei’s daughter hadn'' been working in the export processing plant very long before she found herself a good husband. They come back here all of the time to see her parents. And then there are those like Li-o who aren’t even twenty-five and have already been pushed to the point of a nervous breakdown.”

“I’ve had enough of your defiance. No matter what you say, it’s obvious that the only thing that interests you is making it rich in the city. And I’m sure that’s what’s behind all of your plans to sell my land. Fine, fine. But may I ask what your brother is going to do if you sell the land? Where will your mother and I have to go? And think that more than ten years of education has been wasted on you.”

“I’ve thought about all of these things. If Ah-hsiung wants to farm, we can put aside half of the land for him. If he doesn’t want to, then we can both move to the city to work. As for you and Mom, if Ah-hsiung and I work in the city, then we’ll have enough money to support you. What’s the point of laboring your life away in the

country?”

“Well you certainly make it all sound very nice. And I suppose the streets in the city are paved with gold. Do you actually think it’s so easy to find a job in the city? I’m going to break both of your legs the next time you bring up the subject of selling my land. Maybe that will keep you from disgracing our family.”

He didn’t dare to bring up the subject of selling land again after that. Every time someone came to see his father about a debt he would leave the house in a huff and go sit beneath the banyan tree to sing like a wanderer who didn’t have a care in the world.

That tone of obstinacy was no longer in his father’s voice. During the two years that he served in the army the family’s debts increased rather than decreased and his father had all the trouble he could handle just dealing with creditors.

His father hadn’t come home for lunch at noon. He paced around his room. After the sun had disappeared behind the mountains his father returned looking distraught. He had probably been unable to get the money that he needed. Thinking that this might be a good opportunity, he said:

“Dad, we were talking about selling the land this morning—”

“What? Selling the land? What are you talking about?”

“Didn’t you agree to talk it over with me later? I think that if we sell the land we can pay off all of the debts and there will still be some money left over. I’ve finished my time in the army and I have some technical skills. If I go to the city and open an auto repair shop, Ah-hsiung can help out in the business too. Then you and Mom can come to the city and relax. It would be better than staying here—”

“The only thing you can think about is selling my land, isn’t it? Doesn’t anything good ever come out of your mouth? If I’m going to talk to you about selling my land, I might as well be talking to you about selling my soul. If I didn’t recall the fact that you’ve already been in and out of the army, and that you’re not a baby any; more, I’d grab the broom and beat you out of the door!”

“Dad, don’t be so stubborn. How can the value of farm land ever compare with the rising value of city land? One of my friends in the army told me that his family bought some land in Kaohsiung. In one year it doubled in value. Kaohsiung is a big city and it’s developing now. If you want to buy land there you have to do it before it’s too late. Dad, you live in the country, so you don’t understand how an industrialized society works.”

“Well, I don’t believe in an industrialized society if it’s built on selling land. I’m from the country and I want to stay in the country for the rest of my life. You go where you want to go, and don’t bother talking to me about selling land anymore. Get out, just get out, you damned wastrel!”

He had failed. He looked at his father's face that was, livid with rage and said:

“Okay, okay, I’m going, and I’m never coming back. I’m never coming back to see you crushed by your debts.”

He stormed out the door and made his way to the banyan tree where he froze for a night and then finally left at dawn.

He stayed away for nearly two years.

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His mother and father hadn’t been gone very long before he decided that he couldn’t help but go to Uncle Meng-ho’s house too.

His father was seated in a straight-backed chair on the left. On the right was Uncle Meng-ho, who had just begun speaking to the people who were listening attentively to him.

“I’m not in charge of selling Jung-ah’s land, but I’ll serve as a witness to any business transactions that go on here. I have a detailed account of everything that’s being sold here. First of all, I want each of you to present Jung-ah with the I.O.U.’s. Then the entire amount of money will be divided up among you according to an even ratio. Everyone will get their fair share, nobody’s going to be shortchanged. What do you say?:

“Can you tell us how much the land was sold for?”

“Yes. The land near the pump was sold for NT$125,000. The land near the road was sold for NT$157,000; the land with the stream running through it was sold for NT$30,000; altogether that comes to NT$312,000."\fn{A note reads: *The rate of exchange is slightly under NT$40 to the dollar*.}

“Doesn’t Jung-shu still have two banana groves in the back of the village?”

“He sold them a long time ago. You were in Taipei then, Aunt Pen, and if it hadn’t been for the fact that you were going to get some money out of this, I doubt that you would have even remembered your way back here.” said someone coldly.

“Yes, it sure is a long trip down from Taipei.”

"Those two groves were sold to raise money for my sister's medical expenses, and we had to use every cent of it the minute we got it. If we still had that land do you think we'd try and hide it from you?"

"Mind your manners, boy!"

"Everybody knows that these two banana groves were sold for Li-o. Jung-ah has had to spend a lot of money, and we all know what a generous man he is."

"According to Uncle Meng-ho's calculations, the entire amount of money from the sale of Jung-ah's land is not enough to pay back all of his debts, so are we just going to forget about the amount that can't be paid?"

"What else can we do? Chih-ah, all of you demanded that it be done this way in the beginning. Do you want them to sell their house and move away too? Now I know this is a matter of primary importance to all of you, but I can say in all honesty that the money be borrowed was not just squandered away—it was the interest that did him in."

Uncle Meng-ho shook his head and looked at Father.

"Jung-ah, it's not that I want to say I told you so, but when I advised you to sell the land to pay off your debts, you wouldn't listen to me. The only thing you could think of was your pride. Eventually you could have bought back the land, and Yao-ah wouldn't have left home then either."

"Well, I guess I kept waiting for a good harvest. Isn't paying off a debt usually a pretty simple matter? How was I to know that one disaster would lead to another? Yao-ah was right, but how could I agree to such a thing at that time? I had everything going for me until I hit a streak of bad luck at this old age, and the next thing I knew I was being forced to sell all of my property. How do you expect me to take something like this?" he said and then burst into a spasm of coughing.

"You'd better take care of yourself with a cough like that. Haven't you taken him to see a doctor, Tien-ah?"

"Uncle Meng-ho, I've tried in every way I could to get him to go, but he just won't listen. He says he can't bear to show his face on the street any more."

"Losing face should be the least of your worries with a cough like that. You're stubborn and you'll probably never change. But your health is important; money's no good without the man to spend it, you know."

Uncle Meng-ho's son, Ch'ing-ta, had made up a list of Dad's debts, and he asked Dad to look it over. Suddenly Ah-hsiung said:

"Dad, where did this one come from?"

"Which one?" everyone asked excitedly.

"The forty thousand owed to Ching-shen."

"What's so strange about it? Isn't that the money your mother borrowed from me when you were paying the balance on your house?"

"But I already paid back ten thousand on your husband's birthday."

"Oh yes, I forgot about that. But thirty thousand with interest comes to forty thousand."

"What? Ten thousand in interest? For how long?" someone asked.

"Three per cent comes to nine hundred a month. Are you trying to say that it doesn't add up to ten thousand a year?"

"Then we want three per cent interest on our loans too."

"Don't be ridiculous. Everyone has set their own rate of interest. How can everyone go by three per cent?"

"That's outrageous anyway. How can you charge interest as high as three per cent?"

"Who's being outrageous? At least I was willing to lend them money. I know all about people like you. Every one knows how much money you have but you'd like the world to think you haven't got a cent. You were just lucky that Jung-ah took pity on you the last time you needed help."

"Let's not talk about pity right now. If we're going to charge interest let's do it at the rate of two per cent. Nothing good ever came of usury anyway."

Sheng-shu was trying to work out a settlement, but Ching-shen didn't know a good thing when she saw it.

"What do you mean that nothing good ever came of usury? If it weren]'t for the high interest rates do you think people would be rushing down here from Taipei with money to lend? If you're talking about usury, two per cent is just as bad as three."

"That's enough! If you keep up this arguing, I'll just wash my hands of the whole affair. Jung-ah, do you have any objections?"

"I don't have anything to say. It doesn't matter if it's two or three per cent. They are all my friends and relatives and they did what they could for me and I'm grateful for it. I'll do whatever you think is best."

"All right. Since Jung-ah doesn't have anything to say about this, then I'll say something. In all fairness, two

and three per cent interest on a loan to your own friend or relative is pretty unreasonable. Especially when you know he's having a hard time of it. Since all of you asked me to settle this, I think you ought to charge a 1.5 per cent interest rate. What do you think?"

Some of the people in the crowd agreed while others complained that it would be too great a loss. Uncle Meng-ho stressed that if they didn't do it his way, he would have no further part of it. Finally everyone agreed after a long involved discussion. Everyone surrounded Ch'ing-ta while he figured it out in detail on an abacus. It wasn't until then that Uncle Meng-ho spotted him standing silently in the doorway and exclaimed:

"Yao-ah, I didn't know you were here!" His mother quickly said:

"Yes, he came home last night. I told him to stay home and watch the house tonight, but I see he didn't pay any attention to that."

"Well, he's not a child any more. He should know about these things. How's work?"

"Not bad. His boss knows how hard he works and really thinks quite a bit of him."

After Ch'ing-ta finished calculating and everyone had seen the figures, they argued again and in the end it was the good-hearted old Meng-ho who made all the proper adjustments to get the lowest possible figures and then asked for his father's opinion. Dad just shook his head, hesitated for a moment and then slowly said:

"The situation has come down to this and I really don't have anything to say about it. But I do have one request to make of Uncle Meng-ho and all of you. The land beside the road across from the banyan tree was the land from the ancestral estate that my Dad left me, and that was the most difficult piece of land for me to give up. After I die I know I won't be able to face my ancestors if I have given up that land. I hope Ch'ing-ta can promise me that if I have the means in the future, that he will sell that land back to me," he said and then began coughing again.

Dad inhaled with great difficulty through his nostrils, his eyelids fluttered and his face twisted into a mass of wrinkles. He was unable to say anything else. Uncle Meng-ho pulled at his beard and nodded his head.

"Jung-ah, don't worry. As long as I have at least one breath in me, I'll bear witness to Ch'ing-ta's promise. Won't I, Ch'ing-ta?"

Ch'ing-ta stood to one side and resignedly nodded in agreement.

After Ch'ing-ta had divided up the money and the receipts of the deeds, he gave them to Uncle Meng-ho and Dad to examine for errors. Then he passed them around for everyone to look at. At the end Uncle Meng-ho gave his father a small wad of money and said:

"I would like to end this by saying that Jung-ah has always done what he could for our village. Everyone knows that he is a generous man and that there is only bad luck to blame for all of the trouble that led up to this. I asked Ch'ing-ta to set aside this NT$1,000 before we began today. It's not very much, but we want Jung-ah to have it."

Uncle Meng-ho stuffed the money into Dad's pocket. Dad had remained calm throughout the proceedings of the day, but now his eyes began to redden and Mom began to sob loudly. The expression on Ah-hsiung's face was as hard as if it had been hewn of stone. Only he felt that there were no veins for the blood in his body to rush to.

Everyone silently picked up their share of the money. Suddenly Ching-shen, who had left unnoticed earlier, came rushing in excitedly.

"Uncle Meng-ho! Wait a minute! Last May Tien-ah borrowed NT$1,000 from me to buy cakes for festival. Lowering my interest on the rest of the money from 3 per cent to 1.5 per cent has cost me too much money, so you're going to have to get my thousand back for me."

Everyone was silent for a moment and the only thing that could be heard was the ticking of the clock.

His father took the NT$1,000 from his pocket and gave it back to Uncle Meng-ho with trembling hands.

"If you borrow money you always have to pay it back sooner or later. Uncle Meng-ho, I'll give this to you to take care of. Excuse me now, I—have to go."

Dad's face looked gray in contrast to his white undershirt. He looked as if all of the blood in his body had suddenly stopped flowing.

Yao-ah's temples were pounding, as was his heart, which he felt would burst from his chest at any moment. He couldn't stand it any more and pushed his way up to the front. Ching-shen, who had just behaved so rudely moved away in fear. His mother, who was crying loudly enough to wake the dead, held him back. He threw himself down before Uncle Meng-ho with tears streaming down his face and said:

"Uncle Meng-ho, we're not going to sell that land by the road, we're not selling."

"Don't be silly, stop crying; I understand, but—"

"Uncle Meng-ho, I'll buy it back immediately. I can get the money in two days. I'll think of something. Please help me, just wait two days."

Uncle Meng-ho, who had tears welling up in his eyes patted him on the shoulder.

"Come on, get up; I'll make sure it works out. Come on, get up now."

He turned around and embraced his mother and father.

"Dad, Mom, don't worry. I'll think of something. I'll be back in two days. Ah-hsiung, you take care of them, I've got to go now."

He bowed to Uncle Meng-ho and dashed out of the door and onto the hot winnowing square, trying to put all of the confusion of the moment out of his mind. He knew that where there was a will there was away. He was in the prime of his youth, like the sun at its zenith. The auto repair shop could wait, he thought, considering his father, who was like a sun sinking in the western sky. He broke into a run and rushed in the direction of the banyan tree.

78.101 Diary Of A Warden\fn{by Qi Ping aka Lu Qiping (1935-)} Nanchang, Jiangxi Province, China (M) 5

In the joyous days following the downfall of the "Gang of Four," Mao Qiankun, the newly reinstated Party secretary of the Iron and Steel Factory, had a large banquet in celebration of events gone by. He invited several of his former wardens and prepared for the special occasion a dish of symbolic value—crabs.\fn{A note reads: *In China, crabs historically symbolize evil figures and in this case represent the "Gang of Four." The implicit pun also refers to the way crabs walk—sideways, which in Chinese also means high-handed, oppressive ways of behavior*.}

All the guests had arrived except one—Xiao Wang. He apparently could not make it because he was called away on an urgent meeting. But he sent someone in his place to bring a "present" to the host. The present was smeared with ashes and dust, as if it had been dug out of an underground pit. It was wrapped with several sheets of newspaper; beneath the first was a thick layer of brown wrapping paper; and inside that was a plastic bag containing a diary with yellowish-green mold here and there on the cover.

The following were the contents of this diary:

January, 1975

Today, I accepted an "honorable but difficult" assignment: taking custody of a capitalist-roader.

I say "honorable" because the person to be taken into custody is a big shot, not only manager but also Party secretary of an iron and steel factory employing thousands of workers. His name was "on file" at the Municipality for being a "traitor" and "secret agent"—super material!

I say "difficult" because this capitalist-roader happens to be especially stubborn and sly. Two years ago, he was sentenced to do penal labor at the No.2 furnace, and he managed to incite a large group of people to engage in subversive activities. Then he was isolated for a second time just as the revolution was entering the "criticize Lin Biao and Confucius" stage.\fn{A note reads: *A political movement launched by the "Gang of Four" in early 1974 to discredit Premier Zhou Enlai and other veteran revolutionaries*.} There he again corrupted several wardens. The four wardens before me had all been trapped. Would I, the fifth, be able to resist him and keep my head above water? This was the rigorous test which as a demobilized, soldier, had to face.

Meng Feng told me these details about the capitalist-roader. He was Vice-Chairman of the Revolutionary Committee of the Iron and Steel Factory who was in charge of the special investigatory group. Over fifty years old, with a plump, jovial face, he had a deep dimple on each cheek. Althougb he gave the impression of being very amiable, at the end of our two-hour discussion, Vice-Chairman Meng drew in his smile and recited several paragraphs from Chairman Mao's directives regarding special investigative work. He then said to me in a solemn tone:

"Comrade Wang, the job you are about to undertake is a very difficult one. I hope you will not fall to live up to the trust placed in you by the organization."

I jumped up excitedly, clicked my heels to attention and answered boldly:

"Please have faith, Chief, in my promise to fulfill the assignment." After speaking, I became self-conscious about the removal of my collar and cap insignia which made me only one of. the common people. My embarrassment did not escape his sharp eyes. He patted my shoulder and said:

"You havc been quite a soldier. Upright and straightforward. I like your style. I hope you always stay this way."

The door swung open, and a person over thirty rushed in like a gust of wind. He wore a flat crewcut. His flesh bulged like that of a weight lifter. While the early spring weather had me wearing a thick cotton-padded coat, he

had on nothing but a woolen sweater, and even perspired in it. Vice-Chairman Meng introduced him in a tone of respect:

"This is Comrade Zhao Abao, Chairman pf our factory's revolutionary committee and commander-in-chief of our ten thousand fighters of "red flag iron and steel."\fn{A note reads: *A factional organization existed during the Cultural Revolution which started in 1966*.} Then Vice-Chairman Meng introduced me to him.

"Well, well!" Commander Zhao extended me his rough and hairy hand. My right hand was at once gripped tight as if by a pair of large pincers: He squeezed with greater and greater pressure as if testing my wrist strength. I held my breath, and did my best to reciprocate his handshake. He withdrew his hand in satisfaction, and gave me a matter-of-fact blow on my chest, saying good-naturedly:

"Good man! Do your best, and you will not fail to be rewarded when you have done your job." Then he whipped out of the room the same way he came in.

In the afternoon, I reported for duty to the special investigatory group, The leader of the group was a big fellow with a pock-marked face. He looked at me silently, opened a note-bopkand solemnly announced my duties:

"First, take custody of the capitalist-roader. Second, don't allow him to escape.. Third, don't let him commit suicide." I saw that the group leader was not qualified for his position. I could only take precautions to prevent him from escaping or committing suicide. How could I "not allow" him to do so?

After he finished reading, the pockmark-faced group leader waved his hand and said:

"You can begin your work tomorrow."

That night, lying on, a bunk bed in the dormitory, I contemplated my new life and fresh assignment. I could not fall asleep for a long time; it reminded me of the night before enlistment into the army.

*

What did the capitalist-roader I was to guard look like? When I entered the small room in which he was locked up, Bihu of the special investigatory group was giving him a haircut. He was a small and shriveled up old man, with a yellow-gray face, and two asymmetrical eyes, one large and one small. The large and spiritless right eye stared fixedly at you, while the smaller, brighter left eye constantly blinked. His eyebrows were thin, his front teeth protruded out of his lips, and his hair was already gray, but very hard and erect, like a third-grade bristle brush.

Xiao Fan, who alternated shifts with me informed me quietly:

"His original name was Mao Qiankun, but we all call him 'capitalist-roader.' How can a man like him have the same surname as our great leader?" Only eighteen or nineteen, Xiao Fan was quite handsome. He came to serve as a warden half a month before I did.

I sized up the solitary confinement ward—it was ten square meters or so, probably a former storeroom. It had four brick walls and a small window facing east, which framed the chimney of the factory in the distance. A few thin and rough laths were nailed on the window, which from the standpoint of preventing the escape of the capitalist-roader, hardly seemed sturdy enough. Presumably it was because the room was guarded and the special investigatory group's office was just above it that even with such shoddy preventive measures, they did not worry much about the old fellow's escaping.

There were two single wooden beds in the room, one for the capitalist-roader, the other for the warden. A small writing table and a long bench were beside each bed. Posters advocating "leniency to those who confess their crimes and severity to those who refuse to do so" were pasted on the wall.

Both Xiao Fan and Bihu had gone, and there were only the two of us left in the room. He turned to me, the large eye staring fixedly, the smaller one blinking incessantly. Considering that I would soon have to "eat, live and work together" with this repulsive capitalist-roader, my assignment was indeed "honorable but difficult."

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My duties as a warden were simple and monotonous. Xiao Fan and I took turns going on duty, keeping the capitalist-roader company. According to the rules, each of us had to do twelve hours a day; but we could be flexible. The important thing was that one of us was always there.

The daily life of the capitalist-roader was also mechanical and routine. First thing he did every morning was half an hour's exercise to the broadcast. The rest of the morning was spent studying, while in the afternoon he was supposed to write his confessions. According to Bihu, he was formerly tried once every three to five days, but later on, when it was found that nothing could be squeezed out of him and there were too many people waiting to be tried, he was left alone and was often not taken out for questioning for two to three months.

For the capitalist-roader, an inflexible routine was not so inflexible. Before daybreak when I had barely opened my eyes, I could hear Mao Qiankun's voice counting, "One, two, three, four; two, two, three, four …" The count-

ing was interspersed with gasps, and cracking movements of his arms and legs. He was creating a hodgepodge of calisthenics and traditional Chinese shadow boxing. He did whatever he felt like, and exerted all his strength. When he finished, he was drenched in sweat. Then he washed his face, brushed his teeth and ate breakfast. (According to the rules, we brought him his meals.) He read books and perused newspapers the whole morning. The book he was reading was *Anti-Dühring*\fn{The popular title: officially, *Herr Eugen Dühring's Revolution in Science* (1878, translated in 1934; several chapters published as a basic Socialist exposition under the title *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific* in 1892).} by Engels. He read a line, then recited it, just like a primary school pupil would his lessons, covering only two or three paragraphs of the book each day. When the newspaper came, he concentrated on it, reading everything from the first page to the last, from the news items and editorials to the weather forecast, not allowing one line of the small print escape him. Sometimes he even held the newspaper up to the light and peered at it as if searching for a secret from between the fibers of the paper. Most of the time, he read, then sighed, then gazed out the window in silent repose.

After lunch, he usually took a short nap with his clothes on. Then he walked around the room for a whole hour in a very peculiar way. He went from one corner of the room to the other, stopped, turned around 180 degrees, then walked back again. His pace increased with each trip. At the end of lone hour, his face was as a rule covered with sweat. The capitalist-roader was obviously a firm believer in the principles of survival.

In contrast, he wasn't nearly as earnest when it came to writing confessions. Instead he liked to doodle. Once I stole a glance at what he was writing and found the paper full of the two characters *jian chi*, meaning "to persist." Some were written horizontally, others vertically, some in large print, some in small, with still others in imitation song style and script. How could this be called confession writing? It was sheer resistance. I contemplated talking to him, but remembering that I was still a newcomer I managed to suppress my anger.

After the initial observation I knew that. my opponent was a formidable figure. I was suddenly seized by a strong wave of curiosity, I imagined how he would try to entice me and draw me in with his tricks, and how I was to beat him at his own game and force him to surrender at the critical moment, just as in the scenes of a movie thriller. I worked out many different schemes to deal with him and became anxious for him to play some tricks this very day so that I could test my own powers of judgment.

I glared at Mao Qiankun, itching to take up arms with him, but he continued reading his book, perusing his newspaper and writing his so-called "confessions" in solitude, as if I were not even there. Could it be that he was also silently spying on me, trying to discern my weak points? Although he sat upright in a very concentrated manner, my every movement seemed to inspire a subconscious reaction from him. This old fox is not an easy one. You may have 1,001 tricks up your sleeve, but I have one foolproof method to top them all. I have eyes like torches that can burn right through you. I, a radar operator who has gone through eight years' training in the army, will never fall into your trap or be beaten by your ambush. This was what I thought to mvself.

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He was still like a deaf-mute, but I couldn't hold my breath any longer. In military strategy, reconnaissance by firing is often used to compel the enemy to expose their position. I also formed such a plan to force him to speak. I took out a volume of *Anti-Dühring.* After a while, I pretended not to understand it and paced around the room as if deep in thought. In time, I came near Mao Qiankun, and by chance found that he was also reading the same book. Then I said offhandedly:

"*Ai*! This Dühring was truly a swindler. His 'world-schematism' has made my head all muddled."\fn{A note reads: *"World schematism" is a term first invented by Herr Dühring to describe his belief in tbe oneness, indivisibility and unity of a being. Engels criticizes this concept in his* Anti-Dühring.}

No answer.

"Hey! Can you help me explain it?" I asked. He finally held up his head and said slowly:

"According to my understanding, it is a reflection of subjective idealism."

"Uh … can you give me an example?"

"An example?" he stared at me with penetrating eyes, as if to determine my sincerity. A trace of sarcasm appeared at the corner of his smile, and he said:

"I hope you don't mind if I tell you something."

"Of course not. Out with it."

"It seems to me that you yourself have 'world-schematism' in your head."

"I?!"

"You never knew me before, and you had no knowledge of my background, but you have already taken me to be your class enemy. Is this not a reflection of 'world-schematism?'"

Quite a blow—for our first encounter! All the plans I had made became obsolete. I was dumb-founded, yet I couldn't be angry. He had warned me beforehand.

I was mortified by my defeat in our first battle and lost interest in reading. I looked at the book, but was thinking about a counter-move.

Suddenly I heard Mao say that he wanted to go to the lavatory again. That made it the third time this morning. How could he have so much to excrete? I followed him down the corridor to the lavatory. He pushed open the door and went in. I waited outside, I soon heard faint sounds of paper being torn up, I looked inside through the crevice of a window blind and saw that he was hastily throwIng a ball of shredded paper into the toilet; with a quick pull at the watertank string, the roll of paper was washed away.

It was too late to prevent him from doing away with the torn paper, so it was just as well that I played innocent and accompanied him back to the solitary confinement ward where he became again absorbed in a newspaper article, then hurried stealthily back to the lavatory and made a careful examination. I found that there was a small slip of paper stuck to the side of the toilet. On this slip of paper were the blurred words:

"Your former bodyguard …"

Apparently the paper contained the draft of a letter written to a bigwig. Who was this bigwig? Why was Mao Qian-kun writing to him? How did he plan on mailing the letter?

All these questions were riddles to me. But at least I had obtained undeniable proof of his "unlawfulness." In today's contest with him, we finally came to a draw: one to one.

*

Saturday. All workers who had gone off duty were hurrying home. I alone was loitering on the broad streets of this large steel city. Two years ago, to support the "third line" construction, my parents, younger brother and sister bad all gone to an inland mountain district.\fn{A note reads: *"Third line" refers to the interior provinces in China far away from the eastern coasts*.} So I was left without a home.

"*Honk*!"

The sound of a car horn made me aware that a "Shanghai" brand limousine had stopped behind me. The car's new coating shone with a bright sheen. The door opened, revealing Vice-Chairman Meng's plump, round face; smiling, he beckoned to me with his hand.

"Hey you! Nowhere to go on a Saturday night? Let's go to my place."

Being the immediate subordinate of this high-level cadre, I felt somewhat restrained and uneasy. But I couldn't refuse. I still had to show respect by accepting his invitation.

The car brought us swiftly to a secluded apartment building in the urban district. Vice-Chairman Meng ordered the driver to return to the factory, and led me inside. He explained to me that the former owner of the apartment was a reactionary capitalist who was deprived of the property during the Cultural Revolution. He said with a sigh:

"This revolution has been a good thing! We have to be thorough about change. If we were cautious, always afraid of this or that, this apartment house would still be in the hands of the capitalists, and not the people."

The apartment was quite spacious, but very simply furnished. There was only one unvarnished dining room table, several wooden benches and a wooden chair. The whole room appeared empty and uncoordinated; it had that special feel common to the quarters of many old cadres—it was in good condition but not luxurious. Vice-Chairman Meng enthusiastically motioned me to sit down. The first question he asked me was:

"What's your impression of Mao Qiankun?"

I replied: "In the first place, he is very afraid of death. Secondly, he is quite stubborn."

The Vice-Chairman uttered an "oh" sound to show his obvious interest, and encouraged me to go on. I poured out to him all my observations during the last few days, and showed him the slip of torn paper with the blurred characters. Then I added my results of today's investigation:

"I used to think that his scribbling of the characters meaning persistence was only a way to vent his frustrations or to pass time, but now I find the matter is not that simple. Today he wrote continuously on these sheets of paper. The arrangement of the characters is generally the same: on the upper right-hand corner are a few small characters in the imitation Song style; in the center are two lines of large regular script; on the lower left-hand corner are some medium-sized characters in running hand, while on the lower side are tiny characters in regular script. This shows that he was drawing a picture of some kind."

"Picture?! What kind of picture?" Vice-Chairman Meng asked impatiently, stretching his neck forward and knitting his brow.

"I'm not quite clear. I intend to continue my investigation." I replied.

"The details you have just reported are very important, Yes, very important," he said. He paced the room with

his hands crossed behind his back, his eyes gleaming with a peculiar brilliance. His chin was quivering with emotion.

"This Mao Qiankun is quite something!" he exclaimed. "The evidence of his being a traitor and secret agent is already quite substantial, yet he refuses to admit his guilt. We already suspect that he must have some kind of backing. Now we've got him—traitor, secret agent, capitalist-roader, plus underground operator. Mao Qiankun may be as slippery as an eel but he can no longer escape our revolutionary punishment." I pointed out solemnly:

"We only have a clue. We could never frighten away the snake by beating the grass!"

"Of course," he said. "Let's stop right here. You've had vigorous training in the army. You've got keen eyes and a good head. In just a few days, you've managed to come up with such important clues. I can now set my mind at rest by putting him in your hands." Then he called: "Rixiu! Quick! Bring some tea and cigarettes for the guest!"

A girl, about twenty-three or twenty-four, came out from tbe inner room. She wore two long braids. Her movements and speech were like those of an actress. She brought me a cup of green tea, a pack of cigarettes and a box of candies as was the custom for receiving guests in urban homes. Vice-Chairman Meng proudly introduced her to me:

"This is my daughter Rixiu. She is also working in the iron and steel factory. In 1974, our factory leaders decided to perform a 'surgical operation' on the No.2 furnace. They got rid of the 'cancerous' cadres and let some more youthful ones take over. Commander Zhao forced me to strengthen the leadership by including my daughter. I had no choice but to obey."

Who would think that such a nice girl like her was also a worker at a steel factory, moreover a leader? I could not help looking her up and down. Rixiu shook her head mischievously, throwing back one of her long braids, as if to say: "What's the matter? Don't I look like one?"

Vice-Chairman Meng let out a long breath, and picking up the thread of our conversation of a moment ago, said:

"This Mao Qiankun is by no means easy to deal with. I worked with him for more than twenty years, but still was not able to see through him."

"Even you, Vice-Chairman Meng, have worked with Mao Qiankun?" I asked in surprise.

"Hmmm," he said, nodding his head somewhat reluctantly. "When this city was just liberated, he was transferred to the iron and steel factory as chief of the military control group. I was an officer under him. To tell you the truth he was my sponsor when I applied to join the Party … and I did many wrong things as his subordinate. Only with assistance of the revolutionary rebelling organization was I able to draw a line between us in our political inclinations and ideology."

I suddenly remembered the question about the laths the window, and anxiously pointed out to him:

"The laths in his room are too thin, and they are poorly nailed on window. If—"

"You're afraid of his running away? This fear is necessary." Vice-Chairman Meng shook his head. Then some unknown reason, a meaningful smile worked its from the corner of his mouth, and he said:

"In truth, if were to run away, the matter might be settled easily …"

This seemed to me unfathomable: The pockmarked group leader told me explicitly not to allow the capitalist-roader to escape. Why did Vice-Chairman Meng say that "if he would run away, the matter could be settled more easily?" I wanted to pursue the question, but he immediately changed the subject.

*

The intermIttent drizzle was putting me in a bad mood.

After breakfast, I turned on the light and was thinking of forcing myself to settle down and read the newspaper when suddenly Bihu came in and asked me to go outside. He whispered to me that Mao Qiankun's daughter had come to see him, and told me to keep a look-out and to take immediate action should I find anything wrong.

Mao Qiankun's daughter was short and slender. She had a pale face and was already hunchbacked. She looked at me, her melancholy eyes filled with hostility, then buried her head into her father's chest.

Mao Qiankun's expression at this moment was very complicated. His blinking left eye was now as steady as his right. one. But he very quickly controlled himself and forced back his tears. Then he began to look his daughter over carefully from head to toe. He stroked her back tenderly, as if he wanted to straighten it.

"At such a young age, why are you already hunchbacked?"

The girl smiled sadly and said: "I can't help it." Then she obediently straightened out her back. After a while, she said slowly:

"Daddy, I graduated from the Foreign Languages School."

"Oh," Mao Qiankun replied, his left eye blinked as if he were surprised at how quickly time had passed. Then he asked: "You were learning Spanish?"

"Mmmm."

"Have you been assigned yet?"

The girl sighed and lowered her eyelids. "As a matter of fact, all the foreign affairs departments were short of people, but because of my poor family connections, because you are … I will be given a post either in the mountains or in the countryside."\fn{A note reads: *The current substitute expression for an agricultural assignment*.} The girl started to weep and could not go on.

"Then where to?"

"It's not been decided." The girl wiped away her tears with the back of her hand and mumbled: "Day before yesterday, the Party branch committee secretary suddenly sent for me and told me that there were three roads ahead of me, and it was up to me to choose one of these roads."

"What three roads?"

"The first road is for me to expose thoroughly your counter-revolutionary activities by willingly submitting evidence to the Party committee concerning your crimes as a traitor and secret agent. That way I can stay in the city. The second road is to cut off our relationship as father and daughter; then I can go to a state farm. If I don't draw a clear line between us, but insist instead that you are a revolutionary cadre, then I have to live and work with a production team in a hillside village."

Her complaints were getting more and more intolerable. Was she not slandering the policy of letting intellectual youth go to work in the mountains and countryside? I was very angry, and so I stood up and cut her off, shouting:

"You are talking nonsense! How dare you speak in such a way about your Party branch committee secretary?"

"You can find out for yourself if you don't believe me!" the girl suddenly turned around and shouted back at me. I of course would not allow myself to be outdone.

"I certainly will inquire. What is the name of your school and who is the Party branch secretary?" I demanded. I had hoped to frighten her with my threatening words, but who would have thought that they would only make her more indignant? She jumped up; her eyes were on fire. Her once pale face was now flushed all over.

"Go," she said. "I'll take you there right now. Moreover, our Party branch secretary told me that the decision of our school authorities about me was made at the request of your iron and steel factory."

To my surprise, her firm tone and her outspoken and fearless manner overpowered me. The girl was not telling a lie; she had no need to do so. Could there exist such open defiance of Chairman Mao's instructions, such misuse of the directive to go to work in the mountains and in the country-side as a measure of punishment or exchange?! I didn't know what to say just then.

Mao Qiankun, for his part, remained quite composed; he did not consider what his daughter had said to be at all strange. The girl suddenly grabbed his shoulder and asked innocently:

"Daddy, have you ever really been a traitor or secret agent?"

"What do you think?"

The girl thought about it for a moment, shook her head and then said, "You don't look like one."

"You are such a silly child. Can you tell a traitor or a secret agent by his appearance?"

"No, what I mean is that all traitors and secret agents wish that the Party and the whole country would go to hell. But you taught me when I was very young to love Chairman Mao and the Chinese Communist Party. You yourself worked day and night—"

"Positive words may only be a cover-up."

"Yes, our teacher also said so." The girl knitted her brow. "They say that it is a kind of protective coloring used by traitors and secret agents to camouflage themselves. They couldn't have survived otherwise."

Mao Qiankun nodded his head.

"It's quite true," he said. "But once, you returned home very late at night, called me and mamma up from our beds, and with tears of joy said to us, 'Premier Zhou came to our factory today! He was still as affectionate and as brilliant a talker as before. He went to every workshop and shook hands with everybody. Moreover, he asked us whether we could double or triple our production. Our country, he said, was desperately in need of iron and steel! Without iron or steel we could not defeat our enemy. Without iron or steel we could not build socialism!' Since then, you seemed to have been afflicted with some kind of illness; you talked about nothing but iron and steel. Your words caused calluses to grow in our ears … I don't think you were pretending. You don't know how to pretend."

Mao Qiankun was silent for a long while. Then he again stroked his daughter's hunched back,

"*Ah*! Your back …"

The girl again straightened up her body; but soon becamehunched again, saying regretfully, "I can't help it. Just like one's family background—you can't change it."

"No!" Mao Qiankun loudly rebuked his daughter. The severity of his voice frightened even me. "Wherever you go, you must keep your back straight!"

His words seemed irrational; yet the girl nodded her head as if she understood. She straightened up her back, and was not hunchbacked again before she left.

When there were just the two of us left in the room, Mao Qiankun looked blankly at the door, as if deep in meditation. I intended to finish reading the newspaper article on *Criticisms of Confucianism and Appraising Legalism*, but for some unknown reason, I couldn't concentrate.

Bihu again beckoned me to go out of the room. He asked me what Mao Qiankun and his daughter talked about. Offended, I replied:

"I don't know." Bihu said in surprise:

"Weren't you in the room the whole time?" I became unaccountably angry, and said:

"Among the responsibilities given me by the pockmark-faced group leader, there is none to monitor the prisoner." I was so excited and my manner so hostile when I spoke these words that Bihu, although he was angry with me, could only conclude our conversation by saying:

"Ugh! Just look at yourself!"

*

I was assigned a room. It faced south, covered an area of eighteen square meters, had a kitchen, a bathroom and a balcony. This new worker's house was situated right in the neighborhood of the iron and steel factory, only five minutes to and from work. I knew that housing in the city was very difficult. A number of young men and women were forced to postpone their weddings because of a lack of housing. How could the iron and steel factory be so liberal in allocating houses?

Bihu became aware of my doubt. He bragged about our factory leaders:

"Look, a row of five-story houses. Aren't they magnificent? They were obtained by our Commander Zhao and Vice-Chairman Meng through cooperation with the housing control department. We gave them some iron and stecl, and we got these houses. Aren't our factory leaders resourceful?"

"Do you have a room too?"

"Of course, just next to yours." Knowing that Bihu was also single, I proposed:

"Let's share one room, and return the other one." Bihu waved his head back and forth, saying:

"No, no, our factory's houses are also very scarce; we shouldn't be so generous. Moreover, this room was especially allotted to you by Vice-Chairman Meng. Look, it even has a better eastern exposure than mine." Then he deliberately lowered his voice and whispered mysteriously in my ear:

"Vice-Chairman Meng has taken a special interest in you. He may have the intention of making you his son-in-law. Do your best, young man. Once you have his backing, you will have nothing else to worry about, Nowadays, you can't get on without a backer, ha ha! …"

His words disgusted me, I hastened to cut him short:

"Don't talk nonsense."

Bihu's small eyes narrowed into slits. He puckered his aquiline nose, and said with even more abandon:

"Hmph! I know what I'm saying. Take Mao Qiankun's meeting with his daughter day before yesterday. If the warden had been anybody else, well, it would be strange if he were not dismissed. But because it was you, the Vice-Chairman just said, 'This young fellow has no experience. Let him take some time to recollect what happened.' To tell you the truth, you are obligated to tell me in detail what happened that day. This is part of your work." I said:

"With me monitoring them, what could they say?"

"Just tell me something, anything, so I can make a report to complete my duties."

"I really didn't listen very carefully."

Bihu was getting angry. ":Then what were you doing?" he asked.

"I was reading the newspaper."

"What kind of news had you so spellbound?"

"I was reading a story about the struggle between Confucianists and Legalists." I felt I might as well make something up on the spot.

“Ha ha!” Bihu let out a piercing peal of laughter. I held my breath, afraid that he would see through my lie. However, he only said: “The struggle between Confucianists and Legalists! My, my! Why are you interested in things like that? It’s only a hoax with which to deceive people!” Then he again burst out into mad laughter. He was laughing at my *naïvete* and childishness.

*

The long awaited Fourth National People’s Congress was finally convened. I held the newspaper with both hands, looked at the thin and emaciated countenance of our beloved Premier Zhou Enlai, and tears filled my eyes. Mao Qiankun subscribed to the newspaper at his own expense. Usually I could only read it after he had finished with it. But today, since the paper contained such important news, plus a photo of the premier, I couldn’t help but grab it first and read it through from beginning to end.

It was not enough to read the paper just once, so I decided to buy a copy for myself and keep it as a .souvenir. After notifying the special investigatory group upstairs, I sped to the nearest newspaper stand in the neighborhood. When I arrived, I was shocked to find that there was already a line of people almost half a mile long.

Having finally bought a copy for myself, I left happily without bothering to collect my change. When I returned, I found Mao Qiankun with his face buried in the newspaper, heaving his shoulders convulsively. Tears had drenched and even soaked a hole through the paper. When he saw me enter the room, he hurriedly dried his eyes with his sleeves, and then began to do his self-designed exercises (though it was not his usual time for doing them). Finished with the exercises but still panting, he spread out some paper and began to write furiously. What was he writing? Evidently, it was not his confessions. Neither was he writing the characters which meant persistence in different styles. I knew this because, when I walked towards him, he hurriedly covered up the paper with his sleeve and drew randomly on another sheet of paper. But I didn’t say anything this time.

*

“The capitalist-roader has run away! The capitalist-roader … has … run … away! Quick! … Catch … him!”

Mao Qiankun took off on the paved road while I followed closely behind. I kept shouting while chasing him, hoping that someone might hear my cries and help me stop him. But it was already past midnight, and there was not a shadow of a man.

The ordinarily lethargic and idle Mao Qiankun suddenly became quick and agile as a cat. With body bent at the waist, arms waving in the air, he ran, with short and rapid steps through the windy and rainy street like a shuttle. I called for help but could get no response. I had shouted my throat hoarse and tired out my legs and feet, but he did not seem to care. He ran on and on and on! While we’re on the subject, I must admit that the incident was really all my fault.

After supper, Mao Qiankun, as was his habit, stood beside the window and gazed up at the sky. Suddenly his expression changed. His left eye blinked furiously, and he pressed his face against the wooden laths on the window. His behavior was extremely unusual. With the patience I had acquired in the army during training as a radar operator, I observed him carefully and in silence.After a while, he could no longer control himself. He slapped his coarse bed board and cried:

“Something’s gone wrong! Something’s definitely wrong!”

I put my questions coldly:

“What’s gone wrong and who is responsible?” He explained:

“The No.2 furnace. Look! It’s that furnace just opposite this building. The temperature is too high!"

“It’s good to have a high-temperature furnace.” I made this amateurish remark rashly. “Hasn’t it been said that only raging fire can produce pure steel?”

“That depends on the actual conditions. The No. 2 furnace is a piece of old equipment. It hasn’t been carefully maintained in many years. It can’t bear such a burden.” Then he waved his fist and stamped his foot, saying: “If anything disastrous should happen, I don’t know how you’ll be able to account for it!”

Being a layman when it came to steel production, I could not evaluate his opinion. But I was offended by his arrogant manner. So I said coolly”

“Hmph! It’s your Confessions you should pay more attention to.”

My words evidently angered him. With his face all flushed with exasperation, he said:

“You and your lot are throwing the country’s properties down the drain. Should something happen to the No.2 furnace, I’ll hold you responsible!” I was furious and counter-attacked:

“Mao Qiankun; don’t forget your present status. You are a capitalist-roader, and yet here you are flailing your arms about, criticizing others. It won’t do.” He stamped his feet and shouted:

“My case has not yet been decided. I have not yet been expelled from the Party. I am still one of the iron and

steel factory's personnel. If I see a problem, I have the right to point it out. No one can pressure me into silence." I said:

"The factory's revolutionary committee is well organized. Production is under control. There's no need for you to worry."

"If you really had a mind for production, you could spare me the worrying."

A thought suddenly occurred to me:

"You have been here for more than a year. How do you know that the temperature of the No.2 furnace is too high?"

"The chimney of the No.2 furnace is just in front of this window. How couldn't I know? Just by looking at the smoke coming out from the chimney, I can tell that the furnace temperature is too high."

"Why can't I tell?"

"You don't understand these things."

"You know more than I do?"

"I have been in the iron and steel factory for more than twenty years. Of course I know more than you."

How conceited! I countered pointedly:

"I admit that I know less than you do. But what about the many experienced workers at the No.2 furnace? Do they also not know?" He let out a long sigh:

"All those who have professional knowledge have been removed from their posts." I added:

"There are so many old workers and technicians. How can they all be deposed?"

He stared with his right eye, showed the whites of his left, and his chin quivered, so he could not speak. After a long while he finally said with a trembling mouth:

"I don't want to bicker with you. But I formally request—no, I formally beg you to report at once to our leaders, and I ask them to take immediate steps. Otherwise it will be too late."

The last few words were spoken in a very low voice. I saw that he was dead serious about the matter and I concluded he might have good reason to be so. Anyhow I should report to our factory leaders. I therefore consented:

"Well, I'll go and tell them about it."

Bihu happened to be on duty in the special investigatory group. After hearing me out, he shook his bald head impatiently and said:

"This is just like the man of Qi in the old legend who was haunted by the fear that the sky might fall! Mao Qiankun is not our factory leader. What has the furnace temperature got to do with him?"

I suggested that Bihu make a report. He very reluctantly lifted the telephone receiver and called Vice-Chairman Meng. From the pained expression on his face I could tell that he was probably met with rebuff. Sure enough, Vice-Chairman Meng said that since the movement to "criticize Confucius and Lin Biao" began, there were rumors that Legalists could only engage in revolution and didn't know production. The revolutionaries of the No. 2 furnace decided to smash such shameless slander by action, namely, to set a new record with the old equipment of the No. 2 furnace. The fact that Mao Qiankun was making such a fuss at this very moment indicated that he had an ulterior motIve. So, Vice-Charman Meng said, we must keep vigilance against the new movement of our class enemy and not let ourselves be deceived.

On hearing Vice-Chairman Meng's analysis, I became aware of Mao Qiankun's deliberate attempt at deceit. When I went back to the solitary confinement ward, I purposely walked up the stairs with heavy steps and closed the door with unusual force. Mao Qiankun approached me and asked eagerly:

"How do things stand? Did you make a report?"

"Yes," I replied, sitting jerkily on the bed. "The No. 2 furnace has no problems at all."

"No problems?"

"Not only are there no problems, but it is setting a record in production."

"Setting a record! No wonder they keep going like this. This is killing a hen to get eggs!"

"Killing a hen to get eggs?"

"Yes, the furnace is already very old and not well-maintained; yet they want to work it as long as they can. They'll have an accident before a record is established. Even if nothing serious goes wrong, the furnace will be of no use after a record has been set."

"Is it as serious as that?"

"It is indeed serious!"

I felt embarrassed. After listening to the two sides, both of which seemed reasonable enough, I, an ignoramus on the subject, found it impossible to decide whom to believe. Putting aside the question whether Mao Qiankun

meant well or ill, one can't expect to set records without adopting safety measures. The leadership had to be notified at once.

I again hurried upstairs. The bulging cheeked Bihu impatiently handed me the telephone receiver. I had no choice but make the call during which the following dialogue place:

"I want to speak to Vice-Chairman Meng."

"He's in a meeting."

"Then please find the leader in charge of production."

"He's also in a meeting."

"Can you please ask him to come out for a while?"

"No I can't."

"I have some important business, in connection with the No. 2 furnace."

"The meeting is about class struggle. It is much more important than your No. 2 furnace."

Then, click, the line was dead.

Seeing how disturbed I looked, Mao Qiankun immediately understood. He emitted a long sigh, saying:

"We have done our duty."

Resuming his usual manner, he spread out his quilt, unbuttoned his clothes, took off his shoes and covered himself up with his blanket from head to foot. I also took off my clothes and went to bed, but had no desire to sleep. I gazed outside the window at the chimney of the No.2 furnace in the distance. It looked like a guided missile pointing proudly at the blue night sky. Sparks sporadically spurted out from the mouth of the chimney and soared to the sky, now bright, now dim, as if the chimney itself were trembling and shaking, ready to blast off. I did my best to assure myself that this was only an illusion: the chimney could not take off and nothing would happen to the furnace. But my heart was beating faster and harder. I felt as if a small hammer were pounding through my chest.

Suddenly I heard a creaking noise. Mao Qiankun got up abruptly. I couldn't see him in the dark, but I could see a spark of light. No, it wasn't a spark.. It was one of Mao Qiankun's eyes. He turned quickly around, got out of bed, and put on his clothes and shoes. His movements were as fast as the wind.

I quickly turned on the bedside light. The light on, I could see that Mao Qiankun was already dressed and was about to pull open the door. I jumped down from my bed with the speed of military maneuver and, taking one long stride towards him, grabbed the hand that was turning the door knob. I asked in a stern voice:

"What are you doing?"

"I want to go have a look!"

"Where to?"

He pointed outside the window. I knew what he meant and was about to get out of his way. But my duties as a warden instantly sobered me up. I forcibly removed his hand from the door knob and said sternly:

"You can't go!" Gasping, I added another warning: "Don't forget you are a capitalist-roader under investigation."

"No, I can't; I can't let an accident happen at the furnace!" he muttered as if he were in a dream. With dazed eyes, a heavy breath and foaming mouth, he again dashed towards the door.

I got hold of his wrist with one hand, and with the other took out the keys and locked the door. He stared at me with bloodshot eyes, and desperately pushed me in an attempt to obtain my keys. Failing to do that, he tried to force open the door. When that also failed, he ran round and round the room like a besieged beast in its cage, trying to find a way out.

Considering that such a deadlock was no way to settle the matter, I suddenly thought of a change in strategy that would give me some respite. I said to Mao:

"Don't be in such a hurry. I'll go contact them again, and ask them to take urgent measures."

I was afraid he might escape, so I locked the door from the outside. I went upstairs and found that the door of the special investigatory group office was also locked. Bihu who ought to have been on duty, was no where in sight.

I ran downstairs angrily, and looked for Mao Qiankun to discuss the situation. Upon entering the room, I saw that the window was wide open, the wooden laths had been broken and there was no sign of the capitalist-roader.

Damn! The capitalist-roader had run away! I rushed to the window and saw a dwarfish figure running in the direction of the No. 2 furnace. Yes, it was him! I dressed myself quickly, opened the door and ran with long strides after him, crying out:

"The capitalist-roader has escaped! Quick! Catch him!"

I was, after all, younger and stronger than Mao Qiankun. I had undergone daily training in mountain climbing when serving duty on an island, developing strength in my legs. Indeed the distance between us was shortened after a little while. It seemed that he had tripped on a stone for he started to stagger, which meant that I could easily grab him with one quick charge. Then suddenly a thought occurred to me: he must be using the No. 2 furnace as a cover in his attempt to escape! I considered his escape in conjunction with his strenuous daily exercises, and concluded that he must have been preparing for today's occasion from the very beginning.

A gust of night wind cleared my head. Calmly, I surveyed the surrounding terrain. If Mao Qiankun were trying to get away, he would have to have some accomplices that could protect him. Who were they? How were they going to help him? I would very soon be able to obtain an answer. It would be an excellent opportunity which might never be had again. Then I thought: wouldn't chasing him and shouting madly for help be the same as frightening away the snake by beating the grass? So I slowed down my steps and stopped shouting. Mao Qiankun, however, was still running furiously against the wind. He appeared not to have seen me. I leaped behind a cement electricity pole and searched carefully around me, but found nothing suspicious. So I took advantage of the terrain's topographical features to keep my distance, but also keep him carefully in view. I passed the dumping grounds for burnt charcoal and cast iron before arriving at the No. 2 furnace.

I heaved a sigh of relief. Mao Qiankun had not deceived me after all. The whole workshop was flaming red. Heat waves billowed out, scorching everything nearby. Sweat and grease coated faces of the panic-stricken workers scrambling about. Amid the bustling could be heard cries of

"It's leaking, it's leaking!"

"No, it's cracked!"

"Quick, report to …"

"Someone telephoned but there was no answer!"

"It's no use to call! We'd better just get out of here!"

"Is it a leak or a crack?"

"The crack is getting bigger!"

"Quick, quick!"

Some workers screamed, others stamped their feet. There were also those who ran towards the furnace, and when they got there did not know what to do and could only back out. One man went to fetch a fire extinguisher, Another pointed out to him that it was useless; the man then let go of the fire extinguisher and took up an emergency ax. A female worker embraced a public thermos bottle and busied herself with it. It was apparent that they all wanted to take part, even at the risk of their lives, but no one knew exactly what to do.

Was the chaotic situation due to a lack of leadership? No, it didn't look that way. To be sure, there was someone standing in the center of the crowd taking charge. Judging by the slenderness of the person's back, it was a woman. She extended her arms in an effort to calm the gathering down, but her presence only added to the general confusion. She instructed two individuals to climb to the top of the furnace to investigate, but they swore that the trouble could not be from there. They even quarreled with her. Among the remaining people, some tried to mediate while others sumpathized with one side or the other. The arguments became more heated. The girl squatted down on the ground and began to weep, her shoulders heaving up and down, leaving aside the workshop and the serious danger facing it.

As an amateur to the steel industry, witnessing the circumstances described above caused me to break out in sweat. The girl suddenly turned her head around. Was she not Rixiu? She wore bulky canvas work clothes. Her pretty face was covered with tears and grease. She appeared to be both distraught and disgraced, like a child appealing to her parents after being bullied. Such a big workshop placed under her care. Wasn't it a sham of official affairs?

Mao Qiankun, who stood ahead of me, had of course seen the whole thing. He at once jumped up on a big iron block, raised an arm and cried:

"Settle down, everyone!"

His voice was not loud, but it had a great impact. The crowd very quickly calmed down. Rixiu also stopped weeping. All the people in the workshop looked up to the skinny old man with their eyes respectful, trusting and obedient. In the brilliant light of the flames, his perspiring head seemed glazed; his whole body looked like a bronze statue. With stern eyes, he surveyed the entire scene and peered at the site of the accident with a hand serving as eye-shade. Majestically, he ordered two workers to put on asbestos clothes arid investigate the details of the accident. He told another worker to go to the nearby workers' dormitory to summon more help. Yet another was ordered to watch fluctuations of tbe meters, and a woman worker was instructed to take care of the telephone. The

remaining people were divided into two groups; some experienced workers together with a number of young and strong chaps were organized into an emergency repair squad, wearing asbestos clothes or dampenedgunny sacks, the rest formed a service group to transport tools and materials.

The two workers sent to “reconnpiter” came back and made a report with many technical terms. Mao Qiankun waved his hand to the emergency repair squad and said:

“Start!”

The emergency repair squad members marched rapidly in a file towards the spot of the accident; the scene was quite similar to that of old army soldiers armed with bangalores going to blow up a pillbox. I, a youngster who was once a soldier, felt I should belong to the repair squad. I therefore got hold of a dampened gunny sack and put it on my head. But due to my lack of technical know-how and my unfamiliarity with the terrain, I kept bumping into people and getting in their way. The vigilant Mao Qiankun pointed at me with his forefinger and said:

“You, go to that group!”

“That group” was of course the service group; it consisted entirely of women and old men. I was unwilling to join their company. But Mao Qiankun stared at me with threatening eyes and menacing eyebrows; his manner was comparable to that of a general on a battlefield. I had to withdraw obediently from the emergency repair squad and follow the service group members to transport firebricks.

Coincidentally, Rixiu was behind me. She had now freed herself from the trauma and burden of leadership. She seemed content to carry bricks and not to mind the fact that Mao Qiankun had taken the “power” from her hands.

Workers arrived one after another with clothes draped over their shoulders and shoes dragging on their feet. Perhaps it was because Mao Qiankun stood above everyone else, or because he seemed a natural center in this emergency repair battle, all the people who had come to help instinctively reported to him for duty. He directed them to join one of the two groups, according to the conditions of the worker and the requirement, of. the emergency repair work. Two workers were burned by the raging fire and were carried away. Mao Qiankun gestured to send the wounded quickly to the hospital, and ordered some other workers to continue the emergency repair. Under his direction, the work was carried on smoothly.

The intense struggle lasted about an hour. Then good news began coming in: the opening had been blocked. Still later, any possibility of danger was eliminated. The people in the workshop heaved sighs of relief; smiles began to appear on their grease-staimed faces. The workers, in groups of two and three, embraced and slapped one another, celebrating their victory. Suddenly, a middle-aged worker standing beside me remarked to another person:

“Hey! Isn’t that the capitalist-roader Mao Qiankun?”

The person spoken to was a young man. He curled his lip and answered:

“So what if he is a capitalist-roader! Wouldn’t it have been a bigger mess tonight without him?” Amid the noise of celebration, Mao Qiankun gently leaped from the iron block, pulled my sleeve and said:

“Let’s go.”

“What?” I was lost in the pleasure of the moment. and failed to catch his meaning right away.

“We have to return to the solitary confinement ward.”

We dragged our weary legs home. The cold wind blowing against our faces already reddened by the fire made us shiver. Mao Qiankun, no longer young in age, walked with difficulty behind me. Once he almost tripped. I hurried to lend him a hand. Together we limped back home, and when we arrived, the day was already breaking. I brought him a basin of hot water to wash with, and a bowl of boiling hot rice gruel from the canteen. Then I draped my army overcoat around him. For the first time, he smiled at me in gratitude. His smile was so sincere and full of feeling. I suddenly felt that Mao Qiankun, sitting there in my army overcoat, was not at all an abominable old fox, but an able and powerful old cadre. Even his asymmetrical eyes (I found out only yesterday that his right eye had been shot blind during the war and had been replaced by an artificial one) appeared to be quite affectionate and kind.

It was really a pity that he had been a traitor and secret agent, otherwise …

*

This afternoon, Bihu came in, placed one hand on the back of my ear and said mysteriously, even with a touch of jealousy:

“You little devil, you’ve done it! He’s again sent for you.”

“Who’s sent for me? Where am I supposed to go?"”I asked, not knowing what he meant.

Bihu, full of flattering smiles, said, “Don’t play dumb.”

I lay open my palms as an expression of my continued ignorance.

"I've just received a call. You're to go to the home of Vice-Chairman Meng at half past six tonight." So saying, he winked at me and slapped my shoulder.

I went at the appointed time and rallg the door bell. Rixiu opened the door. She extended her hand to me like an old friend, saying:

"Well, Xiao Wang, it's very obvious you were trained in the army. You're right on time."

Rixiu was especially well-dressed today. Her hair was carefully combed. Sky-blue ribbons were fastened at the end of each braid. Her high-heeled shoes sounded rhythmically on the waxed floor. In contrast to her awkward appearance the previous night she now seemed quite a different person.

More astonishing things followed. After the greeting, I went to sit down on the hard wooden bench. Rixiu, however, opened a small door to what looked like a closet in the corner of the room, and beckoned to me:

"Come inside, please."

What then I saw surprised me. There was a large room inside the small door, at least fifty or sixty square meters in size. The painted walls were lined with carved boards. Velvet curtains draped either side of the steel French windows. A large electric fan hung connected to a crystal chandelier. On one side of the room was a grand piano, on the other a double bed and a complete set of redwood furniture. Only in the movies had I ever seen such luxurious accommodations.

Rixiu turned on the lamp and let me sit down on a leather-covered sofa. She explained:

"This was the reception room of a reactionary capitalist. The furniture was also his. During the Cultural Revolution he was forced out of his home. The house was then given to my father. These things are public property; they are here temporarily. It's better that they're here rather than in a storeroom where they'd just occupy space and deteriorate. So here they are." Rixiu rattled on and on, and in conclusion added in a serious voice:

"My father has told me that besides Commander Zhao and a few intimate friends, no one is allowed to come in here. As for you …"

She did not finish her sentence.

This unusual reception and excessive hospitality made me feel quite uncomfortable. Remembering the degrading words Bihu said to me, I slided quickly to the corner of the sofa, and tried to find something to say:

"Where's your father?"

"He's gone to the Municipality to attend a meeting."

"Why did he send for me?"

Rixiu pressed her lips together and smiled:

"Can you guess?"

"No, I can't."

"Of course, it's about the escape of the capitalist-roadel through the window."

Vice-Chairman Meng must be investigating who was responsible for the incident. I felt uneasy and tried to defend myself. "The wooden laths were very carelessly nailed to the window; I had pointed this out quite some time earlier."

Rixiu laughed heartily. Then she whispered to me mysteriously:

"As a matter of fact, you did a very good thing."

"What!" I thought she was referring to the emergency repair of the furnace that night. But on the contrary, she said:

"My father and Commander Zhao have both been very worried these past few years. They can't come to a decision and close Mao Qiankun's case with the evidence now in our hands. Further investigation can't produce any more results. We still have to keep him in custody. On the other hand, it would be good to let him get away. Now with his running away, this offence, plus his past record, is enough to pass a verdict on him."

I stared at her with wide-open eyes. I couldn't believe my ears. A layer of coolness wafted off my back. I couldn't believe that this frivolous young girl, who just last night displayed such helplessness in the face of crisis, could express such an "informed opinion." I was determined to get to the bottom of the matter:

"Then, the window laths were nailed on carelessly on purpose?"

Rixiu laughed again, and then said seriously, "I didn't say that."

The door opened. The stout Vice-Chairman edged in. Upon seeing me, he was both surprised and uncomfortable. He gave Rixiu a look of contempt. Then he asked me with a straight face:

"You've come early!" I stood up and replied:

"Didn't you tell me to come at half past six?"
"I?"
Rixiu interjected in a hurry:
"Daddy, it's I who told him to come earlier, because I was afraid he might not be able to find our house in the dark."
"It's all right that he's come." After that Commander Zhao came in and lay down on the sofa with a look of self-importance. He took out a final page proof of the newspaper and said:
"Have a look."
The paper carried a banner headline report of our steel factory's emergency repair of the No. 2 furnace. The article reported how capitalist-roaders had followed the revisionist line for a long time, how they had engaged in large-scale control and oppression of workers, and how they had concerned themselves only with the fulfilment of plans and neglected the maintenance and repair of equipment, nearly resulting in a serious accident. Then it went on to describe how the newly-born revolutionary authority held high the red flag and relied on the masses, and how the leading cadres went deep into the scene of the accident and took bold steps to carry out the emergency repair, finally succeeding in turning danger into safety, etc., etc. The newspaper also contained a photograph of the workers at the No. 2 furnace engaged in normal production after the trouble was taken care of.
After reading through the proof, I felt at a loss. Was I dreaming? How could I believe any of it?
Vice-Chairman Meng, who was watching me all this time, asked sinisterly:
"What do you think of it all?"
"I think the newspaper report is false. I and the capitalist-roader were both there that night—"
He cut me short.
"I know all aboui it, although not from any report you've submitted."
"I feel—"
"You feel that the newspaper should give an account of the capitalist-roader, should report how he jumped out from the window and how he directed the emergency repair, isn't that right?"
"I think—"
"Then, what will the report advocate? What will it criticize? Whose ideology will it uphold? Whose reputation will it destroy? Have you considered these questions?"
I scratched my head.
"Comrade, we must look at everything from the standpoint of political policy. Take for instance the matter of the No. 2 furnace. When we briefed our superiors, we reported what actually happened. We didn't want to rob others of their merit! But the newspaper article was revised and approved by the municipal Party committee secretary himself. Do you know what that means? You must think this question over carefully, otherwise, you might commit an error!"
The last sentence was evidently spoken in a threatening tone.
I was not convinced. So I said, "Say what you may, you can't misrepresent facts—"
Vice-Chairman Meng suddenly jumped up and started pacing around the room with his hands behind his back. Then he gazed at me with half-closed eyes and said,
"Speaking of facts, I meant to ask you a question: how was it that a big, strong person like you couldn't keep an eye on an old man like him? Mmmm?"
Commander Zhao entered the battle too. He stubbed out his cigarette butt, rolled up his sleeves, bent one leg and stretched the other, and having taken such a wrestling posture, exclaimed ferociously:
"Someone reported that you let him run away! Of course we don't believe it. But you should do something to show the masses where you stand."
"How do I do that?"
"Very simply," said Vice-Chairman Meng. "The article will appear in the newspaper tomorrow. A mass meeting of the whole factory will be held in the evening to criticize and struggle against Mao Qiankun. After that, he will be handed over to the organ of people's dictatorship to be dealt with according to law. You will have to expose him at the meeting in your capacity as eye-witness."
"What am I going to expose?" I still pretended to be in the dark.
Vice-Chairman Meng looked at me with doubtful eyes; he was trying to find out whether I was telling the truth. Commander Zhao, however, was more outspoken. He said:
"You can say at the meeting how Mao Qiankun escaped by breaking through the window. Be assured that a draft will be prepared for you. You can just read it out loud."

I nodded, “Now I know.” I thought I knew. At least I thought I should know.

*

I did not sleep a wink last night. Before daybreak when the sky was particularly dark, I got up and took over my shift before I was due. Judgment is to be passed on Mao Qiankun tonight. There are many things to be done.

My substitute, Xiao Fan, also appeared not to have had any sleep last night. His eyes were bloodshot, and he looked peculiar. After relieving the shift to me, he said to me, “Let’s go outside.”

Xiao Fan led me to an out-of-the-way place behind the house. After making sure that there was no one round, he asked me sternly:

“We are going to criticize and struggle against the capitalist-roader tonight?”

“Uh-huh.”

“After that, judgment will be rendered to him?”

“Yes.”

“You are going to expose him at the meeting?”

“Uh-huh.”

Suddenly a fist blow was dealt to my left cheek; sparks appeared before my eyes, and my body swaggered. I heard him scolding me furiously:

“You beastly-hearted fellow!”

I had not thought it possible that the usually gentle Xiao Fan could have dealt such a blow. I stroked my burning cheek and stared at him. Scornfully he stood on his own ground, ready for my return blow.

I spat out saliva mixed with blood, and went away without turning my head around. I did not want to explain. He will know tonight.

Back in the ward Mao Qiankun still did his exercises very conscientiously, not knowing he was in for some bad luck. I remembered our dispute about “world schematism” a while back and blurted out:

“Capitalist-roa—I mean, Comrade Mao Qiankun, how soon will this, this historical misunderstanding reach a conclusion?”

No sooner had I said it than I regretted. Would he understand my amorphous remark?

“Very soon.” Mao Qiankun not only understood, but added, “because the length of each warden’s shift here is getting shorter and shorter.”

“What has the length of the wardens’ shifts got anything to do with the matter under discussion?” Now it was I who failed to understand.

“To be fair with you, in this small ward of mine, four wardens have been ‘corrupted.’ The fifth is you and your period is getting shorter and shorter. Doesn’t that prove that the question will soon come to an end?”

I pondered his words, and remembering the blow dealt my cheek, I could not help adding, “and now there’s a sixth—Xiao Fan.”

“Yes. This explains that all those who go against Mao Tsetung Thought will sooner or later expose themselves and have an ignominious end, no matter how well they disguise themselves. This is a law of history.”

“Old Comrade Mao, tonight they are going to take steps against you. Have … have you anything to tell me?”

On hearing this news, Mao Qiankun was neither surprised nor alarmed. He leisurely took out a roll of paper from a hole in his cotton-padded jacket, and carefully handed it to me, saying:

“Please send it out for me.”

I took it and looked it over. It was a lengthy letter which reads as follows:

> Dear and respected Premier Zhou:
>
> On reading the political report you made at the Fourth National People’s Congress, I learned that a high tide of socialist construction would soon arrive with the coming of spring. Although there may still be twists and turns on our way towards progress, I firmly believe we will ultimately triumph. This is an objective law, which cannot be altered by man’s wishes. In order to realize the objective of the four modernizations\fn{A note reads: *A plan to achieve the modernization of China’s industry, agriculture, national defense, and science and technology by the year 2000. First enunciated by Zhou Enlai at the Fourth people’s congress (13-17 January 1975), the plan became a dominant policy of the Deng Xiaoping regime in the late 1970s. Also referred to as “the New Long March” in an attempt to revive the spirit of the Party’s epic Long March from Jiangxi Province to Shaanxi Province in 1934-1935).*} as soon as possible I have used my days of isolation to summarize systematically my experiences and understanding, both positive and negative, in my work on the iron and steel front during the last ten years and more. I have drawn up a plan for a speedier development of the iron and steel industry as a small present to the cause of the four modernizations …

The letter was accompanied by a table showing the system of organization, a treatise on the policy, methods,

and regulations for strengthening the management of the enterprise, plus a diagram on how to operate the mechan-ical equipment of the whole factory with explanations of the best place for each workshop. The diagram was quite familiar to me! Yes, Mao Qiankun's scribblings of the characters "persistence" in various styles of writing in previous days were just the draft of this diagram. The letter was signed "your former body-guard, Mao Qiankun."

"You used to work for the Premier?" I asked with a respectful voice.

"Yes, for several years."

"Do they know?"

"Yes."

"Why do they treat you this way if they know?"

"It's precisely because they know that they're doing it." His tone was quite matter-of-fact and his voice not loud. But it seemed that a nuclear bomb had exploded above my head. I stared at Mao Qiankun, dumbfounded, and looked around the solitary confinement ward. It then dawned on me that the struggle before us extended far beyond the boundaries of the iron and steel factory.

Like a radar operator who had finally spotted his target, I felt that blood was boiling in my chest, heating up my whole body. Although I had no cap and cuff insignia and no gun in my hand, I decided to fight bravely like a soldier.

I held his hand tightly and said with deep feeling:

"Comrade Mao Qiankun, I thank you wholeheartedly. Thank you for teaching me an unusual lesson and helping me learn many things that are not found in books."

Mao Qiankun smiled affectionately, and said earnestly:

"As to thanking anybody, we should thank the likes of Zhao Abao and Meng Feng, big and small, who had taught our Party and our country an unusual lesson!"

*

My diary must stop here. It had to be hidden from tbe enemy. Our "battle" will commence tonight. I must make necessary preparations.

As for my next step, I propose to continue "writing" my diary by concrete actions in class struggle.

79.1 Death Ray On A Coral Island\fn{by Tong Enzheng (1935-)} Sichuan Province?, China (M) 14

I suppose, dear readers, you have not forgotten the mysterious accident that occurred not so long ago to the twin-engined plane, *Morning Star*. From the information supplied by the press you learned that at the time of the accident the machines of the plane were operating normally; the plane's radio connection with the airfield was never interrupted; the long-range alarm radars of not a few countries all showed that no other planes were in the vicinity and there was no sign of any guided missiles being used. Yet *Morning Star* exploded at a height of eight thousand meters in the air, its burning body landing in the Pacific Ocean.

The newspapers announced: "The location of Chen Tianhong is not known." I am that Chen Tianhong, whose location was reportedly unknown. In the following account I am going to tell you not only the cause and the details of the accident, but also my experiences—experiences which caused me much remorse and reflection—on a certain island in the Pacific after the accident.

*

I am a foreign-born Chinese. Since my youth, I have been very attracted to my socialist motherland. I devoured Chinese newspapers and periodicals; the land where our forefathers labored and lived constantly beckoned to me. I cheered China's every success and urged her on to further progress. Several times I planned to apply for permission to return to China, to contribute my youthful energy to the cause of her construction, but I was prevented from doing so because of my parents' ill health. After I graduated in physics from the university I worked in the private laboratory of my teacher, Professor Zhao Qian. Professor Zhao, also a Chinese, was a world-known nuclear physicist. Apart from occupying a public post, he used his savings to establish a small but well-equipped laboratory to pursue his personal interests.

Two years later, my father died, followed shortly after by my mother's death. I felt that the time to return to my motherland had come. I expressed my intention to Professor Zhao and offered my resignation. He heard me out, but then sadness crept into his fully furrowed face.

"My boy," he said, "you should go back to China. We Chinese have a saying, 'Even if a tree is ten thousand feet tall, its fallen leaves will gather round its roots.' If I were younger, I would also return to China. But I hope

you will wait a few more months, until we have completed the assemblage of the high-voltage atomic battery. You can then take it with you. It is the result of the strenuous efforts of my whole life. I wish to present it as my final contribution to our motherland."

The voice of the old professor became choked, and I was so moved I was speechless. The small-sized high-voltage atomic battery was the fruit of many years of research work. Its specialty was that it could generate enormous energy, in a very short time. It was therefore invaluable in military, industrial and astro-navigatory activities. When it was nearly completed, quite a few companies offered to purchase its patent for unbelievably high prices. Should Professor Zhao agree to sell the patent he would at once become a millionaire. But I knew that what kept Professor Zhao going through his many years of. tireless work has been his deep patriotism, and nothing else.

I therefore could not refuse Professor Zhao's request. I postponed my trip and helped Professor Zhao assemble the first sample high-voltage atomic battery. After an initial testing, we achieved our anticipated results. Our satisfaction could not be expressed in words.

I quickly obtained my visa and arranged a flight. Professor Zhao cheerfully prepared a whole set of blueprints and technical data, and personally arranged for the government-to-government transfer of technical information.

On the eve of my departure, Professor Zhao prepared a dinner and invited all the lab workers (most of them were my university schoolmates) to come to bid me farewell. Although they were of different nationalities, they all joined in my happiness in returning to my motherland. They continually proposed toasts to the prosperity and strength of China. The friendship between scientists affected me deeply.

It was nearly twelve o'clock when the dinner was over, I returned to my bedroom on the first floor. Professor Zhao as usual went into his ground floor, study to work two more hours before retiring.

Perhaps because I was contemplating my trip home the next day or because I had drunk several glasses of wine at dinner, I was so excited I could not fall asleep for a long time. Not until the clock on the wall struck two did I begin to feel sleepy. Just at that moment, two ear-splitting gunshots broke through the quiet night.

The gunshots were very near; they were fired within my building. 1 jumped up in my bed, put on my clothes and rushed downstairs. I saw a beam of light leaking out from a crack of the study-room door. I ran towards it and cried:

"Professor Zhao, Professor Zhao!"

There was no reply.

I pushed the door open and went into the room. I saw professor Zhao lying on the carpet. The light of the desk lamp shone on his ghastly pale face.

I ran towards him and gently helped him up. He had two gunshot wounds on his breast and his coat was stained with fresh blood.

"The gangsters … wanted me to give them … the blueprints," he said with his lips trembling.

I lowered my head, and listened hard to his feeble voice.

"I have burned them … My boy, you can now only take … the sample battery … back … back to our … motherland!"

His breath stopped. The long French window was wide open. A gentle breeze flicked his white hair.

The door of a safe in the corner of the room was open. A burning smell wafted out. I knew without having to look that the precious blueprints and information related to the battery were all burned to ashes. The safe, designed by Professor Zhao himself, had a hidden button below the key-hole. With a press of the button, the whole contents of the safe was automatically destroyed.

What had happened was quite clear. The gangsters stole into the study and tried to force Professor Zhao at gun-point to give them the blueprints. Professor Zhao destroyed them by pressing the button. Since they could not get what they wanted, the gangsters fired at Professor Zhao and then escaped.

This righteous scientist had nursed the invention with his life; now he was protecting it with his life. I could not help shedding tears as I looked into the professor's face, his semi-closed eyes. Anger filled my heart, a sort of vengeful anger that I had never experienced before in my simple laboratory life.

I reported at once to the police, and postponed my departure. I did not want to leave before the case was cleared. One week later, a middle-aged, staid police officer of the local police station called.

"Mr. Chen," he said, "we regret very much the death of Professor Zhao. All evidence indicates that the crime was cotmmitted by a delinquent in this city under the alias of George Zuo. He is under the orders of a secret organization of a certain powerful nation."

"A certain powerful nation?" I could not help asking. To my geographical understanding the country he was

probably talking about was located very far from the South Pacific Ocean. I was not clear how our laboratory work could have anything to do with that country.

"Yes, that big power!" The police officer pointed meaningfully to the north. "Their fleet is constantly cruising near our seacoast; their influence is infiltrating this city. Many keen-sighted individuals have already given us warnings. I suppose you have read their articles in the newspapers, Mr. Chen?"

I could say no more, knowing that he was telling the truth: I remembered a certain columnist comparing the unbridled expansive activities of that big power to an over-extension of a bear's paw. Who would have thought that this sharp-nailed bear's paw would now stretch into our small laboratory, leaving it in crime and blood …

"Do they wish to obtain the secret of the high-voltage atomic battery?"

"Yes, the first company attempting to purchase the Patent of Professor Zhao's invention was one secretly controlled by that powerful nation. When their offer was rejected by Professor Zhao, they turned to robbing the secret by force. This is their normal means of action. Now Chen, you are the only person in the world who knows the secret. Their attention is now focused on you."

"What? Do they dare—" The police officer interrupted me, saying,

"They'll do whatever they like! Last year, they perpetrated three cases of political assassination and five kidnappings. We've done everything we can, but still cannot stop them. Mr. Chen, your request for an exit visa has been granted. To avoid further danger while you are here, I suggest you leave as soon as possible."

"But, Professor Zhao's case hasn't yet been cleared."

The police officer straightened his body, looking very serious.

"Mr. Chen," he said, "I assure you that, in the interest of my own country, and to avenge Professor Zhao, I'll do my utmost to arrest the criminal and have him tried. But what is regrettable is that, although we may have arrested George Zuo, the real criminal will still be able to hide himself within the walls of the embassy and escape from the hands of law!"

I thought the matter over, and remembered what Professor Zhao entrusted me with before his death. I knew that the police officer's advice was well-meaning.

"Thank you," I said finally, "I'll leave here as soon as I can."

"The sooner the better, Mr. Chen, and the more secretly the safer," the police officer told me. "To prevent them from, hijacking your plane, it's best for you not to travel on a regular airline," he added. "While you're still in this city, we'll do our best to ensure your safety, but after you leave here, it's up to you to take good care of yourself."

I took my leave by shaking hands with him. When driving back to my residence, I found two plain-clothes detectives following me in another car. I knew that the police officer was fulfilling his promise.

After consulting with my friends, I finally decided to take the high-voltage atomic battery and fly directly on the *Morning Star* plane. *Morning Star* was a small aircraft owned by Professor Zhao's laboratory and used as a means of contact with foreign scientific organizations. I was a licensed amateur pilot, and had many times before navigated this plane as part of the work assigned to me by Professor Zhao.

Early the next morning, my friends secretly escorted me to the airfield. On our way, I did not for a moment remove my eyes from the rearview mirror. I did not know whether it was my paranoia, or just a coincidence, but I discovered that besides the car of the plain-clothes detectives behind us, there was also another vehicle, a light green Ford, that twice mysteriously appeared in my view.

*

I smoothly piloted the *Morning Star* and started flying. When the green fields disappeared from my sight and the boundless Pacific Ocean appeared before me, I cast a last glance at the foreign land which had nursed me, and silently bid farewell to my friends who remained behind. I could not help feeling a bit of sorrow in the depth of my heart.

Morning Star was a twin-engine arid four-seat passenger plane; its performance properties were up to par. At ten o'clock in the morning, the outlines of the X archipelago flashed past my plane's wings. The sun was shining brightly, the sky clear blue. I raised my plane to a height of eight thousand meters and increased its speed. I remembered a news item in the newspaper some days ago about a large fleet of the powerful nation engaging in military maneuver in this part of the ocean: but I did not believe they would dare hijack my plane in the air above high seas. The engines of my plane were working smoothly and my mind felt quite at ease.

Suddenly I heard a clap of thunder pierce through the silent air. A saw-tooth shaped flash of lightning appeared at my plane's left wing. At such a height, and in such a clear atmosphere, it of course could not be natural thunder or lightning. But this unexplainable phenomenon repeated itself several times. My plane's left-side engine began to burn. The plane, dragging a long tail fire, rapidly descended. I did my best to steady the plane, simultaneously

searching for a safe place to land. But I was surrounded by a boundless ocean, and did not have any choice. My plane crashed against the water surface and rebounded some ten meters up before it began to sink. Within these tense seconds, I managed to put on my life jacket and jump out of the cockpit, carrying with me the atomic battery hermetically sealed in a leather bag.

The sea was raging violently. One wave bolstered me up, and another threw me down. The salty and bitter sea water choked me and made breathing difficult. I was swept by sea currents and was soon far away from the scene of the disaster.

Two helicopters appeared above the wreckage of my plane. Several frogmen came down on a hanging ladder; they were obviously looking for me. Judging from the speed with which they arrived, the helicopters must have taken off from a warship anchored nearby.

It appeared that the bear's paw was reaching for me from eight thousand meters high in the sky. My accident must have been connected to the intrigues of the secret service organization in that country. When they found that I had secretly left the city, they hoped to send me to the bottom of the sea so that the secret of the high-voltage atomic battery could be lost to the world forever. "How despicable. But with what means had they destroyed the *Morning Star*?" When considering this question, I clutched the leather bag even more tightly. As long as I was alive, I would not allow these gangsters carry out their dirty tricks.

My watch had stopped. I did not know how much time had elapsed. At dusk, I saw a helicopter at a distance fly along the sea surface. Since I could not discern to what nation the aircraft belonged, I did not dare contact it. It was now dark. I found that my energy was waning rapidly. I hastened to take off my belt, and with it fastened the leather bag closely to my waist. Even if I fainted, I would not lose it.

Thus I drifted in the ocean for one day and two nights. In the earlier part of this period, I felt unbearably hungry and thirsty, but later I was only conscious of my extreme weakness. It was only through the support of a strong desire to fulfill Professor Zhao's behest that I was able to struggle upwards every time I was beaten down by a billow.

In the morning of the third day after the accident, I caught a glimpse of an island. As it was very small and only slightly above sea level, I reckoned that it was a coral island. Although the sea had already pushed me near it, I swam towards the island with all my remaining energy, being afraid of losing this chance to live. Finally, I came very near the coast. I swam into the bay. The water was as clear as a mirror; I could see the beautiful white corals lying at the bottom of it.

Just at this time, the corner of a fish's fin suddenly rose to the sea surface about twenty meters away from me. It was the fin of a big shark at least seven or eight meters long. It was obviously very hungry. After swimming twice around me, it suddenly adopted a position of attack. At this moment, I could see clearly the shark's small cruel green eyes and its two rows of sharp white teeth. I wanted to call for help, but my dried throat could not utter a sound. I wanted to escape, but the shark was blocking my way to the. coast. I froze. I would be unable to escape from death—and such a terrible death!

Just as the shark charged at me, a ray of blinding red light shot forth from the coast. It rapidly vaporized the sea water, causing sounds of explosion. A cloud of white vapor rose in the bay. The red light followed the shark closely; it leapt up to the water surface, and then sank down. Its white belly faced upwards; it mysteriously died. I was also burned by the hot sea water, but I managed to swim to the coast and come out of the water. My hands and feet were scratched by the sharp edges of the coral reefs; and blood was dripping from them. But I did not feel any pain. Then, I heard a man on the reef speaking to me in English:

"Who are you?"

I looked round, but could not find anybody. I could only reply to the hidden person:

"A Chinese who narrowly I escaped death."

"Chinese?" the man asked in surprise. Then he said in my native tongue: "Come up quickly!"

I tried to stand up, but I was completely exhausted. I felt dizzy; the high-voltage atomic battery hanging from my waist seemed to be as heavy as a thousand weights. I staggered, and lost my consciousness …

*

When I regained my consciousness, I found myself lying in a fairly well-furnished bedroom. The room had a complete set of teak furniture, consisting of a dressing table, a wardrobe, sofas, a desk, etc., which were very orderly placed. A combination console television, radio, tape recorder and stereo cabinet stood m a corner of the room. White curtains fluttered in the wind. The sound of sea waves beating against coral reefs could be heard.

I sat up. I found that my old clothes had been changed. My burns and scratches had been carefully dressed. On the tea-table beside my bed rested a microwave-hot tray of milk and sandwiches. I ate some food and felt quite

refreshed. Then I remembered about the atomic battery and jumped quickly out of bed. On finding the leather bag safe and intact under the bed, my mind was set at rest. I walked towards the window, and saw on the two upper shelves of the bookcase some reference books on electronics and nuclear physics which were familiar to me; the two lower shelves were full of fantasy and pornographic novels. On a plastic shelf beside the stereo set, there were many tapes and records of music by the Beetles and other rock groups. A bust photo of a Chinese youngster was on the desk. He had a head of bushy hair, a narrow forehead, a square face, dark eyebrows and small eyes, and a sarcastic smile. Was he the owner of this room? The sight of him filled me with an unexplanable disgust.

Judging from its appearance, the room must be the bedroom of a playboy. The only thing that seemed to be incongruous was a new, sophisticated measuring instrument hanging on the wall. It was an instrument that measured radiation commonly used in a nuclear physics laboratory. But I could not figure out what it was doing here.

The door behind me opened; a man came in quietly. I turned around and saw a Chinese over fifty years of age. His hair was already gray. He had a broad forehead, high nose and two deeply sunken but very bright eyes. He was not tall. His movements were graceful and slow. One could tell at a glance that he was a man long used to mental labor.

"Please excuse me for not having knocked," he said very courteously. "I didn't know that you had woken up.

From his soft voice and his strong Fujian accent,\fn{Indicating he was from Fukian province.} I knew that he was the man who had spoken to me yesterday, the savior of my life.

"Thank you for having saved my life," I said. Before finding out more about my situation, I decided not to reveal my identity. "I am a traveler. In my voyage I accidentally fell into the water. May I ask where we are?"

"It was originally a small nameless island. Later, because I have been here such a long time, some people began to name, it after me, that is, 'Dr. Matthews' Island.'" He replied to my question, at the same time clapping his hands twice. "Let's go and sit outside where we can talk in greater detail. I don't have many guests on this island."

A servant in a jacket coat came in. From his black and stiff hair and olive-colored skin, I knew that he was a Malay.

"Please prepare some coffee," Dr. Matthews ordered. The servant bowed and went out silently.

Dr. Matthews explained to me: "He is called Amang; he has stayed with me for many years. The poor fellow is a mute. There are now only the two of us on this island. I used to have an assistant named Joseph Luo; this bedroom was his. Three months ago, he went away on vacation."

We went out of the bedroom. The room was connected to a patio shaded by green wisteria and beautiful tropical flowers. On the other end of the patio, there was a two-room suite. Dr. Matthews told me that the outer room was his study, while the inner one was his bedroom.

The patio faced the sea. Behind the patio was a white bungalow from the top of which several types of radio antennae extended in all directions. At the back of the bungalow, that is to say, on the other end of the small island, stood a reinforced concrete structure, half of which was built into the sea. Several high-voltage transmission wires were drawn. out from this structure. I was rather surprised to see such modern equipment on such a small, deserted island only a few square kilometers in area. Dr. Matthews seemed to have noticed my puzzled look. He explained to me:

"I'm a physicist. The white bungalow is my laboratory, behind which is an automatic tidal power station; it can use the ocean waves to generate electricity and needs no overseeing. The power thus obtained is enough to meet both my laboratory and living requirements."

We sat down on the canvas chairs placed along the side of the patio. Sitting here, we had a beautiful view of the whole coral island. In front of the island, there was a circular, tranquil reef lake with shallow and clear water. At the bottom of this lake was a layer of fine white sand which glistened brightly under the sunlight. The lake also reflected the blue and high southern sky, just like an emerald mirror. It was surrounded by a circular ridge of reefs, upon which were coconut trees swaying in the wind whose tall silhouettes looked especially beautiful against the background of the blue sky and white clouds. Beyond the circular reef was the boundless ocean, whose billows rushed against and struck at the coral reefs, splashed up sprays like fine rain. The whole coral island was embedded in a white belt of breakers. Here, everything, was peaceful, quiet. Yet, while sipping the coffee brought to us by Amang, and enjoying the beautiful natural scenery, I could not help wondering about many seemingly mysterious things.

"Who was this gentlemanly Dr. Matthews? Why must he seclude himself on this island? What is he researching? Who supplies him with the necessities for his work and daily life? For whom is he working?"

During our chat I brought up these questions tactfully but insistently.

Dr. Matthews smiled a sad smile. He seemed to have, kept a lot of things to himself. After a little while he said:

"If you can promise not to tell anybody after leaving here what I am going to tell you now, then I'll let you in on a secret."

I solemnly gave my promise.

"I don't know if you still remember an incident that occurred ten years ago," Dr. Matthews began. "An overseas Chinese engineer named Hu Mingli achieved wide recognition by inventing a new kind of laser range-finder. Just as the government of his country was going to award him a prize, he got into a fight with the governmental authorities over the actual application of his new invention. After that, the engineer suddenly disappeared. I am—"

"You are the engineer Hu Mingli?" I exclaimed.

Yes, although I was only a high school student ten years ago, I could still remember the controversial news about the famous engineer Hu Mingli. This news had given rise to various conjectures in journalistic circles. I never thought I would bump into this person here.

"Yes, I am that unfortunate person!" said Dr. Matthews, a forced smile again appearing on his face. It was the smile of a person who had been through a lot.

He then told me the story of the earlier half of his life in a low but impassioned tone.

Matthews was born into the family of a Chinese emigrant who had settled in Japan. In primary school, one of his teachers was a crippled soldier who had served in the Second World War. Everyone else in his family was killed by the atomic bomb thrown in Hiroshima. He himself had barely escaped from the battlefield, and though he was still alive, he had only one arm. Because of this, he was deeply opposed to war and constantly taught his students the ruthlessness it fostered. This education left a deep impression on young Matthews.

When Matthews graduated from high school, he left Japan for another country to study crystallophysics. He exhibited great talent in his research on laser, and after graduation he was immediately hired to work in a research organization, where he also achieved outstanding results. In fact, before he invented the laser range-finder, he had already invented several other things.

By that time Matthews was already a middle-aged man. The words of the primary school teacher were still deeply embedded in his mind. He hated war just as before. He did not concern himself with politics, or the direct results of his inventions. He thought he was conducting lofty scientific experiments for the benefit of mankind. That was all. An affluent life made him all the more oblivious to the activities of the outside world.

When the trial manufacture of the laser range-finder proved successful, the government of his country, as an incentive for him to work harder, decided to honor him publicly. Then, his superiors let him read some memoranda of the national defense ministry. One of these memoranda pointed out the possibility of using his laser range-finder as a bomb-release control on aircraft., or as a sighting device on tanks. Other memoranda mentioned other inventions of his, which had already been used for military purposes and obtained very good results.

So, that was it! They respected him and employed him only because the fruits of his work could all be used towards war.

Hu Mingli could not have felt more terrified even if the bomb had exploded right in front of him. He could not see straight nor utter a word. When he recovered his strength, he roared and protested. He said that he had been deceived, and demanded that the government apologize to him and destroy all military weapons which contained his inventions. He hurried to the capital and called upon various departments and offices, repeating excitedly the lesson taught him by his primary school teacher many years ago. At first, there were a few people who listened, but later, they became impatient. They started to avoid him on various pretexts. When he visited the national defense ministry for the last time and found that the persons receiving him were not the officers originally designated, but some doctors from a psychiatric hospital, he felt deeply insulted. After that he gave up the intention of discussing the question with these people.

But what should he do instead? Some newspapers had already published reports describing him as a psychologically disturbed person, a psychiatric patient. They did their utmost to ridicule him, and he was greatly infuriated. He personally received several groups of reporters and tried to explain the truth about the matter, but his words were so cleverly distorted that readers had *more* reason to believe the rumors. Although Hu Mingli was a specialist in laser, he was very immature in social matters. He took public opinion too seriously, and eventually the attacks made against him caused him to hate the world at large. He no longer felt like living in this society; he wanted to find a Utopia where he could forget all the ugly things in the utilitarian world.

Just as he was in the depths of depression and confusion, a friend of his named Blain came from Europe specially to console him. Blain was so good to him that he felt quite comforted. Blain used to be his college classmate. He was now assistant manager of the European Rofiel Electronics Company, a very large enterprise which had joint-stock companies in several countries.

Blain sympathized with Hu Mingli and respected his lofty ideals. He bitterly denounced the corrupt society; its leaders, he said, were a gang of war-mongers. He described himself also as a pacifist. It was for this reason that he participated in the work of the Rofiel Company which was a purely private concern with no governmental connections. The company's objective was not profit but the benefit of mankind and world peace. Finally, he proposed that Hu Mingli join the Rofiel Company in the noble cause of saving mankind. Hu Mingli was, in the end, lured into the network by Blain's sweet words.

"To respect other people's ideals," he said, "is the object of the Rofiel Company. If you are willing to join us, we can establish your laboratory in a secluded place, free of intervention from the outside world."

Hu Mingli agreed to his proposal. Thus, through Blain's discrete arrangements, Hu Mingli disappeared from society. Six months later, the Rofiel Company bought a nameless coral island in the Pacific Ocean and constructed a power station and a fully-equipped laboratory. Hu Mingli, assuming the alias of Matthews, secretly came to this island. At first, there were only two people on the island; Matthews and Amang. Later, Matthews let the son of an old friend of his, Joseph Luo join them and become his assistant.

Ten years had elapsed. Blain, for his part, kept his word. Apart from sea-planes regularly sending Matthews daily necessities, no one came to disturb his peace and quiet. The Rofiel Company had not demanded anything from him, aside from his self-designated research.

When Matthews finished his account, for a while I did not say a word. The name of the Rofiel Company was not new to me; it recently appeared in the news. Finally I remembered the contents of the article. It cited a good deal of data to prove that the Rofiel Company was a trans-national corporation which received a large amount of capital from that certain Power, and therefore was subject to its control.

As I had only just met Matthews, I could not be too blunt with him. So I merely suggested to him tactfully: "Dr. Matthews, have you investigated into the political background of the Rofiel Company? The newspapers have recently reported that it has connections with a certain power." Matthews replied angrily:

"I never read the papers. If the papers have so reported, it must be pure rumor. I believe Blain's words."

I could not go on with what I wished to say and so changed the subject.

"Dr. Matthews," I asked, "the Rofiel Company has spent so much money on you. Don't you think it wants to get something in return?"

"It certainly does," replied Matthews. "During this time I have made some small inventions which are all to be used for peaceful purposes. The company has obtained patent rights for them. From the viewpoint of business, it has not lost money."

I fell into silence, considering how to express my ideas next. As a person born in a capitalist society, I could appreciate the torment and pain suffered by such a righteous soul as Dr. Matthews. He was a lonely man cheated and oppressed by an unreasonable society. He could not find a proper road, and could only hope to escape from the realities of life like the religious hermits of old, by staying on the wide expanses of the Pacific Ocean. But can anyone escape from real life?

"Dr. Matthews," I could only say as mildly as possible, "war is a social phenomenon, and the cause of this phenomenon is the social system which permits one class of people to exploit another. Therefore, we must distinguish wars specifically. There are just wars and unjust wars. Moreover, in order to eliminate all wars eventually, we must, first of all, change the existing unreasonable society through revolutionary war. To abhor all wars without any distinction is not a proper way to solve the question."

"How complicated a question you have posed!" Dr. Matthews said, staring at me naïvely. "I don't understand your reasoning, and I don't want to understand. I only wish to use my remaining years to do some work for the benefit of mankind."

Looking at his honest face, I was filled with mixed feelings. I myself did not know whether I pitied, sympathized with, or worried for him. From his brief account, I instinctively felt that the matter just could not be as simple as be thought, nor Blain as good as he described. There must be something fishy going on. Unfortunately 1 could not tell exactly what was fishy: and moreover had no way of making Matthews believe me. A scientist like him usually judges right from wrong according to the rules of natural science. He believed only in facts, not in words.

Anyhow, I thought, I was obligated to warn him. Therefore 1 said:

“I don't think I need to point out to you, as a scientist, that it is very difficult to decide beforehand whether a certain scientific theory or instrument will be used for war or for peace. How can you be sure that your inventions, through resale by the Rofiel Company, will not .be used directly or indirectly towards war?”

“Blain has promised me that they will not,” said Matthews quite confidently. “The products of the Rofiel Company are principally for civil use. Even though it has entered into contracts with a few countries, they will only use my inventions to manufacture defense equipment for safeguarding peace.”

“Defense equipment for safeguarding peace?” This was indeed a play on words. I could not help asking: “Are not such tools military weapons?”

“Mmmm, yes,” Matthews replied unwillingly.

“To safeguard peace with military weapons? Isn’t this contradicting your attitude of opposing all military arms?”

Dr. Matthews knitted his brows and considered the question for a while. Finally, he shook his head and said:

“I have no way of debating with you. Years ago, a reporter said that I was deficient and childish in this respect; it appears that he was right.”

“Doctor,” I said, “please excuse my frankness/”

Dr. Matthews waved his hand and said, “You don't have to apologize. The language of science is always straightforward.”

I attempted to branch off from the subject of our talk.

“Dr. Matthews, was the weapon you used to kill the shark the other day a new kind of laser?”

He appeared to be hurt again by my words.

“Weapon? There are no weapons on this small island!” He stood up and said, “Why don’t you rest up for a few days. Soon Blain and Joseph Luo will come. You can leave here on their plane.”

As he left me, I noticed that his shoulders sagged slightly, and his steps were quite heavy.

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Thus I began my monotonous life on this lonely island. Dr, Matthews was very busy; he shut himself up the whole day in his laboratory. According to what he told me, one of his inventions was near the trial stage. It was evident to me that our last conversation had left a deep impression on him. Since then, the few times we met, he was unwilling to discuss political questions with me. As to Amang, he looked after our needs during the day; in the evenings, he sat on reefs and played ancient, melancholy tunes on his flute. The sound of his flute reminded me of the silvery beaches under the moonlight, the palm-trees swaying in the gentle breeze and the white sails floating on the rippling waves. I knew that it was a lonesome soul baring his love for his motherland. It appeared that under the cold and indifferent exterior of this man, there was a burning heart.

In Dr. Matthews’ study, there was a fully stocked medicine cabinet. After two or three days’ treatment, the slight wounds were practically healed. But every time I went in to get some medicine, I was astonished by the massive quantity and superior quality of the equipment supplied to Dr. Matthews by the Rofiel Company. Apart from numerous books, there was a computer data bank which can be found only in large research organizations. All technical information from published sources—newspapers, journals, books—anywhere in the world was automatically monitored and deposited in the memory system of the computer. With the press of a button, whatever data or diagrams needed by the user immediately appeared on the fluorescent screen. So although Dr. Matthews was secluded on a deserted island, he was still in touch with the scientific circles of the whole world, and could at all times feel the pulse of scientific development. It was no wonder that his research work was continually making progress.

In an obscure bay on the back of the island, a motorboat of Dr. Matthews’ was docked. When I had nothing to do, I took this small boat out, to fish at sea. Beside the coral reefs, I had several times discovered sharks. This reminded me of the danger I encountered the other day. Common sense told me the shark was killed by a laser. But what kind of laser machine could produce so powerful a ray?

One afternoon, when I woke up from my noon nap, I heard someone knocking at the door. It was Dr. Matthews. He was still wearing his white lab coat. A pair of green sunglasses were pushed up to his forehead. He looked tired and excited. I could tell his latest research was fruitful. He was now immersed in the happiness of victory, and all happiness must be shared with\fn{The text has: *by*.} someone.

We sat down and started chatting. Matthews did not talk about his work, but only recounted some anecdotes about his many years in the laboratory. He had a good memory and a vivid way of description, so that I was quite enthralled. It appeared that he was trying to rest his brain through idle chatter.

Amang brought us our afternoon tea. Today he placed on the tray a birthday cake with cream frosting and ten

iced candles. Next to that was a bottle of wine.

"Is it your birthday today?" I asked.

"Oh, no," Dr. Matthews said smiling. He stood up to shake hands with Amang. "Amang is very kind to me. Whenever I have completed a new invention, he always prepares a birthday cake. Today I have finished my tenth invention since coming to this island."

Dr. Matthews poured three cups of wine; he gave me one and another to Amang.

"Dear Amang, we two have depended on each other for everything. That means you have a share of labor in all my inventions too. Today, before my guest, I wish to express to you my gratitude."

We drank our wine. From Amang's very expressive eyes, I could discern his respect and love for Matthews. He folded his hands across his chest, bowed very low and then retired. We continued our conversation. When Matthews told me about an accident whereby radioactive elements escaped from the laboratory, I pointed to the dosage meter on the wall and said jokingly:

"Is this precautionary equipment the result of your having learned a lesson from that accident?"

Matthews laughed, saying: "There is no such equipment in my bedroom, but Joseph Luo is a bit nervous. Wait a minute." He stopped in mid-sentence, and walked quickly towards the dosage meter. I followed him and found that the intensity of radiation in the room was slightly greater than usual. I had not noticed, but it did not escape Dr. Matthews' sharp observation.

"You don't have any radioactive items, do you?" he asked doubtfully.

I remembered the high-voltage atomic battery under my bed. By then I had had a certain degree of rapport with Matthews. I therefore took out the battery and showed it to him. I told him that it was an invention of a teacher of mine which he had entrusted to me.

Dr. Matthews inspected the battery very carefully and asked me questions about its construction. He evaluated Professor Zhao Qian's invention and said with regret:

"If this battery could be connected with my laser tunneling machine, it would at once usher in a new era to all mining, tunnel construction and underground engineering work. How much benefit would it bring to all mankind!"

"What is the laser tunneling machine?" I asked.

Dr. Matthews looked at me stunned; he knew that he had made an indiscreet remark. But he was a man incapable of telling a lie. After a moment's consideration he told me resolutely: "It is my latest invention. If you're interested, I can let you have a look."

I knew that the riddle which was troubling me in the last several days would soon be solved. I :was of course very interested.

Dr. Matthews cheerfully took me into the laboratory. Here, apart from the oscillator, oscilloscope and calculator which are found in most laboratories, the most noteworthy thing was a semicircular operating platform in the center of the room; a milk-white fluorescent screen occupied the greater part of the platform, beneath which were several rows of meters, indicator lamps and buttons. From the ceiling immediately in front of the operating platform hung part of an instrument like a periscope, the other end of which was evidently placed upon the roof. On the stainless steel rack beside the operating platform was a laser machine. Dr, Matthews led me to this instrument, opened its cover and began to explain.

This was a new variety of the solid continuous laser But its working material was not the usual crystalline matte, or glass, but a new kind of plastic. Matthews had made many advancements in the part of the optical resonant cavity, so that the energy sent out was several grades stronger than the usual laser. Moreover, he had also solved the question of focusing high-potential light beams, and increasing transmission distance several times over.

"I planned this instrument for use by the mining industry and have therefore called it a tunneling machine," said Matthews. "All hard metals and rocks will directly gasify with the application of this laser. Henceforth, drilling rocks will be as easy as cutting cream with a knife. But this one can only transform, transmit and concentrate energy; it can't create energy. Therefore, in its actual application it must have a high-voltage power source and must be connected with heavy and cumbersome auxiliary equipment. Now, with your high-voltage atomic battery, this problem is solved."

"You killed the shark with this laser, didn't you?"

"Yes."

"You were on the beach then?"

Matthews walked to the operating platform, pressed the button and said, "I was sitting right here." The large

fluorescent screen began to shed light, I suddenly found myself transposed to a coral reef. The sea was above my feet, I was surrounded by protruding reef rocks. I automatically dodged to avoid my clothes from getting wet by the sea waves, but then I realized I was still in the laboratory, except that there was a lifelike scene of a sea coast before me. I knew then it was a laser holographic TV.

Matthews smiled and said: "It is another invention of mine. That day, when I was working on my experiment, I saw you struggling at sea. A little while later, I saw that you were in great danger. As the situation was quite urgent, I could only kill the shark with my laser."

"How did you project the laser?"

Matthews pointed to the instrument that looked like a periscope: "By means of this refraction system I can accurately project the laser beam to any place on the sea surrounding this island."

"How do we communicate with the laser?"

"That's even more simple. I have installed on this island a sound reception and transmission system."

Looking at this new laser machine, I recalled an old story. More than two thousand years ago, when a Roman fleet threatened to attack the city of Athens in Greece, a Greek scientist, Archimedes, tried to converge the sun's rays by means of many hexagonal mirrors made with brass pieces to burn and destroy the enemy's fleet. Who would think that such a device fancied by Archimedes had now become a reality?

"Archimedes' dream!" I could not help exclaiming.

"No, it isn't a dream of Archimedes." Matthews undoubtedly knew this ancient story very well. "What Archimedes fancied then was a homicidal heat-ray weapon, but what I have invented is a tool for the benefit of mankind."

"Dr. Matthews," I said, "I have no intention of persuading you to convert your laser into a military weapon, but I cannot agree with you regarding your attitude towards military weapons. For instance, don't you think your saving me from the mouth of a shark was a humanitarian act?"

"It … certainly was," Matthews said hesitatingly.

"If you hadn't used your laser as an offensive weapon, would you have been able to save me?"

Matthews did not answer.

"This will show that the question is not whether not military weapons are forces of evil in themselves, but who has control of such weapons and for what purpose they are used. Isn't that right?"

Matthews shook his head and said: "Anyhow, men are not sharks. I can use my laser to kill sharks, but not men. Without my invention, there are already enough homicidal weapons in this world."

I said regretfully: "Doctor, there will ultimately be a day when you will know that there is great difference between your good intentions and reality."

"You're probably right. But I'm already old, and it's too late for me to change my way of life," Matthews said somewhat sadly. "But during the last ten years, I believe I have done something to elevate the life of mankind. I have improved the laser scalpel, invented a laser wielding instrument, and in respect to space discharge I have also done some research."

"Space discharge?" A thought suddenly occurred to me.

"That is a by-product of my research into long-range radio transmission. I have invented a high-power micro-wave oscillator, which can produce a very narrow beam of radio waves; with it I can create electric sparks on objects a great distance off. I haven't found any practical *use* for it, but the Rofiel Company is very much interested in this invention of mine."

"Good heavens!" I exclaimed involuntarily. "My plane, *Morning Star*, was brought down by just such an electric spark."

"What is the *Morning Star* plane?" Matthews stared at me. "You are not …"

Only until then I revealed to him my real identity. I told him about Professor Zhao Qian's misfortune and his behest; I spoke about the police officer's conjecture and the accident befalling *Morning Star*. Dr. Matthews asked me specifically at what height I was flying, the weather conditions and the location of the electric shock. I answered all these questions. Finally I added:

"At the time of the accident there was only a fleet of that certain power on the nearby ocean. After the accident, helicopters were sent out from the fleet to search for me. Considering the report about the special relation between the Rofiel Company and that country, I think there must be a great deal behind all this."

"No, it's impossible!" Matthews said and, staggering across the room, sat down dejectedly in a chair. I found that his face suddenly turned pale, and with obvious pain he pressed his breast with his hand. I was frightened.

"How do you feel?" I asked.

“Heart disease. Nothing serious, I’ve had it for years,” Matthews said in a low voice. “I have a drug in the medicine cabinet in my study. Please ask Amang to give me an injection of it.”

If I had known his physical condition beforehand, I would not have spoken to him so bluntly. I regretted it very much. Yet, when Amang had given him an injection and helped him return to his bedroom to rest, I still thought it necessary to ask him an important question:

“Doctor, does Blain know that the laser tunneling machine has been completed?”

“He knows only that I’m planning it, but doesn’t know that I have completed a sample machine.”

“What about Joseph Luo?” Matthews thought for a moment and said:

“In the last two months, I have been the only one working on the final stages of the project.”

“Then, before the facts about this matter are clearly known, can you prevent them from seeing this machine?”

“Yes, that can be done!” Matthews replied readily. “We can take it to my bedroom tomorrow. But it is very heavy. Amang and I aren’t strong enough to move it ourselves. You must also give a hand.”

*

During the next few days Matthews treated me very kindly. He frequently asked me about developments on our motherland. I found in our conversation that he was surprisingly ignorant of the outside world. Although he had within his reach advanced instruments of communication, he was not interested in anything unrelated to technical information. He seemed to have built an invisible wall completely separating him and the small island named after him from the rest of society. I recognized then the deceit behind Blain’s plans. He induced the pessimistic, world-weary side in Matthews’ character and helped him realize his ideals with a view to molding him into a simple tool of science, to serve their unspeakable objective.

One evening, Matthews and I were sitting in the patio enjoying the breeze and, appreciating the glory of the setting sun on the Pacific Ocean. As we were deep in conversation, the contours of a warship appeared on the distant horizon.

The vessel steered directly towards our island and cast anchor two kilometers off the coast. I found that it was a P class guided-missile destroyer belonging to the fleet of that certain big power that had been maneuvering recently in this part of the ocean. Matthews took up his binoculars, and saw on the warship the flag of that big power. He knitted his brow and said:

“A warship! What do warships come here for?”

A thought occurred to me.

“Doctor Matthews,” I said. “can it be that Blain and Joseph Luo are coming here?”

Matthews shook his head and replied: “Not likely. Why would they come on a foreign warship?”

I still insisted: “Whatever happens, you must not reveal my identity to anyone!”

“Of course I won’t.”

We saw a helicopter rise from the warship. Some people were obviously coming to visit this small island. I believed my words had had an effect on Matthews, and he had no doubt given consideration to a lot of questions, for he suddenly turned to me and told me to take the high-voltage atomic battery with me and hide myself in his bedroom, not to come out until he said so. I complied, but in my hiding place I could still see through the glass window everything that happened outside.

The helicopter landed beside the lake. When the cabin door opened, the first person that came down was a young man in a patterned shirt. I had seen his photo often on the desk of his room, and could tell at a glance that he was none other than Joseph Luo. The next person that made his appearance was a tall slender European, wearing a pair of gold-rimmed spectacles, with a refined, smiling face and a Slavic bearing in his movements. He must be Blain. Unexpectedly, from the helicopter there also emerged a navy officer and six sailors. What in the world did they come for?

The group came slowly towards us. The setting sun cast lengthy shadows in front of these people. A tense atmosphere pervaded this small, quiet island.

Matthews received Blain and the two other people in his study. The six sailors stood woodenly outside the door. I walked stealthily to the door leading to the study and peeked outside through a crack in the door.

“Please allow me to make introductions,” said Blain, pointing to Dr. Matthews and the navy officer. "This is the well-known Dr. Matthews. This is Captain Sapunov.”

Sapunov was a tall and stout person, wearing a white, well-starched navy uniform. He looked quite like a polar bear. Although he was full of smiles, they did not cover his overbearing manner. He very politely shook hands with Matthews and said in fluent English:

“Very much honored to meet you.”

“Please take your seats!” Matthews said coldly.

“Old friend, we haven’t met for a year; I think of you often!” Blain said affectionately. “You don’t look so well. Are you working too hard?”

“Teacher, you really must get some rest,” Joseph Luo interrupted. “The vacation Mr. Blain arranged for me was a first-rate one. I visited the night clubs of Tokyo, the bathing beaches of Honolulu, and the gambling houses of Monte Carlo. Now that’s living!”

“Vacation, that’s a thing for young people,” said Matthews. “How is it you’ve come on a warship?”

Blain laughed and said: “That's purely a coincidence. There’s an instrument in Captain Sapunov’s warship produced by our company, so he asked us to give it a trial run.”

“Isn’t it a space discharge instrument?” Matthews was still quite composed in his manner, but his voice belied anxiety. I began to feel worried for him.

Silence. Joseph Luo shifted uncomfortably in his chair.

“What space discharge instrument?” Blain asked with feigned ignorance.

“The kind of instrument that brought down the *Morning Star*!”

Matthews once said to me that the language of science was always straightforward. He never beat about the bush. In this case, his tactless move produced an unexpected result. Blain, not knowing Matthews had discovered their secret, was left speechless for at least ten seconds.

Sapunov knew it was now useless to deny it. He cleared his throat and replied on behalf of Blain:

“Doctor, we have contracted with the Rofiel Company for various instruments, among which there may have been some made according to your inventions.”

Matthews still stared at Blain: “Then, what about your promise to me?”

Blain defended himself in a hurry:

“These instruments are all tools for defense, they are not military weapons. Their manufacture does not conflict with our objective of preserving peace.”

Matthews did not pursue this question any further, but said in a feeble voice: “Let’s talk about the *Morning Star*. I’m only interested in technical questions.”

“That’s right!” Captain Sapunov exclaimed joyfully. “You are truly a great scientist! Ten days ago, a drug dealer, having committed a crime in our country, hijacked a plane and attempted to escape. My warship was just cruising in these quarters, and was therefore ordered to shoot it down with the ‘blaze of the God of Death’.”

“‘Blaze of the God of Death.’ What's that?” Matthews asked.

Blain explained: “It’s a defense tool made according to your principle of long-range discharge. But recent experience tells us that this weapon—I mean, this tool—doesn’t have much prospect. It’s very difficult to aim, easily interfered with, and its force is not as great as was expected. So, we intend to supply Captain Sapunov with other defense equipment. This is the reason for our calling on you, old friend.”

“What do you want me to do?” Matthews said, still feigning a matter-of-fact attitude. It was already dark. Matthews turned on the desk lamp and readjusted the lamp shade so that the light was directed away from his own face.

“We know that plans for your high-powered laser have been completed. The company is prepared to manufacture it. We’re now constructing for you an even more sophisticated laboratory in the mountains of Europe, and we hope you will take it over.”

Matthews lowered his head and said nothing. I knew that he felt regret and sorrow. Only now had he realized Blain’s true colors, that he had again been deceived for ten years. What he took to be virtue, friendship and reliability had now all of a sudden fallen to pieces, like a tower built of sand.

Blain had underestimated Matthews’ ability to distinguish right from wrong. His dallying with Matthews during the ten years had made him intoxicated with his own success. Now he misinterpreted Matthews’ silence as acquiescence. He was therefore overjoyed.

“I’m very glad,” he said, “that we have reached a new understanding. Mr. Joseph Luo has expressed his willingness to further cooperate with us. He has promised to hand over the technical data in connection with the plans of the high-power laser.”

On hearing Blain's words, Matthews angrily stared at Joseph Luo. He stood up, trembling all over with rage and spoke in a hoarse, vehement voice:

“You gang of robbers! You speak the nicest words and then do all the damnedest things in the world! Maybe you can deceive me, but you can’t deceive thousands upon thousands of other people! I’ve not realized until today that you are all beasts. It’s already too late. But as long as I’m still alive, I won’t let you take away my laser!”

Joseph Luo hurried to his side to support him.

"Teacher," he said, "don't be angry. Science is merchandise. We're not responsible for what other people do with our products."

Matthews pushed him away angrily:

"You are really vulgar. You've stained the honor of science! How much have they paid for your soul?"

Joseph Luo lowered his head, ashamedly turned away and dared not look directly at Matthews' fiery eyes again. Blain and Sapunov exchanged glances. Sapunov took a whistle and blew it once. Six sailors instantly appeared at the doorway. Blain said with a mild and even sweet voice:

"Old friend, don't misunderstand us. Everything we are doing is the interest of your sacred work, in the interest of the lofty cause of peace. We're now no longer sure about the security of this small island, and have therefore decided to blow it up. You'd better gather up your things and go away with us."

Matthews glanced over the gloomy faces of the navy soldiers and knew that they were about to kidnap him by force. He was infuriated, panting with great effort and crying in a deep voice:

"How vicious you are!"

He wanted to say more, but his feeble heart could no longer persist. He staggered back, stared fiercely at the enemy with eyes full of hatred and enmity, so that even the crafty old scoundrel Blain and the imperious and self-confident Sapunov felt terrified. In deathly silence, Matthews fell heavily to the ground.

Sapunov was the first to act calmly. He bent over Matthews to examine him, took out a white handkerchief, wiped his hands and said indifferently:

"He's gone!"

Having witnessed this tragedy, I felt my blood boiling, my guts torn. I clutched the door knob, and was about to rush out of the room to take revenge for Dr. Matthews but Sapunov's words froze me into composure.

"It's a pity," he said to Blain, "that we haven't got the high-voltage atomic battery. Otherwise, we would waste no time in turning his laser tunneling machine instantly into a death ray weapon."

Now I finally knew the cause and effect of this case: from the assassination of Professor Zhao Qian to the death of Dr. Matthews, these were all part and parcel of a master plot of that country to manufacture the death ray weapon. With the help of Joseph Luo, they could take possession of the plans of the laser, but they did not know Matthews had already produced a sample, much less that the high-voltage atomic battery was just in this room. If I rushed out to argue with them, I might lose my own life, which in itself was not too serious but might lead to their possession of two important products—that would be too great a loss. Therefore, I did my best to control myself and refrained from taking any action.

In my excitement, I unintentionally made some noise. Blain, who was standing nearest the bedroom door, suddenly took a watchful look and walked my way. I was so excited that I perspired all over and my heart jumped. I looked desperately around the room, trying to find something to defend myself with, but there was not even a wooden stick. How I wished I had a bomb with which I could end my life along with that of the precious laser and atomic battery and this gang of vicious animals!

Blain's hand was already on the door knob. He was now separated from me by only a few feet. I lowered myself slightly; all the muscles in my body were taut. I was determined to struggle with him to the bitter end. Just at this crucial moment, someone screamed causing Blain to turn around. It was Amang. He was bringing in a plateful of glasses and a bottle of wine when he saw his master lying motionless on the ground. He uttered from the depth of his throat an extremely sad cry that could only be made by a mute person. He pounced fearlessly on Blain and struck him down with one blow. Only then did the sailors became alert, and rushed to grab Amang and tie him up.

Joseph Luo stepped forward and helped Blain up. Half of his face was swollen and his mouth was bleeding. It appeared that this was the first time he had suffered a beating.

"Where are the blueprints?" he asked roughly.

"In … in the safe in the laboratory," Joseph Luo timidly replied.

At this time a sailor came and reported that he had just received a call from the warship saying that there was a new emergency and asking them to leave the island as soon as possible. On hearing this, Sapunov at once said to Joseph Luo:

"Go and get them, quick!" Then, pointing to Amang, he ordered a sailor: "Do away with this fellow! Set the explosives at once, and let the time bomb go off in one hour!"

Joseph Luo pointed to Matthews on the ground and asked: "How about him?"

Sapunov grinned. "What we are setting is a nuclear explosive device. It'll remove Dr. Matthews' island from

the map forever. The blaze of atomic explosion will give him a grand burial ceremony and the depth of the sea will be his final tomb."

The sailors dragged Amang out of the room. A moment later, an ear-splitting sound of a gunshot announced the end of this faithful servant.

Hearing the gunshot, Joseph Luo shivered and walked away with bowed head as if he had just been punished. Blain partially covered his face with a handkerchief, sat down on a chair, spat angrily on the ground and exclaimed: "What damned luck!"

Sapunov walked over, patted him on the shoulder, laughed self-complacently and said:

"I say, Ivan," (this must be his real name) "you've done a pretty good job! You possess the spirit of a politician and the shrewdness of a capitalist! The seeds you sowed ten years ago have now yielded magnificent fruit! When we've succeeded in manufacturing the death ray weapon, we'll be able to shoot down the satellites, guided missiles and aircraft of our enemies and destroy their warships and tanks, easily and whenever we like. We'd then be not only masters of the whole earth but also masters of the universe! We shall prove that we are the honorable descendants of our great forefathers! Now, get up, let's go examine the laboratory. Don't leave a thing behind."

Blain stood up and followed Sapunov out to the laboratory.

I could not wait any longer. I left at once and carried Matthews into the bedroom where I placed him on the bed. I discovered that he had not stopped breathing; his heart was still beating feebly. I took out his medicine from the cabinet and gave him an injection. I was then both sad and angry; my attention was completely centered on rescuing the patient and I temporarily forgot the imminent danger we were in.

I heard Sapunov and his subordinates leave the laboratory and knew that they had obtained the blueprints. Then all the lights on the island were extinguished, which meant that the power station had been destroyed. A helicopter took off. They had left this condemned small island.

Bright moonlight shone in from the window. Quietness reigned all around us. Somewhere on this island, a timepiece was ticking, calculating the minutes and seconds when the explosion was to take place. In the bay, a small motorboat was afloat; it could still take me to safety. But I could not leave the helpless patient. To move him at this time would accelerate his death! I could only sit silently by his bedside, waiting for the arrival of the last moment. There was no fear in my heart, only deep regret. I was not able to see my great motherland, nor fulfill the behest of Professor Zhao.

Suddenly Matthews moaned and opened his eyes. He looked at me and tightly held my hand. His eyes were filled with tears. For a long time he could not say a word.

"Have they gone?" he asked tiredly at last.

I nodded my head.

"The blueprints?"

I again nodded painfully.

"Has the warship taken off?"

"Not yet."

Suddenly Matthews opened wide his eyes. He struggled to sit up, and with a superhuman effort, pointed to the laser in the corner of the room and said:

"Quick, push it towards the window!"

"Doctor, you shouldn't get any more excited," I said anxiously: "It could be a matter of life and death for you!"

"It's not a question of life and death for me alone," said Matthews panting, "but should they succeed in taking away the blueprints, it would be a question of life and death for thousands upon thousands of people!"

I could no longer disobey him. Three days earlier, Dr. Matthews, Amang and I had dismantled the laser and with all our might moved it part by part into the bedroom. Now, with energy born of anger, I alone pushed it towards the window.

I helped Matthews to the laser. He skillfully connected it with the nigh-voltage atomic battery and adjusted its strength to the maximum point. Under the strong electric current, the laser shot out a still brighter red light. Like a sharp sword of revenge, the laser ray pierced the silent night sky.

In the distant sea, the warship had weighed anchor and started to sail. Her outline began to disappear from the misty water surface. But the deadly laser beam was already following her. She had no way to escape from her fate of destruction.

At the first sweep of the laser beam, a row of coconut trees along the bank of the reef lake were cut in half and fell at once. Then Dr. Matthews tried a second time, but his hand trembled, so the beam touched the sea surface, and the water waves exploded, producing a mass of cloudy vapor which blocked out the moonlight. The third time

Matthews succeeded in pointing the beam at the warship. I saw a bright flash of light followed by a very violent explosion. The naval vessel began to sink in the midst of dense smoke and raging fire.

Matthews 1et go of the button, his body leaning to one side. I hurried to support him. This act of revenge had exhausted the last iota of his strength. His breath became more and more feeble. His pulse was almost imperceptible. Under the moonlight, his face was as pale as a piece of white paper. His lips trembled; he was trying hard to tell me—and all the people to come—the many things that filled his heart.

"Now I see," he said slowly. "If we didn't kill this shoal of sharks, there would, be no justice, no peace in this world."

He wished to say more, but death was already upon him. I saw his head suddenly drop down on his breast …

Within a period of half a month, I had personally witnessed the death of two scientists!

With tears in my eyes, I laid him down on the bed, and covered him with a white blanket. Then I remembered that I myself probably had ten to twenty minutes to escape death. I took up the high-voltage atomic battery and ran as fast as I could towards bay. The laser was too heavy. I had no way to bring it with me.

The motor-boat was still moored off the bank of the bay. I jumped into it, untied the cable, started the motor and steered the boat at top speed further out towards sea. The motor-boat roared and glided away, leaving a long trail of white foam behind her.

When I was four or five kilometers away from the coral island, I heard an earthshaking explosion behind me. The waves almost caused my small boat to stand up. I did my best to maintain its balance. When I turned back my head, I saw a white water column rise from the sea and shoot high into the sky. It was topped by a cap of black mushroom clouds formed by dense smoke. A moment later, the water column broke down, the smoke dispersed, and the wave of spray was scattered like rain. At last, the boiling sea became calm again, and there was only a bright round moon shining on the boundless ocean. The tragic Dr. Matthews' island was thus forever removed from the world. I steered the small motor-boat quickly in the direction of my motherland. My mind was full of hatred, but it was also full of confidence. I was prepared to begin my new life of struggle for the cause.

111.33 Excerpt from **Wu Sang Fights The Tiger: A Folktale**\fn{by Li Xintang (1935-   )} Yangzhou, Jiangsu Province, China (M) 2

… When\fn{This story, of which this is only a small potion, takes place during in the year 1119AD. Another segment is told by Wang Xiaotang (1918-   ).} the God-blessed Second Brother from Guankou, Wu Song, had received news from his elder brother, he bade farewell to his lord, and went off to Yanggu District in Shandong to find his brother. He had been on the road for more than a day, today he had reached the boundary of Yanggu District in Shandong. There was still more than twenty *li* to the city. It was in the middle of the tenth month, and the sun was slanting steeply towards the west. Our hero felt hungry and wanted to take a rest.

The moment he looked up, he saw in front of him a pitch-black and dead-dark town. As he came nearer he saw the wall piled up with flat bricks all the way to the roof and in the middle the round city gate. Above it there was a whitewashed stone with three red characters: Jingyang town.

Our hero shouldered his yellow bundle, lifted his staff with his right hand, and marched with big strides into the town. Who would imagine that when our hero came to this town he would begin drinking wine? He noticed a wine-banner hanging at the doorway of the inn, but he did not understand the meaning of the name of the wine, written on the wine-banner:

"Three bowls and you cannot cross the ridge."

This name had been made up by one of the former innkeepers. In general, a good wine, a good first-brew of *gaoliang*, would get a name like "The paralyzing spear" or "A gust of wind and you collapse" or "You will collapse and have to pay your bill." Well, this was called "Three bowls and you cannot cross the ridge," because the innkeeper wanted a name that sounded a little nicer. So when you entered this inn and lifted the wine mug to pour yourself a cup of wine, *sh-sh-sh-sh*, oh, my, what a good wine!

Well, it is not up to us lousy drinkers to gather this. But those who are good at drinking, they get it the moment they see it. When a good drinker sees this wine, what does it mean? The color is special! What color? "Dark green as phoenix tree, bubbling 'flowers' clinging to the edge, the fragrance attacking the nostrils"—that means a pure green color! And it keeps bubbling all the time.

Before when one wanted to buy some wine, the wine was measured in a can, for example one measure of wine; just like when we went to buy wine as children, if the wine did not bubble "flowers," he would plunge the can fast into the wine: "*Plong*!," down it went, and this foam was called "wine flowers." Actually this kind\fn{Of

"flowers."} would disappear with one blow of the wind. But when you poured a cup of good wine, one "flower" would follow after another, one succeeding another, one after another, real "wine flowers" all the time.

"Wine flower" means a small bubble. Wine flowers beside one another all over the place. As soon as one who is fond of drinking sees this he knows: this is a good wine! This is one aspect.

Then there is also another aspect. This wine—Wu Song did not only see the wine flowers, but its flavor also assailed his nostrils. Oh, how good it smelled! It is not the perfume that our female comrades put on their face, so that nobody will notice a bad smell. Whenever they pass by, it smells awfully good. If we have not had the chance to smell it, we may feel a little disappointed. No, this was something different! It pierced the seven apertures. If you had a cold, you just had to smell it, and your nose would be cleared. When Wu Song who was so fond of drinking saw this wine, what do you think? Oh, my!

"Three mouths' smell!"

"Three mouths' smell," what does that mean? First it smelled, when he inhaled into his nose. Then, *sup*, it smelled when he took a sip into his mouth. Well, in former times, talking about those three bowls, that was in "square mouth" style so when we tell from the old books, what's the sense of using both hands? The wine cups were not so small, they were big: three cups equaled one wine mug, you had to lift them up with both hands, in this way: [informant demonstrates].

Who would imagine that when Wu Song began drinking, it was not like us, please have a drink, please, please, please have a drink, *sup*, we drink just a little, if we visit other people and eat together, I don't mean drink wine, but if we gulp down all the food, and eat their food all up!

Now Wu Song was a real drinker. When he wanted to drink, he lifted the cup [like this], and: *quaff*! If you turned his cup round, not one drop of wine was left. That is what is understood by a good drinker! People like us who are not able to drink like this, if we down a cup, *quaff*, off we go! Why? We tumble round this way. Well, that's a joke!

But as for Wu Song, that was real. When he downed this cup, it smelled good. That was the second "smell," the smell of taking the wine into his mouth.

But there should be ":three smells," oh, I forgot, what do you think the third smell is?

"Hiccup"—after drinking to his heart's content, he would hiccup and that would smell too! Not only he himself would feel it, but people around would also smell this good smell. This is called "three mouths' smell." I cannot go into details about it now.

Who would imagine that Wu Song was a wine-bibber? Our hero was only really fond of two things. The first thing was wine. From the time when Wu Song killed the tiger and all the way to the episode of the *Two Dragons' Mountain*, altogether the *Ten Chapters of Wu Song*, every time our hero meets with misfortune it is because of drinking, but I'm not going to perform all that.

Today he had been drinking, and he was acting in a drunken state. His character was so that he always tried to help the weak and cheat the mighty. If you were such a person, a person without strength, and another mean person would try beat you up, then Wu Song would help you, Wu Song would beat him up.

So therefore, in the first place he was fond of wine, and in the second place he was fond of helping others. In the entire *Ten Chapters on Wu Song* he always acts on behalf of others, never for his own profit.

The first chapter, the one we are telling now, I have performed that often in China. For what reason? Because whenever a person gets into trouble in his daily business, he may come over—how?—to listen to *Wu Song Fights The Tiger*. No matter what kind of trouble, we should study the spirit of *Wu Song Fights The Tiger*.

In the second place, you have Wu Song's fine morals. What fine morals? He acts without anybody asking him! As soon as he sees the advertisement about the tiger, he gets mighty angry, kills the tiger and does away with the evil for all the people.

If somebody asks you to do something, there is first the question of money—"Please, please!"—Will I get something for it? If not, I'll not do it. And the amount of money has to be quite big, because if I cannot kill it, my own life is in danger!

Wu Song was different. Wu Song went along on his own. Well, he had of course had too much to drink. When he saw that advertisement, he cried out:

"*Aiya*!"

"*Aiya*!" doesn't mean he was scared. It means: "*Aha*!" He felt ashamed towards the waiter in the inn Xiao'r.

"I thought he was running an inn of brigands. And I even beat him up!"

However, this situation—this situation made him angry. Why was he angry? '

"You tiger, you! You think you can block my way! A hero only knows how to move forward, there is nothing

called retreat! I shall climb the ridge all the way to the top, and find that tiger, and fight it out! I shall kill the tiger and do away with the evil for all the people. That is the way we heroes act! If I cannot kill him, then let him eat me up and that's it!"

At this point Wu Song … well, this is called:

"If you do not enter the tiger's den, how will you get hold of the tiger's cub?"

A little while ago, under the influence of the wine, Wu Song had become a bit tipsy, and therefore, clearly knowing there was a tiger in the mountain, he obstinately climbed that tiger mountain. Wu Song marched off, he had his own mind. Now he was arriving at Jingyang Ridge. Jingyang Ridge is only about one *li* high. Normally, if he had not been drinking, he would leap and bounce to the top in one single breath, *pu-pu-pu-pu*.

Today it didn't work. He had drunk too much. Thirty cups! He was well aware that he was not in control of his head and feet. When he stepped on the ground it felt like stepping on a cotton bag. He had to take a rest now. He must take a rest, so he looked round. Beside the road he saw an old tree, well, just a tree, one man could hold around it, but it was several *zhang* high. At the foot of the tree there was a moss-grown stone, one meter broad, two meters long, and half a meter thick, and then I do not know how deeply it was embedded in the earth. Wu Song sat down to rest. …

150.239 Hi Lili Hi Li …\fn{by Shui Ching aka Yang Yi (1935-)} Nantung, Kiangsu Province, China (M) 6

Upon waking, Y finds the tropical morning sun perching upon his eyelids like a persistent mosquito. His pupils instantly contract like a cat's, and his eyelids feel stiff and heavy. He hadn't slept well last night. Tossing and turning just because someone had forgotten to turn tightly the faucet in the washroom next door. He felt as if the monotonous trickle, like the endless dripping of a water clock, had drilled a hole in his head and caused his old memories to spill. At this instant his skull, scooped clean of its contents, could roll a long way with one kick, like a dried coconut shell.

A stiff pain goes over Y's whole body—the symptom of an impending illness that he cannot trifle with or, worse, the omen of a natural or political calamity? For a Chinese living in the South Sea Islands, no place offers true security. Recently the celestial signs have boded ill: all those meteors and solar eclipses can only bring about a period of war and famine. No wonder cholera has broken out again and is getting more menacing every day in the city. Some old superstitions, however absurd, simply cannot be eliminated from one's subconscious. So then, he asks himself, what prompted you to leave the island bastion of your own country for this overseas island, sun-baked and barren? Huge tropical flowers, girls wrapped in rich-colored sarongs, exotic, percussive music—things that set Gauguin's\fn{Eugène Henri Paul Gaugin (1848-1903), French postimpressionist painter.} canvas aglow—can be found only in Tahiti. Here, you can see only stretches of primitive jungle or waves of the as yet uncharted sea beating against the coast.

Y looks at the picture of the crucifixion on the wall, which he has been too lazy to remove. The former tenant must have been a Christian, and a devout one, too, he thinks. The emaciated Christ, a crown of thorns on his drooping head and a torn cloth around his loins, is hitched up on the cross. One of his legs is drawn upward, and blood oozes from his palms and soles.

Under the dying stare of Christ is Y's desk. A ray of sunlight rests upon the book which Y was reading last night: a new biography of Oscar Wilde.\fn{Oscar Fingal Wilde (1854-1900), Irish-born writer and wit.} On its jacket appears the lust-ravaged face\fn{In 1894, at the peak of his career, Oscar Wilde was convicted of having engaged in sodomistic sexual relations with Lord Alfred Douglas, and sentenced to two years of hard labor in prison.} of Wilde which, pallid and swollen, offers a sharp contrast to the dolorous countenance of the crucified Christ.

Y walks to the washroom next door. The faucet is still dripping, leaving a rusty stain on the sink. The water must have changed color again. Thanks to the malfunctioning of the city government, the water supply frequently assumes the color of milk, occasionally that of urine. When Y turns on the faucet, as he has expected, a stream of yellow muddy water that faintly smells o urine gushes out. No shaving today, he tells himself, and get the washing done quick!

Toilet done, Y is walking back to his own room when he turns his head and notices on the cement floor the head of a rat. A few scattered blood stains right by it reinforce his belief that the debris must have been left by the Siamese cat making his regular prowl last night. The rat must have been of medium size, and although the head has been sawed off the body by the cat's teeth, it remains intact with its spars whiskers, its protruding teeth, and its beady eyes staring at the world with a sort of fatuous twinkle. There is an American poet\fn{Richard Eberhart;

from his *Collected Poems 1930-1960*.} who, upon revisiting the site where a groundhog had lain dead three summers ago, could think

Of China and of Greece,
Of Alexander in his tent;
Of Montaigne in his tower,
Of Saint Theresa in her wild lament.

Y bends down to examine the triangular face of the dead rat and feels a slight attack of nausea.

Y returns to his bedroom and switches on his transistor radio, hoping to receive some news from the outside world and iron out the ruffled feelings of a blue Monday morning. But there is only the plip-plop of static noise; neither the suave voice of radio Australia's announcer nor the insistent, illogical message from the land of his ancestors can be heard.

"Must be due to the intervention of a sun-spot explosion," Y murmurs under his breath as he starts for the doorway.

A gray wall blocks his way, as if it marked the world's end, with no exit leading to any place, to any hope. Every morning, as he steps outside the door, he is seized by a sense of fear that he is being incarcerated ina prison, even though what he confronts is only a block of wall, a coarse ugly wall of plastered gray bricks.

Presently Y is pacing along the sidewalk of the asphalt main street. Bungalows remain exotic to him, perched as they are upon stilts, three feet above ground, to keep them from the malarial vapors rising from the earth. Roofs, walls, window lattices compose a somewhat unreal pattern of strange colors found only in fairy tales or in toyland.

The sun-baked earth send forth spirals of steam. This is truly a miasmal land of barbarians—to hear the gurgling sound of streams meandering down the mountains, one has to go elsewhere! Hearing the tap-tap-tap of his footsteps, Y feels the rubble rapidly rolling away from his soles. The sun has melted his shirt into a gluey sheet of pressed bean curd, and it sticks to his back.

A clammy sense of dread now clings to him like his shirt. No, how can the whole street be so deserted at eight on a Monday morning? Not a person, a car to be seen? Intuitively, Y links the implacable calm of the present moment to the strange sensation he had when he woke up this morning and asks himself: Could his uneasiness be traced to the unusual quiet around him?

He hastens his steps and feels the rubble rolling faster and faster from the sides of his shoes. The sense of fear now presses harder on him, as if he were passing through a graveyard at midnight. He turns around, and the main street, the bungalows, the coconut palms with their octopus-shaped heads of broad leaves, and the spirals of steam rising from the ground all look reassuringly the same as before. But where are the people? The people?

Heeding the premonition of a storm, Y examines the bungalows searchingly. The wooden windows are all tightly shut (glass window are not common here) as if the occupants were still sound asleep, and the doors all bolted.

Y cannot imagine what could have happened overnight. In this changeable, often (to him) treacherous world, something untoward always happens just when he is completely off guard. Quick, he tells himself, be off to the broadcasting station where you work and find out.

The thought gives him some comfort. Hurrying, he arrives at the radio station.

The iron-wire fence still surrounds the station but the wicket, as if someone has forgotten to latch it, is swinging back and forth. Y slinks in and latches the wicket behind him. a glance at the sentry box shows that the dark brown guard, a member of the local royal armed forces customarily stationed there in his blue-black French cap and blue-black denim shorts, is missing. Y hesitates for a while, his eyes hurt by the brilliance of a cluster of rosebushes along the fence set afire by the sun. A black sparrow with red eyes—all the sparrows here are like that—hops for a while before flying off into the sky.

Full of apprehension, Y goes toward the station, but even inside the building not a soul can be seen and not a sound heard. And the day, he remembers only too well, is Monday, a workday. As he approaches the second floor, he is so petrified by what he sees on the wall facing the staircase that unwittingly he backs down one step.

All over the white wall are assorted bloody handprints, one upon another in total confusion. Among these handprints is a line of words in Islamic script, also written in blood. Y cannot decipher the meaning of this, but from the exclamation marks—there are, altogether, three of them, each bigger than the preceding one—he instantly senses the threatening weight the line carries.

Insurrection? A coup? Oh, heavens, now he knows why the whole street is deserted and why the windows and doors are all shut! In this part of the world a newly independent state, once it enjoys an excess of democracy and freedom, will behave like a pauper who has won the biggest lottery prize. It will spurn reason and turn mad!

What time is this, Y checks himself, to indulge in ineffectual moralizing? He holds tight to the railing, to steady himself. At the same time, his left palm is upon his brow, in an attempt to collect his thoughts. His soles ae glued to one of the stairs for what seems a long while. In this eternal moment he doesn't know whether to retreat or advance. Retreat—who knows if the station is not already surrounded by rebels? Advance—what if his office has already been occupied by them?

The next moment Y finds the back of his head pressed against the tiled wall of the washroom because, he has convinced himself, this is the least important room in the building. Unless the rebels want to search the place, they would never bother to come here. But wait, what if they want to piss?

At this critical moment, he recalls with perverse futility a story he has read—was it by Sartre\fn{Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980), French philosopher, dramatist, novelist and political journalist.} or Camus?\fn{Albert Camus (1913-1960), French-Algerian novelist, essayist, dramatist, and journalist.}—which the anti-hero, a convict or fugitive, breaks jail and takes refuge in a washroom. Finally he surrenders because, with his cartridges all used up, he can no longer defy the law.

But I am innocent, he tells himself, why should I subject myself to this treatment? Why should I be in this sad but ridiculous quandary? What have I done?

At last Y summons enough courage to leave the washroom, hardly a place for a man to be captured in. He wants to preserve his dignity to the end. Moreover, even if he should be caught, he could always tell the rebels that he is but an alien resident. Maybe they would treat him not too badly, and perhaps do no worse than deport him. But—how could he account for his being an employee of the overthrown government?

While thus lost in thought, he has already stepped into the News room—too late to back out now. Luckily there are no armed rebels in the room. He heaves a sigh of relief and smells the more keenly the stale air that has been confined in the room overnight. But the air is at the same time foul and rank as if it were newly released from a refrigerator stocked with meats and vegetables which has not functioned for days. He turns on the switch for the electric fan on the wall. But its four blades refuse to move—apparently, the power supply for the city must have failed. Y then sinks into his boss's high-backed swivel chair. For better security he turns its back so that it faces the window.

Keeping his eyes on the door, he begins to dial the telephone, trying to get in touch with police headquarters to find out what really has happened. Thank goodness, the line has not been cut, but the noise from the receiver—bleep, bleep, bleep—deafens his ear. He holds the receiver some distance from his ear, but the insistent noises continues and no one answers. He counts the bleeps and then has to hang up.

He tries several other places: the newspapers, the telecommunication bureau, the municipal building. But there is no answer—only the monotonous ringing at the other end of the telephone.

Then the telephone suddenly rings loud and clear as an alarm clock. Excited, he grabs the receiver. Once again the buzzing deafens him but now he eagerly presses the receiver against his ear as if afraid he might lose contact forever.

But a few moments later the receiver no longer transmits any sound. The telephone line must have been cut. The telephone that was alive in his hand a moment ago is now dead. Dejectedly he holds on to the receiver for along time before replacing it.

Y can imagine that the party at the other end of the line must have also dejectedly replaced the telephone. He must have been as desperate as I, trying to get in touch with the radio station. Did he run into the same snag as I did? Why couldn't we make contact before the line snapped?

On the desk is a pile of teletype news from the Control room. Y scans it and finds that the latest items of news had come in by 9:30 last evening. Since then this small town has been out of contact with the world. He checks the teletype again to see if there is any news about the coup or insurrection. Then he realizes that should there be any it would be sometime after 9:30 P.M.

What can Y do? The town is now in a state of ominous calm preceding the storm, and they, whoever they are, have just cut the telephone line. Very soon they will send out men to occupy strategic points, including the broadcasting station. He had better get out of here before the rebels swarm in.

Where to go? Will it be safe in the streets? If by chance he should be shot dead, it would have been better to remain in this room and wait for the worst. No, he would be better to back at the dormitory. There he still has a

few cans of food and can stave off hunger for a day or two. The tumult will sooner or later subside, whatever its outcome.

Then, distinctly, he hears someone starting a car. He is all ears, trying to tell from which direction the noise comes. It comes from across the fence and he hopes that the car will turn around to the front directly under his window so that he may have a clear view of who is behind the wheel. If it is not one of the rebels (they would presumably wear some kind of insignia), he will yell aloud to get the driver's attention and then he will be saved.

The humming of the starting motor gradually fills the room, and his hope rises with it. then, to his dismay, the car apparently swerves to the back of the building. The driver seems in such a hurry that he jams the gear several times before he catches up with the speed. The wheels scraping the ground send off a screech. Eventually the driver seems to have made his way out. The deafening noise recedes..

The room is restored to calm, and the foul air assails his nose with renewed intensity.

It must be one of my friends, he thinks, at least an acquaintance, who has left me in the lurch. Don't be too hard on him, though. How could he know I'm stranded here?

Very soon Y is plodding along once again under the sun, in the direction of his dormitory. He has chosen the side streets and back alleys, to avoid being a victim of stray bullets.

The white sun now radiates intenser heat so that Y feels like a patient dying of scarlet fever: dizzy, thirsty, talking incoherently to himself, and in the end almost fainting. Then he comes to, though his cheeks are feverish and his eyes glazed. They stare at the world as if reluctant to leave it.

For only a few days Y hasn't been to this street, but the grass on the curbside has grown to the level of his eyes. He passes by the iron-wire fence of a basketball field, along which the grass is even knottier and more luxuriant. Walking in its shade, Y feels as if the sun has suddenly darkened, even though the tallest blades of grass glisten skyward like uplifted swords. Made uneasy by this incredible overgrowth, he continues walking, enveloped in the smell of verdure. Occasionally he hears the rustle of wings among the leaves as the grasshoppers, disturbed by his approach, fly ahead for a more secure hiding-place.

He makes a turn, and right in the middle of the street a massive black thing confronts him. It bears some resemblance to a car. Upon closer inspection, it is indeed a car, but turned upside down like a beetle lying on its back, unable to reverse its position. On what remains of every broken windowpane are fine cracks like magnified crow's feet on an old man's face. The exposed engine, burned black, is totally mangled. Someone must have wrecked the car before setting fire to it.

Riot … violence … Y hurriedly retraces his steps even though his eyes continue to take in every sight like a camera. Blindly he makes several turns, completely unaware that, in case of a riot, his aimless dashing about can only court disaster.

Finally, after several such turns, his mechanical steps have carried him to the end of a street. Ahead of him lies a wide expanse with no buildings around it. It is paved all over with sharp, small fragments of stone on top of which floats a layer of powder-white stone-dust. The are directly beyond looks totally unfamiliar, and he is far more numbed with fear than when he discovered the overturned car. Quickly turning back, he sees a hospital with its front gate wide open. He walks in unhesitatingly: his common sense tells him that the hospital is as much a sanctuary for refugees as is the church for penitent sinners.

Gusts of cool breeze stroke his burning cheeks. He is now walking under a Moslem-style dome along a corridor with white-plastered walls. The sun floods exactly one half of the corridor while the other half lies in darkness. The apparently deserted corridor is pervaded with a slight but unmistakable medicinal odor. Y can hear his own rhythmic footsteps, which sound hollow under the dome.

Now he has reached the door at the other end of the corridor. A victim of shock, he cautiously inclines his head to listen at the door. When he has made sure there are no movements inside, he gently pushes it open.

The door opens on an enormous sickroom, with a row of beds extending on either side. White sheets, white pillows lying neatly where the sheets are tucked in, the white paint on the iron frames and legs of the beds, the white in-patient cards hanging on pegs constitute a symmetrical pattern in white. There are twenty beds on one side, Y counts with his eyes, and there are twenty on the other.

Y walks ahead along the aisle, his steps again sounding hollow in the vault-like room. The beds on either side look like Egyptian mummies swathed in white cloth, a monotonous and dizzying pattern suggestive of Pop Art.\fn{A visual arts movement of the 1950's and 1960's, principally in the United States and Britain.} Finally giddy, he trips and falls onto the last bed on the right row. His head against the soft pillow, he wants to take a nap: the happenings this morning have been too exhausting.

But he is immediately bothered by the sound of dripping which, upon first hearing, he takes to be that of his heartbeat. The noise, however, comes from the adjacent room, Ward No. 4. In desperation for a human companion, be he ever so sick, he gets up from bed and goes into the other room.

The medicinal odor is much stronger there. the ward is much smaller than the other, and also darker, because its blinds are tightly drawn. Each of the beds is screened from view by a white cloth curtain. Hung high on a hook outside the curtain of the second bed, however, is a bottle of saline solution. The drip-drop he has heard must have proceeded from this bottle because its mouth is no longer properly connected with the tube the injects the fluid into the patient's arm. It drips onto the floor. Looking downward, he sees an out-stretched brown had with its palm turned upward, though he cannot tell whether it belongs to a man or woman. As he rushes toward the extended hand, he stumbles upon a pail near the bed. A mop leaning against the pail hits the floor with a thud.

The pail soon regains its balance. Y peers inside and sees a layer of clammy, white fluid laced with streaks of blood and dotted with dark purple clots of what seem to be vomit. A fly hovers above the liquid before settling again on one of the clots.

Y realizes with the swiftness of lightning that he must have stumble into a special ward for quarantined cholera patients. Hasn't there been an outbreak of cholera in this city? What lies at the bottom of the pail must be vomit. The outstretched hand under the bottle must belong to a cholera patient—maybe he is dead already?

Y wants to get out fast. In his hurry he brushes aside the white curtain and catches a glimpse of the patient in white smock and cap. He lies prone, his head over the side of the bed. His posture suggests that death caught him while he was making a last valiant attempt to empty all the contents of his stomach into the pail. The tube must have gotten loose from the bottle during his last struggle

Suddenly a large amount of stomach acid gushes into Y's mouth. Covering it with his hand, he dashes out of the hospital through the enormous sickroom. Then he leans against a big tree outside the porch, and vomits mouthfuls of acid water because he hasn't had any breakfast this morning. But even though he throws up no food, the muscles in his throat feel sore after repeated contractions. Then, his vomiting done, he saunters to another big tree and sits upon its exposed roots. Heaving a sigh, he shuts his eyes to take a rest.

*

Y is now plodding along a seashore trail that leads to S town. He still cannot be quite sure what really happened in his own city. Coup? Riot? A severe epidemic of cholera? Perhaps all three concurrently? He must walk to S., a small town about twenty miles from where he lives, and get the news. Afraid that he might meet rebels if he took the main road, he has picked this trail, a pathway seldom trodden.

On his right lies the vast stretch of the South China Sea which has dozed under the sun, forlorn and forgotten, for thousands of years. Never have any sailboats or steamships emerged from its distant horizon. Even the pirates' ships do not stop here, because the island is too barren.

The sky is now gray, but the sea is grayer. The sun, however, shines on its surface and livens up its color. Heaps of cumulus clouds are piled up on the distant horizon.

Under his feet is a long stretch of sand whose silvery color indicates its high silicic content. The trail, therefore, looks as if it were paved with ashes—the kind of ashes poured from censers. The sand is dotted with pebbles, and here and there embedded among the pebbles are thistles flaunting their tiny, star-shaped white blossoms.

On his left, for mile after mile—maybe even hundreds of miles—lies the dark, primitive jungle.

A solitary pine emerges from the roadside, a noble specimen like those found in classical Chinese paintings. Leaning against its gnarled trunk, under its shade, Y steals a glance at his wrist watch.

It has stopped. Pressing its crystal against his car, he is unable to hear its familiar tick-tock—surely it has stopped. Its hands point to 9:30: hard to tell whether it stopped last evening or this morning. He winds it up and lets it run its own course, since he doesn't know the correct time.

Then it occurs to him that he as become almost another Robinson Crusoe\fn{The chief character of a novel by Daniel Defoe (1660?-1731), entitled *The Life and Strange Surprizing Adventures of Robinsoe Cruseo*, of York, Mariner (1719).} on a deserted island. Time has lost its importance for him; what difference does it make if he cannot tell the exact hour of the day?

But he cannot help wondering that, from the moment he rushed out of the Special Ward, vomiting and then leaning against the tree for a rest, until he started walking on the seaside trail, there could be no more than an hour's time altogether. Tilting back his head to watch the sun, he reckons that it must be between ten and ten thirty in the morning.

But suddenly the sun hides itself behind the clouds, and he fells somewhat chilly as a gust of wind rising from the sea blows against him. He no longer feels the heat of the sun even though it still shines on him. The sun behind the clouds looks to him as if it were screened by a sheet of dark-yellow translucent paper: it transmits only light, but no heat. His skin feels cold and clammy as if soaked in water. Could this be another eclipse? Three days ago as he left his office during the lunch hour, he remembers, the sun was in eclipse and transmitted only light and no heat, as it does now. The disgraced sun is no more potent than the moon. The sun in Dante's Inferno is probably like that. That noon, in proportion as the honking of cars and bicycles sounded muffled, the burden of terror in his heart increased util he felt as if doomsday were near. He knew, though, that the eclipse is but a natural phenomenon and cannot last more than half an hour, or an hour at most.

That noon he was walking in a bustling street; now, alone in a deserted spot under a vast sky, he feels even more helpless. He feels as if something heavy and hideous like an incubus were pressing hard on his chest. He wants to cry out, to dispel the nightmare, but he feels limp and impotent.

He gets up, looking beseechingly around him.

To his great relief, he notices a human form emerging from the primitive jungle and heading toward the seashore.

He cranes his neck for a better view. Whoever that person may be—rebel or citizen, male or female, Chinese or foreigner—he is going to greet him and make known to him his helpless condition.

The person advances, eventually becomes clearly visible.

It is a woman.

Her hair disheveled, her feet bare, here shabby clothes torn into rags that can hardly cover her, the woman might have just stepped out of a cave of our primordial past. Perhaps she might even be taken for the Eve of Genesis.

Y stares at her with dazed eyes, but the woman, totally oblivious of his presence, walks on unafraid and abstractedly. Shaking her bony arms as she swings her hips, she advances as if she were dancing.

She is dancing, because Y can overhear her humming a tone.

The cold sunshine, a desolate seashore, a world which has lost its sense of time, a crazy woman doing a step suggestive of the *danse macabre*.\fn{The dance of death, a popular gathering during the plagues in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, represented on numerous cemetery walls.} … Shivering, Y is ready to retreat and flee the scene, but then he catches the tune the woman is humming: *Hi Lili, hi Li* … Yes, *Hi Lili, hi Li* … Y remembers now. *Hi Lil, hi Li* … Leslie Caron … an old film … puppet shows. The song R loved best to hum, the doll-faced R that has occupied a permanent place in his memory … could it be she?

It's she. It must be she. Y stares straight at the crazy woman advancing toward him. Those large, limpid eyes are now ashy dull … but even if she had been reduced to ashes, I can still recognize her.

Suddenly a thousand mixed feelings surge up in his heart so that all the words he would like to use are stuck in his throat. What has happened to him this morning is too absurd to account for in rational terms. He feels himself falling apart, perhaps no less crazy than RT. Looking into R's hazy eyes he sees the reflections of himself: huddled, small, and desperate. He slinks to her side and they're facing each other as if back in the good old days when they were locked in each other's arms, ready to join the other dancing couples for a *Put Down Your Little Feet*.

*

R (mechanically waves her bony arms): **Hi Lili hi Li …**

Y (tiptoes round R. Then steals a glance at her for a second time): **Oh, no.**

R (unpertubedly touches her rags): **Hi Lili hi Li …**

Y (clutches his shirt collar; summons up enough courage to talk): **R, please wake up. Wake up. Do you know who I am?**

R (jumps up like a doe, kicking off a whirl of powdered dust): **Hi Lili hi Li …**

Y (follows her, pleadingly): **Are you still mad at me? After all these years, now that we've met again, why're you still mad at me?**

R **Hi Lili hi Li …**

Y (steps a little closer, wanting very much to touch her naked shoulder.)

R (totally unresponsive; bends over to pluck a star-shaped white flower and sticks it among her disheveled hair; then with a ringing voice louder than before): **Hi Lili hi Li …**

Y (jumps up to grab R's shoulders with his tremulous hands; raises his voice to a hoarse pitch): **You must answer me, answer me!** (jolted, R stops her singing abruptly; with this also cease the natural sounds surrounding

them made by the wind and the sea; through the silence one hears Y's hysterical voice): **Tell me, how did you come here? Tell me, why do we end in this mess? What have we done to deserve a fate like this? Tell me, can we escape? Do we still have any future at all? Why don't you speak? Why are you so cruel? Why do you mock and torture me like this? Speak up! Please speak up!** (reflected in R's opaque and lusterless pupils, Y sees his own face, which is a picture of pitiable helplessness, bewilderment, and desperation. He hates himself for that, and in no time two lines of hot tears course down his cheeks.)

R (detaches herself from Y's grip, picks up the interrupted tune; more cheerfully): **Hi Lili hi Li …** (A roll of thunder on the distant horizon; the soft cumulus clouds now look like fierce, bulbous-eyed giants.)

Y (disgruntled, wipes his tears with the back of his hand. Resumes the haughty manner of his former years): **Hmm, Hi Lili hi Li …**

R (excitedly faces the sea and raises her arms skyward as if invoking the rain god above for showers): **Hi Lili hi Li …**

Y (attitude changed, side-glances at R in an appreciate manner): **Hmm, not bad.** (Chants a classical quatrain):\fn{The opening quatrain of *Magic Strings*, by the T'ang Dynasty (618-907) poet Li Ho.}

The witch pours the libation, clouds fill the sky,
In the flaming coals of the jade brazier the fumes of incense throb.
The God of the Sea and the Hill Nymph take their places,
Votive papers rustle in the howling whirlwind.

R (spins her body like a top, the torn rags whirling; sings even more shrilly): **Hi Lili hi Li …**

Y (infected by her enthusiasm, or rather, caught in her spell, whirls around her): **Hi Lili hi Li …** (black clouds lower, fraught with thunder and rain.)

R & Y (gambol like a pair of innocent children playing hide-and-seek on the outskirts of a town, now chasing after each other, now holding or clapping each other's hands. They skip and hop as if inebriated with the brew of Dionysus. They continue to cross the expanse of the thistles, heading toward the impenetrable darkness of the tropical jungle, singing): **Oh, hi iLili hi Li … Ah, hi Lili hi Li …** (again a roll of deafening thunder; the rain then falls like shooting spears.)

203.170 Father's Last Two Days\fn{by Shu Yi (1935-)} Qingdao, Shandong Province, China (M) 9

Recently I've changed my job. I've been put in charge of making preparations for the opening of "Lao She's Former Residence" to the public and also have responsibility for putting the author's papers in order.

The first task I set for myself after taking up the post was to have photographs taken systematically of all the places in Peking that had some connection with my father. Over the past few years the pace of construction in the city has increased tremendously and one can be sure that many old buildings will soon be knocked down. So if I wanted to get a series of photographs together then time was of the essence.

Photographic documentation of this kind would form an important part of the archives of Lao She's life and works. After all Lao She was born and grew up in Peking and had spent a lifetime writing about the city. So I made the arrangements with Mr. Li, editor of the publishing house, Mr. Zhang, a professional photographer and Mr. Wang, a Lao She expert. Off we set, carrying the camera equipment and with me in the lead, wending our way up and down the main streets and the narrow lanes of Peking.

One day we came to the former site of Taiping Lake in the northern suburbs of Peking, the place where my father had taken his own life. Eighteen years ago on a night in early autumn I'd sat here keeping vigil over my father, who had just died. It was a night I will never forget as long as I live. For eighteen years I'd not dared to come back, frightened of seeing anything that would reawaken the memories of that fearful time, that even now was etched indelibly on my mind. Those events of eighteen years ago were even more bizarre than a nightmare, more oppressive and more terrifying. How I wished it had all been a nightmare, for nightmares end eventually. But this was no nightmare, it was stark reality. I'd tasted the full weight of the bitterness that that reality carried with it; that heavy, inescapable, endless bitterness.

But I'd returned so that I could leave a record of this place for future generations. The place had changed considerably in eighteen years. Where was the park, the lake, the trees, the benches? Everything that had been there eighteen years ago had disappeared completely. Now, in their place, there was a very large subway train maintenance yard, enclosed by a wall with several spacious modern workshops inside. Where the outer Taiping

lake had been there was now a large, flat yard about 100 metres wide which was criss-crossed with metal tracks neatly leading to each of the train sheds. We got permission to enter and headed west through the yard for quite a way until we came to a section of track.

Just then a brand new train came out from a train shed to the east and passed by us. Soon it moved into the tunnel and started out on its route. It felt as if this place was the trains' home, their true point of origin. This struck me very forcibly as this same place was also my father's final destination, the place where his life ended.

On the day we took the pictures it was very sunny and there was no wind. It was peaceful and tranquil. After the train had passed it seemed as though all that was left was the sunshine and the tracks, even the noise of the city was shut off by the wall. The anxiety I had felt suddenly dissipated, and all the tension left my body. I felt happy just to stay here standing silently in the sunshine, looking at the tracks and letting them carry me off to some faraway place.

No one spoke. Mr. Zhang silently focused the camera and pressed the shutter release. But then Mr. Wang suddenly made a proposal:

"We should put up a permanent memorial stone here, inscribed with the words, 'This is the place where the writer Lao She sacrificed his life.'"

For the word "sacrifice" he used the two characters *she shen.* My father's given name was Qingchun and his alias was Sheyu. *She yu* means to sacrifice oneself. Probably Mr. Wang had thought about this at length, so that when he uttered the word *sheshen* it really summed up the mood of the time, the place and the scene. Sheyu was the alias that Father picked for himself when he was in his teens. In their written form, the two characters *she yu* represent the two components which make up Father's family name. He wanted to make *she yu*, self-sacrifice, his lodestar throughout life: to selflessly offer himself up to this troubled world, to try and make it a better place. So, from that time on, he set himself on the path of sacrifice and resolutely walked that road throughout his life.

When Father was twenty-three he addressed a group of younger students. In his speech he said that Jesus had borne only one cross, but that Chinese youth should be prepared for a double sacrifice. They had to bear two crosses: one for the destruction of the old world, the other for the construction of the new world. This was probably Father's first "Self-sacrifice Manifesto".

In fact in 1938 Father had himself talked about his setting up a memorial stone, an idea similar to Mr. Wang's. Although he hadn't meant it seriously, nonetheless his determination to sacrifice himself for his country was real enough.

At that time the country was facing a national crisis. Writers and artists who were gathered in the three cities of Wuhan\fn{Now one unified cities, Wuhan was originally made up of three separate entities: Wuchang, Hankou and Hanyang} formed an All China Resistance League of Writers and Artists, and the warm-hearted and ever-persevering Lao She was elected as the head of the general office, but in effect his role was that of head of the whole league. The Resistance League had several hundred members, but only one, Xiao Boqing, had full time responsibilities. Later this role was passed to Mei Lin. All other members worked on a voluntary basis. Apart from writing, other tasks that members took on included holding all kinds of meetings, contacting local artists and writers in each area and setting up branch offices, editing the *War of Resistance* magazine, publishing a poetry magazine, an English-language magazine and a *Resistance Literature* series, distributing popular reading materials to each war zone, putting on benefit performances, publishing *The Collected Works of Lu Xun*, arranging for writers to visit the frontline—they were as busy as could be and achieved great successes.

This period was surely one of the times of greatest unity among men of letters in China's cultural history. Everyone paid their own expenses for travelling and attending meetings, and not one word of complaint was heard. Witnessing this lively scene Father was in seventh heaven. When he was elected to the council of the Resistance League he wrote an "inaugural pledge". He made a solemn pledge to the motherland, to the people, and to the friends and comrades who loved him, saying,

"I am only a foot soldier in the literary world. For ten years or more, night and day, day and night I have sat on my little stool, toiling at my desk. My pen is my gun which spills forth my blood onto the page. If there is anything to be proud about it is just this, my ability to work hard. A foot soldier has none of the clever stratagems of a general, but whatever a foot soldier should do I have done. That is the way I was before, that is how I am now, and that is how I will always be. The day I am put in my grave I hope someone will put up a memorial stone for me, with the following inscription: 'Here lies a foot soldier in the literary world who fulfilled his duties.' Just give me the order, and I'll be ready for the battle. Whether I live or die is of no account, as long as I fulfil my duties as a soldier!"

Father spoke of “sacrifice” on another occasion six years after he made his “pledge”. It was when the Japanese were closing in on Guizhou, and it looked as if they would attack Sichuan from the south. The whole of Chongqing was in commotion, with people from all walks of life preparing to move on again. When friends asked Father what he was planning to do though, he gave the straightforward answer that he had already prepared.

“I am not going anywhere. The surging Jialing river here in Chongqing will be my final resting place if the Japanese come.”

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However in the event Father’s true “sacrifice” came at a time and a place where it least should have occurred, at the hands of people who least should have demanded it, and under circumstances that least should have arisen.

When Mr. Wang spoke of that word *sheshen* being carved on a memorial stone, I was immediately transported back to the shore of Taiping lake eighteen years ago. I was sitting on a bench in the southwest comer of Taiping park, facing east with the sun shining on my back. There was no one around. This was the far corner of the park. If you went any further west you would come to an even larger lake, but that was outside the park proper. In fact the lakes were not really separate from each other, and there was no wall between them. Instead a small bridge divided the inner lake from the outer lake, and there was a path around the inner lake. The place where I was sitting was on the border between the two lakes. There were several tall poplars growing alongside the path that ringed the inner lake, and several benches had been put out underneath them.

The outer lake presented quite a different a picture. No path had been made around the lake, and there were no embankments either. It was desolate and silent, a wild place, even a rather scary place. The borders of the lake were choked with weeds and thickets, which grew above waist height and merged with the reeds and sedge that grew in the lake. Further away from the water untidy willow trees grew together forming a natural protective wall. Visitors didn’t come here; it was a world that belonged almost completely to the animals and plants. It was in this other world that Father lay.

I turned my head, searching through the undergrowth to try and find that little dirt track where he lay sleeping. I don’t know whether it was the sun dazzling my eyes, or because I had something stuck in my eye, but I couldn’t make anything out clearly. That patch of yellow over there, was that the yellow of the sunlight or was it the yellow of a tattered burial mat? I didn’t know.

A young man from the Municipal Literary League was there to see to the handover; behind him was Father’s old driver standing by the car. They were both wearing red armbands. Obviously the young man now had charge of the car. They asked me my name and even instructed me to show them my identity card, although the old driver had been with our family for years and years. The only thing the young man said to me before getting in the car and driving away was

“Be sure to ‘deal with’ him as quickly as possible.” But as the car was moving off the old driver shouted out an important warning,

“There are wild dogs around here at night.”

Father was lying face up, his head pointing west, his feet east. His head rested partly on a clump of green grass, partly on a small dirt track. He no longer had his uniform tunic on, but his cloth shoes were still on his feet. There was no mud on them and no water in his stomach. He’d been lying there the whole day and the sun had long since dried out his clothes and shoes. He wasn’t wearing his glasses and his eyes were swollen. His clothes were in disorder indicating that his body had already been examined by a forensic doctor. There were huge bruises and large patches of coagulated blood on his head, neck, chest and arms. Quite simply he had been beaten black and blue.

Two days previously he’d been beaten up by Red Guards in the Confucian temple in Chengxian street. These ignorant and fanatical youths had decided that some priceless Peking Opera costumes had to be destroyed, burnt to ashes as quickly as possible, and they had picked the Confucian temple as the setting. They also planned to take along two or three of the leaders of the Cultural Bureau to be struggled against at the same time. The Municipal Cultural Bureau and the Municipal Literary League were close neighbours, so when the Red Guards were dragging out a few of the Cultural Burea’s leading cadres they thought they might as well bring out a few well-known literary figures from the Municipal Literary League who had already been “ferreted out” and throw them in the truck too. When Father, who was the chairman of the Municipal Literary League, saw that his friends and the leading cadres from the League had all been called out, he stood up of his own accord.

This integrity of his, of course was one of his most admirable characteristics but it also drove him to his death! A female student from Peking University who was “directing operations” at the scene shouted out,

“That’s Lao She! He’s their Chairman! He’s a reactionary authority! Throw him into the truck!”

In fact Father had just come out of hospital. Since summer began he had been in very low spirits and then one night he suddenly started spitting blood, almost a spittoon full. In the middle of the night we took him to the hospital and immediately he was admitted for treatment. When he had recovered enough to be discharged the doctor urged him to stay at home and rest for a few days, but instead he rushed back to the office straight away. Cruel fate was playing with his selfless spirit, he was rushing, rushing, but contrary to all justice, what he was rushing towards at the greatest possible speed was his own death. That day, 23 August 1966, was the first day he'd gone to work after leaving the hospital.

The dreadful scenes at the Confucian temple have already been related in detail by many authors and playwrights who were also beaten up in the same incident, but who survived. Put simply it was Father who was beaten the worst, the blood from his cut head turning his white shirt completely red. His head was roughly bandaged with the white sleeve from one of the Peking opera costumes, but blood had seeped through and his appearance was enough to shock anyone. When he heard what was going on the deputy mayor of Peking came rushing to the scene. In the far off distance through the throngs of people that surrounded Father he could see the apalling ill-treatment that was being meted out. Inwardly he raged in desperation that he has powerless, totally unable to protect Peking's best known author. But there was no means now of controlling the situation. An angry mob is as unpredictable as a fierce fire whose soaring flames dance and twist, with noway of knowing which direction they are likely to turn next.

Behind his glasses Lao She's eyes flashed with a chilling expression that set you shivering. His face was deathly pale, yet that look in his eyes—burning, courageous, resolute—was eloquent testimony to the pain he was suffering. Seeing the glazed look in the eyes of this, China's most humane and cultivated man of letters, all the kind-hearted people there were afraid. Those eyes were clearly speaking to them, sending a dreadful message: Lao She only needed to close his eyes, to lower his head and he could leave the madness of this cruel world!

Members from the Municipal Literary League were told that bringing Lao She back te the League's offices was their top priority. Little did they know that in rescuing him from this first trial they would only serve to force him into a second, even deeper abyss.

Several hundred Red Guards had massed at the League's offices. Father felt the full brunt of their belts, fists, boots, curses and spittle. My poor father's life was in the balance. In order to divert their attacks from herself a woman author encouraged those ignorant youths to ask my father some provocative questions. Father answered calmly and objectively, which of course was taken as a refusal to acknowledge guilt. These dignified answers just added oil to the flames and brought down an even more vicious assault upon him.

Father decided that he would not bow his head again, that he would not hold up the placard enumerating his "crimes" again, that he would not speak again. He looked up. His face was cut and bleeding, his expression one of anger and nobility.

"Bow your head! Raise the placard!"

Father used his last ounce of strength to angrily fling the placard to the ground. It hit the Red Guard who was standing in front of him. Immediately he was engulfed … yes, engulfed …

The members of the Municipal Literary League thought of a "clever" plan to snatch him from the hands of the Red Guards. They argued that his desperate rebellion was a counter-revolutionary act and that he should therefore be brought before the discliplinary authorities to be dealt with accordingly. So after some scuffling he was pushed into a car to be taken off to the nearby police station. The crowd, which had completely lost its senses, pressed up right against the car, raining blows down on its body and windows, so that it couldn't move an inch. Both the Red Guards and Father realized without a shadow of a doubt that that the naming of him as a "counter-revolutionary" had served only to push him irrevocably towards another world. There were quite a few girls amongst the crowd of youths who followed behind the car as it made its way to the police station.

Once inside, despite the efforts of the staff to prevent them, they continued to beat this dying old man well into the night. And so it happened that in the space of a day the people inexplicably, suddenly and forever lost the writer who they had loved and who they called a "People's Artist".

Mother was told to go and bring Father home. As they clung together in the pedicab which brought them back dawn was already breaking. Just before they had left, Father was informed that he should report at the Municipal Literary League the following morning and that he should bring his "active counter-revolutionary" placard with him.

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The next day he did indeed leave for work on time, and he may even have taken the placard with him, but he did not go to the League's offices. In fact, after he left the house there was no further trace of him.

At dawn, before going to bed, Mother cleaned Father's wounds and they had a long talk. This is the last time they were together, and so it is, not inaccurate to call it a life-and-death talk. Father had already made up his mind to die but he could not directly reveal this to Mother. Yet his vague hints gave their heart-to-heart talk even more of the feeling of a farewell. When Father took off his shirt apd Mother saw how badly he had been beaten, she wanted to weep, but she didn't. She knew she must act, she must speak and not cry. She helped Father take off his vest which had stuck to his body because his wounds had started to scab. She couldn't pull it off so she got some hot water and cotton wool and after dipping the cotton wool in the water, bit by bit she soaked the wounds through the vest. Strands from the vest had cut right into his flesh. Her hands wouldn't move properly, she had no command over them. Her heart was trembling, so her hands and her whole body were trembling too. Her heart ached, what bitter pain! She couldn't hold back her tears any longer. Father said,

"The people understand me! The Party and Chairman Mao understand me! The Premier understands me the best of all!"

He really was a good man! He'd been so unfairly treated, suffered such outrageous torments, been subject to the most awful insults and yet he still spoke of people so warmly and trustingly!

But where in the world can you find such honest and kind-hearted friends? And where in the world can you find such resoluteness and trust?

Father told Mother not to worry about him and said that he would be fine by himself. In the morning he practically forced her out of the door and in the end she went off to work. Shortly after she had left he went out too.

Before he left the house Father went to my daughter's bedside—his beloved three-year-old granddaughter—and solemnly said goodbye to her. Only she and her elderly nursemaid were left in the house. Grandfather called his granddaughter to come to him, and bending over took her little hand in his. Slowly and gently he said,

"Say good - bye - to Grandfather!"

The little girl looked at her grandfather in puzzlement, she didn't understand what was wrong with Grandfather today, why he was coming to shake hands with her, why he was saying "goodbye" so hesitantly, enunciating the words syllable by syllable.

This was Father's farewell to his family, to all those who had loved him, a farewell to the common people whom he had loved for a lifetime and written about for a lifetime. The conversation that he had with his granddaughter was the last he had in his life. So his final words, his reluctant farewell, were spoken to an innocent and guileless child. What a good, kind man he was!

My daughter didn't understand the meaning behind her grandfather's words at all. She should have pulled him back, she should have shouted out,

"Don't go! Get Daddy to come home, get Auntie to come home! They'll hide you! Don't go! Granddad!"

But my daughter didn't shout out. Even if she hadn't called out at least she could have hugged him and given him a kiss … but she only said "bye-bye" and waved to him. She was too young, just too young! After that "bye-bye" Father left forever, never to return.

Father loved that little girl. Grandfather and granddaughter, one old and one young, would often spend time playing together. His little granddaughter was the only person that Lao She allowed to come into his study as she pleased, and any time she came she would be sure to find a welcome. Once, when Father was entertaining two English friends, my daughter was playing in the sitting room. The old man caught his granddaughter between his knees and pulled her to the sofa where he was sitting. In play, he gently knocked her on her head with her rag-doll.

"The future belongs to them!" he said.

The moment before he left the house for the last time it was to this same little granddaughter that he solemnly bade farewell. He was clear-headed and full of a purity of feeling because he was directly bidding farewell to the "future". Perhaps he was thinking: A chapter of history passes in the blink of an eye, all regrets, all worries will soon belong to the past, my time has come and there is nothing more to say. I should go now. So he let go of his granddaughter's hand and left … The future belongs to them.

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Where did Father go to? No one can say for sure. When I was informed of the situation I rushed back from work. At home everything was in great disorder. There were Red Guards everywhere, from the entrance of our alley, right through the courtyard and into our own rooms. They had !heir leather belts at the ready for lashing at people with, and they'd stuck up big character posters all around the place. Since Lao She hadn't gone to work as ordered, they'd come to find him. They searched the whole house, every inch of it, every nook and cranny. I

noticed that the trapdoors in the ceilings of all the rooms had been broken. Did they really think that Lao She was hiding up in the rafters, and that he'd escaped up there through a hole a few inches in diameter?!

It soon became obvious that he couldn't be hiding there, so where was he then? The tearaway youths racked their brains trying to work it out. At last they felt that something must have gone wrong and they all made off. After they'd gone I immediately drafted a letter, hurriedly disguised myself as best I could, and picking up my younger sister, rushed to the State Council reception centre. When a staff member came out I opened my overcoat so that he could see the proof—I had on the shirt that Father had been wearing the day before and had wrapped the opera costume sleeve that had been used to bandage his head around my waist.

The man listened carefully to what I had to say and accepted the letter, saying that the matter would be reported to the higher authorities immediately, and that we were not to worry any more. A few hours later Mother received a telephone call from the Premier's office informing her that the Premier had received the emergency report and that steps were being taken at that moment to locate Mr. Lao She. As soon as they had any news, they assured Mother, they would inform her immediately, but in the meantime there was nothing to do but wait patiently.

A day and a night passed in this way, with no word at all. The morning of the second day, 25 August, was also spent waiting and it was not until that afternoon that the Municipal Literary League phoned up to say that I should go over to their offices. They brought out a certificate and handed it to me. On it was written,

"Shu Sheyu of our League has divorced himself from the people by taking his own life. This is a specially issued certificate to this effect."

They had spent practically the whole day drafting this document and determining the "correct" analysis of Lao She's death. The most important thing, as far as they were concerned, was to make absolutely sure that all the responsibility was shifted from their shoulders. They then said I should go immediately to Taiping Lake outside Huokou to the west of Deshengmen gate to collect Father's body. They said that it would be best if I didn't mention this to Mother. It was obvious that they took the matter very seriously.

After the old driver had urged me to watch out for the wild dogs I asked the younger man to inform my mother when he got back to the League's offices that I was at Taiping Lake waiting for her. After that I sat down, guarding my dead father and waiting for my mother to arrive.

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How had Father come to Taiping Lake? It was a riddle. And why had he come to Taiping Lake at all? Another riddle. I sat by the lake, with this puzzle going round and round in my mind.

Father had been discovered at dawn in the middle of the outer lake. A performer who lived nearby had come down to do his morning exercises by the lakeside and had spotted a body in the water a few feet out from the shore. He could only see the back of the head, which was showing just above the surface of the water. He ran and called for someone to come, but there was no-one around, only the lakeside dwellings of some fishermen in the distance. Finally some of the fishermen came over and they worked together to drag the body out of the water and pull it up on to the shore. The corpse was already icy cold.

On the shore the people found Father's uniform tunic, his glasses, his walking stick and his fountain pen. His identification card, on which was written his name and position, was in the pocket of his overcoat.

When it became clear who he was there was uproar among the onlookers. People thronged to the park the whole day. The news quickly spread through the northwestern suburbs of Peking. Staff from the Municipal Literary League, the neighbourhood police station and a forensic doctor all arrived at the scene. Someone brought that tattered old mat to cover the body up with.

The day before (i.e. 24 August), according to the park attendant, an old man had been sitting in the park for the whole day, from morning until night. Sitting there the whole day and scarcely moving at all. So in all likelihood the final scene of the tragedy took place ill the middle of the night. The old man still held a roll of papers in his hands, and at dawn there had been some other sheets of paper floating on the surface of the lake. Those sheets of paper were also carefully fished out of the water. On the pages several of Chairman Mao's poems had been copied down. The characters were the size of a walnut, carefully and neatly done in Lao She's inimitable hand. Was there not some final message written between the lines? This was an even bigger riddle. He had paper, a pen, the whole day's time, he had thoughts, things that he wanted to say, moreover he was a "writer".

Afterwards the Municipal Literary Association returned his uniform, fountain pen, glasses, and walking stick to us. But they never once let us look at those pieces of paper.

Taiping Lake was an out-of-the-way little park, with nothing special to recommend it. No ticket was required to enter and it had very few visitors. But in the space of a week, it had become a hallowed ground for martyrs: scores of people followed Father's example and drowned themselves there.

Taiping Lake did not feature in any of Father's works. I looked through all his books and could find no mention of it, even though the majority of his works used the names of real places in Peking as background. But I knew that he was familiar with this area. From September 1920 to September 1922, for two entire years, Shu Qingchun, as Lao She then was, at that time still in his early twenties, had been a private tutorial school inspector in the northern suburbs of Peking. His office was in the Huayan temple at Deshengmenwai and he was in charge of all the private tutorial schools in the areas of Xizhimenwai, Deshengmenwai, Andingmenwai and Dongzhimenwai.

At that time he went round all of the surrounding area. Was it then that he got to know Taiping Lake? More than likely. Everyone knows that the first book he wrote, *Old Zhang's Philosophy*, is set in Deshengmenwai. Man and the course of history are the same: sometimes, in confusion, they will move in circles, go through the same cycle, and return to where they began. Although it is really an upward spiral, in the end there's still a feeling of repetition. Father had become known through that story he wrote set in Deshengmenwai; after nearly fifty years it was to Deshengmenwai that he returned, back into nothing.

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Twelve years after the tragedy at Taiping Lake I happened to be looking at a pre-liberation map of Peking one day and finally I discovered the reason why Father had gone to Taiping Lake. Taiping Lake was situated just outside the north-west corner of the old city wall, and it was very close to the alley by Guanyin temple at the north-west end of Xizhimen Street, just inside the city walls. The two were only separated by the city wall and the moat, and from the map looked to be very close to each other.

Guanyin temple alley was where my grandmother had spent the last years of her life. She lived there for ten years altogether in a big south-facing house that my father had bought for her. She died there in the summer of 1942. Suddenly it all became clear: Father had gone to find his own beloved mother.

Father was born into poverty. His father died when he was a child, and responsibility for bringing him up rested solely on his mother, who was of peasant stock. She was illiterate and had to take in washing and sewing, and work as a servant and manual labourer in order to bring up her family. She gritted her teeth and put her youngest son, Qingchun, into primary school, to become the only child in the Shu family who knew how to read and write. She also passed on to my father her qualities of integrity, kindness, warmth, industry, simplicity, honesty, love of flowers and of cleanliness, discipline, stoicism, determination, her retiring yet steadfast nature, and her character as a whole, which had an unyielding core beneath outward mildness.

Father adopted a peaceable attitude in dealing with people and situations, and he took it as a fact of life that he would always lose out. This was not a sign of weakness. Father could make do with anything, but his actions were governed by a basic priciple, and he would not step outside the boundaries that he had drawn up for himself. This was the unyielding core of his mildness. Father said,

"My true teacher, who gave me my character, was my mother. Mother was illiterate, and the lesson she taught me was how to live."

Sixty-seven years later, Father once more returned to rest at his mother's feet, to offer up his life to her. Perhaps this can be seen as a kind of repayment for that lesson in living. A conclusion to all she had taught.

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Immediately after Father had died many different stories began circulating about his death. Rumours about the manner and cause of his death were rife. Japanese authors were extremely shocked by the tragedy and viewed his death as a great loss. Father lived on in their writing, and while the "Gang of Four" was still tyrannizing China, Japanese authors such as Tsutomu Mizakami and Kiyoshi Inoue published articles in remembrance of him. Kiyoshi Inoue, who was a friend of Father's, wrote a famous article in 1970 called "Pot" which was, in fact, a discussion of Father's death. In it he mentioned that the honoured Japanese writer, Mr. Hirokitsu, had expressed his lack of admiration for the Chinese character, as typified in the story of the Chinese man who would rather smash a priceless jade pot into a thousand pieces than give it to a rich man. But, when the news of Father's death reached Japan, Kiyoshi Inoue finally realized the true character of the poor Chinese man in the story Father had told him and Mr. Hirokitsu.

The Japanese woman author Kazuko Yoshisuke also wrote a long article called "The Mystery of Mr. Lao She's Death". Finally, the Japanese author Takatake Hiraki used Father's death as the theme for a novel entitled

Shattered Jade which won the 1979 Yasunari Kawabata prize. They all earnestly hoped to find some deep meaning behind Father’s tragedy.

Ba Jin mentions Father’s death several times in the *Record of Random Thoughts* that he has been writing in recent years. He held that people simply couldn’t remain indifferent to the cruel way in which Father had died, and said, “Comrade Lao She is the finest example of the Chinese intellectual,” and added that there were lessons to be drawn from his death. Some well-meaning person said to Ba Jin:

“Don’t dwell on the past, you should look to the future and move forward.” But Ba Jin stubbornly replied:

“I remember everything that happened in the past very clearly.” In his article entitled, “Remembering Comrade Lao She” Ba Jin wrote,

“I remember his ‘last words’: ‘I love our country, but who loves me?’ I would like to grasp his hand tightly and say to him, ‘We love you, you will always be remembered, you will always live on in the hearts of the Chinese people!’” On 15 December 1979 Ba Jin said,

“Although to this day I am still not clear whether Comrade Lao She killed himself or was murdered, whether he threw himself into the lake full of resentment and hate, or was hounded to death, 1 am sure of one thing: the man is dead but the pot is whole, he has retained the most important thing—his integrity.”

Not long ago I read an article written by Comrade Huang Shang, in which he recalls a recent conversation he had with Ba Jin. They had been talking about Lao She’s death and Huang Shang said, “If you put me in Lao She’s place I wouldn’t have got into such a mess.” When he heard this Ba Jin retorted: “Don’t give me that!” in what Huang Shang describes as “a low voice with a severe tone seldom present in Ba Jin’s speech”.

It seems that essays are still being written about Father's death, and that the debate still continues.

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To me Father’s death came so suddenly, like a bolt out of the blue, and of course it made my situation much worse. But after it had happened I never doubted for a moment that for Lao She there could have been no other course of action except the one he took at Taiping Lake.

Eighteen years ago when I sat alone keeping watch over Father’s body I accepted fate. For Father the outcome of the Cultural Revolution could only be this kind of sacrifice. Moreover, even as I was sitting on that bench by Taiping Lake, I could already see that there had been signs that something like this would take place, although at the time I had not paid much attention to them.

I remember that a few days before his death, I had returned home one Sunday and was talking with Father about the current situation. At that time the Cultural Revolution was in its preliminary stages, and the dreadful damage it would cause was still unimaginable. However, it was clear from Father’s words that he was already deeply troubled. And the way the situation developed unfortunately proved his words right, with his dire predictions being borne out by events. He said:

“The so-called ‘Cultural Revolutions’\fn{An allusion to the Crusades and the damage they caused the Eastern Roman Empire} that occurred in Europe in fact caused very serious damage to culture and the cultural heritage.” He said:

“I won’t put away my little antique bottles and pots, my calligraphy and my paintings. They are not the targets of the revolution, and nor am I. Who gave those children the right to destroy the “Four Olds”, to struggle against this, to smash that?” He said:

“People will die, especially people of spirit and integrity.” Having said this he brought up the example of two people who had been unable to bear the insults they had received in previous political movements and so had plunged head first into Shishahai Lake.

I gave no real thought at the time as to why he would want to bring up these two examples. After he had died I realized that contrary to the saying, “a careless word may be significant to the attentive listener”, in this case it was I, the listener, who had been careless, while Father had chosen his words carefully.

Even more significantly, Father wrote in his 1945 novel, *Four Generations Under One Roof*, about an old man called Qi Tianyou who died in exactly the same way as he himself died. This shocking similarity between fiction and reality seems to suggest that Father had already planned the manner of his death twenty years before the event.

At first glance, the deaths that Father mentioned and the way he described them seemed completely independent and unrelated. If there was any similarity between them it certainly didn’t seem noteworthy.

But these words all issued forth from his mouth and from his pen. I think that this indicates that in his mind he really had drawn a clear boundary, and when that boundary was over-stepped he had already fixed on what he would do. And I believe that a man of resolute character like himself, who would rather break than bend, could

not escape tragedy. Even if he had hidden on 23 August, still he could not hide for a month, or two months, much less for the duration of the chaos which was to reign in the country for over ten years.

There are brave men in this world who would rather die than be dishonoured! I feel guilty, though, even if it had been no use, that I hadn't picked up on the clues he had given, and said something, however little, to try and talk him out of it. I believed in him, respected and admired him, I had absolutely no right to lecture him. It seems that I did not fully understand him, and that pains me and fills me with undying regret.

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I don't know how long I sat on the bench that night. Daylight had already faded and all around me was pitch black. The park wasn't lit, and that night there was no moon and no stars to be seen. We two, father and son, one dead, one alive, were probably the only people left in the whole park.

It started raining, a light drizzle. I didn't move. Time passed and I wasn't sure whether it was the rain drops rolling down my face or tears. I loved that rain; because of it I did not have to hide my tears. I loved that rain, it could cry with me. I just felt a little cold.

I started to pity my father. For two days he hadn't eaten or drunk. Probably he had sat here numbly, in the same way as I was sitting at that moment, but for the entire day and half the night. And how had he passed that day and night? His head must have been full of complicated thoughts, painful and contradictory. When he closed his eyes surely he must have seen his whole life before him. When he opened his eyes, what was there? Nothing, a complete blank.

I didn't dare think further, and yet I couldn't get free of these kinds of thoughts. So I thought on, in fits and starts, and became more and more confused, until I was just left with a feeling of profound sadness for him.

There was no sound of traffic coming from the road. I thought that perhaps Mother would be arriving soon, so I stood up and went to the main street to meet her. In fact Mother and someone from the crematorium were arriving at Taiping Lake in a truck just at that moment. She didn't know where Father's body lay, and so, calling out my name, she started walking towards the outer lake. The urgency in her voice moved the park gatekeeper, and it was only with his help that they got Father up into the crematorium's car. Afterwards I hurried to the crematorium to fill out the forms. When I handed over the "certificate" (issued by the Municipal Literary League), the two girls on duty said,

"He's the first People's Deputy and member of the standing committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference to be dealt with like this."

What they meant by "dealt with like this" is that his ashes were not allowed to be kept.

Father was thoroughly forsaken, even his ashes were obliterated. But the outside world was completely unaware of the misfortune that had overtaken him. At the very time of his death a foreign committee were preparing to award him a prestigious literary prize. When the news of Father's death was confirmed the prize was awarded to another outstanding author who was still alive. He was also an Asian. When the news went round everyone felt it keenly. How heavily Lao She's death weighed on everyone.

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Even up to his death Father didn't believe that he had done anything wrong. And he didn't worry about being slandered and wrongly labelled as this or that, but rather about his attitude towards the people. He felt that he was blameless in this respect. And by his death he proved it.

Twenty days before his death Father had met Ba Jin in the Great Hall of the People. He said to Ba Jin earnestly,

"Please tell my friends in Shanghai that I have done nothing wrong!"

And it was in this belief that he participated in the movement. At the same time, it was in this belief that he faced the storm on 23 August. These words must have been the very last words that he thought of before he died.

Strangely enough, in the case of Father's writing, the more he loved and cherished it, the greater its power and influence, then the more severe the criticism it received. And most of that criticism came from Father's own friends, many of whom he had known years and years. Father was always very self-critical because he was an extremely modest person, and he never spoke effusively, especially about his own writing. He made no secret of his failings and would often say,

"What a mess I've made of that."

Looked at from a different angle this in fact shows that he was a straightforward and self-confident man. He assessed right and wrong on the evidence of his own eyes, and from this decided whether he should judge something harshly or praise it lavishly. As his thinking became more mature, his writing from the 1930s onwards no longer contained thinly drawn and idealized characters, and he no longer used simple plots where the conflict

was resolved by the rich being killed and the poor being saved or by double-dyed villains being wiped out. He began to touch upon complex social problems in his work and approached his subject from a deeper historical perspective, attacking traditional morality and ethics, ideology and conventions and the social system which determined all of these. He wrote about people's good and bad points, and was a master at using lively language and vivid characters to dig out and expose the worst, most deeply buried and most life-threatening weaknesses and evil roots. This is particularly clear in the portrait he drew of Camel Xiangzi in the novel of the same name. On the one hand he wrote about Xiangzi's pride, his ambitions, his dreams, his staunchness and his power; on the other, he showed Xiangzi's degeneracy, his selfishness and his misfortune, describing him as the product of society's diseased womb, and as a wretch trapped in individualism's dead-end street.

In the end Lao She rejects Xiangzi, feeling that it is only in so doing that China can be saved and transformed into a better place.

On 24 August when father was walking by the shore of the lake what tormented him most was not his aching body nor the insults that he had suffered, but the fact that he had been misunderstood. After an entire day and half the night of turning the whole thing over in his mind his final thought was probably still,

"I haven't done anything wrong. The people understand me!" And then hardening his resolve to carry out the "good ... bye" that he had said to his granddaughter, he walked towards the tranquil water of the lake.

*

Father's death was a tragedy. His spirit of resistance through self-sacrifice, his dignified bearing under the most abnormal and bizarre circumstances had a tremendous impact. It brought forth a string of large question marks, and a string of even larger exclamation marks, as if he was admonishing: You were wrong, wrong!

When my friends and I had finished taking photographs of the site of Father's sacrifice we walked out of the site where the Taiping Lake had been. The noise of the city enveloped us again, the sunlight shone on Deshengmen gate.

I suddenly thought of the end of *Teahouse*. The death of Old Wang, the proprietor of the teahouse, and father's own death bore a startling similarity to each other. There was also the sunlight on the stage symbolizing better things to come which was the very image of the sunlight in front of my eyes.

I heaved a long sigh, sure of one thing: the tragedy was finally over.

1936

41.151 & 191.134 1. Excerpt from **The Horse's Mouth 2.** Excerpt from **Grass Soup**\fn{by Zhang Xianliang (1936-)} Nanjing, Xuyi County, Jiangsu Province, China (M) 15

1

… "I\fn{A note reads: *Zhang Yonglin is sent off to undergo labor reform for the second time during the Cultural Revolution. Having endured persecution and humiliation, he discovers after getting married that he is impotent. After a day in the fields, he cannot bring himself to go home and face his wife. He wanders in the wilds, dejected and desperate*.} know you don't really want to go back home."

A gray horse tossed its head and looked me straight in the eye.

"Take a look at yourself—here you are after only a month of married life and you're scared of sleeping with your wife. That's right now, isn't it? You're scared; scared of the night. As scared as I am of being harnessed to a cart."

"You can talk!"

I was so shocked that I fell flat on my arse, wetting the seat of my pants on the soggy turf.

The horse snorted in derision.

"If you could only see yourself now. You seem to have forgotten that blaring loudspeaker that hangs just outside my stall, and all the big-character posters I've munched in my time. The ink wasn't that nourishing, but the paper was good vegetable fibre, and tasted a lot better than some of the rubbish we're given to eat. I've come to realize that I was born into an unprecedented age of verbalizing. You humans may indeed be going downhill in every other respect, but you're all quite expert at manipulating language. It was no big deal for me to acquire the power of speech. Just a process of natural osmosis."

"Oh," I stammered, absolutely dumbfounded. "It's just … so very odd."

"That's what's wrong with you people," he commented. "Try to be like me, and learn the virtues of cool and

silent observation. That's the way to survive peacefully in this world."

"Then what made you decide to open your mouth just now?" I queried.

"I know you don't want to go home," he snorted, "and it so happens that I don't want to either. At times like these I too feel the need to get away from everyone. We need to think things over in peace and quiet. Philosophy encompasses everything in the world, and, after all, the laws of nature that govern men and horses are much the same."

"If you say so," I agreed hesitantly.

He was right: deep down I really didn't want to go back. I felt like staying out in the wilds to work things out for myself.

"Perhaps I can be of some help," the horse offered in a clinical tone. "I may not have your 39 years of human experience, but in equestrian terms I'm an old nag, and as the saying goes, "an old horse knows the way." So maybe I can give you some advice."

"Since you're so perceptive, perhaps you'd like to give me your analysis of my situation."

He smacked his lips eagerly.

"I feel for you. Let's face it, we're both victims of a similar fate: as you probably know human beings castrated me too."

"I see, but I haven't been castrated. My member is still hale and hearty; it's simply stopped doing its duty. But why?"

"Before they got to me, all it took was the neigh of a filly or a whiff of her hind parts and I'd be head over hooves and off running. Nothing could hold me back. My tool never failed me, and I can assure you it always threw me into fits of ecstasy. But when they were through with me I lost all sense of sexual stimulation and I became completely indifferent to everything—"

"But I still feel the urge!" I cried. "When she first wanted to sleep with me I could get it up all right—the first, second and even a few other times. It's only recently that I've lost interest. I get frightened by my own impotence."

The horse neighed a series of strange chilling laughs.

"You set far too much store by such things; doesn't it make you feel crude and vulgar? Sexual impotence must inevitably destabilize your whole personality. You're an educated man; you must be aware of the fact that every man is an integral part of a complex ecosphere, and that it is necessary to analyze every individual system within the context of the whole. If one part of the system goes haywire, it only stands to reason that all the other systems will also be thrown out of kilter. At least you can fall back on your political beliefs, your ideals and lofty aspirations, can't you?"

"But I'm pretty sure none of that has anything to do with my condition," I replied halfheartedly. "Sima Qian, the Grand Historian of the Han dynasty, was castrated by imperial command as a punishment, yet he went on to write his great masterpiece—"

"Hah, hah."

The horse let out a raucous laugh and then snorted loudly.

"Quite the scholar, aren't you, my dear herdsman? You may be well read, but unfortunately in this case I'm afraid you're guilty of faulty logic. The 'palace punishment' they dished out to the old boy was a horribly wicked form of physical torture, but more likely than not it spurred him on to complete his chronicles. I'd even go so far as to speculate that if it hadn't been for his castration he would have never written the book. The world may have lost a set of genitals, but it gained a masterpiece. It's an example of that Mao quote you hear so often on the radio about 'some good coming out of something bad.'

"And here you are as strong and healthy as one of my own kind. They dragged you out to the execution ground but you came away unharmed. Physically you're perfectly healthy, it's just your mind that's all screwed up. The shock you suffered has left its mark on you and affected your entire nervous system. Do you honestly think you can compare yourself to the Grand Historian?"

"You're right, I know."

I lowered my head.

"But please continue."

"This is the very thing we have in common," the horse said to me with a sympathetic gleam in its eye. "My castration has robbed me of the urge to have sex, and I have had no choice but to abandon even the luxury of fantasies. It's because I'm not like the normal run of animals that I have been able to liberate myself from animal dumbness. In a way my achievement is not unlike yours. No one can deny the fact that during your long years of

forced labor in the fields you have been able to familiarize yourself with the quotations of Marx, Engels, Lenin, Stalin and Mao. But on the other hand, *you* haven't had anything cut off—excuse me if I'm not expressing myself properly—well, at least not like the Grand Historian. However, like me you suffer an impairment; though mine is physical and yours mental, the end result is the same: we are both doomed to lives of under-achievement. We are fated to be subject to the whims of others, to follow their lead, to be whipped into compliance and to be rode over roughshod.

"Hee, hee, we're quite a pair: a eunuch and a castrated horse! Do forgive me, I often have considerable trouble keeping a rein on my sense of humour. Even in this respect we resemble each other. We both enjoy being ironical and indulging in caustic satire. We like to give ourselves over to harmless humor, irreverent rantings and wild exaggerations.

"I'll even go so far as to say that you intellectuals have allowed yourselves to be lobotomized, or rather that you have suffered the ill-effects of the linguistic acrobatics of the age. If only one out of ten Chinese males were a real man, this country wouldn't be in the mess it is. I don't know how you feel about it, but I'm bored stiff listening to that loudspeaker all day long. Do you really mean to tell me that with your highly developed linguistic prowess you humans can't come up with something better for your broadcasts?"

"So you mean, I'm done for," I finally said in a mortified tone.

"What do you mean done for?" the horse asked me sternly, raising its head. "You've had your go at life. You've worked, seen many things, eaten lots of meals, heard about all kinds of strange happenings: watched a head of government turn into a common criminal, and a petty hooligan become vice-chairman of a political party with tens of millions of members overnight, just to give a few examples. And after all that you drop dead. It's the same for everybody. And you've been relatively lucky; at least you've had the good fortune to live in an age of unprecedented absurdity. What more can you possibly ask for? Ah, perhaps you also had hopes of helping produce another generation?"

"No, I don't have any illusions on that subject. But as you just said yourself, if the country is endlessly staging farces, even if I did have offspring they would be condemned to re-enact the mean tragedy that has been my life. It would be better for them not. to be born at all."

I put my hands to my head.

"What I am trying to say is that a person should strive to make some contribution to the world, do something creative for his fellow men—"

"In heaven's name, get rid of the desire you have to create, whatever you do. Resign yourself to your place in the world. Be like me."

"According to what you say my wife's right. I'm useless, only half a man."

I felt my cheeks, they were icy cold with tears.

"Ah … that's right." He let out a long, deep sigh. "Why do men castrate us? Because they want to deprive us of the power to create, so we'll be entirely at their beck and call. If we weren't castrated we would still have our own free will. As it is, we often outsmart you humans. If we were whole how would you be able to manipulate and exploit us? Why go on with all this rubbish about creativity?"

I was speechless. I felt maligned and my stomach churned uncomfortably.

The horse suddenly tossed his head back in horror. His nostrils flared and he took a few deep breaths.

"I smell a hint of carnal desire. It's not something coming from you, but it envelops you like an aura. How very odd. Beware, herdsman. We should be going now. I don't want to see you suffer any further misfortunes. After all, you're one of the kinder ones." …

2

1

I don't know why this was the day I began writing a diary.\fn{Entry—11 July [1960]: Capitalist construction: hauled dirt clods} Nothing unusual had happened in the "farm" where I was being reformed. I had been sent in on 18 May 1958, and had already been here over seven hundred days.

I had adjusted to it, as if I'd been raised here and spent my life here. A sharp knife had sliced through the middle of my existence—the half of which I was now conscious had been tossed into this barren wasteland. Where the other half was I had no idea; I wasn't even sure if I had ever been whole before. Hacking away at the

earth, the only painful sensations I had were physical. After hurting for more than seven hundred days I was numb. I no longer felt the pain, I only felt hunger.

If this thin diary did not exist, I might begin to wonder if that part of my life was real. People have poor memories. They deal with the present—whether it is joyful or painful. But the present and mankind within it are the consequence of the past, just as the future is the result of the past. The lives of men do not pass without a trace, disappear as though they had never been lived. Many living in China today dare not admit this—they dare not face the past, and some are unwilling to face elements of the present. For this reason I have felt that I should make this most real of diaries public, also that I should annotate it so that people can understand it.

On this evening of 11 July I have opened a small diary that I bought at the camp shop. Poised to write something in it, I am astonished by the pen in my hand. It may be that I want to write this diary simply because I own a pen.

A pen is not a tradable commodity in a labour reform camp. Nobody wants one, even in exchange for a tiny pinch of tobacco, or the smallest piece of flatbread. In a labour camp, the exchange value of an object depends entirely on whether or not it helps you survive. Things that have nothing to do with survival are of zero value.

Except for the pen, I had already traded everything that could help me survive for a little food. And I had already eaten the food. Preserving a body that had "life" in it in the purest physiological sense was all that mattered to me. If human beings could withstand the cold and live naked in the world, like monkeys, then I would long ago have taken off my pants and traded them for something to eat.

My pen was an imported brand. It gleamed among my few belongings. I felt, when I held it, that it gave off its own heat, a heat that was capable of warming your insides. This pen reminded me that I had once lived in a different world. Yes, that other world would come into my mind at times, but it would seem an illusion. It would bring with it an inexplicable melancholy. More importantly, the pen reminded me that skills I had learned in another world might be used in this one. When I had exhausted all other means of staying alive, I was tempted to try this pen.

The sparkling object was incongruous in a labour camp, so out of harmony with its surroundings. Yet it was the sole material connection I had with that other world. Its shimmering sparkle was a ray of hope.

I used the pen to survive. This diary was written in the interstices, the cracks of time, when I wasn't either working in the fields or writing something else. As I wrote it, the first thing I would think of was not what had happened on a particular day, nor of the thoughts I might have had that were worth setting down. Instead, I would think first of the events or thoughts that I must absolutely *not* write down. The social circumstances in which we were living at that time did not allow a person to have personal thoughts or private matters. Anything private had to be "handed over" to the Party. This included, of course, a diary. Depending on the degree of secrecy and the degree of evasion, the leaders would evaluate one's loyalty to the Party. People who willingly handed over their most unmentionable secrets were considered to be most loyal.

In order to express absolute loyalty, infinite loyalty, some people would fabricate anti-Party and anti-Socialist thoughts that they had never had. It was these people who eventually suffered most, who were thrown into the labour camps to be reformed. Among the multitude of "thought criminals", people who were sentenced because of their thinking, many had handed over diaries to the leaders which contained a few words or sentences that were incriminating.

So, experience taught people to be hypocritical. As political movements started rolling over the country, gathering in ever more people, the experience became general, to the point that dishonesty became a common practice among all Chinese. Dishonesty not only permeated our daily lives, it affected our standard of ethics and culture—not just then but also later.

Since written words were used to expose counter-revolutionary thinking, naturally words could also be used to whitewash oneself. Experience taught people how to use all kinds of written devices to transmit to the leaders information that might be useful to themselves. This was often done in an indirect way, but was another manifestation of general falseness. And so a diary could become a work of self-promotion, written not for oneself but for others to see.

In the 1960s, many diaries of martyrs or even living heroes were made public in China. These would be ffiled with the lofty spirit, the progressive thinking of their authors, and they would be prescribed as required reading, "study material", by the leaders. On the surface the author would seem to be a genuine individual, honestly setting down a record of his soul with only himself in mind. In fact, from the start he would be writing a recitation for his readers.

I did not want to become a martyr or a hero, but I also did not want to get into trouble as a result of this diary. Since I had decided to write it, it was imperative that I be prepared for the possibility that the diary might fall into someone else's hands. I had to think about how I might explain its entries, how I could safely be "responsible" for it. Consequently, the diary could be no more than a ledger.

Later the diary was indeed confiscated, during a political movement known as the One-Blow-Three-Counters Movement. After scrutinizing it, the leaders of the state farm where I was then working failed to find any serious problems, and so the diary did not become incriminating evidence when they sentenced me. Both the diary and I were allowed to remain in existence.

Today, this ledger-like quality has made my task much harder. Li Daoyuan, of the Northern Wei dynasty,\fn{386-534AD} is said to have spent many years verifying details before he completed his famous *Notes on the Water Classic.* But excavating events in the memory is no easier than searching through ancient books.

That period in my life is like a dream, hazy as mist—in order to make reality reappear as it was then, not only do I have to divorce myself from the present, allowing my mind to be steeped in the past, but I have to experience once again the trauma of that past.

Tormenting the mind and body in order to annotate a historical document is not something most scholarly writers experience. And yet I rejoice that I did not write this diary in more detail. If I had added just one more word in places, I would not be sitting here peacefully working today. Long ago the diary would have become part of the file of a dead man, and as such it would have been destroyed.

The notebook was confiscated in 1970, after which the inspectors began marking it up with queries. To this day I don't know why they did not cross-examine me. I indicate below where the marks were made, but the fact that they occurred in only two places shows how carefully this diary was written.

In 1980, after I had been rehabilitated, the diary was presented to me together with other documents. The other documents, performance records, self-examinations, statements by other people informing on me and accusing me, were all, as government regulations decreed, destroyed before my eyes. I begged that this diary be exempted and preserved. It has become the only connection I have now with that former world.

Can it be that that precious springtime in my life, expended in hard labour, has nothing more to show for itself than this? The yellowing pages, the fading ink of the characters lead me back, one by one, to past events. They make it impossible for me to doubt that these events did indeed make up my life.

I do not want to judge the past. I also do not want to use material that has only recently become available to enhance these notes. I want the diary to stand as an original manuscript, telling people just how far the world can fall. And how, even at that debased material and spiritual level, people go on living.

*

To go back to that first day, 11 July 1960. "Capital construction", which is what I have written for this date, in fact just meant building a house. We had no idea why, when we were starving, when convicts were dying in groups at a time, we should be mobilized to build a house. *July* is a relatively idle time in the north-west: the summer crops have been harvested and the autumn crops are already planted. In the past, farmers would use this time to recuperate. They would lay their weary bodies on the earth that sustained them, in the shade of willows, beside small brooks. Poets would look at this contentment and idealize it in verse, particularly when they themselves felt frustrated. Small farming villages have always seemed a lost paradise for Chinese.

But when the policy of turning farms into communes began, farmers no longer had a single day of ease. Since then not one of the year's three hundred and sixty-five days has been a rest day for them, let alone for convicts in labour reform camps. Hard labour is considered the only way to reform a man's thinking—like prescribed medicine, it can't be stopped for a single day.

The weather this July was particularly fine. People were starving, but the sun had not become any less robust because of that. She was as full and abundant as ever. I often think back to those pollutionless blue skies, those carefree fluffy clouds. We seldom see such unsullied skies today. From the "construction site" where we were going to build this house, that is, from a raised bank of earth, you could see the paddy rice glisten below like black-green satin. A hot breeze would come in, carrying with it the fragrance of the fields, making our feeble work song a little less exhausted.

Brothers, raise the earth-rammer!
Pound it hard!
Bastard if you don't pound hard!
Give it to her fucking *hard*!

Good weather and a good season could lessen the pain and hunger. This too may have been a reason I started to write the diary at this time.

Since the weather was so good, the propaganda bulletins that the leaders were issuing were especially hard to believe.

"Grain output has gone down in consecutive years as a result of natural disasters, so we are instituting a policy of 'lowered-rations-to-be-substituted-with-gourds-and-greens'."

No matter how outrageous, how ludicrous this seemed, nobody dared to ask the leaders for an explanation. Everyone appeared to believe the statement implicitly-what energy remained in our bodies was put into hard physical labour in order to reform.

Years later, I finally understood how the Chinese people, all together, could sink into the hell of famine for three whole years.\fn{The generally accepted figure for the number of people who died of famine or famine-related causes from 1960-1962 is thirty million. [So the translator of this book. In "Confessions: An Innocent Life in Communist China" the figure 20,000,000 occurs, with the same guarantee of general acceptance. Perhaps the true figure is by now unknowable. The first figure is approximately 5,000,000 short of the population of California in 2009; the second is about 3,000,000 short of the population of New York that same year. Something like 700,000,000 people lived in the People's Republic of China in 1962; so strictly in terms of life lost, these figures are utterly miniscule, even when compared to the population of the United States, itself barely 5% of the world's total:H]} The real reasons for what was happening were announced to us too late, but this was not an inconvenience to us. On the contrary, it allowed us the chance to appear surprised. It gave us the opportunity to arrange our recollection of those events as though they were a tragi-comedy, a farce, rather than a disaster.

Most of the labour reform convicts had been put through "heat treatment" in their original work-units. Like alloyed steel, they had been imbued with qualities that made them well suited for doing labour reform. Many actually felt fortunate to be in a camp and away from the heat treatment, as though coming to do labour reform was a favourable change. Just as a blind man might feel grateful to fall off a single-plank bridge and find himself in a shallow, dry ditch, the convicts felt quite relieved. Anything was better than being "criticized and struggled against" in the heat treatment. Before, a thousand-league precipice had been yawning under their feet. Saved from that, why should they question China's leaders now?

Whatever we're given to eat we'll eat, was their attitude. Even if the labour reform camp supplied no food at all, they were there by the grace of the leaders. And so, although the labour was performed without much enthusiasm, back in the barracks there was often laughter and high spirits.

The weather was good; this work we had been assigned was also good. Building a house, strictly speaking, meant no more than mixing earth and water and gumming together earthen clods piled up into a wall. A few boards and a reed roof were then laid on top. A house was a square-shaped shelter that could keep out the wind and rain, not much more. Later the phrase "Learn from Daqing"\fn{After the supposedly true testimonies of amazing results produced by a model collective farm of that name:H} was promulgated, and this kind of house was given its own term in the dialect of the northwest: it was called a *gandalei*, or "clod-pile".

"Hauling dirt clods" is a very simple kind of labour. The earthen clods we used for bricks were not really fired —we just dug them out of the ground with shovels, let them dry and then used them. As a result, each was irregular. Instead of a brick, you could only call it a clod. Each clod weighed about seven to ten kilos. I could haul three of them at a time, at the most four. My whole body, including my belt, weighed no more than forty-four kilos, so three or four clods weighed about the same as I did. I would carry this weight, not only the clods but also my own weight, and walk with it for some fifty to one hundred metres.

The simplest things in life often cause the most trouble. This may be why leisure-loving mankind has made work into a more and more complex thing. The irregular, multi-sided clods would roll around on my back, digging into my spine at every step. When I say spine, I mean the actual bones, since there wasn't a scrap of extra flesh on my entire body. I could hear the scraping of the dry hard clods against those bones—the sound was slightly sharp, giving it a derisive tone. Sometimes a sweetness would well up in my throat, but I never actually spat blood—the only visible blood was on my back, where the thin layer of skin had been scraped away. That didn't count, since I couldn't see it. If you could manage to carry on, the skin quickly grew a protective layer of calluses. Our name for them was "old silkworm cocoons". And if you couldn't carry on, you had to anyway.

Hauling clods also had its easy side. This came when you walked down the road on the return. People who work at any heavy job will get a commensurate reward—for example, the road back was exactly as long as the road going. It was often hard to contain an appreciation for the fairness of the laws of nature. And what a road! It was a dry road, no water, no muck. Not only could bare feet slapping against the ground feel the warmth and

dryness of the earth, they could also raise little puffs of fine dust. After I set a load down, I could enjoy the sensation of being free.

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The diary starts on the 11th of July, but I must describe the work in the paddy fields that I was doing before that, or the reader will not understand my sense of release. He will not know why hauling clods was such good work.

Rice paddies are seeded in May. By July the sprouts are already at the plucking\fn{I.e., transplanting} stage. Before this, we would already have weeded them countless times. The people in Ningxia have a saying:

"Rice pull nine, starved dogs you'll find."

This forced rhyme means that the more weeds and grasses you pull out of a rice field, the better the rice plants grow—and the more rice you grow, the less likely you'll starve. Fewer starving humans means fewer corpses for dogs to feed on.

While you weed, you serve two functions: pulling up grass and at the same time stamping the field, using your feet to crush down rotted plant matter so that it goes into the earth and fertilizes it. The relationship between weed-pulling and starving dogs may be far-fetched, but in order to follow this ancient bit of farm lore we had to immerse ourselves in water from May till July.

The rice fields of the labour camps were created out of virgin land. When you turned irrigation water on to such land, the weeds would leap upward for sheer joy. All kinds: *sha*-grass, ice-grass, *gao*-grass, reeds, even *jiji*-grass which will normally grow only in arid regions. To convicts who had to weed these things out, all the myriad plants of the earth seemed to have gathered at our feet, other than immortal's palms, which *do* only grow on the desert.

A pair of hands were all that was required. We weeded no differently from the time our ancestors first entered the Agricultural Stage of Society thousands of years ago. We would bend our backs and pull from before sunrise to the time the moon came up. If it was a particularly bright moonlit night and it was still possible to distinguish rice shoots from weeds, then we would just keep on pulling. Sometimes, however, the convicts would be weeding a field, and when they looked back they wouldn't see any rice. A vast sheet of black water would be all that was left.

The Troop Leader would then have hard work to do—he would have to run up and down the banks of the field, looking through the weeds to see if there were any rice stalks in them. Were the convicts intentionally sabotaging production? Pulling up rice shoots along with the weeds? Usually his efforts would be in vain—the young shoots would long ago have been murdered by the healthy weeds.

After more than seven hundred days of wielding a shovel and hoe, my soles and palms had passed through the bloody stage and grown a protective layer of calluses. Legs cannot accustom themselves to constant immersion, however. Certainly not in that water. Dense with rotted vegetable matter, salts and minerals, it was more a kind of supersaturated solution. The people of Ningxia described it accurately as "mud soup". Every time you stamped your foot, a stinking smell would erupt from the black mud that it disturbed. Such nasty smells were insignificant, but the mud soup held substances that burned and stung your skin. After half a day, your legs would be covered with a layer of red welts. A layer is the only term I can use for it, because you couldn't possibly count the sores individually. From the waterline downward, the leg would be a dense confusion of blisters. Very descriptively, Ningxia people called these "crazy-itching bumps".

As soon as the bumps came out on your legs they would start to itch, and this was not a normal sort of itching. It was an itch that worked its way into the soul, an itch that drove men to madness. Some convicts would hold one leg and jump around on the other while they howled, as though they had been severely burned. If you tried to scratch the bumps with your fingernails, you would find you were "scratching through thick boots", another descriptive phrase, used to mean that something has no effect. Scratching would not stop the itching in the slightest. The best thing might have been to rub the legs with sandpaper, but where were you going to find sandpaper in a labour camp? An alternative was to use a dry, hardened old towel, and rub like crazy.

Needless to say, legs are made of skin and flesh. They are not like metal rods—once you had scratched for a while you would scrape through the skin. At that point the itching would be replaced by pain, but this was much easier to bear. I later read a definition of the concept of itching:

"Itching can be considered a very slight form of pain."

The author of this dictionary clearly never seriously itched in his life.

The medical name for "crazy-itching bumps" was "rice-paddy inflammation". Though it was a simple, common form of skin infection, there was no simple, common medicine with which to treat it. In order to make it

possible for us to keep on working, pulling weeds in the rice fields, we were issued machine oil, the kind used to lubricate tractor engines. We were told to spread this on our legs as a preventative, at least as a layer of something between skin and water.

Machine oil is adhesive—it stops up the pores of the skin and becomes inconvenient when you want to sleep at night. But the worst thing was that the machine oil was not effective. In the water it was not necessarily any better and out of the water it was definitely unsatisfactory. So the question was, should one paint on machine oil or not? Should one imprison the two legs for twenty-four hours a day, or simply itch? Each course of action had its persuasive arguments. This was the sort of quandary that drove the convicts crazy.

The best solution was to get out of the water. To get out of the mud soup. We would bind a thick wad of weeds with other weeds and then toss the bundle up on to the nearby bank, and every time we did this we glimpsed that oh-so-desirable dry land. We were like sailors, out at sea for days, finally catching sight of land on the horizon. It was so close to us and yet so remote. We never knew when we would be allowed to dock, to enjoy the land's dryness.

Today, 11 July, we had finally come to shore. The diary starts this day, although I may already have worked on land for several days. Like a sailor who has finally reached his destination, it was only possible to think of writing in this new frame of mind.

The fact that I had come back to dry land wa probably the main reaqson that I started the diary on this day.

2

Still hauling clods today.\fn{Entry—12 July: Hauled dirt clods, picked throgh greens, wrote eulogy "Shine On, Crimson Rays."} Hauling clods is the lowest-level job in building a house. All you need is legs, hands and the ability to walk—anyone can do it. You don't need to use your brain at all. There is no trick to it, and there is nothing like "responsibility". Even better, it involves walking on dry land.

I could now be considered doubly blessed. My back had turned to a bloody pulp and my bones hurt from the scraping. But that kind of hurting was hardly worth mentioning—it was no more than a very slight form of itching. The convicts who laid the bricks had it no easier than we did. They didn't have to carry loads that were the same weight as their own bodies, but they did have to use a bricklayer's cleaver to try to shape our clods. When they held up a clod and tried to figure out where to begin, their hands looked as though they were handling a red-hot coal.

It would have been hard for a physicist or an engineer to make a straight, free-standing wall out of those irregular lumps. The bricklayers would often curse the convicts hauling in the clods, telling them to bring proper, complete, brick-shaped ones.

"You go get them yourselves!" the clod-hauling convicts would say, pleased at their own sense of humour. These bricklayers weren't Group Leaders,\fn{Group leaders were convicts selected to be in charge of small groups of around 20 men} after all. Who cared about *them*! Clod haulers cared only about transporting clods to the side of the wall. That was it. Whether or not a clod was usable was someone else's business.

Convicts doing hard labour pay strict attention to their own task. Doing their job, they become nothing more than a tool—there is no need for them to consider the requirements of the next step in the procedure. Something so simple as not blocking the next step on purpose is sufficient to qualify a man for being an up-to-the-mark, model convict.

In "capital construction", those who wielded the brick-layers' cleavers were called "big workers". Convicts who transported the clods were called "small workers". Then there were some small workers, also convicts, who did odd jobs for the big workers, like mixing mud, hauling mud, handing up clods, etc. Each wall of the building was made of many-sided irregular clods, and all these diamond-faceted many-sided clods relied on nothing but dried mud to hold them together.

There is a joke about an irresponsible capital construction worker. He tells his mates, once a house is built,

"OK! You stand here and prop up the walls, while I go get the money. Don't let go until I've got it."

The point is that these buildings are only reliably standing when you lean against them and actually hold them up. The minute you move away, the thing falls down.

In a labour camp, of course, this way of doing things was impossible. There was no money to be fetched at the end of a job, and whoever built a wall that fell down would be in worse shape than the wall. He would be accused of sabotaging production.

What was one to do? The only solution was to use plenty of mud to try to glue the thing together.

“Whether it holds or not is all in a slap of mud.”

This was the big workers’ secret formula for success. The most irregular bricks served the function of filling in holes in the wall.

Fortunately the soil of the loess plateau makes a kind of mud that, once dried, becomes as hard and durable as if it had been fired in a kiln. It could probably withstand a grade-five earthquake.\fn{The Chinese do not use the Richter Scale but a scale increasing from one to five “grades”} Of course, building this way meant that you had to use a very large amount of mud—so the small-worker assistants had to work even harder, transporting and mixing earth and water. If these small workers relaxed for a moment they would be cursed by the big workers.

The big workers were important people in the process of capital construction—they had technique, and they had responsibility. As a result, the Troop Leader favoured them, and when they cursed the small workers he would help out and curse them too.\fn{Troop Leaders were not convicts and were in charge of several hundred men} No matter what had happened, the small worker was always at fault. Convicts who were big workers took this opportunity to use their power. If, for example, a big worker was at odds with a small worker, then the swearing at the small worker would be endless. The unfortunate underling, unable to do anything right, would have to put up with curses from the time the sun went up and work began until the sun went behind the mountains and everyone knocked off.

When a big worker started cursing, his use of language would be infinitely more vivid than when he simply made a speech to one of the groups. Not only would he want to sleep with the small worker’s mother, he would also describe every part of the mother’s body in exquisite detail. Both Troop Leaders and convicts were acutely appreciative of this graphic use of language; I too could become transfixed just listening to it. This was another benefit, an entertainment programme, that was not available when you were working in the rice paddies.

Convicts who were allowed to have a bricklayer’s cleaver and work as a big worker were usually those who had been trained in physical labour on the outside. Most of the small workers had been intellectuals. They were rightists, historical counter-revolutionaries or other thought-offenders, and this kind of person could only do things that required no physical skill. When they came into the camps, they were fit only for simple hard labour. Not only in working, but also in cursing, intelletual convicts were no match for convicts who were born to work. First, they were incapable of using the language that way. Second, they did not dare talk back, especially with the Troop Leader on the side of the big workers. As a result, when you heard cursing, on the construction ground or in a rice paddy, you could be pretty sure that its object was an intellectual convict.

Don’t think, however, that intellectuals let themselves be bullied all the time. There were many occasions when intellectual convicts attacked labourers in denunciation meetings. On the Outside people might not have had the slightest problem with one another, but on the Inside the conflicts were legion. This collective, this group of people, was like a mill for grinding ball-bearings. Everything thrown into it was ground against everything else. This was another one of the means of labour reform—forcing people into collisions with one another. Like a ball-bearing plant, the function of a labour camp is to process goods, to abrade them and mix them together until each unit is just like the others.

Yes, hauling dirt clods on your back is an excellent job. As an intellectual, not only would I not be cursed at, but I could have the pleasure of seeing others cursed. I could enjoy the artistry that went into flinging invective. To hurt and be cursed too was much worse than just hurting. Although those being cursed were my own kind, intellectuals, when your stomach is empty and your back is carrying a weight nearly equal to your own, sympathy and compassion are fairly well worked out of you. You could say that they have already been metabolized. And when you are at that point, seeing others in a worse condition can turn into a kind of comfort. The perception of suffering is relative to your point of view. You need only see that others are suffering more and your own suffering will suddenly feel less.

When you grasp that point, you begin to realize that whatever can be apprehended by the senses does not, by itself, exist. It is merely a function of your own mind. One cannot then blame God, Allah or the so-called leaders of a country for disregarding the people’s suffering, or for bringing endless tribulations upon a country. Nor can they be blamed for allowing some people to inflict on others what so many of those others considered to be pain. (Can’t you see the carefree nature of my short diary entry on this day?)

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“Picking through greens” meant helping the chief cook prepare vegetables. The labour reform camp had four Stations—a Station was a sub-camp, a division of the camp as a whole. Each Station had eight hundred to one thousand men. The kitchens for making food for so many convicts were naturally quite large. The lower each man’s grain ration, the greater the expenditure of the camps on water and wild plants. It took quite a few hands to deal with all this: lighting the coal, drawing water, washing pots, picking through greens etc. The most envied job

in the camps was being a temporary small worker in the kitchen. It was something like being assistant to the general manager of a large company on the Outside. Sick men, lying in the infirmary, would compete for the privilege if they could.

In a period when the rule was "lowered-rations-to-be-substituted-with-gourds-and-greens", vegetables became the main course of the meal, not the side dish. Indeed, people kept themselves going by eating nothing but vegetables. In order not to confuse the reader, I should add that the vegetables we ate were not the kind found on a menu. They were more likely to be found in a textbook on botany. Many varieties were available, like the weeds in the rice paddies; for example, there was just about every kind of grass.

It is true that I enjoy eating all kinds of grass, but I particularly favour bitter greens and purslane. *Kukucai*\fn{Bitter greens} and dandelions are in the "composite" family, like chrysanthemums. Dandelion greens have apparently become the rage on the tables of Europe and Japan. At that time we had no inkling of their fashionable future—we knew the plants simply as "grass", or "wild greens", and we ate a lot of them.

Grass that had been dug from the fields and carted into the kitchen had to go through a process of being picked through before it could go in the pot. The convicts who dug up the plants often handed over roots and all to the kitchen. They knew that they were going to eat these things, but that didn't make them more careful. Like everything else, there was a daily quota on the quantity of greens a convict had to dig up. Leaving the roots and dirt on greens would increase the weight. It was the same principle as hauling clods of earth and not caring whether or not they could be used in a wall.

"Picking through greens" was not a matter of dividing edible plants from inedible ones. There was no plant that had been dug up and brought in that we wouldn't eat. The term also did not refer to removing dead leaves and crushed stems—if you did that you were considered unfit for the job and the cook would yell at you. No, "picking" meant nothing more than shaking the dirt off the plants. And that was a splendid job. It was even better than hauling clods. When I did it all I had to do was bring along a clod of earth to use as a stool. I would sit beside a great pile of grass, then slowly, slowly, I would shake the plants stalk by stalk. If a piece of bitter greens or purslane was especially juicy and lovely, naturally I would taste it. By the time the greens were picked, I would have eaten my fill.

The weather was fine and hot. The sun did its best to shine out over the land and the people on it. I would move my pile of grass and my clod over to a shadier place—I doubt if people sitting under awnings at the beach could have been any more content. A lot of the grass would already be limp and shrivelled after being dug up, carted to the kitchen and left for a while. What I ate, however, was generally buried in the middle—it was grass that still exuded the moist fragrance of the earth. What's more, after being sealed in the middle of the pile, the juicier plants would sometimes have begun a natural fermentation.

In the outside world, people used to joke about a poor man who pretended to be living in luxury. Every time he finished eating, he would wipe his mouth with pork rind, so that when he went out people would think he'd just eaten meat. Here in the camps, the trick would be to see whether or not a convict's mouth was green. He would be envied and considered a lucky man if he had any chlorophyll on his lips.

The Troop Leader would often scrutinize the mouths of the convicts to see if they had stolen any greens. Clever convicts would wipe their mouths constantly as they ate on the sly, as refined and gentlemanly as though they were sitting at a formal dinner. If such a convict ran into an over-zealous Troop Leader, though, he was in trouble: the Troop Leader would crack open the suspect's mouth and study his teeth, exactly like examining the mouth of a horse. This was not, after all, a banquet hall: there was no water to rinse out your mouth! Generally, a convict examined meant a convict who was caught.

When a "greens eater" was caught, he would be photographed. I'll describe what that meant later: if the reader carries on, he will learn some interesting things.

I, however, did not have to worry. Assigning me to be a cook's assistant, to pick through greens, was essentially the same as giving me special treatment. And so my work on this day was not at all onerous: I hauled clods in the morning and picked through greens in the afternoon, both highly desirable jobs. Only convicts who enjoyed the status of "being looked after" could be so lucky.

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These were generally convicts who had "preservation value", or convicts who had a particular use. The former included those who had been influential on the Outside, who had a certain standing, or those with whom the leaders of the camp were friendly. For example, one cadre who was sent here to do labour reform came from a province-level post in the government. Once in the camp, he did not have to do a single day of physical work. The

leaders allowed him to teach juvenile delinquents. He had a private room, he didn't need to line up with the rest of us at mealtimes, and in the evening he wasn't required to listen to reports and lessons.

Then there was another man who enjoyed the reputation of being the model for a war hero in some novel. After Liberation he was Deputy Mayor in a southern city, but his luck turned when he came to the northwest—when he got to the camp, he found he had to compete with the pigs for their fodder. The camp leaders discovered this, though, and immediately assigned him to chief cook in the main kitchen. In no time at all he was fatter than any cadre.

The second kind of convict to enjoy special treatment were convicts with special expertise, some ability to do a task the camp could not do without. A driver of a heavy truck or an experienced field overseer fitted this category. These men were established as high-class convicts in the camps. It was necessary to make sure they stayed alive.

The reason for my special treatment was a temporary one.

Although I could be said to have a certain influence in the world—I had been singled out by name as a rightist in the *People's Daily*—that "influence" was completely negative. Therefore I should have been in the ranks of those who had no preservation value at all, quite unlike that cadre with a province-level position. Preservation value depended on whether or not a man's continued existence would advertise the greatness and the rightness of the policy of labour reform. Also on whether or not a man, in the future, could emerge from the camps to play some useful role in the organs of the Party and the government.

Among those of us in the creative arts who had committed crimes, however, there had never been a single model example of successful reform. On the contrary, if this kind of person were taken care of, were allowed to live, it would serve as a lesson to other writers that committing crimes was not so bad. Authors would be free to compete for the honour, thereby adding to the troubles of society.

Our leaders seem to have an instinctive suspicion of writers; they are also unconsciously jealous of them. Six years later,\fn{I.e., during the Cultural Revolution} this mentality was even more pronounced. By then, other than through some lucky fluke, no writer could avoid plunging to the lowest depths of misfortune.

Even at those depths, such flukes of luck could happen. I was now enjoying one. And since it was purely by chance that I was being looked after, I *appreciated* this feeling of being cared for. I benefited by thinking that I was possessed of some preservation value. From this, I developed a sense of gratitude to the leaders. This was unlike the experience of the province-level cadre who was given easy jobs the moment he entered the camps. Having always received special treatment, he was generally querulous and dissatisfied.

I ate greens openly, right out in public. I didn't even worry about letting the Troop Leader see me. To put it bluntly, inviting me to pick through greens was the same as inviting me to eat. In order not to be unworthy of the leaders' good intentions, I used the opportunity to eat like mad. I wanted to put into effect, to make reality, their kind-hearted plans for keeping me alive. My powers of digestion were substantial, and in fact wild grasses are easy to digest: no matter how much you eat, you never feel bloated. Both the leaders and I were fairly confident that I would succeed.

Why did the leaders suddenly decide to take care of me? Why, for the time being, did they place me among the ranks of those who had a preservation value?

The entry in the diary makes it clear: I was in the process of writing an article called "Shine on, Crimson Rays". It was a sort of news bulletin, or you could call it a eulogy.

The hero of the piece was the senior leader in our labour reform camp. He was the camp's Party Secretary and was known as an Old Revolutionary. Administratively, our camp was under the jurisdiction of the Public Security apparatus. As a result, the Party Secretary was not called a secretary but rather, in the military tradition, a political commissar. When I had just arrived at the camp in 1958, this Old Commissar made a deep impression on me. He was a perfect representative of our ideal, namely the class called workers-peasants-and-soldiers.

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Before being sent here, I had written hundreds and hundreds of pages of self-examination. I had undergone innumerable criticism-and-struggle sessions, and had earnestly sworn that my ultimate ambition was to learn from the workers-peasants-and-soldiers so that I could remake myself, reform my worldview. Now I came face to face with a true role model. My two starving eyes must involuntarily have glowed.

The group of intellectuals I came in with had never done a bit of farmwork. That first fall harvest, in 1958, the Old Commissar personally taught us how to do it. How to hold a sickle, how to bind up rice stalks, how to load a cart. Hand to hand, man on man, he educated us in every aspect of our labour reform.

When several hundreds of thousands of *mou*\fn{1 *mou* – about one-fifth of an acre} of rice in our camp had been harvested but not yet moved to the threshing ground, while it was still spread out in the fields, the Old Commissar

called a mobilization meeting. All the convicts from our Station gathered around the threshing floor and watched him personally demonstrate how to tie up a sheaf of rice. He used a chair to represent the sheaf. First he showed us how to lay the rope on the ground. Then he put the chair in the middle. Next he wound the rope around until he had secured the chair/sheaf. Once he had taught us how to tie the knot, he demonstrated how to fasten "back-loops" on the whole ensemble. He said that when this was properly done, a person could sit on the ground, place his back tightly against the sheaf with the back-loops around the arms, and easily get up from the ground.

"What you all learned in school before was rubbish, useless. What I'm teaching you now is real talent! What is knowledge?" he shouted to us. "Knowledge is the ability to make sure you get enough to eat! If you've filled your stomach with knowledge but still don't know how to grow a single kernel of grain, what kind of dog-shitting knowledge is that?!"

Nobody went to work that afternoon. We all listened with great respect to his lesson. He wasn't very tall, he had a swarthy complexion and his face was covered with wrinkles. But he had great energy. He would get excited performing in front of us—his hands and feet would be dancing as he talked and saliva would fly. His talk was extemporaneous. He had no prepared notes—when he thought of something he would just include it. The earthiest Shaanbei\fn{The poorest, northern part of Shaanxi Province} swearing would roll fluently from his tongue.

In addition to the regional flavour of his accent, his language was incredibly vivid. Listening to the reports and lessons of others in the evenings, for example the Troop Leader or Station Leader, we would often nod off to sleep. The minute the Old Commissar came up, we would be charged with excitement. Even being cursed by him felt like a kind of entertainment.

We were incapable of not submitting to his abuse and to his training, for he was a true educator, who used himself as an example. He was over sixty, and had a high position, yet he would go to the fields every day and pace up and down the banks between paddies, hands behind his back. His torso was fairly long, while his legs were short—at the most critical work events, his silhouette would be there, bending to the task. If he saw that some convict could not do the work, or wasn't putting enough effort into it, he would not curse the convict, he'd curse the Troop Leader.

Convicts would much rather be cursed by him than by the Troop Leader, though. When the Troop Leader yelled at people he added fists or a rope to the argument. Naturally, he didn't do it himself: he would have another convict do it for him. A convict always put more muscle into hitting another convict.

In contrast, if the Old Commissar did personally curse a convict who was doing some kind of work or other, he would take over the convict's sickle or shovel while he yelled, and demonstrate how to do it properly. He would have the convict stand to one side to watch, and so instead of getting hit the convict would gain a moments rest.

"Humans are the spirit of all things. You intellectuals even more so than others! So you should listen more carefully than anyone."

He generally started his lecture to us with this soliloquy. Once, when a convict would not plead guilty and submit to punishment, would not be reformed, he spoke to us of the need for intellectuals to be obedient.

"Those who are disobedient are not intellectuals. They don't deserve to be intellectuals! Do you see that tractor over there?" he shouted vehemently. "A tractor is a lump of steel, and a lump of steel is obedient! This morning at work, that tractor climbed up on the end of the field and then wouldn't budge. A whole group of men were there trying to fix it. It wouldn't move. I told them to step aside, and then I went up and gave it two hard kicks. As soon as the men started the motor, it took right away.

"Now humans, humans are not like a lump of steel: you can't keep people walking by kicking them all the time. They have to be obedient and walk by themselves. They can't be like lazy mules who stop when they're beaten, and move backwards when you try to get them to go forward."

When your normal leader makes a report, his mouth is always stuffed with the Classics, the words of Marx and Lenin, Stalin and Mao. By avoiding this, and even more by not frightening us with class analysis, the Old Commissar's talks made intellectuals who had committed crimes feel a new freshness, a rekindled warmth. People who had been immersed in books all their lives had never run into his kind of simplicity. They had never known peasant talk unadulturated by any theory. His reasoning, derived strictly from a life of farming, made it impossible for intellectuals to refute him from a theoretical point of view. All we could do, each and every one of us, was hang our heads in shame. True, how could humans, the spirit of all things, be disobedient like a lump of steel or like some barnyard animal?

We began to see that being obedient, especially to the leaders, should be a prominent characteristic of intellectuals.

During these lectures, he would often remind us of the difficult times at the pioneering start of this particular labour reform camp. He would be as casual and friendly as though we were talking about the weather. In those days, just a few years earlier, the land that the camp was now situated on was nothing but a stretch of watery wasteland, as far as the eye could see. Salt that had seeped up from underground blanketed the place in white; weeds grew taller than a man's head. When agriculturists were brought in to look it over, they simply shook their heads. They said the place wasn't worth spending time and money on to try to bring under cultivation.

But the Old Commissar obstinately stuck to this place—he liked it. He brought in a dozen demobilized cadres from the Army to look at it. They lived in tents and ate cold field rations (when he got to this point, we all started drooling). There wasn't a single piece of machinery back then—all they had were a dozen shovels, hoes and axes.

Step by step, they measured out several tens of thousands of *mou* of wasteland with their bare feet. They worked out where to dig the canals, where to build buildings, where there should be fields, where a vegetable plot. In the evenings, under the light of an oil lamp, they did their planning; in the daytime, with wooden stakes, they marked it all out.

Only after that stage were a tractor and a large group of convicts brought to the wasteland. To use the Old Commissar's words, it was then like "a thousand armies and ten thousand horses gathering for the battle. The first shots were fired in the opening round of setting up the camp." This was the one and only literary phrase he ever used, and it is possible that it was a slogan created by someone else. When he said it, though, it became his own—it resonated and meant something.

He never tried to deny that the first group of convicts, who created the camp, had died in droves.

"Back then hardship was real hardship. You'd see a man topple over while he was gnawing on a steamed bun. You'd touch him and find he was dead. Had he starved to death? No! Wasn't his mouth still full of bread? As long as you have a mouthful of something to eat, you don't die of starvation!"

So how had the man died?

He didn't say.

Leaders who had some experience in the matter seldom used the enticement of good times in the future to make people work. Instead, they used the hard times of the past to drive people on. The panorama of the future was much too indistinct, whereas the pain and trauma of the past were real. They had a very concrete power of persuasion.

When we had heard these stories a few times, the tribulations of our predecessors turned into a reason for us to have to endure hardship too. Even so, knowing that the earlier convicts had been through even worse comforted us. It made us feel lucky.

According to the Old Commissar, everyone who was just starting out, including himself, got crazy-itching bumps. He said that legs would inevitably develop these blisters if they were soaked in water that was irrigating land hyper-saturated in salts.

"You guys believe in science, don't you? Well, this is called a scientific law! Getting blisters on your legs is one of the ways to reform people. If you don't get blisters, you can't be reformed!" When convicts crawled out of the water and howled on the banks from the itching, he would just watch from the edge of the canal and laugh:

"That's right! Great! This will reform you even faster!"

The exclamations that he put at the ends of sentences can't be expressed in ordinary Chinese characters. You could hear in them the kind of happy astonishment that a father has on seeing his child begin to walk. As a result, when we died from itching and then returned to life again, we felt somewhat gratified. We intellectuals had been told by the country's senior leaders long ago,

"To make yourselves into New People you must shuck off your bodies and exchange your very bones."

Peeling off a layer of skin was nothing to that.

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For a short time the labour reform camps instituted a policy of not rationing grain, of "eating to the limit". This was in the few months when a slogan was circulated around the country that said,

"Fill your bellies: eat as much as you can! Pull out all the stops for more production!"

At the end of that year, when grain became scarce and rationing was imposed again, the Old Commissar handled it differently from the other bureaucrats we knew so well. They would have waved the red-headlined document sent down from Above, made an announcement to everyone, then simply instituted the rationing.

Instead, the Old Commissar asked the Troop Leaders to gather all the convicts in an emergency meeting. It was right after breakfast, which we always took to our bunks to eat. He waited until every convict was there at the threshing ground and standing at attention. Then he ordered a group of cooks to go into the convicts' barracks

(these were called Numbers in the camps). They were to go from Number to Number, searching for food. After a long while, the cooks returned with all kinds of baskets containing the leftover steamed buns and rice that convicts had not finished eating. He had the cooks exhibit these things in the middle of the threshing ground. Then, with a face that was steel-gray with anger, he pointed to the baskets and shouted:

"A sin! A sin! Just look at that! We let you eat as much as you want, and you waste it! Don't you know that every grain of rice, every kernel of wheat is a farmer's drop of sweat and blood?! All that work just to be wasted by you?! Sinners! You're sinners! Starting from the next meal, every man gets put on rationing again! You kitchen workers, do you hear me? Fixed ration of rice at the next meal!"

China has an old proverb:

"The sins of Heaven can be disregarded—there's nothing you can do about them anyway. It's the ones you bring on yourself that will get you in the end."

Yes, you are responsible for the crimes you commit. So whose fault is it when you again have to tighten your belt and lock up your throat? One by one, we began to blame ourselves. Then we began to blame each other. Later, when the grain ration got smaller and smaller, when large numbers of people began to die, some convicts on the brink of death were still regretting their earlier sins: if they had not wasted so much grain before, surely there would still be enough to eat today. Surely it was our own fault that we were dying of starvation.

When there wasn't enough grain, naturally you had to eat grass. Listening to the Old Commissar, it seemed that eating grass was part of China's traditional food culture. When we started eating grass, the Old Commissar instructed us:

"Eating wild plants to get through times of scarcity is one of the inherent talents of us working people! Wang Baoxun ate bitter greens for eighteen years. When Xu Pinggui finally arrived, Baoxun became his number one wife.\fn{This is an allusion to a Tang-dynasty story and play, familiar, however, to the people in general} So what's the matter with wild plants! Back then everybody ate them to get by. They ate them until they got greedy—then they started eating fine vegetables.

"You all came here to be reformed, not to be landlords and capitalists! So everyone here eats grass, otherwise you won't get properly reformed!"

Before long, the convicts had no energy to work. Some simply lay down in the middle of a field. Then there were those who "pretended to be dead dogs" and didn't even go out to the field. A counter-revolutionary theory went round about that time, to the effect that the men had no energy because they were eating nothing but grass. When he heard it, the Old Commissar refuted this idiotic idea:

"Who says that grass hasn't got any nutrition? That you can't get any energy from it? Livestock eat grass, don't they? And don't they put out a lot more work than you do?!"

Convicts who had committed criminal offences and a small number of historical counter-revolutionaries were the only ones who had some doubts about this assertion. They continued to pass their counter-revolutionary theory around underground. Among the intellectuals, not one did not express utter belief in and servility to the Old Commissar. This was particularly true of rightists, and those among us who were zealously reforming themselves by extolling the "Short History of the United (Bolshevik) Communist Party" and "Dialectical Materialism". These people had the highest respect for him. It didn't matter if his lesson was about lumps of steel or the traditional food culture of China, his was a brand-new way of thinking.

If these intellectuals, trying so hard to reform their worldview, did not follow his example, then whose were they to follow? Intellectuals who came to the camps to be reformed had long since lost the ability to think independently, for themselves. They had endured endless struggle-and-criticism sessions, study sessions, reading groups, and they had lost self-confidence. They were dispirited and weakened. With his iron-clad assurance, his crude logic that permitted no doubts, this representative of workers-peasants-and-soldiers quickly prevailed over their timidity. The brains of China's intellectuals were turned into public toilets long ago, to the point that six years later Jiang Qing could even throw her menstrual pad inside.

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The lessons of the Old Commissar had a considerable amount of "knowledge" that differed from what was written in books. But at that time one could only doubt what was in a book anyway. The capitalist class was the only one with any book education, and now we were to be re-educated by workers-peasants-and-soldiers. Knowledge turned out to have a class nature.

For example, capitalist-class knowledge said analogies between man and metal were inaccurate, also that man's intestines and stomach were different from those of livestock. Knowledge of the "class with no capital", i.e.

proletariat knowledge, saw man and metal as the same type of thing, and recognized a commonality between men and livestock.

Which were you to believe? You had to believe the latter. It was not a question of common sense, it was a question of class.

What's more, a lot of things that capitalist scholars said could not be done had been made reality through the guidance of the proletariat worldview. Experts said they were impossible, but the common sense of workers-peasants-and-soldiers made them happen.

Take this labour reform camp right before your eyes as an example. A few years ago, many people had thought that the land was unsuitable for establishing a large-scale state farm run by the central government. Even Soviet experts argued that this place could not be cultivated. But the Old Commissar brought in a dozen cadres and workers and they turned white salt-flats into fields. Weeds still flourished in those fields, the land was bumpy and uneven, and the whole project had cost innumerable lives, but you could not deny that the fields produced crops. From a distance it looked as though the hoary salt-flats were clothed in green.

All this was undeniable. It made you sigh and say that what you had studied in the past was not complete. There were *lacunae*.\fn{Gaps} It made you acquiesce and agree that you simply must start again, by being re-educated by worker-peasant-soldiers like this Old Commissar.

Chinese intellectuals who have been educated in old-fashioned patriotism and nationalism have a trait that verges on fetishism. They have only to see construction projects such as factories, oil fields and farms springing up on what was originally raw land and they prostrate themselves in admiration. They see these as symbols of development, of an advancing country. They never consider the price that is paid or their effect on the natural environment.

In the evenings, when the moon was so bright it obscured the stars, on a threshing ground washed by the fragrance of grain, we convicts would sit in rows before the Old Commissar and listen to him like children listening to some uncle tell a story. He told us of things gone by. He said:

"Used to be I couldn't even read the character for 'big'. Up in Shaanbei when I followed Liu Zhidan into the revolution, I'd paste on the glue and he would stick up the slogans. Then he began to teach me a couple of the characters on those slogans. So I began getting a few words, slowly learning them. Now, fact is, if you intellectuals gave me a test I might not pass! Why? Tried my best to learn from revolutionaries, that's why. What I know is revolution. Lot more useful than what you're going to find in books."

With great warmth of feeling, he often mentioned the famous revolutionary Liu Zhidan.

"Liu Zhidan was a good man! Never mind that he was born into a landlord's family. Little master of a landlord, he was—but when he took to revolution, he wasn't afraid to die. He'd fight on the rivers and in the mountains for us poor people. What's that say to us? It says that a person just has to try—doesn't matter what family background he has, if he works at it no one can stop him."

These words would stroke us like a warm, gentle breeze, and for a short time they would revive starving, exhausted, hopeless men. Although they had lost any pride in their past, although their educations were clearly a disaster in light of the reality around them, there might still be a future. Listening to these heartening words, convicts from bad family backgrounds would feel tears come to their eyes.

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I was one of those who sincerely admired the Old Commissar. He was different from the other leaders with whom I had come in contact, men who appeared profound but didn't have a thing inside. Every word he spoke seemed spontaneous and new. My remaining vestiges of poetic sensitivity told me that he was truly an artist. He was a model leader among workers-peasants- and-soldiers. I'd heard him give a number of reports, usually just after I had drunk grass soup and didn't feel quite as hungry as usual, and eventually I had the idea of writing about him. After all, didn't I have a pen?

Moreover, it was clear to me that some people were receiving special treatment. Certain convicts did nothing but easy jobs. Since envy was unpleasant, it occurred to me that I too should belong to the ranks of those looked after. I have never been athletic, even when I was younger. By this time there were only forty-four kilos of me left, and I was even less nimble. I was no match against others when it came to eating greens, and when it came to hard labour I was never going to surpass the rest. I had to avoid that path if I wanted to preserve my own little life.

Most people are smart enough to display their better side and to hide their faults. I knew that the only usefulness I had was the ability to write. That was the one pitifully meagre talent I had learned in the world Outside. If one was to write in this labour reform camp, the ideal scenario was to make this Old Commissar the

main character. I decided to write an article that sang his praises and extolled his virtue. Never mind that he truly *was* worth writing about.

One day, after the Old Commissar had finished his lesson, I bravely marched up and gave a Troop Leader under him a message, describing this aspiration.

Nobody ever gave me an answer, nobody declared any position on it, but several days later the Troop Leader suddenly plucked me out of the Main Work Troop. He said that I was not to go with the rest of the men to the big fields. Instead, I was to do the work that these first entries in the diary mention, good jobs like hauling dirt clods and picking through greens. It was clear that I had been elevated to the status of being looked after.

And so, it became imperative that I use my free time, when I was not hauling clods or picking through greens, to throw myself into writing with all the grateful fervour I could muster. Since I was much more practised at writing than at hauling, I had the article written within a few nights.

By now, I had already begun to correct my final draft. …

77.23 Afternoon In The Study\fn{by Chang Ling-ling (1936-)} Kunming, Yunnan Province, China (F) 1

It's been quite a long time since I came to father's study to escape a dull and drawn out afternoon. The huge bookshelves standing against four walls were crammed with father's heavy philosophy volumes which looked like a troop of clumsy Russian soldiers casting their lengthy still shadows.

When it was sunny outside (the sunlight in the afternoon always looks lazy) the shadows thickened. I would curl up in the sleepy silence, reading Scott's legendary tales and Mrs. Browning's elegant love poems,\fn{Sir Walter Scott (1771-1832) and Elizabeth Barret Browning (1806-1861) are meant.} immersing myself in any kind of classical love stories—romantic love stories—to escape a long and tedious afternoon.

Summer days always weighed heavily upon me; peeping at me through the windows, and even father's philosophy books stared at me from the bookshelves. How long the afternoon was! It's been quite a while since I came to father's study to indulge myself once again in those books I loved when I was seventeen: enchanted by the crippled Byron, pointed-faced Pushkin and the tubercular Keats. Climbing to the top of the bookshelf, I would lose myself in the tragedy of Hugo's *Notre-Dame de Paris*, follow Don Quixote in his travels, and share Hemingway's adventures, I used to curl up in the shadows, bathing in Van Gogh's sunlight, or relaxing in the romantic atmosphere of *A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Latte*.

But now, I will no longer be able to indulge myself in anything. Soon I'll have my own study, away from father's philosophy and logic. I will leave the study which I had reveled in. Younger sister is also leaving, to go abroad as a scholarship student in one of the large universities. And right at this moment, in the smothering heat of a summer afternoon, my younger brother is probably combing each company, restaurant, or luxurious hotel along the streets of Los Angeles, asking, "Do you have any jobs?" Younger brother, calling from the other side of the world:

"Mom, please explain to Pa, I'll get my Master's degree this fall. I'll conquer the feeling of white superiority. But Mom, I feel so sad. I saw Chinatown yesterday. The Chinese people there are looked down upon, living in a tiny grocery store, they have no desire to better themselves. I miss all of you so much. How I miss those days in our study!"

Those days in our study! They will never come again. Younger sister is leaving to start on the road of her own happy fate. Younger brother had said:

"Congratulations to sister, good luck always comes to the lucky."

Younger sister will be leaving to live on a scholarship in an overseas university. I am leaving, too, to build a study of my own. There won't be any of father's philosophy books in my study. I might feel lost. Just as younger brother is feeling lost in an alien land, infected with the prevailing mood of depression.

"Mom, I have just finished the spring term exams. I steal some time to go to the library and read the books father had put in my suitcase; of a sudden, I doubt whether that could be of any use to me at this moment. Because, Mom, summer vacation will be here now, and I'm still waiting for the confirmation of my summer job. All the answers from the companies are: we are very sorry to inform you that because you are not a citizen of the United States … I have decided to go with a throng of Chinese students to try our luck in Los Angeles. The scholarship terminates in summer vacation. I can't just drink iced milk and gnaw dry bread, burying myself in the laboratory of a dead town from which the people have gone to their summer resorts. I can't get my doctorate without a penny in my pocket. Mom, please explain to Pa, I've decided to go west to try my luck, but I will never forget what father told me in those days in our study."

So, each dull summer day, brother walked the streets of Los Angeles, throwing his oriental shadow of pride in front of the westerners who had been nurtured by a more worldly mercenary philosophy. At last, brother told us that he had found “two poor jobs,” typical jobs for Chinese students! Younger brother is lost in another country, deeply dejected by the infectious melancholy over there.

Oh, the days are gone when we hid in father’s study and dreamed of how we were going to discover the wonders of the future. We memorized Lee Li’s poems as if we were reciting tongue twisters. Occasionally, we listened to father’s pirate stories. We read *Wuthering Heights*. Our pleasure in criticizing the vulgarity in *Dreams of the Red Chambers* is lost. In those summer days in father's study, we spent long afternoons together, acting out many *Little Women* type of tragic-comedies.

For quite a long time, I haven’t wanted to go to father's study. I am tired of those gentle, sweet love stories, tired of serenades. It’s impossible to remain infatuated with the crippled Byron as I was at seventeen. I would prefer to leave the study, to face the reality of “the fantastic greasiness of an abstract painting.” With both sister and myself leaving, and brother lost, I no longer wish to bathe in Van Gogh’s sun any more, nor drowse in Seurat’s Island of La Grande Jatte.

The afternoon is so long and depressing. I don’t want to go to father’s study, for those heavy volumes of philosophy would stare down at me; and even their shadows are too lengthy and too quiet. I don’t want to curl up and drowse in that kind of somnolent, quietness. I would rather go search for the abstract images of the abstract paintings, to feel the present day hopelessness of modern poems, or to discuss cancer (why did Keats have tuberculosis?). My melancholy has become a cancer. I don’t want my brother to become depressed in summer days, to become dejected by father’s philosophy. I do wish we could all go back to father’s study and be together each long summer afternoon …

But, I am leaving, sister is leaving, and brother is lost on the coast of another continent.

83.22 The Big Event Of The Week\fn{by Philip Chou (1936-)} Shanghai, China (M) 9

“Daddy, get up, it’s seven o’clock already!”

At first all I heard was what sounded like the buzzing of a mosquito. But it kept repeating itself, and with each repetition the volume was turned up several notches, until about the twentieth repetition, when I realized that it was Chen-chen’s voice. She was standing beside me sounding reveille. I ached all over and felt as weak as a kitten, and since I was still sleepy, I pretended I couldn’t hear her, so I could stay in bed a while longer.

There was a momentary silence before the shouts started in again, “Daddy, get up! Mommy said to tell you it’s Saturday!”

“Saturday!” That single word had the power to turn a mollusk into a fire-breathing dragon—I was raring to go. Three minutes after jumping out of bed, I had already gone to the toilet, combed my hair and washed up, gotten dressed, and was heading toward the kitchen.

When I got there, Ch’iang-ch’iang, Chen-chen, and my wife were sitting around the table eating breakfast. I seldom greeted my wife in the morning, but since it was Saturday, and therefore important that I please her somehow, I changed my routine.

“Good morning, Hu-kua,” I said. Obviously, it hadn't worked. Without even looking up from her breakfast, she grumbled:

“Chen-chen called you no fewer than twenty-one times before you got up. You don’t have an ounce of get-up-and-go!”

“It’s only in the morning that I don’t have any get-up-and-go. That all comes out at night," I said contradictorily.

“At night?” She hadn’t caught it.

“That’s right. Don’t forget it’s Saturday. Tonight’s the night for ‘the big event of the week.’”

“Shame on you!” she scolded. “What a dirty mind you’ve got.”

Although she tried to sound serious, there was the trace of a smile in the corners of her mouth as she gave me one of her come-hither looks. That was a good sign. If I should somehow avoid upsetting her during the day, I was in for a treat tonight. I could barely contain my excitement.

The braised beef stew, which was our breakfast, was on the table, still in the pot. I dished myself a bowl of rice out of the electric rice cooker, then sat down.

The rice was so undercooked I couldn’t eat it. Since washing and cooking the rice was Ch’iang-ch’iang’s job, I said to him:

"Hey, Ch'iang-ch'iang, you barely cooked the rice." Then I turned to my wife and said to her playfully, "Hu-kua, I can see that Ch'iang-ch'iang hasn't learned my system of turning raw kernels into fluffy rice, if you know what I mean."

My wife allowed no one (me, my parents, and her parents included) to criticize her children. Ignoring my double entendre, she roared:

"Just how can you be so heartless! Ch'iang-ch'iang's only five years old, and he has to get up every morning at six o'clock to cook the rice. What do you expect from him, a catered banquet? Think back to what you were doing at the age of five!"

"When I was five years old," I said with mock seriousness, "I was my parents' pride and joy."

It was half past seven by the time we finished breakfast. The four of us piled into our old clunker, but my wife was no sooner seated than she hopped out of the car as though someone had lit a fire under her. As usual, she had to go back inside and take one more look around to make sure the gas was turned off and the windows were locked. When she climbed into the car the second time we were able to get on the road. Ten minutes later we made our first planned stop—*Carl's Jr*. Chen-chen, Ch'iang-ch'iang, and I stayed in the car while my wife went in and bought four take-out salads.

Since we worked seven days a week, ten hours a day, the main requirement where meals were concerned was simplicity. We ate braised beef stew, braised pork, or braised chicken for every meal at home, and no vegetables—they took too much time to clean and prepare. We made up for this dietary deficiency by stopping at *Carl's Jr*. every morning on our way to work. *Carl's Jr*., a fast-food place that's open 24 hours a day, mainly sells haburgers, but they also have take-out salads, which sell for $1.50 and include carrots, cucumbers, tomatoes, purple cabbage, lettuce, and alfalfa sprouts. Nutritionally, they are okay, but they taste so bad that when we first arrived in America, my wife had called this concoction of raw vegetables pig slop. If someone had told us then that this pig slop would one day become our daily fare we wouldn't have believed him.

Before long my wife was on her way back to the car with four take-out salads in her hands. She had an uncharacteristically happy expression on her face as she walked toward us, and when she was settled in the front seat of the car I asked her as I drove off:

"What are you smiling about?"

"This is my lucky morning. The girl at the counter undercharged me two dollars."

"Oh, no, you should give it back to her. If you don't, she'll have to make it up out of her own pocket when they discover the shortage." I didn't share her happiness.

"Let's be a little less sanctimonious, okay!" I hadn't swayed her. "If we had given one of our customers too much change, do you think he'd have handed it back?"

"Don't you always say that you never make a mistake? So how could you give too much change?"

"That's a fact." I eased the car onto the Highway 10, which was the part of the trip when Chen-chen, Ch'iang-ch'iang, and my wife ate their "pig slop." I didn't say anything more as we drove toward Los Angeles. Taking the Los Angeles Street exit off the freeway, we headed downtown. Several traffic lights later we reached the intersection of Fourth and Los Angeles, where the *Midnight Mission* was located. As always, the sidewalks were crowded with bums, some sitting, some lying down, and some half sitting and half lying down. Although they weren't exclusively men, they were all so dirty and smelly that you couldn't tell the women from the men either by sight or by smell. I turned left onto Fourth Street. The sidewalks on both sides of the street were also packed with bums—men and women—who were hanging around until about eleven o'clock, when they could go over to the *Midnight Mission* and line up for a free lunch.

This was LA.'s Skid Row, which I called "The Street of Bums." There were missions here run by seven different charitable organizations, all of which provided, free of charge, a place to sleep and two meals a day.

The promise of free food and lodging years ago had drawn swarms of bums to the area, and their influx had driven out the people already living there. In the twenty years between 1960 and 1980, eighty to ninety percent of the shops and hotels in the area had been boarded up, and no one came in there any more. When night fell, the place turned into a battle zone, with muggings and murders involving the bums a common occurrence. In 1980, some bold Chinese from Taiwan ventured into the area and, with no thought to their own personal safety, opened up wholesale toy stores. They chose this particular location primarily because of the low rent. Reportedly, back then you could rent 3,000 square feet of combined showroom and warehouse space for only $150 a month.

Much to everyone's surprise, these people who had come for the low rents were still alive a year later, and that was all the encouragement the not-so-bold Chinese from Taiwan (like me) needed to pick up and follow them here. After our arrival in early 1983, we located a Fourth Street location with 2,500 square feet of showroom and

warehouse space, which also included a parking lot with eighteen spaces next door to the east. The rent was a very reasonable $400 a month.

Naturally, you never get something for nothing. When we moved in, there was more dust on the floor of the abandoned showroom than on the surface of the moon. The cobwebs were so dense we had to hack them down with a *samurai* sword. The pipes were all rusted through, and in the bathroom what water there was came not from the faucets but from the leaky ceiling. Owing to the lack of running water in the bathroom, years of shit had accumulated in the toilets until, in the dry heat of Los Angeles, it had petrified. We had to break it up with an electric snake, then take it out in hardened lumps.

Our landlord was a Jew, an 89-year old man who had one hand on his coffin and the other outstretched, palm up. In 1984 he doubled our rent to $800, and in 1985 adjusted it upwards to $2,500. He seemed to consider us "captive tenants," and finally we had to content ourselves with our captive status. The reason was simple: LA.'s Skid Row had turned into the wholesale toy center of Southern California. By rough count there were two hundred wholesale businesses run by Chinese alone, and all our customers came to us unsolicited. We didn't know who they were, where they lived, or what their telephone numbers were. To move out would be cutting ourselves off from them completely, so for us it was a case of: "There are thirty-six available strategies, and the best one is to stay put."

I parked in front of the store to let out my wife and the children so they could open up. Then I pulled into the parking lot. Our private watchman arrived just as I finished parking the car.

"*Amigo*," I greeted him.

"*Amigo*," he greeted me back.

Amigo means friend in Spanish, which is what the Mexicans speak. "Friend" is their customary greeting, just as "Brother" is ours. Most Chinese who run wholesale stores hire a Mexican or two to help out with the strenuous jobs. We Chinese call them *amigo* and hire them for the sake of economy. Since most of them are illegal aliens, they don't dare demand the salary the law prescribes. Take my watchman, for instance. We pay him $2 an hour, slightly more than half California's current minimum wage of $3.75.

Our watchman has to keep watch outside all day long, from nine in the morning till seven at night. His primary duty is to see that no disturbances, thefts, or robberies occur in the shop or in the parking lot. His secondary responsibility is to prevent customers of other shops from trying to park in our lot. Ours is the only business in the 400 block of Los Angeles Street that has its own parking lot, which we reserve for the use of our own customers; everyone else has to pay a parking fee of $5. This parking lot of ours has greatly increased our competitive edge. My wife knew what she was doing back then when she insisted on renting this particular site.

The other *amigo* in our employ—José—does the heavy work. He is late to work every single day, arriving at about a quarter after nine, invariably drunk. By the time he finally stumbles in, the rest of us are all in our places. My wife is seated behind the large desk in the middle of the showroom, from where she checks off the merchandise, writes out the bills of sale, takes the money, and makes change. The fate of our business hinges on her efficiency. If she moves too slowly, the customers will grow impatient and buy less, and maybe even turn and walk out. It's not like there aren't any other wholesale shops in the neighborhood! The proprietor of a wholesale business has to be proficient at keeping the flow of customers moving as fast as possible, ideally one right on the heels of the other. The only way to ensure survival in this business is to have the customers lead one another to the "chopping block." Fortunately for us, my wife has no peer in totaling up sales and writing out receipts. Her hands fly over the keys of a hand calculator with the virtuosity of Van Cliburn at his grand piano. Of course, "speed of hand" is only one trick of the trade. The hand must also be "ruthless" and "accurate." Conservatively speaking, we stock a minimum of 500 different toys in our store, and my wife has to know the wholesale price of each and every one of them. Not only that, she has to figure up the sales without making a mistake: if she charges a customer too little, he'll feign ignorance, but if she overcharges him, he'll know at once. Either way you can't win.

Since my wife occupies the only chair in the store, it's "standing room only" for the rest of us. Chen-chen, Ch'iang-ch'iang, and I are on our feet ten hours a day. Chen-chen's station is behind my wife, where she is surrounded on both sides by display racks filled with toy samples. Her job is to demonstrate how the various toys work. She has also memorized the numbers in English and Spanish, so she can answer whenever someone asks a price or some other simple questions. The more complicated questions fall to me. Her life shows just how hard it is to be a Chinese child in America these days—Chen-chen is only four years old!

Ch'iang-ch'iang and I station ourselves in front of my wife. My job is to fill the customers' orders, then place the merchandise in front of my wife for her to total it up, issue a bill of sale, and take payment. Once the

merchandise has been paid for, it is Ch’iang-ch’iang’s turn: he boxes the merchandise for José, who puts the cardboard boxes on a dolly and wheels it out to the parking lot, where he loads it into the customer’s car. That, simply stated, is the way to do wholesale business, start to finish.

American businessmen operate under a simple credo: “In God we trust. Everyone else pays cash.” The wholesale toy business is one of these cash-and-carry operations. In the slightly more than two years we have been in business, this “cash only” aspect has had its “orchid” and its “onion” sides. Since this area has as bad a reputation as an area can have, small retailers who come here to do cash business must constantly be on guard. The men usually come here with their hundred-dollar bills hidden in their shoes. The stench of this money can clear out a room. The women, on the other hand, usually hide their hundred-dollar bills in their brassieres. The fragrance of this money can fil1 the same room.

At half past nine, the store came to life, with a crowd of twenty or more customers pushing and shoving. Several Mexican women near Chen-chen were exclaiming to each other, “*Mira*! *Mira*!” (Look! Look!) Chen-chen intoned prices in Spanish like she was reciting scriptures. She was surrounded by a symphony of toy sounds, from the bawling, the laughing, and the cries of *mama* of dolls, to the wailing sirens of toy police cars, the *pow pow* of toy guns, and the strange sounds of robots. She was, obviously, giving demonstrations. In front of my wife’s desk a man was taking off his shoe and a woman was reaching into her bra, both getting ready to pay. Meanwhile, I was running around filling merchandise orders and Ch’iang-ch’iang was boxing them up as fast as he could. José was pushing his dolly back and forth.

Just then a Cantonese man walked in.

“How much dat Lionbot?”

“Thirty-five dollars,” I answered.

“Thirty-five dollar? Too much. Next door sells thirty-four.”

“Then why don’t you buy them next door?” my wife cut in.

“Sold out. What say, you sell thirty-four? I buy six.”

“Okay, okay,” my wife said with an impatient wave of her hand.

The Cantonese paid his bill and walked out with six of the toy lion assembly kits. As soon as he was out the door, my wife turned to me and said,

“Go and ask the dance-hall girl next door why she’s selling them for thirty-four dollars when we all agreed on a price of thirty-five.”

“You’re not going to believe a customer, are you?” I said, trying to get her to change her mind. “He only said that because he wanted to knock down the price, right?”

“I don’t care. You go over and warn her that if I find out she’s engaging in any more of that cutthroat competition, I’ll personally go over and rip those nice cotton underpants right off her!”

The wholesale toy shops are nearly all family businesses, run by husband-wife, father-son, mother-daughter, or brother-sister teams. The one next door—Miss Lee’s—is the only one run by a single woman. Except for Miss Lee, none of the other women involved in the wholesale toy trade use make-up—they haven’t the time. Miss Lee is also the only one among them who likes to flirt, and my wife’s attitude toward her is neatly captured in the nickname she has given her—“the dance-hall girl.” Personally, I like Miss Lee. I only wish she would watch her language a little more. That’s another thing my wife can’t abide in her. On more than one occasion they’ve gotten into arguments, with vulgar words like “whore” and “slut” peppering their speech—even I don’t say things like that. If there’s anything I hate, it’s being sent over to Miss Lee's with a complaint. But since I would never consider disobeying one of my wife’s orders, I had no choice but to swallow my pride and head on over to Miss Lee’s.

“Miss Lee, just a moment ago a customer said you were selling Lionbots for thirty-four dollars. Was he telling the truth?”

“Fuck him! Anyone who sells them for thirty-four dollars has a whore for a mother!”

“That’s what I say. And my wife felt the same way, since she asked him why he didn’t buy them here if you’re selling them for thirty-four dollars. He said you were sold out.”

“Fuck him!” Miss Lee cursed as she pointed to the display rack to her left. “Look over there. As you can see, there are at least ten of them on that rack. You see there?”

“Yes, I see. It must have been a misunderstanding,” I said, trying to make my exit. But Miss Lee’s parting shot stopped me before I got out the door:

“You go back and warn that dried-up old bitch you married that the next time she comes looking for trouble, I’ll rip those nice cotton underpants right off her!”

“Yeah, sure, I’ll tell her,” I said weakly.

“Miss Lee says we’ve been taken in,” I reported to my wife when I returned.

“Miss Lee?” my wife cut me off. “Call her the dance-hall girl.”

“Right, right, the dance-hall girl, that is, didn’t cut the price.”

“She wouldn’t dare!”

An Iranian woman walked up just then and asked for three dozen Dinobots. I could only find thirty of them on the shelf, so I told José to go into the storeroom and get some more. He couldn’t find any.

“We’re six short,” I said to my wife. “What should we do?”

“Why do you have to come to me for something like that? Can’t you just go next door and borrow six from Mr. Chang?”

Miss Lee is our neighbor to the left, while our neighbor to the right is Mr. Chang, a man in his sixties who is in business with his son. He’s a gentle man with a ready smile, and my wife, who greatly respects him, calls him a wonderful person. I went next door.

“Mr. Chang,” I said, “do you have six Dinobots? We’d like to borrow them.”

“No, I’m sorry, I don’t,” he said without hesitation, a broad smile on his face.

Sneaking a quick glance around his showroom, I spotted at least twenty Dinobots stacked on the shelf. But since he had refused to lend any of them to me, what could I say? I returned to our showroom, but didn’t dare say what had really happened, for fear that it might lead to an argument.

“Mr. Chang said he didn’t have any,” I said casually to my wife. “So now what do we do?”

“So now what do we do? So now what do we do? Is that all you know how to say? Why can’t you go over and try the dance-hall girl?” she shouted.

“What did you say?” I couldn’t believe my ears. “Not five minutes ago you sent me over there to complain, and now you want me to go over and borrow something from her. Just where am I supposed to hide my self-respect?”

“You never had any to begin with!”

With discouragement written all over my face, I slinked back over to Miss Lee’s. It wasn’t the warmest welcome I had ever received.

“Now what? Now what? You back looking for more trouble?”

“No no no,” I hastened to say, with an obsequious smile on my face. “That creep a while ago who tried to stir things up nearly destroyed the good feelings between you and us, which is why my wife sent me over to try to make things right with you. She hopes you’ll be understanding and not take offense at what happened, heh-heh.”

“Heh-heh,” she mimicked my hollow laugh. “What kind of fool do you take me for? As I see it, the apology is phony, but your desire to borrow something is genuine. Am I right?”

Since she had me dead to rights, there was no point in trying to keep the deception going.

“Now that you mention it,” I said, shamelessly, “there was something. I’d like to borrow six Dinobots, as a matter of fact.”

“No one’s stopping you from going over and getting them,” she said, pursing her lips and pointing with her chin in the direction of one of the shelves.

I went back to our showroom carrying six boxed, unassembled dinosaurs. Before I got there I ran into Lin Ah-po, who was on his way to our showroom, walking unsteadily with the aid of a cane. The sight of Lin Ah-po has always distressed me. I can’t get over how sad it is that someone that old needs to keep a small business going just to stay alive. Not only that, my wife takes advantage of him, too.

“Hi there, boss. Have you eaten already?” Lin Ah-po greeted me. Even though he himself often goes hungry, he never forgets his Chinese manners, asking everyone he runs into whether they have eaten.

“Yes I have.” I rubbed my belly.

Life has not treated Lin Ah-po well. At least that’s what some people in the business told me. He spent much of his youth as a vagrant in a mid-Taiwan city until he fell afoul of the authorities, who put him away for a while. After getting out he signed on as a deckhand on a ship to steer clear of the people he had hung around with. Ten years ago, after saving up US$10,000, he decided to jump ship rather than return to Taiwan to live out the years left to him—he was afraid it would be all over for him if he confronted his past again. On the very day he jumped ship in New York, he was mugged by a gang of blacks who took every penny he had. Already past the age of fifty, he was clearly unemployable. Luckily for him, he was a Chinese in New York, whose Chinatown boasts so many restaurants. He could live on the food that was thrown out. In fact, he lived off restaurant leftovers for a number of years, sleeping at night in a Chinatown school, at a time when there were only two Chinese among all the vagrants in New York’s Chinatown.

He was one of the two. On one bitterly cold night the other Chinese froze to death. When it was reported in the newspaper, this news brought shame to the entire overseas-Chinese community, which had always been respected by Americans for the way it took care of its own. Some of the local organizations, like family and hometown associations, began to take a charitable interest in Lin Ah-po, wanting to avoid the additional embarrassment that would come if he froze to death too. They scraped together a little money and set Un Ah-po up in a small business. But as his health worsened and he could no longer tolerate the harsh New York winters, he moved west to Los Angeles. As nearly as I can figure, his situation hasn't improved much since he moved out here. Since he is still an illegal alien, he is ineligible for any government aid to senior citizens.

Lin Ah-po walked into our showroom and greeted my wife:

"Boss lady, have you eaten already?"

"Lin Ah-po, what do you want today?" My wife raised her head and gave him a quick look.

Lin Ah-po, who was quite breathless, steadied himself against the desk in front of my wife.

"I'm too old to be any good for anything," he stammered. "It's nice to be young like you folks. What do you have that's good? Pick me out any old thing that's good."

Lin Ah-po always asks us to pick him out any old thing that's good, but my wife isn't about to give him "any old thing." Instead, she loads him up with slow-selling items, rarely giving him any of the fast-moving merchandise. This has been the cause of several arguments between us, and on a couple of occasions the arguments have been so heated that even "the big event of the week" was canceled. But what good does it do to argue? My wife always declares self- righteously:

"If I don't unload the slow-selling stuff on him, who can I unload it on? If you have such a good heart, maybe you ought to go out and be a monk instead of a businessman."

Lin Ah-po paid his bill and left. I had been sad to see him come, and now I was sad to see him go.

The telephone rang. It was a Mexican customer asking if his 300 Cabbage Patch dolls had arrived. He was going to send them to Mexico. I told him they weren't in yet, although they should have been. I said I'd check into it and call him back. As soon as I hung up the phone I asked Ch'iang-ch'iang:

"What's Lao Kuan's phone number?"

"628-4379," answered Ch'iang-ch'iang, our little human computer. The phone number of every toy importer we dealt with was tucked safely away inside his five-year-old brain.

I dialed the number.

"Lao Kuan, Chou here. Have those counterfeit Cabbage Patch dolls arrived?"

"They arrived, all right, but my entire order of counterfeit Cabbage Patch dolls is now a batch of counterfeit headless dolls. Isn't that just awful?" He sounded awful, all right.

"What are you talking about?"

"Well, you know," Kuan explained, "that we sneak our Cabbage Patch dolls past U.S. Customs officers by putting the bodies and heads in separate shipping containers when we ship them over from Taiwan. Once the shipments have arrived safely we attach the heads onto the bodies. This time our luck went bad. The bodies got through without any trouble, but the heads were discovered in Customs and confiscated. That's what I mean by headless dolls."

"Tsk-tsk. How big was your loss?"

"Big. Over fifty thousand."

"My God!" I exclaimed. "But, like they say, that's the chance you take when you deal in counterfeit merchandise. The bigger the profit, the greater the risk. Isn't that right?"

"Okay, okay. The last thing I need after taking a beating like this is a bunch of philosophical nonsense. Don't you have any human sympathy?"

"Not today I don't."

I hung up. It was already eleven o'clock. Chen-chen suddenly announced:

"Mommy, I have to go to the bathroom."

"Wait till some of the customers go," my wife said.

"The customers will never go," Chen-chen said pleadingly.

"If the customers never go, then you'll never go," my wife bellowed.

The phone rang again. I answered. This time it was a Korean. He wanted 100 Mustangers.

A Mustanger is a toy made up of five little motorcycles that can be assembled together into a spaceman. He wanted to come right over and pick them up. These toys that change their shape—called Gobots and Transformers—are all the rage these days, so there's never enough to meet the demand. Since we only had a few left, I got the

number from Ch'iang-ch'iang and made a phone call.

"Yang Ta-fu, Chou here. Send over another 500 Mustangers right away."

"Send send send," Yang Ta-fu said in a strange voice. "How can I send what I don't have?"

"You got a shipment two days ago. Are you telling me you're all out of them so soon?"

"Two-thirds were sold, the other third was stolen. Doesn't that sound like I'm all out?"

"Stolen? By whom?"

"How should I know? If I knew that, do you think I'd say they were stolen?"

"Where did it happen?"

"Right across from you. From the alley behind Lao Ch'in's. You know, I've always made his deliveries at the back door. Well, yesterday, when I drove around to the back door, no one answered when I knocked. You don't know how hard it is to turn a big delivery truck like mine around, and besides, that Fourth Street of yours is one way, which means I would have had to drive all the way around just to get to Lao Ch'in's front door. So I decided to walk around to the front and see what was going on. Lao Ch'in was so busy I didn't want to interrupt him. But he finally dragged himself away and went with me to open the back door. The truck was still there, just where I'd left it, but the fifty cartons of toys I'd brought with me were all gone. Talk about back luck!"

"So what are we supposed to do now that your merchandise has been stolen?"

"Listen to you! You don't give a damn about my loss, do you? All you care about is whether you get the stock you want. Where's your heart?"

"Wherever it is, it's black."

I hung up.

Tap tap tap. It was a familiar sound—a woman's high-heels. My heart leapt, my nostrils flared.

I was right. A South American woman in a low-cut dress appeared in the doorway. Her name was Maria. She had a typical Latin figure: short and heavy, with big breasts and hips and waist that's hard to locate. Americans call South Americans Latins. She was my "Latin lover."

When she spotted me from the doorway, she headed straight for me. Holding my head in her hands, she kissed me softly on the lips, then turned around, bent over, and kissed my wife on both cheeks as she handed her a merchandise order and said in English:

"I'd appreciate it if you would fill this order. I am very thirsty. Will you permit your husband to take me for a drink of water?"

Taking a pretty woman for a drink of water is good work if you can get it. Fortunately, our refrigerator is in the storeroom, and my wife won't allow customers to go in there alone, afraid they'll get a little sticky-fingered while they're there. So, with my wife's blessings, I accompanied Maria into the storeroom, where my wife couldn't see what we did—naturally, we were not on our best behavior, hugging and kissing until Maria gently pushed me away.

"I'd like a drink of water before we continue, okay?"

I opened the refrigerator and handed her a Coke. After taking a few swigs from the can, she said to me:

"Darling, I gave you my address and phone number last time. How come you never come over?"

"Maria, I would give anything to grow a pair of wings and fly straight into your boudoir. You must believe me when I say I tried to grow them, but I failed. And without wings, all that's left to me is the automobile. I've looked up your address on a map, and it would take me three hours to drive there and back. So if we were to spend two hours together, that would make a total of five hours. Do you really think my wife would give me my freedom for five whole hours?"

"If five hours is too long, then how about two? I could come into the city and meet you here."

"Even two hours is out of the question. To be honest, just having these two or three minutes alone with you, to feel your body next to mine and smell your fragrance is sheer ecstasy. You bring new life to my numbed senses, you soothe my wounded masculine pride, and for this I am eternally grateful. I have no right to ask more."

"You poor little fool, I love to hear you talk nonsense like that." She stroked my cheek. "But you mustn't give up hope. Someday we will be together in more intimate surrounding. You must never forget that I also supply twenty-four-hour service, just like *Carl's Jr*."

With that she turned and headed for the bathroom. Once inside, she lifted up her skirt without first closing the door—naturally—and I, as a proper "Son of Han," turned away to show that I was a gentleman who "avoids what was not meant for his eyes." Just because she placed no barriers between men and women was no reason for me to abandon my manners.

She took so long in there that when she finally did come out, my time was up. Not wanting my wife to grow

suspicious, the two of us left the storeroom in a hurry. As her invoice was being totaled up, there was a slightly nervous look on Maria's face. My wife handed her the invoice, which she barely glanced at before reaching down the front of her dress and taking out some large bills to pay what she owed. Then, instead of counting her change, she just stuffed it down the front of her dress, called José over to give her a hand with her purchases, and left the store with him.

Every time I watch her disappear through the door I am struck by intriguingly contradictory feelings of loss and achievement. But then when I carefully analyze the situation, I am left with confused feelings. Based upon my incomplete understanding of such things, I have concluded that the mere sight of Maria produces a primitive, animal-like excitement in me. But when we start fooling around, and I have to be content with "scratching my itch" through my clothes (sometimes the "itch" actually gets worse), I'm so horny I can barely stand it. That is surely why the feeling of disappointment and loss, produced by unfulfilled desire, follows on the heels of her departure. That is number one. Although this sort of illicit behavior has never reached its logical conclusion, has never become an "affair of the flesh," it has nonetheless produced guilt feelings. The inescapable conclusion is that I am being unfaithful to my wife and disrespectful to the institution of marriage. My masculine image has suffered and my integrity as a husband has been injured, which is why afterwards I always have a nagging feeling that the losses have outnumbered the gains. That is number two, which, I suppose, takes care of the "loss" column.

What then of the "achievement?" Here's how I see it: The fact that I have been able to keep my entanglement with Maria a secret from my wife shows that I have gained at least one victory in the battle of wits between us. Even this solitary victory gives me a sense of pride. Additionally, since I need to prove to myself that my attraction to the opposite sex has not evaporated because of my marriage, Maria's display of passion toward me has been just the thing my vanity needed.

And there's more: through Maria I can get even with my wife. Ever since our arrival in the States my wife has been a different person altogether. She no longer acts like a wife—she no longer even acts like a woman! In her latest letter my mother-in-law praised her daughter in a tone of motherly pride as a "dynamic woman." Unfortunately, this time her words were right on target, for my wife has already begun to display all the shortcomings of a "dynamic woman." Let me give an example. At work a dynamic woman treats her husband as one of her hired hands, not as a colleague. This certainly describes my wife. At home a dynamic woman treats her husband as a part of the fixtures, not as a loved one. Again, this fits her perfectly. But no matter how my wife treats me, all I ever do is fume inwardly; and since I would never dare to complain, I am forced to gain retribution in passive ways. In this Maria has played a major role.

Yet in my more rational moments I can be repentant too, feeling that I was unjustified in trying to "get even" with my wife. Rather than setting out to change, she fell victim to the pressures of living in the materialistic environment of America and the insecurities of having to make a living in an unfamiliar city. If I am correct in this, then she cannot be held responsible for the changes she has undergone. To be absolutely truthful, if a culprit has to be identified, there is really no need to look any further than myself, since the idea to uproot ourselves and immigrate to America was mine, and mine alone. In fact, my wife tried to warn me before we left by reminding me of what happened to the actress Chen Chen and her husband Liu Chia-ch'ang.

Even today I can hear her words of warning. It was late one weekend night, just after she had come home from playing *mahjong* at a neighbors' home. Back then, when we were still living in Taiwan, I would go to work each day to earn the money my wife would gamble away the next. We carried out our duties to the best of our ability, and had no real complaints. She would come home every night and narrate the just-ended gambling battles in detail for my benefit. That night, she followed her narration of the various campaigns by handing me a copy of a movie magazine.

"Since you've got your heart set on going to America, there's an article here you should read."

"I don't want to read it. You tell me what it says."

"Okay, lazybones, I'll tell you what it says. It's about the restaurant Chen Chen and Liu Chia-ch'ang opened in Los Angeles, the *House of Chen Chen*. In the interview she said that the restaurant had kept them so busy for the first six months that they had been husband and wife in name only, never enjoying any of the pleasures of married life. You'd better think hard about whether you and I will be so busy after we get to the States that we'll have to give up any sort of married life for six months. Do you think you could take it?"

"Did Chen Chen say if she was able to take it or not?" I asked her playfully. Her veiled warning escaped me completely.

When we finally did arrive in America, our situation was even worse than Chen Chen and Liu Chia-ch'ang's.

We had no married life for a full year. The *House of Chen Chen* operated in the red and eventually went out of business. Our business also operated in the red for the first year.

By the time our family situation began to improve in the following year, our feelings for each other had nearly disappeared. Like someone who had neglected his studies for too long, it was not going to be easy to get back on track. Sometimes I'd try to get romantic, but I was so shy that the moment would quickly be gone. At other times my wife would make a bunch of excuses, and nothing would happen. Finally, following the Christmas rush of 1984, when our wholesale stock was depleted, we took a one-week vacation, which was just what we needed to take stock of our married life. I proposed that we bring our most private affairs out into the open, and even went so far as to recommend that we set up a timetable, work out a budget, put together a five-year plan, and things like that. During that vacation my wife learned all over again how to enjoy herself. In fact, she asked me, "Will we have to punch a time clock?" The more we carried on the sillier we got, and we were soon laughing so hard we could barely stand. Once we had defined the "official" role of the "marriage act," we began a discussion on the issue of frequency. I jokingly proposed,

"How about three times a day, once after every meal."

"We're not talking about taking medicine," my wife responded coquettishly. We doubled over laughing again. Finally we agreed on Saturday night as the "official" time, and since it was to be a once-a-week arrangement, we took to calling it the "big event of the week."

Over the next three months we didn't miss a single "big event of the week," but then other things began to take priority or we would have an argument, and the frequency kept decreasing until eventually it all but disappeared. Then, just when everything seemed to be falling apart, Maria walked into my life.

A scream from my wife quickly brought me back to the here and now. The scream had come from the storeroom. I looked over to my wife's station—she wasn't there. She must have slipped into the storeroom while I was watching Maria walk out the door and lost in my thoughts, where she had made a shocking discovery. Before I could even respond to her scream, my wife came tearing out of the storeroom and sat down angrily at her station.

"Hah!" she snorted loudly. "Just as I suspected. That Latin bitch stole fifty robot wristwatches while she was in the storeroom!"

Her words hit me like a sledgehammer. What? Maria had stolen some wristwatches? How could that be? Convinced that my wife was bringing false accusations against a good person, I leapt to her defense:

"You can't slander someone like that! Every time she comes in to stock up she spends at least a couple of thousand. What makes you think she'd even consider stealing something barely worth a hundred dollars?"

"Hah! That's what you think! There are three types of customers. The first type comes in only to make a purchase, the second comes in only to steal, and the third comes in with his options open. If he can steal something, he steals it; if not, he buys it. That bitch has to belong to the third category. Besides, have you noticed how big her bosom and her rear end are?"

"Yes, I've noticed," I admitted.

"Well, wouldn't they make perfect hiding places for fifty watches?"

"Just because she's got room to stash some watches doesn't mean she stole our watches." I refuted her contention with indisputable logic. And yet, I could already sense that my confidence in Maria was beginning to waver. Thinking back, I recalled how Maria had left the bathroom door open while she was inside, knowing that I would turn my back to her, and I also recalled that there was a carton of robot wristwatches right next to the bathroom. It would have been the easiest thing in the world for her to steal a few dozen wristwatches while I was being the gentlemanly "Son of Han." But if she actually had stolen them, did that mean that the passion she had professed for me had been a sham all along? It was a proposition that could shatter what little masculine self-respect I had managed to hold onto. It was not an appealing proposition.

What really took me by surprise was the sinister, mocking smile that was slowly spreading across my wife's face, an expression I had never seen before. Slowly, patiently, she revealed her secret to me.

"Okay, I don't have the time to keep twisting the knife any longer, so I'll go ahead and let you in on it. I've known all along how you and Maria carry on in the storeroom. If you think you can hide something like that from me you've got a lot to learn. Just think for a minute—when was the last time you were able to keep anything from me? I didn't feel like exposing you this time, that's all. Good or bad, Maria is still a customer, so it doesn't make any sense to offend her. Besides, since you never had more than a few minutes together in the storeroom, there wasn't a whole lot you could do anyway. I mean the 'big event of the week,' or anything like that. But I was suspicious of her from the very first day she set foot in this place. What could she have seen in you to cozy up to you like she did? You have no talent, no money, and no freedom, so what did she expect to get out of you? If I had

a nice big bosom and rear end like that, do you think I'd fall for you? I knew she had something else in mind. And sure enough, when she walked out of the storeroom today she had a strange look on her face. I couldn't be sure that she had finally made her move, but like they say, a business is a battlefield, and, like a battlefield, it's better to kill a hundred innocent victims than to let a single guilty one go. So while she wasn't looking I added sixty dollars to her bill, then shortchanged her forty more when I gave her her change. And I was right—she was in such a hurry to get out of here with her guilty conscience that she didn't even look at her receipt or count her change. As soon as she was out the door I rushed into the storeroom to see for myself. That's when I discovered that fifty wristwatches were missing. Since Maria was the only outsider who went into the storeroom today, who else could have taken them? It's a good thing I was on my toes today and made the first move. Otherwise, we would have played right into that bitch's hands!"

My wife talked on and on, her every word, her every sentence, piercing my heart like daggers. When she had finished lecturing me, I felt like a prisoner in the dock who had just heard the pronouncement of his own death sentence. My eyes were glassy, my hands were icy, my legs were rubbery.

I stood there dumb-struck, the spitting image of a toy robot that couldn't move because it had no batteries.

A moment later I became aware of my wife yelling at me:

"What are you doing? Just what are you doing? I'd like to know what you're waiting for. Why don't you wise up? Your little games with Maria nearly cost us more than a hundred dollars. Considering what I could do, you've gotten off pretty easy so far, so you can stop that pouting and looking like your feelings are all hurt! There are a lot of customers waiting to have their orders filled, so what's the idea of ignoring them? You listen to me—you'd better get moving, and I mean now! If I see you looking like you've just lost your parents one more time today I'm going to rip that stupid look off your … that buffoon face of yours!"

It worked. Like a nine-volt battery, my wife's warning started me—the robot—working. But my actions were strictly mechanical. I managed to do a lot of things, but I had no idea for whom I was doing them, or why. Nor did I have any recollection of having done anything once it was finished. After working for a short while, my actions would begin to slow down noticeably, at which time my wife's angry shouts would give my batteries a quick recharge, and I would speed up again. I passed the day that way, moving about in spite of myself for several hours. Eventually all the customers were gone, and I helped close up shop (I think) before getting into the car and driving the family home. Once there we sat around the table and ate dinner.

Seeing Chen-chen and Ch'iang-ch'iang eat with such gusto gave me a momentary feeling of comfort. There, at least my children aren't going hungry! I hadn't shirked my responsibilities as a father, after all! But the sense of comfort was short-lived, for I noticed that Chen-chen and Ch'iang-ch'iang neither spoke nor played with each other while they ate. They weren't acting at all like children. Even at this tender age they had to shoulder part of the family's responsibilities instead of enjoying the pleasures of childhood that they deserved. So I really was a failure as a father! That thought brought me a momentary feeling of shame, which was also short-lived. From that point on, my feelings were totally numb.

After dinner my wife told Ch'iang-ch'iang to do something, but I couldn't hear what. it was. Her instructions to Chen-chen, on the other hand, came through as clear as a bell.

"Chen-chen," she said, "you go to bed now. Oh yes, didn't you say you've been having tummy-aches the past few nights? Well, if you have one again tonight, I want you to call for Mommy. As soon as you call Mommy, Daddy will be right there. Do you understand?"

Discretion being the better part of valor, I kept my mouth shut and went into the bathroom to take a shower.

When I had finished my shower and was passing through the living room on my way to the bedroom, my wife was there watching television. Wanting to patch things up, I said to her as I walked by:

"Hu-kua, it's getting late and you need your sleep. You have to take care of your body."

"Okay, okay, who needs your hypocrisy!" she said impatiently. "I'm sure your only concern for my body is how it affects your 'big event of the week.' You go to bed. I'm going to watch television until the stew that's cooking on the stove is finished, then I'll come to bed. Don't worry, I'll wake you up."

As soon as my head hit the pillow I realized just how tired I was, physically and mentally. Sleep quickly conquered my body, then my mind.

*

My dreams were interrupted first by someone shaking me by the shoulder, then by the sound of a woman's voice:

"Wake up, you damned sleepyhead, wake up!"

"What's wrong?" I asked sleepily. "Is it time to take care of the 'big event of the week'?"

"No, it's not. Chen-chen says her tummy hurts. It's down low. Get up and take care of her."
Fully awake by then, I jumped out of bed and headed toward Chen-chen's bedroom, guided by her moans.
"If I've told you once I've told you a thousand times," I said on my way out of the room, "that you have to let her go to the bathroom whenever she says she has to pee. But no, you tell her she's got to hold it. Are you satisfied now? What if she develops a bladder condition or a kidney problem, then what? Don't forget, we still can't afford health insurance."

188.51 Solace In Action: A Mother's Mission to Publicize The Truth\fn{by Ding Zilin (1936-)} Shanghai, China (F) 3

I am simply a Chinese intellectual and a mother who lost her son in the June Fourth massacre of 1989. Since the massacre, the Chinese government has talked constantly about respecting its citizens' "rights to exist." Yet on June 4, 1989, guns and tanks deprived countless outstanding young Chinese men and women of their "right to exist" in a single night. This is nothing but hypocrisy.
As the mother of a victim, there is no way for me to forget the boys and girls and men and women, including my own son, who died in pools of blood. I want the people of the world to know that they once lived in this world, that this world once belonged to them, and why and how they disappeared from it.

*

Late in the night of June 3, 1989, the West Road martial law troops came in from the western suburbs of Peking along Wukesong and Cuiwei Roads, shooting and killing as they made their way east to the head of the bridge at Muxidi. There they were blocked by over ten thousand people. Just after 11 p.m., the sound of machine gun fire began again and my 17-year-old son, Jiang Jielian, a second-year student at People's University High School, was in the first group of people to fall.
Earlier that evening, Jiang Jielian had seen the televised announcement that martial law troops were closing in and insisted on going to Tiananmen Square to help the students who were still there. My husband and I tried to stop him, telling him that it was too dangerous and that if anything were to happen to him, we would be left alone. But he insisted on going, replying that,
"If all parents were as selfish as you, would the country or its people have any future?"
He then took my red school badge, pinned it to his shirt, stuffed a couple of *yuan* and some change into his little wallet, and tried to console me by saying,
"I'm just going to take a look; I'll be right back, don't worry. I'll call you from a public phone as soon as I get to Tiananmen." Patting the school badge pulled to his chest he said,
"With this on they can't call me a 'hoodlum,' and the martial law troops won't harm me."
I'd locked the front door to keep him from leaving, so he crawled out the window in the bathroom and ran off despite my protests.
He left home at around 10:00 on the evening of June 3rd and rode toward the Square with a classmate. At Muxidi, tte two met up with hordes of people. When the martial law troops opened fire, these two children thought they were shooting rubber bullets! His classmate later told us that as they tried to hide in a subway entrance, Jiang Jielian was shot in the back and his classmate was grazed by the bullet as it exited through his chest. Jiang Jielian was only able to say, "I think I've been hit," before he collapsed with blood pouring from his wound.

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Shot dead at around the same time was Hao Zhijing, 30, a science and technology policy and management researcher at the Chinese Academy of Sciences. He had returned from a visit to the United States in 1988 and had been married less than a year. He too was his parents' cherished only child. He was shot in the chest and taken by local citizens to Fuxing Hospital where he died. His family did not find his body until July 4.
Also among the mass of bodies that fell one after another in the continuous spray of machine gun fire at Muxidi was Xiao Bo, an instructor in the Chemistry Department at Peking University who had turned 27 that day. He had gone to Muxidi expressly to urge his students to return to school. Xiao Bo died leaving behind a pair of twins not yet 70 days old.
Also brought down at the same time was 27-year-old Yuan Li, an engineer in the Electrical Machinery Departmentof the Peking Machinery Industry Research Institute who had just received a visa to visit the United States. He was shot in the chest not long after leaving llis home in Ganjiakou at 11 p.m. Soon afterward, his corpse was labelled "Unknown Body #2" by the Naval General Hospital and placed in storage until his family found where it was on June 24.

Stored together with Yuan Li's corpse was "Unknown Body #3," later identified by his family as Wang Chao, 30, an employee of the Stone Corporation who had been married only a month.

"Unknown Body #1" turned out to be 19-year-old Ye Weihang, a third-year student at Peking High School Number 57 and student association chairman. He was shot in the right shoulder and chest at 2 a.m. on June 4, but did not die until he received a second shot, this time in the back of the head.

Twenty-seven-year-old Lu Chunlin, who entered the master's program of the Philosophy Department at People's University in 1986 and was the son of a southern Jiangsu farm famiIy, was also shot at Muxidi. Just before he died, he used the last of his energy to give everything he was carrying with him to a passerby to let the university know he had died.

As the troops charged toward Tiananmen, the number of sons and daughters of China stripped of their "right to exist" increased. Duan Changlong, a graduating senior majoring in applied chemistry at Quinghua University, had just found a job. His 46-year-old father had only this one beloved son. That evening, Duan left an experiment unfinished in the school laboratory and rode his bike from Houhaijia to the vicinity of the Palace of Nationalities at Xidan. There he came across the martial law troops blocked by the crowd. He pushed forward and was hit in the chest with a bullet. People took him to the nearby Postal College where he stopped breathing before receiving any medical care.

Also dying alongside Duan Changlong at the same time in the Postal College Hospital was a 19-year-old girl Zhang Jin. She was a student majoring in foreign trade. Jin and her boyfriend had hidden in a small alleyway near the Palace of Nationalities, but they were unable to avoid the slaughter. Just past midnight, Zhang Jin was shot twice in the head and fell at her boyfriend's feet. She died shortly after being taken to the Postal College Hospital around 1 a.m., June 4.

Among the other bodies at the Postal College Hospital was that of a senior in the Industrial Management Department at the People's University, Wu Guofeng. He was the only university student from his remote district in Sichuan Province. He left the school carrying a camera on the evening of June 3 and never returned

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As the troops pressed on toward Tiananmen Square in the early hours of June 4, the killing continued. At Liubukou on West Chang'an Avenue, a tank pursued a group of students who had just withdrawn from the square and were walking along the sidewalk. Between six and eleven of them quickly lost their lives under the treads of the tank. Walking at the head of the group had been Wang Peiwen, 21, a first-year student in the China Politics College Youth Work Department.

Bringing up the tail end was Wang's classmate, Dong Xiaojun, who was not yet 20. Both were crushed to death by the tank. Their corpses were not even left intact.

The closer one got to Tiananmen, the more tragic the scene became. Wang Nan, 19, a second-year student in Yuetan High School, was hit at the Nanchang Avenue intersection. A bullet passed right through the helmet he was wearing but he did not die immediately. He collapsed at the street corner and his brains flowed out over the ground. A resident-organized rescue team went forward to help him but were stopped by the martial law troops who said that "rioters" were not allowed to aid anyone. According to an eyewitness, Wang Nan lay at the corner of Nanchang Avenue for about two hours before being removed to an unknown destination. His family searched over 20 hospitals in Peking before they finally found his body with the help of friends in the cold storage room at Pejing Huguosi Hospital on June 14.

It turned out that on the morning of June 4, a corpse collection team had hurriedly buried the bodies of Wang Nan and two other victims in a ditch on an empty lot to ilie west of Tiananmen in front of Peking Middle School Number 28. With the summer heat, the area began giving off a strange smell a few days later. Only after complaints by the school did the audtorities come to dig up the bodies. By this time ilie corpses had already begun to decay and were covered with maggots. Since Wang Nan had been wearing army clothes at the time of his death, ilie authorities suspected he might have been a soldier; not wanting to deal with such a matter too hastily, they had put his body in Huguosi Hospital.

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All these victims were shot down on Olang'an Avenue to the west of Tiananmen Square. Many oiliers on the eastern side were also unable to escape a similar fate.

Yu Di, 32, an engineer at Peking Solar Energy Research Institute, had received an award for electrothermal coating. Between two and four in ilie morning of June 4, he was standing among a band of locals stretching from the corner of Nanchizi and East Chang'an Avenue to the History Museum and was in the first group to be hit by gunfire from the martial law troops. Eight of his internal organs, including his liver, kidney, and lungs, were dam-

aged. Locals took him to Xiehe Hospital where he underwent a total of four major operations, including the removal of one kidney, but he never recovered; Yu Di passed away on June 30.

Another man shot at about the same time was 42-year-old Yang Minghu, an employee in the legal division of the International Trade Promotion Association who had just returned from a business trip to Guangzhou. He could not believe the news that shots were being fired outside and went to see for himself. He encountered gunfire in front of ilie Public Security Bureau on the eastern side of Tiananmen early in ilie morning of June 4. He was hit in the abdomen by an "exploding" bullet and was in extreme pain with his bladder and pelvis shattered. Although locals immediately took him to Tongren Hospital for emergency surgery, his high fever did not go down after the operation and he remained fully conscious as he moved closer to death before finally passing away in Tongren Hospital on June 7.

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The argument has been made that the slaughter of June 3 and 4 was necessary to clear Tiananmen Square. Then why, I ask, did the indiscriminate killing of innocent people continue for several days after the martial law troops had already occupied the square?

On or about June 5, Zhang Xianghong, a second-year student in the International Politics Department at People's University, went to the end of the alleyway near her home with her sister-in-law, as they were anxious about Zhang's brother who was going out. They were chasing behind him, calling for him to return home when Zhang was hit by a round of ammunition fired by the martial law troops. Zhang died instantly in the arms of her sister-in-law.

An Ji, 31, of the Chinese Division's journal, *Township Construction*, was killed under similar circumstances. At a little past 11:00 on the evening of June 7, An Ji and a group of friends were seeing off another friend to Yangfangdian. As they passed the Peking Children's Hospital near Yuetan Park, martial law troops shouted at them to halt. An Ji and several odter young men ran to hide and in a burst of gunfire, he and another man in his thirties surnamed Wang were hit and killed. Both of them left behind old mothers, wives and young children.

These young men and women are only a small number of ilie victims of June Fourth that I know of. Relatives of some victims, fearful of official pressure, are unwilling to reveal publicly the names and circumstances of the deaths of their loved ones and thus they bear an even greater pain.

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The June Fourth Massacre is already four years in the past [now six] and the dead are long gone, but what has it meant for the living parents, widows, and orphans? An epitaph on a tombstone in the Wanan Public Cemetery west of Peking reads:

Crying in sorrow for my son
who had not yet come of age
abruptly left this world.
Our family's star of hope
suddenly fell from the sky.
How is the God in Heaven so unfair
to call away a dedicated youth
and leave behind his parents in their old age?
Our son was born on the seventh of July
and ascended to heaven on the third of June.
A brief short life
unfortunate from beginning to end.
The entire family is heartbroken,
forever bereft of happiness and laughter
we erect this memorial in our grief:

These words articulate the anguished cries of the families of those killed. For the relatives of these victims, there is no longer any laughter; the only thing left is pain and tears. One elderly couple who lost their cherished son wear expressions of indifference and seldom speak, but deep in their hearts dley are uneasy. They have only one wish and so they pray that they can live a bit longer to see with their own eyes the day when the clouds will open and the fog will clear.

The government has adopted a policy of forbidding discussion in order to make people forget June Fourth. With the passage of time, the warmth and solicitude of people around the families of victims grows increasingly sparse, and the longing for a lost loved one even more suffocating.

There is one mother who has gradually grown quiet over these past four years. It is a fearful silence. She is unable to talk about the 19-year-old son she lost; she acts as though none of it ever happened, but in her heart she is suffering terribly and her whole personality seems to have been transformed.

Anodler mother is so pained that she does not want to go on living. She is close to having a nervous breakdown. When she can no longer control herself, in the middle of the night she goes to a deserted area and cries and screams madly.

There is another mother who normally restrains her sorrow, but at the Qingming grave-sweeping festival and on the anniversary of her son's death, she falls before his grnve and cries ceaselessly.

On these anniversaries, yet another mother is unable to stay in the house where her son once lived and walks aimlessly through the streets and alleyways unwilling to return to her home for long periods.

One widow found it impossible to hold back her bitterness and hoped to meet others with whom she could share her pain. So once when she was attending to the grnve of her husband, she quietly left her address on the funeral urns of others she did not know who had died in the same way. In this way she broke through her loneliness and helplessness.

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I suffered the same fate as these mothers and wives and endured many grim, sad days and nights after June Fourth. My spirit and health were seriously damaged and I suffered repeated bouts of heart trouble. When I could bear it no longer, I broke my silence on the eve of the second anniversary of June Fourth by agreeing to an interview with ABC Television in which I pointed out the errors of fact in Premier Li Peng's interpretation of the June Fourth incident. I paid a heavy price for this, bringing on more than a year of persecution. On the eve of the third anniversary of June Fourth, I was expelled from the Chinese Communist Party and deprived of my job as a graduate student advisor.

A month after the massacre, the Chinese government-controlled Hong Kong newspaper *Wen Wei Po* published a story saying that appropriate funeral arrangements had been made for those mistakenly killed in Peking. Deputy Secretary of the Peking Minicipal Government Yu Xiaosong was quoted as saying that "the government is undertaking conscientious and careful arrangements" for their relatives and that they would be given compensation of between 10,000 and 20,000 *yuan.* Yu indicated that the children of victims would be supported by the government until they reached 18.

Despite repeated requests, however, no government official has ever announced die official verdict on whether my son was mistakenly wounded or was a "rioter." One mother I know of angrily requested that the audiorities list her deceased daughter as a "rioter," saying that it was better than just leaving the cause of her death completely unclear. Of all the relatives of victims I know of, not one has obtained an official conclusion on their loved one's cause of death or received any compensation.

During the political study and investigation campaign which followed the June Fourth Massacre, the C.C.P. political department in each work unit pressured the families of victims to take part in "study" sessions to raise their understanding, to maintain unanimity with the central government, and to acknowledge that "pacifying the uprising" was a reasonable action. Some families were forbidden to make their status as relatives of victims public and were prohibited from accepting press interviews under threat of being expelled from their deceased relative's work unit housing. Other families of those killed and wounded have been put under supervision and control. Neighborhood committees monitor their meetings with outsiders, foreigners in particular, and their incoming and outgoing mail. Some families have been interrogated frequently with severe surveillance, particularly during the Qingming Festival and June Fourth. When the families are sweeping the graves of their relatives at Qingming or June Fourth, a great number of military police are sent out to "maintain order;" legitimate memorial activities are restricted and a threatening atmosphere pervades the cemetery.

Some survivors, particularly widows and orphans, have had to seek help from the leaders of the work units where those killed and wounded had been employed. They were told that if the family signed a statement stating that their relative had died of natural causes, they would then receive 800 *yuan* in compensation, but otherwise they would not receive a cent. As for the money for raising orphans, even the most fair-minded of leaders have provided only 50 yuan a month. For a while, good-hearted friends provided financial help for the orphans and widows. But as time passed, it became difficult to continue this support, and now they have been virtually forgotten.

Four years ago our innocent loved ones were stripped of their right to exist by machineguns and tanks. During these four years, we have suffered from unimaginable material, spiritual, and physical pain. We have lost the right to enjoy a normal life and lost the right to express our opinions and viewpoints. Human rights, which should be

universally enjoyed by all human beings, remain a luxury in present-day China, especially for those of us who are relatives of the victims of June Fourth.

256.129 1. A Distracting Sunday 2. A Rose-colored Evening Meal\fn{by Shen Rong (1936-)} Hankou, Sichuan Province, China (M) 12

1

One Sunday morning early in May, 1979, the university's Party Secretary Mu Zhijian was seated in an easy chair in his sitting-room reading the papers. Normally his work kept him too busy to do more than glance at the headlines. So each Sunday he read the most important articles published that week. This had been his habit for years. His three-year-old grandson Ganggang, leaning against his easy chair, grasped his arm in both chubby hands to pester him:

"Can't we go now? Let's go."

"In a minute." Mu made no move, intent on reading the paper.

"You promised to take him to the park for a ride on the aeroplane," put in his wife Wang Lei, looking out from the bedroom. "Hurry up and get going!"

"All right, straight away."

Mu put down the newspaper and padded in his slippers to the window. Outside it was a fine spring day. Pairs of birds were hopping and chirping on the jade-green boughs of the tall poplars. He stretched and said to himself with a smile,

"Yes, this is just the weather to go to the park."

Before the "cultural revolution", Mu had been the Party Secretary of this university. Still under fifty then, in his prime and full of drive, he was regarded as one of the most promising cadres in higher education. Now that a dozen years had passed and his temples were grizzled, he had come back to his post. Luckily he was still lit and energetic, confident that he could do a good job of work.

"Ha! Grandad's taking me to the park!" crowed Ganggang. Mu turned to pick up his grandson and at sight of his radiant face rubbed foreheads with him, then put him down and ordered:

"Go and fetch my cloth shoes and we'll leave. Can you do that?"

"Yes!"

Ganggang trotted on sturdy legs to his grandfather's bedroom, ducked boldly under the bed and pulled out the shoes. Scrambling up, a big shoe in each small hand, he trotted back again.

Just then from the hall they heard a soft knock on the door. Mu hurried to open it. There stood a man in his sixties. Tall and thin and wearing glasses for near-sightedness. Seeing Mu Zhijian he clasped both hands in salute.

"It's been a long time, Old Mu."

"So it's you, Old Dai. Come on in, I haven't seen you for years."

Mu stepped forward and shook him cordially by the hand, then cheerfully showed him into the sitting-room. Ganggang resented this unexpected guest, guessing that his arrival meant no trip to the park for him. He pouted, tears in his eyes. Ignoring his guest for a moment, Mu said coaxingly:

"Go and play with granny, Ganggang, there's a good boy."

"No. I want—"

"Do as you're told. I promise to take you to the park after I've had a talk with this visitor."

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Old Dai, or Dai Jiyao, had been a history professor in this college, an expert on Ming history. Driven out during the "cultural revolution", he had now been assigned to the History Research Institute. Perhaps a common failing of all historians is to concentrate on the past rather than the present, or perhaps he had something on his mind which made him ignore the little boy's dismay and plump himself down on a sofa. Having handed over the pouting child to his wife, Mu brewed a glass of Dragon Well tea for his guest.

"What wind blew you here. Old Dai?" he asked with a smile.

"An ill wind," answered Dai, taking the glass with a nod, his expression not merely solemn but indignant.

Mu had not seen Dai for over ten years. Before that he had known him as a scholar who paid no attention to the outside world. People addressed him as "Master Dai" but behind his back called him a "pedant". Dai had rarely called on him. One summer when his roof leaked, he had preferred to catch the drips in basins rather than complain to the school authorities. Mu had made a self-criticism because of this, saying that he showed too little

concern for the living conditions of senior intellectuals. So what ill wind could have blown this “pedant” to his door?

“I’ve come to find a back door,” announced Dai bluntly, to the Party Secretary’s astonishment. “I’ve spent all my life studying history behind closed doors. But now what can I do? You’re forced to look for back doors whether you like it or not. It’s preposterous, completely preposterous!”

Mu couldn’t help smiling. This scholar who didn’t know how to find back doors was certainly going about it the wrong way. With his vehemence and righteous indignation he looked not in the least like someone asking a favour. He said soothingly:

“Never mind. Tell me what you want, Old Dai.”

“You’ve a graduating student called Ding Dazhi, haven’t you?” Mu thought and nodded.

“Yes.”

“He comes from Beijing but was sent to the countryside. In ’76 he was recommended to study here.” Dai went on more slowly, “They say, when jobs are assigned, all graduates will be sent back to the province they came from. His father’s worried because he’s already found a unit in Beijing to take him. And he’s got his son’s old brigade to agree to release him. He asked me to take this up with you, Old Mu, to get the college to make allowances for him and keep him in Beijing.” Dai kept his head lowered as he spoke, not watching the reaction of his host.

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As Mu listened he cast his mind back. Yes, one of the graduating students was called Ding Dazhi. An impressive-looking youngster, very active in school, with wide social contacts outside, but a mediocre student. He had struck Mu as very pushing.

In 1977, when the enrolment system was being overhauled, one student had put up a big-character poster criticizing the system of “recommendations” introduced by the “gang of four” which made it easy to get in through the back door and lowered the standard of the students admitted. He cited the case of a freshman who had ascribed the defeat of the Paris Commune to “failure to learn from Dazhai”.\fn{Dazhai was an agricultural brigade whose activities were held up to the people as a model for the whole country}Though no names were named, the whole school knew that it was Ding Dazhi who had made this howler.

Two days later Ding put up a poster too, stoutly denying that he had got into college through the back door. According to him he had been recommended by the poor and lower-middle peasants and approved by the county, commune and brigade—he had documents to prove this. Furthermore he accused the writer of the first poster of attacking the masses in order to side-track the whole investigation.

Two days after this the writer of the first poster put up a second. This time he named Ding Dazhi by name, and disclosed that the documents vouching for him had been procured by his father by bribing his brigade cadres.

This enraged Ding Dazhi. Mu’s first task on his reinstatement was settling this dispute. It took a whole week and a whole series of meetings to mobilize Party cadres to persuade the two opponents to call a truce and concentrate on denouncing the “gang of four”.

Now, to get a Beijing assignment, this Ding Dazhi and his father had once again shown their resourcefulness, finding a unit in Beijing to take him and getting his brigade to release him. They had even recruited honest Dai Jiyao to come and plead their case! What did Ding’s father do, to be able to pull all these strings?

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Silence fell in the sitting-room. Having stated his purpose in coming Dai had no more to say. Mu puffed at his cigarette, thinking hard.

“Old Dai,” he finally said, “this Ding has a bad reputation. He got into college by the back door.”

“Really? I didn’t know that.” Dai leaned back, taking out a handkerchief to wipe his nose, at a loss for words.

“Now he wants to go through the back door again. What kind of behaviour is that?” His eyes on Dai, Mu unconsciously raised his voice.

“You taught here for many years, Old Dai. Before the ‘cultural revolution’ how many graduating students refused the jobs to which they were assigned? Very few indeed. Now some of them openly say they’ll go only to Tianjin, Nanjing, Shanghai or Beijing.”

“Are there really students like that?” Dai shook his head.

“You’re a historian, Old Dai. Today we ought to learn from the first Han emperor and bring order out of chaos to restore stability.”

Rather carried away, Mu stood up and poured himself some water. Sipping it he added,

“When I came back to work here I told the Party Committee several times: To overhaul this college we must reform enrolment and job assignment. That’s our only hope. If we don’t recruit students on the basis of merit, how can we guarantee the quality of our higher education? If graduates won’t take the jobs assigned by the state, what’s the use of training them?”

“You’re right, quite right.” Dai nodded. Mu sighed then said,

“Unfortunately it isn’t just up to us. We come under very heavy social pressure.” Dai apologized.

“By taking the liberty to call today I’ve put more pressure on you. But never mind, Old Mu. I was asked to beg this favour. Whether you agree or not is up to you. I don’t want to embarrass you.” Out of curiosity Mu asked,

“Are you connected with Ding Dazhi’s family?” Dai shook his head.

“We’re not related, not friends—there’s no connection. 1 haven’t a clue as to Ding Dazhi’s height, his appearance or character. As for his father, I know even less about him.”

“Then who asked you to put in a word for them?”

“It was all the doing of my Minister of the Interior. Actually she doesn’t know the Ding family either. But she has a cousin on the paternal side who does. It seems the father works in some commercial department. You know, Old Mu, my only self-indulgence is drinking two ounces of good liquor every day. Somehow Ding’s father got to hear of that, and through her cousin my wife got him to keep me supplied. So for the last two years I’ve never lacked for good liquor. Pah! I’ve my self-indulgence to blame. Now I’m having to pay for it. Her cousin turned up the other day to persuade me, saying I’m on good terms with you, and you’re in charge of job assignment. She insisted I must help. Old Mu, I hate to raise this request, but what else can I do? It’s really most provoking!” He pounded his right fist on his left hand.

“Don’t get worked up. Old Dai.” Mu forced a smile. “Do you know how many requests like this I’ve had? In the right drawer in my office I’ve a list of thirty-eight graduating students, all of whom have had people interceding for them or sending official letters asking us to make special allowances for them. You’ve simply added another name to the list.”

“Then what do you mean to do?” asked Dai.

“I’ve two alternatives.” Mu laughed. “One is to stick to principles and not make any exceptions except in line with official policy, no matter whom I offend or whether I lose my post. The other is to turn a blind eye and give the green light, to do them a good turn which will pay me too. We’re having a meeting this afternoon to consider the cases of those thirty-eight students, no, thirty-nine students now.”

“I do apologize for troubling you.” Dai realized that he was in the wrong.

“Never mind, we’ll decide after we’ve talked it over.”

“Then I’ll go now, Old Mu.” Dai turned back at the door to add,

“I apologize too, Old Mu, for stopping you taking your grandson out to play.”

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After seeing him off Mu returned to the sitting-room. The sunshine was still enchanting, the birds still as merry as ever. But this spring scene no longer appealed to him. Those thirty-eight, no, thirty-nine names were preying on his mind. Each had a host of connections. Those connections enmeshed him like a spider’s web so that he was unable to move.

He recalled the exposure of Ding Dazhi’s entry into college through the back door. His classmate said that his brigade had originally recommended a girl in every way better than Ding. But his father had squeezed her out, using a first-class bicycle as a bribe.

“How abominable.” Mu paced his sitting-room. He had never met Ding’s father Ding Qiliang but he pictured him as a smarmy hypocrite. Ding had no doubt had his eyes on him ever since his reinstatement. In order to have his son kept in Beijing, he had ferreted out all the Party Secretary’s social connections. Then had chosen Dai Jiyao to breach his defences and made up to Dai by supplying him with good liquor. Spent two years preparing to get through this back door.

“We certainly can’t pander to a man like that.”

Mu stood up. This decision taken, his heart felt lighter. Just then Ganggang clumped in again, calling:

“Aren’t we going, grandad? Let’s go!”

“We’ll go, right away.”

Without waiting to be told, Ganggang brought the shoes he had put by the door and watched his grandfather put them on. As Mu stooped to do this, they heard a woman call cheerfully in the hail:

“Are you in, Sister Wang?” Wang Lei went to meet her, laughing.

“Come on in, Sister Li.”

This Sister Li was one of the oldest residents in the street. The Li family was said to have lived there for several generations while some Manchu princes had their mansion there. Brought up in a compound occupied by several households, she was dynamic, capable and outspoken. When Mu came under fire and his whole family was outlawed, under a cloud, she had still called to see them. As she said,

"I can size up people for myself. Why should I join in the general hullabaloo?"

When Mu was sent down to the countryside and his son was working in the provinces, it was kind-hearted Sister Li who had looked after the rest of the family. So they thought the world of her. Mu and his wife called her Sister: their children, Mama Li: and Ganggang, Granny. Hearing her voice in the hall Ganggang's face puckered. Mu patted his head and said:

"Granny Li wants to talk to your gran, it's nothing to do with us."

Ganggang brightened up. Mu, straightening up, took his hand. But before they could set off Wang Lei brought in Sister Li.

"Old Mu, Sister Li wants to have a word with you."

"Oh?" Mu wondered why.

Ganggang stamped his feet, howling. His grandmother carried him off.

"Sit down, Sister Li, sit down. Tell me why you've come. Mu offered her a glass of tea.

"Comrade Old Mu, there's a family at the east end of our alley called Song. The wife's name is Jin. D'you know them?"

Mu shook his head. Though he'd lived here for scores of years he didn't know the names of all his neighbours.

"Well, it was Sister Jin who told me this. Made my heart bleed. I don't know whether I'm right to butt in or not, but I just had to do something."

What was on her mind? Could she be looking for a back door too? No, honest Sister Li had never tried to pull strings.

"Sister Jin has a nephew …" Mu wished she would come to the point. And with a sigh she did.

"His name is Ding."

Another Ding! Mu gave a start. Sister Li went on placidly:

"He's called Ding Dazhi, and he's studying in your college. Do you know the boy, Comrade Old Mu?" Mu simply nodded.

"What a memory you have!" She chuckled. "All these thousands of students and you can remember their names."

"Not all their names. I remember Ding Dazhi."

Mu wrinkled his brows with a wry smile. Failing to notice this she went straight on:

"The trouble the Dings had getting that boy into college! Nearly ruined them, it did." This bewildered Mu.

"Old Mu, wait till you hear the whole story," she continued. "This Ding Qiliang is a small, low-paid cadre under the Bureau of Commerce. His wife has no job and is poorly, so they've always been hard up. Their elder child, a girl, was born with a weak heart. She's stayed in Beijing with a factory job, but keeps having to take time off. Their second child, this Ding Dazhi, went to the countryside in '69. At first he had dozens of classmates in that village, but in less than two years those of them with pull joined the army, found work in factories, went back to town or managed to get into college, leaving just the few youngsters who'd no back door to stew in that mountain gully. Just think, with the others all gone and so far from home, how could the boy settle down there? The old couple were so worried, they asked right and left for help to get him back. In '76, when the colleges took in students, his brigade was given one place. But what use was that to him? You had to be recommended, and who would put his name forward?" Sister Li paused for breath and sipped her tea, then went on:

"The old couple talked it over and got busy so as not to miss this chance. They sold the old man's watch to raise the fare, and he asked for leave to visit his son's brigade. He went to beg for this favour. There used to be an old saying: 'A favour's bigger than the sky, it's something only money and pull can buy.' Times may have changed, but money still talks and some people won't listen to reason. Who'd help a nobody like Ding Qiliang? He sold his watch, spent all his money and wore himself to a frazzle, doing everything short of kneeling and kowtowing, but he got nowhere. Too bad! As he was leaving, though, the secretary in charge of that village hinted that if he brought them a good bike they'd let his son go. There was nothing for it but to hurry home, sell up everything they had worth any money, then borrow right and left till he'd scraped together the price of a good bike. He delivered it himself. That's how he pushed his son through the college gate."

Mu sat there motionless, stunned. It had never occurred to him that this despicable back-door farce could give rise to tragedies too. Her hands to her heart Sister Li sighed again and said:

"They got their son home, but the family was head over heels in debt. His mother was so frantic she couldn't get up from her kang. Her husband had to go to work and nurse her too, trying to cut down their food budget to save money to pay his debts. Do you know how they managed? For the last two winters they've never dared light the stove, never bought fresh vegetables, only picking rotten cabbages out of the garbage, without even pickles to eat. They really had a hard time. Sister An says her brother-in-law has just turned fifty, but he's bald, his teeth have dropped out, his back is bent, and he staggers along looking like a man of seventy. What for? All to find a back door for his son. Think what he's had to put up with!"

Mu's heart had sunk as he listened. He had a mental picture of an old man shuffling towards him, bent under the burden of finding a back door. He seemed to hear this toothless old fellow asking:

"Am I to blame? Did I do wrong?"

"Now they're up against it again." Sister Li's voice seemed to be coming from far away. "Now jobs are to be assigned. And it's said the boy will be sent back to where he came from. Won't that be the death of them? They're so frantic they're begging right and left for help. And now, by a stroke of luck, a factory in Beijing is willing to take him, and his brigade has agreed to let him go. It's just up to your college. Somehow they discovered that we're on good terms, so they sent Sister Jin to me. I told them, if the decision is up to Old Mu, there won't be any problem. Old Mu's a high official but doesn't give himself official airs, he's kind to everyone, always reasonable. If I tell him the whole story he's sure to help. Wasn't I right, Comrade Old Mu?"

Mu found it quite impossible to answer. Sister Li put her glass on the table and aired her views:

"My old man tried to stop me, saying this is going through the back door and I shouldn't have anything to do with it. I asked him: 'Is there no justice in the world? Ha, the children of big cadres can whisk through any back door. One telephone call or one note and everything's fixed. Why should it be so hard for the children of the likes of us to get anywhere? Should the door be closed against them? Old Ding's whole family has come to grief trying to get his son through a back door, shouldn't we help them out?' I told him: 'I'm going to see to this, so don't give me that daft talk.'"

Mu had no idea what to say. Her reasoning was wrong, but the situation was such. Many of the thirty-eight students on his list had their names there as the result of a telephone call from some high official or a note from some organization. Of course, the fate of those thirty-eight was still undecided; their cases would be discussed at this afternoon's meeting. But, undoubtedly, it was easy for big cadres to make such requests, while people like Ding Qiliang had to sweat blood to do it. In this sense it was certainly unfair.

Sister Li said no more but waited for his answer. Mu felt as if a great weight had sealed his lips. Finally he answered listlessly, almost rudely:

"You'd better be going now, Sister Li."

She glanced up at him, feeling that Old Mu was not as obliging as usual. As she stood up slowly he added:

"We shall be discussing this problem at a meeting this afternoon."

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While Sister Li took her leave of Wang Lei, Mu remained sitting on the sofa. He heard them talking in low voices in the hall. In the silence that followed he visualized Ding Dazhi and Ding Qiliang one after the other. It now seemed to him that Ding Dazhi was not pushing as he had once thought. Apparently push was another form of weakness. To survive when injured the weak had to start pushing.

But what could he do for the Dings? Do as they asked? That would be unprincipled, counter to his pledge at the time of his reinstatement. Refuse them? That would certainly be a big blow to them. And if he refused them he should also refuse all the others who wanted to be assigned to big cities. It would be unfair to discriminate.

"Grandad, let's go." Ganggang was standing before him.

"Right." Mu spoke wearily, as if too tired to get up. From the hall they heard another knock on the door, and a very familiar voice:

"Young Mu at home?"

It was Vice-minister Gao, Gao Chengzong, who had been Mu's first superior, his first mentor when he joined the revolution. Mu owed much of his knowledge and experience directly to him. Indeed Gao had influenced his whole way of thinking, his working style and even his behaviour. Mu stood up to open the door, but Wang Lei forestalled him.

"Minister Gao, why hasn't Nini come?" she asked as she ushered him in.

Nini, Gao's only daughter, had always accompanied him to their home in the past. For Gao hoped, without saying so in so many words, that Wang Lei would introduce a young man to her.

"Aha! Nini has a boyfriend now, that's why she hasn't come with her old man." Gao laughed heartily as he shook Mu's hand.

"Oh?" For a second Mu looked sceptical. Then he smiled. "Fine. Congratulations." As Wang Lei made tea, Ganggang rushed up to Gao to complain:

"Grandad Gao, grandad said he'd take me to the park, but he hasn't."

"Well, that's not right. Let's criticize him." Gao patted the child's head and said to Mu,

"Young Mu, this happened so suddenly, don't you think it's rather strange? Haha! It surprised even me. You know, my daughter's twenty-seven this year, and not good-looking. She said she meant to stay single all her life. But it so happened last Sunday that I took her to Yunshuijian, and there she met a former middle-school classmate. The two of them got talking and hit it off so well that we all came back together in my car. Since then they've got on like a house on fire. We really ought to thank the old man in the moon."\fn{In Chinese mythology, the match-maker} He chuckled.

"Splendid." agreed Mu, though still rather sceptical. Nini wasn't just "not good-looking", she was downright ugly besides being blind in one eye. But her demands were so high that although she had asked many people to introduce her a young man, no one had ever found a suitable suitor for her. How had she suddenly formed this attachment?

"Wang Lei! At last that weight has been lifted from my mind," continued Gao jubilantly. "When a girl's grown she should marry. When I couldn't get her off my hands I was worried stiff."

"When shall we drink at their wedding?" asked Wang Lei with a smile.

"Soon." Gao roared with laughter. "I saw through that talk of hers about staying single. She capitulated at the first encounter." Mu joined in his laughter.

"By the way, Young Mu, there's something I want you to do for me." Gao turned to him. "This future son-in-law of mine is one of your college's graduating students."

"Yes?" Mu felt a premonition. "What, what's his name?" he stammered.

"Ding. Ding Dazhi."

Ding Dazhi again! This was a stunning blow. Mu leaned back in his chair, speechless.

"Apparently he'll be assigned to the provinces. Under the circumstances, Young Mu, can't you make allowances and keep him in Beijing?"

Mu didn't hear the rest of Gao's request. He couldn't believe that anyone would rush into marriage like that. Was this a plot, or love? Was it finding a back door or marrying? His mental pictures of the Dings had blurred again. What sort of people were they? Experts at infiltrating through back doors, or pathetic creatures crushed by this burden on them? How could they be considered pathetic creatures?

"What's up? Have you anything against Ding Dazhi?" Gao noticed Mu's silence and his strange expression.

"No, no." Mu shook his head.

"Well then, you fix it!" Gao turned away to tease Ganggang, assuming that there was no more to be said.

Mu pulled himself together. He was tempted to tell Old Gao of his visits from Dai Jiyao and Sister Li. That seemed to him his duty. Yet how could one gain an accurate impression from their mutually contradictory accounts? And if he spoke up what would the consequence be? If Ding Dazhi were blameless, Mu might destroy a young couple's genuine love, which meant so much to Nini, a love she could never hope to find again. But if this were a swindle and he didn't warn them in time, wouldn't she and Old Gao be in for a terrible shock?

"Old Gao, do you think"—Mu beat about the bush—"Do you think Ding Dazhi is really in love with Nini?"

"I don't know what you mean by in love. My marriage was arranged for me by my parents." Gao had suddenly sobered up.

"Why ask such a question, Old Mu?" protested his wife. Mu ignored her to probe again:

"Old Gao, do you believe Nini will be happy?" After a short silence Gao answered:

"Until I go to see Karl Marx I think she may be happy."

"What's got into you today, Old Mu?" Wang Lei demanded.

"Young Mu's right," Gao told her, raising one hand. "That had occurred to me too. But he hasn't thought it through the way I have. All right, let's leave it at that. I leave Ding Dazhi's business to you. I must go and report back. The young couple are waiting at home for news."

His forehead had cleared and he was laughing again. Gao left.

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Leaning back in his easy chair Mu felt completely disorientated. The conflicting images of the Dings, father and son, now contemptible, now pathetic, were too confusing to grasp. Then he recalled Dai Jiyao's indignation,

heard Sister Li’s appeal to right a wrong, and Old Gao’s hearty laughter. Back-doorism really seemed to have become an irresistible tide, drawing into it so many people, some of them very good comrades. This tide was sweeping down on him, he found it hard to withstand it.

“Grandad, let’s go!” cried Ganggang, rushing in.

This cry sounded only faintly in Mu’s ears, and was almost at once drowned out by the clamorous babel of the search for back doors. No, he must hold out, not capitulate, Mu resolved. Sure, it was hard, and precisely because it was hard he must summon up all his reserves of strength. He felt as if the eyes of all the staff and students were fixed on him, to see if he would keep the promise he had made after his reinstatement. He felt the eyes of the public on him too, to see if he would live up to what was expected of a Communist and high-ranking Party cadre.

“Grandad, let’s go!” pleaded Ganggang. Mu sprang to his feet and patted the little boy’s head.

“Come on!” he said cheerfully. “We’ll have a ride on the aeroplane.”

“There’s no time. Don’t you have a meeting this afternoon?” Wang Lei objected. As he led his grandson out Mu replied:

“There’s time. A turn in the park in the fresh air will buck me up for the meeting.”

2

The bottles of wine and soda-water are opened. Deep red wine, orange soda-water. The children cheer. Ribbons dance, dimples appear between wrinkled faces, and little black heads next to dignified white hair. The whole family sits round two tables put together. This is their first reunion after a long separation. Has the God of Happiness really come back to the earth? Please join in this Saturday evening’s family feast.

“Rose, rose, red rose, the rose in my heart …”

A newly bought tape-recorder stands on the brand-new wine cabinet. The soprano seems to be smiling as she sings for this family, her song adding to the festive atmosphere. Ah, no one can do without music, whether in ancient or modern times, whether in grief or joy.

It looks as if he was right to come. Su Hong sits straight by the table, his five-year-old daughter to his left, his wife to his right. The little girl kneeling on her chair is calling,

“Granny, I’m going to drink a whole bottle of pop!”

Being a child, she feels at home straight away. Who could believe that she’s only known her grandmother for one hour. Mum laughs. Kindly, happy old lady, she seems to have dreamed of her grand-daughter calling her. His wife exclaims,

“What a fine cook you are, mum! How did you prepare this liver?”

Her voice is nauseatingly sweet. Her smile is repulsive. How can she bring herself to say such things? All these years she’s never mentioned his family, as if she had no in-laws.

The nightmare's over, a new day has dawned. At last you’ve come back from a rugged mountain to a prosperous city, from medieval barbarity to modern civilization. Everybody longs for Beijing: the Summer Palace, foreign Films, boating on the Kunming Lake, the marvellous Echo Wall in the Temple of Heaven, the spirit of the Central Committee, Beijing roast duck, hot pickled mustard tubers from Sichuan, endless specialized conferences, a host of traditional performances …

Thousands of people pull strings yet fail to get transferred here, to squeeze their way in. And now you have come back, never mind how. In this revitalized capital the high-rise buildings are growing higher and higher. What does it matter living on the thirteenth floor? There’s a lift. How fascinating it is, looking down from the balcony so high in the air at the toy-like pedestrians and traffic below. Life, like a flowing stream, can never bring back what it has borne away. It’s wisest to look to the future. Prepare for old age! Your children are grown up, you don’t have to support them. You can buy a nineteen-inch color TV in place of your twelve-inch black and white set. Refrigerators and washing machines are on sale everywhere, you needn’t go through back doors. That’s a good stereo tape-recorder you’ve bought, with four loudspeakers. You can sit with closed eyes all evening listening to Mozart and Strauss. The lovely music will carry away your cares, even your past nightmares.

“Come on, let’s all drink a toast!”

Mum’s husky voice sounds rather nasal. Is she smiling or tearful? Her hair is gray, how she has aged. He remembers her with abundant jet-black hair and a sweet, mellow voice.

All glasses are held out towards her, each smiling face turns to her. Deep red liquid flows into their crystal glasses. Is this intoxicating wine or healing medicine?

"Rose, rose, red rose …"

Father has the top seat. He has aged, his snow-white head is drooping as if the light music has lulled him to sleep. No. he's awake. His expression is cold. His snill eyes under thick eyebrows aren't looking at anyone.

Mum shoots him a sidelong glance, deploring his coldness. She has gone to great pains to prepare this meal for them all, and invited her sons, daughter and grandchildren to this family reunion. This isn't any festival, but the occasion is more worth celebrating. The last twenty Spring Festivals and Mid-Autumn Festivals had been lonely times for them.

His younger sister and her husband have brought their Imp, a beady-eyed child who is fidgeting on his chair like a monkey. Younger Brother's face is shining. Wearing a spruce uniform and snow-white shirt, with, his head held high, he is murmuring to his fiancée. A lovely girl. her limpid, unfathomable eyes are lit up like two little flames. Those bright eyes remind him … yes, remind him of the girl forever hidden in his heart. Her last glance at him was so pathetic.

"Rose, rose, red rose in my heart …"

"Turn it off!"

Father has at last spoken, gruffly, not raising his eyes. He is not behaving like the master of this new flat, not as if this sumptuous meal is to celebrate his rehabilitation after twenty years in disgrace. He seems unaware that he has returned to the field of art, that his paintings are to be exhibited again and *Su Banshe's Art Album* republished. He looks like an old horse exhausted after a long gallop, like an old man so accustomed to isolation that this rowdy party revolts him. No, I'm the only one who revolts him. Mum's laughing, laughing huskily. Turning a deaf ear to his request she's leaving the tape-recorder on to make everybody happy. She wants to create a harmonious atmosphere. Ah, Mum, Mum, how can you recover spilt water, repair a broken mirror, or heal a broken heart?

He's disgusted with me. Curses me. Detests me. I'm this family's renegade. *Persona non grata* here. Why did I come? I shouldn't have come. When my daughter heard we were going to see her grandparents, she stared in surprise.

"Have I a granny? A grandad?"

She had never heard of them. When my wife knew that Mum had phoned, she was quite carried away. What should she wear, what presents should she bring? She bustled about like a typical petty *bourgeois*. Look how she's messed up her hair, having it waved in tight curls. Look at her broad grin. As if she's been longing to greet her mother-in-law, as if she's entering a new world by coming into this family which is prospering again. It's her fault, all her fault, why did she insist on coming? If she hadn't, I wouldn't be feeling so awkward and irritated.

Is it really all her fault? No, that's not fair. I wanted to come too. After all he's my dad, in his sixties, without much longer to live. Besides, I'm his elder son, once his favourite son. Childhood, carefree childhood, dream-like, golden childhood. The current races down the gorge, small boats struggle upstream, tow-men strain forward, bent double, the setting sun dyes red the glinting river and the boatmen's perspiring faces. Dad, stooping over his big desk, with a few strokes of his brush paints this enchanting picture.

"Honghong, your glass!"

Mum is looking after us all. Honghong! He feels like crying. Something has lacerated his bleeding heart.

"Get on with your meal."

The gruff voice sounding coldly from the head of the table seems to rap his wrist. Su Hong puts down the glass he has raised. At once he raises his other hand.

"Here, mum, let me help myself." He stands up, reaching out and forcing a smile. Good, only his voice is trembling.

Frantic, I glance at my brother on the left and sense the coldness of his look at me. Yes, he should be the favourite son. When they went through hard times, had nothing to eat and were under fire, he was the only one who stayed at their side. Still small, treated as a little cur, he went with them to the mountains. Saved their lives by lugging them a sack of pumpkins from hundreds of *il* away.

All glasses are raised, clinked together.

"Here's to your health, dad and mum!" Brother has a pleasing voice, and his fiancée chimes in like a silver bell,

"Dad, mum, good health."

Sister's voice is shrill, her husband grins. The Imp stands on his chair.

"Here's to your health, grandad, grandma."

His father has told him what to say. All the other children join in. My daughter smiles too and calls out, showing the gap in her pearly front teeth.

"Rose, rose, red rose …"

Su Hong raises his glass too, this heavy glass of wine. Its rim feels cold to his lips. A familiar feeling. What does it remind him of?

Stacks of rice paper, square inkstones, brushes, cinnabar, malachite green, bright red, big ink-slabs. What an enormous inkstone. Two small hands clutching an ink-slab are grinding it hard, Dad's going to paint!

"That's my good sonny!"

Paintings cover the wall and everyone listens to Dad as he explains different techniques. What fun it is seeing a dove fly suddenly on to a sheet of white paper. A prawn swims over. Plum-blossom blooms. Chrysanthemums scent the air. Dad has a magic brush. He's a real magician.

"Honghong, pour Dad a glass of wine."

Quick, pour the wine, Dad paints best when he's drinking. Honghong holds the glass carefully, afraid to spill it. Dad always bends down to put the glass to his lips.

"Here sonny, have a sip, it's sweet."

Yes, it's sweet, honey-sweet childhood. What's sweet is Dad's love, not the wine. Wine is sharp, bitter, choking. When he frowns, shuts his mouth and makes a lace, Dad always bursts out laughing and brushes his prickly moustache against his cheeks, then swings him up high in the air. So high that he can touch the ceiling …

Well, those days can never come back. Ever since that fearful time everything has passed away like a flowing stream or like a floating cloud. Father's tenderness has gone never to return. Everything has turned icy cold, father and son seem strangers. He coughs, raises his glass with the noisy laughing people around the table, and takes a sip. The bitter wine fills his heart with bitterness.

He sees shafts of golden light in which thousands of flowers are swirling. In those days his life was full of light and fresh flowers. The secluded college campus, cradle of engineers, future specialists, scholars scaling the heights of science, probationary Party members, both red and expert. Entrancing, dream-like love, limpid eyes, an innocent heart, rose-red cheeks, strolling in the wood by the brook. Abruptly the earth spins round, his hopes are toppled, the light of life is extinguished.

"Your father's a Rightist."

"You must stand firm and make a clean break with him."

"Make your choice: side with the Party or with a Rightist."

Heavens, how could this have happened? What should he do?

"Why are you a Rightist?"

Amid the talk and laughter this question rings in his ears. What a ridiculous thing to ask his father. His father doesn't answer, cannot answer. He dares not raise his eyes to that icy face, but sees his hands trembling on his knees. Mum's husky laugh rings out, but her laugh is close to tears.

"Don't ask your father that, Honghong, how can he bear it." Sobbing, she stands in front of the seated figure.

He feels a lump in his throat, tears spring to his eyes, but he must on no account shed them. He stealthily picks up the bottle to refill his glass. Forcing a smile he screws up his face and drinks.

"Rose, rose, red rose …"

His rose is a beautiful red, not a gaudy scarlet, not a vulgar pink, but a refined tender crimson suffused with faint melancholy. The same colour as this room. A brand-new room. White walls, glittering glass. a newly painted door, bright electroplated furniture. The red rays of the setting sun have dyed everything in their gay rosy light. Everything is new and spotless in this new home they have set up. The old seems to have been swept away by a flood.

Why can't the flood scour our souls? To let the past die and embark on a new life. If we could start again from scratch what a fine world this would be.

It can't be done. Printed in black on white paper, he found the answer in the newspaper.

"The Rightist artist Su Banshe with his reactionary outlook has an inveterate hatred for the Party and socialism. In his paintings our motherland's sky is overcast, the earth is gray, socialism is like a sinking ship with people at their last gasp struggling in the water or lying panic-stricken on the deck. What vicious insinuations!"

That was the conclusion reached. The final verdict.

Of course he had to make a clean break, could never go home again. There was no need to go. It's the people who raised me, the Party that trained me. The Party is my home. Scrap those petty-*bourgeois* sentiments and be an iron-willed revolutionary.

White chicken, dark brown preserved eggs, deep red liver, pink sausage, green pickles. Mum made these hometown pickles on her return here. So many pairs of chopsticks, so many smiling faces. Toast after toast, senseless laughter, disgusting flattery. What is she laughing at? How can I live with such a petty-*bourgeois* hypocrite? Have I really slept with her for twenty years? Is this fate or a trick played on me by history? How could I ever have taken up with her?

"Rose, rose, red rose, the rose in my heart …"

Where is the rose in my heart? Where has she gone? With her sweet face and graceful figure she was like the goddess scattering flowers in one of Dad's paintings. That painting was burnt when our house was raided.

She ought to be happy forever. It would be a crime to let the dust defile her or worldly conventions upset her. How could he, a criminal, harm such an innocent girl? Her eyes are misted over, her step is no longer so light. Stop maundering like this and make up your mind to release her. She should be like a dove, free to fly wherever she pleases. Because I love her I want her to be happy.

Love, love, what is love? He had given his "love" to the librarian. In the old library among all those books, she had seemed a little duck quacking away and preening herself, distracting serious students. He had swooped on her like an eagle, sweeping her off her feet. Had taken her everywhere to flaunt his love, even to the one he loved. Give me up, my heart already numbed.

Amazed, fearful, wounded, she wrote him long passionate letters. Her eyes downcast, her lashes covered her eyes brimming over like autumn pools. What a fool he'd been, thinking he'd acted a part successfully when his performance had in fact been so crude. After the graduation ceremony, when the applause had died away, it was time to take leave of his college. No, take leave of his dreamlike youth. She should be standing by the brook under the weeping willows. How many times she had stood there in the moonlight. Yes, she had come. Go quickly to avoid her. But he couldn't. This was their last meeting, the last, last one, to end everything between them. How could they part like this? He went over to her. Gazing into each other's eyes they drew closer and closer together as they walked. Like characters in a Shakespearian tragedy. A tragedy? Yes, it was a tragedy. He longed with one ardent kiss to wipe away all the hurt, the grief in her eyes.

"You shouldn't do this. You're deceiving yourself, deceiving me and her too …"

This staggered him. Why not pour out to her all the bitterness in his heart? Only she could understand.

No, his own wretchedness was enough. Making a clean break hadn't saved him. He had been switched from studying a most advanced, top-secret course. His admission to the Party had been postponed because he "still sympathized with his Rightist father". He wasn't even eligible to teach in the college as an assistant. Where in the wide world was there a place for him? With my fine academic record I must strike out for myself in the sea of life and battle with angry billows. Not knowing where to row my little craft, how can I involve this angel in such danger?

"She and I have already—"

She turned and quickly made off. Then slowed down and stopped to stare at him with her big dreamy eyes, her sad, expectant eyes.

What a ghastly, irretrievable mistake.

Brother is laughing again, his pretty fiancée too. Carefree laughter, piercing laughter. Peacocks like to flaunt their plumage. Girls like to dress up, lovers to laugh. Ah, they're quietly clinking glasses and drinking to their future happiness. Happiness. From ox-carts to locomotives, kites to rockets, homespun to dacron, kindling fire by rubbing wood to space ships, for how many generations has mankind sought for happiness? Ever since Pan Gu created the world and the search will continue till the end of time.

Love, the greatest happiness of all. Selfish love unwilling to be seen by others.

He meets their eyes at an inopportune time for them. At once Brother's smile vanishes, his expression freezes. Why is there such contempt on her beautiful face? Why should she despise me? Are you the only ones fit to be in love? My brother must have told her everything.

Laugh, preen yourselves, enjoy the sweet wine of life. You've no right to despise me, what do you know about love? Do you know what sacrifice means? Love and sacrifice go together, that is the only true love. But why think of such things, don't envy them, swallow the bitter wine of your own love.

Where is she now? By the Songhua River in the northeast? On the loess steppe of the northwest? For ten years we hovered between life and death, no, surely she's still alive on this smiling earth. He reaches again for the bottle.

"Don't drink so much!"

A broad white face. All too familiar, yet like the face of a stranger. Looking at him with reproachful, anxious eyes. He pretends to be drunk. Drunkards with their bleary eyes can't see distinctly. Are you my wife? I don't seem to know you.

Yes, they were strange bedfellows. No wonder she was always complaining, nagging. Habit is a fearful thing. Habit made him come home from work every day and park his bicycle under the eaves as his daughter ran out calling daddy. His meals were cooked for him, his clothes washed, his trousers pressed.

His wife was not to blame. Why make a scapegoat of her? As time passed he steeled himself, underwent a slight change, and she had known a little happiness. But his heart was like ice, there was a limit to his self-reproach. He was miserly too with his kindness. They lived together, that was all. Everyone must marry and have children, that was only right and proper. Such was life.

"Rose, rose …"

Why does this tune go on and on? Probably this tape-recorder has an automatic replaying circuit. To please his fiancée Brother keeps it repeating itself. She is a rose. Of course, the rose in his heart. His road is strewn with the fresh flowers of love, father's love, mother's love, his fiancée's love … This song is maddening!

"Turn it off," Father calls, finally losing patience. He gets up to drive the soprano out of the room.

*

With the music turned off the room is suddenly quiet. With so many people there why should it seem so empty? Ah, Mum has gone to the kitchen to fetch another dish. She must have queued up for two days to prepare so many.

"Duck, duck, a big duck!"

The children clap their hands. It's long since he's seen an Eight-treasure Duck, so yellow, succulent, savoury and translucent.

"Come on everybody, eat. I forgot how to cook this after all those years." Mum rolls up her sleeves to attack the poor duck with a knife and chopsticks.

"Honghong, have this, it's one of your favourites."

She offers him a leg, using a spoon to catch the fat dripping from it. Quickly hold out your plate. Why has Mum become so ceremonious? He remembers her rapping him on the head with her chopsticks. Which year was that? One Spring Festival, when he was wolfing down duck and she didn't want him to over-eat.

He loved duck, loved the way Mum cooked it. He always squeezed into the kitchen, beside the table, to watch as she deftly turned and boned the duck, then stuffed it with ham, mushrooms, sticky rice and lilies. Yes, and Job's-tears. With his little hands he stuffed in a handful too. When Mum tried to elbow him aside he refused to go, waiting right there for the duck to be cooked. She scolded,

"Greedy guts!"

The duck on his plate is just as well cooked, with all the old ingredients. Where did she manage to find Job's-tears? No doubt in a pharmacy. He looks, but doesn't pick up his chopsticks— how can he eat this?

"Life in the family of a bourgeois Rightist imperceptibly corrupted me. I'm going to make a clean break with my guilty family." As a sign of determination he had denounced this duck, yes, seriously.

"That wasn't Eight-treasure Duck but Eight-poison Duck."

How utterly ludicrous. Because of this Eight-poison Duck he had been four years on probation before being admitted into the Party. How could he stomach this duck served up today?

Dad isn't eating either. His lace is dark, his lips quivering. How many sound teeth has he left? He used to have strong white teeth as handsome as Brother's now.

"Eating is an art in China. If an artist doesn't know how to eat, he can't be a good artist."

He had been criticized for saying this. His paintings fetched high prices, but by the end of each month Mum complained that she had no money to buy rice. Dad was a spendthrift. Mum was a good cook. When he received money he invited his artist friends and drinking friends to one of the well-known restaurants frequented by men of letters, with inscriptions inside written by Guo Moruo. And every few days they entertained guests at home till all the money was spent. His maxim was:

"Money is something we're born without, and it can't be taken with us when we die."

Dad was very open-handed. Many. many of his former guests had denounced him.

Now he's old, has given up drinking and hasn't much appetite. He's sitting at this feast as if at a meeting where he has to come clean. He's lost his joie de vivre, is worn out, looking listlessly at the duck and at the grown-ups and children seated around him. His cold, blank glance sweeps over Su Hong's face with no love in it, no hate either, nothing but a fearsome coldness which seeps into people's bones.

Su Hong hangs his head, staring stupidly at his empty glass, as empty as his heart. Why look at me like that? Am I feeling good? If I hurt you, acting in a way no son should, it certainly wasn't because I wanted to. If you'd bawl me out it would be better than this. But you can't. Your "good sonny" disappeared long ago, pretend he was never born.

No, no, not that … I love you with all my heart. Of course I can't say so, I don't want to tell you anything. Things are too snarled up to be sorted out or explained. Who knows how wretched I am? Instead of dwelling on these things I should be smiling. This is a celebration, a special occasion.

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"Rose, rose, red rose …"

Why do I still hear that song, like a mosquito buzzing by my ears, when the tape-recorder's turned off? I can't drive it away. I know you blame me, know you can never forgive me. When you were sent away for labour reform, Mum notified me that the train left at 9.45. I remember that distinctly. I sat in my office then, watching the second hand creep to "9". I didn't ask for leave to see you off. Didn't I want to go? I didn't dare to. If I'd asked for leave I'd have had to make long explanations.

I hope you've burnt those three letters. I long ago burnt that one you wrote me, burnt it as soon as I got it. But I remember every word in it.

"Su Hong, is work keeping you busy? I've been cleared. Your mum and I are both well. Father."

You'd written with a fountain-pen, not a brush, though all your previous letters to me had been written with a brush. I wrote back copying phrases from the paper, so that it wouldn't matter who read my letter. I had to be careful. So many people had got into trouble over letters. A year later I wrote to you again. The year after that, when the "cultural revolution" started, I didn't even dare write. I knew you would hold it against me. No, you can't have. Nothing matters to you anymore.

Why does fate play such tricks on us? I shouldn't have gone to Sichuan that year on business. There was nothing to eat on sale, it was terrible. You'd said our native province was "the land of plenty". That its green hills and limpid streams produced men of good taste.

For boasting of your good taste you were criticized. You were too ingenuous, too foolish, no wonder they called you a pedant. I hadn't intended to go to that exhibition, but as my boss went I had to. I hadn't expected you to be helping out there. In the corridor I spotted an old stooped workman, a ladder over one shoulder, approaching with a bucket of yellow paint. He was barefoot, his clothes stained with paint of different colours. Stepping out of the way of the ladder I saw that it was you.

I wanted to speak but my boss told me to hurry. I went on, meaning to come back later to see you, but I never did. I know you resented that. No, no no, you may have forgotten. So much the better. I wish I could forget.

"Why aren't you eating, Honghong?" Mum's husky laughter.

She's extremely observant. Why single me out? I'm someone special here, needing special consideration.

"He's drunk!" My wife chuckles; showing her teeth.

What's funny? I only wish I were drunk, too drunk to think or be conscious of anything.

All right, get drunk. The bottle in front of him is empty. He reaches for the one by his sister and fills his glass. Drink up, eat, don't brood or talk. He picks up his chopsticks to help himself to some food. Is it fish? Prawn? Chicken? Duck? This must be what is meant by "eating without tasting". It's fish, set out on a new blue and white oblong porcelain dish. The tasty fish is decorated with three flowers cut out of carrots and Chinese cabbage to add a festive note.

Dad liked "beautiful food, beautifully served". Called that art.

"The superior man won't eat a fish that has been turned over." He said this at each Spring Festival when Mum brought in a fish and we were all too full to finish it.

So we were all "superior men". Superior men? Then why had it taken intellectuals so long to join the ranks of the working class? Live fish frisk on rice paper. Why are there no paintings in this room? We used to have so many. Live fish, live prawns, all gone now. These speculations must come from drinking too much.

"My head aches, I'll leave you to it."

His patience exhausted, Dad stands up, pretending to be tipsy. He's not, in fact, as he has drunk very little. A snail retreats into its shell, an old stag struck by an arrow hides deep in the forest. He walks away, stooping, then glances back. His face is dark, his glance cold, he hates me, hates me. I shouldn't have come.

"So your family's reunited."

When colleagues say this I have to smile and nod. But they will never know the nature of this reunion. If kinsmen are unkind it's best to have none. You can choose your friends, can ignore the people you meet, but not your family. Life is not a sheet of paper; if you make a mistake you can tear it up and start again. Life is ruthless, a history written in flesh and blood. Nothing written there can be altered or torn up, how fearful.

What are they laughing at? What are they saying? Dance? The dances of the fifties were too slow, to tunes like Auld Lang Syne. It's disco in the eighties, can you dance this? I'll show you how. It's the two of them again, my

brother and her. Why not dance disco? It's most civilized, you don't even hold hands. Just twist any way you please. After sitting in an office for a week it's good to dance for a while. But I can't do it. Our college parties used to last all night, she was the queen of those dances. Now she probably can't dance either.

With flushed cheeks, puffing, they sit down again. Sister hands them towels to wipe their perspiring faces. Where did she learn her stock of compliments? She must envy them. Is her marriage happy or not? Her husband's much older than she is, inscrutable behind his spectacles. So thin, so greedy. This may be the best meal he's ever eaten. He's eating the fish too. I'm sure he can't dance. Like a good father he's urging the Imp to eat. He seems very fond of Sister. She and Brother are chattering away. They ignore me, pretend to be discussing dancing. What's there to discuss? Let anyone dance who wants to. It won't make the sky fall down. They hate me too. I'm odd man out here.

Sister knows the whole story, she went with them too, being too small to leave them. But a long time ago she married and left them. She seems to have kept in close touch, buying cloth for Mum, sending Brother shoes. Posing as tolerant she greeted me as Elder Brother.

I don't need your tolerance. What crime have I committed? Maybe I was afraid, weak. Yes, I admit I'm a weakling. But to start with I really believed I was right. How could I oppose the Party?

I'm not drunk, no one could get drunk on this wine. I inherited a capacity for liquor, I'm quite sober.

Mum's sitting down looking limp, on the verge of collapse since Father left the table. She's still smiling, urging everyone to eat, and to put on the tape-recorder.

"Rose, rose …"

Is there no other cassette? The room's lively again, she doesn't like awkward silences.

"Honghong, eat!"

With her husky voice Mum's putting on a show; she obviously hates me. Her smile is a sham. That evening she told me,

"Su Hong, forget us, and we won't involve you."

That's what she said, she can't have forgotten. She hates me. I shouldn't have come today.

"Rose, rose, red rose, the rose in my heart …"

The song of the rose circles round the room. The rosy sunset comes to rest on the table. Everything is veiled in its refined, deep colour tinged with grief. Where are you, rose in my heart?

73.28 Chant Of Great Grief\fn{by Wang Shang-I (1936-1962)} Honan Province, China (M) 3

"Actually, when all is said and done, we have no faith," said good Old Ma.

The waning moon dispersed a layer of gray-white fog. Throughout the gray fields, the muffled sound of barking dogs was everywhere audible. The shadow of a distant castle stuck up like an island on the horizon, silently gazing down on everything created or destroyed, all things not yet born or destined to die.

My friends, Chang and Old Ma, and I were just coming out of the front door of the hospital. Our steps were soft and slow, just as they had been while we walked through the long, narrow hospital corridors up to Room 204. Ignoring the "No Visitors Please" sign attached to the door, Chang pushed it open anyway and stepped in. He soon came out again and told us the patient was already comatose and taking oxygen. As we returned back through the long, narrow corridors, we heard the moans coming from various rooms and Death's familiar, friendly summons. The pretty nurses in the night shift room were laughing loudly and light-heartedly. We passed down to the end of the corridor and paused for a second before a mirror. After taking a casual look, we walked down the stairs, went out the front door, stepped onto the pebble road, and looked up at the castle.

Old Ma's earlier remark still gnawed away at the silence. Under the moonlight, his face was pale, sad and touching; he was such a good-hearted and sympathetic type.

Chang wore a kind of philosophic air. He was emotional and frail but had a cutting and mocking attitude; he could not escape sorrow so he ridiculed it. Ruminating on Old Ma's remark, I felt disillusioned and disquieted. Gradually, I realized his words were a tremendous criticism of our past lives, even a judgment which, like a sharp knife, had laid bare the core of our irresolution. Because of this irresolution, we had for years been unable to grasp the present; we were flitting about, wandering, chasing, abandoning, denied by existence, stirred by the nihilistic direction of the wind, torn to pieces by pain, buried …

"No faith, therefore, no roots, and so we melt into nothing, just like a piece of duckweed."\fn{A note reads: *Duckweed in Chinese has a connotation of uncertain wandering because it is a plant with no roots, which floats on the water*.} As he expatiated on his conclusion, Old Ma accelerated his steps.

"And if you have faith, so what?" said Chang shiftily. "Suppose we had faith. Do you mean to say we could avoid the evils of birth, old age, sickness, and death? Even Christ wept for the world's ills and Sakyamuni\fn{Buddha, the founder of Buddhism.} only escaped them when he achieved *nirvana*. Make the leap, transcend everything! Contemplate the spectacle that lies beyond appearances."

"Chang, we have been completely lacking in faith so far."

I walked along closer to him as if wishing to admit a fault and explain myself more sincerely. I don't know why, but as soon as I think of death I feel sympathetic toward faith. But I would not have accepted Old Ma's opinion in any way, unless I had been coming out of the hospital this instant and seen so many cases of death and near-death with my own eyes. It would have been quite another story if I were in a pool room, dance hall, or bar.

"When there is faith, then and only then can there be worth-while work and real living," Old Ma said, raising his voice to a high pitch. His words rose like swelling waves but stopped short just as they reached their peak. Mentally exhausted, he could push on no further but nervously rummaged about in his mind, seeking more energy. All this while his eyes remained fixed on the castle. Change mocked:

"Faith is like wine. Nietzche says, 'Wine is a weapon to conquer pessimism.'"

"Wine," I reflected, "what does wine have to do with it? If life consists of these circumstances and if men's hearts have these needs, the purpose of life is to live all modes of life. Life is not just work, not just thinking. Another thing; if faith were only an external form, it would not be faith at all." Originally, I wanted to resolve all contradictions, but the subject of life confused me and enmeshed me in contradictions. Chang went on:

"You two just saw that my uncle was about to die and you visited him with me. But his own son is off somewhere or other living his own life. He has studied philosophy, attempted suicide, been ordained a monk, and returned to being a layman. Now his father is about to die, and the son goes on without caring. Think of him!"

Chang stopped here but made no conclusion. It was cruel of him to do so. He revealed the problem without hinting at an answer. With his words pointedly directed at our discussion on faith, he had dug a trap and was waiting for me and Old Ma to jump in.

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Two years before, I had heard the dying man's son lecture at a temple where he had set up a weekly seminar on Buddhism. His wide square face with its small nose and sharp eyes, sat on his short, stout body. He wore a thin, black Buddhist robe. Drawing two circles on the the blackboard, he had put Plato, Hegel, and Kant in one and Lao-tzu, Chuang-tzu, Sakyamuni, and Nietuche in the other. He used a broken line to join the two circles; afterwards, erased the first and then, with great self -confidence, said:

"Quite obviously, we must affirm Eastern culture."

As I recall, Chang and I were sitting in the last row. I was listening and laughing at intervals as Chang was recounting the speaker's past to me:

"He is a queer duck—well-read, the top of his class in the Philosophy Department, but was never satisfied with things as they are nor with his tedious home life. He really was fed up. Imagine, over thirty years old and not married! Anyway, he took money from home and went on a journey by himself. He hid himself in the countryside, wandering all day long in the mountain forest. He attempted suicide twice and, finally, quietly took off to become a monk. My uncle got upset and took to drinking every day. My aunt was half-paralyzed. Ah! And this was the only son …

"He shut himself up for more than a year in a temple deep in the mountain, concentrating on his studies and cultivating self-stability. Only very recently has he come North, invited by someone to propagate Buddhism. If he had continued devoting himself to this cause, then he would have had a hopeful future, but …"

I was half listening to Chang's words and half listening to the lecturer on the platform. Gradually, I came to realize that although the speaker tried his best to appear self-confident and optimistic, it was very difficult for him to suppress the nihilistic nature of his character. Nevertheless, he side-stepped many questions by either beating around the bush about textual details or by playing with ideas as if they were a pack of cards-dealing out Distress, Orient, Spirit, Liberation in colorful combinations.

In spite of all this, I loved and respected him highly. After all, he had been able to leave the world—that takes courage. He renounced his home, love, and reputation because he saw through it all. The distressing sense of an abiding boredom which weighed down on him is, to a greater or lesser extent, the characteristic of this generation. I could not but envy his words and his having found a lasting and permanent place, which he had been seeking after so long in his quest through life's experiences.

But not long after, he returned to the world. When Chang had heard this news he had spit out the following words with great vehemence:

"Originally, he didn't believe in anything."

Then he went into business, made and lost money, looked for some excitement, then he would have had a hopeful future, but …

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The patient in number 204 was turned over to the hands of a Higher Being. He left off the sufferings of this life. Chang was busy, occupying himself with the funeral arrangements.

On the day of the funeral, Ma and I were dragged along to be spectators at the burial ceremony. Chang wanted us to join him and see the Transmigration Rite\fn{A note reads: *According to Buddhist belief, man has a number of successive lives which are better or worse according to how successfully he has worked out the karma of his preceding life. The final goal is release from all states of existence to nirvana. Part of the ritual is concerned with helping to deliver man from life's sea of misery into a better state*.} and listen to the deceased man's son sing the *Chant of Great Grief*.

The Soul Hall was crowded with people, the great, and the insignificant, the strong and the feeble. The noises of the crowd drowned out every other sound. Long, white scrolls of condolence were fluttering and dancing in the wind; their hand-written black characters were so vibrant they seemed to pierce the eyes, as if they were trying to jump off the scrolls, rushing to leave worldly noise far behind. Pointing to the crowd, Chang said:

"All these are famous, outstanding people, but my uncle was also quite exceptional, he lorded it over the world like a dictator—county governor at twenty and head of an important government department at thirty."

The funeral ceremony had started; the incense was burning and the sacrificial money\fn{A note reads: *Sacrificial money is made out of very cheap paper with a tinfoil emblem in the middle stamped with a design. It is burned as an offering to the dead who are supposed to receive an equivalent purchasing power in the other world*.} was flying about helter-skelter. Chang nudged Ma and me and said:

"Look, he's coming, wearing his Buddhist robes. The leader of the procession is his Buddhist mentor."

Twenty more persons filed in to perform the Transmigration Rite. Each person wore Buddhist robes and carried bronze bells in their hands. The leader held the "Wooden Fish"\fn{A note reads: *A wooden drum-like instrument used for beating rhythm during Buddhist incantations*.} in both palms. After entering, he stood before the altar, stationary. He burned incense, chanted an incantation and knelt in reverence. Next, the sound of the prayers began to be heard. I could barely see his lips quivering slightly. The sound was monotonous and shrill, like a tearless sob. One could not make out any meaning. I was immersed in the prayerful sound; it gradually suffocated me. I quietly withdrew to a not too remote corner, and glanced over each person's face. There was neither disconsolate sorrow nor pious respect. Each face was like a heap of broken, fallen bricks—sharp-edged, desolate, without feeling.

I thought of a strange question:

"Where do they want to send him?"

Even if there is a "Transmigration," there certainly cannot be any lasting and permanent place of rest. Either they are professional mourners hired for the.occasion or they simply have no genuine feeling of sympathy. They don't even know what they are doing. Just like the son who wore his thin Buddhist robes while lecturing and self-confidently affirming Eastern culture. Has there ever been a period in his life when he really liberated himself from worldly affairs? He is continually chasing rainbows, trying to satisfy his greedy desires, indulging in wild hopes and fancies, and running head-over-heels into wrong-doing. He is so intent on the things of this life, that he can not see through them. There is no lack of intelligent people in this world and inevitably they will think: If he can read the *Chant of Great Grief*, he can also read Kant, Hegel, and even Sartre. But just because people read in this way, doesn't mean they will be released from worldly affairs.

Is this faith? It's like a circus thrown together—even the performance is not really true. I thought of laughing, but I was suddenly disgusted with laughter …

Meanwhile Chang had also withdrawn and walked over to my side.

"Really unexpected. A few days ago he could not be found. Nobody thought he would come. Who would have expected him to join the chanting? What is this? A dream?"

"Let's go," said Old Ma. This time he was content to make much lower waves in the thoughts of others. He didn't say anything else, but slowly walked away. I was the second to stroll off, with Chang following me.

The sound of the mourners' prayers became distant as well as the absurd shadows. When we arrived at the mortuary, no one said a thing. All of a sudden, I felt very isolated and lonely. Why didn't Chang or Old Ma say something? I looked at Chang with expectation. His mocking appearance almost approached anger. Old Ma's good, kind face had become more melancholy.

Suddenly, I thought of doing something crazy to create a disturbance. I really hoped that the funeral cortege would catch up with us and would pass our eyes before we had walked too far—the black hearse, the white

funeral streamers,\fn{A note reads: *A sign of mourning held by the sons of the deceased*.} the yellow Buddhist robes, the crest-fallen faces, the mumbling of the *Chant of Great Grief*—Distress, Liberation, Death—Faith's real funeral escort.

188.144 Was I Really Guilty?\fn{by an unnamed female doctor at a children's hospital (1936-after 1986)} Peking?, China (F) 6

I killed my father with my own hands. You already know this.

I was planning to talk with you a couple of days ago. I had to get it out. But last night I didn't have a wink of sleep, so I decided not to say anything today. Just the thought of recalling what happened and the way my parents looked on that day brings everything back too clearly. It's too painful. I'm hypertensive and was afraid that I wouldn't be able to handle this interview. But as soon as I met you, I knew I just had to talk. I've got to say something. Perhaps it's better this way.

My wounds can never be healed. Even after twenty years I still can't figure out whether I was right to kill my father. My initial sentence was life imprisonment. However, when the Gang of Four fell, I was declared innocent and released. But was I really guilty or not? My family, my brothers and sisters-in-law, all told me they understood. But after all, I was the one who ended my father's life. If not for me, he certainly would have lived until now. He had been very healthy.

Did I rescue him or destroy him? One moment I feel as though I did the right thing, but the next I'm bitterly remorseful. Why is it like that? At the time it all happened, I was not in my right mind. I had a complete nervous breakdown. Everything seemed unreal, chaotic, totally confused.

Back then, my two older brothers lived on the ground floor and my parents had the upstairs floor. I was working as a doctor in the Children's Hospital. I was also an active member of the Communist Youth League. I was diligent in my profession and had even received awards as a model worker. When all this happened I was staying with my parents on sick leave after contracting hepatitis while working in the countryside with my medical team.

It was on the morning of the twenty-sixth of August, 1966. Oh no, it was the twenty-eighth. The twenty-sixth was the beginning of the ransacking of my home. It was also the climax of the ransacking in the city. Our door was suddenly forced open by a group of middle-school Red Guards armed with clubs. They declared that my father was a capitalist. In fact, it was a misnomer. My father had inherited a house from his parents and rented out a vacant room on the ground floor. At most he could be called a householder. But in those days renting was synonymous with exploitation, that is, profiting without labor. Within minutes the Red Guards had smashed everything in my home to bits. My whole family was forced to kneel down in the hallway.

We were all very *naïve* and had no experience of such violent abuse. We were scared out of our wits. My father was a painter and had had one of his paintings displayed in America before 1949. The Red Guards examined the certificate from the American exhibition and said,

"Aha! So you've got imperialist connections! You must be a dirty spy!"

We were frightened to death. Only schoolchildren, you might think. Why were we so frightened? Well, during the Cultural Revolution almost all the families in our neighborhood were molested and had their houses ransacked. If those Red Guards felt like it, they could execute you on the spot. Everyone was terrified. One bunch after another would raid the houses. They'd smash everything. Books, paintings, anything that struck them as *bourgeois* would be taken out and burned. Then they would seal up your house. So many, many of them. Their bonfires were everywhere.

From the twenty-sixth to the twenty-eighth, from dawn to dusk, my parents and I were locked up and beaten with belts. Our hair was shorn to the roots. We were dragged out to the street again and again to be denounced and humiliated before the neighborhood. We never had a moment's peace. They tormented us ceaselessly until we no longer even felt a semblance of humanity. Suddenly we had somehow become enemies of our country. Just cringing there. No idea of what our monstrous crimes must be. Oh, how we longed to find a refuge, but where? The whole city was like this. Red Guards everywhere parading people in the streets to the sounds of gongs and drums. Tension was mounting rapidly and we had reached our breaking point. Even death seemed preferable to this.

Until the twenty-eighth, for three entire days, my parents and I had nothing to eat. Even our bowls had been smashed. It was only when the Red Guards left to eat that we were able to hurriedly make some noodle soup to feed my brother's children—straight out of the wok.

That night my parents and I were filled with terror and despair. At daybreak the Red Guards would show up again. More denunciations, more humiliating parades, more physical torture. Too much to face. There was no way out. So the three of us made up our minds to die together.

It was pitch black. The power had been cut off—perhaps to prevent us from electrocuting ourselves. We were sitting on the foyer floor, racking our brains for a way to kill ourselves. It was raining outside. Already past midnight. Day would soon break; no time to waste. I felt a pocket knife on the floor attached to a key chain. The Red Guards must have missed it in their search. The knife seemed to be a godsend. I'm a doctor. I know that if you puncture the carotid artery in the neck, the embolism produced will result in immediate death. This was the fastest and most effective way. My father asked whether it would really work and I assured him it would. My mother said how lucky they were to have a doctor daughter to help them die. Since I was the doctor, we decided that I'd kill them first and then do it to myself. But things didn't turn out as we expected.

Before going through with it, we sat there hand in hand for God knows how long. The thought of parting forever was almost too much. I'd always been so close to my parents. They wanted me to help them die but to stay alive myself. That wouldn't do, I said. I'd be accused of murder and put to death anyway. The pass we had come to is unbearable to recall. As soon as I close my eyes, even the tiniest details come back to me. It was getting too late, already dawn. My parents both insisted that I go ahead with it. I had never thought myself capable of killing anyone, let alone my parents. But under these circumstances I was capable of it, and I had no other choice. My father encouraged me. He told me,

"What you must do is something good. You will relieve our sufferings. Mother and I can't stand any more torturing when the Red Guards come again."

My mind was too shattered. I felt compelled to do it. I scrabbled about and found a crayon and two pieces of paper. In the lifting darkness I somehow managed to write out two suicide notes for the sake of my remaining family:

> We are the common enemy of the people. In order not to poison others surrounding us, we are determined to be liquidated from society. Long live the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution!
>
> To XXX (my husband who was working in another city) and the Mu families (the families of my brothers who I didn't dare to identify as brothers for their own protection): You are resolutely following the revolutionary road. We are the sole cause of your trouble.

My father asked my mother to be first and she asked him the same, for whoever was first to die would be spared at least one grief. Finally father agreed to listen to mother one last time. He'd be the first to die..

I felt for my father's strong artery and pierced it. Immediately the hot blood spurted out. He even asked me to see if his pulse had stopped. I said that as far as I knew, it would be over in a minute. He said he wished it could be faster. Then my mother asked me if I was sure I could do it to myself. She knew I had to die with them; I couldn't be left behind. I reassured her that when they were finished, I'd die too. She waited there patiently as though I was about to give her medical treatment. We'd tried to be very quiet, not to alarm others.

But suddenly one of my brothers ran upstairs yelling like a madman. It sounded as if the Red Guards were coming. He came and held me tight.

All of a sudden I realized that I couldn't go on with this. I nearly fainted, but managed to struggle free. I ran to the third floor balcony and jumped. If I had hit headfirst, I'd have died. But there was no time even to think about how to jump or what would happen to my mother. I only remember hearing all the sounds of hell and then nothing.

It's like I told you. We were really being driven out of our minds. Mother and I hadn't planned to jump out the window. It just happened. When you reach the end, you close your eyes and do the obvious thing like we did. We jumped.

When I finally came to, I was still only half conscious. I thought I heard some voices. Maybe Red Guards. I don't know. When I opened my eyes for a second time, I was already in a hospital. I saw my mother and father lying beside me. But no, I was hallucinating. I shut my eyes, very scared, trying to think. This can't be. What happens if my father was saved? Faintly I could make out the babble of denunciation meetings and parades outside. In desperation I tried to concentrate. This was a women's ward. My father couldn't be here. My eyes were playing tricks on me. I didn't want to look again. My head was full of a cacophony of sounds. I think that it must have been a symptom of my mental disorder. I even tried to cry out, but somehow no sound came out of me. Afterward, the next time I came to, someone was questioning me about my case. I forget what he said.

When I fully regained consciousness, I was told that my mother had jumped off the balcony right after me. Later when I was being interrogated, I was told Father had died on the spot but Mother had been saved. How I cried for my dead father and also for my mother. I was badly injured and she was so old. She would be paralyzed or worse if she really had survived.

It was only after the Cultural Revolution had ended and I was finally released that my sister-in-law told me the truth. My mother hadn't died right away. Instead they took her to the hospital, but she was refused treatment. You probably know that at that time people without a socially acceptable family background weren't admitted. Sometimes the hospitals even organized the "respectable" patients to denounce and criticize those "bad elements" who had earlier gained admission. I was admitted only because I had to face legal proceedings. My mother died a few days later at home. My father had died as they said and was cremated a week later.

The hospital didn't want to treat a patient like me. Very soon I was transferred to a prison hospital called New Life Hospital. Both of my legs were broken—the left tibia and the right femur. The right leg was more seriously injured, with a compression fracture. The bone had splintered and compressed so that the fragments overlapped, shortening the leg. The first hospital had applied skeletal traction, using a ten kilo sandbag to pull the bone back into position. But when I was moved to the prison, the hospital insisted I leave the bag behind. So the doctor put the bone fragments back into the wrong position. Just like breaking it again. It was only a sandbag. They could at least have let me use it, but no, they refused. That hospital didn't give a damn about me. Neither did the doctor who treated me. I don't know where he is now, but I hope he's no longer practicing medicine. What treatment I did get I was given only so that I could face my legal responsibility. It's strange to think about it now. My broken bones were pulled this way and that. But I felt no pain, not even a little. Didn't cry either. It was as if I was dead.

It was eleven o'clock when we arrived at the prison. The prison hospital staff didn't start working until two in the afternoon. When they finally came on, they separated my bone again and put in a steel pin. Then they manipulated the leg back and forth in the splint they made. My leg is still deformed. Only about a fifth of the bone has knitted. It aches a lot. I don't want to dwell on it. You can see I'm crippled for life.

I was formally arrested ten days later and handcuffed. That was September 7, 1966. In 1968 when the Military Control Commission took over,\fn{The Military Control Commission of the People's Liberation Army replaced the police, the legal apparatus, and the People's Courts during the Cultural Revolution. It was given power to create laws and to put itself above laws} I was charged with "committing the crime of murder in opposition to the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution." Murder was a criminal offense and opposition to the Cultural Revolution was a political crime. A very serious combination. I was sentenced to life imprisonment. I thought then that I'd rather get the death penalty. Life imprisonment meant continuing to suffer. Here, you have a look at my sentence:

> It is verified that the accused Y, of a *bourgeois* family background, has failed to be reformed after Liberation. During the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, she has masterminded a scheme to resist the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution through collective suicide and the murder of YY and furthermore has attempted personal suicide as a means of escaping punishment. The accused has both alienated herself from society and become an enemy of the people, thus committing the crime of murder in opposition to the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution. In view of the seriousness of this offense, the vile manner in which it was committed, and the irrefutable evidence presented, this court, in solidarity with the proletarian dictatorship and the resolute defense of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution's continuing progress, hereby finds the accused guilty of murder in opposition to the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution. The accused is sentenced to life imprisonment.

Someone from the commission said to me that if I had been just an ordinary housewife, my sentence wouldn't have been so severe. Obviously, however, I knew what I was doing. My father's case was considered very serious. He said I killed my father to save him from just punishment. That's the real reason I was sentenced to the crime of opposition to the Cultural Revolution.

Well, they said I killed my father to protect him. It's true. I did. This has been a great weight on my mind. What they meant is not the way I look at it. I saved my father from more torture, but they said I was guilty because I prevented them from torturing him anymore. Am I making myself clear? It's all very muddled. I've never been able to make any sense of it.

I was in prison for twelve and a half years. The only reason I didn't kill myself was that I always believed my mother was still alive. I tried to imagine how she was living. The three of us had planned to die together. My father, dead. Me, imprisoned for life. My mother—well, I'd never see her again. Every time my nephews came to visit me they'd tell me that Grandma was at home. Grandma wanted me to reform myself, they said, so that my sentence might be reduced. Sometimes even the prison guards would ask me to tell them about my mother. Of

course, they knew my mother was dead, but they too tried to hide it from me. In fact I really had wished that my mother would have died. To live on was only more misery and suffering. If only I had been told the truth, I would have been at peace.

Once you've been in prison, you get a different perspective on things. I wouldn't have believed that so many good people could be so unjustly imprisoned until I saw them myself. My case, though, was different. I did kill my father with my own hands. I really wanted to atone for my sin, but I also hoped to get an early release so I could see my mother. I felt extremely guilty too toward my brothers. We have the same father but different mothers. However, we were so close that no one ever suspected. They never showed any hatred to me after Father died. They would often come to see me and send me food.

Ah, each time I saw them I cried until I ran out of tears. I didn't know what to say. I felt I had betrayed them. But my brothers reassured me that they understood and that as long as they and my sisters-in-law lived, they'd never stop caring about me. For my brothers' sake also I really had to redeem myself. I worked as hard as I could to reform.

At first I was given sewing to do. I didn't even know how to use a sewing machine, so I started from square one. Pretty soon I got skilled at it. To sew collars was the hardest. Since I had become the best worker, I was given the difficult and important tasks. I even managed to exceed the quotas. We also did things like produce slogan posters, propaganda articles, and political drawings. I tried to lend a hand at everything. For production I was sometimes awarded a Red Flag or Chairman Mao's "Little Red Book." Hey, have a look at my glasses. Can you guess how strong they are? I got nearsighted from looking at my sewing in those days.

I was also called upon to use my medical skills. It wasn't only to treat fellow prisoners, but also the chief warden and his children. If the ordinary prison workers, along with their relatives and cadre friends, called upon me, I'd go at a moment's notice too. To feel trusted by others, not regarded as an enemy—that was a great consolation. In the middle of the night I'd often be awakened to treat someone's fever, stomachache, or convulsions. It always took at least a few hours, but the next day I'd be off to work as usual. I was working like mad both day and night. The prison workers showed their appreciation. Even today they still sometimes come to see me at the hospital to have me treat their children. Back then, not being treated too harshly was the best I could ask for. Please don't laugh at me. At the slightest praise I'd be overjoyed for days.

There's one thing I want to mention. When I was officially arrested on the seventh of September, 1966, in the prison hospital, I was still married. My husband was working in Peking. The weather was getting cold, I thought, and his clothes and belongings had already been taken away when our apartment was ransacked. He shouldn't suffer anymore because of me. So I wrote a letter asking him to arrange a divorce. By the end of September, it came through. Not long after that his sister suddenly came to the prison. She left me some tonic and 20 *yuan*, a lot of money in those days. I asked the guards to pass on my request that she not bring any more money again or anything else. But I was penniless in prison, so I kept 5 *yuan* and begged one of my wardens to send the rest to my mother. Of course I didn't know she was dead.

This warden was a retired army officer. At first he refused, but I pleaded with him and he finally agreed. Later that sister-in-law sent another 30 *yuan*. She came five or six times altogether gave me about 120 *yuan*. Each time I asked the warden to send it on to my mother. Strangely, though, my family never wrote me even once about this. I thought maybe they just hated me too much. A year later, when I was sentenced, I was finally allowed to see them. Whenever they visited, wishing Chairman Mao longevity and studying his quotations would take up half of the time while the rest was filled with my sobbing. Not much chance to talk. My family didn't say anything about the money and it was too awkward for me to ask. It wasn't until 1979 when I was released that I discovered the money hadn't reached them. All those years I had regarded that warden as my benefactor. I still don't understand what was going on. Maybe the post office had refused to deliver the money since the postal service often refused to handle mail for families in disgrace. But even if that was the case, the money should have been returned to me.

Believe it or not, there were some decent prison workers. I had been quite healthy before, but now my weight had dropped to about forty kilos. A warden, seeing how thin I'd become, stealthily slipped my sister-in-law a health certificate.\fn{A document showing that the carrier was in poor health and in need of extra nutrition} The next time she came to visit, she was allowed to bring in a kilo of cakes. I was upset. I thought that it would be much better if the cakes had been given to my mother and nephews. Life outside was hard too. In prison I was given 1.50 *yuan* pocket money each month. I didn't buy anything except soap, toilet paper, and toothpaste, which would last me for months. I tried hard to save as much as possible. When I had saved 5 or 10 *yuan*, I'd send it home. For without my family's warmth, what did I have to live for? I tried my best under the circumstances to do something good for them. It was a kind of atonement.

In prison we also had to do political study and practice criticism. Very often I was called upon to denounce my crime of resisting the Cultural Revolution. Those in charge asked me to set an example of self-criticism at many meetings, both large and small.

Self-criticism was really not so bad. Sometimes I'd be feeling very down. When it was my turn to self-criticize, I'd talk about the many years of education I'd received from the Party and how I should have believed in the Party and its policy. If I had followed the Party's policy, everything would have been all right. After each self-criticism session, my confidence in the Party would be reinforced and I'd feel better about going on living. I'd think about how to perform even better to get an early release and be able to pay back the Party.

Believe it or not, good behavior did work. In 1972 my sentence was reduced from life to an additional ten years—the most lenient treatment I could have expected. I could get out in 1982. So I had something to hope for.

Not long after the Gang of Four was ousted in 1976, the courts reexamined my case. They decided that I had been persecuted during the Cultural Revolution. I was not a murderer, but rather a participant in a group suicide. Thus I was declared innocent and released. I got out in 1979, two and a half years earlier than I had expected. The new verdict went like this:

> The original sentence that Y committed the crime of murder in resistance to the Cultural Revolution is hereby declared invalid. Therefore the conviction is withdrawn and Y is declared innocent and is to be released.

I was released on the second of March, 1979. When I entered prison I only had on the hospital pajamas—the kind with blue and white stripes. Later, my brothers sent me a small suitcase of old clothes that I'd left with the rural medical team before the Cultural Revolution. I'd been wearing them for ten years. I was in rags when I came out. It was a heavy blow to learn that my mother had passed away a long time ago. It was my thoughts of her that had kept me going all those years. Now, with not only my father dead, but mother too, everything was finished. I was close to a nervous breakdown.

I came back home in March and started working in the Children's Hospital in May. I had had only two months rest. Lots of relatives and friends came to visit me. I couldn't sleep peacefully for all sorts of reasons. My mind kept going nonstop. I just couldn't relax. Three of us had planned to die together, but only I was alive. I felt terrible. People tried to comfort me, telling me how lucky I was even to be alive. So many higher-ups had followed Chairman Mao through hellish conditions on the Long March, braving snow-covered mountains and impassable swamps. They too had been persecuted. Many had died; their families had been ruined. Their lot was worse than mine. But those who have survived are trying to make the best of things, aren't they?

My work unit was very considerate. When I was released, my family's houses were still occupied by others and hadn't been returned to us. So I just lived in the hospital dormitory. I'm a Muslim and my meals presented a bit of a problem. My nephew sent me suitable food every day by bicycle. He did this without fail for several years. As for my work, the hospital required me to work as a resident first. According to hospital regulations, you have to do a residency before getting an appointment as a staff doctor. I didn't have a home of my own to worry about, so I made full use of my time studying. In prison we weren't allowed to read professional books and journals so I had to double my efforts to make up for lost time. Before long, I got up to date.

I was put in charge of eight wards scattered between the first and fifth floors. Every day I ran up and down, fourteen hours a day. One night when I was on duty, I suddenly felt as though I was walking on clouds. I got someone to take my blood pressure. It was 180 over 100. Too high. I immediately asked for an injection. The one I got was supposed to be effective, but half an hour later it still hadn't worked. The systolic was up to 200. The nurses decided among themselves to stop calling me for emergencies and let me rest. They were afraid I was exhausted. But I just continued my rounds. They were very sympathetic and showed their respect. What can I say?

Well, I just doubled my efforts. Normally residency takes a full year, but in only six months I was promoted to staff.

Around this time I made a new acquaintance. He was a graduate from the East China Textile Institute. When he was young, he had shown great promise and had been highly recommended by one of his colleagues, a chief engineer. During the "Antirightist" movement, his mentor was denounced as a Rightist. My friend was asked to expose him. He refused. Instead he tipped off the engineer. To act against his conscience was not part of his character. He was treated as a Rightist and he himself believed that he was one. When the Rightists were de-labeled, he was told that it had never been recorded in his files that he was one. The mistake was his own. But for

twenty years he had believed this. He'd never gotten a promotion or raise. He hadn't even married for fear of the label. How could such an absurd thing have happened? When I met him he was over fifty and still single.

Well, we got married. We have a lot in common and can communicate well. He's very considerate to me. We're a comfort to each other.

I adopted one of my brother's sons. He's studying a foreign language now in Peking University. My husband was recently promoted to director of his factory. At last I have a real home and family.

Even today, though, I still can't rid myself of thoughts of the past. I don't think about it every day, but there's no escaping from my memories. In my mind my father's image appears again and again. My colleagues have asked me,

"You couldn't even step on an ant, how could you have done it?"

In the Cultural Revolution people were deprived of their basic humanity. Who in their right mind could stab their own father to death? Under normal circumstances no one would even consider it. And what about my mother? How can I make up for that?

If I hadn't done what I did, my parents would perhaps be enjoying life today. If I'm not to blame, then who is? No matter how hard I try to justify my actions, I still fail. I can't decide whether I saved my father or destroyed him.

In the beginning I felt that I had saved him but I feel more and more now that I destroyed him. Other things I can make sense of, but not this. My mind just goes round and round. All those bad things were caused by the Gang of Four. Why then did all those others survive until now and not my parents? It must be my fault alone. Whenever I think this way, I feel that I must have been guilty. It's too depressing. And yet my friends tell me that only when I enjoy life will my parents be able to rest in peace. They're right perhaps, aren't they?

I can't say any more. Please don't ask me to go on.

1937

76.34 A Summer Experience\fn{by Ge Wujue (1937-)} Wenzhou, Zhejiang Province, China (M) 8

I was thirty-two on my last birthday. This all happened during summer. Since then I have often felt as though I have been in a sort of trance, a strange sensation lingering in my mind—sweetness, bitterness, sourness? …

*

There are two people in my family—Sha Sha, my four-year-old daughter and myself. Last spring I was able to get a three-room suite with a balcony front and rear. Then I began to understand that being a member of the Provincial Overseas Chinese Association was not merely an empty title.

But the spacious rooms brought inconvenience too. I have to spend a lot of time and energy looking after them. In the past I had only one room twelve square meters in size and could clean it easily just by standing in the middle and turning around. Also the new place is a long way from the kindergarten Sha Sha attends every day. When I go to fetch her, I have to change buses twice. But it's the best kindergarten in the city and thanks to my status as an overseas Chinese I can send Sha Sha there. The third inconvenience is having a female visitor by the name of Yang Na, whom I first met by chance at a friend's house. After I moved she came around to have a look and since then has been a frequent visitor.

Perhaps this shouldn't be considered an inconvenience. Yang Na is very beautiful. My ex-wife was also very beautiful. I remember being in a park once and seeing a young couple hand in hand, shoulder to shoulder, posing for a picture. The young girl was rather ugly and the young man thin and short. But I was touched by the scene, and even thought that real love perhaps only existed between ugly couples. She Sha's mother always used to hum her favorite song, "Love is like a wanderer, or a bird flying free in the sky." She used to think that this song from an Indian film was from *Carmen.* A year ago, when we left the Civil Affairs Bureau after finalizing our divorce, she turned and asked me with a smile:

"Will you buy me a pair of brown boots as a memento? They've just come in. We'll never go shopping together again."

As the department store was opposite the bureau, I complied with her request. I was only thirty-two, but in matters of love I had already proved myself something of a pessimist. Sports competitions are real games which can be judged by marks, and in seconds or millimeters. But love is the product of ignorance and impetuous emotion. Now you can add money, overseas connections and housing to that. I decided to remain unmarried, rejecting anyone who was recommended by others or who introduced herself. Of course I had dropped large hints

about this to Yang Na.

Yang Na was an elegant young woman, who would tilt her head slightly backwards when she looked at me. Then she would smile and appealing lines would appear at the corners of her mouth.

"You've been unlucky," she said.

No, I'd prefer to say that I managed to escape my bad luck. Yang Na's eyebrows had been carefully plucked into fine and delicate lines. I hoped she hadn't come to bring me more bad luck.

Since I was a basketball coach for the provincial team and my timetable was determined by the training schedule, I was often the last parent to fetch my daughter at the kindergarten. One windy day, the sort that is quite common in North China in May, our training session ended early. When I got to the kindergarten, the children had just finished their dinner and were playing in the courtyard, their eyes glued to the front door. Once the parents arrived, the place exploded with joyful noises.

Sha Sha wasn't in the playground so I went to the third grade classroom where the children were gathered around in a circle singing and dancing.

Little friends, clap your hands
And follow one by one.
Don't talk, don't turn
Just circle round and round, like a rubber ball.

"Sha Sha, here comes your father." The young teacher playing with the children called out in a low voice. I hadn't seen her before. Perhaps she was new.

Turning her head Sha Sha walked straight through the circle and threw the dancing group into disorder. Without saying a word, she gave me her hand and I led her out of the classroom.

"Mr. Wang! Mr. Wang! Please hold on a minute," the young teacher called out. "Sha Sha's dress should be mended. Would you ask her mother to do it?"

"All right, all right," I muttered.

"I don't have a mother. Daddy and Mummy are divorced," offered Sha Sha.

My daughter was only telling the truth. But she had put me in an awkward position.

"Oh, I'm sorry! I didn't know. I've only been with this class for a little while." The teacher blushed and looked even more uncomfortable than I did.

"That's all right. I'll mend it. I'm afraid I'm too careless,"I tried to comfort her.

On the bus home I asked Sha Sha, "What's your new teacher's name?"

She shrugged her shoulders. Sha Sha's teacher couldn't be called beautiful. Her eyes weren't large, her forehead was narrow, and she was a little heavy by current standards. Her mouth was somewhat large too, but she had a small exquisite nose and moved very gracefully when she ran. She would race in and out of the classroom and I couldn't help thinking that with her long legs she could, with some coaching, hit the 12.5-second record for the 100-meter dash.

Back home, after putting the rice on the stove, I started mending the clothes. Sha Sha sat on a small stool preparing shallots which made her eyes water. I heard footsteps on the stairs. I knew that it was Yang Na and immediately put the clothes away. I was afraid she would take a look at them and repeat in that affected manner (who knows whether she meant it or not):

"Hey, you really are unlucky!"

Yang Na was standing at the door smiling. She wore a pair of white high-heeled shoes and a white sweater with a blue brooch. Her skirt was made of black velvet with a gold-colored trim. Her dark, long hair hung loose, fastened together with a large white clip. She had bright eyes and ivory white skin. She was really a beauty and she knew it. Perhaps my expression told her. At any rate her face was glowing with health and she was brimming with confidence. Waving her artificial crocodile handbag, Yang Na made a mock bow and said with a smile,

"Here I am again."

"Come in." She went into the front room ahead of me and took some attractively packaged chocolates from her handbag.

"This is a birthday present for Sha Sha. They're made in Switzerland."

"But Sha Sha's birthday's on the sixteenth of next month. It's still a whole month away," I said.

"Really?" she laughed. Her frequent laughter seemed slightly unnatural, designed only to create an effect. She could start and stop at will. "Then I'll have to come over again next month. Every time I come here I have to rack

my brains to find an excuse. You really are impossible!"

She sat down gracefully. "You really ought to buy a suite of furniture with your overseas remittance certificates. I'd like to advise you on what to get."

I headed her off with a vague reply, "Some other time."

"When? When you invite me to your wedding?" She started laughing again.

The joke annoyed me. Just then I heard the water boiling.

"I'll go and cook. Do you mind if I leave you by yourself for a while?"

"Go ahead." She stood up and walked over to the balcony. I didn't like her standing there where she could be seen from outside.

"Would you like to listen to some new tape? One is by that famous Japanese singer, Yamaguchi Momoe."

She turned on the tape-recorder, but then suddenly said, "I'll do the cooking. I'll make something really nice. Have you got some slippers? I like to change out of these shoes."

Wearing my slippers, walking about the place as though she owned it, what did it all mean?

"I was just going to make some noodles and eggs. It's easy enough."

"Oh, you really are unlucky!" Heaving a sigh, she picked up a rattan chair, and walked over to the ba1cony.

*

Sha Sha was a slightly eccentric child who had been brought up in the shadow of family quarrels. When she was a year old, it was I who had looked after her, coaxing her to go to sleep.

"That's a good girl. Don't cry, don't cry. Your mummy has gone out dancing."

When she grew up, she often heard her mother say, "Go away! Go and see your 'darling daddy!'" or from me, "Go and get your mother!" Sha Sha had a fierce temper. Whenever she was in a bad mood she would shriek whether we had guests or not. When she was only two she already knew how to register her complaints by breaking things. Her mother and I were surprised when we saw her do it the first time, but what could we say—she was only imitating us.

We had been divorced a year. It frightened me that Sha Sha never once asked for her mother. Somewhere, there was a murky area in her mind, a very profound recess indeed. Sometimes when I woke up during the middle of the night, I would look at the plump child asleep beside me and feel guilty. It wasn't her fault—it was the two of us who were to blame.

Then one day, probably about half a month after I first talked with the new teacher, I once again arrived late to fetch Sha Sha. I'd bought a red balloon on the way.

"Sha Sha, look at the balloon. Isn't it wonderful?" I tried to interest her.

Sha Sha, pulling a long face, didn't pay much attention, but the teacher took the balloon and asked, "Can it fly all the way up to the sky?"

I thought the teacher seemed more childlike than the child.

"Yes," I said.

"Sha Sha here, hold it." The teacher wound the string around Sha Sha's finger. "Don't you like it?"

"Thank you, Daddy."

Sha Sha looked up at me. She seemed more concerned about saying this than in watching the balloon.

I felt a slight tugging at my heart, moved by these very ordinary words. My daughter had now started to learn manners. In the past she had been unconcerned about courtesy. She had seemed to be indifferent to any toys I bought her too, and sometimes even threw them away.

I wanted to kiss her, but the teacher was one step ahead of me. She hugged Sha Sha, kissed her, and said:

"Sha Sha, that's a good girl. You really are a clever girl."

From that moment on I began to like Sha Sha's teacher.

I am a rather careless father. Once I found a button on Sha Sha's clothing that had been replaced by someone else and another time I found that the elastic band in her sleeve had been renewed. And so I knew that Sha Sha had a good, dedicated teacher. However, a special reflex activated by Yang Na's visits warned me to be on the alert.

That day the training was longer than usual and the water had stopped while I was taking a bath, so I was an hour late when I went to the kindergarten to fetch Sha Sha. Only Sha Sha and her teacher were in the classroom. They sat facing each other on stools, singing children's songs and clapping hands:

Row, row, row the boat,
Row to Granny's bridge.

I don't cry, I'm not naughty,
Granny calls me her little darling.

Intrigued I stood by the window watching them. Sha Sha sat upright, saying:

"Teacher, do you know my granny?"

The young teacher answered:

"No, I don't. Does she love you?"

Sha Sha said, "Yes, she does. She lives in America. See my shoes. Granny bought them for me." Sha Sha raised one foot and then the other. As I entered the classroom, she jumped up immediately, and the teacher helped her to straighten out her clothes. I apologized:

"I am very sorry to have kept you waiting for so long."

The teacher just smiled and asked, "Where do you live?"

"South Zhongshan Street."

"That's convenient. My family live there too. You have to go out of your way to get here from the sports association. I''d be better for me to bring Sha Sha home."

I politely refused, not so much from worrying about inconveniencing her, as from worrying about bringing myself more trouble—that special reflex had put me on guard.

"The buses are too crowded to take a child on. I'll come earlier next time. But thank you very much."

Sha Sha clapped her hands, shouting, "Daddy can say 'thank you' too." We all laughed and the tense atmosphere relaxed.

Although I had rejected her offer she still called on me a little while later.

Sha Sha had tonsillitis and couldn't go to kindergarten. The next day there was an unexpected knock at the door. It was the teacher.

My place was in a mess. The bed wasn't made, dishes were unwashed, there was a mop in the center of the room and clothes thrown on chairs. I had never been much good at doing housework.

Sha Sha's teacher seemed not to notice that I had such a fine flat with modern facilities. She asked quickly, "How *is* Sha Sha?"

"She's still sick. She has a temperature of thirty-nine degrees."

"Teacher! Teacher!" hearing her voice Sha Sha shouted out. She quickly made for Sha Sha's room. Sha Sha welcomed her warmly. She kissed the child's forehead and said, "You're quite hot, just like a little fireball."

Sha Sha asked, "What did you bring me?"

What a child—asking for things!

The teacher fished out a sopping wet plastic bag from her multi-colored satchel. Sha Sha asked, "What's that?"

"My swimsuit.S She put it aside and took out a batch of white papers, saying:

"These are for you. Do you know what they are?"

"White papers." Sha Sha took the papers, staring at them disappointedly.

"You're wrong. There's a little dog, that's a little boat. This is a frog and that's a camel. This one is an old hunchback You just hold them for me." She was skilled at folding the paper into different shapes and gradually she spread them out over the bed.

Having set my mind at rest I went to turn on the television. Tonight was a video relay of the basketball final between the U.S.S.R. and the U.S. from the World Student Games. Since basketball was my job I needed to watch it.

After a while the teacher came in and asked,

"Mr. Wang, do you have any mung beans?"

I had more than ten tins of green soya beans but no mung beans.

"No, I haven't," I answered.

"Well, do you have a saucepan?"

"Yes, in the kitchen. What a great shot!"

I didn't want to move from the TV. The American No. 1 had just made a beautiful backhand shot. It took a strong player with several years' hard training to do that! Now he made another block and then, dribbling behind his back, he moved to shoot again.

"Teacher!" Sha Sha shouted from her room.

"I'm coming," she answered cheerfully. She was standing right behind me, fascinated by the game. Hearing Sha Sha call she smiled.

"I've brought some mung beans. Sha Sha likes mung bean puree. Where's your saucepan?"
I ran to the kitchen and handed her the pan and hurried back to the TV.
"It's not the best time for Sha Sha to get sick," she chortled."
While the puree was boiling, the teacher wandered about, comforting Sha Sha and occasionally watching the television. My flat was full of the sound of her busy footsteps and warm laughter.
The American team won. Sha Sha had finished the mung bean puree and had fallen asleep. I discovered that the teacher had also tidied up my rooms. Now she was about to leave. Suddenly I realized I didn't even know her name.
"What's your name?"
"Call me Meiqing," she answered with a smile.
Sometimes you feel perfectly relaxed, perhaps from drinking good wine, from listening to good music, or watching a good film. Tonight, I'd enjoyed the best-played basketball game I'd ever seen. I asked the teacher, "What do you think of this television?" By this question I was just showing off because I was in such a good mood.
"It's very nice. After watching a color TV no one likes black-and-white. Was it expensive?"
I told her the price. She was astonished.
"That's a lot! Unless I got a raise, it would take me five years of saving my whole salary to buy one." She laughed again and I thought how pleasant she was. "I'm on my way now. I'll come over tomorrow night."
"I'm sorry to have troubled you." Having said this I immediately regretted it. From then on I didn't really give it much more thought.
The next day I tidied up, then bought five ice-lollies to make ice cream the way Yang Na had taught me.
The red and green traffic lights were glittering one after another and the evening streets were bustling with noise and excitement. In the distance I saw Meiqing turning a comer at a good pace, her vigorous, lithe strides bathed in the bright lights!

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In the end I decided that whenever my training finished late, I would ask her to bring Sha Sha home. I used to stand on the balcony waiting for them, waiting to see Meiqing holding Sha Sha's hand as they turned the corner. A little later on I changed my routine. In the past, I used to ring up the kindergarten if I had time to go and fetch Sha Sha. Now I hardly ever rang, and instead waited for them on the balcony every evening.
And now a new problem vexed me; that of whether I should give a key to Meiqing or not. It was a serious decision.
Yang Na still came to my place once or twice a week. She hadn't met Meiqing yet because Meiqing only saw Sha Sha to the stairs and didn't come in. She was reserved and seemed only to be interested in her work.
One rainy day my department held a long meeting to discuss our training programme before going abroad. Afterwards I raced home to find Meiqing teaching Sha Sha to sing.
"Come on, let's sing it again:"

Little alarm clock, ding-a-ling-a-ling,
Our little room, silent, silent and silent.

The two, their clothes drenched, sat by the front door.
Meiqing cuddled Sha Sha and held her small hand to beat time. They only noticed me when I stood directly in front of them.
Meiqing rose to her feet quickly, smoothing out her wet dress. She had a nice figure, full and athletic, like a professional swimmer.
"Sha Sha, your daddy's here."
Sha Sha's eyes narrowed in annoyance.
"We've been waiting ages for you. We're both nearly frozen to death." The tense atmosphere was dispersed by the frank, light tone of Meiqing's complaint. She was someone who treated even hardships and difficulties as jokes. I saw that her lips had turned purple from the cold.
As I took Sha Sha in my arms, her small hands were like ice. I then let slip what I had previously been reluctant to say:
"Meiqing, I think I'd better give you a key."
She laughed.

"How can you do that? I can't pay for any losses. If something in your place got stolen, I couldn't possibly pay for it. My wages wouldn't cover anything like that.

She meant what she said. There was something both *naïve* and charming in the way she spoke. She said goodbye and quickly ran downstairs, seeming almost afraid that she might have to make a decision which would affect the rest of her life. There was obviously something on her mind.

From the corridor came the sound of footsteps. It was Yang Na. Her waterproof black silk mackintosh was dripping wet. She looked very elegant, her face white, eyes wide.

"Here I am again. Am I welcome?" she said with a smile.

I opened the door.

"Come in. I've just come back myself."

"Was that girl on the stairs a nurse at the kindergarten?" Yang Na took off her hat, and her hair tumbled down loosely like a waterfall.

"She's a teacher there."

"Well, what's the difference between a nurse or a teacher in the kindergarten. They're the same thing," she said contemptuously. I wondered what she thought of her own job as a worker at the water-supply company. I was angry, but decided not to say anything.

I silently did my routine housework, helped Sha Sha change her dress, dried her hair with a towel and then put the water on to cook noodles and eggs. Sha Sha was watching TV and I imagined Yang Na would be watching too, although she was not usually that interested. She often liked to bring tapes of popular music to listen to, though she had never made much comment on my cassette recorder. "Not bad" was her pet phrase about all of these things, and I wondered what might actually elicit the word "fine" from her.

While I'd been lost in thought, the water had come to a boil. Removing it from the stove, I turned round to see Yang Na leaning against the kitchen door. She held her head high and her large eyes were full of tears.

"You don't like me, do you?"

I couldn't really answer her question then. She was like a calendar photograph of a movie star. I could hang it on the wall to appreciate it, but there was no real connection between us. Whether she was happy or not, Yang Na always looked good. She had a kind of graceful bearing, but she was not a very substantial person.

Sha Sha's mother was also pretty, but she was always worried about this heaven-sent endowment being spoiled. To her it had actually been a burden. Her beauty was only in her appearance, in the large sentimental eyes, the refined nose and the soft lips … but her innermost heart was empty, poor and barren, like an abandoned well. If you live with a woman like that you often feel deceived. Only the inner beauty, the beauty of personality, like a clean, murmuring spring, flows for ever and makes you aware of the sweetness and warmth of life.

"You're very pretty. You will be happy," I said comfortingly after thinking a bit.

"No. I'm not. You're the lucky one." She continued leaning against the door, staring at me without moving.

*

Every day I would see Meiqing twice—in the morning when she came to fetch Sha Sha and in the evening when she brought her home.

I consciously tried to test her several times, for I didn't completely trust her. In any case I was ten years older than she was. Of course these tests were usually related to Sha Sha. Meiqing would wash Sha Sha's dirty clothes, although I had a washing machine; she mended Sha Sha's worn out socks, although I could do I that myself or even buy a new pair. She would also wash Sha Sha's hair, comb out her plaits and cut her fingernails, and once even made an apron for her. In the kindergarten, a movement to give children as much affection as their own mothers had been launched and Meiqing had already given Sha Sha the kind of affection she would have given her own children. She was like a good mother in every respect.

One day while we were chatting, she told me, "In my family there are only three of us, my mother, my brother and myself."

What had she meant by this remark? Another time when we were talking about the children in the kindergarten she said, "Sha Sha has no mother. That really is a shame."

Was this a hint?

One Sunday I met her on the street by chance. It was then that I found out that she didn't live near my place but in fact quite a distance away, more than one bus stop's walk. But she had never once mentioned it to me, pretending instead that she lived close by. Suddenly I felt that I could read her mind.

Once I asked, "Do you get tired of children?"

She answered, "Of course. Sometimes I get so annoyed that I want to pinch them to shut them up. Every day

when I get home, I like to sit quietly just to get rid of all the crying and shouting still ringing in my ears. But I'll get used to it."

So why was she so kind and concerned with Sha Sha?

Now her motives seemed crystal clear. No *fiancée* could be absolutely perfect so I started looking for her faults. I decided not to indulge in any kind of lovesickness, since I had already tasted the sourness of love once. Certainly her job wasn't ideal. People say that doctors and nurses don't pay much attention to their spouses because they see too much suffering. But what about Meiqing? As a kindergarten teacher she saw too many children, so would she still be able to love Sha Sha? She was attractive and lively, but she lacked a certain elegance and dignity and these things were very important when one grew older. Would my mother like her when we went abroad? And her eyes were a little too small. People say that double-fold eyelids and wide eyes are accepted norms of beauty. It would be ideal if Meiqing had eyes like Yang Na.

Perhaps my attitude to falling in love was too sober. In September our basketball team was to go abroad to play for two weeks. I was pleased at this opportunity to force myself to make a decision.

It was then the second of August. I waited on the balcony as usual. Meiqing was wearing a white round-necked blouse, green skirt and a pair of high-heeled shoes in pastel yellow. Holding Sha Sha's hand, she waited for the buses to pass and then they crossed the street. She liked to laugh and run, both of which made her even more attractive. I calculated that in three minutes she would be knocking on the door. I stood behind it and immediately opened it when she did.

Surprised, she said with a smile, "You gave me a scare. You saw us coming?"

"Intuition. Please come in."

She hesitated. Ordinarily she wouldn't have entered. After saying goodbye to Sha Sha, she always left in a hurry. But that day she came in, asking, "Was there something else?"

I asked casually, "Did you go swimming today?"

"Yes. I go every lunch time. You see how tanned I am."

"What about in winter?"

"I go skating."

She was probably a good skater too I thought.

"Which do you like best? Figure skating or racing?"

"I like racing. It's much more exciting. I like to compete with people who can skate fast." She had an amiable disposition, and talked about all sorts of things with genuine enthusiasm. I decided to come to the point.

"Three days from now I am going abroad with the basketball team. May I ask a favor of you? Can Sha Sha stay with you for a couple of weeks?" I watched her reaction.

"Sha Sha, would you like to stay with me?" She took Sha Sha in her arms. She didn't seem to take the whole business that seriously and I felt a little disappointed. Sha Sha said:

"Daddy has already told me and I said all right. Daddy, didn't you mention it yet?"

It had been three nights ago. Since then I had repeatedly told her, "Daddy is going abroad. You will stay with Meiqing for a couple of weeks. I hope the two of you will get along."

"All right, Sha Sha. I'm sure we'll get along very well."

Meiqing was still pretending to talk to Sha Sha. She really was—clever.

I then took out a key from the drawer and handed it to her.

"Please take this."

Slightly irritated she said, "Do you want me to stay here?"

"I'd like you to take care of my home too." I stared at her, smiling.

"May I watch the television then?" It seemed an odd question, asked in innocence.

"Of course." I wanted to say something more meaningful but I stopped myself.

*

I returned home from the trip at four in the afternoon. I could sense the presence of Meiqing everywhere. The rooms were tidy and there was even a white gauze cover on the pillow. A bottle of orange juice and three freshly cleaned radishes were in the refrigerator. On the balcony two small chairs leaned against the wall side by side.

Yang Na must have been here too. She would have been rather surprised to meet Meiqing since she knew that I was still abroad. She would think herself unluckier still. The opportunity to go abroad carries considerable weight on the scales of love. But I didn't feel any responsibility for Yang Na. In any case she would have had to experience sadness sooner or later.

I didn't know whether or not to go to the kindergarten or just wait at home. To stay home would be more

convenient, but I would have to put up with waiting about for more than three hours.

I decided to wait. The truly wonderful moments in one's life are few. When next we met and I said those most important words to her, then a new life would begin.

I just sat on the balcony for those three hours. I knew that she wouldn't be appearing around the corner, but I was content all the same just to stare at the street she walked along every day. It was a street I had often thought about while abroad.

At half past seven she and Sha Sha appeared beneath the traffic light. They were coming. She would be able to see the light from my flat. I turned on the lights in all three rooms, the hanging lamp, the table lamps and the wall and floor lamps. I saw Meiqing with Sha Sha waiting for the cars to pass by one after another. Perhaps she was too impatient to wait any longer, for she took Sha Sha in her arms and carried her across the street.

I felt my heart beating and the wrist watch in my pocket ticking. The watch was an expensive foreign kind which Meiqing had once admired in a television advertisement. I had bought one abroad to give to her.

I went downstairs but then I thought it better to wait for them in the flat and returned. I heard them walking up the stairs. When they came in, Sha Sha was hugging Meiqing, shouting at the top of her lungs, "Daddy! Daddy!"

Meiqing was also very excited.

"I am glad to see you back. We saw the light on in the distance. I even made a bet with Sha Sha about it last night."

She was genuinely overjoyed. I was sure then that I liked her more than I ever had before. Her large mouth seemed quite in keeping with her open-minded character. Her eyes needn't have been any bigger, since they made her seem gentle, friendly and innocent. Her figure was well-developed, not overly lean. She seemed so graceful and unrestrained.

We finished exchanging greetings and she asked about my trip, the team and the condition of my health. She was interested in knowing everything. The watch kept ticking in my pocket. I decided not to bring up what was on my mind just then, but to wait for exactly the right moment.

Meiqing looked at the clock.

"Oh, it's quite late. Are you working tomorrow?"

"No. I've got a couple of days off."

"That's good." She went into Sha Sha's room and sorted out some of the laundry before emerging. "Sha Sha, don't forget to wash your feet before you go to bed."

Now I felt ready to bring up the most important matter. I couldn't even guess at what her reaction would be. Perhaps she would throw herself into my arms with joyful tears in her eyes. Perhaps she would pretend to decline, or stall for the time being, saying, "Let me think it over. I'll tell you tomorrow."

"Are you going home?" I asked calmly.

She smiled, "Oh, I nearly forgot!"

Fishing a key out of her pocket, she handed it to me, saying:

"Sha Sha won't be going to kindergarten tomorrow, and it so happens that I'm taking time off too. I'm getting married the day after tomorrow."

I was stunned. I couldn't even pretend to be calm and just stared at her dumbfounded.

"You must have seen him." She obviously realized there was something odd about my expression.

"Who … who is he?" I asked abruptly."

"You've met him twice. Let me see … no, three times. Once when we were going to a film, we met you on the street. He even gave Sha Sha a sweet."

I couldn't remember that at all. I hadn't ever noticed her with any young men. Perhaps it was because I felt that there wouldn't be anyone who could match me … my first-class living conditions, my job and all of the material possessions which ought to have impressed her. I couldn't help looking around the room.

"Where does he work?" I stammered out the question almost as though I hoped it would change things.

She chortled.

"Where does he work? He can't even get a job in a factory. He works at a stall he set up with other young people. They've just got their licence for it. I've got to go now. Goodbye, Sha Sha!"

Sha Sha ran to the door.

"Bye-bye, teacher!"

She was gone.

The key was on the table and I suddenly found that I had the watch in my hand. I couldn't even remember taking it out of my pocket.

On the balcony I stood staring as she crossed the street and then was swallowed up by the crowd. I hadn't even said thank-you to her and had just taken everything for granted. Now I understood and was deeply ashamed. I felt my cheeks burning.

The sky was studded with a myriad twinkling lights and the fragrance of summer flowers filled the colorful, noisy streets.

Summer has ended now, and after autumn winter will come and then spring …

*

Meiqing still comes over twice a day. In the morning she knocks on the door, calling, "Sha Sha, hurry up! It's late!" In the afternoon she always says, "I'm leaving, Sha Sha. Goodbye!" after she brings Sha Sha home.

I've never really dared express the gratitude I feel, afraid as I am of profaning what is to me the most precious thing in the world …

150.245 Li T'ung: A Chinese Girl In New York\fn{by Pai Hsien-yung (1937-)} Kweilin, Kwangsi Chuang Autonomous Region, China (M) 8

Hui-fen was a Wellesley\fn{Apparently Wellesley College (founded 1870, Wellesley, Massachusetts), an exclusive college for girls, is meant.} girl. Even years after our marriage she had not grown out of the habit of reminding me that, when she was a sophomore, each evening she would walk into the dining hall wearing her best Chinese silks. She said her wardrobe at that time, though a trifle smaller than Li T'ung's, was unquestionably superior to those of Chang Chia-hsing and Lei Chih-ling. The four of them had graduated in the same class at McTyiere's, an aristocratic girls' school in Shanghai. They all came from prominent families, but Li T'ung's was the richest since her father was a high-ranking minister in the government. When they had dancing parties, they had invariably gathered at Li's spacious, German-style villa on the fashionable Rainbow Bridge Road. There were two marble fountains in its garden, and when they danced outdoors the fountains illuminated by multicolored lights provided a rich and picturesque background. And since Li T'ung was an only daughter much pampered by her parents since her early childhood, her mother took great care in providing everything for her parties, including fancy foods laid out buffet-style in the garden.

Hui-fen said that in 1946, on the day when they let Shanghai for the States to study, the four of them had by coincidence all worn red Chinese gowns. Standing together in their flaming silks, they literally lit up the Lung-hua Airport, and as they looked at one another they bent double with laughter. Li T'ung claimed they were the big Four of the postwar world—China, America, Great Britain, and Russia. She styled herself China, on the ground that her gown was the brightest. No one wanted to be Russia, however, because Russian women were of coarse skin and large build and a sizable number of them in Shanghai then were prostitutes. But Li T'ung quite arbitrarily appointed Chang Chia-hsing Russia, since she was the chubbiest of the four. Much peeved, Chang Chia-hsing was still bickering with Li T'ung after they had boarded the plane.

About a hundred relatives and friends came to see the four off. As they waved to the boarding girls, the whole airport was aflutter with handkerchiefs like a swarm of butterflies. The four were then only seventeen or eighteen, too excited to be properly solemn or sentimental at the moment of leavetaking. Her mother hugged Li T'ung and cried bitterly at the last minute and even her father was rubbing his eyes, but Li T'ung in her rakish sunglasses with upsweeping frames still had her mouth open in the form of a smile. Once on the plane, the four chatted interminably. Many foreign passengers looked at these four Chinese girls in red and nodded and smiled with approval or amusement. Hui-fen said that they were then truly elated, as if they were really the plenipotentiaries of the Big Four flying to New York to attend an international conference.

Right from the beginning they had become most popular at Wellesley. Hui-fen always loved to enumerate the large number of boys she had dated on weekends. Especially when I was not too attentive, she would rehearse how X had courted her and how Y had doted on her, thus reminding me of the power she had over boys in her prime. I didn't particularly care of these stories and was at times slightly jealous, but when I saw her soaking her white and delicate hands I the dishpan until they peeled I couldn't help loving and pitying her all the more. she is after all the daughter of an aristocratic family used to having her way, but ever since we were married, she had been doing all the household chores with a willing diligence which I can't help respecting.

Hui-fen said that, although all four had done well socially, Li T'ung far outshone the other three. She eclipsed even American girls from wealthy families. Wellesley was very style-conscious. She had brought over with her a fantastic wardrobe, and she certainly knew how to dress. Every day she walked around in something different, but equally eye-catching. Some American boys, seeing her in her shimmering silks, would teasingly ask her if she

were a Chinese princess or something. Soon she had become a campus personality and she was elected May Queen.

The boys who dated her were too many to be enumerated. Counting on her beauty, Li T'ung was most haughty to them. Wang Chüeh, a Harvard Law School student highly regarded for his scholarship and character, was infatuate with her, but because Li T'ung appeared indifferent, he eventually became disappointed and stopped seeing her. Hui-fen told me that she knew Li T'ung liked him very much, but since she was used to putting on airs, she could change her ways in time and thus lost her chance to be real friends with him. Hui-fen said that she could have bet that Li T'ung suffered a long time after that, but since she was very proud she would never admit it.

During their third year in the States, the civil war was getting worse in China. When Li T'ung's family tried to flee from Shanghai to Taiwan on the *S. S. Peace*, it was sunk on the way. Her whole family were killed in the accident and gone, too, were the valuables they had brought with them. When Li T'ung first learned the news, she was taken to the hospital and confined there for more than a month. She refused to eat anything and the doctors had to tie her up in bed and give her glucose and saline injections every day. After being released from the hospital she was very quiet and subdued. Her three friends, too, were no longer in he mood to compete for popularity since their families had also suffered reverses on account of the war, and all four of them now worked hard at their studies. When Hui-fen referred to her Wellesley period, she always began her recital with "When I was a sophomore." The junior and senior years she mentioned very seldom.

It was not until after her graduation that Li T'ung recovered her former gaiety. She went to New York and became a fashion designer at Originala, making a big salary, but her three friends all agreed, however, that there had been something disconcerting about Li T'ung ever since.

I met Li T'ung for the first time at my wedding. I had dated Hui-fen earlier in Boston; at that time I was a graduate student at M. I. T.\fn{Massachusetts Institute of Technology (co-ed, founded in Cambridge in 1859).} and she came to Boston quite often to visit her relatives even though she was then working in New York. But Hui-fen insisted that we have our wedding in New York and make our permanent home there. She said that all her old friends were now working there and only in New York could she forget she was in a foreign country. Our reception was held in our new home on Long Island. Only our best friends were invited. After changing from her wedding gown, Hui-fen formally introduced me to Li T'ung, Chang Chia-hsing, and Lei Chih-ling. Actually I could spot them right away without these introductions since Hui-fen had described them from head to toe Heaven knows how many times. Chang was big, and Lei petite, rather true to Hi-fen's descriptions, both very self-assured and smart. But as for Li T'ung's looks, I must say Hui-fen's estimate was obviously too conservative. No, Li T'ung had not thought too highly of herself. Her beauty was devastating. She literally shone in the gathering and it hurt the eye to look straight at her, as at the blinding sun that has jumped out of the sea. She had finely chiseled features and a tall-graceful figure. Her eyes, dark and flashing, were spellbinding. A riot of shining black hair, two thirds of it combed across her forehead, tumbled down on her left shoulder. On the left temple just above her ear was a hairpin, a big glistening spider made of small diamonds, its claws digging into her hair, its fat, roundish body tilted upward. She wore that day a Chinese white satin gown of silvery sheen, with a red maple leaf design. The maple leaves were each the size of a palm and flamed like balls of fire. No woman is a reliable judge of another's beauty, and I couldn't help suspecting that Hui-fen's reluctance to praise Li T'ung's looks was a form of protest. After all, standing next to Li T'ung, my bride's extreme prettiness was unmercifully overshadowed by her dazzling beauty. That day I was especially happy not only over my own wedding but at meeting Hui-fen's attractive friends.

"So you're the one who broke up our *mahjong* team. Wait until I get even with you." Upon being introduced, Li T'ung looked me all over with a critical eye and said this with a laugh. She laughed in a strange fashion, with her chin tilted, the left corner of her mouth raised high, and her eyelids closing brusquely as if to obliterate everyone from her vision. Hui-fen had told me they used to live in a four-room apartment on West End Avenue. After office hours the four of them often got together to play mahjong and they called their apartment the Big Four Club. When Hui-fen moved out, they others also split up.

"Then how about letting me join the Big Four Club and pay my membership fee?" I said appeasingly, bowing slightly to Li T'ung and her friends. I had learned to play mahjong and poker in America and had become rather proficient since whenever Chinese friends met it was customary for them to play a game.

"Welcome, welcome," the three girls all laughed at my reply. "You should thank your luck star that you know the game; otherwise we might not let you marry Huang Hui-fen. We originally agreed that no member of our club was permitted to marry a non-gambler."

"I have known about that for some time," I said. "I even know which of you represents which power. Li T'ung is China, right?"

"Don't you dare mention it," Li T'ung cried. "This China of yours has been beaten at every game a catastrophic loser. You think I could win playing against those content to win small games? You go and ask Chang Chia-hsing: half of my paycheck each month goes into her purse."

"You're a lousy player, don't just blame others," Chang Chia-hsing put in.

"Come on, Li T'ung, be a good sport," Lei Chih-ling joined Chang.

"Ch'en Yin," Li T'ung drew close to me and said with her finger pointing at the other girls, "you'd better heed my words: never try to win big when playing with these people, including your beautiful bride. They are the queens of the small game and the quick kill. I build toward the best combination of tiles, if I can't make it, I would rather lose."

The other girls all protested, attacking Li T'ung in unison. But she held fast and wouldn't back down, her head raised high, smiling defiantly, the diamond spider glittering on her profuse black hair. I was greatly intrigued by these smart-looking girls arguing among themselves.

"I too always aim big." I supported Li T'ung, sensing her isolation under the combined attack.

"Really? Really?" Li T'ung cried out in excitement and shook hands with me with evident warmth. "Then I have found my match. Let's have a contest real soon."

At our reception that day, Li T'ung darted here and there conspicuously, her body aflame with the brilliant red leaves on her gown. My bachelor friends were all visibly restless as if they had been scorched by these leaves. My former college roommate Chou Ta-ch'ing repeatedly asked me about Li T'ung that day.

*

After we returned to New York from our honeymoon, Chou Ta-ch'ing rang me up and asked us to have dinner at the tavern-on-the-Green in Central Park. He wanted me to bring Li T'ung along. Chou had taken to several girls in college nothing had worked out, however. He was a nice guy and rather good-looking, too, but somehow he didn't have luck with girls. Each time he fell in love, he was dead serious. I knew he had again lost his head, this time over Li T'ung. When I broke the news to Hui-fen, she said I'd better leave the girl alone since she was so very hard to please, but as I knew Chou Ta-ch'ing to be very honest and reliable, I eventually talked Hui-fen into arranging the meeting.

We picked up Li T'ung and headed for Central Park. She wore a pink organdy gown, very chic. But this time her diamond spider had slid down almost to the end of the flowing mane around her left shoulder, swaying there as if it were suspended from some invisible filament. It was altogether striking. Chou Ta-ch'ing had been waiting for us for some time at the Tavern-on-the-Green. He had just had his hair cut, and looked overly trim. He got up as soon as he saw us, with a stiff smile on his face, seemingly still as nervous as when, back in his college days, he had waited outside the girls' dormitory to take his date to a dance. After we were seated, Chou Ta-ch'ing removed the gold wrapping paper from a box with a transparent plastic lid and took therefrom a large purple orchid as a present for Li T'ung. She smiled, her eyelids drooping, and pinned the orchid to the sash around her waist. Chou Ta-ch'ing ordered champagne for all of us, but Li T'ung asked the waiter to bring her a Manhattan.

"I detest champagne," Li T'ung said. "It tastes like water."

"A Manhattan is quite strong, isn't it?" Chou asked with evident concern as he saw Li T'ung emptying half of her glass in one gulp.

"It suits me beautifully." So saying, Li T'ung proceeded to drain her glass I no time, and picking up the cherry, she stuck it into her mouth. As a waiter passed by, she pointed to the empty glass with the cigarette between her fingers:

"Another Manhattan, please."

Thus drinking, Li T'ung began to talk with great gusto about her adventures at Yonkers. She said she had had no luck in horse racing either, she would win at the start but then lose. She asked me if I knew how to play poker; I said I was rather good at it. She stretched her arm across the table and gave me a firm handshake.

"Huang Hui-fen, our husband is so sweet!" Li T'ung turned to Hui-fen. "Better let me have him. He and I could run a prosperous casino in Chinatown."

We all broke out laughing. Chou Ta-ch'ing laughed uneasily: he knew nothing about gambling and Li t'ung had paid him scarcely any attention. A couple of times he had tried to change the topic of our conversation, but was brushed aside by Li T'ung.

"You may have him," Hui-fen answered Li T'ung laughingly and gave me a push. Li T'ung got up and slipped her arm into mine. We made for the dance floor in the open surrounded by lamps casting amber light. Li T'ung rested her head on my shoulder while dancing. The amber light shone radiantly on her hair and gown.

"Chou Ta-ch'ing is crazy about you," I whispered to her. Chou and Hui-fen had stepped down to the dance floor.

"Oh?" Li T'ung tossed her head, smiling. "You should have told him to take lessons in gambling then."

"He's a very nice fellow."

"I'm not supposed to marry a non-gambler, you know that," she grinned, and rested her head on my shoulder again.

Li T'ung had five or six Manhattans before we finished our dinner. Each time she ordered a drink, Chou Ta-ch'ing looked at her with sheepish disapproval.

"Why look at me like that? Too stingy to buy me a drink or something?" Li T'ung suddenly turned her head toward Chou Ta-ch'ing. She was laughing, her cheeks flushed crimson and the left corner of her mouth curved upward. Embarrassed, Chou Ta-ch'ing hastened to explain, "I was only afraid you have had too many."

"Tell you what, I'm not going to dance with you until I have another." Li T'ung flipped her fingers toward the waiter for another Manhattan. After finishing that, she got up to dance with Chou. The Latin American band was playing the *La Tino Cha Cha* with much spirit.

"I don't cha cha too well." Chou Ta-ch'ing got up after some hesitation.

"I'll coach you." Li T'ung stepped straight to the dance floor, Chou Ta-ch'ing following behind.

Instantly, Li T'ung attuned herself perfectly to the frenzied tempo of the cha cha. She danced very well, with ease and abandon. Chou Ta-ch'ing could hardly follow her. At first Li T'ung accommodated herself to Chou's clumsy steps, but soon she surrendered herself completely to the ever-quickening pace. Her body surged up and down, whirling in wider and wider circles, her steps getting almost frantic. The cha cha rhythm became, as it were, a whirlwind of noise, blowing out her long rippling hair and the sash around her waist. The diamond spider was flung into the air, clinging tenaciously to her mane, but the purple orchid flew off the sash, swirled down to the floor, and was trodden to a pulp by her feet. She held up her head, her eyelids lowered, her brows closely knit, her long supple waist swaying urgently. She was like a cobra mesmerized by a magic flute, whirling agonizingly even to the point of allowing its body to disintegrate. The Latin musicians played in frenzy until at the climax of the tune they broke out in singing and yelling. The other dancers had stopped to watch Li T'ung even though Chou Ta-ch'ing still struggled to say near her, and they applauded with the musicians when the tune stopped. Li T'ung waved to the musicians and came back to her seat. Sweat stood in beads all over her face and a big tuft of hair clung to her cheek. Chou Ta-chj'ing kept wiping his forehead with a handkerchief, his face flushed purple. The minute she sat down, Li T'ung waved to the waiter for another Manhattan.

"Li T;'ung, you're going to get stoned," Hui-fen patted Li T'ung's hand, trying to stop her.

Li T'ung flung her arms around Hui-fen's neck and said laughing, "Huang Hui-fen, my dear Huang Hui-fen, don't stop me, not tonight. I'm so happy. I've never been so happy as this."

She pointed to her chest, her eyes burning darkly. Before she would let us lead her away, she had two more Manhattans. She staggered a little on her way out. As the Negro porter opened the door for us, Li T'ung suddenly pulled out a ten-dollar bill and unsteadily stuck it into his hand.

"Your Manhattans are the best in the world!" Li T'ung said, bending forward.

On reaching home, Hui-fen blamed me. "I told you to leave Li T'ung alone. she is so willful I really feel sorry for Chou Ta-ch'ing."

*

Our first two years in New York were as busy as the Lexington Avenue Express. Both of us worked on weekdays, but as soon as we got home, we would be asked by Hui-fen's friends to go out again. On weekends there were the inevitable dinner parties, very often planned weeks ahead. Both Chang Chia-hsing and Lei Chih-ling were then going steady, Chang with Dr. Wang, a physician, and Lei with an engineer named Chaing T'eng. Both Wang and Chiang loved to play mahjong and poker, and when we saw the two couples, we passed the time playing either one or the other game: you might say their courtship was carried out among cards and tiles. Li T'ung did not have a steady boy friend and changed her escorts often. Moreover, she had lost interest in mahjong, calling it a tepid game, and one Saturday she suggested horse racing. So off we went that afternoon, the eight of us, to the Yonkers racecourse. Li T'ung's escort was Teng Mao-ch'ang, a business man from Hong Kong in his late thirties who ran a Chinese curio shop on fifth Avenue. Li T'ung said that Teng was an expert on horse racing, winning nine out of ten times. It was a sunny and hot day and all four girls wore broad-rimmed straw hats. Li

T'ung also wore magenta shorts and a white shirt. Its collar was turned back, exposing a rakish wisp of her lavender neckerchief.

The racecourse was already packed when we got there. Except for Teng Mao-ch'ang, we all knew little about horse racing, and he enthusiastically acted as our broker, running up and down in the crowd to gather information and then ordering us with authority to place bets. The first two rounds we each won thirty or fifty dollars and on the third race Teng urged us to throw in a big bet on Lucky.

"I don't want him," Li T'ung said. "I want to pick my own horse."

"Just listen to me once, will you?" Teng advised anxiously, his hand holding a bundle of bills we had given him. "I swear Lucky will hit the jack pot."

Checking over the program, Li T'ung pointed to a name and told Teng, "I want to bet on Bold Lad."

"Lucky's got to win," answered Teng.

"But Bold Lad, what a pretty name! I want to bet fifty bucks on that."

"But that's a lousy horse."

"Throw in a hundred for me then." Li T'ung fished out five twenty-dollar bills and stuck them into Teng's hands. While he was still trying to talk her out of it, Chang Chia-hsing cut in, "Why should you care if she loses? She makes over a thousand a month."

"Why are you so sure I'm going to lose?" Li T'ung turned to Chang with a sneer. "You people like to run after a sure thing. I don't."

Lucky dashed to the forefront as the race began and after two or three rounds of the track he had left the other horses far behind. Chang Chia-hsing, Lei Chih-ling, and Hui-fen, hugging each other, jumped with excitement. Bold Lad, however, had lagged behind from the very beginning. Li T'ung took off her hat and swung it in the air, shouting at the top of her voice:

"Come on, my boy! Come on!"

Her face went red and her voice got hoarse but her Bold Lad failed her pitiably. In the end we all won big on Lucky except Li T'ung. In the next few rounds she got more and more erratic and made random bets on whichever horses took her fancy. The day over, Hui-fen and I turned out to have made the biggest pot over five hundred dollars. Li T'ung, the sole loser, had thrown away over four hundred. In a happy mood Hui-fen took all our friends to a Chinese restaurant on Upper Broadway and ordered a sumptuous dinner. At the table Teng Mao-ch'ang began to recount his experiences at the Hong Kong races; much fascinated, Chang Chia-hsing and Lei Chih-ling showered him with questions.

"You made me slip today," Li T'ung suddenly broke in on teng. "You are responsible for all my losses."

"You wouldn't have lost if you had listened to me," Teng said.

"Why should I have listened to you? Who gave you the right to boss us around anyway?" Li T'ung flipped her chopsticks down on the table and retorted, her eyes flashing.

"All right, all right, I'll try to keep quiet the next time we go to Yonkers," Teng smiled appeasingly.

"What next time? Can't I go horse racing without you?"

Teng couldn't find anything to say to these cutting words; he looked at Li T'ung with that helpless smile fixed on his face. We all felt a little uneasy. It was an uncomfortable dinner.

*

During the third year of our stay in New York, Hui-fen came down with a serious case of insomnia. The doctor blamed it on her taut nerves, but I knew it must be those frantic parties that had impaired her health. Without waiting for Hui-fen's consent, I asked for a transfer to the Buffalo branch of our company. Although Hui-fen didn't make too much of a fuss about the move, I knew she must resent it. When Chang Chia-hsing and Lei Chih-ling heard the news, they all became indignant and accused me of kidnapping their Huang Hui-fen.

During the six years we lived in Buffalo, we came back to New York only once, once for Lei's wedding and the other time for Chang's. We met Li T'ung on both occasions. In fact, she was Chang's bridesmaid. She looked thinner, but her striking beauty still arrested attention. The reception was held I Dr. Wang's luxurious apartment on Central Park West; with his wide connections, little wonder that he had so many well-wishers gathered in the living room and dining room. Pushing through the crowd, Li T'ung came near me and asked me to take her out for a walk. She dragged me to Hui-fen's side, asking with a smile, "Won't you lend me our husband for a moment?"

"Take him along. I don't want him any more," Hui-fen smiled.

"You'd better keep an eye on that girl," Lei Chih-ling teased. "She's going to kidnap your husband.

"All the better," Hui-fen said, still smiling. "I won't have to go back to Buffalo then."

"There were too many people in there and I was suffocating," Li T'ung said to me when we were in Central Park. "To tell you the truth, Ch'en Yin, I want to you to buy me a drink, too. It was all Chang Chia-hsing's brilliant idea: a champagne party. You know I loathe that stuff."

I walked Li T'ung to the Tavern-on-the-Green and ordered a Manhattan for her and a Scotch on the rocks for myself. She chatted gaily while drinking. She said she had changed her job. Originala had raised her pay to fifteen hundred a month, but she had quit because she had a fight with her boss. Now she worked at *Vogue* where she got even higher pay as the second in command in the Design Department. Not happy with her new job, either, she shrugged her shoulders, since her new boss was an unbearable crank who had rheumatism all year round. I asked her if she still lived on Lexington Avenue. She laughed and said she had moved three times since I had last seen her. She had already gulped down three drinks during our talk and her face was beginning to turn red.

"Take it easy, Li T'ung," I said to her, "you don't want to get high as you did the last time here."

"So you still remember it," Li Tu'ung tossed her head and laughed. "I must have been terribly drunk that night. Did I scare your friend Chou Ta-ch'ing?"

"No, he wasn't scared, but he had been saying since that you're the best-looking girl he's ever met."

"No kidding," Li t'ung laughed, "No I remember seeing him at Macy's four or five months ago. He was shopping with his wife. He gave me his address and asked me to visit him."

"He's a very nice guy."

"He must be," Li T'ung laughed again, "He keeps sending me a Christmas card each year with best wishes for my happiness. A very interesting fellow, but he doesn't gamble."

I asked Li T'ung if she still went to the races. She suddenly beamed, gulped down her drink, and gave me a slap on the hand.

"Tell you what, last Saturday I went to Yonkers, all by myself. I picked Gallant Knight—isn't that a cute name? Guess what, I won four hundred and fifty on that. Four hundred and fifty on a single bet! That was my greatest accomplishment in my whole damn life, Ch'en Yin. You remember Teng Mao-ch'ang, don't you, the self-appointed expert on horse racing. He went back to Hong Kong and married someone of Chinese and Portuguese blood. Well, anyway, I've suddenly become lucky on horses since he left. I've won every single bet for the last three months."

Li T'ung talked rapidly, shaking with laughter, and kept asking the bartender to fill it up for her. It was getting dark outside and Li T'ung got up abruptly, saying, "We'd better go; otherwise Huang Hui-fen might think I've really kidnapped her husband."

*

We had Lili during our second year in Buffalo. When the time came for her to go to kindergarten, Hui-fen gave me her ultimatum: if I persisted in staying in buffalo, she would take Lili with her to New York and resume her work there. She said she wouldn't mind having insomnia again. I agreed that the methodical, dull life in buffalo was not very healthful and so we moved back to New York and bought a new house on Long Island. Hui-fen decided that we should give a big party the first Saturday after we moved into the new house. On that day Chang Chia-hsing and Lei Chih-ling came with their husbands. Li T'ung, however, came unescorted. Some other friends came in Dr. Wang's car.

Hui-fen had spent three solid days preparing for the party, and came up with over a dozen Chinese dishes. After dinner we began to play poker and *mahjong*. Huifen asked Chang, Lei, and Li T'ung to join her at the same table to play mahjong so that they might talk about the good old days at the Big Four Club. After one round, however, Li T'ung got up to exchange places with someone at the men's poker table. She said she had not touched *mahjong* for ages and had forgotten practically all the rules. I wasn't playing that night, busy serving drinks to spare Hui-fen further work. After both tables had warmed to the games, I came to the poker table in the dining room but couldn't find Li T'ung thee. The men said she had left the table a while ago for a short recess. After searching everywhere, I finally opened the door separating the living room from the porch and found her asleep in a *rattan* rocking chair.

The porch was dimly lit by a small yellow lamp hanging down from the ceiling. Li T'ung's head inclined to her right shoulder, her hands were on the armrests, her long slender fingers dangling limply. Her long dark red skirt almost touched the floor; in the dim light it appeared dingy, as if it were an old blanket of faded color. Her hair seemed to have grown much longer, covering the whole of her left cheek, flowing down to he chest. The diamond spider was still there, squatting on her left cheek, fierce, shimmering. I had never seen Li T'ung so haggard, so fatigued. No matter where I had seen her before, she had always looked defiantly gay and untamed, as

if she would never agree to lie down for a rest. My footsteps woke her. With a start, she sat up, pushed back her hair, and said with a yawn, “Is that you, Ch’en Yin?”

“You were asleep, Li T’ung,” I said.

“Oh? I felt a little tired at the table and so I quit. I thought I would just take a little rest here, but I passed out. Isn’t that funny? Thank God, you’re here. Get me a drink, will you?

I fixed a bourbon on the rocks and took it to the porch. Li T’ung took a big gulp and heaved a sigh. “Jesus, that was good. I had bad luck tonight. Haven’t had a darn hand the whole evening. It bored me to tears watching them playing. I’m getting more and more impatient, I guess. I can’t even stand poker any longer.”

In the living room Hui-fen, Chang Chia-hsing, and Lei Chih-ling were interminably talking and laughing. Chang had a loud voice, and every once in a while she would burst out laughing, drowning out other sounds. The poker players were also quite spirited: the chips kept knocking against the table.

“Probably Chang Chia-hsing has made another smashing combination of tiles,” Li T’ung remarked, shaking her head in amusement. She looked even thinner than the last time I had seen her, her cheeks sunken a little, but her dark eyes flashed as brightly as before.

“Get me another one, will you?” She handed me the empty glass. I got her another bourbon. As we were chatting on the porch, my five-year-old daughter, Lili, popped in, bundled up in a white nightgown, a knot of hair tied with a blue ribbon sticking up on her head. She had a round chubby face, clear dark eyes. A real darling. She would never go to bed until I had kissed her good night. I bent down and she, standing on tiptoe, gave me a gentle kiss.

“Don’t you want to give auntie a kiss, too?” Li T’ung said to Lili. Lili toddled to Li T’ung, bent down her neck with her encircling arms, and smacked her on the forehead. Li T’ung hugged her and put her on her lap.

“A perfect copy of Huang Hui-fen,” Li T’ung said to me, “she’ll turn out to be a real beauty, too.”

“What’s this, auntie?” asked Lili, toying with a big diamond ring on Li T’ung’s finger.

“It’s a stone.”

“Let me have it,” Lili said with her coaxing voice.

“Then it’s yours.” Li T’ung took the ring from her finger and slipped it on Lili’s thumb. Lili raised her hand and swung it so that it glittered against the dim porch light.

“Don’t let her play with such a valuable thing. It may get lost,” I tried to intervene.

“It’s Lili’s now, I mean it.” Li T’ung looked up to me, her face wearing a serious expression that came to her rarely. She bowed down and kissed Lili on her chubby face, saying, “Be a good girl. The ring is for your dowry. Get yourself a good husband in the future. Go along now and let Daddy keep it for you.”

Lili handed the ring to me, laughing happily, and then left for bed.

“Mama gave it to me when I left Shanghai,” Li T’ung pointed to the ring in my hand and said, “It was supposed to be part of my dowry.”

“Since you like Lili so much, why can’t you be her godmother?” I said.

“Oh, come on,” Li T’ung got up abruptly, her strange smile again drawing up the left corner of her moth. “Huang Hui-fen is a wonderful mother and what does Lili need me for? Look at me, am I the motherly type? Let’s go in now. I’ve already lost a great deal. I’m going to win it back.”

*

We didn’t see much of Li T’ung after that evening, since she rarely attended our parties. One story had it that she was kept by an American millionaire from California on his Westchester estate, while another maintained that she was messily involved with a businessman from south America. On our way to downtown Manhattan one day, we were just entering the East River Freewway when a huge golden Continental convertible dashed past us and someone in it shouted at us in a shrill voice:

“Huang … Hui- … fen. …”

Hui-fen stuck out her head from the window and heaved a disapproving sigh. “She’s given me a real scare!”

It was Li T’ung yelling from that open convertible. She was seated next to the driver but she had turned around to face us, her arms flung wide apart and waving desperately, a huge bright red scarf on her head flapping in the air. The convertible shot forward like a golden dart and carried Li T’ung with it. The man driving the car was a big fellow; he looked Caucasian. That was the last time we saw Li T’ung.

*

Lei Chih-ling gave birth to a boy during the fourth year of her marriage. When the boy was one month old, the happy parents gave a party in their Riverdale apartment to celebrate. Chang Chia-hsing and her husband didn’t

show up for dinner that evening, which was rather unusual with them. We had already played a few rounds of poker when they finally arrived. A telegram in her right hand, Chang Chia-hsing waved to us and cried:

"Li t'ung is dead! Li T'ung is dead!"

"Which Li T'ung?" Lei Chih-ling walked quickly to meet her.

"What do you mean 'Which Li T'ung'?" Chang said impatiently.

"Nonsense," Lei cut her short. "Li t'ung left for Europe only two weeks ago."

"Look at this." Chang forced the telegram into Lei's hand. "I just got it from the Chinese Consulate in Italy. Li T'ung drowned herself in Venice. She didn't even leave a note and didn't have a single relative here. The police must have found my address in her purse and then asked the Consulate to wire me. So I went with the police to open up her apartment on Fifth Avenue. Closets and bureaus full of clothes and shoes—I don't know what to do with them."

Chang Chia-hsing and Lei Chih-ling started arguing over why Li T'ung had killed herself. Why? Why? Suddenly both of them became indignant, as though Li T'ung had deceived them by committing suicide. Hui-fen took the telegram and read it in silence; she didn't say anything.

"How can one account for it? Why should she kill herself?" cried Chang Chia-hsing. "She earned more money than any of us here—how could she be so fed up with everything?"

"I told her many times to get married and settle down. But she was always mockingly evasive, never taking my words seriously," said Lei Chih-ling.

"So many men after her and she spurned them all. Whom to blame?" added Chang Chia-hsing.

Lei Chih-ling went to her bedroom and took out a picture to show us, saying, "I've forgotten to show you this. I received it only last week—who could have expected her suicide?"

It was a color picture. Li T'ung was standing there by herself in an unbuttoned black topcoat, her left arm akimbo, her right hand raised high as if she were waving to some people. Her chin tilted, her eyelids lowered, she had that strange arrogant smile on her face. In the background stood a leaning tower, seemingly about to topple on her. Hui-fen held the picture in her hand and looked at it intently. I went over to her side and found here reading the lines written at the back of the picture:

Dear members of the Big Four:
This is the Pisa tower,
China, December, 1960

Chang Chia-hsing and Lei Chih-ling continued to argue over the cause of Li T'ung's suicide, Chang saying that it was probably because that American had deserted her and Lei maintaining that she had been suffering from a bad case of nerves. But both agreed that Li T'ung shouldn't have died.

"I know," Chang Chia-hsing suddenly broke out, shaking her head as if something had dawned upon her. "Li T'ung should have gone to Europe by herself. A Chinese should never do that, running around in Europe by herself like the Americans. Her ghost will now be wandering there all alone. She ought to have stayed in new York; at least we could have kept her busy with cards or something. Then she wouldn't have had the time to die."

Lei Chih-ling seemed to agree with Chang Chia-hsing's conclusion and stopped arguing. A moment of silence fell. The two of them seat facing each other, lost in their thoughts. Hui-fen, her head lowered, kept turning the picture in her hand. The men at the card table were either fiddling with the chips or smoking quietly. When the silence was getting oppressive, a lusty cry from Lei's baby broke out in the bedroom. Lei jumped up with a start and said, "Come on, people, let's get back to our game. No use talking further."

She herded us back to the card table and poker was resumed. Somehow the game got wild and our bets grew bigger and bigger. Chang Chia-hsing was heard repeatedly shouting, "Show your hand! Show your hand!" She had her sleeves rolled back and bet a pile of chips for each hand. Lei Chih-ling followed suit, and even Hui-fen, usually a cautious poker player, seemed to have been infected with their frenzy and pushed heaps of her chips into the pool recklessly. Even with their better self-control, the men also played with abandon since the game had already got out of hand. Chips of all colors kept rolling back and forth from one player to another. Each time Chang Chia-hsing won, she threw her arms across the table and swept the chips to her side, shouting and laughing until she came to tears. Lei Chin-ling had a small voice, but she tried to vie with Chang by raising it to a pitiable screech. Round after round went on. We didn't realize it was already morning until Lei Chih-ling's husband went to draw asked the curtains and a flood of dazzling sunlight poured through the windows. We all averted our faces and narrowed our eyes. Chang Chia-hsing threw her cards on the table and covered her face with her hands. We

stopped the game and Lei Chih-ling left for the kitchen to make coffee for us. It turned out that both Hui-fen and I were big losers.

When Hui-fen and I walked out of the apartment building, we found it had snowed during the night. There on the street patches of frozen mud partially covered with a thin layer of fluffy snow looked as if they had gotten moldy overnight. The apartment houses on this Riverdale street all looked the same: tall, old buildings a stale brown color. It was Sunday and there was nobody on the street. People were apparently still in bed since yellow curtains were drawn across their windows. From opposing sides of the street these windows stared at one another like huge vacant eyes with their pupils removed. The sun had risen above the buildings and lit up the whole street, but the air was still freezing.

Hui-fen walked in front of me, her overcoat huddled around her shoulders. Her head was bent in order better to watch her steps and avoid the muddy patches of snow. The hair that had been tied into a bun now fell over the collar of her coat in an unkempt fashion. I had forgotten to wear my gloves to the party; now my hands were thrust inside my overcoat pockets, still feeling stiff and cold. The chill morning air made my eyes smart, and since I had drunk too much coffee last night, my throat also felt very dry. Our car was frozen, too, and it was some time before I got it started. When we got to Broadway, Hui-fen opened the window on her side. The cold air blew in, making me very uncomfortable.

"Close the window, Hui-fen," I said.

"I want to get some fresh air," she said.

"Close the window, will you?" I said. My hands on the wheel were getting numb with cold. Hui-fen turned to the other side, her chin resting on the window ledge, without saying a word.

Close the window, did you hear me?" I suddenly found myself shouting at her in a fit of annoyance. It was as if the cold wind had pumped up some suppressed irritation inside me, like stomach acid. Hui-fen turned around and closed the window quietly. When our car got near times Square, I suddenly found that Hui-fen was weeping. She was sitting stiffly beside me, looking blankly in front of her. Tears kept rolling down her cheeks; she didn't even try to wipe them away and let them fall on her chest. I had never before seen Hui-fen so pale, so haggard. As a proud person, she rarely showed emotion before people. Even when she was alone with me, she would not show on her face that she was troubled or unhappy. But now I could feel a kind of profound and yet strangely hollow grief that came to me through her weeping. Sob followed convulsive sob, each as flat and as monotonous as the other. All of a sudden I felt I could fully understand her profound and yet hollow grief. I knew that no words could allay it and all she needed was privacy. I turned my head away and didn't look at her any more. When we got to Forty-second Street I speeded up. The neon lights of both sides of the street were still on but they looked dim and weak in the sunlight. There weren't many cars on the street and very few pedestrians. I had never suspected that one of the busiest streets in New York could be so empty and deserted on a Sunday morning.

150.253 & 151.13 1. An Unfinished Record **2.** Remorse: **Two Short Stories**\fn{by Zhang Jie (1937-   )} Peking, China (F) 9

1

I know that I will never come back to this place again. As I close the window, forcing my old cat, the Grand Historian, outside for the last time. He grows cross with me for the insult of this rough treatment. Yet he's far too tolerant and dignified to scratch or yowl at me. He merely springs back on to the windowsill, crouched, staring at me through the pane, with those apparently all-seeing eyes.

The sighing of the poplars, the clamor of the traffic, the neighbor boy playing his mouth-organ are all muffled now, more distant, removed. I wonder if the lad is growing tired, attempting the same tune over and over again since this morning. But I am finished with these sounds by now and with the pain they make deep inside my ears.

I decide to be thorough and lock the windows, but its been broken for so long that the frame is coming apart and is too misshapen to shut properly. No matter how hard I try, it cannot be bolted. It is not the fault of the maintenance staff for not doing their job properly; rater, I'd call it one more symptom of my hopeless indifference to making my life more comfortable. Usually I managed by tying up the frame with string, making raising the window a terrible nuisance, but luckily I've rarely opened it. I've long been as delicate as a premature baby and the night breezes or the slightest change in temperature cause me the most mysterious complaints. I'm always wishing our hospitals had insulated cubicles for decrepit old wrecks like me to find rest in.

From being shut off so long my room has always had a musty atmosphere, like that of a cellar, the desiccated odor of a room where an invalid has been enduring for a long time. But for the last few nights I've kept the window open, wanting the flower-scented spring breeze to drift into every corner and whisk away all traces of my life which had impregnated the room for all these years. It was a warm, lovely breeze but it started me off coughing, my throat thick with phlegm, like a chimney clogged with soot. If only, like a chimney, it could be swept clean.

This is probably the last thing I will be able to do for anyone else. Or is it the first? The best thing, of course, would have been to give these walls a good new coat of whitewash, but now it's too late. Sooner or later some new tenants will move in, and I don't wish them to resent any lingering part of me. But even if they do resent any hold I may have on the place, I will be beyond hearing them.

The hospital called me the day before yesterday with the message that I should come there today. The boy who spoke to me had a voice like a singer in a musical, melodious, as though he were singing a solo. He might have been urging me to go to a rendezvous with someone who'd be waiting for me, under a silk tree or by a little bridge. But instead I'll be going through the door that leads to … who can say what?

After that phone call I began looking back over my life, the way people who are about to die find themselves doing. It surprised me—why hadn't I done this before? Do we really have to wait until it's too late to do anything, before we remember all those countless old debts, great and small, that we've no way of settling now? Each of us can only experience the mystery of death once and it seems cruel to enter this mystery feeling unsettled, with a sense of guilt. But, in fact, my life has been pointless and dull, the most ordinary life possible, containing absolutely nothing of interest for a novelist—no dramatic tragedy, no peaks of joy. Poor soul who must write my eulogy, perhaps the shortest eulogy ever, read in two brief minutes.

My very name seems to have been designed to make things awkward for everyone. It's graceless, hard to pronounce, a stiff and commonplace-sounding name. Even though it appears on the spite of books on Ming history every couple of years or so, those thick tomes of four or five hundred pages costing well over a *yuan* are usually found on the bottom shelves of the bookshop. I always know perfectly well that when my next book comes out the previous one won't have sold out, but I can't help going to the bookshop. I always know perfectly well that when my next book comes out the previous one won't have sold out, but I can't help fewer of those unsold volumes. Even one less would be a welcome sight. Then I slip away like a thief, afraid someone will discover that I'm the author of those unsold books. I've wasted all that paper, I feel, and tricked all my readers into giving me their time. It makes me heavy-hearted. I know I have little talent, but it's as if I had been bewitched into devotion all my thoughts, my soul and even my body to the study of our ancestors' history I could not stop myself from writing. What else was there for me to live for, all alone as I am?

A moment ago Li, my neighbor, asked with some concern whether there was anything he could do for me while I was in hospital. Should he take letters and cables straight to the hospital, or wait till he could bring them along when he came to visit me? They could wait, I told him. He could get someone to take them along when it was convenient.

Apart from letters to and from publishers, magazines and a university journal which takes my articles, and very occasionally a hand-written note from another simple-minded bookworm like me wanting to argue about just where a battle was fought during some dynasty, I have virtually no private correspondence. And since I have done no work for a long time because of my illness, even letters such as these have become few and far between.

Now that I think of it, there is something to be said for having no private life: you have few attachments, and nobody has to feel distressed when you begin to fail. Still, if I do get to heaven I shall feel sad that no one on earth will be grieving for me. It's not that I don't get along with people, but that I simply haven't had the good fortune to make any friends. My colleagues in the research institute regard me with great respect and kindness. People usually treat me well, but I tend to frighten them off, or to mistake their ordinary courtesy for an expression of interest. I'm afraid I have gone on for hours and hours citing evidence to show that the Qing historian Xia Xie's Universal Mirror of Ming history is full of wrong judgements, not caring whether my listeners are interested, how busy they are, or if I'm trying their patience. Whenever I have to return a visit, my mind stays back with those manuscripts piled on my desk and I hope that the person I am going to see will be out. then, by leaving a brief note, I can meet the requirements of courtesy with the minimum waste of time. If I find them in I always make meaningless remarks, such as "It's gradually been getting a bit warmer recently," then repeat myself three times over. These social performances generally exhaust me, and my boorishness and lack of manners leave others at a complete loss as to how to deal with me. When I get up to leave, my host's face shows relief and gratitude that he will not have to prolong this mutual torture.

My everyday life is totally organized around work, and on public holidays when I can’t go to the institute cafeteria, I’m never sure about when to eat breakfast, lunch or supper. No one has more enthusiasm than I have for the development of China’s food and clothing industries: I’m eager for the time when the whole business of eating can be reduced to the simplicity of the astronaut’s toothpaste-tube meals. I await anxiously the new clothing to be made out of paper, as well as the quilt-covers and pillowcases, so mine won’t always be like soiled rags. Of course, I like clean clothes and quilt-covers the same as everyone else, but I’ve had neither the time nor the inclination to bother with them.

But now these minor irritations are history and I ask myself has there been nothing else interesting to review from my life? Is there no more than the few *yuan* I owe here and there, or the call I’ve forgotten to return? In a fairy tale of Hans Christian Andersen, one cold, winter’s night a lonely old man on the point of death sees the whole of the past through one of his cloudy tears. And it reminds me that there has been just one tear in my long, monotonous life. Not an old man’s cloudy tear, but a unique tear from my youth that had the luster and the color of a pearl.; It is only now, when it is about to be buried with me, that I can bear to bring it up from the deep well of memory.

*

It was a warm summer morning. She was laughing as she came into our office, which was dark and somber from the shadowy green vines on the wall outside the small windows. From the moment she arrived it was as if there had been another window in the room. How could she laugh so much? Whenever she laughed I laughed too, and I discovered to my delight that this made her laugh even more. I never knew what I looked like when I laughed, but from then on I was full of confidence that my face looked fine when I laughed, and that confidence made my writing suddenly speed up from one to two thousand characters a day.

I’m always losing umbrellas, one after another. It only has to rain for me to lose an umbrella—on buses, in little restaurants or bookstores I chance upon, or by newsstands. The day I left my umbrella at some academic conference, she came running after me, calling and laughing, and handed me my umbrella back. I drank in her laughter with such pleasure that I forgot to thank her.

*

Listening to her voice, to her laughter, and feeling that the office had an extra window in it had become the most important thing in my life. Any day on which she did not come to work might just as well have not happened. Her lightness, her conversation, her losing a button, her touch of irritation because she had been unable to buy a pretty pair of shoes all slowly infused the historical data I read and the words I wrote. I longed to share everything I had and everything I did with her.

My life seemed a lot more complicated than it had been before I knew her. I was always showing her books that I found interesting and useful, and whenever I talked to her about our admirable forebears and the history that had ebbed like a tide I felt an emotion I had never known before: happiness.

I even started going to the picture. I recall one film. At the time everyone said that it was a thoroughly boring film, the sort you forget all about before you’re even outside the cinema. But that film, with an actress who reminded me of her, turned my heart upside down. I found a new boldness I didn’t know I had. I took out paper and pen and I wrote to her, asking her to meet at nine o’clock by a little bridge, just as in the film. Even the words I used were borrowed from the film. I was drunk with the image of her running to meet me under the silk tree.

I arrived an hour early, to be there ready to see her as she arrived. Nine o’clock passed. By ten o’clock she had still not come and I thought that I must have written the wrong date or time. That was very possible, even though I had taken the letter out of the envelope many times, read it through and put it back again before I posted it. I could not be sure that my mind had been clear enough at the time, or whether my nerves had been dependable. That sort of thing had happened to me before. Back in middle-school maths, for example, an exam question asked what 50/2 was equal to. I wrote it correctly: 50/2. I don’t know how many times I checked through my answers, but for its own reasons my mind stubbornly held on to 50/3, a fraction that could not be reduced any further. Could I in the same way have written midday or eight p.m. instead of nine a.m.?

I became hungry, but I dared not leave the little bridge to have some lunch. I kept taking my glasses off to wipe clean the lenses, so I wouldn’t miss seeing her, but they stayed as hazy as ever. I wished I had not always thrust them into my pockets with keys, nail clippers and everything else, or carelessly thrown them lens-down on my desk, until they were like frosted glass. Why did they seem now even worse than ever?

I began to wonder whether she had suddenly fallen ill. I felt so anxious that my heart was hurting. Perhaps she had had an accident on the way there. If something like that really had happened, I’d never have been able to forgive myself, not even if I could have gone to hell and been punished ten times over.

The bustle of traffic and people gradually died away with the day. the street lights came on in the distance and generously cast their gentle orange glow over me, as if to soothe away my disappointment. I walked home alone, among the shadows, as if the happiness of the morning had never been.

Even before I got into the office next morning I heard her laughter as I walked on the path among the green trees. Thank heavens! She was still alive, healthy and happy. For a long time I stood under the eaves of the building, not wanting to go inside in case some other impression might weaken the happiness I had lost and now recovered. My eyes were filled with tears of gratitude, even though I did not know who I should be thanking or for what.

Laughing as sweetly as ever she spoke to me. “Please meet my fiancé. We would like you to come to our wedding on Saturday evening.” He was strong, tall and good-looking and shook my hand heartily.

As she spoke she handed me a heavy parcel, wrapped in strong brown paper and tied with string. It was the book I had lent her. As I watched them I thought happily about their wedding, and of how well matched they were. It was just as if my agonies of self-reproach by the bridge the day before had never happened and the letter I had tortured myself for so long over sending had never existed.

The wedding ceremony was informal, with a very free and jovial atmosphere, like a group of friends meeting spontaneously. That was very much her way of doing things. It was the first time I had been in a crowd without feeling awkward and uncomfortable.

The bridegroom sat down right next to me and told me he was a geologist. He explained to me with great gusto how the stress that caused earthquakes is built up, and how infrared remote sensing was going to replace the geologist’s compass, hammer and magnifying-glass in prospecting for the earth’s natural resources. He talked to me not as if he were the groom, but as if he were a guest who had come along to offer his congratulations.

I smiled. His way of making conversation without bothering whether he was killing the person he was talking to was a bit like mine. He was very fond of his work and believed that geology was definitely very useful to the world and a truly wonderful science. I admired him and even started wondering whether I had made a mistake in studying history instead of geology all those years ago. He casually handed me a cigarette. He was evidently too happy and enthusiastic to care about such details as whether I was a smoker or wanted to smoke.

Of course I accepted the cigarette—I couldn’t turn his kind offer down. He was the man she loved, and on top of that I liked him myself. I didn’t know whether I was meant to swallow the evil-smelling fumes or to inhale them. From the health posters I had seen in hospitals about smoking causing lung cancer I guessed that you had to draw them into your lungs. I could not have remembered wrongly; the hospital was a place I knew very well, the lace I went to most often apart from my office and my room. I choked on the first puff, but tried as hard as I could not to cough although the effort made my eyes water. It did not go at all well and I was afraid al this would alarm him and make him blame himself for causing one such misery.

She came over to us smiling, her eyes dazzling. She handed me an exquisite crystal glass and wanted me to drink a toast to them. I accepted the glass of wine and at once a humming started in my head. The drink was so strong, yet my heart remained light. It was very odd that I should have felt that way, but I was as happy as if I were getting married myself.

It was late at night when I left the place where those two people had surrounded me with happiness. It was mid-October, still quite warm, and I was in a cheerful frame of mind. I flung my jacket over my shoulders and strolled back through the moonlight. I didn’t know whether it came from the cigarette or the drink, but I felt as if I were floating through the air. In a gust of light breeze I seemed to hear people whispering or laughing quietly from the locust and poplar trees by the roadside.

I remembered the Schubert\fn{Franz Peter Schubert (1797-1828), Austrian composer.} *Serenade* stanzas the bridegroom had just been singing:

Softly my songs
Cry to you through the night

and I remembered her expression as he sang.

A pale longing welled up in my heart. I longed to have a soft shoulder beside, me, longed to have someone leaning her adorable curly head against my shoulder. I would have put my jacket around her like a gallant Spanish knight wrapping his woman in his cloak

I tripped over a stone, and looked down to see my shadow on the ground, the shoulders as narrow as a child's. I looked as if I had three less ribs than anyone else, and seemed to be painfully bent forward. It suddenly occurred to me that I was an old fool—no woman would ever want to rest her head on a shoulder like mine.

Oh my dearest, a cry to the beloved is carried on
The wind, on such a night as this …

As soon as I was back in my room I flung myself across my little bed, stretched out on the side of the bedside table and on it wrote the first letter of her name: S. I felt no particular misery or grief. Gradually my eyes misted up, and the letter seemed to turn into a winged angel flying lightly above my head. I closed my tired eyelids. I must have had a happy dream that night, but it was such a long time ago that I can no longer remember it clearly.

She soon left our institute and started traveling all over the country with her geologist. And the years passed. I realized that by now she must be as decrepit as I am, but as long as I don't see her again I'll remember her as she was when we parted, always laughing for no good reason, radiant and cheerful like someone who has slept and dreamt well the night before.

People say that love is endless longing, heartache and madness, wild exhilaration pain like hell frozen over, cruel sleepless nights. I've never in all my life experienced such complicated and bitter-sweet emotions. But I am very grateful to her. Even though I never stood in front of her window night after night, waiting for her shadow to appear, she still brought me good fortune. Because of her I knew the delight and felt the brightness that emanate from an extra window, and was happy even with just her single initial by my side.

*

I suppose I should be going, but there is still so much unfinished business to be done. Why am I trying to sort it out now in this last minute? I had intended to catalogue all the books now shoved into the shelves at random, and to arrange them by period so that they will be easier for their next owner to refer to. And I haven't yet corrected the proofs of the article on Zhu Yuanzhang, the founder of the Ming dynasty,\fn{1368-1644.} and the Red Turban Army of peasant rebels.

All I managed to complete last night were two small tasks that were within my powers. I rubbed out the initial written on the side on the side of my table, and burned that sheet of brown wrapping paper—so brittle it went to pieces at the touch—and the piece of string. I didn't want those things I've treasured for so many years to be casually thrown away as rubbish when my effects are sorted out after I'm dead, and I wasn't prepared to let a stranger's hand rub that initial out.

As I watched the last spark fly away I thought of all these years, of how I kept them as treasures because she had breathed on them and touched them. It was as if I had been a thief all these years, a thief who had stolen what she had never given me, what had never belonged to me—a tiny fragment of her life. It was probably the most shameful thing I have ever done. If I could I'd kneel before here and beg her to forgive me. She is so good and sweet and generous that I'm sure she'd have forgiven me and said, "In a long life everyone does something wrong."

*

As I lift the net bag with my washing things in it my toothbrush slips out through a hole and when I lean over to pick it up I take another look around the room that has shared half a lifetime with me. My old table stands isolated in the middle of the room, there irrelevant and unconnected, like some obscure island I the Pacific that not even the most third-rate explorer would bother with. The springs of my folding bed gave out a long time ago, and it sags very low to the floor. The yellowing and blackened walls have an air of decrepitude, just like my dried-up face, as they lean feebly together around my jumble of furniture. Even the books on the shelves look sick and crippled, without even one fine leather volume with gold lettering to give the bookshelves a touch of distinction. All the large soft-cover books like on their sides, drooping out over the shelves like wilting foliate taken too long ago from a tree. Dusty cobwebs sway from the ceiling and the corners of the room.

The sight of this dispirited room fills me with regret, as if I have wasted its youth for nothing. It could have been as clean, bright and tidy as other rooms. And as I see this, a new nameless feeling begins to overwhelm me. I cannot give it a name, but from it I sense that my whole life from beginning to end has been lacking in something.

Lacking what? My eyes sweep the cluttered bookcases, across the books I've scrimped and saved for a lifetime to buy, or written with my own sweat and blood. I realize that I have all of these things to leave to a lot of people, but no one unique thing to leave to one special person. And this is the lack, this is what is missing.

I know that dong, from the personnel department of the institute, will finally sign in the space on the operation form where the next of kin's signature is needed. but if only there could be one beloved face, wrinkled like mine, sitting on the bench outside the operating theater, anxious for me, quietly sobbing for me. If only on my bedside table there could be good things to eat prepared by her own hand. My head, which has worked through mountains of waste paper like a mechanical recording machine, has at last shown its boundless creative genius in imagining the food. These delectable treats look, smell and taste delicious as I eat them from the aluminum canteen that's been scrubbed till it shines.

But, in fact, the time for these imaginings is finished. Soon my ashes will lie in their urn, which will be placed on an obscure shelf to gather dust for three years, until at last they are flung away. Nobody will want to keep them. And even less will anyone want to mingle her ashes with mine.

There is a soft noise at the window. The Grand Historian's ugly face is pressed against the glass, his expression one of concentration and bewilderment. His usual coldness and superiority have vanished. I look away at once, not wanting him to see the loneliness in my heart. We have seen many things together and he should not feel bereft as I leave him. He scratches at the pane with his front paws like someone knocking at a door.

Years ago I picked him up in the street and brought him home. There wasn't an uglier, lazier cat in the world. His short tail was like a piece of rag. His grayish, dull fur was so dirty that you couldn't tell his true color. He had been sitting in the middle of the road, not moving or making a sound, while the torrent of bicycle, lorry and car wheels flowed past him. He just sat there like a pile of rubbish that had been dumped on the road, as if he had stopped caring whether he lived or died. It would only have taken a small turn by a single wheel to squash him flat.

I gave him a bath in my foot-bowl and I'm inclined to think he failed to understand my good intentions and reckoned that I was trying to skin him alive. He drew blood where he clawed the back of my hand as he jumped on to my radio, which was playing at the time and felt warm to his paws. He stared at me with caution and silence. After several days of very close observation he acknowledged me as a friend, but even then, with a touch of condescension. Whenever I sat at my desk writing furiously he always looked at me with a certain superciliousness. His manner said: "What you're scribbling is all useless nonsense, old friend." When I read my articles aloud to myself, wagging my head, he lazily shut his eyes and purred rhythmically. And when I gazed with adoration at the letter written on the side of the table every night before going to sleep he sat by my pillow with his head on his front paws and stared at my face with a pitying, mocking stare. I am still covered from head to foot with little red flea bites, just as I was when he first came to me.

Every morning he used to stroke my thinning white hair with his paw, telling me to stop lying in bed gazing vacantly at the ceiling. Whenever I sat down to take a rest and shut my dim old eyes he'd spring on to my lap, or lick my hands with their protruding blue veins and slack, wrinkled skin, or grasp my wrists and nip my fingers, but very carefully so that he never hurt me.

It was because of him that I finally started paying some attention to feeding us properly and sometimes treated us with cold meat. I would spread it out on the greasy wrapping paper, and as he crouched on the other side of it facing me, we would take our time savoring the meat together. Sometimes my imagination would run free and I'd think that if we could both have had a drink, we would have clinked glasses and drunk to each other. Thank God for sending me an animal soul, so patient and understanding, never using its tongue to harass or harm me. I am praying that the next tenant will adopt the Grand Historian and that maybe even he will liven up a bit. I'm sure he can, and that someone will take him in, but I can't be certain.

I have been silently hoping that the next tenant will be someone full of life who will decorate this room like other rooms with sheer white curtains, a gleaming crystal fixture hanging from the ceiling, a woven table-cloth, a beautiful landscape painting on the wall and a vase of pale-yellow roses … a girl would be best. She'd be bound to have her boyfriend mend the window bolt so she could open it wide and allow the moonlight to come flooding in, the breeze to waft in the scent of locust blossom in May, and perhaps even strains of Schubert's *Serenade*. Then the room will have the joy and pleasure I was never able to bring to it.

What else is thee left? Oh, yes, so many longings I still feel, vividly, acutely, now that the time is used up. They have not faded but hang suspended in my heart.

I used to think that all my emotions belonged in the past, to history, but I know that I yearn for the future just like everyone else. Even as life draws to a close, I realize that I have never understood myself completely … If only …

But now it certainly is too late to do more, to be more, in this lifetime.

2

Finished.

The last bit of flame flickered and went out.

This was all that remained of his son. Sixty-five kilograms, one and four-fifths meters. A son of flesh and blood had become a thin thread of smoke, a handful of white ashes. Life won through thousands of years of evolution had been destroyed so easily it was scarcely believable.

After returning home from the crematorium, he instinctively wanted to recall his son's life—though it was an exaggeration to call twenty-seven years a lifetime. So short, so young! Yet it seemed as if he couldn't remember a thing. He had known too little about him. People say that it is harder for men to reveal themselves to each other than it is for women. Was this the only reason they had lived together like passersby in the street? But what kind of man had his son been? He had not even been in love; he had not enjoyed enough sunshine.

He looked at the things his son had left: a copy of *Andersen's Fairy Tales*, published before the Cultural Revolution; an old, broken iron pencil box; a one-inch portrait, "half-body, front-view, hatless"; an old book of abacus tables, its edges curling up.

The beautiful *Andersen's Fairy Tales* had been taboo in the family.\fn{Hans Christian Andersen (1805-1875), Danish author.} The son had known this very clearly. Why, then, had he stubbornly held onto the book?

When he was thrown off life's normal tracks, the son was just at the age when he was playing with toy guns, and certain that his father was a great hero. This "hero" hardly understood how he had come to be such a low, vile thing!

But such a father, who knew very well that he himself was the hammer that had shattered his own son's dream, and who understood that there was no escape from this arrangement of fate, he would surely feel a sensation so painful it would feel as if he were choking, or being burned in a fire. At the time, his son could still look at him angrily with a pair of round eyes filled with tears, and ask:

"Father, why won't my little friends play with me anymore?"

He could not answer. How could he explain? For some time, the anthill under the tree in the yard had been the lonely son's only entertainment. He would squat there for a long time, totally absorbed by the busy ants scurrying back and forth. Their animated, simple, fraternal life must have aroused envy and yearning in him. He had asked,

"Father, why is it that ants always play with one another, and never desert each other?"

"I don't know!"

"You are a grown-up, why don't you know?"

But how could the son know that there are many questions that not even adults can answer?

One day, another child came over, and with a few stomps flattened the kingdom of ants that had not been doing anyone any harm. He knew he could not blame the child. He also knew how lonely his little son was. But he did not dare give him another little brother or sister for company, because he knew he no longer had the power to protect another innocent little soul.

When the son grew a bit older, as if he understood his position somewhat, he avoided his father as if the man were a plague, as if he would spread a disease. Whoever caught this disease would be forgotten by life, would become a solitary being.

Innocent son, he did not realize he was already contaminated. The father could never forget the expression of yearning on his son's face when he looked at the red scarves\fn{A sign that they were Red Guards.} waving on other children's chests. It seemed like that of a person who had fallen into hell, and who, cherishing a devout wish to be reincarnated in a better life, looked hopefully toward heaven. Once he heard his son ask his wife:

"What crime has he committed?"

"Who?"

"Him!"

"Who is 'him?''"

"Him—father!" He felt his wife groping for the right words:

"Because he told an Andersen's fairy tale to a leader!"

If the emotions contained in speech could be weighed, there would be no scale that could measure the dignity she put in her voice, stung by the son's judgment of his father.

"Which one?"

"*The Emperor's New Clothes*."\fn{Implying criticism of the Party leadership, and probably of May himself.}

"That's ridiculous! Why doesn't anyone call Andersen a rightist? He told so many of those tales!"

If Andersen—who had used beautiful, sincere feelings all his life to exert a good influence on people—heard this sentence in heaven, no doubt he broke into a warm, moving smile. There is such a difference between real life and children's tales!

From the "half-body, front view, hatless" portrait, the son looked at him with a pitiful expression. If it hadn't been necessary for a work permit, the boy would never have had his picture taken. He could imagine his son's thinking. He must have felt that there was no moment in his life worth recording. He wished so much that his child could have been like other children—mischievous, noisy, throwing temper tantrums, fighting … But no, he always wore such a pitiful expression. What wrung his heart most was his son's face when it didn't wear this pitiful expression. When interacting with others, no matter whom, his son wore an anxious-to-please expression, like a dog wagging its tail, asking for pity. For the father, it was worse than if he had spit in his face. That sort of expression should have been buried with the old life!

In 1972, the son was assigned to a produce station to sell meat. Originally, his father had been a very open-minded person, and had never considered measuring a person's worth by his occupational position, high or low. Nor had he minded the differences among people in the social division of labor. But his common sense told him that he was the reason that his son was seIling meat. How could he not look upon the relationship between moral character and occupation as a natural pattern of cause and effect? Was he not a materialist?

From then on, the curled-edged, frayed old abacus tables and an old abacus became the sole substance of the son's life after work. He either sat at the little table that was both a dining table and a desk, moving his lips, silently reciting the abacus tables, or he noisily practiced on the old abacus. When, from the window upstairs, there floated the sound of a Schumann etude being played on a neighbor's violin, the son would sigh lightly, inaudibly, and rise to shut the windows of the house, not caring that it might be the hottest part of July.\fn{As the son of a rightist, he was forbidden such privileges as going to a music school.} His son's manipulation of the abacus had long been outstanding; for addition and subtraction, he was as fast and as accurate as a calculator. Yet as soon as he got off work, he continued to recite and to practice, as if the abacus had become a biological need like eating or sleeping, or a necessary outlet for his emotions.

The father also knew that the customers who did not know his son's background all liked him, and complimented him by calling him "Just One Chop."\fn{I.e., his precision was such that he could cut the exact weight of a meat order with just one chop.} Once, he had stealthily stood around the produce station, watching his son sell meat. He could see that the boy got satisfaction and enjoyment from the endless repetition of weighing the meat and calculating. A slight flush suffused his pale face, indicating excitement. At those times, he must have felt that there were many people who still wanted him, who had not deserted him.

But as soon as he left the meat counter, he would become a different person. At home or in the work unit, he avoided people. Except for reciting the tables and practicing on the abacus, squeezing into a corner was his only hobby. As long as nobody noticed him, he would sit in that corner for hours, staring blankly at the tips of his own shoes as if they were not his shoes, but the text of a volume of profound Hebrew scriptures that could solve the riddle of fate. He always tried his best to hunch himself up, as if his innocently fearless, excessively broad shoulders occupied a bit too much of boundless space, and thus might offend someone.

This son-who-was-like-a-stranger understood the difficulties of the family. The father could still remember his little son watching other children eating chocolate, only to turn away proudly. He had also seen this son who dreamed of being a hero press his nose tightly against the glass panes of shops filled with toy guns and cannons … yet he had not asked for anything. Even the old iron pencil box that was broken and worn at the edges had been bought only when the boy had started primary school. How could this son, who had once been so greedy, so eager to throw temper tantrums on the floor, and who would never get up until he got what he wanted, all of a sudden give up all demands? No one had given him a special warning. It was so strange!

In the last part of the Cultural Revolution, the father discovered the nobody-can-enter expression of his son's eyes gradually opening up toward him. Yet he had quickly pushed away this long-hoped-for understanding.
The night before the Tiananmen Incident,\fn{When there had occurred (1976) a spontaneous mass memorial for Zhou Enlai that was really a protest against the ultra-radicalism of the Gang of Four.} the son had said to him,

"Father, I want to go to Tian An Men!"

For the first time he detected in his son's eyes what could be called a passionate yearning. He knew that he should—why not?—have given his pitiful, cautious, timid son a bit of sympathy or a hint of support. It would have given the boy tremendous encouragement and strength; maybe it would even have gotten rid of his pitiful expression. But he did not. He was so nervous, he felt breathless.

"What for?" The son hesitated, wavering, and said,

"I wrote a poem …"\fn{Thousands of 0people wrote poems of protest and laid themat the foot of the Revolutionary Martyr's Memorial in Tiananmen Square.} It was as if he had been stung by a scorpion. Instantly, nervously he had yelled,

"No, you cannot go!" His expression of extreme apprehension immediately made his son lose courage:

"Will people die?"

"No, the terrible thing is not death …"

The light that had lit up his son's eyes a moment ago went out. He returned to his usual corner. No, it was he who had pushed the son back to that corner.

The son became ill. He was not sure whether it was because of his son's habit of not wanting to bother people or whether the boy had long hoped for something like this. Anyway, a common virus developed into a fatal urinary infection.

When, in a state of great agitation, he had brought the news of his total reinstatement to his son, the boy's gaze was unfocused. He could not have understood any sentence uttered to him. He was beyond happiness and sorrow.

He suddenly realized that even if his son had understood the news he had brought, the pitiful expression would not have disappeared from his face because it had already permeated his soul.

With remorse, he felt that his son would carry in him an unliberated soul when he died. Yet the day his soul flew to another world, a peaceful, relaxed expression returned to the boy's face—the same expression he had worn on the day he had been born. Apart from that, the face had an excited look, as if it were happily contemplating something.

The son had left him, carrying with him the emotions of a stranger. For more than twenty years there had been no love, no friendship or understanding, no heart-to-heart talks between father and son. It was as if the father had brought him life and had reared him without getting anything back—as if he had suddenly caught a handful of flowing water and then, right before his eyes, the water had leaked out through the cracks between his fingers.

He really could not even tell whether the boy had loved him. If he hadn't, it served him right. What right had he to demand his son's love! Even the name he had given his son had not been deliberated over, just casually picked! Jianshe\fn{Construction.} had been the most common name given to children born during the fiery era of the early years of national construction. At the time, as the chief editor of a journal, he had been too busy thinking of a name for his son would have taken him away from his work.

But perhaps the son had loved him after all. He remembered when the boy was four years old. One night, because of a meeting, he had returned home very late. He saw that on the chest of drawers beside the bed, there was a tray of peeled water chestnuts. Each water chestnut had a little bite taken out of it, as if a naughty, but not greedy, little mouse had taken a bite of each. His wife had said to him,

"Your son left these for you." Intrigued, he pointed to the little bite marks on the water chestnuts and laughingly asked,

"What are these supposed to be?"

"He took a bite out of every water chestnut to find the young ones to be left for you; the tough ones he ate himself."

He looked at the water chestnuts that looked as if they had been bitten by a little mouse and his heart was filled with the blessings and satisfaction of being a father. He had hardly slept that night. Several times he had sat up in bed, holding that tray of water chestnuts, smiling, imagining what his son, who at such a young age had demonstrated such delicate emotions, would become when he grew up. An honest worker? A great hero? A romantic poet? No matter what he imagined, there was always a rose-colored mist before his eyes. Maybe this was how every father felt about his son. He had imagined everything, but somehow he had never imagined this—his son nakedly leaving the world!

It had been a few days since he had received the notice of complete reinstatement. After the initial excitement, he had calmed down, and gradually he began to feel an inexplicable thing charging toward him, tightly enveloping him, entangling him, pressing him, gnawing at his heart to the point where he couldn't totally immerse himself in longing for his son. Yet he wanted so much to obtain a little bit of tenderness and solace from the heartbreak of remembering. What he felt was not the sorrow triggered by the death of his son diluting the liberation he had longed for, because this feeling was not the same as sorrow. It was more solemn than sorrow, more profound, heavier …

When had it begun? Maybe it had begun on the day he had stopped his son from going to Tian An Men. Maybe it had been even earlier; maybe it had long been hiding somewhere in the past and had now come to settle an old account with him.

Why was it that when he had heard about recovering his party membership, his spectrograph-like mind had shot out a range of emotions, including an empty, lost feeling? Strange, for twenty-two years\fn{Since the 1957 anti-Rightist Campaign.} he had never formally accepted in his heart the decision that had expelled him from the party. But ironically, during the process of his reinstatement, he had begun seriously to question his own worth. An empty, lost feeling …

He had lost something more precious than life! Twenty-two years of party standing could be compensated for, but what could compensate for having relinquished the sacred responsibility of being a Communist Party member? Certainly he could still remember the oath he had recited under the hammer and sickle flag. Yet for more than twenty years, because of his family, because he had not wanted to add yet more sorrowful colors to his son's apparently joyless childhood and youth, he had lived timidly, just staying alive. He had stood to one side of life, watching the slow flow of dirty water, not wanting to move a finger. He had not even done the most basic thing: communicate to his dearest beloved son belief in truth, confidence in life, and the spirit to sacrifice for one's life's work. What else could one say?

When someone dies, people often think with remorse about the wrongs they have done that person in the past. Yet where was the wrong he had done his son for which he should really feel remorseful?

He was full of remorse! He would always be full of remorse! Not because he had done something, but because he had done nothing.

Was he not responsible for the pitiful expression that had penetrated his son's soul?

No other sentence or punishment could make him suffer as much pain or reproach as this remorse!

180.60 Excerpt from Falling Leaves**: "The True Story Of An Unwanted Chinese Daughter"**\fn{by Adeline Yen Mah (1937-)} Tianjin, China (F) 13

At the age of three my grand aunt proclaimed her independence by categorically refusing to have her feet bound, resolutely tearing off the bandages as fast as they were applied. She was born in Shanghai (city by the sea) in 1886 during the Qing dynasty when China was ruled by the child emperor Kuang Hsu, who lived far away up north in the Forbidden City.\fn{In Peking} The pampered baby of the family, eight years younger than my grandfather, Ye Ye, Grand Aunt finally triumphed by rejecting all food and drink until her feet were, in her words, "rescued and set free."

Shanghai in the late nineteenth century was unlike any other city in China. It was one of five treaty ports opened up to Britain after the First Opium War in 1842. Gradually it burgeoned into a giant intermediary between China and the rest of the world. Strategically situated on the Huangpu River seventeen miles upstream from the mighty Yangtse, the city was linked by boat to the inner western provinces. At the other end to the east, the Pacific Ocean was only fifty miles away.

Britain, France and the United States of America staked out foreign settlements within the city. To this day, amidst the new high-rise buildings, Shanghai's architecture reflects the influence of the foreign traders. Some of the great mansions, formerly homes of diplomats and business magnates, possess the stately Edwardian grandeur of any fine house by the River Thames at Henley in England or the Gallic splendour of a villa in the Loire valley in France.

Extraterritoriality meant that within the foreign concessions, all subjects, be they foreign or Chinese, were governed by the laws of the foreigner and were exempt from the laws of China. Foreigners had their own municipal government, police force and troops. Each concession became an independent city within a city: little enclaves of foreign soil in treaty ports along China's coast line. China was governed not by written laws but by the rulings of magistrates appointed by the emperor and her citizens traditionally viewed these mandarins as demi-gods. For roughly one hundred years (between 1842 and 1941) Westerners were perceived throughout China as superior beings whose wishes transcended even those of their own mandarins. The white conquerors were treated with reverence, fear and awe by the average Chinese.

Legal cases were tried before a Chinese magistrate but presided over by a foreign consular assessor whose power was absolute and whose word was final. The local populace was further humiliated by being barred from ownership of, or even free access to, many of the most desirable sections within their own city. Discrimination, segregation and abuse coloured most inter-racial dealings, with Westerners viewing the Chinese as their vanquished inferiors.

All this was bitterly resented.

Immediately south of the French Concession in Shanghai, my great-grandfather owned a tea-house in the old

walled Chinese city of Nantao. These Chinese quarters, or the Old Town, were packed with low, dense buildings, small bustling markets and wandering alleyways overhung by colourful shop signs. Business was successful in spite of fierce competition from mobile stoves on bamboo poles, road-side stands and modest one-room *cafés*. When Grand Aunt was seven years old, her father relocated his tea-house to a more fashionable site in the International Settlement, formed by the merging of the former British and American Concessions. He then moved his entire family into a house a few streets away, in a quiet residential neighbourhood within the French Concession.

The French laid out gardens, apartment blocks, office buildings and tree-lined avenues which were given the names of French dignitaries. These boulevards became thick with *café* strollers and imported motor cars intermingling with wheelbarrows, rickshaws and pedicabs. Shanghai began to be known as the Paris of the Orient, though Grand Aunt always claimed that Paris should be called the Shanghai of Europe.

Grand Aunt's older siblings received little formal education, but they did learn to read and write at a private teacher's home. The youngest of five children, Grand Aunt was an afterthought. When she came of school age my great-grandfather had prospered. He enrolled her at the fashionable and expensive McTyeire Christian Girls' School, run by American Methodist missionaries. She was the first child in the Yen family to be given a foreign education.

By that time, Shanghai had become the centre of China's trade and industry. Opportunities were limitless. Grand Aunt's eldest brother had established a successful business manufacturing spare metal parts for rickshaws, pedicabs, bicycles and some of the more modern household appliances. He was. to die young, probably from syphilis, for he succumbed to the three vices common to Chinese men at that time: opium, gambling and the brothels. Leisured women also gambled and took opium, but discreetly at home. Grand Aunt's second brother set up a thriving import-export tea business but he, too, became infected with venereal disease and was unable to sire children. Her sister had an arranged marriage and died from tuberculosis.

Her third brother, my grandfather Ye Ye, was softspoken and gentle. A devout Buddhist, he was tall and slender, with poetic leanings and gentle ways. He disliked the required Manchu male hairstyle of shaving the brow and braiding long hair into a single queue. Even as a young man, he kept his head clean shaven (the only permitted alternative, wore a round skull cap, and sprouted a neatly trimmed moustache. Determined not to follow his brothers down the slippery path, he proved to be far more able than either of them.

While at McTyeire, Grand Aunt developed a lifelong passion for riding. She became fluent in English, was baptized as a Christian and made many western friends through her church. One of these, a fellow member of the Anti-foot-binding League, gave her a job as a clerk in the savings department of the Bank of Shanghai. During the twenty years that she worked there she learned every aspect of the banking business and was made manager of her division.

*

Grand Aunt never married. In those days, daughters could still be legally sold or bartered. A wife was often treated as an indentured servant in her husband's household, especially to her mother-in-law. If she failed to bear a son, one or more concubines would be brought in. Remarriage for widowers was routine but considered unchaste for widows. Most men of means routinely visited brothels but a woman who was unfaithful to her husband could be punished by death.

I remember Grand Aunt as a tall, imposing figure, treated with great esteem by every member of our family. Even Ye Ye and Father deferred to her every wish, which was remarkable in a society where women were disdained. Out of respect, we children were instructed to call her Gong Gong, which meant Grand Uncle. It was common practice for high-achieving women within the clan to assume the male equivalent of their female titles.

At five feet seven inches she was only slightly shorter than Ye Ye. Erect, dignified, her feet unbound, she had a striking presence, in contrast to the obsequious demeanour befitting women of her time. Her black hair was cut short above her ears and combed backwards to reveal a smooth forehead above an oval face. Behind round, wire-rimmed, tinted glasses, her large eyes were penetrating. Always elegant, she favoured dark, monochrome, silk *qipaos* (Chinese dresses) with mandarin collars and butterfly buttons.

Her complexion was fair with a tiny sprinkle of freckles across her nose. Habitually she wore face cream, a dab of rouge and a touch of lipstick, while her ears were adorned with exquisite stud earrings of pearls and jade. She moved with ease and athletic grace, riding and playing tennis into her sixties. I have a photograph of her smiling and confident astride a large black stallion, dressed in a white blouse, dark tie and well cut jodhpurs.

In 1924 Grand Aunt founded her own bank, the Shanghai Women's Bank. It is impossible to overestimate the scale of her achievement. In a feudal society where the very idea of a woman being capable of simple everyday

decisions, let alone important business negotiations, was scoffed at, Grand Aunt's courage was extraordinary.

The reputation she had gained was such that Grand Aunt was able to raise the financing for her bank without difficulty. Shares were issued and fully subscribed to. Her bank was staffed entirely by women and designed to meet their specific needs. In they came: spinster daughters, with their inheritance and nest eggs; first wives (called big wives), with their dowries and winnings from *mah-jong*; concubines (called little wives), with cash presents from their men; and professional and educated women, who were tired of being patronized at male-dominated establishments. Shanghai Women's Bank was profitable from the very beginning and remained so until Grand Aunt's resignation in 1953.

With her profits she built a six-storey bank building at 480 Nanking Road which, in the 1920s and 30s, was considered *the* most prestigious business address in China. Her bank was situated at the nerve centre of the International Concession, adjacent to major office blocks and department stores, less than a mile from the Bund (nicknamed Wall Street of Shanghai), the famous park-like riverfront promenade which, in those days, excluded Chinese ownership. Her staff lived in comfortable dormitories on the upper floors.

The best building materials were used. Lifts were installed and modern plumbing put in with flush toilets, central heating, and hot and cold running water. Grand Aunt lived in a spacious penthouse on the sixth floor with her friend Miss Guang whom she had met through church. There were rumours about their relationship. They shared a room and slept in the same bed. In China, intimate friendship between single women was sneered at but tolerated.

Miss Guang, born in 1903, had money of her own and was one of Grand Aunt's first investors. She became the bank's vice president. Later on, Grand Aunt adopted a daughter. (This was a common practice among childless women of means and required little formality.) They employed three maids, a chef and a chauffeur and entertained lavishly at home. Many a transaction was negotiated over a bowl of shark's fin soup during lunch at Grand Aunt's penthouse apartment.

*

At the age of twenty-six, Grand Aunt's third elder brother, my Ye Ye, entered into an arranged marriage through a *mei-po* (professional female marriage broker). My fifteen-year-old grandmother came from an eminently suitable Shanghai family. Theirs was a *men dang hu dui* (as the appropriate door fits the frame of the correct house) marriage.

Across the street from my great-grandfather's tea house, her father owned a small herbal store filled with desiccated leaves, roots, powdered rhinoceros horns, deer antlers, dried snakes' gall bladders and other exotic potions. The bride and the groom saw each other for the first time on their wedding day in 1903. On the eve of her wedding, Grandmother was summoned into her father's presence.

"Tomorrow you will belong to the Yen family," she was told. "From now on, this is no longer your home and you are. not to contact us without permission from your husband. Your duty will be to please him and your inlaws. Bear them many sons. Sublimate your own desires. Become the willing pisspot and spittoon of the Yens and we will be proud of you."

Next day, the trembling bride, bedecked in a red silk gown and her face covered with a red silk cloth, was borne into the home of her parents-in-law in a red and gold sedan chair painted with a phoenix and dragon, rented from a store specializing in weddings and funerals. The wedding procession was a colourful, noisy affair accompanied by red lanterns, banners, trumpet blowing and the clanging of gongs.. It was a point of honour for families to impoverish themselves for such occasions. However, in the case of my grandparents, friends and relatives gave many wedding presents including large cash gifts to defray the costs.

The young bride's fears were misplaced because Ye Ye proved to be loving and considerate. At her insistence, the young couple broke with tradition and moved out of the Yen family home into their own rented quarters in the French Concession.. Grandmother taught herself mathematics and used it to great advantage in her daily *mah-jong* games. I remember her as a quick-witted and strong-willed chain-smoker with bound feet, short hair and a razor-sharp tongue.

At the age of three, Grandmother's feet had been wrapped tightly with a long, narrow cloth bandage, forcing the four lateral toes under the soles so that only the big toe protruded. This bandage was tightened daily for a number of years, squeezing the toes painfully inwards and permanently arresting the foot's growth in order to achieve the tiny feet so prized by Chinese men. Women were in effect crippled and their inability to walk with ease was a symbol both of their subservience and of their family's wealth. Grandmother's feet caused her pain throughout her life. Later, she braved social ridicule rather than inflict this suffering on her own daughter..

My grandparents grew to love each other and had seven children in quick succession. Of those, only the first

two survived. Aunt Baba was born in 1905 and my father two years later.

*

On 10 October 1911, when Aunt Baba was six years old, the Manchu Dynasty came to an end.. Dr Sun Yat Sen, the leader of the Chinese revolutionaries, returned from exile to Shanghai in triumph on Christmas Day the same year.. He was named President of the Republic of China. One of his first acts was to abolish the custom of foot-binding.

Ye Ye supported his family by buying and leasing out a small fleet of *sampans* (bum-boats) which plied the waters of Shanghai's busy Huangpu River. Goods were ferried in and out of China's interior and loaded on to giant ocean cargo steamers moored at the Bund. Ye Ye never gambled or wasted his money in brothels and opium dens. By the time he was forty, he had accumulated considerable wealth. He was approached by young K. C. Li, the dynamic proprietor of Hwa Chong Hong, a thriving import-export company, to manage their branch office in Tianjin, a port city one thousand miles north of Shanghai.

Ye Ye had a secret. He was prone to seasickness and hated to set foot on board one of his own *sampans*. So, though his business was profitable, he decided to sell and move up north, leaving his family behind as Aunt Baba and Father both attended local Catholic missionary schools which were considered the best in China and he did not wish to disrupt their education.

*

In 1918, when Ye Ye moved to Tianjin (Ford of Heaven), the last Qing emperor had been deposed and China had fragmented into fiefdoms governed by warlords. To the north, Japan already controlled Korea and now set her sights on China. At the Versailles Peace Conference held after the conclusion of the First World War, Japan was allowed by Britain and her allies to seize and keep Germany's colonial possessions in Shandong Province as a reward for having remained neutral. Emboldened, Japan began moving into Manchuria. Japanese soldiers then infiltrated south into Tianjin.

Situated in the level and fertile great plains to the north-east, Tianjin was the second largest of the treaty ports. It was opened up to trade after China's second defeat by Britain (and France) during the Second Opium War in 1858. The treaty of Tianjin added ten more ports between Manchuria and Taiwan. The city suffered from hot, dry summers and bitterly cold winters. It was prone to flooding because of its flat terrain criss-crossed by many branches of the Huai River. Between November and March, the rivers were icy and there were occasional dust storms. Whereas the architecture in Shanghai reflected mainly British and French influence, Tianjin adopted a bewildering kaleidoscope of building styles representing all the allied countries which had defeated Empress Tsu Hsi during the Boxer Rebellion in 1903. Besides Victorian office buildings and French churches, there were Russian dachas, a Prussian castle, Italian villas, Japanese tea-houses and German as well as Austro-Hungarian chalets, all situated in separate concessions adjoining each other along the river bank.

Ye Ye again chose to live in a rented house in the French Concession, a tongue-shaped enclave sandwiched between the Japanese to the north, the British to the south and the Russians across the river. The area was neatly laid out with tree-lined avenues, tidy tramways, an imposing Catholic church, missionary schools and cheerful green parks.

Meanwhile, business had never been so good. Both Tianjin and Shanghai were booming. British, American, European and Japanese money poured back into China at the conclusion of the First World War. Concrete and steel buildings replaced the Victorian structures along the river. Factories sprang up at industrial sites manufacturing wool and cotton textiles, carpets, glass, concrete, tiles, paper, soap, matches, toothpaste, flour and other foodstuffs. Under Ye Ye's management, Hwa Chong Hong prospered. To his delight, the traditional bonus paid to him at Chinese New Year greatly exceeded his annual salary.

To celebrate his prosperity, fellow employees and friends urged him to take a young concubine to "serve him." Even Ye Ye's boss, the London-educated K. C. Li, jokingly volunteered to "give" him a couple of girls with his bonus. Ye Ye reported all this in a matter-of-fact way in a letter to his wife, adding touchingly that he was a "one-woman man."

Soon after receiving this letter, Grandmother and fifteen-year-old Aunt Baba hurried to join Ye Ye in Tianjin, leaving my thirteen-year-old father in the care of Grand Aunt. Aunt Baba was told to drop out of school because advanced education was considered detrimental to the marriage prospects of young girls. Confucius had professed that "only ignorant women were virtuous."

*

Father remained in Shanghai and continued attending Chen Tien Catholic Boys' School. He excelled in English and Ye Ye advised him not to leave his excellent teacher, an Irish missionary. Father lived with Grand

Aunt until graduation five years later. During this time, he converted to the Catholic faith and was given the name Joseph. He also developed a close relationship with my Grand Aunt, who became his mentor.

After completing middle school in 1924, Father chose not to go to university. He joined his family in Tianjin and was employed as an office boy under Ye Ye at Hwa Chong Hong. Although this was a menial post and the salary was minuscule, Father claimed in later life that it was the best possible education for a bright, inexperienced teenager. He learned all facets of the import-export business at first hand. Because of Father's fluency in English, K. C. Li soon relied on him to write and translate most of his firm's correspondence.

Father bought a second-hand typewriter and often typed important business letters after eating dinner at home, with his whole family clustered around the dining table in awed admiration. Once Ye Ye wondered aloud how the heads of these international companies would react if they found out that valuable documents worth hundreds of thousands of taels of silver were being banged out with one finger by an eighteen- year-old boy barely out of high school.

Hwa Chong Hong developed profitable relationships with various large pharmaceutical companies, including the German firm Bayer. Enormous quantities of the Chinese plant *ma huang* were purchased by Hwa Chong Hong and exported abroad. For many centuries, *ma huang* was used by Chinese herbal doctors to treat asthma and general malaise. Eventually, scientists working in the West identified and extracted the key component of the plant, ephedrine. This was then imported back into China in its purified form and sold to pharmacies prescribing Western medicine.

*

Meanwhile, outside the foreign concessions, the Japanese military presence in Tianjin deepened. Well-armed and ruthless, they were a law unto themselves and treated the Chinese with contempt. Hwa Chong Hong's prosperity did not escape the notice of the Japanese. Company headquarters were situated outside the French Concession and unprotected by French law. K. C. Li was being increasingly harassed to "collaborate." There were no formal demands, just vague threats hinting at the need for "protection against criminal elements." During a routine "visit" by Japanese inspectors, K. C.'s employees were randomly beaten for not showing sufficient respect to photos of the Japanese emperor in old newspapers, which were frugally being cut up and used as toilet paper.

K. C. realized that at any time the situation might explode. Rather than give in to Japanese coercion, K. C. decided to move out of Tianjin altogether. Father did not follow Hwa Chong Hong on its departure. Instead, at the age of nineteen, in 1926, he started his own firm, Joseph Yen & Company, within the French Concession in Tianjin. Ye Ye had such faith in Father's business acumen that he invested his total life savings, about 200,000 *taels* of silver (equivalent to over one million US dollars in today's currency), in his son's company. Ye Ye resigned from Hwa Chong Hong and became the new firm's chief financial officer.

No formal contracts were drawn up between father and son. It remained unclear whether the money was a gift or a loan. However, Ye Ye had authority to sign all company cheques and extracted an oral promise from Father that he would look after everyone in the family and pay all expenses, including Aunt Baba's dowry should she marry. At this time, my aunt had left Tianjin and was living in Shanghai. Grand Aunt's recently opened Women's Bank was flourishing. Reliable assistants were urgently needed and Aunt Baba had been dispatched to work at the bank.

Father's company prospered from the start, picking up much of the business left behind by the departure of Hwa Chong Hong. *Ma huang* continued to be exported, as did walnut kernels, straw hats, candle wax, pig bristles and dried fruits; imports included bicycles and pharmaceutical products. In the state of political unrest and increasingly ominous Japanese presence, many businesses came on the market very cheaply and Father expanded rapidly by buying up their assets. He soon acquired a lumber mill, a carpet-weaving concern and a bicycle spare parts assembly plant. Father retained the loyalty of key personnel by giving them incentive stock in his newly acquired companies.

Grand Aunt and her bank played a crucial role in Father's early success and rapid growth. She had connections in Tianjin, including the manager of the local branch of the Bank of Shanghai. With her help Joseph Yen & Company was able to issue letters of credit for up to half a million U.S. dollars guaranteed by Grand Aunt's Women's Bank. Their arrangement was for net profits after expenses to be split 70/30 in Father's favour. Hundreds of thousands of *taels* of silver changed hands with each transaction. Every deal was profitable. In three years, they never had a loss. Father began to be known in business circles as the "miracle boy" who had the power of *dian tie cheng jin* (converting iron into gold).

Marriage brokers swarmed around the young business tycoon. But, with that same bit of swagger that gave him an edge in business, he declared that all Tianjin girls were dreary and provincial. He preferred the sparkle and

sophistication of the young women in Shanghai.

*

Shanghai in the late 1920s was an exhilarating city for a young girl such as Aunt Baba. While the rest of China still travelled by push carts, sedan chairs and horse-drawn carriages, in Shanghai shining imported motor cars were speeding down well paved roads alongside trams and buses. Giant, colourful billboards advertising British cigarettes, Hollywood movies and French cosmetics gazed down at crowded pavements teeming with young men in suits and ties and girls clacking around in high-heeled shoes and stylish *qipaos*. The Bund, close to the Women's Bank on Nanking Road, had been transformed into a panorama of majestic buildings sweeping along the Huangpu River. Gunboats, steamers, *sampans* and tugboats festooned the muddy waters. Multi-storeyed department stores, such as Sincere, Wing-On, Dai-Sun and Sun-Sun, were crammed full of furs, jewelry, toys, household goods, ornaments and the latest Parisian fashions. Large enough to rival Selfridges of London or Macy's of New York, these emporiums promoted seasonal sales, gave away coupons and prizes, and even held concerts and theatrical performances on their roof gardens.

Aunt Baba had become friendly with a girl a year younger than herself, who worked in the new accounts department. Miss Ren Yong-ping could render complicated currency conversions in her head with astonishing speed and accuracy. Even when Grand Aunt checked her calculations with the abacus they were never wrong. Glowing with high spirits and vitality she had a ready smile and warm liveliness which made her attractive.

Miss Ren came from a middle-class Shanghai family which struggled somewhat after her father, a post office official, became addicted to opium and spent the last twenty years of his life in a drug-induced haze. An only daughter, she had three younger brothers, two of whom also worked in the post office, both rising later to become inspectors. She herself was soon promoted by Grand Aunt to head the new accounts department.

Working downstairs in the bank and spending their leisure hours upstairs in the dormitory, the two girls soon became best friends. Aunt Baba remembered one occasion when she and Miss Ren lunched by themselves in the restaurant at Sincere's, nicknamed "Shanghai's Harrods" because of its physical resemblance to the famous London store. The two girls hired rickshaws which pulled them along the busy Nanking Road, where traffic lights were controlled manually by red-turbaned Sikh policemen stationed in cage-like boxes perched on poles twelve feet above ground. The restaurant was elegant, with white tablecloths, fresh flowers and crystal glasses. The menus listed only Western food items with which they were unfamiliar. Chinese food was unavailable.

A little intimidated by the tuxedoed waiter, they hesitantly asked whether there was a "daily lunch special." Informed that it was *re gou* (dog meat, served hot), Aunt Baba was only slightly nonplussed. She had heard that in some provinces dog was considered a delicacy; but Miss Ren was much more dubious, remembering her family's pet Pekinese at home. She promptly remarked that "today's special" usually meant "yesterday's leftovers."

The waiter became impatient. He was one of those Chinese who had adopted the haughtiness of the foreigners and preferred to serve the wealthy whites from the concessions. On this occasion the two girls were the only Chinese in the restaurant. They began to feel like *gauche* simpletons and, as much to be free of the arrogant waiter as anything else, they both ordered the dog dish. Aunt Baba was pleasantly surprised by the sausage that arrived wrapped in a bun and ate it with relish. Miss Ren, however, could not stop thinking about the little family pet and gave up after one bite. They laughed heartily when they eventually learned from Grand Aunt that *re gou* "hot dog meat" was, in fact, the classic American hot dog.

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On one of Father's frequent visits to Shanghai to discuss business at the Women's Bank, he was introduced to Miss Ren. *Xiao qiao ling long* (petite, vivacious and interesting) was Father's verdict. They began to correspond. Five months later, they were married. An enormous banquet was held at the Xin Ya (New Asia) restaurant in the International Concession just off Nanking Road. Besides immediate relatives, most of the guests were business associates of Grand Aunt's and Father's. It was 1930.

Father took his bride to Tianjin and bought a large house at 40 Shandong Road, conveniently located in the town centre of the French Concession and very near a public park. Across the street was St. Louis Catholic Boys' School.

Their marriage was happy and they had four children in as many years. The young couple were *ru ring sui xing* (inseparable as each other's shadows).

First came a daughter. The baby was large and Dr. Mary Mei-ing Ting, an obstetrician, applied forceps during the difficult delivery. Force had to be exerted and the baby (my eldest sister Jun-pei) was born with a partially paralysed left arm. Then came three sons (Zi-jie, Zi-lin and Zi-jun). There was a gap of three years before I (Jun-ling) came along.

The family house was spacious, with two storeys and a large attic where the servants slept. With its rounded bow windows, balconies, charming porch and pretty garden, the house was considered ultra-modern because of its flush toilets, running water and central heating. The latter constituted the height of luxury: most Chinese homes were still being heated by raised brick sleeping benches called *kangs.*

Father converted the ground floor of his house into offices for some of his staff. The rest of the family lived with Ye Ye and Grandmother on the second floor. There were seven servants to take care of the household. Father bought a large black Buick for himself and a black rickshaw for Grandmother to visit friends and play *mah-jong*.

Aunt Baba often took the train from Shanghai to Tianjin, a two-day journey in those days, and stayed for long visits. Father and Mother would meet her at the station in the Buick and the three would spend hours catching up on Shanghai gossip and Grand Aunt's latest business triumphs. There were outings to restaurants, films and the Chinese opera. According to Aunt Baba, it was an idyllic time for them all.

Mother's obstetrician, Dr. Ting, was almost a member of the family by the time my three brothers were born. Like Grand Aunt, who was her classmate and childhood friend, she too had been educated at Shanghai's McTyeire School for Girls. She converted to Christianity and at the age of fifteen had spurned an arranged marriage. The intended bridegroom came from a wealthy family but was sickly, in pain and already addicted to opium. On her wedding day, the bride simply vanished. Her parents were sued and forced to pay the bridegroom's family a great many *taels* of silver in compensation for breach of promise, besides enduring considerable loss of face. With the help of her uncle, Mary escaped to Hong Kong where she continued her studies at another missionary school.

Mary's uncle followed her to Hong Kong, cut off his *queue* (pigtail) and sent it to their family in Shanghai in a gesture of defiance. This was a serious crime and amounted to a public declaration of rebellion against the Qing emperor. (After the Manchus conquered China in 1644, they had imposed the partly shaven head and *queue* on every Chinese man to state their dominance.) Mary and her uncle were both disowned. He went to work in Hong Kong to pay for Mary's education. Later Mary won a scholarship to the University of Michigan Medical School and specialized in obstetrics and gynaecology. Returning to China, she settled in Tianjin rather than Shanghai where painful memories haunted her. She founded her Women's Hospital and became the best obstetrician in town. My sister and three older brothers were all delivered at Dr. Ting's hospital.

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When my mother became pregnant with me, the political situation in China had deteriorated drastically. In 1928 the Manchurian warlord, Chang Tso-lin, had been murdered by the Japanese while riding in his private railway coach. Over the next few years, Japanese soldiers invaded Manchuria. A puppet regime (Manchukuo or Nation of Manchu) was established under the former boy emperor Puyi in 1932.

The United States refused to become directly involved. Britain looked the other way and recommended compromise. The League of Nations promised to investigate. Chiang Kai-shek, commander in chief of the army and head of the Nationalist party (Kuomintang), was fully occupied fighting the Communists, who had formed their own army and government in the rural strongholds of Yanan in the northwest.

Emboldened, Japan proceeded to launch a full scale attack on Tianjin and Peking in July 1937. This was the beginning of the Sino-Japanese war which was to rage on for eight long years. Japanese soldiers were everywhere, wearing surgical masks and carrying bayonets, demanding bows and obeisances, taking bribes and threatening violence. The foreign concessions remained neutral, small havens of uneasy independence amidst a vast sea of Japanese terror. The rest of Tianjin was now occupied territory under Japanese rule. In the evenings there were black-outs and curfews. Special permits were needed to cross key points at night, especially those conduit streets and bridges leading from the concessions into Japanese-patrolled areas.

My mother's labour pains started at four in the morning on 30 November 1937. Father did not possess the papers required to drive her past Japanese sentries on the way to the Women's Hospital. However, Dr. Ting had been issued with a pass allowing her to travel freely at night. Her chauffeur-driven black Ford, flying a small US flag given to her by the American consulate, arrived at my parents' home an hour later. My birth was uneventful.

Dr. Ting advised Father to transfer mother and baby to her hospital for a check-up and a few days' rest.

Father demurred. The birth had been so smooth and rapid. He considered it unnecessary. He also rejected Dr. Ting's advice to employ a nurse to care for my mother. He thought he could look after her himself, with the able assistance of Aunt Baba, who happened to be visiting at the time. Besides, trained nurses were expensive. A special bell was placed by mother's bedside so that she could call for Father as needed. Mother was weak, so instead of using the bathroom down the hall, it was easier to slip a bedpan under her. Afterwards Father would wipe her with a towel held in his bare, unwashed hands. Mother thought Father knew best. Father was convinced he knew best.

The headaches and fever started three days after I was born. Mother's temperature soared to 103 degrees and stayed there. Her lips were cracked and blistered. Her mind became cloudy and she was incoherent. Dr. Ting diagnosed puerperal fever. In those days before penicillin this was virtually a death sentence.

Dr. Ting immediately admitted my mother to the Women's Hospital. She was given fluids intravenously and various medications were administered in a desperate attempt to save her life. Her temperature rose to 106 degrees. She became delirious, refused all food and drink, and tried to pull out all her tubes, making wild accusations that Dr. Ting was trying to imprison and poison her. Dr. Ting realized that the prognosis was hopeless and finally gave permission for her to go home to die.

Her condition worsened. Doctor after doctor was consulted but to no avail. A dark cloud hung over the entire family.

Towards the end there was a short period of lucidity. With Father weeping at her side, she spoke to her parents-in-law and saw her children one by one, calling out each name with yearning. When Aunt Baba came in to say goodbye, Mother was weak but clear-headed. She smiled at my aunt and asked for a hot dog. Then she added sadly,

"I've run out of time. After I'm gone, please help look after our little friend here who will never know her mother."

My mother died two weeks after my birth, with five doctors at her bedside. She was only thirty years old and I have no idea what she looked like. I have never seen her photograph.

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After my mother's death, Grandmother and Father persuaded Aunt Baba to resign her job at the Women's Bank and stay on in Tianjin to take charge of the household. She was put on the payroll of Joseph Yen & Company at the same salary that she had been paid by Grand Aunt. She nagged and harried the servants and ensured that the house ran along similar lines as before. She became our surrogate mother, worrying about our meals, clothing, schooling and health. An invisible silken handcuff was thus slipped around her willing wrists, evaporating her chances of marriage and a family of her own. In those days, women in China were expected to sublimate their own desires to the common good of the family. In return, the men felt honour-bound to protect and support them for the rest of their lives.

Marriage brokers again clustered around, not for Aunt Baba, but for her newly widowed brother. The double standard accorded men and women determined that single girls not married off by the age of thirty often remained single for life, whereas a man was expected to take at least one wife, regardless of his age. Father had just turned thirty and headed his own company, with properties, investments and many thriving businesses. He had worked hard to achieve all this, putting business affairs and family welfare before personal gratification.

Now he decided to please himself. Cruising with his sons around the neighbourhood in his impressive Buick on a Sunday afternoon, he spotted his secretary, Miss Wong, standing by the door of a modest apartment complex conversing with a girlfriend. He immediately noticed that the friend was very young and possessed a *xiu se ke can* (surpassing loveliness good enough to feast upon).

Jeanne Virginie Prosperi was the seventeen-year-old daughter of a French father and a Chinese mother. Her features were an exquisite combination of Chinese delicacy and French sensuality. Her face was oval, with a white, porcelain-like complexion. She had lustrous, large, round, dark eyes, fringed by long lashes. Her head was crowned with thick, silky, jet-black hair. That day, her slender frame was dressed in a simple white blouse with a scooped-out square neckline and a royal-blue cotton skirt tied with a bow at the waist. Later on Father was to discover that Jeanne was a skilled seamstress and made all her own clothes.

Next day at work, Father made discreet enquiries and found out from Miss Wong that Jeanne was her classmate and had just started work as a typist at the French consulate. At lunchtime he drove over to the consulate on the pretext of applying for additional import-export licences from France, found her there and made her acquaintance.

Jeanne's father had been a soldier in the French army and was involved in the building of railways in China. He married a woman from Shandong Province. They had five children and times were hard. He left the army and found a job working as a security guard for a firm in the French Concession in Tianjin. He died suddenly in 1936, reputedly trying to break up a bar-room brawl.

His widow coped as best she could. She had a small widow's pension. She and her spinster sister, Lao Lao, took in sewing to make ends meet. Being French citizens, all five children were given special scholarships by missionary schools within the French Concession. Both Jeanne and her older sister, Reine, graduated from St. Joseph's Catholic School for Girls, run by the Franciscan sisters.

Although Jeanne was not someone with an impressive social pedigree, she did graduate from the most exclusive convent school in Tianjin and, along the way, had acquired many of the social graces. Besides Mandarin, she spoke fluent French and English. Father was enchanted by her beauty and style. The fact that she was half European made her something of a trophy, to be prized, cherished and put on display.

During the 1930s, in the treaty ports such as Tianjin and Shanghai, everything Western was considered superior to anything Chinese. A young, beautiful and educated European wife was the ultimate status symbol. Jeanne Prosperi, therefore, possessed considerable allure. She was always perfectly groomed and remained so all her life. Still in her teens, she displayed all the beguiling modesty instilled at the convent. In addition, there was a gleam in her eyes that suggested that she was a little more exciting than an ordinary girl barely out of school.

Father began to desire Jeanne with a desperation in which sexual longing mingled with social aspirations. A decorous courtship began. Father would pick her up from the French consulate every day and drive her home, sparing her the unpleasant crush of Tianjin public transport. They went for meals at exclusive hotel restaurants, danced at the country club and went to the movies. Tianjin boasted three cinemas, the Gaiety, Empire and Capitol, which showed romantic Hollywood films. He gave her at first flowers and chocolates; then pearls, jade and diamonds.

The trinkets became increasingly expensive. Jeanne must have had a fairly clear idea as to where things were leading when she expressed a desire for a Russian sable coat costing four thousand *taels* of silver. Though Ye Ye voiced his objection in front of Jeanne and called it "senseless extravagance," Father went ahead with the purchase and had the coat delivered three days later. That Father should have behaved in such an unfilial way was a clear indication of his passion for Jeanne. Things started out as they were destined to continue, with Jeanne stating her terms and Father agreeing to meet them. As the Chinese saying goes: to Father, even Jeanne's farts were fragrant.

Father also made himself agreeable to her family. Jeanne's home was only a mile from Shandong Road. Mindful that her exquisite daughter was poised to enter a world far more luxurious than any she could ever provide, Mrs. Prosperi encouraged the courtship. Father suspected that Mrs. Prosperi came from peasant stock. In her rented, cramped apartment, conversation was limited to the basic to and fro of daily life. Her Mandarin was coloured by a heavy Shandong accent and her spoken French was very elementary. She could read or write neither language. Her eldest son had been in trouble with the police and had been sent away to labour camp in Hanoi.\fn{Then under French control and in a large territory known as French Indochina} Her older daughter, Reine, had just married a sensible and educated Frenchman who worked for the United Nations. There were also two younger sons. Eventually, Father was to give the older boy, Pierre, a job in his company and send the youngest son, Jacques, to school in France.

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When they became engaged there were diamond earrings, a diamond bracelet and necklace as well as a spectacular ring. In the face of tradition, Jeanne brought no dowry. The wedding ceremony took place at Notre-Dame des Victoires Catholic church. Father appeared nervous in his well cut tuxedo. Jeanne looked spectacular in a figure-hugging white satin dress trimmed with lace, resplendent in all her jewelery.

None of us children attended. The Prosperi clan brought many guests, including a good many children. Aunt Baba said that she, Ye Ye and Grandmother felt somewhat uncomfortable at the lavish reception paid for by Father at the grand Astor House Hotel. Ye Ye found himself one of the very few male guests dressed in a long Chinese gown, matching satin *ma-gua* (short jacket), skull cap and cloth shoes. All the other men were in Western suits and ties. The French guests called for endless toasts but the Chinese party were simply not used to drinking so much. My aunt believed that she may have embarrassed Jeanne and her family because she had to retire to vomit more than once.

Afterwards Jeanne complained to Father that some of his Chinese kinsmen at the wedding banquet offended her delicate French relatives by being too loud and strident. However, her expression was sweet and demure when she said this. Father was utterly in her thrall, so much so that he began to adopt ambiguous notions about his own race. Growing up in the treaty ports, observing daily the symbols of Western might, living within a foreign concession in his native country, ruled by extraterritoriality, he, like many Chinese, had come to see Westerners as taller, cleverer, stronger and better. Although Jeanne was fluent in three languages, she could not read or write Chinese and was proud of this because it proclaimed, yet again, her Western heritage.

Jeanne's taste reflected her mixed origins. She invariably wore Western clothes and she wore them well. She liked to be surrounded by French furniture, red velvet curtains and richly textured wallpaper. At the same time, she collected antique Chinese porcelain, paintings and chairs. She liked plants and flowers to scent the hallway,

living room and her own bedroom. Like Grandmother, she smoked incessantly.

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I think Jeanne was happy at first. Ye Ye and Grandmother welcomed the idea of Father's remarriage as it was not right for a young man to be without a wife. Aunt Baba, moreover, was partially released from her housekeeping obligations and might, in theory, have picked up the threads of her own life. Quite how my sister and brothers reacted to the marriage I cannot really say as I was only an infant when it took place. But a Chinese saying goes, if you are to have but one parent, choose your beggar-woman mother rather than your emperor father.

Father bought the house next door on Shandong Road as a present for his bride and the newlyweds moved in by themselves. The rest of the family and the servants remained in the old house, where Father still kept his offices. The family ate dinner together every evening. Father and Ye Ye continued to work downstairs side by side and business thrived. Since my elder sister and brothers still spoke frequently of our own dead mother, whom they called Mama, Grandmother told us children to call Jeanne Niang, another term for mother.

We, in turn, were given new European names by Niang. Overnight, my sister Jun-pei became Lydia, my three brothers Zi-jie, Zi-lin and Zi-jun were named Gregory, Edgar and James, and I, Jun-ling, was called Adeline.

*

Japanese troops, which already occupied Tianjin and Peking, were now moving steadily southwards. They met surprisingly strong resistance in Nanking and, in retaliation, went on a terrifying spree of rape, looting and murder. Over 300,000 civilians and prisoners of war were tortured and killed during the Rape of Nanking in 1937 and early 1938 after the city was captured by the Japanese. Shanghai fell and Chiang Kai-shek fled westwards across China, up the Yangtse River, deep into the mountainous province of Sichuan. There he set up his wartime government in the town of Chungking. It's not hard to imagine the tension and turmoil that these momentous political upheavals must have imposed on Chinese family life.

In 1939, suddenly and without warning, Tianjin was drowned in a great flood. The disaster was of staggering proportions. Ye Ye called it "China's sorrow" and went to the Buddhist temple to burn incense and offer prayers for relief. Pro-Japanese newspapers printed in Tianjin blamed the catastrophe on Chiang Kai-shek while the Nationalist party (Kuomintang) press in Chungking accused the Japanese. Dykes on the Yellow River had been deliberately dynamited and river water released to slow the advance of troops. The flood encompassed three provinces. All crops in its path were destroyed. Two million people became homeless. Hundreds of thousands died from starvation and disease. Schools were closed. Businesses came to a standstill.

However, Father's lumber company kicked into high gear. The price of rowing boats soared from one hundred to eight hundred *yuan*. Oars were extra.

The flood caused Father to construct a high wooden platform connecting his two houses. Crossings were slippery and hazardous, particularly for Grandmother tottering on her small bound feet. Niang had just given birth to our half-brother, Franklin, and was still recuperating. Father virtually had to carry her across to the "old house" every evening so that the family could eat dinner together.

Niang had little sympathy for all the difficulties the servants faced. Cook was expected to reach the market every morning, and return home laden with groceries, on a flimsy raft nailed together with planks. When Ye Ye pointed out the dangers inherent in these shopping expeditions, Niang simply replied that Cook was a good swimmer and she did not see fit to arrange for a rowing boat to be put at his disposal. When the waters finally subsided after forty days, Grandmother ordered that a solid and covered room be constructed linking the two houses. Lydia nicknamed it "the bridge" and we used to play hide-and-seek there.

*

The youngest child of our generation, our half-sister Susan, was born in November 1941. Two weeks later, on 7 December, across the Pacific in Pearl Harbor, Japanese bombers attacked the American fleet. Japan was suddenly ip league with Germany and at war with America and her European allies. At that precise moment (8 December in China), Japanese soldiers in armoured vehicles were ordered to roll over flimsy barbed wire barricades and take over the foreign concessions of Chinese treaty ports. Simultaneously, Japanese marines invaded Malaya and bombed Singapore.

In one day, the Sino-Japanese conflict had merged with the war in Europe, expanded into Malaya, involved America and turned into the Second World War.

In Shanghai and Tianjin, British and American settlers, formerly almighty and invincible, were herded into Japanese concentration camps. The French Concessions were transformed overnight into malleable puppets at the mercy of the Japanese. All trading, especially that between China and the West, was being closely monitored by

the new masters. The Vichy French law court presiding over Father's business affairs now found itself headed by a freshly appointed judge from the New Order in East Asia, a puppet government led by the traitor Wang Jhing-wei during the Japanese occupation.

The few American businessmen in Tianjin hurried to escape with their families and what they could salvage of their possessions. A robust eighteen-year-old peasant girl now came to us, introduced by one of Father's interned American colleagues. She applied to be a wet nurse for Susan and demanded three times the going wage, stressing that she had come from the employ of an American couple and was accustomed to the "highest standards." Her goal was to save up 500 *yuan* by the time Susan was weaned, buy an ox, return to her village and raise her own baby at the side of her husband.

It caused the most dreadful commotion. Niang was determined to hire this girl. No one else would do. She seemed to think that only a woman who had suckled a white American baby was good enough for her own daughter. Father acceded to her wishes, even though the new maid's thirty-*yuan* monthly salary infuriated all the other servants. Her wages were supposed to be secret but the entire household staff soon discovered the discrepancy. Franklin's maid demanded parity for herself and everyone else. Accusing Niang to her face of unfair discrimination, the spirited maid simply packed her belongings and left.

Aunt Baba was now entrusted with the additional care of two-year-old Franklin. She took on the task with reluctance but Grandmother pointed out that Franklin was as much a nephew to her as all the rest of us. So Franklin joined me and Aunt Baba in our bedroom. She used to buy us dragons' eyes to snack on. This was a summer fruit rather like *lychees*, said to make children's eyes grow large and bright.

Aunt Baba was unsparingly kind to both of us and started teaching us elementary Chinese characters. Lydia was attending St. Joseph's, from which school Niang had graduated in 1937. I was also enrolled there in kindergarten in the summer of 1941.

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My own memories of Tianjin are nebulous. Early photographs show a solemn little girl with clenched fists, pressed lips and serious eyes, dressed in pretty western frocks decorated with ribbons and bows. I enjoyed school and looked forward to going there. Lydia and I were pulled there and back daily in Grandmother's black, shiny rickshaw. It had a brass lamp on each side and a bell operable by foot. When I revisited Tianjin in I987, I was surprised to find that it took only seven minutes to walk from our house to St. Joseph's.

I remember Lydia as an imposing, rather intimidating figure. Between us there were three brothers and a gap of six and a half years. We were a world apart.

Lydia liked to exercise her authority and flex her muscles by quizzing me on my homework, especially catechism. Her favourite question was,

"Who made you?" To this, I always knew the answer. Like a parrot I would trot out the well worn phrase,

"God made me." Then came the twister. A gleam came into her eyes.

"Why did God make you?"

I never could answer because teacher never taught us beyond the first question. Lydia would then give me a resounding slap with her powerful right hand, and call me stupid. During our daily rickshaw rides, she liked to keep me waiting and was invariably late. On the rare occasions when I was delayed in class she simply rode the rickshaw home alone but would send the puller back to get me.

She tended to be stocky, even as a child. Her physical deformity gave her a characteristic posture, with her semi-paralysed left arm hanging limply by her side and her face perpetually tilted slightly forwards and to the left. From my four-year-old perspective, she was a fearsome figure of authority.

My eldest brother Gregory had a sunny personality and the infectious ability to turn ordinary occasions into merry parties. His *joie de vivre*\fn{Love of life} endeared him to many people. Being the eldest son in China meant that he was the favourite of Father as well as of our grandparents. I remember him, full of mischief, gazing with rapt fascination at a long, black hair blowing in and out of the right nostril of snoring Ye Ye one hot afternoon. Finally Gregory could no longer resist the temptation. Skilfully, he pinched the hair ever so tightly between his thumb and index finger during the next exhalation.

There was a tantalizing pause. Ye Ye finally inhaled while Gregory doggedly hung on. The hair was wrenched from its root and Ye Ye awoke with a yell. Gregory was chased by Ye Ye brandishing a feather duster but managed, as usual, to escape.

On the whole, Gregory ignored James and me because we were too young to be interesting playmates. He was always surrounded by friends his own age. He did not enjoy studying but, like Grandmother, excelled in games of chance such as bridge. Good with numbers, he occasionally taught us younger ones neat mathematical tricks,

roaring with laughter at his own cleverness.

Of all my siblings, it was Edgar I feared the most. He bullied James and me and used us as punchbags to vent his frustration. He ordered us around to perform his errands and grabbed our share of toys, candies, nuts, watermelon seeds and salted plums. He did not distinguish himself at school and was deeply insecure, though he possessed enough fortitude to maintain a passing grade.

My *san ge* (third elder brother) James was my hero and only friend. We used to play together for hours and developed a telepathic closeness, confiding to one another all our dreams and fears. With him, I could discard my vigilance and I needed that haven desperately. Throughout our childhood, it was immensely comforting to know that I could always turn to him for solace and understanding.

We were both Edgar's victims, though perhaps James suffered more because for many years he shared a room with our two eldest brothers. He hated to make waves. When pushed around, he endured the blows passively or hid from his tormentor. Seeing me being beaten by Edgar he would skulk quickly away in blinkered silence. Afterwards, when Edgar was gone, he would creep back and try to console me, often muttering his favorite phrase

"*Suan le*!" (Let it be!)

Of Niang's two children, she openly favoured Franklin. In physical appearance he was the spitting image of Niang: a handsome boy with round eyes and a pert upturned nose. Susan at this stage was still a baby. But they were already special. I don't recall either Edgar or Lydia ever laying a finger on them. James and I were the ones singled out to do everyone's bidding. If we were not fast enough there was often a slap or a shove, especially from Edgar.

I always felt more comfortable with my friends at school than at home, where I was considered inferior and insignificant, partly because of the bad luck I had brought about by causing the death of my mother. I remember watching my older sister and brothers playing tag or skipping rope and longing to be included in their games. Although James and I were very close, he went along with the others and became "one of the boys" when they wished to preclude me.

At St. Joseph's, marks were added together every Friday and the girl with the highest total received a silver medal which she could wear pinned on her breast pocket for the entire week. Father immediately noticed when I wore the medal. Those were the only times when he showed pride in me. Father would say teasingly,

"Something is so shiny on your dress. It's blinding me! Now what could it be?" or

"Isn't the left side of your chest heavier? Are you tilting?"

I lapped up his words. Soon I was wearing the medal almost continuously. At prizegiving at the end of 1941 my name was mentioned for winning the scholarship medal for more weeks than any other student in the school. I remember my pride and triumph as I climbed up the steps, which were so high and steep that I had to go up on my hands and knees, to receive my award from the French *monseigneur*. There was warm applause and delighted laughter from the audience, but no one attended from my family, not even Father.

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At the beginning of 1942 the Japanese were taking uncomfortably closer looks at Father's books, insisting on an exhaustive audit and finally demanding that his businesses be merged with a Japanese company. Father could remain nominally in charge but profits would be split 50/50 This "offer" was, in fact, an order. Refusal would have resulted in confiscation of assets, probable jail for Father and unthinkable retaliation against the rest of the family. Acceptance meant open collaboration with the enemy, immediate loss of independence and possible reprisal from the underground resistance fighters.

After many sleepless nights, made worse by elaborate luncheons during the day when the Japanese alternately cajoled and threatened, Father took a radical step. One cold day, he took a letter to the post office and never returned home.

Ye Ye carried on with this life-and-death charade for a few months. Those were chaotic days. Kidnappings, murders and disappearances were everyday events. He immediately went to the local police and reported his son missing. He placed advertisements in the newspapers offering a reward for knowledge of Father's whereabouts, alive or dead. It was a dramatic ruse and the price was high but ultimately it had the desired effect.

Without Father at the helm, Joseph Yen & Company floundered. Many of the staff were laid off. Business dwindled. Profits plummeted. The Japanese soon lost interest.

Father, meanwhile, having managed to transfer part of his assets before his staged disappearance, made his way south to Japanese-occupied Shanghai under an assumed name, Yen Hong. He bought what was to become our family home on the Avenue Joffre. Soon afterwards he sent for Niang and Franklin, who travelled with a couple of trusted employees and joined him there.

For the rest of the family, stranded in Tianjin, life became oddly serene. Aunt Baba ran the household and encouraged us children to invite friends home to play and snack on various dim sums [?] in a way Niang would never have tolerated. Mealtimes were informal and the adults talked and played *mah-jong* late into the evening. Ye Ye kept a skeleton staff in the office.

By and large the Japanese left us alone. A chauffeur was hired and on Sundays we were driven to various restaurants to try out different cuisines, including Russian, French, and German. I remember drinking hot chocolate and eating pastries at the sparkling Kiessling Restaurant while a music trio played Strauss waltzes and Beethoven romances. Sometimes we were even taken to see suitable movies.

Father was keen that the rest of his family should join him in Shanghai. In the summer of 1942, Grandmother was persuaded to visit for two months but returned saying that Tianjin was now her home. She stubbornly refused to move and told Aunt Baba that the essence of life was not which city one lived in, but with whom one lived.

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After dinner one stiflingly hot day, 2 July 1943, we were planning next day's menu with Cook. Aunt Baba suggested that we have Tianjin dumplings instead of rice. Freshly made with chives, ground pork and spring onions, these dumplings were a great favourite among us children. We were all shouting out ridiculously high numbers as to how many dumplings we could eat.

Grandmother developed a headache from all the commotion. She went to her own room, lit a cigarette and lay down. Aunt Baba sat by her and narrated a story from *The Legend of the Monkey King.* Even though Grandmother knew many tales from the well-known Chinese classic, she found it relaxing to hear them told again and again by her daughter. She removed the shoes, stockings and bindings from her tiny damaged feet before soaking them in warm water to relieve the constant ache, giving a sigh of contentment.

Aunt Baba left her and was taking her own bath when Ye Ye hammered on the door. Grandmother was twitching, frothing at the mouth. Doctors were called but it was too late. Grandmother never regained consciousness. She died of a massive stroke.

I remember waking up in the sweltering heat of a Tianjin summer morning. Aunt Baba was sitting at her dressing table and crying. She told me that Grandmother had left this world and would never come back; her life had evaporated like *yi chang chun meng* (an episode of a spring dream). I recall the sound of cicadas humming in the background, while street-hawkers clicked wooden clappers to an- nounce their presence, chanting their wares melodiously on the pavement below:

"Hot beef noodles. Stinky bean curd. Fresh pot stickers."

I wondered how it was possible that life could go on being so much the same when Grandmother was no longer with us.

Grandmother's body was placed in a coffin in the living room. Her photograph sat on top and the coffin was elaborately decorated with white flowers, candles, fruits and banners of white silk covered with elegant, brush-stroked couplets memorializing her virtues. Six Buddbist monks came to keep watch, dressed in long robes. We children were told to sleep on the floor in the same room to keep her company. We were all terrified, mesmerized by the shaven, shining heads of the monks chanting their sutras in the flickering candlelight. All night I half feared and half hoped that Grandmother would push open the lid and resume her place among us.

Next day, there was a grand funeral. We mourners were all dressed in white, with white headbands or pretty white ribbons. We followed the coffin on foot to the Buddhist temple, accompanied by music and chants provided by Buddhist priests. Along the way, attendants threw artificial paper money into the air to appease the spirits. My brother Gregory took the place of chief mourner in the absence of Father, who was still hiding. He walked directly behind the coffin, which was placed on a cart and pulled by four men. Every few steps he would fall on his knees and start bewailing the loss of Grandmother at the top of his voice, banging his head repeatedly on the ground to make obeisance. We followed Gregory silently, marvelling at his performance.

Finally we arrived. The coffin was placed at the centre of an altar, surrounded by white floral arrangements, more silk banners and Grandmother's favourite dinner. There were about sixteen dishes of vegetables, fruits and sweets. Incense heavily scented the air. Prayers were chanted by monks. We were instructed to kowtow, kneeling and repeatedly touching our foreheads to the ground. The monks brought paper effigies of various articles which they thought she might need in the next world. There were masses of "gold" and "silver" ingots, a very intricate cardboard automobile resembling Father's Buick, an assortment of furniture and appliances, even a *mah-jong* set. These effigies were all burnt in a large urn. This delighted us children, and we eagerly helped stoke the urn by dropping in the effigies, forgetting in the excitement the purpose of the occasion and fighting over the paper car, which was very ingeniously made and covered with bright tin foil. Years later, Aunt Baba informed me that all of

it, including the eulogizing banners, monks, flowers, musicians and effigies, were chartered from a speciality shop which arranged for such “happenings” and supplied the appropriate props.

I remember watching the various paper images burning furiously and the smoke curling up and believing it would all regroup somewhere in the sky in the form of articles for the exclusive use and pleasure of Grandmother.

Our relatives and friends then followed us home and a lengthy and elaborate meal was served. Afterwards, we children were sent out to the garden to play. Lydia set up a make-shift urn. We manufactured paper stoves, beds and tables and began our own funeral for Grandmother. Soon the urn, which was a wooden flowerpot, stated to burn. Ye Ye came out ina fury, turned on the faucet and drenched us and our funeral pyre. We were sent to bed, but the incident helped to dissipate the dread and gloom of the last two days, and we felt that Grandmother was going to be happy in the other world.

Far away in Shanghai, Father grieved deeply. Hew could not accept that his beloved mother had died when she was just fifty-five. From then on, he wore only black neckties in honor of her memory.

The funeral marked the end of an era. We did not know it, but the care-free years of childhood were over. …

1938

75.64 Red Gate\fn{by Sung Ching aka Ma Sen-ching (c.1938?-)} Hangchow, Chekiang Province, China (M) 5

He had just telephoned and Hsiao-ling had told him. She would be waiting for him at home. He had not seen her for five months; if he had not met her the other day on the street near the Hsin Sheng Theater and if she had not called a greeting to him and if Chang had not given him a few new ideas so that he was resolved to take things lightly, he would not have had the courage to come and pay this visit. He stood before the tin-plated gate that was painted a bright red, looking doubtfully at the cream-colored sedan parked on the left. The autumn afternoon sun shone on his shinily-pressed khaki military uniform; he felt a little hot. He looked at his reflection on the door, straightened his military cap, then pressed the bell.

In a little while the gate opened. First a large police dog darted out and started to growl at him, glaring at him so fiercely that he prudently backed away. Then the round-faced servant appeared, dressed in a clean white shirt. Looking him over coolly, the servant asked him whom he was looking for and if he were the man who had just telephoned. The servant considered his answers carefully and then decided to let him in.

He approached the house, his hobnailed shoes clicking while the slanting sun threw his shortened shadow through the screen door onto the several pairs of brightly polished shoes strewn over the cement floor. He stood there for a moment, undecided; but his friend Chang’s words had already printed themselves in his head, and not caring that there was no one to welcome him, he sauntered in through the screen door. He stood before the steps where the shoes are removed\fn{A note reads: *Many houses in Taiwan are of Japanese style, left over from the Japanese period, and the custom of taking off shoes when entering is still observed*.} and pulled his cap off, holding it in his hands.

Through the tightly-closed paper sliding doors he heard the whisper and click of mahjong tiles. It was almost exactly like the last time he had come here; even the weather was the same. But then it was spring and now it was autumn. That first day he had stood by these steps for at least ten minutes. It was good that he was prepared this time. Don’t think too much, he said to himself. You have come to see a friend of half a year ago; you like her—what does it matter whether you like her environment?

He stood there remembering how five months ago he had left this house in anger because Hsiao-ling had made him wait ten minutes before she came out. This had made him conclude that she did not really welcome his visit so that he had only said a few words and taken his leave. That had surprised her, humiliated her. That time, sensitive to the point of nervousness, he had depended entirely on his intuition.

Now he saw the door on the left open and from it came that freckled long-faced maid who surveyed him from head to foot, then looked away as if he were not worth looking at.

“You’ve come before, haven’t you? Please sit down in the guest room. Hsiao-chieh\fn{A note reads: *“Little Mistress:” a term of address for the young daughters of a household*.} will be out in a few minutes.” She talked in a flat, lazy Kiangsu dialect, not even bothering to look at him.

He bent over to untie his shoelaces, stepped up onto the tatami\fn{A note reades: *The straw mats on the floor of Japanese-style homes*.} in his mended green socks and put on some slippers. The maid had already gone in, and he went into the sitting room at the right. A burst of laughter greeted him from behind the closed sliding paper doors on, one side of the room, and a low male voice laughed:

“Ha! You really have a one-track mind! You could very well have won by picking up your own card, a six-

character card, but you had to wait for a nine character just hoping to get yourself a whole dragon. It really serves you right that the banker has won.” The voice laughed again gloatingly.

He looked around the sitting room—the same as five months ago except that the roses in the vase on the table had been changed for chrysanthemums. He could smell their fragrance. He placed his cap on the table and, with his hands behind his back, started to pace back and forth over the soft yellow and green flowered carpet. The painted landscapes and other scrolls hanging on the wall caught his eye; he went up closer to look at them. Five months ago he would not have been interested. He had been so worked up and tense that he could neither sit nor stand because then he had felt on the verge of either winning or losing her. But today was different. He had decided that all he felt for her was liking; he did not love anyone, so he could be calm.

He remembered two evenings ago when he had gone boating on Green lake with several girls who had just graduated from middle school, how he had the wonderful sense that he could play with them as if they were only dolls. And all due to the ideas that his friend Chang had given him. After all it’s all in fun; nobody gets hurt, so there is no need to treat the girl as if she’s something sacred. He really had acted differently that night. Even Chang had praised him afterwards. But today he still could not be. sure how he would feel when he saw Hsiao-ling.

The paper door slid open and Hsiao-ling came in, nodding at him with a smile. She had a glass of tea in one hand while she reached behind her with the other hand to close the door. Her hair was neatly combed, falling softly over the collar of her pink blouse. Her cheeks were slightly flushed while her dark eyes were luminous; it was obvious that she had just wakened from a nap.

“I’m sorry to keep you waiting so long,” she said in the clear high voice that was so familiar to him. He began to have that dizzy feeling again; every time he saw her his heart would beat faster and he felt somewhat bewildered. He went forward to meet her so that they stood very close to each other; then, bending his head, he used both hands to take over the tea. His hand brushed hers and his heart pounded painfully. She gazed at him, her face tilted upwards and her cheeks flushed a brighter pink, before she suddenly remembered to ask him to sit down.

He sat down across from her with the low table in between, and prolonged his sip of tea before he put the glass down on the table.

“Summer vacation is almost over,” he said. “You’ll be registering for classes next. week. Is it Tuesday?”

“Oh, I haven’t even looked the schedule up yet. Yes, it must be Tuesday.” She laughed. “See how muddle-headed I am!”

He shook his head. He did not know how to make polite small talk so he did not know what to answer. They sat in silence.

“You still have to serve another five months, don’t you?” She looked at his uniform as she said this.

“Yes, that’s right. Well, you certainly have a good memory!” He burst into a laugh, so abrupt and sharp that it took him aback. He was trying hard to curb the beating of his heart, to act naturally while fighting his feeling of constraint in her presence.

She looked at him in astonishment, her hands folded in the lap of her skirt. She pressed her lips tightly together. She remembered how he had left the last time without waiting for her and then three days afterwards his letter had come. Such a thick letter. She had taken it into the privacy of her room and had read it over three times, all five pages of it. She had even forgotten her supper that night. He had always been very distant to her, and she had never imagined that he might ever feel about her the way his letter indicated. From that day on, every time she received a phone call, her heart leapt wildly. But several days passed without even his shadow appearing, and she had begun to forget him. She could not understand. He had changed; last week he was so cold. When she met him on the street, and today he laughed so strangely.

“What have you been doing during the holidays?” he asked as he looked straight at her. He had at long last overcome some of his excitement.

“What did you say?” She was a little flustered.

“I said, what have you been doing with yourself during the holidays?” he repeated, realizing that it probably sounded as if he were cross-examining her. He had heard that she had been playing around a lot this summer, attending every dance with a new partner each time.

“Oh, I’ve been doing some reading at home. I don’t like to go out very much.” She leaned forward a little, smiling directly at him. “You know, I’ve read some of your stories. Really very good.”

“Where did you find them? They aren’t much—you must have laughed yourself silly over them!”

“I found them in … in … I can’t remember.” She tried to think, then, smiling naively, she asked, “Was that one about the man and two girls a true story?”

"What do you mean? It's a story, and it doesn't have to be true."

She nodded with a shy smile, saying softly:

"My sister understands things like stories and poetry better than I do. But, you know, I've begun to learn painting during the summer—"

He realized that talking about cultural things would bore her. In fact he did not like a studious girl who always had to talk about literary subjects, nor did he want a sloppy woman artist. He was attracted to this girl because she was lively, pretty, with a high clear voice and a light step that was as graceful as a swallow's flight.

"Been to Green Lake this summer?" He changed the subject.

"No, I haven't." She could not understand why she was lying. Just the day before yesterday, she had gone boating with three boys who were her classmates. Could he have seen her? She was really getting into the habit of lying, she thought. "What about you? How many stories have you written recently?"

"I haven't written anything." He was also lying. "I sit at the desk in the supply office of my battalion during the day and in the evenings and Sundays I go out. Sometimes the movies, or boating, fishing, hiking, walking around in the theater district or just sitting in the coffee shops. Green Lake is really beautiful at night, you know. Different every time, especially these past few nights with the moon so bright. Night before last I went out there with my friends and we took out two of those boats. Really a wonderful evening."

He was afraid that she thought of him as always reading or writing. He should be like other young people, lively, with no set time for study but always ready to throw down their books to rush out for a good time. However, although he had already left school, he still wasted too much time with books and pen and paper. To pass one day without reading a book was worse for him than a day without sleep. This habit of reading made him angry with himself for what he was afraid he was missing outside. He heard the slither of the door being opened and the long-faced maid stuck her head in.

"Hsiao-chieh, a telephone call for you."

Hsiao-ling left the room. He sprawled out lazily in the armchair with his head resting on the back, listening to the *mahjong* sounds from the next room. He remembered how he had first met her two years ago on the campus; she had on a white blouse and a flowered skirt with her hair pulled back in a pony tail. With the blue school bag heavy with books in her hand she had looked so fragile and young, just like a school girl. Their eyes had met and involuntarily he had braked his bicycle to a stop. She had also stopped in her tracks as if there was a current pulling them together. He had always liked this kind of girl—pretty, graceful, and with a childish clarity in her eyes that revealed the absence of any contact yet with the realities of life. He had gazed at her stupidly until, blushing furiously, she had turned her head and started walking again.

That same noon, as he was having lunch in the small Cantonese restaurant just across from the university, he had seen her again. With a group of other girls, she had come out the campus gate, talking and laughing, her pony tail switching back and forth with every step as if keeping time. They had entered the restaurant, pouncing on the large round table in the center of the room—like excited sparrows around a cup of grain. The waiter handed her the menu and immediately seven or eight heads had clustered around her, trying to decide what dishes to order. From the way she had acted, it was apparent that she was to be the hostess. She seemed very happy to have others see that she could afford it.

She had looked up suddenly and their eyes had met. The quick, memory of their earlier meeting made him lower his head in embarrassment and hurry through his meal with shortened breath.

Now the door slid open again. She came in smiling, smoothing with both hands the hair that lay against her neck, and sat down at her original place.

"You said that you're permitted to read during office hours so you must have finished a whole lot of books."

"That was at the beginning, not now. They'd rather you talk, drink tea or smoke to pass the time when you're not busy."

He remembered that in his letter to her he had said that he could go down to the small stream behind the office building to fish or read. So she actually had received his letter. He was filled with a feeling of warmth.

"What will you do after you finish your military service?" she asked with concern.

He hesitated. He was going to tell her that as soon as he had finished his service he would try to find a job teaching in a middle school. But then maybe she would think that was a poor job with no future to it.

"I may go to work for one of the English newspapers. My uncle is the manager."

In fact, he had never thought of working at that newspaper. He did not like the idea of being kept so busy. Although the pay there was three times as high as that of a teacher, he had never wanted to ask for his uncle's help; He wanted to have the winter and summer vacations to himself. He did not know why he should be saying all this

to her; it was all so much against what he really wanted. She only smiled slightly.

"Then you'll still be in Taipei?"

"Of course."

They were silent again. She crossed her feet, hugged her knees and gazed at him with a smile. He noticed her eyes, black with a tint of blue in the whites, like the clear water of a mountain pool; they were filled with a soft but mischievous smile.

"Have you seen that movie *Bridge Over The River Kwai*?" he asked.

"Yes, have you?"

"I have. How did you like it?" She thought it over for a while.

"Quite good. But why wouldn't the British officer blow up that bridge at the end?" She frowned as she pursed up her small mouth with a puzzled look.

"Because he was blinded by his ego. He was a stubborn old-style army man with a one-track mind, not at all in keeping with the present age."\fn{Actually, he just didn't want to see the work itself—a remarkable feat, considering the privations his men were forced to work under—destroyed, even to further the war effort of the Allies. He had become enamoured of it, considered it a tribute to his own qualities of leadership, that is true: but more deeply, he understood it as a means by which the men under his command had been able to retain their self-respect, and so be better able to save their lives when confronted with the daily brutality of the Japanese guards. His men did not at first understand this—that doing ones best in adverse circumstances becomes mentally triumphant over the mentality of those enforcing physically adverse circumstances. On the other hand, they were not expected to by their own officers: which is to say that they were not expected to be able to save themselves from the natural disorderliness, petty thinking and unclean habits to which soldiers—in the armies of those days, just another form of lout—were prey to—through the exercise of self-discipline and cooperation in a common project. It was the officer that was expected to produce the concept that enabled them, in their turn; it was the officer who was, in short, expected to be a civilized man, and so constrained to maintain civilized standards in the midst of organized barbarity—war. It is still quite a film.}

He wanted to go further into this subject, really praising the theme of this movie but he stopped himself, afraid of boring her. He must talk about something that would interest her. He tried hard to think of some movie that was more entertaining, but since he hardly ever went to them, he could not remember a single one.

They sat silent listening to the noises of mahjong in the next room. Then they heard a door sliding open. He lifted his head to see Hsiao-ling's father going past in the corridor. He had a cigarette in one hand, and as he shuffled by in his slippers his corpulent body waddled a little.

The silence hung between them; he could not think.of what to say. He started remembering again: last year on Chinese New Year's night he had gone to a dance at a friend's home, his first dance. It was already past eight but only three or four girls had appeared. He was sorry for the host, who had boasted that their would be plenty of girls, so, encouraged by his friends, he had bravely gone out to ask Hsiao-ling to come to the party.

In the dark, chilly night he had found her house, but one look at the huge gate was enough to scare him off. He had stood on his toes to peek through a crack but there was no light inside so he had decided to leave. Just then a car had turned into the lane, the headlights blinding him. When the car had come to a stop beside him, Hsiao-ling had gotten out and surprised him into speechlessness. Her hands had been up under her chin, holding the collar of her red coat wrapped tightly around her neck. When she saw him, her eyes had widened with surprise.

"*Ai*, it's you! How is it you've come so late to say Happy New Year?" Then she had bitten her tongue in embarrassment and had added, "I am only joking. It's so cold!"

Two other people had gotten out of the car, their coats wrapped tightly around them. They were Hsiao-ling's parents, and she had introduced him to them. He had bowed awkwardly. The distant street light had illuminated their faces enough so that he could see they were not quite over forty. Her father was stout; but her mother had a good figure and the soft collar of her fur coat showed off her delicate beauty, very much like Hsiao-ling's. He had managed to stutter a few words; then the gate had opened. Hsiao-ling had insisted that he should go in and sit for a while but he had refused.

"Is there anything special?" she had asked softly, throwing a look at her parents who had urged him to go in.

"No, nothing at all." It might have been the cold or it might have been nerves, but his voice had been trembling a little. Then, under the gaze of all three pairs of eyes he had straightened his borrowed black suit, bowed politely and taken his leave.

Thinking of it now made him laugh suddenly.

"What are you laughing at?"

"About that Chinese New Year's night. You asked me to come in and I kept refusing."

"I remember. I didn't know whether you had something to say or not. It was so cold that night, wasn't it?"

"Was it? Maybe I was too nervous; I didn't feel the cold." He stretched out his legs and leaning against the end

table next to her, he put his hand under his chin and smiled teasingly at her. “When. saw you, my heart started to beat so fast it warmed me up in a hurry.”

She did not say anything but looked at him with surprise. Why did he say such things? This proved what she had felt a little while earlier, he had indeed changed.

He looked at her bowed head and discovered a tranquil beauty in her lowered eyes that he had never noticed before. He felt his heart stirring.

“Have you been dancing much these days?” he asked in a low voice.

“No, I haven’t been dancing for the last three or four months.”

“Really?” He laughed. “Next Friday there’s a dance given by some of our old classmates. I hope you can come.”

She looked at him hesitatingly. This was the first time he had ever asked her for a date. She had waited for a whole year, during which she had instinctively felt several times that he had been on the verge of asking her but each time, after much stuttering and talking in circles, he had never come out with it. Today he had finally asked her and she felt different. She had never felt this way when other boys had asked her. She could not smile naturally any more, but felt the muscles tightening on her face as it began to burn. Then a new thought occurred to her: he always talked to her about dancing and movies as if this were all she knew about. When he talked to her, she told herself, the look in his eyes was the same as if he were talking to a child. Why had he invited her in such a careless way? And why had he asked “Really?” when she told him she hadn’t been out dancing. She had said it because she wanted him to know that she had changed, that she no longer was only interested in social life. She quickly changed her mind.

“No, I’m afraid I won’t have time that day. School will have started then, of course, and I will be very busy this semester—I have to collect a lot of material for my thesis.”

She knew that what she was saying wasn’t true. Her studies were always easy for her and neither of her parents expected her to become a scholar. Why had she refused? He might never ask her again!

Vividly, she remembered again the day at Green Lake when it had begun to rain and they had rowed their boat up close under the overhanging cliff with the huge characters *Little Red Hut* written on it. Hidden in the hollow there, it had been another world shut off from outside view. There had been four girls and five boys and they had sat in a circle playing cards. He had sat opposite her and had kept looking at her in a dazed sort of way with his long-lashed dark eyes. He did not talk much and every time he had said anything, he would blush. Her friend Lin Hsiu-tsu had whispered to her and giggled about how shy he was, but she had liked him for it. That was the first time they had been together in a group and she had found him different; not rugged like Fang Chung nor gallant like Little Lee, who always knew what to say to a girl. She had been attracted to him by his very difference, by his air of stubborn self-respect—or was it shyness? They had not seen each other often during the past two years but she had always thought of him.

Now she had hurt him. Why had she done it? She realized how stupid she had been—she knew him for what he was, but she had treated him the way she treated Little Lee. If it had been Little Lee, he would use his persuasive tongue to overcome her refusal. But he was not Little Lee. He did not know how to play that kind of a game.

He had not expected her to refuse and for a moment could not think of anything to say. A feeling of indescribable disappointment crept over him. He knew that she had gone out happily with others and now the first time he had asked her, she had refused. In fact, he was not a good dancer, nor did he care much for dancing. He had asked her today only because he had thought it would please her. But she had refused. What would she think now? She must look down on him all the more.

He thought of what Chang had said. Could he feel lightly about all this? Could he regard her as something less than sacred? No, he couldn’t. He felt that she was so perfect, so unattainable, and he was so out of tune with the times, a mere bookworm. But could Chang have been wrong? She had seemed to like him before. Maybe if he had acted like himself … she had looked at him very strangely each time he had tried to act the way Chang said he should. He was in a turmoil of self-doubt. He gazed at her woodenly and smiled a bitter smile of self-deprecation, of heartsick disappointment.

They were each lost in their separate thoughts. He saw her glance at her watch.

“Do you have anything to do?”

“No, nothing.” She smiled apologetically.

“I really have to go.” He picked up his cap and stood up politely.

She watched him as he bent over to tie his shoelaces and saw that his hands were trembling. She saw him to the gate, the huge police dog standing quietly beside her but watching his movements with alert eyes.

"Come again when you have time," she murmured softly as he turned to go. He did not answer but twisted his head to look at her again. He saw her looking at him with a strange expression in her eyes. Was it regret? Her smile was also strangely tremulous, a little sad. He hesitated. Then he cursed himself for an imaginative, love-sick fool and, waving his hand to her strode through the gate. He felt her gaze on his back but forced himself to go on without looking back again. Only when he was almost at the end of the lane did he hear the red gate bang shut.

186.199 The Story Of A Brigade Leader Prospecting In The Great North-West \fn{by Mrs. Yu (c.1938-)}
Jingxiang Village, Cang'an County, Zhejiang Province, China (F) 9

"I was born and grew up in Jigxiang Village in Cang'an County, Zhejiang Province. It has over six hundred years of history. It was built when the Ming Dynasty general Qi Jiguang fought Japanese pirates there. It has a city wall with four gates and a moat, and there's a group of hills inside the town that looks like a lion, called Lion Mountaqin. The scenery is very beautiful, and there are a lot of cultured people in the town. But it's a pity, they pulled down the walls and got rid of the ancient buildings during the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution.

"The Eastern Sea\fn{The East China Sea, an extension of the Pacific Ocean} is close by, it's a land of fish and rice, you could eat freshly caught fish every day there. Girls from the seaside all have big, bright eyes, perhaps because they eat a lot of seafood, fish and prawn skins. We didn't understand in those days, but later on I discovered that seafood contains a lot of calcium, which is good for the eyes.

"The girls are pretty there, and it has a good climate, there are no bitterly cold winters, and no sandstorms either. There was this one winter when we were young, there was a sudden, light fall of snow, snowflakes were drifting about in small flurries, not many of them. My brothers and sisters and I were so happy, we got a cotton sheet, and each took hold of a corner to catch the snow so that none would fall on the ground, it was very beautiful. And then there was another particularly cold year, it snowed again, and that time we made a snowman. We never saw snow in winter again after that. We never wore thick cotton-padded clothes, thick overcoats, or even woollen undertrousers, we'd just use an extra pair of unlined trousers.

"My father's family had been scholars for generations, although by his generation they had lost most of their wealth. They always approved of education and supported setting up schools. My grandparents gave several *mu* of family land for a school, it was called the "Awakening Teacher School". My oldest uncle went to Hangzhou Commercial College, but my second uncle and my father didn't get so much schooling. My father started out as an apprentice in a tailor's shop straight out of primary school. He didn't marry until he was thirty, and he was very happy when I came along.

"It was a feudal society in those days, people only celebrated the first male child, but my father wasn't like other men—he treated me like a boy. My grandmother was widowed when she was still in her thirties, she was very fond of me. Now I don't have very clear memories from when I was very small, but sometimes they still appear vaguely in my brain.

"I remember when I was four I often put charcoal bricks in my grandmother's brass stove—my mother used to get everything ready, and then I'd pop in the charcoal. It was a cold winter day, I hadn't slept all night. I heard the grown-ups crying, and I thought that it was Granny, crying because there was nobody to tend her stove, so I called out to Mummy, "Take the stove over to Granny so she can get warm," but Mummy said that Granny had passed away. Later, I saw the adults crying and I cried along with them. That was the first time I saw grownups cry, and it made me wonder why.

Then there was a time when I was five or six, a very cold day in winter. We had a pond in the courtyard of our house, the children all liked playing by that pond and looking at the fish. I went to play by the pond, but somehow I fell in! The pool was quite deep in the middle, though the sides were shallow, and I was wearing a black quilted jacket. That heavy soaked padded jacket was a dead weight, dragging me down, I couldn't move, and I didn't know to call out. Luckily, one of my uncles was over on a visit, he heard the splash from the parlour, and saw a black padded jacket bobbing about in the pool.

"*Aiya*," he said, "I've just seen a child fall in!" and he came rushing over to pull me out. I was chilled to the bone. Now whenever I speak of cold, I think of the freezing cold of that black padded jacket.

"By the time I was seven or eight, I was already in the second year of primary school. Our family had a big house then, with a central courtyard paved with flagstones. In those days there were no toys, nothing to play with, so in summer we little girls drew houses on the flagstones with chalk and played hopscotch.

"Just as I was playing happily with a few other girls, all of a sudden there was a roar, the earth and sky seemed

to shake, the sky grew dark, and we heard a loud noise. We were frightened out of our wits, we didn't know what was happening, so we hurried out onto the street. We saw people strolling about, enjoying the cool evening air; they were all fine, they'd heard a loud noise, but it was all over quickly, and nobody knew what it was.

"It was only later that we found out from the grownups that this noise was made by something called a bomb. The Japanese had been dropping bombs on China, but we had never experienced it in our part of the world. So we girls slowly made our way back home, where we found that a beam of the house had been broken by the shock, and the two beds underneath the beam were covered in tiles from the roof. They had just fetched my baby brother from the bed.

"In the first year we learned a lot of poems and children's folk rhymes. There's a song I still know by heart:

Kitten small,
kitten jump,
kitten catch a rat,
rat run away.

"In the second year the teacher taught us how to use an abacus to add and subtract—there were rhymes to teach us the rules of the abacus. For activities, we ran races and played with rubber balls, and we played hide-and-seek, and running to a tree for forfeits, the last one to touch the tree had to sing a song.

"Our village was relatively enlightened for the time. A lot of the girls went to school, sometimes a third of a class was girls. All the girls in my extended family went to school. My uncle, who had attended commercial college, became the headmaster of the school my grandparents set up. He only had three daughters, no sons, but he had progressive ideas, and encouraged the villagers to oppose Yuan Shikai and support Sun Yat-sen. All his daughters went on to marry scholars and educated men, and they certainly influenced me.

"In those days there was only a primary school in the village, so when I started middle school at the age of thirteen, I had to leave home to go to teacher training school. At that time my ambition was to be a doctor. A lot of people died of tuberculosis in those days—my cousin and my oldest uncle had both died of TB, and other relatives too. To become a doctor I would have had to attend the standard middle school, followed by senior middle school and university, but my family's finances couldn't stretch that far, so I had to sit the exam for the teacher training school. At the start of the course the teacher announced that the first essay was on "My Ambition". I said that my ambition had originally been to be a doctor, but now I was at the teacher training school, I had told myself: you should be a teacher, and serve the people. The teacher liked my essay, and I got 99 per cent.

"Our home was a few *li* away from the teacher training school, and in those days there were no cars, and it would take two hours to get from home to school on foot. When I was in my second year, I wanted to go back home to pick up some clothes. I had a classmate, not as tall as me, but a year older, who also wanted to go home for her summer clothes, so the two of us set off early one Sunday morning. The school food wasn't that tasty or plentiful, four small dishes between eight of us, and if you were a slow eater you wouldn't get enough. We'd all stand to attention and then they'd say *kaitong*,\fn{Dinner is served} and everybody would pick up their chopsticks at once, quick eaters would eat their fill, slow eaters got very little, so when I came back home I wanted something to eat.

"In those years we didn't have any biscuits or bread, just rice; the family had a grinder, my mother ground flour and made a few flat cakes, with spring onions and shrimp flakes added—that was a delicious treat. Because we waited for those tasty shrimp cakes, we didn't set off back to school until four o'clock.

"In summer, thunderstorms could come at any time, but we were young and thoughtless, and nobody thought to warn us. There were four gates in the town wall, north, south, east and west, we left by the north gate, heading for school, but when we reached a village called Qianche the sky darkened, there was a roll of thunder, and all at once the rain came pouring down in torrents. The flagstone path we were walking on was only a handspan wide, just a row of stone slabs, with paddy fields full of uncut rice plants on one side and a big river on the other. We were walking in single file, and I was holding an umbrella, with a bag of summer clothes on my arm. I was scared I wouldn't make it back to school in time and they'd fine us, so I was getting panicky and flustered. We just kept walking, with her in front and me behind. We couldn't see any peasants working in the fields in their south Chinese straw rain capes, there wasn't even anybody else on the path, no one but ourselves between the vast, empty paddy fields and the river, where many wild water lilies were growing. The other girl was going very fast, she was over a dozen metres ahead of me, and somehow I slipped and fell into the river. Luckily the wild water

lilies were very thick there, I dropped right on top of them, with the river water rushing past in. torrents next to me.

"At the time I wasn't scared, and somehow I managed to clamber back up. As soon as I was on the bank I shouted, 'Heavens above!' (Southerners shout 'Heavens above' whenever anything happens.) But that evening I lay on my bed, tossing and turning, unable to sleep. The more I thought about it the more scared I became; if the water lilies had covered me, I wouldn't have been able to climb back up by myself; and nobody would have come to rescue me, they wouldn't even have been able to find my body. Having nearly drowned twice when I was young, I was always afraid of water and so never learned to swim.

"I can't remember so much about Daddy, he was always busy with his work; besides, I was a girl—he liked me, but he didn't care about my studies as much as my younger brothers'. My mother was a very hard-working, very honest woman, she wasn't afraid of hardship. She was very fond of me when I was a little girl, she taught me to turn up a hem, to cut out cloth and make clothes, to sew and mend. In the past, we even made our own belts for trousers; raising silkworms, weaving cloth, we did it all ourselves. She could do everything: reeling the silk off the individual silkworm cocoons to weave into silk, weaving cotton cloth and embroidery. In the summer and winter holidays I liked to follow her about and give her a hand here and there. I wove on the loom as well, and when I was a bit older I helped my mother make shoes. There were four boys after me, so I helped my mother to sew many shoe soles. Our summer holidays weren't like the ones children have nowadays, with drawing lessons, piano lessons or cramming classes. We had to spend every holiday making shoes, we couldn't afford to buy them.

"I really don't know how we would have managed without my mother's skill and hard work. I never thought about these things until I became a mother myself, but by that time I wasn't my own master, the times were different, and there were different demands on women.

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"We weren't very sophisticated then, we only thought about building up our motherland, about not letting the American imperialists bully us, not giving the Westerners a reason to look down on us! In 1953 a call went out to train a batch of fasttrack teachers to serve the nation. Three years of study were condensed into a single year. When I finished teacher training school I was sent straight on to Wenzhou City Normal School. My idea at the time was that once I graduated as a teacher I'd start making a living as a teacher.

"But when we were about to graduate and be assigned jobs, the North-West Geology Management College sent a representative from Xi'an to our school in Wenzhou to select two hundred students to help the great north-western oil-prospecting mission. He said the nation needed this survey more than they needed teachers, so the school encouraged activists to devote themselves to the construction of the motherland. I was very progressive in those days, I was class monitor, and I'd been on propaganda teams.

"I liked the thought of seeing the outside world, that had always been an ambition of mine. I had read many books as a little girl, and the story of Mulan in the army was the one that stirred me most deeply. I had learned about the Great North-West in geography and history classes, I knew about the northern Chinese scenery, I knew that it snowed in the north-west, and I knew about things like the Qilian Mountains and Jiayuguan, where the Great Wall ends in the desert. All of these were things I'd heard about in poems, and I wanted to go out and explore it for myself. At that time none of us knew what a geological survey actually was, and we never thought to mention it—the motherland needed us!

"I was in Wenzhou, which was a long way away from my home town, and at that time transport was poor, there was no road, and no bridge to cross the river, so I hadn't been back at all since I left for the Normal School. I thought the family wouldn't be that worried, after all I wasn't a boy, so I went straight from the school to Xi'an—my family didn't even know.

"First we took the bus to Hangzhou, and then a train from Hangzhou to Xi'an. When we arrived in Xi'an we were all very excited, it was quite backward but we didn't care, and we went to visit the Great Goose Pagoda. The course in Xi'an was an accelerated course, we went very fast. We were put into two classes where we studied everything from the theory of surveying to on-the-spot surveying. I was head of the first class. We studied theory as though our lives depended on it, but we didn't really get to grips with what it was actually like and we had no idea of the hard work that was to come. As part of our training, the school sent our group away for field study and testing, so after several months of theory we went to Yan'an for winter training, on the Yellow Earth Plateau.

"It was so cold in Yan'an in winter, there was over a metre of snow. Still, nobody complained, none of us showed the slightest anxiety or worried about the hardship, we felt almost holy, living in a cave house in Yangjialing, a place where Chairman Mao had once lived. I was in charge of three small groups in one sub-unit, all girls, six to a cave house, with six army canvas travelling cots and a basin of burning charcoal to keep out the

winter cold. The quilts were very thin, just light summer quilts, and everyone had a heavy cotton-padded jacket and a pair of padded trousers. They only had millet in Yan'an, they'd never even seen rice, and *mantou*\fn{Steamed bread buns} were for field training only.

"Field training was very tough; we got up before daybreak, and set off carrying a water bottle and a dozen *mantou* in our backpacks. By noon our *mantou* were lumps of ice, sometimes we couldn't get our teeth into them at all, there was no fire to heat them on, and we'd finished all the water, we were so thirsty we had to eat snow. We always had good appetites in those days. Walking around in the ice and snow, tens of degrees below zero, the girls' hair stuck together in icy clumps, and when the boys went out their moustaches went all white. The Yan River had frozen solid, and we had to cross it every day to climb the snow-covered mountain; if you fell into a hollow where the snow had piled up you couldn't climb out by yourself, somebody had to pull you out.

"At that time we lacked even the most basic necessities for our tasks—we didn't even have warm shoes, just light military summer shoes with rubber soles, and those are very slippery. It was impossible to climb mountains in thick cotton-padded trousers, so we didn't wear them, just two pairs of unlined trousers, and nobody complained of the cold either.

"We were young, we were healthy and full of energy, but even so, going out early and coming back late, some of our classmates' hands froze up like the *mantou*, sometimes we couldn't get our socks off because they were stuck to our skin. In the evening, when the cold became unbearable, we had to sleep in pairs, huddled together for warmth.

"I feel a real nostalgia for our enthusiasm and cheerfulness under those conditions: we used to sing songs while we were resting. Sometimes we'd start to sing on one mountain, and they'd pick up the tune on the next mountain; we sang back and forth to each other. There was the *Song of the Pioneers*, and songs from the Soviet Union, *Katyusha*, *One Road*; I've sung them all. And that was our three months of practical study. Back in Xi'an we spent two or three more months reinforcing what we'd learned, and then we were posted to jobs in the Jiuquan Big Brigade.

"There were three survey brigades then, two with male leaders, and I was the leader of the third brigade. We were the vanguard of the survey, the advance guard of the oil pioneers; our duty was to draw topographical maps of the areas they were exploring, so we were always first on the scene. At that time trains from Xi'an only went as far as Lanzhou, there was no railway from Lanzhou to Jiuquan, so we set off from Lanzhou in big trucks.

"With the vast yellow sands of the Gobi all along the route, we could go for a day with nothing but endless yellow sands, no sign of human life, and then another day would come and go without a soul to be seen. All the roads were dirt tracks, all bumps and hollows; we were tumbled about in the trucks until even our insides hurt from all the shaking. Our track was a strip of yellow road under us; behind us was dust like a tail of thick, choking smoke.

"Our throats were burning and dry. We could do nothing about our hair—we all had matted hair and grimy faces. Every time we reached a stop in the evening, there'd be over a dozen of us to one big *kang*, all in a row, one next. to the other, with grass mats to lie on. We were stung and bitten all through the night, and we couldn't do a thing about it.

"What did we burn? Cow and horse dung! It was still very cold indeed in the Great North-West when we first went out in April and May, and we only had dung for fuel, which filled the room with its stink as soon as you lit it, but nobody said a word about the dirt or the harshness of the life. It's very interesting to look back on that time. Our generation takes pride in having experienced this memorable part of history.

"And that was how our band of girls arrived at the Jiuquan Big Brigade base. It was a single-storey building, we slept on iron beds, and we couldn't have been happier if we had gone to heaven. It was almost International Labour Day when we arrived, and I still remember 1 May very clearly: snow was still falling from the sky—we all sat on the ground in the open air, wearing big thick padded jackets, but no hats, holding an activists' meeting.\fn{In post-I949 China, 1 May was a very important festival. First, it was a holiday that belonged to the working people themselves; second, it was an opportunity for propaganda, crusading against the oppression and exploitation of the labourers under capitalism; third, work units or the government would use this day to hold activists' meetings, introducing new schemes or work plans for the summer}

"In the activists' meeting the leaders told our group that we were going to leave for the worksite. The following day a long file of more than ten trucks set off in the direction of Jiayuguan, carrying my womens survey team and a few tents. Our worksite was on the far side of the Jiayuguan pass.

"In the past, many majestic, beautiful epic poems had been written by scholars and poets about this Jiayuguan, but when we got there all we could see was the vast Gobi Desert stretching out boundlessly in all directions, a

great, barren desert with no sign of life and no vegetation! There wasn't a living soul to be seen.

"But do you know something? When we saw it we were full of pride. I told our group: we too can bring our work to places where the great poets of ancient times have been, this is an honour. Really, at that time that was what I thought.

"We put up our tents in a village in Jiayuguan and moved in. The only technicians in the team were me and my classmates, all women. One of the apprentice workers from Nanjing was just sixteen, and I was only eighteen. On outside fieldwork we were split into many small groups: Terrain Reconnaissance, Site Selection, Observation, Mapping. My team were the vanguard of the survey, the people in Mapping would survey and map the terrain based on the control points we had measured.

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"He\fn{Her husband} was in the Jiuquan Big Brigade too. He came to work in our brigade in 1952, to help us with the technology. He was also responsible for the organisational work of the Communist Party Youth League, and he often came to inspect our work. At that time I was still young, I hadn't started thinking about courtship, marriage or anything of that sort. Then a writer called Yu Ruobin (his pen name was Sha Duoling) came to the site; he'd come to experience life with us in the Jiuquan Big Brigade, and he wrote a lot of poems about our women's survey team and the Gobi Desert. Many journalists from the Xinhua News Agency used to come to report on our team, and they took lots of photographs.

"This writer Sha Duoling told me about You's background: he was a graduate from the Lanzhou University physics department, a Hero of Labour, and his work was first-rate. He said he'd done a special report on You, a man who struggled fiercely for the sake of the construction of the motherland. He suffered from stomach trouble, and once he'd fainted dead away on the worksite, but when he came round he just carried on as normal … he was a man with a very strong work ethic. I began to notice this man, and later on You himself suggested that he would like to make friends with me. He didn't say the romantic words you would see in books today, he just asked me if I wanted him to make friends with me, and was that all right?\fn{In China before 1990, "lover" was an embarrassing word, even a *louche*, dissolute word. When a man and a woman were said to be "making friends", this referred to courtship. In the period between 1930 and 1980, a couple who were Party members had to gain authorisation from the Party organisation before "making friends"; from the 1950s to the 1980s this rule was an unwritten law in Chinese society}

"At first I really didn't know what to reply. When I kept silent he said:

"'It's perfectly simple, just tell me, do we or don't we? Be frank.'

"At that time there were quite a few people who were keen on me, but I agreed anyway. Why did I choose him? This has a lot to do with my family, and the influence of my older girl cousins: they had all married university students in the 1920s and '30s, and they were all very talented men: one was a professor in the Shanghai Finance and Economics Institute, and one had been a student of literature at the Sun Yat-sen University in Guangdong, and after the Liberation he became a teacher. Everyone thought he was amazing—at that time people who had been to university were rarer than a unicorn horn or phoenix feathers.

"So I thought I couldn't do less than them, and I had always admired educated people. At that time I'd never heard of MAs, PhDs or anything like that, and though my ambition had been to be a university student myself, it was impossible then, so I would naturally tend to look favourably on a university graduate as a marriage partner! The best candidates among my classmates were only vocational school graduates, none of us had been to university. So You's educational background and his personal circumstances both met my standards, but actually the most important thing was the man himself. Besides, that writer Sha Duoling, our deputy group leader and the organisational secretary of the Youth League had all told me:

"A Hero of Labour is bound to be a hard worker, and a hard-working man is always good news."

"At that time an introduction from the Party organisation was as good as a guarantee, many people said yes as soon as the organisation introduced them! In those days we'd only just freed ourselves from arranged marriages—anything that wasn't decided by our parents was a kind of freedom! Besides, I had this notion of marrying a university student, so when other classmates suggested getting together, I turned them down. He was the first one I considered, but I didn't know how to answer him.

"He was a leader—even when proposing marriage he knew a thing or two about leadership. He saw I was unable to speak so he said:

"Can we or can't we? If not, we don't have to."

Just like that. I still didn't reply, but I didn't refuse him either. He won a Hero of Labour prize (back then prizes were always *The Complete Works of Mao Tse-tung*) but when the time came for him to collect it he didn't go himself, but sent me to collect it for him, so I went blundering off to collect his prize. All this had a purpose, it

was to test whether I was really serious, and to show me that he was a famous Hero of Labour.

"Afterwards when we returned from Jiuquan to Xi'an, he took my suitcase for me, and put it in the truck for me. He didn't lift a finger to help any of my other classmates, I remember it very clearly. When we were back in Xi'an for theoretical study, we went to the Xi'an restaurant on our rest day to eat snacks, especially their local speciality.\fn{*Yang-rou-pao-mo*—lamb stew with coriander and crumbled flat-bread} Xi'an was very backward in those days. There were no cars or buses—we took a horse and cart from outside the city wall to the city centre.

"The marriage ceremony I do remember. Before we were married, the Petroleum Bureau wanted to train a group of people in aerial surveying at the Peking Central Mapping Bureau, in order to improve the speed and quality of surveying. My name was on the list. But then the leaders said:

"'You're getting married soon, you don't have to go.' At that time I always felt I had never learned enough. I'd always dreamed of a university diploma; given a chance like this, I couldn't not go. So I said:

"'It doesn't matter if I'm getting married, I can still go once I'm married. I'll come back when the course is over.' I was already China's first head of a women's surveying team; I wanted to be a member of China's first aerial surveying team as well.

"In those days new training programmes were kept secret: there was no announcement. I'd heard the phrase "aerial surveying" but didn't knew whether it meant flying in the air or walking on the ground. I had no idea. I supposed that if it was aerial, it must be flying in the air, surely? I was determined to fly up to the sky; I wanted to be the first female aerial surveyor of the New China.\fn{There is in this part of the Protocol for World Peace devoted to China a story written by the first Chinese female soldier:H} Since I was going away to study, my colleagues said:

"'Have your wedding right away, before you leave, a settled relationship is beneficial to study.'

"And so we got married. We were still wearing our fieldwork clothes, even in our wedding photograph, but I bought us two new scarves for the photo, both the same colour and style, and we wore rosettes, attached to our work clothes. Our colleagues had a whip-round and got us two sets of bedding and some sweets, it was a very simple wedding.

"At that time marriages were the biggest events in our social life. They forced us to sing a song. A few of his geophysicist classmates were a bit more unruly, they were slightly older, they'd seen more of the world. I could sing Shaoxing Opera, and so I sang a bit of that, not very well, just *Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai*. When I was young I used to join in the community singing, and I was in the singing group. Later on I had my tonsils out, and my voice turned hoarse.

"As it turned out he was sent to Moscow for two years while I was studying—he went in 1956, he didn't come back till '58.\fn{"Did you go to visit him when he was abroad?"}

"Go to the Soviet Union? No, in those days it was impossible, they were very strict about letting you go abroad. Besides, we had had our first child by then. When You came back from his studies in 1958 he was assigned to the Bureau of Mines in Turfan, in Xinjiang province; at that time the slogan was "Spur on the galloping horse to full speed, march on Turfan". They dug a well for prospecting beneath the Flaming Mountain, the same Flaming Mountain as in Wu Chengen's *Monkey,* the part where the monks borrow the fan of the Iron Fan Princess.

"We set up camp at the foot of the mountain, where we had a one-room brick house for living quarters. There were no fans or electrical equipment then, and in summer the average temperature was over forty-two degrees,\fn{Centigrade} and that was in the shade—impossibly hot, you could cook an egg by burying it in the sand. It was over forty degrees inside too, all our things were scalding hot—you could burn your hand on an iron bedstead.

"Nowhere was it cool, you had to splash the beds and ground with water and at midday draw the curtain, which was just a piece of black cloth, like in a photographer's darkroom; we had to turn day into night to survive there. At midday when it was hottest, work was out of the question, we women just lay there on soaking wet beds, and even that wasn't enough, we had to cover ourselves with sopping towels. The men went to the irrigation ditches, where they skulked under the little bridges, hiding from the heat of the sun. There was nothing else we could do in the middle of the day.

"Luckily by then our fieldwork could be taken indoors, but the drawing board was so hot that our maps used to stick to it. During the worst heat of the day all we could do was doodle aimlessly, with sweat streaming down our bodies. And as for the nights … it was impossible to sleep indoors. We'd drag our beds out into the big courtyard and sleep in the open air.

"Every evening in Turfan, at eight or nine, a wind would start to blow, and it would continue until eight or nine in the morning; every day was like this, so if we moved outside because we couldn't sleep, we had to try to sleep

in the middle of a sandstorm, surrounded by flying sand and walking stones, just like it says in *Monkey*:

The sand was flying, the stones were walking.

"When I heard this story as a child I thought the writer was exaggerating, how can there really be stones that walk or grains of sand that fly? But in Turfan we experienced it at first hand. The sand and stones scoured your skin, it hurt, and we couldn't do anything about it, you just had to cover your face with a thin bed sheet, but then it didn't let any air in; everybody was in and out all night.\fn{"What did you eat at that time?"}

"There were lots and lots of grapes and Hami melons. We couldn't eat more than a hundred grams of grain rations in a day, it was too hot to eat, so we lived on fruit. The Hami melons were so sweet that they left a sticky, sugary layer on the table. We didn't eat grapes one by one, but a big handful at a time, like playing the mouth organ.

"*Aiya*, we were there for years! We carne in '59 and left in '64. After that we went to Ningxia. Our living quarters were half in a cellar dug under the ground and half in a tent pitched above it. Ningxia suffers from sandstorms too—in a Ningxia sandstorm you could be sitting a metre and a half from me, and I wouldn't be able to see your face for all the sand blowing about! When you got out of bed in the morning there, you'd find a thick layer of sand on the plastic sheet, and we often used to find sand in our *mantou*, blown in during the cooking process. It creaked and squeaked in your teeth as you ate, really, you wouldn't believe it if you hadn't lived there. In the big storms, our tents used to get covered in sand, heaped up so thickly that we women couldn't get the door open. A man had to come and help us in the morning.

"In Ningxia it made no difference how high or low your rank was, the sexes were segregated, there was separate accommodation for men and women. Living arrangements were the same after marriage: men living with men and women living with women. Husbands and wives all lived apart. You need a room for a child, don't you, and when we first arrived there weren't any. Then a room was set up for married couples. You had to wait in a queue and book it. My three children were all made there - my older son was born in 1958, my second son in 1960, and my youngest, a daughter, in 1963. At that time we all knew that finding oil wasn't really the be all and end all, but you did have to go all out for the revolution. We didn't abandon them,\fn{Families and spouses} but they weren't as important as they are to people nowadays.

"Besides, anyone who talked a lot about their children and husband and so on would be looked down on. People would accuse you of not having a progressive attitude or of being too *petit bourgeois*. You couldn't be too fussy about living conditons. We were all tired out every day, nobody mentioned missing home or anything of that sort. When you got up you'd work with all your might; when you got back to the dormitory you went to sleep as soon as your head hit the pillow. It was very simple, and very happy too! Fortunately we didn't have the children with us at that time, my elder children grew up in You's home town, here in Hezheng. When I was pregnant with my younger daughter I decided to take home leave and go back to my own family. Taking care of the children was too much for You's mother, I needed help from my family.

"The first time I went home on a family visit was 1964, ten years after I left. On the map it looks like there's a direct line from Xinjiang in the north-west to my home in Dong'an in the east, but at that time there were no roads, not even railway stations, the only transport was in big trucks. When I went home for the first time, I squeezed onto a big truck with the local Xinjiang people. I still remember the strong goaty smell from the old sheepskins they wore. It was freezing on the truck, we all crawled inside our quilts, it was like there was a counterpane covering the truck.

"I took my daughter home by myself. We went from Hami to Lanzhou, spent a night in Lanzhou, and then set off again, changing trains many times en route from Xi'an to Shanghai. At that time trains from Shanghai to my home only went as far as Jinhua, we had to change to a bus at Jinhua, and then a ferry, but at last we finally made it home!

"It'd been ten years, and my mother and father looked at me like I'd fallen from the sky, but they were happy, so happy they cried! I didn't sleep at all the night I arrived home. It was summer, I sat with my mother and father in the central courtyard of the house, and we talked till dawn, just the three of us. I didn't have any gifts to bring them from Turfan, only a couple of bags containing several dozen pounds of raisins.

"Oh, yes, my father went shouting all the way down the street:

"'My daughter's back, my daughter's come back, and she's brought my granddaughterl' All our relatives and friends could hear him. They didn't complain.\fn{About her being away so long or leaving "without a proper farewell, and hadn't been heard of since."} My parents knew that I had wanted to leave to join the army in 1949 and 1950, but I

didn't go then because my brothers were too small, I was needed at home. My home town was liberated in May 1949. The teacher in our local school was a member of the underground Communist Party, though I didn't know that at the time, I only found out once we'd been liberated. The Party organised a teachers' and school-leavers' propaganda team. I joined the team and we went to the country villages and the fishing villages by the sea, opposing imperialism, local despots and feudalism, and helping liberate women from arranged marriages.

"In 1954, in the *Peoples Pictorial News*, *Peoples Daily*, you could find reports about me in all the youth papers. All my family knew, all the teachers too. The news caused a nationwide sensation at the time, this was the early fifties, remember. The Xinhua News Agency took photographs for propaganda, women going to work in difficult places was big news, they were big pictures too. We got letters encouraging us from all over the country, all the young people wanted to be like us, and went as construction volunteers to the north-west. We were all yearning to sacrifice our youth to the motherland.

"I really didn't cry,\fn{Over the hardships she had to endure} not once. I think it's because I had good health, I never got even a touch of frostbite, or any injury—good health is one of my best traits. Plus I had both a burden and an ambition. When I was a student in Yan'an I read a book. In those days the Soviet Union was a model for China, and this story was set in a very, very cold place that was a long way away from Moscow. It was the story of a woman engineer who toiled, struggled and devoted herself to the motherland. I am a woman engineer too, I was a Bolshevik like her, and I was a long way from Peking, in the Gobi Desert, the Great North-West, struggling for the sake of my own motherland. I thought I was the Chinese version of her.

"Oh, I've had every kind of worry in my work! What did it mean to be a Big Brigade Leader, and how did I set about being one? I just didn't get it, but I was the first, there was nobody to teach me. At the very beginning we had to set up four starting points for prospecting sites in a day, when we went out in the morning the sky might be clear for a thousand miles, but a moment later we'd be in the middle of a thunderstorm, the light was all wrong for surveying, so the observation points weren't accurate, and inaccurate surveying would affect the quality of our work. The plan had been to finish our mission in eighteen days, but we couldn't make the deadline, we were working on it for a month. That was an anxious time, we all cried together, we all commiserated. At that time we took the nation's plans very seriously indeed; failure to complete your plan on time was like committing a crime, so if everyone was unable to complete their mission, they would be very, very guilty, profoundly guilty.\fn{"And you didn't cry for your children either?"}

"No, I didn't! The children were raised by their two grandmothers, so I didn't worry about them. We couldn't keep the children with us, and the old people were fond of them.

"They complain that their parents didn't bring them up when they were small, they grew up tagging along after the old people, they couldn't even go to school properly. This was the 1960s, the Cultural Revolution, my husband was "struggled against", and he was relieved of all his duties.

"I hadn't had as much pre-Liberation schooling as he had. He was worried that I wouldn't be able to bear to see him punished, so he fixed for me to go and stay in the south for a while. I wasn't with him when the public humiliation and criticism were worst. I felt very guilty that I hadn't taken good care of him—'68 was the cruellest time for him, and I didn't come back until '69. Afterwards we had very poor living quarters, our bed was a narrow slab of wood, we had to squeeze onto it to sleep.

"I had no regrets. At the time I thought: What's the worst that can happen? He'll go back home to the countryside, he can till the fields and I'll weave cloth, and we'll never go back to any leaders' jobs again, a peaceful, stable life is best.

"I can understand it. They struggled against him because he had been to study in the Soviet Union. Relations between the Soviet Union and China had been good, then later they deteriorated, and he became a running dog of the Soviet Union, and the knowledge he had studied in the Soviet Union for the sake of the nation became a crime.

"The young people today haven't let themselves get caught up in political movements. We were witnesses to the whole process, we were the ones who went through it all. First it was suppressing counterrevolutionaries, later it was the Three Antis and the Five Antis, then the Four Clean-Ups, then the Anti-Rightist campaign, one movement after another. They haven't experienced that spiritual pressure, or seen the pathetic figures their parents cut on the stage in those sessions.

"Young people nowadays … judging by our own sons and daughter, they don't have our faith or sense of responsibility. In our day, work came first.\fn{"Do they understand you?"}

"Yes, they do, but now I feel very ashamed and full of regrets. We didn't bring up our three children properly, because we were both so devoted to our own work. When they were the right age for school it was the Cultural

Revolution, and because their father was a ‘bad man’, they weren’t considered suitable. It wasn’t till they were grown up that they went to the adult education school, and they found that really hard going. At that time we both had ambitions, we were both educated people and we had very high expectations for our children, but none of them measured up to our ambitions, not even in education. All this was because we had buried ourselves in our own careers, our careers for the sake of the future they have today, yet our children were rejected by the times.

“I … I think I have no regrets of any kind about my choice of career, in spite of the illnesses I picked up, the stomach problems and the rheumatism I have now. When I recall the hard work of those days, I feel very proud, I feel I have brought honour to my own life, because a person who has never experienced hard work and suffering will never know how sweet work and life can be afterwards.

“The idea of women’s liberation in those days was very masculinised. I wanted to be able to do anything boys could do. In the propaganda team I wanted to dress up to play the boys’ roles. My father told me that he wanted me to have the same success as a boy—whatever a boy could do, he required me to do, his demands on me were very severe. There are other stories of Chinese women too, Hua Mulan following the army, Qiu Jin in the 1911 revolution, and Communist women like Song Qingling and Deng Yingchao. Those women influenced me a lot—in those days we were all imitating heroes.

“I feel that I was right. China’s current greatness and strength didn’t just fall out of the sky, it’s only the hard, bitter struggles and sacrifices of the previous generations, one generation after another, that have given us the China we have today. If you don’t believe it, ask You\fn{Her husband} later—our generation just had more spirit than today’s young generation. Other things I can’t be certain about, but we’re of one mind about the price we paid in those years for our work, and for the motherland.

“It’s a miracle he’s still here. He’s had a lot of narrow escapes, he'’s been in car accidents, *aiya*, several times he’s come out safely from some pretty scary situations. Once he was in a truck that turned over—he was on his way to help some other people, and his vehicle turned over in the same place; that big Liberation truck went belly up, all four wheels pointing to the sky, and the people inside all came tumbling out from inside the cab. He’s been to that big desert they call the Sea of Death—for every ten people who went in nine never came out again. After the Cultural Revolution he became a big leader again. He must have received honours from every institute of learning in the world, rushing here and there, flying all over the place. He didn’t retire till he was over seventy, and he’s still climbing up and down the mountains, organising efforts to alleviate poverty.

“He’s very strong, he’s a very loyal friend, very practical, and in the time of the Cultural Revolution he didn’t make wild statements about other people in order to clear himself. He’s a good husband.\fn{“Is he a good father?”} You can only call him just about average, because none of the children have grown up into people of accomplishment. None of them have his deep scholarship, none could ever equal him.

“I’m really not very outstanding. I have ambition and I’ve struggled.\fn{“As a woman, as a wife, as a mother, as a grandmother?”} I don’t know what to say. I want to make it up to them by being a mother and grandmother to them. And I don’t know if they're grateful for what I’ve given up, coming to live in this out-of-the-way place. I want to go to the Old People’s University too; I want to play *mah-jong*, take part in singing contests, sing songs, go on trips to scenic spots. But because I didn’t do a good job of raising them before, now I’m retired I want to repay the debt I owe my children through my grandchildren. These aren’t very grand ideals, but they come from the heart.”

77.52 & 82.111 1. Such A Beautiful Sunday **2.** Foolish Eighteen: **Two Short Stories**\fn{by Kang Yun-wei (1938-)}
Hopei Province, China (F) 16

1

I followed him outdoors, glad to escape from the grim, chilly interior. Outside, the sun was gloriously bright and the sky a deep sea-blue. At this time of year, however, the sunlight did not penetrate the interior and, in the absence of the sun’s rays the interior had grown dim and almost mildewed.

“It’s OK, I can wash my own clothes.” He shook his head and stopped beside the wash-tub under the eaves.

“Let me wash them. Didn’t I tell you I was going to?”

I shouted to him from behind. I thought of how, just now, in that grim, chilly house, I had flared into anger against that grim, chilling man. Still deeply disturbed, I shouted”

“I wash all your clothes now.”

“Twice at most,” he calmly replied, glancing at me. His tone of voice matched his glance and I felt as if I had received some insult against which I was helpless. I blurted out in anger”

"At least six times."

"OK. Let's say six times," he concluded as he began washing.

Let's say six times! Why did he have to put it so flatly? When I had bent over his clothes with the perspiration pouring down my forehead I had wanted to do everything for him. And he says, "Let's say six times," summing up my everything so flatly. I stood behind him, burning with anger and trying to think of something to say that might sting him. But I couldn't do it. I had no experience in making stinging remarks. You have to be cold-blooded to do that. I'm a very meek person by nature, so like the lion with an ant in his ear, I have to put, up with being made fun of.

He stood there washing his clothes with great concentration. The tub was now filled with soapsuds. Anger went on churning within me like those suds overflowing from the tub. How can there be people who completely disregard the feelings of others? How? A sudden feeling of pathos, of pity for myself and others, wiped out my anger, demolished my will and strength.

I stared at him in bewilderment. His wrists were covered with white soapsuds, The cement-covered ground, grooved by the constant flow of water over it through the years, was also covered with an overflow of suds. I suddenly felt a strong attraction to those bubbly suds. I wished that I, like him, could plunge my hands into them and wash clothes. For some inexplicable reason, I wanted to cry in my desire for that simple pleasure. He turned on the faucet and, with weary eyes, I watched him pour out those white suds.

I walked slowly to the yard and sat on the grass, gazing up at the sky and thinking of those appealing soapsuds spilt out on the ground. I remembered when I was a young girl I liked to sit on the river bank near the Catholic church, looking at the reflection of the blue sky in the water or, putting on the glasses which corrected my myopia, gaze out at the green hills and the red bricks in the buildings of the Catholic church. White clouds, blue sky, green hills in the distance and the red of the Catholic church buildings—all blent into a fairytale landscape. When I put on my glasses they all took on glory and splendor.

I lowered my gaze and noticed a plant I had long forgotten. I called it "bittersweet." Plucking one of them I held it to my nose and sniffed. I don't know the real name for this plant. It is a creeper with round leaves and a bitter odor. When I was a young girl without a care in the world I used to call it "bittersweet."

"We'd better watch out for the baby." It suddenly occurred to me to say as I chewed on the plant, "the Yang's baby has been catching one sickness after another and is in terrible shape."

"This is the ninth time."

He didn't turn his head but from his tone of voice I could see the teasing smile playing over his lips. I couldn't help smiling too. Perhaps I had already mentioned it eight times. It was because he couldn't stand any more of my chattering that he had just dashed out of the house to wash his clothes. Was I really such a chatterbox that people couldn't stand me? What had happened to the quiet little girl who used to like to sit on the river bank near the Catholic church and look at the sky reflected in the water?

I bit my lip and smiled as I watched him in silence.

He washed away at his clothes with such concentration he seemed to be enjoying it. Nothing could bother him. The agony I went through in childbirth didn't shake him a bit, either. He had once smugly written to a friend of his:

"We went off to the hospital at two AM, I brought along a lot of newspapers and magazines to read. When I heard her in the delivery room giving off one shrill scream after another, I knew it wouldn't be long now. The other men in the waiting room were acting as if something dreadful were about to happen, pacing anxiously up and down the hallway. I felt like inviting them to sit down and read a newspaper. Relax for a bit. 'When the gourd is ripe, it will fall by itself.' What's there to get so nervous about?"

Nothing causes him any anxiety. He has no idea that man is an emotional animal. Even if I live to be a hundred years old, I'll never forget that cold night, when I was lying there in the delivery room struggling with pain, afraid I was going to die. Suddenly there he was in front of the bed like a light from Heaven. I gazed at him longing for him to take my hand and give me strength. But instead he looked at me strangely in my suffering as if he didn't know me.

"I want a drink of water. This is more than I can bear," I blurted out amid my moans and then screamed in anguish, "I don't want to have a baby." My heart was drained of all the desires it had ever cherished. I clutched the railing at the head of the bed in my agony. My fingernails scratched against the ice-cold bars. It often comes back into my mind—that heart-chilling, rasping sound.

While I was going through all that suffering he never stretched out his hand toward me. He later explained that it hadn't occurred to him. Appalled by this remark, I replied:

"It's a perfectly natural action. Anyone would have done it under the circumstances."

He pointed out that even so he couldn't have taken my suffering on himself.

"But at least you could have given me a little consolation," I couldn't help saying. "You don't care what anyone suffers. You're a frightening, frigid man."

"Why did I come into the delivery room, then? It's not a place they let just anyone walk into."

Had he come into the delivery room because he was anxious about me? But he had looked at me so oddly, as if I were a complete stranger.

"Suppose I had had difficulties in labor?"

"But you didn't."

"I said suppose."

"I would have done everything possible to save you. I would have spared no expense."

"Do you really mean it?"

"Of course I really mean it," he said, "I don't want to discuss this with you any more. You]'re picking a quarrel about nothing. Every day so many women have children. If it were as hard as you make out, we wouldn't have to worry about overpopulation."

He always talks on and on like that at me until I haven't a word to say. I just look up at the sky in utter bewilderment. When I want to draw a little closer to him emotionally, is that picking a quarrel about nothing? Whenever the baby is sick I always tell myself there's no reason to be alarmed. We live in a modern age with a high standard of medicine and doctors can cure illness. There's no need to get emotional or make a big thing out of it. But his attitude of total unconcern about everything is beyond me.

The vast expanse of the sky and the sweet-sour "bittersweets" were no help to me any longer. He finished washing his clothes and went back into the house. A wave of anger at being slighted swept over me again, ruling me with confusion. I quickly rose and followed him in. I would have liked to stay in the, garden enjoying the sky and the "bittersweets" but this anger at being slighted overcame all other feelings. With an irrational masochism composed of self-pity and self-contempt, I went back into that grim, chilly house to try to regain my value in the eyes of that grim, chilling man.

He was stretched out very comfortably on the sofa with his feet on the coffee table. The phonograph was playing Hoffman's *Boat Song*. As he poured out a cup of hot tea he proclaimed:

"If the ground were all scattered with gold, the fool would still not know how to find any."

Slowly, he drank a mouthful of tea. Although the amount of tea involved was very little, he made so much noise about it one would infer that it must be very tasty.

"Now that you've got some spare time, you might listen to some records. They all seem to be records you bought," he said seriously. "You're a very strange person. Probably you don't even realize it." He looked at me and then added in a kinder tone: "You look pale. Why don't you go to a movie. Everyone needs a little variety in life."

Was I pale? I subconsciously raised my hand to rub my wan cheek. Everyone needs a little variety in life. But I had made myself into a strange and pathetic creature. Perhaps I should go down town and look for some excitement amid the throngs of people. I had been hibernating in the shade too long.

I washed my face and sat down in front of the dresser. The mirror reflected my pale face. I took out a comb and began listlessly to comb back my hair. After a while a malicious smile began to play over my lips. I put on lipstick and painted my eyebrows. The malicious smile began to deepen. I remember I had once seen a woman in a movie who looked like that. But she was playing the role of a schizophrenic. I quickly put the mirror aside.

The baby began laughing in her sleep and I stepped over to the side of her crib. The green blanket set off her pink skin wonderfully. I put out my hand as usua1 to touch her forehead. Her temperature was normal now but I wondered why she had had a sudden feverish spell last night. I gazed at her face and wanted to pick her up and hold her. Did she realize she was my precious baby?

I'd much rather talk to someone about my baby than go down town. I'd like to talk about her little, pink face and her sudden smiles. She was just four months old and fresh and tender as a lemon blossom.

"Well, are you going out or not?" he asked impatiently. "If you don't I will. It's such a beautiful Sunday."

The sunlight had not yet penetrated the interior of the house. I had been living in this dim, chilly atmosphere too long. I must escape. I must find action and excitement amid the crowded streets down town. I was a stupid fool who didn't know how to find the road to his heart.

I went into the bathroom and washed away my lipstick and eyebrow paint with soap. Then I took a face cloth and rubbed my face vigorously until it hurt.

“Here’s two hundred dollars.”\fn{A note reads: *200 NT dollars equivalent to 5 US dollars*.} He stared in amazement at my smarting face. “Treat yourself to something good to eat, have a good time and see a movie.”

I took the money. I realized that he was being perfectly sincere. But why couldn’t I just stay home and talk to him about the baby? Or about something else? Before we were married we had had the most enjoyable talks on all kinds of subjects.

“When the baby wakes up,” I said, “give her her bottle.”

“Sure. I know. Once every four hours. Right?”

“Three spoonfuls of powdered milk and a hundred and eighty c.c.’s of water.”

“I know.”

“Be sure and wash the bottle.”

“Don’t worry about it. Have a good time. I’ll take care of the baby.”

Why wasn’t he that nice about other things? Why did I only want to talk to him about the baby?

“Change the baby’s diapers regularly. Don’t let her cry.”

“Right. I know.” He was clearly impatient. I felt that I wanted to say something more, but what? I was like a chattering woman who doesn’t know what she has already said and what she wants to say next. I just felt that there was something else I ought to mention.

I opened the screen door and walked listlessly out. Such a beautiful Sunday. Where would I go? I didn’t like to see a movie alone. As I stood hesitating in the yard, I heard the baby crying. I thought I had better give her her bottle myself, before leaving.

“What did you come back for?” He was standing at the crib, changing the baby’s diaper and turned his head to look at me.

“I’ll fix her bottle before I go.”

I saw him shake his head. I said nothing but got the bottle and poured out the milk. I was used to his cavalier treatment of me. I fixed the bottle and gave it to him. He gave me a bright-eyed stare and laughed.

“Do you know what happened when Lincoln freed the slaves? The slaves wanted to stay with their masters because they didn’t know what else to do.”

I couldn’t help breaking into loud laughter. I never know before that I had such a piquant husband.

The baby had her eyes fixed on the bottle so I didn’t pay any more attention to her. I put the movie section of the newspaper in my purse for possible reference.

I hadn’t been on a bus for a long time. Inside the crowded vehicle, I felt I was going to vomit. Actually, that could not be possible. My impression is that only country hicks who seldom travel ever get sick on a bus. Naturally, I was never bus-sick either. Actually even when I was pregnant I had never vomited. But I felt nauseated just as if I were sick.

When the bus finally managed to get downtown, the bellowing of the Beatles was audible from a record shop. I was not familiar with them. I didn’t even know Chinese singers like Ling Po. I only knew the old timers. I now had to be careful of the traffic as I was almost run over several times.

After I had already bought a movie ticket I discovered my glasses weren’t in my purse. I am so near-sighted that without my glasses I can’t see a movie. I looked at the posters behind their glass cases. A little girl came running over and tried to sell me some watermelon seeds. I have never had the patience to eat watermelon seeds but she was so insistent that I didn’t know how to get rid of her. I finally gave her the movie ticket I didn’t know what to do with. She just stood there, staring with wide-open eyes. Evidently this had never happened to her before.

I hurried away from the crowd in front of the theater, not knowing where I wanted to go. I didn’t dare cross the street alone, I was so terrified of the endless stream of cars. As I followed the crowd, I thought of the famous passage from Lamartine.

“Perhaps amid the crowd there is an unknown soul who understands the depths of my soul and will respond to me.”

Reciting this poem, I followed the crowd around a corner and up a street. I was wondering whether I wanted to pass the whole day like this. I didn’t feel like going into a department store. I hate to have the sales girls hounding me with the question:

“Is there something you’d like?”

But I couldn’t go home. I don’t want to be like the slaves that Lincoln couldn’t free. And besides, it was such a beautiful Sunday.

2

That Spring, I was eighteen. On registration day of the last semester of senior high I took the nine o'clock train to K Town. As 1 walked out of the train station, I saw Yu Hsiao-yuan at a vendor's stand eating fish balls.

"Yu Hsiao-yuan!" I yelled loudly.

"Hi, Fang Yi-an," she replied, lifting one hand to wave to me while holding a bowl in the other.

"You glutton."

"I came here to meet you!" She gave me an impish look as she swallowed the last fish-ball.

"How nice of you. Where's Chung Ling?"

Chung Ling, Yu Hsiao-yuan and I had been classmates since junior high, but we had grown much closer over the years.

"Chung Ling," said Yu Hsiao-yuan sourly, "is the only one you ever think of."

"Please don't get upset," I apologized, "some more to eat? My treat."

"No," she replied, wiping her mouth with the back of her hand, "but you can pay for the bowl of fish-balls I just ate."

I shook my head.

"You needn't shake your head. I'm not getting a free meal off of you. I made a copy of the algebra homework for you."

"Really!" I said as I looked at her questioningly. If she had made a copy for me, I wouldn't have to rush to get it done.

"Of course, for real," she said. "I went to Hsueh Fen's house to copy it yesterday. I knew you wouldn't be able to do it and you'd be rushed like hell to do it when you got here, so I made a copy for you."

"You're such an angel!" I said in appreciation. I didn't care if old Lady P'an did shake her head at me. What a despicable creature. She always looks at me as if I had done something unspeakable. Let her hate me. If only she could show a little sympathy for my poor brain, which wasn't at all suited for mathematics, I would have done anything to pass the exams even if it meant eating the text book.

"I'm not an angel. We're in the same boat, so we should help one another." Yu Hsiao-yuan glanced at me, "however, there's a string attached—you must buy me fried rice-thread noodles after registration."

"No problem," I said generously.

K Middle School was about a ten-minute walk from the train station. When we arrived at school, there was a long dragon-like line in front of the registration office. We didn't see Chung Ling in line. I scanned a crowd under the trees. Under the big tree closest to the classrooms, I saw Chung Ling and Feng Ch'in. I drew Yu Hsiao-yuan along in their direction. Chung Ling saw me and called out,

"Hi, Fang, you're so early!"

"Just a little later than you girls." I laughed, running over to them. I hadn't seen them for a long while. I felt a stream of happiness gushing from my heart, flooding the ground and flowing under the big tree.

When Yu Hsiao-yuan arrived, she waved her hands vigorously in front of Chung Ling and Feng Ch'in.

"What are you doing?" Feng Ch'in yelled.

"Would you please, please," said Chung Ling looking up at me, "take her away."

"I haven't done my physics homework yet!" I lowered my head trying to locate their physics notebooks. As long as Yu Hsiao-yuan didn't bother me, I didn't care what kind of mischief she got into.

"You haven't done your physics homework either?" Yu Hsiao-yuan stared at me wide-eyed, "you're really in trouble."

"You don't have to be so self-righteous," I said carelessly, giving her a punch, "you're not much better, you probably did yours in the last two days."

"We're alike," Yu Hsiao-yuan smiled happily, "we're of the same ilk." As she finished speaking, she deliberately waved both her hands in front of Chung Ling and Feng Ch'in.

"Yu Hsiao-yuan, do you have epilepsy?" said Feng Ch'in, pointing at Yu Hsiao-yuan's nose. "Not long ago, when she was sitting at her desk, she constantly moved her legs to and fro. We couldn't even write, so we want her to meet you, telling her that you would buy her something to eat. Now it's her hands that are moving uncontrollably—she must have epilepsy."

"Me, epilepsy?" said Yu Hsiao-yuan raising her voice, "you must be responsible for what you say."

"Responsible for what?" said Feng Ch'in harshly. "I won't be nice if you act crazy again."

Yu Hsiao-yuan closed her mouth tightly, scrutinizing Feng Ch'in from head to toe, only to realize that she was

much taller.

"You're taller, I can't fight with you. Take your time copying while I go report to the military instructor."

"Do you dare?" asked Feng Ch'in.

Yu Hsiao-yuan was off in a flash. It became quiet under the tree. I leaned over Chung Ling and asked her what she was copying.

"Physics," she said sternly, lifting her head.

"You've got nothing to be cocky about. I didn't mean that you had to copy it for me." I took out my pen, opened my notebook and started copying. But before I could finish one line, Chung Ling spoke:

"Don't bother. I've almost finished copying it for you. Yu Hsiao-yuan copied the math homework for you, which reminded me to copy the physics homework for you; otherwise, we'd all have to wait for you to finish copying before we could go to registration."

I gave a silly laugh, not knowing how to express my appreciation.

"You'd better be careful, your homework is written with several different handwritings," Feng Ch'in said.

"Don't worry!" I answered. "They don't give a damn. At most they just write an **OK** in red on the notebooks. If they did otherwise, they wouldn't have students like us. Just look, everywhere someone is copying homework from the Winter break."

Feng Ch'in and Chung Ling didn't say anything; their heads were bent in concentration as they copied. I sat there and stared at them blankly. How did we get this way? When I first entered the seventh grade, I would be in a panic if I left one math problem unsolved. By the eighth grade my interest had turned to writing notes to my classmates and to my teachers. The biology teacher had a slip of the tongue and said *heiyagao* instead of *hsueyagao*; and the history teacher read *liude fafa* instead of *liaode huahua*; we laughed like crazy and to this day I still couldn't guess which province they came from.

The chemistry teacher was even funnier. He was a short young man who was once a brilliant graduate student in the chemistry department at National Taiwan University. Every time he showed up in class, he never wanted the Class President to announce "Attention!" because when we all stood up, he could not be seen any more. He always stood, murmuring chemistry formulas as he wrote them down on the blackboard. Yu Hsiao-yuan said he recited all those formulas because he was planning to go abroad for his PhD. The funniest time was when he gave us a quiz. I didn't know the answers, and neither did Chung Ling nor Yu Hsiao-yuan. The chemistry teacher sat there staring at us with a long face. The others had no chance to pass us the answers. Class was half over when he suddenly said:

"Take out your book and copy the answers; it's not fair that those in the back do so."

The English teacher was more interesting. He was over seventy-five; he had white hair and white beard like an immortal in fairy tales. He liked to hold his book up in front of his face and read as he walked around the class. When he discovered a student sleeping over her desk, he would ask her to answer a question or read a paragraph. If she were unable to do so, he would kindly say:

"Young sister, sit down. From now on don't sleep in my class."

It was said that he studied in England and that's why he had such nice gentlemanly manners. There were more them fifty students in our class; he called everyone "young sister."

I lifted my head, empty of thoughts and looked up at the sky through the leaves when I heard Yu Hsiao-yuan yell:

"Girls, Teacher Tung quit, he's gone!"

"You"re a liar!" I looked at her, "you're talking nonsense again."

"Why should I lie?" She walked over and leaned against the tree, her face full of sadness as she sang a song written by Hu Shih: *Where Are You, Friend*.

"He's silly," said Feng Ch'in, "how could he marry such a woman and make a fool of himself?"

"Such a woman?" Yu Hsiao-yuan said, staring at Feng Ch'in, "you girls are so shallow. You're just like the rest, all saying that's what he gets for marrying a teahouse waitress. You know Teacher Tung was the kindest teacher at school. He graded us according to our eagerness to learn and not solely on our scores like the other teachers. I'm sure that before he married her, he thought that an uneducated woman would be simpler and more well behaved—"

"Enough! There's no need for a long lecture," Feng Ch'in cut in. "I respect him, that's why I feel sorry that such a thing should happen to him. The newspapers are full of those notices about 'runaway spouses.' Teacher Tung always told us that everything is upside down these days."

When we were in the first year of high school, Teacher Tung married an ugly, uneducated woman. Within six

months, she stole his money and ran away. When we were in our sophomore year, she came back and Teacher Tung accepted her. Last year she gave birth to a son, then ran away again. Why should this sort of thing happen to Teacher Tung? Though he is short, his eyes are bright, shining with intelligence. The first time he came into class, he called the roll, after that he never brought the roll book with him. He was such a nice teacher, why did he marry that kind of woman? I don't know how Teacher Tung will explain this to himself, either.

After registration, we took the eleven o'clock train back to Taipei. On the way, we met Liu Ssu-ming and Chen Wen-ying. Yu Hsiao-yuan saw their curled hair and shouted out in great surprise:

"Are you crazy? You've had permanents!"

"It's none of your business," said Liu Ssu-ming glaring at her. She and Chen Wen-ying had also had their hair cut and they looked very cute with short curls.

Yu Hsiao-yuan stuck out her tongue. We said good-bye to them and went on our way. We had walked but a few steps when Yu Hsiao-yuan turned to look back at them.

"Those two are really wild. They went dancing at Tao-yuan with some air force guys."

"You should talk! You've had a boy-friend since you were in the eighth grade."

"She was doing that out of charity, you know," laughed Chung Ling.

"Shut up, you two," said Yu Hsiao-yuan, laughing too. "It's strange. My sister didn't want him, so, feeling sorry for him, I wrote a letter to comfort him. After all, what does an eighth-grade student know about love? It just doesn't make sense, that's all. But, to tell you the truth, Big Head still treats me like his little sister."

Yu Hsiao-yuan was a funny girl. She always kept us in stitches. She made Chung Ling and me laugh until it hurt. When we were in junior high, Yu Hsiao-yuan showed us Big Head's letters, which were written in a very odd printed hand. I remembered one of them went something like this:

> My handwriting is not as good as yours, so I won't write a long letter. The sinking of the ship Eternal Peace gave me a feeling that all things named Eternal Peace such as Gate of Eternal Peace, Hall of Eternal Peace, are never at peace. Our ship is at sea now. I'm having a cigarette and a cup of coffee, if you were here it would be even better. Therefore, I'm trying to recall all the things that happened to me in the eighth grade.

Letters like that made us believe that there';s nothing wrong for such a young girl like Yu Hsiao-yuan to correspond with a man. On top of that, Big Head had a pen name which he put on translations of light reading that he did for the newspapers. We all envied her for having such a boyfriend.

It was eleven o'clock when we arrived in Taipei. Yu Hsiao-yuan said good-bye and walked off towards North Gate with some students from another class. Chung Ling and I walked down Chung Ch'ing South Road. Suddenly I got the idea of asking my father for some money to see a movie.

"I'd be embarrassed."

"There's nothing to be embarrassed about. Just follow me."

Entering *The Oamei Store*, I dragged Chung Ling upstairs. Old man Jia saw me and announced, "Young mistress is here." All the employees in the Store lifted their heads and greeted me, which made me quite uncomfortable. Going into my father's office I told him,

"Papa, you should move your office outside and let your employees move into your office. This way, every time I come here, I wouldn't have to say anything to them."

My father laughed and asked if we were finished with school for the day. Chung Ling told him we had no class on registration day. My father also asked if Chung Ling had seen any movies.

"That's what we came for, Papa," I said, "there's a 12:41 show at The Great World Theater—*Roman Holiday*. \fn{Released in 1953, a story about a young princess who escapes her entourage and spends a day wandering on her own around Rome, Italy; it starred Audrey Hepburn, whose performance won for her an Academy Award, a Golden Globe Award, and a New York Film Critics Circle Award—all from this, her first film presentation.}

Father took fifty NT\fn{New Taiwanese dollars.} from his wallet and, handing it to me, said, "I won't go with you, is fifty enough?" Then he gave me another fifty. I didn't need that much. After paying tuition, I still had more than one hundred left. Besides, I didn't want Chung Ling to know I had a rich father.

As we left my father's office, Chung Ling said: "Your father is nice."

I didn't respond but did give her a sympathetic look. Chung Ling lost her parents when she was small. After that, she had been kept by her grandmother and then stayed with her aunt. In the first year of high school, she gave me a photo of herself sitting on a sofa, reading a newspaper. On the back of the photo, she had written:

This is my aunt's house.

Usually people didn't like to watch noon movies so we could buy the tickets immediately. I felt that just going straight into the theater was rather dull and remembering that I had promised Yu Hsiao-yuan that I would buy her a bowl of rice noodles, I said to Chung Ling:

"How about if I go buy three tickets and you go fetch Yu Hsiao-yuan?"

"What if she doesn't want to come?"

"She will come," I said, sure of myself, "if she's at home."

"Okay, I'll go and see," said Chung Ling.

"I'll buy three tickets. No Yu Hsiao-yuan, no movie."

"Shut up your big mouth," she said getting on her bike.

She was off in no time.

After I purchased the three tickets, I crossed the street to buy some sandwiches and beef jerky from a snack shop. Then I stood by the Coming Attractions posters to wait for them. After just a short time, I became anxious and began eating the jerky, one piece after another.

Chung Ling finally arrived with Yu Hsiao-yuan on the back of her bike. Yu Hsiao-yuan jumped off the bike before Chung Ling stopped.

"I'm embarrassed to let you spend money," said Yu Hsiao-yuan smiling broadly.

"Are you? Then why are you here?"

Chung Ling parked her bicycle, then joined us, mopping her perspiring face as she said:

"I was scared to death carrying her. She must weigh more than a hundred pounds, and she's not that well behaved. She's just like some country girl who has come to Taipei for the first time. She's all excited and talks about every little thing."

"That's because I'm happy I get to see a movie for free," she said, taking a piece of jerky from me and popping it into her mouth as she shook her head, "you know, Chung Ling just likes to spoil the fun."

Roman Holiday was really good. We sat in the theater as if we were movie critics, giving our opinions on every scene, irritating the people around us.

After the movie, Yu Hsiao-yuan said:

"I wish Audrey Hepburn would marry Gregory Peck."

"She can't marry him," Chung Ling disagreed, "a princess cannot marry a newspaper reporter."

Recalling the scene at the end of the press interview, the empty palace and the slow music, all combined to give me a feeling of unspeakable sadness.

On the street, Chung Ling and I pushed our bicycles; Yu Hsiao-yuan walked between us. It was very crowded downtown. I lifted my head, looking up at the tall buildings, thinking of how lonely it would be if all the people suddenly disappeared.

While I was thus wrapped in thought, Yu Hsiao-yuan went into a grocery to buy some peanut candy. I thought she was going to treat us, so I said:

"I'm embarrassed."

"Don't be embarrassed," said Yu Hsiao-yuan, "I bought this candy for my father. If you like, please have one."

"I don't like peanut candy. Take it home and do your filial duty."

"Yu Hsiao-yuan is stingier than Scrooge," remarked Chung Ling.

"So what!" yelled Yu Hsiao-yuan. "At least I'm more generous than you people from Fukien."

"Never mind," laughed Chung Ling, "I don't think you are any better than I even if you are from Peking."

"To be fair, it must be said that Fang is the most generous," said Yu Hsiao-yuan smiling.

Was I generous? I was easily angered by trivial things. Did it make me generous because I spent money on them? I was just lonely and bored all the time. I needed company, that's all. As we walked down Chunghua Road, Yu Hsiao-yuan asked us to see her home.

"No problem as long as you carry her on your bicycle," said Chung Ling.

When we arrived at her home on Chenchou Road she asked us to go in and sit down. Both Chung Ling and I said "no" but she pulled at us and wouldn't let us go. Then she started yelling:

"Ma, Chung Ling and Fang Yi-an are here to see you." There was no way out so we went in. Then she shouted again:

"Pa, see what I brought for you."

Mr. and Mrs. Yu came out to greet us. Mr. Yu kept saying, “good girl, good girl.”

“Come, come, come,” said Mrs. Yu. “Chung Ling, Fang Yi-an, come and eat some.”

I was touched, I felt that the candies in that small paper bag really meant a lot!

When we left Yu Hsiao-yuan’s house, I decided to buy something for my father, but I didn’t want Chung Ling to know. We said good-bye in front of the Presidential Palace. I turned back onto Hengyang Street to buy ten pieces of peanut candy and two handkerchiefs.

I flew home on my bike. Hsin-yi Road, at four in the afternoon, was quiet. I lifted my face towards the sky and laughed a silly laugh. In my imagination, my mother hadn’t left father and me for another man, but had stayed behind in Mainland China or had preceded us to the other world. Father and I depended only upon each other to survive.

I rode my bike down Yungkang Street and passed a multistoried green house; I couldn’t help looking. It was said that it cost five hundred thousand dollars to build and that it was built by a man who owned a shoe store as a gift for his mistress. The large house stood out among all the low Japanese-style houses. It was said that the dinner table could be turned with a touch of a finger, so that the woman could have her desired dish right in front of her. What kind of table was that? I thought about these kind of things as I rode my bike. I had never once seen a beautiful woman come out of that house, its big green gate always seemed to be shut.

Arriving home, I rang the bell. Ah Hsiu didn’t come to answer the door right away. I heard my step-mother and her friends playing *mahjong*. I wondered if father was home or not. I rang the bell again; finally I heard Ah Hsiu yell from inside, “Coming, coming!” Ah Hsiu opened the door.

“Mistress is winning,” she said, displaying her gold front tooth.

“You’ll get your bonus later.” I felt an inexpressible disgust whenever I saw Ah Hsiu's gold front tooth when she smiled; and my step-mother, though she was a nice-looking woman with white skin, all I had to do was close my eyes and I could imagine the way she held a cigarette in her mouth, the unbuttoned collar of her *ch’i-p’ao* opened wide and her eyes narrowed to slits, just like a woman gambler. She once told me:

“All my *mahjong* friends say that I am too nice to you, allowing you not to call me ‘mother.’ I am nearly sixteen years older than you, is it too much to ask that you call me mother?”

I never knew how to deal with her.

I put my bicycle away and asked Ah Hsiu, “Where is my father?”

“In the study, reading the paper.”

Ah Hsiu went back to the kitchen. Normally I would follow her to see what she was fixing, but I wanted to make my father happy that day, so I hurried on in. Seeing me, my step-mother said:

“Have Ah Hsiu make a key for you so that you won’t have to ring the doorbell all the time. Sometimes she is busy and cannot open the door for you right away.”

I didn’t respond, but went straight to my father’s study. I didn’t know if my father loved me or not. When we were together, we had nothing to talk about, but I was his only daughter, and I knew that he never refused me a thing.

“Papa,” I called from behind. He was reading the evening paper.

“Hi, you’re back.”

I always felt that his attitude towards me was better at the office than at home. Perhaps that was because I seldom visited him at work.

“Papa,” I called again, reaching out to take his newspaper away.

“Don’t bother me.” He shifted in his seat with his nose still glued to the paper.

The noise of shuffling *mahjong* pieces was loud. I stood behind my father, looking at his fat neck. I felt strange and went to my room.

Tossing my school bag aside, I threw myself on my bed. Through the paper door, the noise from the *mahjong* game in the living room seemed to be right next to my ears. Gradually it seemed as if eight hands were kneading my brain, attempting to smooth out its wrinkled contours. My head felt as if it were expanding, then I faintly heard my father call my name, and after that I remember nothing.

It was already eight o’clock when I woke up the next morning, and the house was dead silent. My head throbbed with pain when I got out of bed. In the bathroom, I intentionally made lots of noise. Back in my bedroom, I found that the peanut candy which I had purchased the previous day and put in my school bag had attracted ants. I yelled for Ah Hsiu and then lost my temper with her. Even after Ah Hsiu took away my bag and cleaned it, my body still seemed to itch as if ants were crawling all over me.

Later, Ah Hsiu brought me the newspaper and in her Taiwanese Mandarin, she said to me, “Yesterday, Master

called you for dinner, but you didn't answer. He thought you were sick."

"You're the one who is sick!" I stared at her, then I took the white handkerchief I bought for my father out of my school bag. "Give it to your Papa or your boyfriend."

She smiled, showing her yellow teeth.

"Don't mention it," I said to her in Taiwanese. She walked away happily.

Living in this kind of home, I longed for school to start, but on the first day of school, the people giving speeches gave the students a very bad impression. The Principal, the Dean, the Director of Discipline and the military instructors all wagged their tongues just like those snake-oil salesmen who talk too much.

Though March is not very hot, it was hot enough for all of us to sweat, standing under the sun for two hours. There was no sign of the ceremony ending soon, so the students formed small groups, chatting with each other, disregarding the rules.

As Yu Hsiao-yuan and I chatted, Chung Ling suddenly elbowed me to warn me. Automatically, I shut my mouth. A moment later, we heard a military instructor shout from the podium:

"Yu Hsiao-yuan!"

His shout immediately silenced all the small groups and all eyes focused on Yu Hsiao-yuan!

"Aren't you ashamed of yourself! You're a senior now." The military instructor stood stiffly on the platform.

"Go to hell!" mumbled Yu Hsiao-yuan, as she lowered her head.

It wasn't easy standing through the ceremony, and when we were dismissed, it was like a reprieve.

"Hey, Chung," said Yu Hsiao-yuan standing in front of Chung Ling, "what did you mean by just warning Fang Yi-an when you saw the military instructor watching me."

"I didn't have enough time," Chung Ling laughed, "besides, wasn't it better that way? You're a celebrity now, after the military instructor's shout."

"Okay, Chung, remember this: it's never too late to get even with you. You'll see, I'll give you a chance to be in the limelight."

Yu Hsiao-yuan finished speaking and walked away. Chung Ling and I also slowly set off for class. In the classroom, the students were still complaining about how boring the speakers were. Someone joked that they hadn't spoken to us during the entire winter vacation, so they had to make up for it today.

"Standing more than two hours, it felt like the passing of the four seasons, so I hummed all the popular songs I know," said Liu Ssu-min.

The third class was Chinese. Teacher Tong had left and the Dean wasn't in the office. Liu Ssu-min and Yu Hsiao-yuan got up on the platform and told jokes. We laughed and egged them on to sing songs. Yu Hsiao-yuan voluntarily sang the *Song of Ormosia*. Her voice was very beautiful and full of emotion. When she got to the words, "Endless the flowing green river," even the students from other classes who were standing outside the classroom clapped their hands.

At that moment, the geography teacher came in with a man who looked like he was in his thirties. The geography teacher complimented Yu Hsiao-yuan on her singing. She was quite pleased. Then she suddenly announced to us, "Next we would like to ask Chung Ling to give us a performance.Give her a round of applause, everybody."

All the students laughed, fixing their eyes on Chung Ling, who was now blushing furiously.

"I don't want to be embarrassed in public," she said nervously.

Yu Hsiao-yuan was very serious and kept saying, "We didn't applaud enough. More and louder applause."

Again there was another uproar of laughter. Chung Ling was annoyed and said in anger, "You're crazy."

Yu Hsiao-yuan stepped down off the platform to face Chung Ling, and with a wink, said, "Chung Ling, everybody is waiting for your performance."

"What did I do to offend you?" Chung Ling angrily asked her.

"I'm just giving you that chance to stand in the limelight." Yu Hsiao-yuan said smiling.

"You go stand in the limelight!" said Chung Ling impishly with a tone of disgust. "I don't know how to sing or dance, and even if you beat me to death, I still won't stand up in front of everyone!"

The students exploded with laughter. The geography teacher and the man in his thirties watched with interest.

"Since Chung Ling insists on not performing for us, we can only .ask her good friend Fang Yi-an to perform instead."

Yu Hsiao-yuan said returning to the platform, clapping her hands. All the students except Chung Ling and I enjoyed Yu Hsiao-yuan's bad joke. They clapped their hands as if they'd all gone crazy.

It was really a bad joke. I wish I could have slugged Yu Hsiao-yuan. Then an incident from our sophomore year flashed through my mind.

We were electing a class President, who was always a good student. I don’t know who slipped my name in among the ballots, but when my name was read aloud by the chairman, she stopped as if stunned and the entire class roared with laughter. I blushed down to my neck as if I had committed some sort of sin. I lowered my head to hide my embarrassment. I was sure that Yu Hsiao-yuan had been behind that bad joke too.

Angrily, I stood up. I wished I was able to sing a song amidst all that cheering and applause.

"If the phys-ed students will join me, then we’ll sing.”

After announcing that, I felt the tension growing. My heart was pounding and my fingers trembled. I hated the fact that I couldn’t sing and wondered why I couldn’t just let it go like Chung Ling had, saying: “I can’t sing, even if you want to beat me.”

“The phys-ed students are willing,” said Yu Hsiao-yuan. “Let’s all sing *March of the Young People’s Army*.”

My voice was unclear and trembling. I was extremely frustrated when I heard the students outside give a disappointed hiss. Inwardly, I cursed them: “I’m not obligated to entertain you. Why do you expect me to play the clown?”

Tactfully, Yu Hsiao-yuan agreed: “Okay.”

“Stand up.” I gave Chung Ling a push. She stood up shyly, and we started singing:

The beacon-fires fill the sky,
The smell of blood fills the land,
The Chinese suffer unheard of calamities
We grow up in an age of hardship
Tempered in the furnace of this great age.

Whenever I sang this song, my heart always filled with emotion. The phys-ed students inside were not the only ones who joined in the singing—the students standing outside also joined us. As we finished singing, the applause went on for a long time, and my eyes were filled with tears.

The geography teacher stood up and said, “Excellent. I've never heard Fang Yi-an sing before. I don’t know if her voice was any good or not, but I know she is very smart to lead us in this very touching presentation. See, your new Chinese teacher is so moved that he cannot teach class today.”

So the man with him was our new Chinese teacher. Wide-eyed, we stared at him. He was smiling and Yu Hsiao-yuan said, in all modesty, “It was nothing.”

“Not at all,” said the new teacher with a beautiful Peking accent. “This is the most meaningful thing I’ve ever seen. Please continue.”

“We’re happy to perform if the teacher thinks there is meaning in our mischief.” Yu Hsiao-yuan spoke respectfully, but her eyes were filled with daring as she looked at the new teacher.

The new teacher looked at Yu Hsiao-yuan and smilingly said: “You also have a genius for drama, I see.”

“Yes,” Yu Hsiao-yuan said politely.

Then the new teacher asked where she was from.

“Peking.”

“No wonder!” said the new teacher, “people from Peking are born eloquent speakers. Any two people from Peking can perform, if they want to, a comic dialogue at any time.”

We all laughed. Then he asked: “There’s a game called Eighteen Questions, do you know how to play it?”

“No,” we answered.

He began to explain it to us: “Right now, I'm thinking of a person. You all know who it is, regardless of whether he or she is from the past or the present, Chinese or foreign, male or female, old or young. First you ask the gender, then the age, occupation, nationality, and so on. I will answer either “yes” or “no.” After eighteen questions, you should know the person’s identity. If not, you lose the game.”

We didn’t quite follow his explanation at first.

“Let’s give it a try,” he said.

Yu Hsiao-yuan went first: “Is the person Chinese?”

“Yes.”

“From Taiwan?”

“No.”

Yu Hsiao-yuan shrugged her shoulders. Liu Ssu-min followed right away, “A Hong Kong movie star?”

“No.”

Everybody laughed because Liu Ssu-min was a fan of movie stars. She practically worshipped the actress Li

Li-hua. She would defend Li Li-hua if anyone said she overacted or said other actresses like Lin Tai or You Min were prettier. With a look of surprise and disdain, she would say: “What do you mean, Lin Oai is pretty? Li Li-hua is still around!”

I admired Liu Ssu-min’s single-hearted devotion to a movie star, for I had experienced the same emotion in junior high. That’s why I always took her side in an argument. For this reason, she told me in secret that when she was younger, she had liked Li Li-hua, but not any more, and explained, “The problem with Li Li-hua is that she has never realized that she was too old to play the part of an angry eighteen year old girl. It’s enough to give one goose flesh.”

“Is the person a writer?” asked Feng Ch’in.

“Yes.”

“You said the person is not from Taiwan. Is he from mainland China?” asked Yu Hsiao-yuan.

“No.”

“From America?”

“No.”

“In Hong Kong?”

“No.”

Yu Hsiao-yuan lost interest in the game. She pushed me and said: “Hey, Fang, the person isn’t from mainland China, America, or Hong Kong, where else could they be from?”

I thought it’d be funny if the person was in heaven, so I asked:

“Is the person living?”

“No,” he said, “good question, now you know the person is a dead Chinese writer.”

Everybody laughed. Our interest was rekindled. Someone suggested Tsao Hsueh-ch’in, someone guessed Lu Hsun, Li Po, Ou Yang-hsiu …

“All wrong,” the Teacher said, “you didn’t use your brains to ask the questions; I’m afraid you've asked eighty questions.”

His words inspired me, I asked: “Was the person born before the Republic?”

“Yes,” he said, “also a good question, this way the range has been narrowed down.”

All the students looked at me, hoping I could solve the riddle. I suddenly felt smarter, I asked: “Is it a woman?”

“Yes.” He said. “You see, you just found out that the person is a woman after all those questions.”

“Okay,” Yu Hsiao-yuan said, “now we know who it is; it has to be Li Ch’ing-chai.”

“That’s right.” The teacher then asked me if I had ever played this game before. I said “no,” and Yu Hsiao-yuan said in surprise, “It’s hard to believe that Fang Yi-an is so smart.”

It was a very pleasant Chinese class. At lunch time we practiced the new game—some said it was very interesting; some said it was boring.

“The new Chinese teacher is not bad, but he’s not very good looking. His lips are thick and if he weren’t so white, he’d look like an Indian,” said Yu Hsiao-yuan as she picked up a piece of barbecued pork from Chung Ling’s lunch box.

Imagining Chung Ling’s unpleasant expression, I lowered my head to eat my lunch. Yu Hsiao-yuan was really unkind. When we were freshmen, Chung Ling usually opened her lunch box only halfway, keeping all but her rice concealed. At first we thought she did this so that we couldn’t see how poorly she ate. Later, Yu Hsiao-yuan forced open her lunch box and we found delicious soy sauce cooked pork and fish inside. “You look very generous, but you can’t overcome that Fukien stinginess.”

“Do you know the new Chinese Teacher’s name?"

Yu Hsiao-yuan lifted her head and said, “His name is Li, Li Chia-chu. It means he’s a famous thoroughbred of the Li family.”

“How do you know all this.” I looked at her.

“I have well-informed sources.” Yu Hsiao-yuan was proud of this. “Not only can he sing well, but he is also a virtuoso on the violin as well.”

“Shame on you,” said Chung Ling, “you just like to find out things about the men teachers.”

“I have nothing to be ashamed of, I say what I think, my heart is snow-white, unlike a hypocrite like you.”

“You’ve got a lot of nerve. I’m not going to lend you my blouse.”

“What’s going on? What blouse aren’t you going to lend her?” I asked Chung Ling.

“Don’t you know?” Chung Ling looked at me. “Big Head is meeting her at the train station today.”

"Chung, don't be so stingy," Yu Hsiao-yuan said anxiously, "I'll buy you a bowl of noodles."

I looked at the new green blouse that Chung Ling was wearing and couldn't help but laugh. If her blouse were like mine, with a hole in the pocket and faded like withered leaves, Yu Hsiao-yuan wouldn't have been so set on borrowing it.

After lunch we put our lunch boxes away and then went out to the ball field. As we walked, Yu Hsiao-yuan kept pleading with Chung Ling to lend her the green blouse. We sat down under the tree at the end of the field. Before us lay the green field, and behind us, the house where teacher Tung used to live. The house was surrounded by a tall bamboo fence which lent the house a poetic atmosphere. I was wondering who might be living there, when I heard Yu Hsiao-yuan say:

"Li Chia-chu is living in this house now."

We girls talked about everything when we were together, except the subject of going to college. Every time the subject came up, Yu Hsiao-yuan would say: "My biggest hope is to graduate from high school without any problems. I don't care if I pass the college entrance exam. It's a virtue for a woman to have no talent." She continued on in high spirits. "Are you going to get married after we graduate? Eighteen is kind of early to get married. If anyone of you gets married before me, I'll be your children's godmother."

Every time I heard Yu Hsiao-yuan speak this way, I'd recall the time when my father's business wasn't doing so well and we had to share a house on An Tung street with another family. There were five children in the family, and every afternoon, after the man went to work, his wife would go out to play *mahjong* somewhere. Their oldest daughter, who was nine, would carry her six-month old baby sister over to sit on the stone stairway. With all the energy she could muster, she'd sing one of Pai Kwang's popular songs, *Thinking Of My Lover*.

The peach tree's pointed leaves
Willow by the river's edge
Little sister opened the window and looked outside:
Oh, lover! Have pity on me.

She sang the song again and again until her voice became hoarse, and even then she kept singing. I always wanted to laugh when I heard her young voice becoming hoarse singing the words, "Oh, lover, have pity on me," but just as quickly I would feel sad and depressed.

"After graduating, you'll be the first to get married," Chung Ling said, "because now you're already thinking about it."

I seldom joined them in talking about marriage. I didn't know what my feelings were toward marriage. I thought of the uniform I had that had the pocket eaten out by a mouse—I had left some goodies in the pocket. I overheard my step-mother tell her *mahjong* partners: "Our girl has already turned eighteen and she still wears that mouse-eaten dress to school. That is so unusual; it's said her mother dolled up to attract the men when she was only sixteen."

My mother was a sixteen year old seductress? I often used to think about this, but I couldn't remember my mother at all. I only knew of her from photographs; she was very pretty, and quite proper looking. I don't know why she and father were divorced. I got the impression that she fell in love with another man and so divorced my father. I didn't know if she loved me or not, but I knew she didn't want me to stay with her. I often heard that after their divorce, my father wanted me to stay with him and wander around the world and that he never wanted to remarry. However, my mother's father found another woman for my father and then cut all family ties with my mother. For this reason I have a very bad impression of my mother. I don't know if it's because of my mother that I never thought of marriage or not; but since I was a child I imagined that there was a prince charming waiting for me. Slowly my prince became a just and powerful man, someone to think of whenever I was wronged. Later I thought of him every night right after I got into bed and turned out the lights. I thought of him unconsciously, almost like a baby who must hear its mother sing a lullaby before it can sleep.

I don't know if Chung Ling and the others ever had such experiences, or not. I never heard them mention it, and I never told them.

That afternoon, the entire school was involved in a big clean-up project. The office of the dean of students announced that any class passing the clean-up inspection could go home, so for this reason, we worked very hard. Yu Hsiao-yuan, who was cleaning windows, sang *Song of Ormosia* again. Liu Ssu-min sang *Seven Lonely Days* in response. Some of the students joined in singing *Song of Ormosia* and some *Seven Lonely Days*. Our class thus divided into two teams to sing two songs. Normally one side would grow weaker until both teams ended up sing-

ing the same song.

"I have some good news to announce," said Hsueh-fen banging the broom handle on the desk. Old lady P'an will no longer be our teacher."

"Great!" cheered the class.

"Where did she go?" asked Yu Hsiao-yuan, tossing aside her rag.

Feng Ch'in, who was helping her with the windows, said, "Don't sneak off and get out of cleaning the windows, I'm not cleaning your share."

"Last year a student transferred to the Third Class. Teacher P'an discovered that her father was a big shot in the Bureau of Education. She got on good terms with the student's family and even started tutoring her in math. The girl's father got her a place in the Continuing Education for Teachers Program. Now teacher P'an is in the States eating bread and butter."

We all laughed at this.

Liu Ssu-min said, "Hsueh-fen, you're ungrateful; you're a model student. Teacher P'an has been very nice to you."

"The Way of the Teacher has long been out of practice," said Yu Hsiao-yuan shaking her head.

"Don't be ridiculous; come and clean the windows," said Feng Ch'in.

I felt sick after hearing this news. I remembered Teacher Tung telling us that constant war had made the Chinese clever and that they'd do anything for their own benefit.

It was now two weeks since the new semester started. The new math teacher was not as good as Old Lady P'an; Li Chia-chu couldn't compare with teacher Tung, but he liked to recommend essays and fiction by contemporary writers in addition to the standard texts. These writers wrote of their own experiences, what they thought and felt. They touched me very much. I slowly realized that the people of this age bear a heavy burden in their hearts. Everyone has his own problems, and has to struggle vigorously to improve life, not like Yu Hsiao-yuan, Chung Ling and myself, who have no thoughts or ambitions.

On Youth Day, the school held a Wall Newspaper competition. We had not been assigned a tutor, so we asked Li Chia-chu to select some of our compositions. He also gave some suggestions of his own. He designed the newspaper format and a cartoon. Belonging to the literary section of the class, we became very close to him. One time he talked to me about literature, human life and religion. It was the first time in my life that someone took me seriously as an adult. It made me happy and I felt intelligent.

Our Wall Newspaper won the competition among the four senior classes. As Li Chia-chu came into the classroom, Yu Hsiao-yuan was the first to clap her hands. Amidst the applause, Li Chia-chu looked at the black satin banner we had won. Yu Hsiao-yuan suddenly asked:

"Why not be our class-tutor?"

He just laughed and didn't say anything. Yu Hsiao-yuan spoke again:

"Your silence means YES. Hsueh-fen, you go to the Dean's Office and inform him that we have a new class tutor."

"I don't have the experience necessary to be a class-tutor, especially for the girls' class. I'm sure the Dean's Office will assign you a better class tutor," said Li Chia-chu.

"We like you," all the students yelled.

"Let me think about it. Now let's begin class."

He opened the textbook and lowered his head.

"We like you very much and you refuse to accept our appreciation. Our feelings are hurt," said Yu Hsiao-yuan.

Li Chia-chu laughed and lifted his head to look at us. Suddenly, he said loudly, "Okay, I'll do it. Now let's begin class."

"All right, all right!" we yelled.

"Keep quiet, keep quiet," Li Chia-chu lifted his arms, motioning for us to be silent: "Don't be so loud, the Dean will wonder what we're doing if you make so much noise."

Just then, the Principal appeared in the doorway of the classroom.

"What are you doing? What are you doing?" he shouted. "Why aren't you studying?"

"I'll maintain order as soon as class gets underway," said Li Chia-chu, beginning his lecture in a pleasant voice.

I lowered my head thinking how wonderful he was! Time was flying, the second exam was followed by the graduation exam. The school probably intended for all of us to graduate so the examination questions were very simple. None of us tried to cheat on this exam as we had done in the past. After I answered all the questions, I

happily discussed the answers with my classmates. Li Chia-chu walked toward me and asked me if I could help him calculate the scores after all the exams were graded. I assented immediately.

The last exam ended before 3:30 the next day. Chung Ling, Yu Hsiao-yuan and I went to see Li Chia-chu. As she stepped through the door, Yu Hsiao-yuan asked him, without even pausing to say hello, "What was my score in Chinese?"

"A very high score," answered Li Chia-chu, laughing.

"The school wants us all to pass, anyway," said Yu Hsiao-yuan with a smiling grimace. "However, Chinese, unlike math, is much easier for me to pass." Suddenly she looked at Chung Ling and said, "Come with me to find out our math scores. My mind will be troubled until I know for sure that I got at least a sixty on the exam."

Yu Hsiao-yuan pulled Chung Ling along with her. Li Chia-chu and I started working. The bamboo outside the window whispered, and the sun shone through the window, illuminating my desk. The sound of rustling bamboo filled my ears. Li Chia-chu was silent the whole time. I seemed to watch the bamboo leaves falling to the ground. At that moment, the entire universe was so silent that it produced an intense feeling of loneliness. I bit my lip, struggling to add up the scores. In a short time, beads of sweat formed on my forehead. Li Chia-chu looked up at me and asked if I were hot.

"No," I murmured, keeping my head down, concentrating on adding up the scores. When I finished, my body was soaked with sweat. I checked and rechecked, but found no mistakes; still, I wasn't sure of my work. I kept asking myself why I was so stupid.

"I'm finished, but there might be some mistakes," I told him with a pang of conscience. "I'm not too good with numbers."

He laughed and said, "It's all right, I'll check them over."

In silence, I stared at the bamboo swaying outside the window. My heart was disturbed with conflicting emotions. Sitting silently in Li Chia-chu's house, I felt as if I had melted into a sad, musical world. My heart was moved with a feeling of loneliness.

Li Chia-chu asked me something, but I heard only the word "hope." I found myself saying to him: "I hope to hear you play your violin."

"How did you know I play the violin," he laughingly asked me.

"I knew that the day you arrived," I said. "We sit under the big tree in front of your house every day, but we never once heard you play the violin."

I didn't know what I said to make Li Chia-chu look at me with such panic in his eyes. Suddenly, he violently took me in his arms and placed his warm, wet lips on mine. Frightened, I tried to push him away. As I struggled, the many cases of rape reported in the papers every day flashed through my mind. When he finally released me, my heart was pounding and my mind was totally blank.

We sat there for a long time; Li Chia-chu didn't say anything. I felt angry and stupid, but I also felt it was laughable that a kiss could produce so much sadness and fear.

Li Chia-chu lit a cigarette. The wisps of gray smoke floated past me, one puff after another. He was obviously showing his impatience while thinking about what had just happened. I felt like vomiting.

"Hey, Fang, are you about through?" yelled Yu Hsiao-yuan from outside the bamboo fence. "I got a sixty, exactly sixty."

I hurriedly wiped my mouth with the back of my hand. Yu Hsiao-yuan and Chung Ling entered. "She ought to be ashamed. She got a fifty-six, but had to plead and beg forever to get a sixty," said Chung Ling.

"Shame on me? If I got a fifty-six in Chinese, you wouldn't let me beg you for such a long time, would you?" she asked Li Chia-chu, then she turned to me. "What's the matter with you? You seem upset. What's wrong? Your face is all flushed. Is the heat getting to you?"

"You're the one with heatstroke, not me!" I was afraid Yu Hsiao-yuan would go on with her nonsense, so I stood up and tugged at Chung Ling saying, "Let's go."

Outside, the sun shone so brightly that I could hardly open my eyes. Was the world really so bright? I raised my hand to shade my eyes from the sun and deliberately walked very slowly, thinking that many things are like the roads one leaves behind, things that would in all likelihood never occur again in one's lifetime.

After we got back to the classroom, Yu Hsiao-yuan chatted with other classmates and Chung Ling put her head down on her desk to take a nap. I took out my notebook and wrote:

> Before today, I respected you very much. Why did you do this to me? What kind of person do you think I am? Did you ever stop to think of how you have disturbed an eighteen-year-old girl's peaceful life? If you didn't mean to toy

with me, then please tell me why.

I wrote down my address, tore out the page, folded it neatly, and then I went alone to his office and put the note in his desk drawer. I didn't tell Chung Ling or Yu Hsiao-yuan about this, because I didn't want them to have a bad impression of Li Chia-chu. I. walked back to the classroom with my head down. Suddenly I felt I was a pitiful creature.

After school, Chung Ling, Yu Hsiao-yuan, Feng Ch'in and I met together in the restroom on the train. Chung Ling and Feng Ch'in poked their heads out the window and Yu Hsiao- yuan sat on the wooden sink counter.

"This is the last time," she said, "from now on I cannot sit here whenever I take the train, or people would say I'm crazy if they saw me."

I laughed and she shrugged her shoulders and sadly sang: "After we say good-bye today, when will we meet again, and if we meet, where will it be?"

Feng Ch'in turned her head and said: "Yu Hsiao-yuan, you're disgusting."

It was after 5 pm when we arrived in Taipei. The sun was still high in the sky, but it was not as hot as at noon. The hot sun had softened the asphalt roads. I rode my bike, but it was slow going on the soft roads. I pedaled with all my might, feeling that the road ahead was very long and difficult.

I felt drained of strength by the time I arrived home. When Ah Hsiu told me that my father and my step-mother wouldn't be home for dinner and that she also would like to go out, I cried out, shouting:

"All of you get out of here, get out of here!"

Stunned, Ah Hsiu just stood there. I cried for a long time then I went to the bathroom. Taking off my clothes, I saw my naked body in the mirror. I thought of the virgin nude in the sketchbook and the incident with Li Chia-chu at his house. My face was burning and my heart was disturbed as if it were a lake into which someone had tossed a stone and now the ripples were spreading outward.

All summer long, Li Chia-chu never wrote to me and this made me feel uneasy. While Chung Ling and Yu Hsiao-yuan were attending the Ching-yi English College in Tai Chung, I would ride my bike to the temple on Mt. San-chang-li, where I would meditate. The clouds, the outdoors and the rhythmic clapping of the wooden fish and chirping birds combined to make me feel sober and calm. But leaving the mountain in the evening, I almost longed to see Li Chia-chu. I was ashamed, burning with the passions of an eighteen-year-old girl.

The meditation at the temple made me realize that though I was as pure as white jade, I was already eighteen and I couldn't resist the longing for a man's comfort.

Finally I saw Li Chia-chu on the street. At that time I already had a boy friend who was studying at Cheng-chi-li University. Later, I frequently saw Li Chia-chu with his wife and children walking on the street. We said hello to one another as if nothing had happened. Li Chia-chu told me that he had quit the job in K Town and had opened a supplementary school in Taipei.

Once, while shopping with Chung Ling, we met Li Chia-chu on the street. That was the first time I saw Chung Ling after she had her baby. I told her what had happened between Li Chia-chu and me.

"I never knew you had this secret!" she said, surprised, "why didn't you tell me when it happened?"

"It's no longer a secret," I said avoiding a direct answer. "I often see Li Chia-chu on the street, and I find that he doesn't attract me anymore. I don't have to keep it a secret, because it means nothing to me."

Chung Ling laughed and said as if suddenly remembering: "Cheng will finish graduate school this summer, right? You know, you are the only one of us three that hasn't got married. Yu Hsiao-yuan already has two kids."

I laughed and didn't say a thing. Chung Ling began to sound like an old woman: "Will you get married this year? You don't know, a woman can really settle down after she gets married and has a baby. She won't need anything else."

As usual, I laughed and said nothing as I listened to Chung Ling recount her husband's fine qualities, and then those of her beloved daughter's.

20.104 Between Life And Death\fn{by Su Shu-Yang (1938-)} Hebei [Hopeh] Province, China (M) 7

Ah, here you are. Sit, sit. How about some tea? It's brewed, just ready to pour. What a rare pleasure this is. No other writer has ever bothered to come and sample our life here. Our unit deals with things that make people's skin crawl, I'm afraid: everything in this building is destined for cremation. Anyway, nobody ever visits, since we are only associated with the business of dying. Thse of us who work here are generally deemed unworthy to enter the higher echelons of art and literature. There is a fear, I suppose, that we carry with us the stench of death

wherever we go, so powerful as to overwhelm the delicate fragrance of flowers and chase away the Goddess of Creativity, as if even her lute will end up in the fire—cremated alongside the corpses.

Most people find our work crass and lowly, not fit to be embraced into the mainstream of life. We are limited to keeping company with the God of Death. All anybody wants to write about are hospitals and doctors—I have no objection to that, of course, but hospitals and us are close companions—what they can't cure end up on our doorstep. So why is it that they get praised sky-high, while we are somehow less than worthless, our work thought to be devoid of sound philosophy? Philosophy to the arts is like a soul is to the body, I grant you. But these people don't know what they are talking about! Life and death are both full of mystery and surely all religions deal with the relationship between this life and the next. Religion is by nature philosophical! How can there not be philosophy inside a crematorium? Only an outsider could have such cranky ideas! Frankly, people look down on us. They think that just because we spend all our time with corpses we are half-dead ourselves. The Old Society\fn{The pre-Liberation society of China, which the Communists had, until perhaps the last ten years or so, resolutely assumed they had swept away.} used to call us "pall-bearers," the lowest of the low. I regret to say this hasn't changed much, even though sooner or later every writer ends up being part of our 'business.' Just now, however, they'd much rather keep their distance. In fact, we have looked after more writers and artists here than you can count. I dare say the numbers are large enough to form a film studio on the other side, not to say an orchestra, a dance troupe, a theatre company and on top of that a huge writers' union, no less influential than what you might find in this world. Don't you believe me?

Anyway, you are here, that's good. So you almost chose our profession yourself! Don't look so surprised, we have our ears to the ground. Some time ago we were exchanging information with the crematorium you were going to join—to see if we can improve our work in this unit. There are young people here too, you know: men, women, educated people. Standards may not be very high, but we do have quite a few high-school graduates among our staff. In fact, you are looking at one right now.

Our colleague from the other unit pointed at your name one day and asked me: "Do you know so-and-so?" I said yes, of course. "He almost came to work with us, did you know? He is a proper writer now."

I knew your name, although you were down on your luck at the time. A crematorium can produce good writers too, as well as poets, artists, musicians, scientists. It is not impossible. Who can figure out why we are so despised?

Ai, I've talked such a lot of rubbish and still haven't got round to the main theme. I guess you are here to ask me about my family, my wife, things like that?

Where should I begin? Let's start with my father. He spent his entire life servicing the dead, yet he has never complained. He used to say: "Everyone has to die one day. To be good to other people is the same thing as being good to oneself. In life, we may be divided into aristocrats, professionals, beggars, whatever; but the minute we close our eyes, everybody is equal. Over on the other side, it is not fashionable to show off and behave like a bully. Anybody who wants to climb over other people's heads and stand on their shoulders is not going to have an easy ride, there are quite a few revolutionaries over there as it happens. All they have to do is to get on a platform, summon the crowds, and start a campaign. It would be much easier to build a socialist society in the other world I can assure you!"

Can you deny my father's words are full of philosophical wisdom, imagination and poetry?

He used to say: "Being kind to the dead is also to comfort the living, so that those who survive can concentrate on getting on with their own lives. In this way we too contribute to the welfare of the state."

Is this without perception? I don't deny he was also somewhat superstitious. Just before he died—and we looked after him here of course—he said to us: "Don't be sad, dying is just like a light going out. I have lots of friends on the other side. I may be going alone, but once I'm there my friends will band together and rekindle my light."

When my father went he went with a smile. What was there to worry about? His conscience was clear. Whenever he saw a dead body which was over-dressed, wearing a beautiful watch, or a nice pen, he would say to the family: "Keep the good clothes for yourselves, it isn't cold over there, and nobody cares how you dress. Keep the watch too, and the pen. Over there time-keeping is automatic, and everybody uses a typewriter. After all these are things to remember him by, and you may find some use for them later on. Burning everything would be a waste."

During the ten years of the Cultural Revolution we were inundated with people who had been persecuted, dying without justice, often with violence. My father was equally kind to all of them. He would give their faces a good scrub, erasing any trace of maltreatment. Don't think there was no interference though! He was occasionally

admonished: “Don’t you have any kind of standpoint on our class struggle?”

My father would look up to the ceiling, and speak with a soft voice: “Don’t shout, his soul is still here. All this shouting might persuade him to follow you home and stick to you night and day.\fn{A belief in the ability of the departed to wander about the earth ghosts was very widespread in the “Old Society,” and these spirits were usually considered as malign and thought of with much apprehension.} Is that what you want? You must realize this is our work, and we have our own standards. If you don’t agree with what we are doing, you are more than welcome to do the job yourself. In any case, what exactly is the nature of your objection? When your time comes, would you want to go with a dirty face?”

I don’t know what you writers think of people like my dad. Was he a good man? Was his soul beautiful? Is he worth writing about?

Another time he was engaged in a debate with a notable pen-pusher at the time. This philosopher had come to supervise the cremation of a man unjustly branded as an “Old Opportunist.”

My father said: “The boundary between a living and a dead man is no more than that of a breath. There are inumerable cases of people who are alive but don’t breathe at all and people who are dead but full of spirit!”

This made the philosopher stop short. He ordered an immediate investigation into my father’s ancestry, to see if he had come from “bad stock.”

The foreman said: “He is descended from three generations of undertakers. All his family ever did was bum the dead. No need to investigate.”

This was what they called “revolution” at the time, can you imagine! And they couldn’t even refute my father’s simple ideas. What do you think? If you look carefully at this world and the next, you’re bound to see the truth in what he says—over there, there are many who have died who will always remain in our hearts, and yet a lot of the so-called living are stone-cold inside.

Me? There is nothing interesting about me. I was a high-school graduate. I didn’t manage to get into a university. My old man said to me one day:

“You might as well follow in my footsteps. Nobody is willing to do what we do nowadays. If it carries on like this, sooner or later there won’t be anyone left to take care of the dead. The socialist doctrine can’t only benefit the living, while the others are left to wait in long queues! It isn’t as if we are a body bank, looking for an overabundance of corpses. No, they must be sent on their way as soon as possible. Our task is to be a comfort to both the living and the dead. Believe me, young man, it isn’t such a bad profession—you are a member of the youth group, show the way …”

At that time my head was full of revolutionary fervor, so I wasn’t too happy about the prospect of following my father into the crematorium. I had a girlfriend too, a graduate of middle school, who collected old junk for a living. She was very pretty, and always smiling. Her name was Er Ya. If you will permit me to borrow a Western phrase—this seems to be the fashion nowadays, and no doubt using it will elevate my status—the smiling face of my girlfriend looked just like the *Mona Lisa* by Leonardo da Vinci. She had a kind of eternal mysterious smile. We used to sit side by side, and got on extremely well. Nothing obvious was ever said between us, but in the manner we spoke together, the way we looked at each other, things were perfectly understood. I loved her, and she liked me too.

You are still young, you must appreciate the sensation of a first love. Flames and sparks are meaningless adjectives. The way I felt could only be described as bitter sweet, I can think of no better way of describing it. There was always something tugging at my heart, all day long I ached to see her shape, to hear her footsteps. I could happily have spent all my time walking with her silently through the rain, just walking. There was an infinite number of things I wanted to say to her, yet whenever we were with each other, I would become tongue-tied, staring at her like an idiot. There is a Japanese song called *The Sailor*:

When I think of my baby,
I am filled with melancholy …

Ai, melancholy, that is indeed an apt description. Just imagine, here was a warm and pretty girl who was capable of inducing melancholy in my heart—how was I to rest? I trusted her. I trusted that she wouldn’t be petty or materialistic. I trusted that she knew everyone must die eventually, and move on to the next world, and that somebody has to be there to pave the way, improve their looks, give them some peace. Such a day will come to her too. Surely she would not despise those who will be of help to her in time? I made up my mind. Choosing between work and love, I put my work first, believing that romance and cremation need not be mutually

exclusive.

I was wrong. When I told her I was going to work at the crematorium, she told me at the same time that she had had an offer from a film studio to become an actress. She could not accept my decision. She could not begin to imagine how a film star and an undertaker could walk side by side on the street, let alone go to the park and look at roses and peonies, or row a boat under the weeping willows. Clear breeze, drizzling rain, fresh flowers, green grass, poetry and music are all associated with life, the dead are only permitted darkness. Just because I keep company with the dead, people think that I, too, must be half dead, and not to be associated with beauty. Anyway, she didn't say much else. There were some tears, of course, but not enough to stop her from leaving. We said goodbye.

You see, a person's fortunes are often determined in the spur of a moment—the very moment she was invited to star in a movie she changed completely—from a poor girl who earned her keep collecting rubbish into a glittering movie star. As for me, it only took a moment as well, not much longer, to make the decision to become a man who burns dead bodies for a living. In that split second, I toppled from the fairly respectable position of an educated man to being the scum of the earth, undeserving of literature, art, or philosophy. And yet nothing had really changed. Not my education nor her beauty; nothing had altered in our appearance—our bodies, down to the length of our eyelashes, remained exactly the same. But our worth, and the whole way we were perceived by others had turned upside down. Before that crucial moment, we were ideally suited, after that moment, our destinies diverged and sped in opposite directions.

What can it all mean? Today her picture adorns the pages of calendars. People spend an entire month in the year looking at her image. Meanwhile, during the course of the same month, I would have said farewell to many of our contemporaries and waved them off to the next world. You writers love to talk about life. Tell me, how did our lives come to be fractured in this way?

No, I am not so small-minded as to be envious of other people's fame, nor do I want to drag them down to my own level. Neither am I suggesting changing the pictures on our calendars. It is perfectly understandable that people would rather look at a pretty film star than one of us in here! What fool would pay good money to ogle at idiots like us month after month? All I'm saying is that a person's destiny is often determined in a flash, down to the nobility of our minds, or the hour of our death. Sometimes we simply fmd ourselves standing at crossroads, like trains arriving at a junction. Some go east, some go west. Is it really necessary to call the one going east a rocket, or the one going west a pile of twisted old metal? Society needs different skills to function, without us, dead people will have nowhere to go. Anybody who wants to dispute this can try dying themselves, see if they still disagree.

Come, let's take you as an example. Say you really did join that crematorium as a member of staff, and let's say the foreman is a stubborn old fool, and that whatever fancy essays you might have written, he refuses to let you leave. Where would you be today? Would you still be welcomed everywhere with applause? Or would people treat you the way they treat me—holding their noses, rubbing their chests in fear of the smell of death? Whether you are a worker in a crematorium or a writer adored by the public, does your worth fluctuate in any significant way? Of course not! Your height remains the same, although it's true you might not be as fat. Life has its own rhythm-dynamics, its own way of proceeding. Since sociologists have no answers, why should we all spend so much time worrying about status and power? Those who are successful turn up their noses at the rest of us and those who fail—perhaps we shouldn't even call it failure—often try to put an end to their lives. They hang themselves, drink bleach, creating havoc for us here. The important thing surely is to know yourself, respect yourself. That must be enough.

See, I have been getting on my high horse again. Let's talk about her, my old girlfriend, the movie star. Sometimes we would run into each other. If there was nobody around she would stand three feet away and say two words; if she was not alone, that beautiful neck of hers would suddenly change direction showing me the back of her head. I never take any notice of her, whatever the circumstances.

I hear she has gone through three or four boyfriends. Like choosing a chicken in the market, she would pick one up, give its neck a thorough appraisal then decide whether or not to buy. Two years ago she finally got married; maybe he was the sixth in line. I don't know. I've got to give it to her, she sent me an invitation on the day. At first I didn't want to go, but my mother kept on at me:

"Shu Ren, go and have a look. At least Er Ya hasn't forgotten you. She still remembers her old friend at the crematorium. Go and congratulate her, don't let anybody think we are small-minded, or that we have suddenly shrunk in stature. Go on, put on your good wool suit, let everybody see that you are every bit as handsome as the man on the movie screen. Take a good present too, I don't want people to say we have to skimp."

This was the pride of old people talking. I couldn't contradict my mother, so I did as I was told, and went along to congratulate Er Ya.

The wedding wasn't big but it had style. Every guest seemed to have arrived from some foreign beauty contest. Let's just say if you were not at least a meter seven in height, with a sweet dimple on either cheek, eyes the shape of an almond, brows like a new moon, you'd better not be there. When I went in, the bride, Er Ya—I'll call her by her nickname as I'm sure she wouldn't want me to reveal her identity—introduced me to her Number Six with a smile. This man had a big bottom, sturdy waist, thick eyebrows and huge round eyes—the hairy heroic type. He took my hand and boomed at me:

"Ah, my friend, so which company are you with?"

I was perplexed for a moment and thought to myself, I am not a soldier, why would I belong to a company? Of course! He meant a theater company. In his eyes acting was probably the noblest profession on earth.

"He is a poet," Er Ya interjected quickly.

"Oh, a poet!" the groom said.

"No, I am not a poet," I said. "I work at the crematorium. I burn bodies for a living."

"Really!"

The groom was somewhat taken aback, withdrawing his hand.

"Yes, I rub shoulders with corpses every day." I was deliberately nonchalant. "Actually everybody is in regular contact with dead bodies. The fish, duck, chicken and beef about to be served up on these tables are all corpses of animals as you well know. Allow me to wish you both every happiness for your future. Goodbye."

I left, deliberately spoiling their appetite. Did I make too much mischief do you think?

Er Ya said I wrote poetry. This was not entirely without foundation. I write poems and songs in my spare time. Obviously I don't write about our profession, however worthwhile I might think it is. Dead flesh disintegrating in a furnace is not what most people want to read about. Perhaps I should write about the way the make-up is applied?

But that doesn't seem popular as a poetic theme either—in fact, it appears to be something of a taboo. We might work with the dead, but in our hearts we celebrate life. We celebrate the spring, the wondrous effervescence of our days, the warmth of the sun, even down to a blade of grass, or a wild flower—nothing is too insignificant to be the subject of my poetry. I see tears every day, black muslin and white flowers, the power of death, the weight of grief. But these are not the things I focus on. I write about happiness, smiles, how children learn to walk on the lawn, the embrace of lovers under a tree. I write about love, babies, mothers, vitality which goes on generation after generation, undefeated by death.

All the young men who work here learn to write, paint, sculpt, garden, compose songs, play music or chess; they also enjoy ball games and love to swim. We are the guardians of the last exit, but we prepare the dead as if they are about to make their first entrance. Ours is the final frontier between life and death. If you believe there is another world, then death on this side merely coincides with birth on the other. Perhaps this is mere idealism, and that neither heaven nor hell really exists. What we do know is that both life and death are mysterious, subjects which inspire constant fear and interest. Consider this: once, Tom, Dick or Harry didn't exist, somehow, for some reason, they become sentient, they begin a life, they manifest themselves in the world. They are happily going along, then just as suddenly and inexplicably, they don't feel anything any more, they become an inanimate object. How many philosophers and writers have explored this question, yet nobody has written about our work—how we turn tangible shapes into a phantom militia marching into the next life.

Our work is full of mysticism and yet it is thought to be commonplace.

Wouldn't you agree that's odd?

Did you ever consider some of these things before you came to see us? Where we are is like a garden. Despite our daily contact with death, we urge our youth leaders to value life, to go on living with renewed courage. Why must we be the butt of so much antagonism? Those departing are given their fmal solace here.

I say this not because I want you to take up our profession once again. I only want to point out that this job is just as valid as any other. We shouldn't be despised, that's all.

You ask about my wife? Ah, we met at the Cultural Centre. I belonged to the literary group and she was in the music department. I wrote some lyrics, she liked them and set them to music, and we performed the piece at the local concert. She played the strings, I sang. We won a prize. We went to celebrate afterwards. That was how we got to know each other.

She said my lyrics were good, full of a passion for life. I wrote about a small wild flower, how it sprouts in the spring, blossoms, is trodden underfoot, and yet continues to bloom, giving out its own unique fragrance for all to

enjoy.

She asked me: “Your observation seems so acute, so full of feeling. How is that?”

I said: “Because I look into the face of death every day.”

She was shocked, she didn’t know I worked at the crematorium. But I knew what she did. She had just graduated from the university—she was a gynaecologist.

After that time, she didn’t talk to me for quite a few months. When we rehearsed at the Center she would just stare at me. I loved her, but I had to disguise my feelings. Those of us who work here are condemned to a single life. I couldn’t tell her I was in love, that would have been disrespectful to Wei Xue—that’s her name—and I didn’t want to upset her. I had to leave her to make up her own mind. If she didn’t love me, I wouldn’t have complained. The full pressure of society on the back of a single young girl would have been too much to bear, and it might well have crushed her under its weight. Besides I had a little self-respect too. Er Ya had bruised my heart, and I couldn’t let another girl break it completely. I felt I had to give myself to my country, to society, to hundreds and thousands of families, look after the dead, console the living. After all my heart was only the size of a fist. I thought that perhaps there wasn’t enough of it to go round.

Eventually one day Wei Xue invited me to accompany her on a walk in the park. Under the newly renovated pagoda, looking into the setting sun, she asked me gently:

“What exactly do you do?”

“I make up the corpses.”

“Aren’t you afraid?”

“I was frightened in the beginning. Not only frightened, but repulsed. Often I was not able to eat after work. But I don’t want to describe their faces and make it even more difficult for you. Anyhow, I got used to it by and by, and began to look upon the corpses as empty canvasses, or sculpting material, and then it was fine.”

“Is there extra bonus in this line of work?”

“No. The wages are the same as everyone else’s. I earn less than you do.”

“What is the value of the work you do? Don’t you fmd it irksome?”

“I don’t want to spout philosophy at you—it’s all so much hot air. All I can say is, when a family sees their relative lying there peacefully, as if they were merely asleep, it makes them think that there has been no suffering, and they get enormous comfort from that. Many people thank me with tears in their eyes.”

She didn’t say anything, her eyes fixed at the clouds in the evening sky.

“Since you have this skill, why don’t you do make-up for people who are alive?” she asked, not unreasonably.

“Because somebody has to do this job,” I said. “I happen to do it well. I also do re-sculpting work. Those with broken noses get new bridges, collapsed cheeks are refilled, wounds are carefully disguised. I also shut the eyes, mend lips which have been torn. In this way the dead can make their exit the same way they looked when they were alive.”

“But what is the point of it all? They are already dead!”

“You are right, my exhibits never last more than three days, then they all end up in the furnace. Nonetheless, in those three days I often experience the most incredible love and gratitude from the survivors, and sometimes it seems to me that even the bodies want to sit up and thank me! My heart would be full to bursting.”

“Don’t say any more, I can’t bear it,” she said softly.

“Aren’t you regularly in touch with death too?” I asked her.

“Yes.” She sighed. “Sometimes I think that the most ineffectual science in the world is medicine. Death always wins in the end.”

“This is a little too pessimistic,” I chided her. “You deliver babies! Babies are born all the time. No matter how many people die, nobody can stop others from being born. It may be true that medicine is in a race against time with death, but it also helps bring life into the world.”

She tilted her head to look at me, then laughed.

“If we became friends, what do you think people will say? Life comes through my fingers, death runs through yours!”

I laughed too.

“We often say that crematoriums and hospitals are intimately linked. Like boats on the same river. You paddle upstream, we paddle downstream. That’s all.”

Later I said: “You welcome life, I give death a proper send-off. You and I are guardians of the two gateways of a lifetime. When we are born we are all equal, when we die we are equal once again. What we do are similarly respectful of the true worth of people.”

Tears were streaming down her face. “I feel very confused, very confused indeed. Why did I have to meet you?” She was sobbing now. “Can’t you lie to me, and say you are a poet? Don’t you write poetry? Haven’t you published a lot of poems?”

'But I am someone who makes up dead bodies. That is what I do every day. I can’t lie to you. This work is not incompatible with writing poetry, a poet is not worth more than a mortician. Really they are not.”

I grabbed her shoulders, and said with feeling: “Think about it carefully before you make up your mind. I won’t blame you whatever you decide.”

I left. The evening sun threw my shadow on the ground, it was long and slender, and I thought to myself, the poet is my shadow, the mortician my true self, but my shadow is worth more than my self in the eyes of others. If you stand a corpse on the ground, it too would cast a shadow. The shadow might even be that of a hero, straight and strong. But there is no life in a corpse. To think that even the shadow of something without life might be admired, and yet I, so full of vitality, can only cause misery and confusion. Tell me, why is that? Attitude? Yes, you’re right. It is to do with attitude. Here is an attitude which clearly doesn’t do anybody any good, and yet people continue to defend it. You don’t believe me? Go and do a survey in the streets. Ask the question: “Can a beautiful woman doctor marry a man who bums the dead?” Answer: “No.” At least ninety per cent will say no. I am willing to lay a bet.

Spring had gone, summer arriving hot on its heels. Then all of a sudden it was time for folks to go and look at the turning leaves on Shiang Shan.

Wei Xue invited me to go with her. We stood on the top of the mountain, waves of red spreading underneath our feet. She was sad again. Letting out a sigh she said:

“Why can’t your profession be different? I am not someone who is interested in money. I don’t need only to make friends with university graduates—a scholar who is shallow is far inferior to an uneducated man who has soul. But you, a beautician for the dead …”

“That’s not so good, is it?”

“It’s not so easy to accept, I must admit.”

I didn’t speak, perhaps more accurately, I had nothing to say. There was a breeze blowing through the leaves. I listened to the sound for a while, and then spoke.

“Look at these mountains, those trees. When we are dead, they will still be here. But even in nature the new is constantly substituting the old. Nothing escapes the ever-changing cycles of living and dying.”

“You seem to be something of a philosopher.” She sighed again.

“Let us part then!” I said. “Let’s not see each other again.”

“No, no, no!” she screamed. “I couldn’t bear that. Can’t you give me some encouragement? How can I face society’s pointing finger on my own? Why don’t you say something? Why don’t you launch an offensive? Don’t you think you are being terribly selfish?”

My brain exploded all of a sudden. She loved me for sure. But she couldn’t face the prejudice of the entire world. She was right, how could I let her deal with this alone? If I didn’t shield her, then I was indeed being selfish. I was waiting to have everything brought to me on a plate. Love is something that occurs between two people, and in order to earn its rewards, one must be willing to fight, to wrench it from the hands of the opposition.

I took her in my arms and said with gratitude, “I love you. Nobody will ever take your place in the world. Even though I deal with death, I am not dead myself. I have just as much passion and energy as the next man. I won’t let you go. I shall make you happy. I may not earn very much, but happiness is not dependent on money. Look at me, Wei Xue, my chest is broad enough to give you shelter.”

She threw herself into my embrace, through tears she said, “I love you and I am going to marry you. One who enables birth can marry one who facilitates death. We shall have a family which lives between these two enormities.”

“Nonsense, in our family there will only be life, because every day we shall shoo death away.”

That Chinese New Year, we were married. All my workmates came—old, young, men, women. Our friends from the Cultural Center, the newspaper and the hospital came too, they all laughed, they laughed so much tears ran down their faces.

My wife is very good to me, there is only one rule: I have to have a bath before I go home. When I get there, she insists I rinse my hands twice more with clean water. I know why of course, she doesn’t want me to stink of corpses. But actually it is she who smells of Lysol. In any case I always tell her I like the smell.

It’s lucky you came today, she has just given birth to our baby yesterday. A little girl every bit as good-looking

as her mother. Morticians' daughters are no less beautiful you know!

On the same day, by coincidence, Er Ya's husband died, his body was brought here. He was drunk when he decided to go for a spin in a cheap car. I don't need to tell you how his face looked. I'm sure you can imagine. On the table next to him was a young man, someone who had been sentenced to hard labor twice in his lifetime. He died rescuing a baby who had fallen into the river.

I did the make-up for both of them. Er Ya's husband was too high-born or too privileged perhaps, and lost his life in his empty pursuits. The youth who saved the baby had a tough life, but at the moment of death he was elevated to a state of grace. I am pondering a poem in his honor. Apparently, a famous artist has drawn his portrait, and now a sculptor also wants to make his image, to be erected at the place where he made his sacrifice.

The two corpses and I were all in the same little room. I looked at them both, and felt quite moved. Number Six had looked down on me once, but now waits for me to clean away the evidence of his recklessness. The young man I didn't know, but apparently he had been the target of a lot of prejudice, and had taken one or two wrong turns in his life, but then he was able to prove his worth in death. He will always remain in people's memory, just as Number Six will disappear without a trace—perhaps even while alive he wasn't all that different to a corpse. In my eyes the two men are equal now. As a matter of fact I was far more meticulous with Number Six, since his face looked a lot worse.

Er Ya came. She could see that I had repaired her husband's face, and turned to me with red, grateful eyes. I asked her to go closer and take a good look, say goodbye properly. But she ran off crying. She was frightened of him now. What about when he was alive? Did she ever really love him? Just you wait, Number Seven will be along shortly.

I had just finished working on those two when I got a call to say my daughter had arrived.

So you see, I had barely said farewell to death when life was already round the comer.

I walked through the streets looking at the lights, the cars, the people. I thought to myself, how many people have turned to ashes today? Probably only I knew the answer. But how many were born? I had no idea. Whether you think that death is ridiculous or solemn, it can never put a stop to the never-ending flow of life. People will always remember the achievers, and recount their history for future generations. But it is the insignificant deaths which demonstrate to us how, in the final equation, we are all the same. The way we die hardly matters, one instant and it's all change again. All we can do is to respect our own lives, or the new-born will surely come along and shove us into the furnace!

Ai, why haven't you drunk your tea? What I have been saying, you must promise never to publish. . .

83.7 Auntie Yao\fn{by Yang Ming-sien (1938-)} Peking, China (F) 10

There were two Auntie Yaos living in the same court. When someone stuck his head in the court and screamed "Is Auntie Yao home?" both Auntie Yaos would answer at the same time. "Yes, I'm home. What can I do for you?"

In order to make it easier to tell the difference and not to get them mixed up, people called one of them Fat Auntie Yao. Fat Auntie Yao definitely lived up to her reputation. She weighed no less than one hundred ninety-nine and a half *catties*, about two hundred and sixty-four pounds. Auntie Yao was not really short, but all that fat on her added to her width.

When neighbors got together and chatted, Auntie Yao often said,

"I was not always as fat as this. If I were, that would really be the limit. My waist measured only two feet and six inches in my younger days. That is indeed slender, wouldn't you say?" She usually gesticulated with her hand as she spoke, and she sounded regretful.

Grandpa Wang smiled his toothless smile and said, "Are you sure your memory does not fail you, Old Sister-in-law? Most likely it was your calf."

They all laughed. Auntie Yao retorted, smiling as she said, "Don't be spiteful, you rotten old man. Watch out that the corners of your mouth don't rot away from uttering such nonsense."

Auntie Yao seemed to be made up of many globular bodies. Her face was big, fat and round; her nose was smallish and shaped like a clove of garlic; her cheeks were round and plump, and she had thick lips. Beneath her eyebrows, which were wide but without much hair, were two small eyes with puffy lids. They looked all right when she was not smiling, but when she did, they narrowed into slits. At the back of her round head she wore her hair in a loosely-knotted bun. A big sphere made up the front of her body from her chest all the way down her tummy, round and well-stuffed. Her buttocks were shaped like two semi-circular spheres. Her bound feet had

been released from their bondage but she always just slipped them into her shoes, never pulling up the back over her heels. No matter when you saw her, she would be slopping around as if in slippers. She sometimes wore her daughter's shoes, the kind that had a strip across at the front. Sometimes she wore her son-in-law's laced shoes with ten holes and sometimes even her grandson Hung-hung's shoes. She couldn't care less what she wore as she shuffled up and down the streets.

She wore a loosely fitted blue cotton top in summer and in winter she wore it over her cotton-batting padded jacket. The cotton top was held together by only six buttons, and Auntie Yao never had all of them buttoned. She never buttoned the one at the collar, and the others took turns being forgotten. Being fat, she did not like to tie the belt of her pants too tight, for she felt constrained. On the other hand if she wore it too loose her pants tended to slip, so one end of the long red coarse cotton strip which served as her belt was always hanging out in the back from under her cotton top. Niu-tze, Feng-erh, and some of the other girls liked to tease her, telling her,

"Grandma Yao, your tail is showing."

"You confounded girls, what do you think your Grandma Yao is? A fox in disguise?" Auntie Yao would stare at them with her beady eyes and pretend to be mad.

"We're only teasing."

"Teasing? You tease your Grandma Yao as you tease the crickets?"

"Grandma Yao, if you're a cricket, you've got to be the grand ancestor of all crickets. Who'd ever see such a fat cricket?"

The glib little girl Niu-tze made Auntie Yao throw her head back and laugh.

Auntie Yao's old man passed away long ago. Her oldest son and her second daughter both left home, and she lived with her oldest daughter. The daughter was a ticket-seller on a trolley that her husband drove so the old lady was head of the household. In addition to cooking, shopping for food and doing the laundry, she also had to keep an eye on her grandson Hung-hung. This grandson of hers was well-known for his mischief throughout the whole alley. Their neighbors made briquettes from coal dust, and left them out under the sun to dry. Hung-hung would smash them with his little feet, row by row. While children from their court were playing with a swallow's nest on a sandy slope, he would be turning somersaults on the slope, flattening the nest and kicking up sand into the eyes of the others, causing all the children in the court to scream at her at least three times a day,

"Grandma Yao, aren't you going to discipline Hung-hung?"

"Of course, of course. Who says I'm not going to discipline him? I'm going to give that little devil a good flogging." Auntie Yao went up the street to look for Hung-hung, while Hung-hung circled around playing the game of "eagle chasing after a chick" with his fat grandma. Auntie Yao stretched both her fat arms out to grab Hung-hung, but she never could catch him. Hung-hung made funny faces at his grandma; his head tilted to one side with a smile on his face which revealed his missing front tooth, and with his thumb on his nose, he flipped the other four fingers at his grandma. Thus he made all the kids who had told on him clap their hands and laugh. Sometimes Hung-hung was caught and Grandma would bring him home, dragging him along by the ear. She would give him a beating and forbid him to go out. Hung-hung was so bored he would press his face hard against the window pane, flattening his nose as he did so. Auntie Yao, standing by the door making steamed corn meal bread, would be so tickled by the sight of Hung-hung's crooked nose and mouth, she would laugh and say,

"Oh come out, you bothersome little monkey!"

Auntie Yao couldn't really bring herself to spank her precious grandson. A child would not be a child if he were not mischievous. It would be enough just to scare him a little bit. There was a very good proverb: a naughty girl would turn out to be good at sewing; a naughty boy would have a promising future. Naughty children are generally smart ones. Take a slow child, for instance, no amount of urging could make him mischievous.

This point of view of Auntie Yao's was not accepted by all, The other Auntie Yao, for one, could not tolerate it, and she often said privately,

"Always take the side of the little one and spoil him rotten."

Former old residents in the alley referred to this other Auntie Yao as Yao Erh Nai Nai, Number Two Mrs. Yao, not because she was Number Two Mr. Yao's wife, but because she was Number One Mr. Yao's second wife. Now, in the new society, all were equal and no distinction was made between No. I and No.2. Furthermore, the original Auntie Yao had died, and No.2 Mrs. Yao automatically became No. I Mrs. Yao. Her neighbors also began to just call her Auntie Yao.

This Yao Erh Nai Nai, No.2 Mrs. Yao, was only four years younger than fat Auntie Yao. She was fifty-six years old, tall and slender, with a face which was fair and in the shape of a melon seed, wide at the forehead and tapering off toward the chin. She had large eyes which, though not as bright as those of the young people, were

still very alert, giving her a spirited and intelligent look. She wore her hair just the right length, right below her ear lobes, and kept it smooth and shiny. Should any fly accidentally land on it, it surely would slip off. Her blue serge pants were cut like a uniform, and the crease was always well pressed. She wore a light gray color dacron top which was ironed just right. Not to mention the comfort in wearing such an outfit, it was also most pleasing to the eyes.

Yao Erh Nai Nai never opened her mouth without a smile, and when she did it was always about some directives or teachings of Mao Tse-tung's. Those who listened to her couldn't help but admire her and consider her up to "standard," and truly "knowledgeable." Yao Erh Nai Nai liked to read the newspaper out loud, at the top of her voice, but sometimes, she read "a sound beating" as "a sun heating," and "calm and without a sense of shame," as "came and without a scent of shame."

Luckily, her audience was not really paying attention. Auntie Chang was thinking of the bread she had to steam that evening and wondered if the dough had risen properly yet. Sister-in-law Li was thinking that they were running out of food and that as soon as the meeting was over she had to fetch her bag and buy some corn meal. Otherwise what would they eat that night? Uncle Chao had always been hard of hearing. No.2 Uncle Yang seemed to be listening with his eyes closed while in fact he had long gone to meet with Mr. Sandman.

Only Grandma Yang was listening attentively, and spotted the mistakes, but she was one of those whose home had been ransacked during the cultural revolution, she would not dare to utter a word even on borrowed nerve. Yao Erh Nai Nai was therefore left alone to read on and on, passage after passage at the top of her voice and enjoying it to the fullest, swallowing hard and blowing her nose with her fingers from time to time.

Yao Erh Nai Nai was not the "Director of the Revolutionary Committee" for the block, nor was she a member of the Committee or the head of a unit, but she was an "active element" trusted and depended upon by those people. It was not a simple matter to be an "active element." There were not many of them in all the alleys. To be an "active element" one had to, first of all, have the right background. Secondly, one had to run to the director and committee members constantly to report such trivia as that the Changs had failed to make a report about the number of people in residence in their household when they had a visitor; or the Lis were late getting to a meeting; or that during the morning or evening session certain people did not open their mouths wide enough when singing *[The] East Is Red*; or report the gossip about the director or committee members behind their backs, or about the couples who had a fight the night before, or about the family who had applied for a subsidy from their working unit, but managed to buy two pancakes for their children for breakfast. Better not to even dream of being an "active element" if one is not capable of all of this.

In addition to the above mentioned traits Yao Erh Nai Nai had yet another "superior qualification:" she had numerous friends and relatives who brought her raisins from Sinkiang Province which she shared with Director Ho. She had a bottle of quality vinegar for Mr. Pai, a committee member. A bottle of spirits which she got from a "backdoor" source made a wonderful present when Director Ho invited Master Wang of the Workers Propaganda Unit over for dinner. This bottle was indeed the unifying force between them. Aside from all these, Yao Erh Nai Nai had at her disposal more money, more rice coupons, oil coupons, cloth coupons, and so on, than any of them. Some day Committee Member Li would borrow fifty cents from her, and on another day Unit Chief Chang would borrow three *catties*' worth of flour coupons.

Yao Erh Nai Nai never dreamed of asking them to pay her back. She was "generous." Furthermore, she was smart and clever with words, and most apt at turning with the tide. All of this made her a "red hot" personality of West Huai Li Alley.

Take, for instance, the "struggle" meeting which took place two days ago when quite a few representatives made speeches, but when it came to making exposes and accusations none of them were Yao Erh Nai Nai's equal. Hers was truly a quality speech with depth and concrete evidence. She tore Tsao Hsiu-chen, the concubine of a landlord, to pieces. Her expose included the facts that the old landlord died of exhaustion in bed and that the bookkeeper had been seduced. Finally, she cried at the top of her voice saying:

"Throw Tsao Hsiu-chen, concubine of the landlord, on the ground and kick her so that she will never be able to redeem herself!"

"Down with Third Sister Tsao, the concubine of a landlord!"

"Down with Third Sister Tsao, the concubine of a landlord!" the people echoed.

Auntie Liu whispered quietly to Auntie Sun who was sitting next to her, "Our Yao Erh Nai Nai used to be on such good terms with Tsao Hsiu-chen that, as the saying goes, they used to wear the same pair of pants."

"This is the meaning of the saying: An astute person is one who knows when to turn with the tide."

"Rats! This is like putting rouge on the face of a person who hanged herself, shameless even after death.

Astute, my eye! The two of them make a fine pair of 'dilapidated shoes.'"

Fat Auntie Yao turned around and joined them in bad-mouthing the ladies.

Quite a few people nearby laughed stealthily.

Auntie Liu smiled as she whispered softly, "Neither the mind nor the ears of this fat old lady are here at the assembly. At 'Down with Third Sister Tsao,' she yelled 'Down with Third Sister Liu.' What had Third Sister Liu ever done to her to deserve it? Who is this Third Sister Liu? Where did she come from? It was like watching a historic fight on stage between Tou Er-tun and Li Kwei; you can't even tell which is which. Now she comes up with 'astute' and 'dilapidated shoes.' Haven't you heard it said that chanting the wrong slogan makes one an anti-revolutionary!"

"Don't try to scare me. This fat old lady does not scare easily," she pouted and said half-jokingly.

No one in the alley dared to openly criticize Yao Erh Nai Nai, but even emperors had been cursed. Moreover, fat Auntie Yao despised her from the bottom of her heart. She could not stand her, and she made no bones of it. She was told,

"Don't try to grope for the bottom of a tiger."

The old lady turned her eyes upward until the whites of her eyes were .showing and said loudly,

"Who said I try to grope for it? I kick her fat bottom. She ain't no tiger! She's a weasel at best."

There was a reason why fat Auntie Yao did not like Yao Erh Nai Nai. She had witnessed things that bothered her. For instance, she had seen, through the window panes, Yao Erh Nai Nai talking to her visitors, the director and committee members, doing her job of "reporting." She would be pointing to a room to the east, gesticulating towards a room to the south, shaking her head or making a disdainful expression with her mouth. At such times fat Auntie Yao would curse in her heart,

"Born to be a concubine, specializes in waggling her old wife's tongue and telling on people."

Aside from her ability at "reporting," Yao Erh Nai Nai's company behavior was another thing that fat Auntie Yao could not stand. At a mass rally or at meetings to voice criticism, she would be weaving through the crowd back and forth, back and forth. At times she would hold a bullhorn to her mouth and announce in her shrill voice in a most pretentious manner,

"Those of you in the back, sit down! Sit down! Don't stand up!"

"Attention! Attention! Don't move about! Order! Order!"

Sometimes she would whisper something in Director Ho's ear, or she might hand Master Wang, who was in the back, a stool.

Had fat Auntie Yao been sitting in the back or somewhere in the middle where she could not see all this, it would have been another matter. But Auntie Yao liked to sit in the front in case Hung-hung wanted to go to the bathroom. Even if Hung-hung was all right, it would have been easier if she herself wanted to make a hasty retreat. She, therefore, was there to witness it all. Whenever Yao Erh Nai Nai whispered in Director Ho's ear, Auntie Yao would scream,

"Watch that she does not bite off your ear!"

Hung-hung would help his fat grandma along by clapping his hands and singing, "Suck up words, rot the mouth, little toads by the horde."

When Yao Erh Nai Nai walked back and forth in front of the group, fat Auntie Yao would be quite capable of pointing at the podium and saying impatiently,

"Hey, don't stroll along here. You are making me dizzy. Go! Go and sit on the podium which is both prestigious and cool, and also you can see far from there."

Sister-in-law Sun praised Yao Erh Nai Nai and said, "Look at her! Auntie Yao has more gusto than the young people."

Fat Auntie Yao nodded her agreement and said, "Gusto indeed! Every part of her physical body 'gus' to me the wrong way."

Erh Niu Ma failed to appear both at the morning instruction session and the evening reporting session for two or three meetings, so Director Ho denounced her at the mass rally without specifically mentioning names.

"Not to appear at morning instruction session or evening reporting session is indeed a serious problem. This is a question of the political attitude of loyalty to Chairman Mao. Some even give going to the bathroom as reason for not attending, saying that surely a person is not expected to hold it in! Now if we stop to analyze this statement, it sounds somewhat reactionary."

Erh Niu Ma's face turned ashen with fear.

Auntie Yao screamed at Director Ho in a loud voice,

“Say, Director Ho, don’t you throw around groundless accusations. You ought to dig into it and find out if that indeed was what was said. I heard with my own ears when Erh Niu Ma loudly screamed that she was in the toilet, and asked Yao Erh Nai Nai to make her excuse for her. Constipation is not as simple as diarrhea. When she came out of the toilet everybody else was returning from the session. You want her to go there all by herself? Or else, we can easily have a few more sessions. Make it four so that no one would ever be late. I’m telling it as it is. If you don’t believe me, you can ask around. Quite a few people in our court heard her. I for one, did not hear anything about holding it in.”

Committee Member Pai and Unit Chief Chang both stared round-eyed at Auntie Yao. Director Ho’s pale long face seemed to have grown longer. Yao Erh Nai Nai bit so hard on her lips she nearly drew blood.

As to the audience, no one dared to utter a sound. Back from the rally, Auntie Yao stood in the courtyard and said for all to hear,

“Truth must be out. Fabrication of false accusation won’t do.”

That evening Director Ho and Master Wang came to visit Auntie Yao.

Master Wang asked about this and that, trying to make conversation, then finally he came to the point and said very affably, “Auntie, do you have any opinion about the cadre of this area? You can tell them so that changes can be made if need be, or else a word of encouragement would be fine. If you have anything to say, bring it out openly. Don’t ever discuss it privately, it would be committing the offense of liberalism. The work of our streets can only be expanded when the mass and the cadre are united as one. Only then can the Cultural Revolution be a great success. Don’t you agree?”

“To be sure, Auntie Yao, you can submit any opinion you have, and we cadres will accept them all with humility.”

Director Ho butted in, but he sounded more like they might listen to her with humility, but they were not going to make any changes.

“Whatever possessed you to ask for my opinion? Could it be that someone has brought an accusation against me?”

“Come on, old lady! What’s this about bringing accusations? In this day and age there is no such thing as bringing up accusations,” said Director Ho with a smile that did not reach his eyes.

“I’ve no culture. I’m full of old-fashioned terminology, so don’t you pick on me,” Auntie Yao retorted angrily. She thought to herself: Who do you think you are? You took over the three big north rooms of the Wang’s confiscated estate. You may be very pleased with it, but you were no different from the ‘newly rich’ family in the Peking opera *Chu Wan Ting*, who, taking advantage of the disturbance during the Taiping Rebellion,\fn{A popular rebellion (1850-1864) in several provinces against the Manchu dynasty.} plundered and enriched themselves. Now you get to live in the big north rooms, and your second and third child wear Great Roman brand wristwatches and ride around on bicycles. Where did all that come from? Can a family who has to rely on subsidies from the unit to fill themselves with corn meal gruel afford these expensive items? Auntie Yao had no respect for people who pretended to be what they were not, like a pig pretending to be an elephant by wearing a scallion on his nose.

“Auntie, don’t get excited! We all know you have an impeccable background, and that you had your share of hardship in the old society, but you cannot just fall back on that alone. You have to continue to carry on the revolution. You must make unity work. You mustn’t have any prejudice. Our strength is in unity. The proletariat must be firmly united internally before we can proceed to struggle with the enemy. If you have any opinion, tell us to our face. Don’t ever grumble behind peoples’ backs. That would be creating a bad impression. If you are dissatisfied with any of the active elements in the neighborhood, seek them out and exchange opinions with them. You may also talk things over with the propaganda unit. The important thing is unity. Chairman Mao instructed us not to ever forget class struggle and not to allow the enemy of the classes to divide us.”

Before Auntie Yao had a chance to let off some steam, her daughter came into the room with her bicycle. Director Ho and Master Wang exchanged a few words with the daughter, then they got up and left. Auntie Yao felt she had been gravely wronged, and she was full of grievance and complaints. She poured them all out in front of her daughter. This daughter was not one to be trifled with. Her background was impeccable; she started life with a clean slate; she was a member of the communist youth party and a leader of the revolutionary group of this working unit. She pushed open the door and went looking for Yao Erh Nai Nai.

The family was sitting around a small square table eating supper.

“Aunt Yao, there is something that I want to talk to you about,” daughter Yao said.

Yao Erh Nai Nai smiled amiably and said, “Hello niece, did you just get back from work? Have you had dinner yet? Come! Come! Come sit down and have something to eat. The fish I cooked is very fresh; have some and see

if you like it—"

"Aunt Yao, there is no need to stand on ceremony. I just have a few words to say, then I will leave you alone to eat your supper."

"Sit down, sit down and take your time telling your aunt what you want to say. Here is a cup of tea, freshly made and very strong. Have some."

"Do not trouble yourself, Aunt Yao. You often said that you and my mother grew up in the same alley, and you are like sisters and that you understand one another, so it shouldn't be too difficult for me to say what I come to say. My mother is a straightforward person, and she is like a gun barrel, shooting off whatever is in the barrel. She is not at all like you, who are educated, who have culture, and who understand the fine points. My mother is a rough and rustic person. She speaks plainly. If there is any 'contradiction' between you two old sisters, you should bring it out in the open, and not treat the other as an object of the revolution and yourself as the force behind the revolution. There is no call to get the organization or the leadership to resolve certain small matters, be it the Director or the Workers' Propaganda Unit. They should concentrate their efforts on guiding the street blocks toward the expansion of their political movement, and not the inconsequential personal conflicts. If they only deal with these matters day in and day out, then the true meaning of the function of the workers' propaganda unit would be unclear. Aunt Yao, hereafter if you have any opinion, feel free to discuss it with me. Whatever my mother's shortcomings, I will criticize her. There will be no need for the Director or the Propaganda Unit to educate her."

"*Ai ya*! My niece, what are you talking about! What right do I have to ask the Director or the Propaganda Unit to educate Sister Yao? There is certainly no 'contradictions' between us two old sisters. If there were, we would face one another and talk it over, and all would be resolved. We two old sisters are like a reversible lamb wool jacket. There is no wrong side or right side. My good niece, you mustn't let it come between us. How could I go behind her back."

"If that is the case, very well. Aunt Yao, you had better go back to your supper before it gets cold."

The next morning Yao Erh Nai Nai went to see Director Ho and voluntarily petitioned to be relieved of the role of an active element with tears rolling down her cheeks. Not only had the oldest daughter of the Yaos reprimanded her personally, not in so many words mind you, but she also hinted that the Director and the Propaganda Unit only interfered with inconsequential matters among the masses and neglected their great responsibility of guiding the political movement.

Director Ho was so fuming mad that he was breathing hard after hearing this. Master Wang always had a habit of fluttering his eyelashes, and now the fact that anyone would dare to criticize the Workers' Propaganda Unit got him so mad that his lashes nearly fell off from too much fluttering. The final conclusion they arrived at was: this old lady might have an impeccable background, but her thinking and her perceptions were questionable.

Since her daughter had straightened things out for her, Auntie Yao became more conceited.

More than half of the couples living in the different courts in their alley were both working. Schools were closed since the beginning of the Cultural Revolution. Parents were busily occupied with their work and with their learning programs and meetings, the teachers were preoccupied with different movements, thus the children, young and old, were left on their own, running around all over the streets. This kid Hsiao Tu-dze stepped on that kid Sze Ho-shang; Chou Tan beat up Er Leng-tze; any such incident could lead to a mass war. It was said that there could be no revolution without fights or quarrels. Everyone wanted to be a revolutionary. The "leadership" of this alley were the two grandsons of Yao Erh Nai Nai, the grandchildren of Director Ho, Committee Member Pai's half a dozen children, and the "red" successors of unit chiefs Chang, Wang, Li, and Chao. No one dared to touch them. Aside from the fact that their grandmothers and mothers were of the "leadership," every one of the children had either a brother or sister who wore the armband of the red guard or carried a belt capped with a copper buckle.

These children were guided by the motto: "If the father is a hero, the son is a man; if the father is a counterrevolutionary, the son is a scoundrel." They were merciless when they beat the children of families whose properties had been confiscated, kicking them around like footballs, while cursing them saying, "Fuck your grandmother; we beat you bastards born of indenture maids; your grandfather was a doggone land owner."

The children who had been beaten ran back home, bleeding from their noses and mouths, their faces swollen. Such was the fate of the grandchildren of landlords; they deserved to be beaten. Any child in the alley could be the object of "struggle" of this "petite leadership." The child of Mr. Chin the teacher, Ming-ming, was hit by the grandson of Director Ho with a slingshot when he went shopping for noodles one day. He ended up with a big purplish bump on his head. Mrs. Chin, also a teacher, thought it outrageous. To go around hitting people for no

reason at all was not to be tolerated. If this pebble had hit him in the eye it surely would have blinded him. She was steaming mad and dragged the child along with her to see Director Ho.

Director Ho was squatting in front of a stove, poking at the briquettes, and he said very slowly and calmly without so much as turning his head, "Was it our Hsiao-ping? Are you sure, Ming-ming? If it was him, I'll criticize him by and by. If he says he did not do it, then you, Mrs. Chin, have no right to accuse an innocent person."

The next day before it could be determined who was right and who was wrong, Mr. and Mrs. Chin came back from work and saw that every pane of glass on the door was smashed, and pieces of paper that covered the windows were full of holes. On the wall were the words: "Down with the proletariat intelligentsia, smelly old students; watch out you smelly old students—be careful not to get your doggone head smashed."

Most people suffered the insults and injuries to their children in silence, because they dared not touch these leadership people, young and old, who might just choose to throw a few derogatory accusations around to cause no end of trouble. Not Auntie Yao though! Should anyone dare to injure her Hung-hung in any way, she would tear the party apart and give them a tongue-lashing.

One time Hung-hung came home crying. As he ran into their court, his hands covering his face, he screamed, "Grandma, Hsiao-ping boxed me!"

Auntie Yao ran out to the entrance of their alley, dragging Hung-hung behind her. There was a group of people at the entrance sitting around on the big rocks. Auntie Yao pointed a finger at the forehead of Hsiao-ping and cursed him, saying, "You little son of a turtle, are you suffering from being overstuffed with cornmeal rolls? Are your finger nails overgrown? And do you want them trimmed? Listen to me! If you ever dare to touch Hung-hung again with the tip of your finger, I'm going to scoop out your eyeballs and stamp on them like so many bubbles, and I'll twist your head off and use it as a urinal. You can count on it!"

"Chairman Mao told us not to beat or curse others. Aren't you ashamed of yourself, you old granny, for opening up your mouth and cursing," Hsiao-sze, Committee Member Pai's child said, his mouth twisted in a contemptuous manner.

"Get the hell out of here, you! If he hadn't gone around beating people, I wouldn't be here cursing. This is called returning the courtesy; it is equality! Why do you have to butt in? Is Hsiao-ping your grandpa? Why do you take sides? Even if you don't open your mouth, there is no chance that you'll be sold as a mute. On the contrary, a talkative mule could only command the price of a donkey and no more. You just shut your big mouth."

"All this is against Chairman Mao's teaching, this cursing and beating people. Remember the three disciplines and the eight points: one must fight against selfishness and be critical of revisionism and examine oneself. Old Mrs. Yao, you must first kneel before the portrait of Chairman Mao and ask him for forgiveness; you must fight against selfishness and be critical of revisionism!" shouted Smelly Egg, the second son of Unit Chief Chang, as he stood on one side, picking his nose. He was bent on provoking Auntie Yao.

Auntie Yao walked up to him and stood in front of him, looking him up and down, and said,

"Good! First go home and tell your ma to finish fighting selfishness and being critical of revisionism. Then I'll take my turn. Go home and ask your ma if taking over the house of the Sung's, by force, is selfishness or not? Devising different reasons and excuses for not returning the money borrowed from neighbors, isn't this practicing capitalism? Huh? Go home and find out about all that before you lecture me. Furthermore, before you start lecturing me you had better go home and ask your ma to trim off your fat tongue, because you are not making sense when you talk in a lisp with your fat tongue. Can't tell what kind of a fart you are making; it was even odorless."

She warned them further, "Listen to me, all you bunny rabbits. Don't be like a dog living in the reflected glory of its master and stepping on our Hung-hung. It won't do."

Auntie Yao's deliverance, uttered without mincing words, made all the kids who had been taken advantage of very happy. They wished they could applaud her. As always, while one group felt avenged, another group would be deeply resentful. All those who were objects of Auntie Yao's scorn were left speechless. They knew that Auntie Yao was not to be trifled with. She was likely to tell how so-and-so's mother used to steal turnips, or so-and-so's sister had had an illegitimate child, or about so-and-so's grandmother had been a prostitute. She would not hold anything back. It would never do to have her expose the "Five Red Hot Groups;" they could only swallow their pride and wait until they get home to tell on her to their mothers or grandmothers.

All the mothers and grandmothers hated this disastrous old lady beyond words, but none as much as Yao Erh Nai Nai. Before Yao Erh Nai Nai came up in this world, she lived in the same place as Auntie Yao, next to the smelly water of Dragon Whisker Creek. Auntie Yao could tell them all the stories about Yao Erh Nai Nai's ancestors, as far back as eighteen generations ago. There was a saying that people from your native village and

who knew your roots were to be feared. So, in addition to resenting Auntie Yao, Erh Nai Nai feared her too. She told her two grandchildren,

"Don't pay her any mind. Treat her as a smelly commode and stay far, far away. Don't waste your breath on her."

But, Erh Nai Nai was always full of smiles whenever she ran into Auntie Yao, greeting her cordially with, "Sister, I just brewed some fine leaf fragrant tea, very delicious. Want some?" or "Hung-hung, Grandma has a date cake for you."

Lots of things puzzled Auntie Yao since the Cultural Revolution. Take confiscation of property for instance, it was not a new terminology. Auntie Yao grew up in the Tien Chiao section of Peking, and she had heard tales from many different storytellers. In the old days, the emperors used to impose this kind of punishment all the time. Weren't General Hu's family properties confiscated, and weren't members of the family chopped up into small pieces? Now, after the liberation and in our new society, new matters were dealt with in new fashions; if a person was guilty, he alone would be punished. What was this about confiscating property? The Red Guards smashed the signs of old restaurants such as *Tao Hsiang Tsun*, *Yueh Sheng Tsai* and *Chuan Chu Teh*, and they called it smashing the "Four Olds." Should confiscation of property be considered as one of "Four Olds?"

"Revolutionary rebellion:" the Red Guards kept the wristwatches and gold bracelets they confiscated, and put them in their own pockets; they stripped all the pears from the pear trees in other people's yards; they cooked the ducks that others cured and put them in their own stomachs. Was this "revolutionary rebellion?"

There were the Five Blacks. They were the people who had been beaten till they were covered with blood, the people who had been accused of alleged crimes, or people who had to wear a sandwich board proclaiming that they were "demons with ox heads, or spirits with the bodies of serpents." Auntie Yao was not totally convinced that these people were, one and all, "anti-revolutionaries." For instance, the old man of the Yang family had been a neighbor of Auntie Yao's for over thirty years. He had taught college all his life, could he be considered an "anti-revolutionary?"

Sometimes, late at night when all was quiet, Auntie Yao would ask her daughter, in confidence, about things that had been puzzling her. Her daughter would tell her in all seriousness, "Ma, haven't you learned that one has to carry out what one understands as well as what one does not understand? Leave what you don't understand; just remember: stay away from what is not your business and make no utterance about matters that do not concern you, should you make a single wrong statement, our whole family will suffer the consequence."

Her daughter and her son-in-law were workers, so Auntie's was truly a proletarian family, which was an asset in these days. Auntie Yao didn't know enough to make use of this asset. One time a rally was called for their blocks to reminisce about past sufferings and to express hope for a rosy future. The purpose was to tell the masses not to forget social injustice, to remember always the blood and tears they had shed, and to love the new society with all their hearts. It was a touching lesson in class struggle. Master Wang of the Workers' Propaganda Unit asked Auntie Yao.

"Auntie Yao, will you please talk about your suffering during the old society at the Rally?"

"Oh no, I don't know how. I have, of course, gone through a lot, but if you want me to tell about it, I'm afraid I don't have a glib tongue. I'll surely faint standing on the podium."

This rally to reminisce and to hope was held in the auditorium of an elementary school on Two Dragons Road. Three or four representatives made exemplary speeches. Yao Erh Nai Nai was, to be sure, among them. She told how she and her family were persecuted, about their suffering and their misery, weeping and moaning all the while as she piled accusation after accusation on the old society. She told about how her family had to share one torn quilt on bitter cold winter nights, how they had to go without even a bite of gruel of the coarsest of grain three days in a row, and that her father, a rickshaw man, was unable to support a family of seven or eight. She and her brothers and sisters had to beg for a living. Her oldest brother was dragged off the street into military service. One of her younger brothers was killed by an automobile on his way to the Chien Men gruel kitchen. Her second younger sister was sold into a rich man's household as [an] indentured maid. She was kidnapped but managed to escape and married Yao the drummer … at this point, mucous from her nose had reached her chin, and she pounded on the table and cried,

"As God is my witness, there was no way out in the old society for poor people like us." She rolled up her cuff and showed the audience an old scar, a remnant of her beggar days when she was bitten by a German shepherd belonging to a capitalist. This was the "brand that the evil old society left on the poor."

Many were moved to tears. Auntie Yao did not shed one tear. She had no way of knowing whether the others were telling the truth, but most of the time Yao Erh Nai Nai lied without blinking an eye.

Auntie Yao thought: you're really something, lying with a straight face.

After listening to reports reminiscing about past sufferings, the people had to have a meal of remembrance. Everyone would be given a large piece of cornmeal bread, made specially from spoiled bean refuse, sandy wild-grown vegetables, and cornmeal. This was to remind the people "to always remember the hardship they suffered in the old society and to love passionately the blessed new society." That is to say, "In liberation, don't forget the Communist Party. In new life, don't forget Mao Tse-tung." Only in eating a meal of remembrance would people realize how sweet life was today!

A moment ago Yao Erh Nai Nai was screaming and crying on the podium; now she stood before the Workers Propaganda Unit, all smiles, and taking big bites of the smelly and sour tasting vegetable-cornmeal bread. Each person was supposed to have one, but she ate two, one after the other, saying to Master Wang, "In the old society, if the poor had this to eat, they would have to thank Buddha for it."

Auntie Yao pulled the corners of her mouth back in a contemptuous expression and said to herself, a lot of people survived in the old society; if these people couldn't even have this sort of thing to eat, how did they sustain themselves? By feeding on the northwest wind?

Auntie Yao took one bite of the cornmeal bread and spit it out. It was hard to swallow; it was smelly, sour, and sandy. Even pigs in the old society probably did not have to eat this unless one wanted them to develop sandy bags in their stomachs. Auntie Yao put the bread in her pocket and threw it into the privy when she got home.

At night when they all sat around in the yard to cool off, Auntie Yao would be waving her huge rush-leaf fan to chase the mosquitoes away from Hung-hung. And the girls like Niu-tze, Feng-erh, and Shu-ying would take their places around her and engage her in conversation. Hsiao-ching pulled at her arm and asked her,

"Grandma Yao, what is a small drummer?"

Auntie Yao's voice box was thus opened. "Don't you even know what a small drummer is? What kind of high school kids are you?"

"*Tse*! *Tse*! Grandma Yao is being arrogant again! We grew up in the new society, how are we to know about the old society? Tell us about it, Grandma Yao. We just love to hear you talk about the old times."

Auntie Yao took a sip of her hot tea and cleared her throat.

The kids looked at one another and smirked.

"A small drummer was one who bought unwanted old items from people. They got their name because when they left home on business, they carried a small drum in their hands. This drum was the size of our five-cents copper coin. When they learned certain people had things to sell, they would go to their houses or to the entrances of their alleys and rattle their small drums. Someone from the house would come out and greet them. There were differences between small drummers too. Some were hard drummers; some were soft drummers. The hard drummers had more capital, and they had connections with antique dealers. Some of them even had their own second-hand stores. These hard drummers were very smart and very tricky. They could tell at a glance what kind of goods they were dealing with. They all had extravagant three-inch long glib tongues. They made the things they wanted to purchase sound absolutely worthless, and the things they wanted to sell seem hard to find both in heaven or on earth.

Fortunes were made by their ability to buy and sell. Some of these hard drummers specialized in jade, pearl, or agate, and chests made of redwood or sandalwood, or even books and scrolls of calligraphy and paintings in pretty dilapidated state. But it was a mistake to underestimate them. They knew their goods and they made fortunes. They wore long gowns, looking very clean and neat, and carried a small black cloth pouch under their arms; looking quite handsome. They would not enter the house of a very poor person, knowing that there would be nothing they would want to buy there. The soft drummers specialized in the poor people; they frequented small dirty alleys to buy old shoes, worn clothing, rusty tin cans. They'd buy anything. They balanced poles on their shoulders with baskets hanging from either end of the poles into which they put the things they bought. They rattled their little drums as they went through the alleys. Sometimes they cried, 'Rags, rags for matches![1]'"

"Humm! This time you really told a good and moving story. How do you know so much about it, Grandma Yao?"

"Why not? Your Grandpa Yao was a small drummer in his day."

"What kind of a drum did he use, Grandma Yao?"

"Soft drum, of course, need you ask?" Hsiao-ching blurted out.

"So, what kind of a drum did Yao Erh Nai Nai's husband use?" Feng-erh asked quietly.

"He? He was of course a hard drummer! How else would he have been able to manage two wives?" said Auntie Yao with a disdainful expression on her mouth.

"Hush! Lower your voice, my dear Grandma Yao. Don't talk so loud." said Feng-erh as she bent to lift Auntie Yao's cuff.

"Heh! What are you doing? Trying to flirt with an old lady?" the girl Chun-yen cried loudly. They made Auntie Yao laugh, and the girls also burst into laughter.

"Don't be ridiculous! I'm looking to see if there are any scars on her leg from dog bites," Feng-erh said smilingly.

"On my legs? I have scars all over my body, not just on my legs." Grandma Yao said in all seriousness.

"Are you really telling the truth?"

"I surely am, but they're not from dog bites. They're mosquito bites."

The girls around Auntie Yao burst into laughter. Grandpa Wang shuffled over with a tea cup in his hand and said, pointing at Auntie Yao's mouth,

"And you, my old sister-in-law, ought to post a sentry at your mouth."

Grandpa Wang was absolutely right. She did need a sentry at her mouth. She had a habit of broadcasting what she heard at the "People's Culture Palace" near the Hsitan Market:

" … There was this good-for-nothing who forced his mother to remarry, saying: 'How am I to deal with you? I cannot get myself a wife because of you.'

" … They don't want to be involved with anyone who has a mother, to tag along. The mother said: 'I won't live with you; I'll just get my own place.' The son then said: 'I can barely support a wife on my thirty dollars a month; how can I afford to set aside a few dollars every month for you? How am I to live? Why don't you get yourself an old man to support you?' His widowed mother of over sixty was so mad that she swallowed half a bottle of Ti-ti-wei. That settled it! The 'Security Police' arrested him. Now there's no need to find a wife.

" … The oldest daughter of Dr. Pai of Ta Mu Tsan Hospital was sent down to the countryside in Shanhsi Province. She became sick the moment she stepped into the house. She had no appetite for either food or drink and felt nauseous at the smell of a greasy pot. Her mother was a doctor, and she knew right away something was wrong. A physical examination revealed that she was pregnant. She finally admitted, after tremendous pressure, that it was the captain of the production unit, the unit in charge of the production of the poor farmers to which she was assigned. Isn't it immoral? A seventeen-year-old maiden ruined. Dr. Pai sued."

One day Auntie Liu and Hsiao-ching's mother were on watch duty. As Auntie Yao came back from shopping for food, Hsiao-ching's mother yelled at her saying, "Come over here, Fat Auntie! Let me have one of your juicy turnips to quench my thirst."

Auntie Yao waddled over and said to Hsiao-ching's mother, "This little mistress looks flushed today. What are the good tidings?"

"Are you a fortuneteller? Flushed indeed! I lost thirty cents when I went shopping for food this morning. My one day's food money just disappeared into thin air, good tidings my eye!"

"No wonder there are clouds between your eyebrows and the tip of your nose is red. A red nose indicates loss of money."

"This old lady surely knows how to change course as the wind blows. First she tells someone she looks flushed, which indicates good tidings, then she says she was to lose some money and to suffer a setback. Really, if this person is not a fairy goddess, she should not pretend to be ethereal."

Auntie Liu smiled and said, while biting into her juicy turnip, "Who says she does not know how to tell fortunes! Just look at your eyes! They are indeed flirtatious."

Ha, Ha! Both ladies spit out the turnip in their mouths. No one knew when Yao Erh Nai Nai and Committee Member Pai had joined them.

"What's so funny? Tell me so that I can have a good laugh too." It was from Yao Erh Nai Nai.

"You want to have a good laugh? You may want to have a good laugh, but I may not want to tell." Auntie Yao was partly serious and partly joking when she said that.

"Auntie Yao was telling Auntie Liu's fortune. She said Auntie Liu had flirtatious eyes which she used to beguile Old Wang."

"Is that so? Tell me, Auntie Yao, what kind of eyes do I have?"

Committee Member Pai joined the fun and commented, "As for you, what you have are triangular-crossed-eyes, a sassy shrew."

Ha! Ha!

"How about you? What kind of eyes do you have?" Committee Member Pai asked.

"Me? I have the look of a red-faced loyal courtier."

"Heh, they say it is good to make friends with a red-faced fellow, not a white-faced guy. Is there any truth to that?" asked Hsiao-ching's mother.

"Haven't you heard it said that a white-faced young dude is not to be trusted?" said Auntie Liu.

"Of course it's true. Don't you remember that in the Peking operas Kwan Kung always had a red face, while Tsao Tsao's face was white. Tsao Tsao was full of tricks and was always plotting against someone or another. He could not sleep at night, and during the day he had no appetite for food; no wonder his face was white. A big white face with short stubby eyebrows are characteristics of a scoundrel … short eyebrows also indicate a short life span, early death." Auntie Yao looked at Yao Erh Nai Nai when she said that.

Yao Erh Nai Nai's smile spread all over her face when she asked Auntie Yao, "Do you see good fortune in the features of our Chairman?"

"It goes without saying that our Chairman Mao is flushed with good fortune, and there's compassion in his brows and smiling eyes. He no doubt is going to enjoy longevity—"

"How about Lin Piao?" Yao Erh Nai Nai did not wait for Auntie Yao to finish.

"Lin Piao's face is not as benevolent as the Chairman's, and his brows—"

Hsiao-ching's ma grabbed hold of Auntie Yao's sleeve, as she pulled hard and yelled,

"Hung-hung is calling for you. Don't just sit here and make idle conversation."

That evening Auntie Yao was arrested by the "Security Police" as an anti-revolutionary element. She was accused of insulting Mao Tse-tung's designated successor, Vice-Chairman Lin.

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Both Auntie Liu and Hsiao-ching's ma were brought before the "Security Police" several times for questioning. They were asked to expose Auntie Yao's "anti-revolutionary speeches" and to write reports to testify about the "true facts" about those speeches. The two of them were terrified and driven to tears.

It was impossible for anyone to defend Auntie Yao. Even her daughter, a leader of the revolutionary elements, could only hide in her room and cry.

181.6 Autobiographical Statement\fn{by Erin Zeng (1938-)} Kowloon, Hong Kong, China (F) 2

My father was a Hakka (subgroup of Han Chinese), growing up in the backward countryside of Mei Xian, in Guangdong Province. It was so mountainous that it was hard for people there to get to any nearby town. My father was very bright. When he was a teenager, he met a missionary who found out his talent and encouraged him to go to university. He later attended Fu Jiang University in Shanghai and got his degree in Chinese literature. In 1930, he went to the United States and worked on his PhD in education at Stanford University. He got his degree in two years.

Then he returned to China. He held positions in several leading Chinese universities. He was the dean of the College of Art at Qinghua University. Later, he started South China College in Hong Kong in 1936. During the Japanese occupation of Hong Kong, he moved his college to mainland China. Before the Communist Party took over in 1949, he moved his college to Hong Kong once again. He became a professor at Chung Chi College (the current Chinese University of Hong Kong). He wrote many books on elementary, high school, and university education. He wrote the university textbook *Da Xue Zhong Wen* (Chinese language for university students), which was used in many universities in Hong Kong and many other southeastern Asian countries.

My mother was born in Shanghai. She received her college degree in sociology from Denison University in Ohio in 1930. Then she returned to China and met my father on the ship. They got married in 1931 or 1932. She taught college English for all of her life.

My parents worked very hard. They were so busy that they did not have too much time to spend with us. My father was busy traveling to raise funds for his college and my mother was busy making a living and raising children. Those years were full of turmoil. We moved a lot.

My mother later became the dean of the Women's College at Chung Chi College after my father died. In 1960, my mother came to the United States to live with me. She worked in the library at the University of Chicago for four years when I was a graduate student there. She followed me to UC Davis,\fn{University of California at Davis} where I was a research associate and lecturer in chemistry for two years; however, she was too old to find a job there. My mother got her U.S. citizenship in 1965. She died in Oxford, Ohio, in 1986.

My brother was born in 1934. He is four years older than me. In 1950 he graduated from high school in Hong Kong, then he went to Zhongshan University in Guangzhou. During his university years, he went to Hong Kong to visit my family and my mother went to China to visit him. After graduation, he was sent to Changchun, Jilin

Province. As soon as my mother got her citizenship, she began to work for my brother's visa. The visa was ready five or six years before my brother came to America, because he had trouble getting his passport from the Chinese government.

In 1978, my mother was very ill, which allowed my brother to get a passport. He came to the United States alone in 1981. His family (his wife, a son and a daughter) came later in 1983. He had a hard time at first, but he received his master's degree in geology at this university. Later he found jobs—first in Toledo, Ohio, then at Stanford University. Now he works for an optical company.

His wife learned English and driving after she came here. She is working in the same company as he does as a technician, making about $25,000 a year ($7 hourly pay), which would be equivalent to a bachelor degree holder's pay. If the company needs her, she works ten hours a day and some hours on the weekend.

My niece attended the university here for a year; she had a hard time adjusting. Then she went back to China to enroll at Fudan University in Shanghai and earned her BA there. Later she got a master's degree at a university in New York.

I was born in Kowloon, Hong Kong, on February 8,1938. Because of the turmoil during the World War II years, I didn't have a formal education until 1949 when I started high school at Pei Ching High School, a well-known Chinese high school in Hong Kong. Before my high school years, I had never learned English.

I came to the United States for my undergraduate work in 1955 when I was seventeen years old. My father paid my traveling expenses with the royalties from his books. My benefactress, Alice, who was the mother of my mother's close friend, gave $18,000 to Berea College in Kentucky, which was enough for four years schooling. Berea College has very good reputation and it is very hard to get into it, but the tuition is very cheap.

In the first year at Berea, I was very shy because I could not speak English and I looked different. Berea had an international reputation and there was a large racial element. But I was the only Oriental there. There was also an Indian fellow. When we ate in the dining hall, sitting at the round table, I was speechless, just smiling. But I could get along with my classmates and roommates and did not feel lonely, for I was so interested in what I saw and so busy studying that I did not have time to think I was lonely.

My childhood experience also helped me. We traveled from place to place when I was little. I can speak five Chinese dialects. To me, coming to America was the same as coming to a new town. I passed the entrance exams. I was behind in English, but I got high scores in math and other science courses. I had to take a 100 level English course. The difficulty in English kept me very busy.

I stayed in Berea from 1955 to 1957. Then I transferred to the University of Chicago, which was close to where my benefactress lived. Using the money from my benefactress and the money I earned over the summer, I was able to support myself. Entering the graduate program at the University of Chicago, I got a scholarship. I never felt that anyone discriminated against me. I was always the only female in my class. I was treated like a queen. I felt I was special.

I was well treated until I earned my PhD. I had a hard time finding a real job. I was a post-doctoral research associate and instructor in chemistry at Illinois Institute of Technology for two years from 1963 to 1964, and research associate and lecturer in chemistry..at the University of California at Davis from 1964 to 1966. After that, I was a research associate and visiting scientist at Argonne National Laboratory in Argonne, Illinois, from 1966 to 1969. I felt Argonne was an ideal place for my research, for the equipment there is advanced. Unfortunately, the government cut off the funds and I had to look for a job somewhere else.

I found my first real job at this university in 1969. I met a professor from the university when I was at Davis. He was interested in my research. Later he invited me to give several seminars at the university. The search committee then decided to hire me as an assistant professor. Four years later, I was promoted to associate professor.

I feel that in scientific fields, the scientists are very fair in value judgment and recommendation, whereas in the humanities and social sciences, there is a greater human factor there. If you are a woman, if you are a Chinese, you have to work harder. It seems that there is no prejudice there, but every little element can add to the difficulty. When I teach graduate level science, no students complain about my accent. But when I teach freshmen level, these freshmen would say: I don't understand her, she has an accent. They could have understood me with a little effort, but they don't want to make any effort!

If I am in a good mood, I would just laugh at these evaluations. But this could be a source of depression. Language is the major source of hardship for me. I have to work harder than my peers. I am upset that I am still criticized after I made a great effort, whereas some of my colleagues don't even prepare before their lectures. You are fighting a battle that you can't ever win. Like my niece and nephew, when they speak out in the class,

everyone looks at them carefully, questioning in their mind if they can speak English. Even if you could speak perfect English, they still feel it different, for they look at you differently. You are socially handicapped.

I met my husband Mark in the chemistry department here. We are both physical chemists. At that time, I was thirty-one years old and thought I could never get married. When my mother found out about our relationship (she lived with me), she could not be happier. She did not mind the racial difference, as long as this man is nice. Mark is a very nice person. He came from a farmer's family. Unlike my mother, his parents didn't have any knowledge of foreign cultures, but they were all very nice. Mark introduced me to his family and relatives. We got married in 1971 when I was thirty-three, and he was thirty-one. We didn't have a ceremony. We thought we were old, so we didn't want to tell friends and relatives about our marriage.

I am very happy about my marriage. I became a U.S. citizen in 1973, two years after we got married. I never judge people based on racial background. If you work with somebody, then you might develop a relationship with him, which is what happened to us. My husband appreciates Oriental culture. He has a great knowledge of Chinese history and geography. He made the whole transition a smooth one. I have no problems adjusting to a white American man, for I am totally Americanized, but I feel that I understand him better than he understands me. I have been a foreigner among natives—he has never been in the same situation. The first five years of my marriage were very difficult. There were all kinds of adjustments with work and family. Then both of us felt we should not have children.

I like American men. They would make better husbands and fathers than Oriental men. They are capable and hard workers. My husband can almost do everything, physically and mentally. He can fix everything. He knows almost everything. Sometimes I feel sorry for my husband; he is working all the time, doing all kinds of thing for other people. He never refuses other people's requests.

I am very Americanized. When my brother came, I had to learn to adjust to him. But my judgment and sense of value are still Chinese. I have a Chinese attitude. I am proud of my Chinese culture. I would be upset if somebody thinks I am Japanese. I think I am very fortunate to be Chinese. I think Chinese culture is still at the top of world civilization, except for classical music and science, which are pretty Western-oriented. I like Chinese culture, but I also appreciate Western classical music and science.

I appreciate some American characteristics: generosity and encouragement to speak out. On the other hand, I consider superficial values to be a bad feature of American life. For example, in political campaigns, people's judgments are sometimes very superficial. I am very interested in American mainstream politics. I have voted every year. I sympathize with the two cultures.

Even though I am Americanized, I don't feel I fit into American society. I don't think I fit into the professional situation in a deep sense. Superficially, I fit.

I don't fit into China either. I can talk to my husband about my feelings, but he is not my entire world. I have to face students, my job, and other problems. When I faced age problems, I was also unhappy about my teaching. Students demanded that exams be easier and easier. The national education level is dropping. At this time, I sometimes feel as if I have no spiritual and moral support system.

181.159 Excerpt from **The Middle Heart: A Novel**\fn{by Bette Bao Lord (1938-)} Shanghai, China (F) 12

Stone Guardian's footsteps sounded beneath her window like the clapper of a blind fortuneteller. Was he still hoping that she would change her mind, lose heart, not go through with it?

Foolish man! Jade lingered in bed, toying with the bracelets that always circled her wrists, taking pleasure in the smoothness of her arms, as white and cool as the Yongle vase her husband caressed when he replaced the flowers each morning before the portrait of his first wife.

Why could he never see beyond the pockmarks on her face? Ten years under the same roof and still he failed to appreciate her many virtues. Only a dreamer with eyes fixed on top of his head would have expected beauty as well as a handsome dowry. Anyone else would have thanked the gods for a match so dispassionately arranged, so equitable. Had her skin been unblemished, she would never have become a room-filler for any widower, much less a bankrupt one with an insolent son. She would have been the mistress of a great clan, not this sorry House whose land had been pawned like articles of clothing until only a few tattered courts in provincial Wen Shui remained. She would have been the …

Ai ya! What was she doing, indulging in fantasies? That was his failing, not hers.

Impatiently she threw off the quilt and crossed the bare floor to perform the ritual that had begun each of her days since the illness left her forever scarred. Seated at the dressing table, she poured hot water from the thermos

bottle into the shallow bowl, soaked the silk handkerchief and placed it steaming upon her face. Three times she did this and then, while her skin was still warm, she covered it with an expensive paste made of secret ingredients but smelling of honey.

Only when this had been accomplished did she look into the mirror. Carefully she applied the rice powder and rouge, then lacquered her hair into a bun, hiding her forehead with long bangs. Now strangers at a distance would see a face that, if not pretty, was unblemished.

Satisfied at last, she unlocked the sandalwood trunk at the foot of her bed and took from it the pillow stuffed with scarves. She grimaced. Even now, with only days remaining before she would be done with the deception, she resisted. Her figure was slender as a reed and moved as gracefully. What a shame to spoil it! But the disguise was critical and, holding the pillow to her waist, she reached into the chest again for the long sash and wound it around her body as tightly as her *amah* had wound the bindings that, when she was a child of seven, had shaped her feet into golden lilies. Once the ends were tucked away, no movement could work them loose.

There was no pleasure in choosing among the cotton gowns borrowed from her portly sister-in-law, so once the pillow was in place Jade dressed quickly, then proceeded to the altar in the far corner of the room. She lit a stick of incense and placed it in the censer before the porcelain image of the Goddess of Mercy. Head bowed, she sank to her knees and prayed.

"O merciful Kwan Yin, let the child be a boy. For without a son, how can I hope to fulfill my responsibilities to the House of Li? How can I be worthy?"

More importantly, how could she ever hope to hold her head high? When she first came to the House of Li, the studied slights of the women had been endurable. After all, every new bride was put on trial in her husband's home, especially one who, like herself, had had to kowtow at her wedding to a portrait of his first wife. Even now Jade could see the dead woman's wretched *amah* weeping as she prepared the bridal chamber, as if the newcomer had murdered her former mistress.

All this she had accepted with resolute pragmatism, a trait inherited from her father, the shrewdest of merchants. But after ten years, the arrogant Li women still set the tradesman's daughter apart, and no matter how long she continued to live among them or how much of her father's money they spent, without a son she could never expect more than polite disdain from her social superiors.

"O Kwan Yin," she cried, "give me a son and I vow to make him a leader of men, so that he may in turn honor you!"

She kowtowed nine times, then waited a decent interval before rising to her feet to unlatch the shutters and let in the revealing light.

*

A week later, Stone Guardian shared a rickshaw with his wife, as the coolie, cursing the noisy mobs that forced him to detour down one street, then another, trudged from their hotel toward the hospital. For once he regretted his economies. If only he had hired a second rickshaw he would at least be free of the cloying smell of honey that soured the air when Jade was about.

He fixed his gaze upon a tall girl with bobbed hair who stood on a makeshift platform, gesturing like a soldier as she shouted into a megaphone.

"China, awake!" she cried. And hundreds of boys and girls—the entire student body of every middle school in Shanghai, it seemed—roared in response:

"China, awake!"

Fools, he thought, you have as much chance of prevailing over the imperialists as I have of prevailing over this malevolent wife of mine. Nothing can save us. We are too poor. We are too weak. Foreigners shackle our country just as Jade shackles the Patriarch of the House of Li. There is no way out, not for China, not for me.

At the hospital, Jade hurried to the nursery, leaving him free to slip inside the girl's room. It was actually quite small, but the whitewashed walls and tiled floors, uncluttered except for the single iron bed, lent a spaciousness that belied its dimensions.

Amber Willows did not stir. How young she looks, he thought. Younger than her seventeen years. Her hair, the color of ink, was loose and trailed across the white sheets like the finishing stroke in the word "eternity." He leaned toward her, then resisted the temptation to caress her cheek.

Somewhere, in another room, a baby began to cry. The girl's eyes opened.

"Is that my … baby crying?" she whispered.

"Don't excite yourself. Rest, rest." For a brief moment he thought her trembling hands were reaching out for him, but before he could clasp them they dropped as from their own weight, and he heard her ask,

"Where is my baby? Where is—"

"The baby is with Jade."

The lights in Amber Willows' eyes faded. He bent to kiss the furrowss from her brow, but again drew back. Why didn't she shed tears1ike other women? Tears could be wiped away, but not that opaque look, without will, without want. He had noticed it the night they met at the House of Midnight Scholars, when he had paid generously to be her first; and later, in the west chamber, when he had been in no hurry to see her disrobe, content merely to feel the smoothness of her face; and again when he had paid the proprietress still more to reserve Amber Willows for him alone. In time the lights had returned to her eyes, as she learned that he, too, was caught in heaven's web, that he meant her no harm, that he needed someone as helpless as she to love.

Suddenly, like an overwound toy, Jade spun into the room, trilling,

"My son is beautiful, so beautiful! His eyes are bright as lanterns and his skin is smooth, unblemished as the tenderest bean curd." Turning his back to her, Stone Guardian mumbled under his breath,

"That's not what the nurses say." Jade made a dismissive gesture.

"Oh, if you mean the birthmark—it's beautiful too. A tiny kingfisher next to a well, which is his navel—a sign of good luck if ever there was one. Why, I've already sent word to my father to have kingfisher jewelry made for me. And all my new dresses will …"

Sickened by the thought of seeing kingfishers and smelling honey every day for the rest of his life, Stone Guardian wanted to spit, but knew nothing would come of it. His mouth was dirt dry.

Now Jade commanded him and Amber Willows to attention, to look her way. He counted to ten, but when at last he obeyed she proceeded merely to lick a finger, then used it to smooth her long bangs again and again, until every strand was arranged to her satisfaction. Finally, she cleared her throat and addressed them.

"Many months ago …"

Not again, he thought. He could anticipate every word, every gesture, and indeed, the wretched woman was now shutting her eyes and drawing a deep breath, as if to summon the courage to speak, even in passing, of the House where he had found solace in Amber Willows' arms. How could he have imagined then that the price for beauty would be so high?

"Had the child been a girl …"

Yes, yes, we know. Had the child been a girl, you, my dearest wife, would not have cared whether she was kept or killed, abandoned at the nearest baby tower or sold. His eyes were on Amber Willows, who stared at the ceiling as if momentarily it would give way. How could they live the future Jade had planned?

"But my prayers have been answered. The child is a boy, a healthy, beautiful boy, my son. And he will grow up to be an official. Yes, yes, an official as mighty as the Li ancestor you all claim forced the ouster of the chief eunuch in the Forbidden City. Then we'll see how those fine, upstanding relatives of yours will grovel. Meanwhile …"

Meanwhile, Stone Guardian thought, Amber Willows and I will be trapped in a nightmare beyond the powers of the young to imagine and the old to endure, a nightmare that is your dream. Pointing to Amber Willows, Jade declared,

"You will be wet nurse to my baby, and to show how generous I am to those who vow loyalty to their mistress, you may bring along that crippled brother of yours to live off me as well."

So Jade had decided to take the brother hostage too. Her father's daughter, she would leave nothing to chance. Pointing to him, she declared,

"And you, my husband, will be a loving father to our son."

"What do I want with him? I already have an heir," he retorted, then added, mimicking her, "A healthy, beautiful boy."

For a moment, Jade didn't look so smug, and he took satisfaction in having given her pause. It did not last. Changing the subject, she commanded their silence. Forever. She needn't worry, he thought. He would die before revealing his shameful, unconditional surrender.

"With Amber Willows registered under my name, our secret will go with us to the grave." She paused dramatically, then flashed a smile that cracked the makeup on her face.

"You see, I've thought of everything."

Everything except … what did the pockmarked bitch know of a man's hunger for beauty? The torment of having it near and not possessing it? Far better to lose Amber Willows as he had lost his proper wife than be forced to bury her anew, day after day, in his heart. He walked to the window. There was no view. A wall. With his back to them, he said,

“My wife, as you know all too well, I had no choice but to agree to this grotesque charade. My debts are many. My means are gone. But why must you keep her around? Wet nurses are plentiful, servants too. Take the baby, but let her go.”

“No … no, please.” Amber Willows struggled to push herself upright.

“Master—please, Master, I want to wait on her. I want to. I must be with my … the boy.”

Her voice was no stronger than the rustle of fallen leaves, but her words killed his spirit as surely as if they had been the sword of heaven and this the appointed hour.

*

On the day of the Grasping Ceremony, when a child’s fate was foretold, Amber Willows tied the tuft of hair that had been left on the baby’s shaven head with red silk, as tradition demanded, and stepped back to admire him. His vest of red brocade was embroidered with lambs in token of the Year of the Sheep, 1919, the year of his mother’s suffering. His pants were as green as the trees had been on the fourth of May, when he was born. It was a suit befitting the son of an emperor.

She felt a surge of pride so intense that tears leapt to her eyes. One fell, and with it the weariness that had weighed upon her during weeks of embroidering by the light of a smoky lamp also fell away. She had selected threads as fine as'a single strand from the silkworm’s cocoon and a needle no thicker than a hair, so that the stitches might be as true as the weave in the brocade. And so they were.

Now, carrying her treasure, she walked gingerly around the rotten slats in the floor of the gallery and down the steps to the stone garden. There, despite the lateness of the hour, she paused at the great rock in its center that had been hauled four hundred years before from the bottom of Wuxi Lake and presented to the House, at the Emperor’s command, in honor of the extensive system of dikes the Lis had built. The rock was prized for evoking an endless variety of sculptures. Surely it would be a lamb today. And so it was.

She turned to go. Stone Guardian blocked her path, in his eyes the same yearning and anger she saw there whenever they happened upon each other alone. Lowering her gaze to the hem of his blue gown, which was stained with the mud of last week’s rain, she said,

“I beg your pardon, Master, but you must hurry and dress. The guests are arriving.”

“Guests?”

“In honor of our boy’s birthday.” She held out the baby to him. Stone Guardian glared at the child as he would a usurper.

“Not ours! *Her* boy. And I have no intention of playing host for her or hers on this or any other day.” She squeezed the baby tight, wringing out the courage to ask what she must, and yet knew she ouglit not, ask:

“How can a father’s heart not have room for his own son?”

Before he could respond, she slipped past him and hurried toward the moon-gate, and not until she was safe in the next court did she look back. Though he was nowhere to be seen, his shadow continued to trail her, as it always did, like an abandoned dog. She could hear it sighing, feel the cold wetness of its nose nudging her hand, see it circling before it settled down at the foot of her bed for the night. Even when she slept, the master pursued her, howling,

“Not ours! Hers! That boy is no son of mine!”

Near the main hall her six-year-old brother, Mountain Pine, drew himself up as straight as his lame leg would allow and waved. The baby, as usual, wanted to be carried by the boy who rocked as he walked, and squirmed like a giant carp caught in a net until she relented and handed him over.

Waiting for permission to enter, she marveled at the scene in the hall. Except for the dark hues worn by the four Li widows, who sat on chairs set against the walls, flanked by their personal servants, the *qipaos* of the assembled ladies were as colorful as a field of wildflowers. At the center of each cluster, a clanswoman hosted guests of her generation. The crimson rug, gift of a village saved from extinction by the courageous judgments of a Li patriarch in the Ming Dynasty, had been cleared of furniture. The scrolls, painted by admirers of the House in the Qing Dynasty and, with the rug, among the very few family heirlooms that remained unsold, dressed up the tired walls with lotus ponds, dragonflies and cherry blossoms.

Beside the altar of the ancestors stood a table bearing the tray upon which were displayed the toy implements of the noble professions. All this was for the boy. Her boy. Jade’s son.

*

Suddenly a chorus of delight erupted. Mountain Pine, holding the baby, had stepped into the room. At once, Jade snatched her son away to parade him from guest to guest, pretending humility while gushing over their gifts.

“You spoil us so. Such extravagance for this worthless nobody of mine.”

Not yours, mine, Amber Willows thought, and again tears came to her eyes. She shook her head, willing them away, but must have made some sound, for Mountain Pine squeezed her hand. She looked at his upturned face. It was flushed with the joy of anticipation. Ashamed, she scolded herself for vain yearnings. After all, what stars in one's heavenly chart could be recast? What lifelines could be redrawn?

As she made her way through the room, hearing the ladies talk of the striking resemblance between Jade and her son, as she offered them candies and nuts, sesame and almond cakes, an assortment of dried and fresh fruits, Amber Willows, the true mother, nodded and smiled.

At long last, Jade, still carrying the baby, took his tiny hand in hers to light the incense on the altar. Then, having executed three deep bows before the ancestral tablets, she minced on her golden lilies to the center of the room and, in a voice shrill with pride, ordered everyone to form a circle, as large as could be, around them. Finally, nodding to her son's wet nurse and to his young servant, she announced the start of the Grasping Ceremony.

Amber Willows fetched the tray of toy implements.

"Remember what we practiced yesterday," she whispered to her brother as together they walked to the center of the circle and bowed, first to Jade, then to the guests, who were cheerfully accusing one another of neglecting decorum while inching surreptitiously nearer for a better look. With a finger upon her lips, Jade shushed them. The giggling subsided.

Mountain Pine took the toy sword from the tray, held it aloft for all to see, then placed it on the rug. In unison the ladies chanted,

"Grasp the sword, this hour, this date, and a soldier's life will be your fate." Next came the hoe.

"Grasp the hoe, this hour, this date, and a farmer's life will be your fate." Then the hammer, the inkstone, the brush, until all the toys but one formed a small circle within that made by the ladies.

Only the official's seal remained on the tray. To this object and this object alone Jade had attached a red ribbon and silver bells, and when Mountain Pine took it in his hand, he waved it enticingly just beyond the baby's reach before setting it on the floor to complete the circle of toys.

"Grasp the seal, this hour, this date …"

Their part in the ceremony over, Amber Willows and her brother retreated through a gap in the circle of ladies to stand a discreet half-step behind them.

" … and an official's life will be your fate."

A hush fell over the room, and Amber Willows, sensed that even those who scoffed at such rituals were suddenly uncertain, wondering if destinies could somehow be fixed by trifles. Jade set the baby down on the rug, then hastened to the place in the outer circle closest to the seal and knelt.

"Come over here, come to Mother," she called. "Take the seal, my son. Take the seal."

But the baby remained where he was, blinking solemnly.

Jade made a clucking sound. He looked her way, then surveyed the faces smiling down at him. Jade pounded the floor. He made a move toward her, then changed his mind and sat back, tugging on his shoes.

Suddenly, he was scuttling across the floor. For a moment Amber Willows could only stand staring at the ring of toys. Nothing had been disturbed.

"Why didn't you stop him?"

"Why didn't you?"

"I never saw a mouse move as fast."

Merciful Kwan Yin, Amber Willows thought, what made my boy go to Mountain Pine?

Jade clapped her hands once. Quickly Amber Willows freed her brother's ankle from the baby's grasp and sent the boy fleeing from the room. Then she placed Jade's son once more in the center of the rug.

At last the baby grasped the seal. At last all was well.

*

On an unseasonably warm day, when the sun bleached the skies, a playful wind off the Yangzi River lured Steel Hope to its banks. He sat with his servant on the top of a crumbling levee that was part of the elaborate network of dikes built by his ancestors centuries before—the reason their hometown had been named Wen Shui, Civilized Waters. Once the levee had held back floods; now it was merely his favorite lookout. He shut his eyes, trying to picture the grandeur of the dikes when new, but all he could see was the ebony coffin that last year's angry floodwaters had gouged from the earth somewhere upstream and flung into the top of a drowned mulberry tree. It had stayed there for weeks, while the survivors keened for the millions lost, their voices piercing the heavens. Their robes of coarse white hemp had transformed the landscape into an endless, ashen shroud.

He shook the memory away. Sad thoughts, always unwelcome, were especially so on this unexpected holiday, and once more he tried coaxing Mountain Pine into a game. It was useless. When reading, as now, the servant could sit longer than a chair. Ignored again, Steel Hope was about to snatch the book away when he was distracted by the music of the pigeons flying overhead.

They were his, a gift from Amber Willows, who, with her dexterous fingers, had tied the reed whistles to their tails. As the birds swooped toward the river the sound of the flutes grew deeper; as they rose into the heavens the pitch rose too. He filled his lungs and thought how good it was to be idling in the sun. Indeed, anything was better than being imprisoned in that dingy schoolroom and stuffed like a duck with ancient homilies.

He nudged Mountain Pine.

"Hey, how long to repair the school roof?"

Mountain Pine straightened his glasses, but otherwise seemed not to hear. On his lips was that smile of indomitable serenity he always wore when reading.

"A week? A month? A year?"

Still that Buddha smile. Always that Buddha smile. *Ai ya*! It had been the same for six years, ever since his mother made Mountain Pine his bookmate. Steel Hope would rather have endured the canings his father administered for poor grades and misdeeds than be tied to the scrawny scholar every minute of the day.

Not that he couldn't get free. Flying Feet, though five years younger, against Shriveled Leg, though a head taller, was no contest. But that was the trouble—no contest. Besides, the one time Steel Hope had yielded to temptation and escaped, Jade had had Mountain Pine caned.

Was the second son of the Patriarch of the House of Li the kind of warrior who would send a cripple to do battle in his stead? The answer was obvious. It was just his bad luck that his mother knew it too!

Sighing, he watched the smoke from a decrepit steamship paint the wind black. Its transit revealed another vessel, a patrol boat flying the Japanese flag. The very sight of the white and red banner infuriated him. It mocked the greatness of his country and his clan. It made him feel small. It reminded him of his father, who, as a young official at the time of China's humiliating defeat in the war of 1895, had had to preside over ceremony after ceremony at which the Imperial Flag was lowered to yield to the Rising Sun. If not for that unutterable degradation, he thought, Stone Guardian would still be the admirable man everyone said he had been up to that time, and not the failed Patriarch and heartless father Steel Hope knew. If not for that, Stone Guardian would care for his second son.

To stop the tears from flowing, Steel Hope flopped onto his stomach and took aim.

"Bang, bang, bang!" That was for seizing China's lands.

"Pow, pow!" That was for stealing China's wealth.

"Bang, bang!"

He leaped up and scrambled from one imaginary machine gun to another, firing round after round. Finally, the last Japanese vessel left afloat, a passenger ship tied up at the dock, took blasts until the hull was riddled with holes and it sank. The hero, gasping for breath, collapsed beside Mountain Pine.

"Hey, I could've used some help," he said when he could speak again. He expected no reply, but this time his bookmate surprised him.

*

"Look at that! Over there!" Mountain Pine pointed toward the quay. Steel Hope shot upright, but saw nothing unusual.

"Look at what?"

"That boy. There he goes again."

Now Steel Hope saw him, an urchin darting stealthily among the half-naked coolies hawking rickshaw rides, the peddlers of souvenirs, the beggars scrambling for coppers tossed by foreigners. He seemed to be moving in on a very fat man who was bowing like a piston to the puny Japanese captain standing at the head of the passenger ship's gangplank.

Steel Hope blinked. Yes! So much flesh could only belong to Watermelon Wu, their land-grabbing neighbor, who prospered by being as cozy as lips to teeth with the imperialists.

As Wu turned to face shore, the sly one darted forth again. Quick as an adder he stuck a paper with a big black X drawn on it to the fat man's back, then as quickly vanished.

Not until the bystanders began laughing and pointing at him did Wu realize he'd been marked. Even Mountain Pine laughed, as the traitor, twisting and thrusting like a pregnant sow, tried to snatch the sign from his back but succeeded only in losing his Panama hat.

“I’m going after that boy,” Steel Hope said, and raced toward the quay, keeping an eye on the pair of grimy feet he could just see behind the line of rickshaws. As he rounded the last sedan he executed a combination of Swooping Scissors and Throttle the Tiger and pounced.

“Friend!” he whispered, to avoid giving the wrong impression.

The boy wasn’t convinced. So violently did he kick and punch that Steel Hope was forced to tighten his grip.

“Keep still,” he hissed. The boy made a strangling sound.

“Stop that!”

It was Mountain Pine.

Steel Hope let go. The boy keeled over in a heap.

“You must forgive my young master,” Mountain Pine said courteously, helping him up. “I’m Mountain Pine. He is Steel Hope. What’s your name?”

“Firecrackers.”

Steel Hope had never heard of such a name and started to laugh, but thought better of it when confronted by a pair of fierce black eyes.

“Hate toadies, do you?” he said instead.

“Only a traitor wouldn’t!” Steel Hope nodded appreciatively.

“How’d you get the paper to stick?”

“Cockleburs.”

“Cockleburs?”

“Cockleburs,” repeated Firecrackers, grinning, and without further conversation the guttersnipe, the lame servant, and the young master of a noble house strolled off together toward the broken levee, where they sat dangling their feet above the water. Steel Hope removed his shoes. and socks and regretted the cleanness of his toes.

“I'm the second son of the Patriarch of the House of Li,” he announced. Firecrackers’ mouth fell open.

“The famous House of Li?”

“None other.” Scratching his armpits, Firecrackers assessed this information, then said,

“Got anything to eat?”

Steel Hope shook his head. Firecrackers pointed.

“What’s that in your pocket?”

“That’s not for eating,” said Steel Hope, showing him the old rice, which he had kneaded into a compact ball. “It’s what I feed the goldfish.”

“I’ve got goldfish too,” Firecrackers declared. “Big ones.”

Before the young master could let out an incredulous hoot, Mountain Pine had snatched the rice ball from his hand and given it to the braggart.

“Try feeding them some of this,” he said.

The boy pocketed the rice. Steel Hope shook his head. His book mate might know lots of things, but clearly he knew nothing about boys like this one.

“Show me your fish,” he demanded. “Where do you live?”

“On a boat, a *yaolu*.” He was impressed.

“Take us there.”

“I can’t. I mean, I would, but … it’s not here, it’s gone downriver.”

Steel Hope rolled his eyes heavenward, but noting that fierce look again, he decided against calling Firecrackers a liar and wracked his brains for a more congenial subject.

“Like games?” he asked finally.

“Who doesn’t?”

“*He* doesn’t!” Steel Hope, scratching a sudden itch, nodded toward his bookmate. Firecrackers asked,

“Like races?”

“Sure. I always win.”

“You do not.”

“Yes, I do.” Louder and louder they each insisted until Firecrackers poked the young master in the ribs and said,

“Prove it. Last one across the river is a turtle’s egg.”

Steel Hope gulped. It was not yet spring and, despite the sun, the river, which was lis and lis wide and only the gods knew how deep, would freeze his nuts off. More to the point, he couldn’t swim. But then … neither could

Mountain Pine. Cupping Firecrackers' ear, the young master sadly imparted this most unfortunate fact and, without thinking, added that ever-handy excuse,

"He's got one long leg and one that's short, you see."

Halfway through the sentence, Steel Hope realized how feeble an excuse this was and how quickly he must come up with something else or be laughed at. By the time he finished the sentence, Merciful Kwan Yin had told him exactly what to do. Before Firecrackers could react, he was off, shouting,

"Come on or forfeit the contest!"

The others had no choice but to follow. At a deserted spot along the shore, where fish nets were drying, he drew a straight line in the dirt, then paced its length and, with mathematical precision, determined its midpoint. Straddling it, he bent down and traced his feet. Next, at each end of the line he drew two more pairs of feet. By now Firecrackers and Mountain Pine were looking at each other for a clue. Steel Hope marched to the center position, cleared his throat, and commanded his companions to take their places. Mountain Pine, sighing wearily, took the spot nearest him and asked,

"What next?"

Steel Hope wouldn't be rushed. He stretched, rolled his head, rippled his muscles, shook out his legs, and cleared. his throat again, but just as he was about to speak, Firecrackers, who had taken his assigned place but had been watching this performance suspiciously, shouted,

"You've got to make it fair." Steel Hope was insulted.

"I'm no cheat," he said. Then, to reinstate the proper mood, he repeated his entire warm-up before proclaiming,

"For this competition Mountain Pine's leg being short an inch or so doesn't matter. Neither does your being small and skinny or me being strong and fast. But before we can begin …" He paused.

"Get ready …" He untied his trousers.

"Get set …" He dropped them.

"For a pissing contest!"

Suddenly, there was laughter. Steel Hope turned. Mountain Pine was doubled over, pointing to the pair of feet traced in the dirt where, a moment before, Firecrackers had stood.

"Where did he go?" Steel Hope asked. The servant shook his head, still laughing.

"Who knows? Maybe I'm not the only one who's short an inch!"

*

On the day of Pure Brightness, when willows are in bud and clans gather to unite past and posterity, the members of the House of Li knelt among the family graves to perform the ancient rites. Solemnly the Patriarch, Stone Guardian, intoned the words that since the Ming Dynasty had been said in this place on the third day of the third month of the lunar calendar:

"O Spirits of our Noble Ancestors, we, your children, have traveled from near and far to attend your needs in the afterlife, to venerate your memory, to enshrine forever your legacy of honor and attainments in our hearts. We who still dwell in the earthly realm beseech you who abide in the netherworld to intercede on our behalf …"

Barely listening, Steel Hope examined his palms. The red welts were still there. Spirits, he cried silently, why don't you ever intercede for me? You must know that Father punishes me for no reason at all. The splotches of ink on the cuffs of his new silk jacket accused him, however, and he hastened to hide them from view. Well, maybe there had been a reason for the punishment this time. But the spirits might at least have alerted the Patriarch when the promised five strokes had been delivered.

O Spirits, he prayed, soften Father's heart and I will be as obedient as Mountain Pine. And should you have time left over, please, please stop Mother from devoting every moment to making an official of me. Jade had feigned illness to avoid seeing her husband make a spectacle of himself at his first wife's grave, but even in her absence her son could hear her voice,

"Now, now, don't disappoint me," she clucked, at least once a week. "You know that I live only for the day when the splendor of your achievements will lend a glow to my dark existence."

And I live only for the day when you stop nagging me.

Suddenly there was a silence. Had others heard her voice and his unfilial thoughts? Steel Hope's eyes swept the scene. All heads were solemnly bowed, even those of his four grandaunts, who always whispered among themselves. He could never imagine what these women, cloistered together since widowhood, had to say to each other that they hadn't said a thousand times before. Nearby were the shy maiden cousins, who lived in the innermost courts but whom he wouldn't recognize if one ever let go of the other's hand.

His gaze settled on his brother, Grand Hope, whose Western suit, spats and Panama hat marked the twenty-four-year-old as a sophisticate from the Foreign Concessions. Truly, Steel Hope didn't mind half as much as Jade that Grand Hope gambled, dropped foreign words that no other Li understood into every conversation and boasted of his success in the Shanghai Stock Market—or even that Stone Guardian never mentioned the countless times the clan had had to pay his elder son's debts but now recalled at least once a day the one time, about three weeks ago, when Grand Hope had paid the clan back. Since all fathers traditionally indulged their firstborn, such partiality was bearable. But the way Stone Guardian, who loathed the Japanese, pretended ignorance of Grand Hope's blatant admiration of Japanese power, efficiency and modernity—even of his visit to Tokyo without permission last year—did rile him.

And why should it be that Grand Hope, who never cared whether he pleased their father, could make him laugh? On Steel Hope, the Patriarch wouldn't spend a smile.

"… In victory, our ancestors were magnanimous. Never did they strip any man of face, least of all those who were vanquished. And so must we do the same. Remember our ancestor who not only spared the surviving son of his bitterest enemy, but provided funds throughout his life for his welfare. In defeat, our ancestors upheld honor. And so must we do the same. Remember our ancestor who, having lost favor in court, trekked ten thousand *li* into exile rather than disavow the words he had written …"

When he was younger Steel Hope had loved hearing about these heroic ancestors, but lately he'd found himself comparing the great deeds his ancestors had performed for the Empire with the empty words his clansmen mouthed every day. Once the Lis had been renowned for sacrificing themselves to save the lives of strangers; now they seldom bothered to be kind even to one another. Hardly an hour went by when his parents didn't quarrel.

"… Thus we who bear the honored name of Li shall never forget what the great sage taught us, that civilization began with filial piety …"

After Stone Guardian had led the nine kowtows before the monument, the collective ceremony was over, and the clansmen scattered to honor those who had ridden the stork. They ranged leisurely over the hillside, placing upon the graves of their most direct ancestors willow branches to ward off evil spirits and bowls of fruit, plates of cold food and cups of wine to feed both the living and the dead. Steel Hope trailed behind his brother.

Halfway down the hill, they stopped at the grave of the first wife of the Patriarch, where Stone Guardian was already on his knees, weeding the mound. Suddenly Steel Hope felt as if he were intruding, as if he had happened upon an intimacy, a tenderness, not meant for him to see. The weeds his father pulled were not weeds, but stray threads from the gown of a beloved.

*

As his brother knelt alongside Stone Guardian, Steel Hope backed away. He drifted, hesitantly at first. Then, like a boulder loosened by seasons of rain and snow, he hurtled down the hill, racing headlong until finally the land met a stream, and the thought of muddying the hem of his new gown stopped him. For a few minutes he looked for a crossing. Then, ashamed of thinking like an old woman, he jumped into the slime at the water's edge.

He shaded his eyes and looked about for a companion, but on the Day of Pure Brightness no one worked the fields. He listened, but heard only the wind. Masking his disappointment, he shrugged and proceeded to shadowbox down the path until the gravekeeper's hut came into view. Perhaps he was at home and wished for company, though from a distance the hut looked deserted. Close up, it was positively derelict, with large cracks patched with straw in walls that would have collapsed long ago but for crutches made of bamboo. Had it always been this way? Only the rags and bones drying on mats strewn about the yard and the row of scallions planted by the doorway, surprisingly beautiful amidst the squalor, affirmed that someone did live here.

The door was ajar, and he called into the darkness within.

"Wei? Wei?" No one answered.

He tried again. Again there was no response, and he was turning away when he thought he heard a faint coughing.

"Is … anybody home?"

He could see nothing. Was the house inhabited by ghosts?

"I'm from the House of Li …"

Yes, there was coughing. It sounded human enough, and seemed to come from a far corner of the room. Still, Steel Hope hesitated. The place had a sour smell. Mountain Pine, who had memorized all the maxims all the sages ever uttered, said that men were more fearsome than ghosts. What if the gravekeeper was drunk? What if, disturbed, he flew into a murderous rage?

Finally his eyes became accustomed to the gloom, and he saw two cots against the back wall of the room, one

empty, the other heaped with straw and—there was an arm attached to—what? Was a corpse buried in that mound of hay? The arm twitched. He flinched and edged back. He was almost out the door when the coughing started again, a dry lacking that sent bits of straw floating to the ground.

He stopped in his tracks. What if the gravekeeper was deathly ill? Mountain Pine also said that within the four seas, all men are brothers. Surely the coughing man could use a brother now. Besides, it would be cowardly to leave him, and no Li was a coward.

Breathing through his mouth, Steel Hope stood tall and boldly approached the cot. There he discerned, almost buried in the straw, a face greasy with sweat, a man too weak to be dangerous.

"Are … are you all right?" he asked. The man gulped for air like a fish on shore.

"Wa …" Steel Hope leaned closer.

"Water …"

He nodded and searched the room, at last finding a cup in a niche bove the stove. But when he peered into it he found it filled with ockleburs. What would anyone want with those? he wondered.

Then, suddenly, he knew, and pursed his lips slightly to draw out a big, slow mile.

He'd been right. That liar Firecrackers didn't live on a *yaolu*. He lved in this very hut, and the gravekeeper must be his father. No, from the look of him, grandfather.

"Water …"

He snatched a jug and ran to the stream, scooped up some water and raced back. The gravekeeper swallowed with difficulty.

"More?"

When there was no reply, Steel Hope decided the man was hungry and began searching for food in the jars and baskets scattered about the room. Finding nothing except some dried beans and uncooked rice, he regretted not having stuffed his sleeves with his share of the feast before leaving the ceremony. By now, all that remained uneaten would belong to the ancestors. Still … the food would just be sitting there—and no Li, as far as he knew, had ever gone hungry.

"I'm going but I'm coming back," he said, and sprinted off, out the door and up the hill to the graveyard, where his clansmen, living and dead, having enjoyed their annual picnic together, were now gathered around the Patriarch, who had begun recounting the tale of the ancestor who designed the dikes.

From behind a tree, Steel Hope waited for the right moment. Finally, as Stone Guardian approached the climax of the story, he saw his chance and tiptoed to the grave of Great-Grandfather.

"Noble Ancestor," he prayed, "don't be angry. One offering among so many means nothing to you, but it will make all the difference to a starving man."

Then, glancing about to make sure he was still unobserved, he snatched a dumpling. Nothing untoward happened. Perhaps Great-Grandfather didn't disapprove—after all, hadn't he extended credit to his tenants for seedlings and then destroyed the notes when there was a drought? Keeping a wary eye on his kinsmen, Steel Hope slipped from one ancestral mound to another, snatching bits of food. Finally, sleeves full, he scrambled back down the hill and burst into the hut.

The gravekeeper was in a deep sleep. He cursed. A benefactor should be hailed with praise, not snores. There was nothing to do but leave the food and rejoin the clan.

*

He was setting the last of the cakes on the brick stove when suddenly the hairs on the back of his neck bristled. Someone else was in the room. He froze. For robbing the ancestral graves, his father would chop off his hand. He saw his inky fingers twitching in a pool of blood, the jagged stump …

"What … are you doing here?"

The voice sounded nothing like Stone Guardian's. It belonged to someone much younger. Bravely Steel Hope swung about.

Firecrackers stood in the doorway.

When the boy repeated the question, but with even less authority, Steel Hope's eyes narrowed.

"I could ask you the same question, but you'd just tell me more lies. Besides"—he paused, then announced triumphantly—"I know."

Firecrackers shot a fearful glance at the sleeping gravekeeper and turned as pale as a bone. Was whatever ailed the old man catching? Steel Hope took a half-step toward the door, then thought better of it and fixed his gaze on the tabletop, with its splinters and pits. If only Mountain Pine were here.

"Please don't tell," Firecrackers begged. "No one must know that the gravekeeper is sick and a girl is doing his

job. We have nowhere to go. Swear, Steel Hope. Swear, no matter what, that you won't tell."

Who was Firecrackers talking about?

"What girl?"

"Me." He burst out laughing. When he'd caught his breath, he thumped his chest and shouted,

"I'm no dummy. I know the difference between a girl and a boy. Why do you tell such ridiculous lies?"

"But … but you said you knew. You mean father didn't—"

Fireracker stopped short.

Suddenly Steel Hope recalled the pissing contest. Suddenly he couldn't close his mouth or make a sound, or stop the blood that must have colored his face like a repulsive rash. He bolted toward the door. Firecrackers blocked the way. They wrestled fiercely, and for a long time, because Steel Hope, though far stronger, couldn't bring himself to punch a girl, even a girl who looked and fought and smelled like a boy. In the end, he pinned her down. When he saw her tears, he let go.

"I didn't mean to twist your neck so hard. Are you all right?"

"Yes, Young Master," she said, and he stood and once more started for the door. Firecrackers grabbed the hem of his gown.

"Please, Young Master," she begged. "You've got to stay and hear me out. No lies, I swear. The truth. Please, Young Master, please?"

Mulling it over, he found his curiosity was stronger than his embarassment. She seemed so desperate. What did she have to tell him?

"Make it quick," he said.

She began to brush the dirt from his clothes and he retreated from her touch. Since he'd turned twelve, the year before, not even Amber Willows had been allowed to fuss over him.

"Not here," he said. "Outside." Outside, she couldn't block the way when he decided to leave.

Sitting by the scallions as far from the door and the girl as he could fet and still be within earshot, without making a move or saying a word, or even looking at her, he listened.

*

"My father wasn't always a gravekeeper," she said. "Before the spells came on him, he was an agent boater with a *yaolu* of his own. He was strong then. He could push and pull the long oar all day, every day, going from town to town, from village to village. He could call every customer by name. He knew every order by heart, no matter how large or how small—what color, what size, what grade—everything. He could locate the right basket or jug or bag faster than the owners themselves.

"Customers trusted him. The shopkeepers who paid him to sell their specialties in the villages did too. Happy faces greeted us everywhere.

"Now, even beggars spit on him. Who wants a gravekeeper around? If only I'd never been born. If only I wasn't cursed—"

She stopped. How could she tell this boy of the happy times, of the day when her mischievous brother, proclaiming he was a spirit sent from the deep to capture wicked little girls, and wailing like a ghost, had crept up on her, coming closer, closer, until her mother, laughing affectionately, lifted the corner of the oilcloth she was mending to envelop her frightened daughter in the safety of its folds? How could she tell him of the disaster that had ruined their lives and was all her fault? How could she? But Steel Hope had drawn nearer to her.

"Please, go on," he said softly. "Don't be afraid to tell me."

She only glanced at him, but even so she saw so much caring in his eyes that she felt safe. And she did tell, choked with tears, speaking in fits and starts, like someone desperately trying to piece together a shattered mirror by seizing a shard here, a shard there.

Steel Hope, listening, was afraid for her. He didn't dare interrupt. Fixing his attention on every utterance, he managed to discern the essentials, but even then, he wondered if the events so real to her had happened at all.

*

Her mother had given birth to twins. First, a healthy boy child. Then, a stillborn girl child. There was nothing to be done, so the agent boater lowered the dead baby over the side. But as the body slipped into the water, suddenly there were cries, cries as loud as firecrackers. The girl lived.

Growing up, Firecrackers wanted to be just like her twin, to be as audacious and fearless and carefree as he, to do all the things he did, but of course, being a girl, she couldn't. While he climbed, swam and fished, she washed, cooked and mended. While he roamed as he pleased in towns and villages, she had to remain on the *yaolu*, waiting to hear about his adventures.

Someday he would be an agent boater like their father. Someday she would have to leave them to join her husband's family. How she envied him.

One afternoon, when her parents were busy settling accounts, she followed her brother into town. With so much to see, she kept bumping into people. Most of them just kept on walking. A few cursed. She was too happy to mind. There was much to buy, and she had only a few coins left from her New Year's red envelope. Keeping her brother in sight, she hurried along the street trying to choose, and finally decided on an orange.

A motorcar passed. It was green and shiny, and she turned to watch it, walking backwards. Again she bumped into someone. The man's Panama hat went flying and the half-eaten orange in her hand was mashed against his white suit. Though she immediately brushed off the seeds and tried to wipe away the stain, her efforts only made matters worse. He shoved her away. His friends shouted angrily, but she didn't understand a word. When she stooped to pick up the uneaten sections of her orange, he kicked her.

She let out a howl.

Her brother rushed to her aid. The man struck him. Another hit him with an umbrella. He stumbled backwards and fell. His head hit a rock.

The man and his friends disappeared. Bystanders crowded around, all talking at once.

"Japs."

"What can you do?"

"To Brown Dwarfs, a dead Chinese means less than a dung fly."

Firecrackers watched with horror as her parents mourned—her father as wooden as a plank, her mother at first wailing, then keeping silent and refusing to eat. That neither ever questioned her presence at the scene made her wish even more that she could trade places with her brother. With each passing day she became increasingly certain that the gods had never meant her to survive her birth. They would continue to enact retribution until the heavenly accounts were settled.

One morning her mother, now bedridden, awoke and thought her daughter was her son. When Firecrackers instinctively answered to her brother's name, the grieving woman smiled and, for the first time since the tragedy, ate some noodles.

That day Firecrackers cut her hair, put on boys' clothing, and became her twin brother. Thus she might please her mother and, more importantly, fool the gods.

Now and then her mother would sense that something was wrong and test her.

"Climb the mast, son," she would say. So Firecrackers climbed.

"Go for a swim, son," she would say. "Fish would be nice." So Firecrackers swam and fished. Then, on the night of the Mid-Autumn Festival, when they were about to eat the mooncakes, her mother suddenly asked,

"Where's Firecrackers? How can we celebrate the bond of all bonds when one of us is missing? I must go after her."

She left the table, calling her daughter's name. Her father waited for Firecrackers to do something, but she couldn't think what. No matter who she was, her twin or herself, they were only three. She didn't hear the splash, or see her mother again.

Thereafter the agent boater succumbed to spells that came and went without warning; he lost his route and, to pay his debts, the *yaolu* was sold. Before long they had no roof and little to eat. Then one day, not long before the New Year, while making the rounds from servant gate to servant gate begging for leftovers, they happened upon the House of Li. When the second cook recognized the agent boater who had serviced him so honestly and diligently, he took pity and, knowing that his relative was retiring as grave keeper, offered the mistress another to take his place. The mistress agreed …

*

There was a long silence. Now Firecrackers' eyes were dry, and it was Steel Hope who blinked away tears. He ached for her and the family she had lost. He ached for the family he had never had. While the difference between their lives was as great as the difference between a boy and a girl, somehow the hollow they shared was real. Finally he asked,

"But why do you go on with the masquerade?"

"Don't you understand?" she cried. "Father stands for hours just moving the broom back and forth over the same spot. So when he's asleep I pretend I'm as fearless as my brother and tend the graves. If the House of Li ever knew a dirty girl was looking after their ancestors, they'd throw us out. Then where would we go?

"I also work mornings at a teahouse. If Old Yang knew I was a dirty girl, he'd throw me out of there too. Then how would we live?"

Steel Hope didn't have an answer. Firecrackers was right: If his clansmen knew about her, they'd never let her and her father stay.

"You must have relatives," he said.

She nodded.

"Go to them! They'll give you a home." She shook her head.

"Only Father knew where they live, and he's forgotten that, too."

He must help her. He must find a way. But what did he know about girls? All he knew for sure was that they got married, and without stopping to think, he blurted,

"What if I made Mountain Pine marry you?"

Firecrackers broke down and sobbed.

Steel Hope was bewildered. What had he said that was so wrong?

"Mountain Pine would be a good husband," he argued. "He's kind and loyal and the smartest one in school."

Firecrackers shook her head violently.

"He is, I tell you!" Then, suddenly, he realized that his mother would never permit his book mate to marry before her son graduated, and he refrained from saying any more.

"Oh, please keep my secret anyway," she begged. "Say you'll help. Say you'll be my friend."

For a long moment, he didn't know what to do. Then he spotted a cocklebur on the ground, and in a flash it occurred to him that they shared a common enemy. Had it not been for those sneaky dwarfs, her brother wouldn't have died and his father wouldn't have lost his pride. And what true son of the House of Li would forsake an ally in need?

Of course, it was outrageous that a boy would befriend a girl. But with her hair even shorter than his, her feet as calloused as a rickshaw driver's, who would ever suspect? And if nobody else guessed, what did he care? Naturally Mountain Pine would have to know, but he'd never tell. Mountain Pine's failing wasn't telling secrets, it was avoiding games.

At the thought of games, Steel Hope grinned. What game could possibly be better than helping this wretched girl and, in the bargain, fooling the whole town?

"You swear never to grow your hair long?"

"I swear."

"You swear never to wear a *gi-pao*?"

"I swear."

"You swear never to wash your feet?"

"I swear." Racing away, he shouted over his shoulder,

"Wait for us at the dike tomorrow afternoon." …

194.1 Excerpt from **The Battle Of Sangkumryung**\fn{by Lu Chu-kuo (1938-   )} Yiyang, Honan Province, China (M) 5

The first gray light of dawn was already filtering through the tunnel entrance as Company Commander Chang Wen-kuei hastily scrambled into his clothes. Completing his morning ablutions with water from a metal ammunition case, he moved a few steps away and walked outside. He stretched his arms, threw out his chest, and inhaled deeply of the cool, moist but fresh air of the morning.

It was a fine autumn morning. The scenery to the rear of the position fanned away like a water-color. The endless, undulating mountain ranges were clothed in crimson-hued maple leaves, dotted here and there with a jade-green pine as well as some nameless trees whose leaves had the tint of a ripe orange—all these colors matched each other in perfect harmony. A thin morning mist, like some white kerchief of fine-spun silk, drifted above the beautiful mountain valley, and the long golden fingers of the rising sun caressed the mountain tops, transforming the whole Korean landscape into a kaleidoscope of dazzling color.

Every sunrise Chang would stand outside the tunnel, feasting his eyes on the beauty of the Korean countryside which spread itself out in front of him. Just as, when a child, he used to station himself at the door to watch the hustle and bustle of his market town. He was a tall, sturdily-built man, but even the few wrinkles which weather and war had engraved on his brow could not mask his ingenuous nature. With both hands buried deep in his trouser pockets, he rocked gently from side to side, curled back his tongue and softly imitated the chirping of a bird.

A gray lark winged its way over to alight on the twisted remains of a shell-torn tree. Flexing its small, reddish-colored neck, it twittered happily, throwing an occasional watchful glance in Chang's direction. Suddenly, four mortar shells whizzed through the air and thudded down near the communication trench which led to battalion headquarters. There was a great flash, and the earth trembled. With a tremulous shudder the lark rose from its perch and whirred off to the north. Chang regretfully watched the small gray dot until it was swallowed up by the maple trees in the distance. Then he casually brushed the dust from his shoulders, removed his cap, and flicked the dust from that too.

Since his posting to the .tunnel several months earlier, Company Commander Chang Wen-kuei had felt many changes within himself. Previously he had been like a carefree child, giving little thought to the world around him and caring only for the marching, fighting, and training of a soldier's life. Now for months on end he and his men had been confined to the tunnel in the daytime, with only a nocturnal excursion now and again to break the monotony. No Korean civilians were ever seen in that area—the very houses had long since been reduced to ashes—and even a glimpse of the sun became a rare thing. A few hundred metres to the south were the positions of the U.S. aggressors, whose planes and artillery beat a daily and deadly tattoo on .the peaks of Sangkumryung. Dead, grassless ground, pocked with craters of blackened earth, and broken only by the traces of the communication trenches. It was hardly surprising that Chang now regarded any of nature's offerings or tiny creatures as something novel, something to be treasured.

Several weeks before, during the "Guard Against Germ Warfare Movement", he had acquired a small kitten—a little black thing covered with white patches—from regimental headquarters for the purpose, as he had put it, of "reducing the risk of vermin". Three days prior to that particular morning, however, as the kitten was basking on the sun-drenched slope outside the tunnel, it had fallen victim to an enemy shell. Wang Chi-pao, the company messenger, had been cursing volubly for three days; Chang too, although it was to himself, not openly.

Chang spat angrily and gave vent to a few choice oaths. Even a visiting bird is frightened away by the American shells! He swung round in annoyance and walked back into the tunnel.

A group of the men had just returned from their night's work of reinforcing the defence positions. Some were shaking the dust from their clothes. Others were filling their mugs from a large dixie of water which purred gently over the charcoal brazier. A few had already settled down comfortably on the straw mats, and by the light of an oil lamp were intent on the card game in progress. Without having to strain his eyes for a clearer view, Chang knew for certain that Liu Tsai-hsueh and Lin Mao-tien, the company's Card Kings, would be two of the four clutching the cardboard fans.

"Pooh! Stinking luck! First one I get is a deuce. Second's a deuce too. All three of 'em only make seven," wailed the tubby Liu Tsai-hsueh. He flicked his middle finger hard against each card as he picked it up. A long thread of smoke from a hand-rolled cig?rette curled upwards into his narrowed eyes, causing him to frown, and making his sparse eyebrows appear as one distinct line below the creases. He leisurely picked up the cards, the cigarette dangling loosely from his lips.

Lin Mao-tien, a machine-gunner, was a swarthy-complexioned man whose dark eyes seemed too large for his face. His eyebrows shot happily ceiling-wards as his fingers tightened on a Joker, plus several Aces and Kings. After he had taken up his twelve cards, he carefully placed his hand over the six cards remaining in the kitty and spoke to Liu:

"Right—Call! How much d'you bid?"

Lin knew that Liu, if his hand was a poor one, would make a grab for the kitty and then bid only fifty or sixty. Liu was inclined to "cheat" in this way. Liu deliberated for a moment or two, arranging and rearranging his cards, before replying slyly:

"Pah! Can't bid a bloody thing. I don't have a single face card. Not even a pointer. Redeal 'em. Redeal 'em." He bent forward, laying his cards down face up.

"Now, take a look at that!"

"Hang on a minute!" grunted Lin, as he carefully stacked his own cards and began to ruffle through Liu's discarded hand. "I trust you about as far as 1 can throw you."

He soon discovered a Two of Hearts hidden under the King of Diamonds. Caught red-handed, Liu quickly picked up the cards in the kitty and shuffled them in with his own.

"Aw!" he said, rising to his feet, "let's pack up. Anyway, it's time we hit the hay."

"Hit the hay! You're a bloody cheat, that's what you are! This game's going to be played through to the end."

Lin's face was flushed with anger, and his dilated eyes blazed an open threat. As Liu shuffled sheepishly away Lin reached out and tripped him up. Liu went sprawling over the prostrate form of a platoon leader who was

asleep nearby. Startled out of his slumber, 2nd Platoon Leader Sung Chan-fang raised himself on one arm. He was a meticulous sort of person, who himself neither played cards nor smoked. His eyes widened as they lit upon the playing cards and cigarette ash scattered over his quilt.

"Liu Tsai-hsueh—You!—" He was both angry and amused. "If you've so much extra energy, you'd better save it for the enemy, huh!"

Liu quickly stubbed out his cigarette and popped his tongue out and in again in a gesture of self-reproach. He well knew that the platoon leader's indignation would fade as speedily as it had been aroused.

"All right, I apologize. Let's start a new game. The platoon leader's given me a telling off, so that should take the edge off your anger, eh!"

Company Commander Chang Wen-kuei sat on a hand-grenade case, his head tilted in amusement as he watched the two men. Liu's "cheating" seemed to increase in proportion to Lin's growing sense of the injustice of the game. Although Chang had never formally encouraged any "skylarking" in his company, he liked to see the men lively. Indeed, what would life be like if they sat around like stone statues day after day?

The men in Tunnel "A" were like one big family. Liu with his incessant clowning; and the easily-piqued Lin with his sharp and ready tongue, were real live wires which this "family" couldn't do without. A born humorist, Liu never let the opportunity of a wisecrack escape him, regardless of time or place; and, as Lin was fond of pointing out, Liu was a bit of a trickster. Lin's peppery nature was such that losing his temper had become almost habitual. At the slightest provocation he would rant and rave, his eyes wide open, glaring a threat. In most cases, he would be at it with Liu. Both men were, however, the best of friends. Their bunks were always adjacent; when a card game was on, where one was you would find the other; and they were an inseparable team when it came to getting hold of a live prisoner—"catching a tongue" as the armymen called it—or for "live target practice."

Liu and Lin were heatedly engaged in some new dispute when the telephone clamoured for attention. The operator rose from his seat on the mat, lifted the receiver from its cradle, and clamped it to his ear.

“"Huh? … Yes, he's here … Right." He handed the telephone to Chang Wen-kuei, saying:

"For you, Company Commander. The battalion political director."

"Look," Lu An-kuo's voice sounded loud and clear as it vibrated through the ear-piece, "Number 109 Commander's coming over to your position. I want you to take all necessary precautions." His voice dropped to an almost inaudible whisper as he continued, "Do your best to … er … to 'limit' his movements, eh! Inform me by 'phone as soon as he arrives there." The suddenly changed tone seemed to indicate that the Number 109 Commander was within hearing distance.

"What!" asked Chang in surprise, as he bent over the telephone. "Number 109?"

"That's right. He'll be leaving here immediately."

In all truth, Chang was happy at the prospect of seeing the divisional commander again; but, on the other hand, he wished the intended visit would never come about. It would be a real morale booster for the troops, but coming to the tunnel was fraught with danger.

"All right," he replied. He stood up and reflectively rubbed palm on palm. He then drew the back of his hand across his chin. No, he didn't need a shave. And the other men had had one when he did. Still He couldn't feel at ease about it. He called to the messenger.

"Wang Chi-pao, instruct the 1st Platoon and the squad up forward to check up and see if any of the men need a shave. If they do, have it done right away. The divisional commander's due to arrive here at any moment."

Chins and cheeks fell under close scrutiny. The hirsute Lin Mao-tien, who was still wrangling with Liu Tsai-hsueh, was quickly labelled a "must" for the barber. As a hot towel and lather were in turn applied to his chin, Liu grumbled to the barber:

"See, this beard of mine grows faster than wild grass! I had a shave the same day as the others but now it's almost long enough to make braids!"

"My suggestion," Liu chimed in, addressing the barber, "is that you pluck out his stubble hair by hair. That'd save you a lot of trouble in the future, eh!"

The barber grinned as he took up his razor. Lin twisted round to glare at Liu.

"I'll settle accounts with you when I'm through here."

"Ah! It's nice to have no beard," Liu said banteringly in an undertone, still intent on his game of solitaire. "No scraping for me!"

"Maybe not," interjected Chang Wen-kuei as he shot a glance at Liu, "but for goodness' sake try to keep your witticisms to yourself when the divisional commander's here. Anyway, your head's so overtaxed that both you and your beard have stopped growing!"

A smirk of satisfaction spread itself across Lin's face, and his black eyes gleamed malevolently.

"An improper remark won't pass my lips. I promise," said Liu. His fingers laid down the cards in neat rows. "I'll just wrap myself up in a game of patience."

Chang carried out a circumspect tour of the tunnel, ensuring that all the weapons were in their proper racks and that all bedding was folded in the correct manner. He even remembered things like the charcoal brazier and the oil lamp. Everything was in order. As a final touch, he spent a few moments arranging two maple sprigs and several blue chrysanthemums in an empty "Tunghua" wine bottle placed in front of Chairman Mao's portrait. The wine had been sent over in honour of National Day, which the men had celebrated a few days previously, and the sprigs and flowers had been presented to them by the girls of an army ensemble which had recently visited the front lines.

Yes, everything was in order. Chang took a small mirror from his haversack, held it up and carefully examined his face. He walked confidently out of the tunnel to go and meet the divisional commander. When Tsui Hsin-wei, the divisional commander, was still a regimental commander, Chang had been his orderly. From long experience, Chang knew how much the divisional commander loathed any untidiness on the part of his subordinates. He still remembered the time when a battalion commander had come, unshaven, to attend a meeting at the regimental headquarters. Tsui looked at the battalion commander, and then, in a tone which oddly combined seriousness and jocularity, called to Chang:

"Orderly, please ask the barber to come over here immediately. This officer is in need of a shave."

The battalion commander was greatly embarrassed. Never again did he appear unshaven. Occasionally Tsui would catch Chang with a collar button undone, and he would observe:

"You seem to be reluctant to part with your 'guerrilla' habits, eh!"

Thus, this time, in expectation of the arrival of the divisional commander, Chang had made certain that both he and his company were spruce and tidy.

Chang hung around the tunnel entrance for some time but no one was seen approaching. He walked a little way along the communication trench and unexpectedly came face to face with the divisional commander as he rounded a bend in the trench. Beads of perspiration trickled down through the sparse gray hairs over the commander's forehead. In his hand he held a sturdy tree branch—a makeshift walking cane. His orderly was carrying the commander's jacket over his arm, and behind followed a medical attendant who had a red-cross satchel slung over one shoulder.

In response to Chang's salute the divisional commander reached out and grasped Chang's hand in a firm hand-shake.

"Well, what on earth are you doing out here?"

"I was waiting for you, Divisional Commander."

"Absolutely unnecessary. There's no call for you to be walking around outside. I'm quite familiar with the position here." He paused for breath, both hands resting on his "cane".

"Very good, Divisional Commander. Shall we go now? It isn't far."

"Right. Phew! It's quite a climb up here. And, curse my luck, this orderly of mine wouldn't even let me sit down for a breather!"

When they reached the tunnel the divisional commander stopped, his attention caught by the chiselled inscriptions on both sides of entrance.

"Well now, Chang Wen-kuei, look!" He read off the words. "'We Enter the Darkness of This Tunnel so That Our Motherland Might Live in the Sun.' Who in your company thought up this idea? It's only about a rrionth since I was here last. And now you even have an epigraph at your door, eh!"

"The idea originated with our political instructor. A soldier in the 5th Squad, Liu Tsai-hsueh, did the engraving."

"Wasn't your political instructor wounded recently? Where is he now? Has he written to you?"

"Yes, he has. Claims that being in hospital is like confinement to barracks. The assistant instructor, Wang Hung-yuan, has taken over his duties. He was formerly my 1st platoon leader, but he has been promoted now."

"Ah, I see. Now, those characters at the top there—This Stronghold Is Our Home"—I think they're a shade too small. A little more breadth and they'd be just right."

"Yes, I agree. They are a bit on the small side. A lack of experience, I daresay. Please, Commander, won't you come in?"

The men were lined up in single file along one side of the tunnel. Sung Chan-fang, the 2nd Platoon Leader, shouted "A-ten-shun!" and a sharp "click" followed as heels came together in unison.

"Ah!" said the divisional commander, smiling with satisfaction. "A real review, no less! At ease, men. At ease. Freshly shaved too, eh! Chang Wen-kuei, has all this been done on my account?"

Chang replied with a noncommittal smile.

"At ease, men," the divisional commander again instructed, and the 2nd Platoon Leader gave the order to fall out. Chang offered the commander a seat—an empty hand-grenade case—and then hastened away to report his arrival to battalion headquarters.

Tsui Hsin-wei didn't sit down right away. Taking the two sprigs of maple from the bottle, he looked at them studiously for a moment and then observed:

"H'm! They're withering. Next time I come over I'll bring some fresh ones. But even I myself can't tell exactly when the 'next time' will be! No, the best thing will be to have a few brought back when one of you goes to the rear. Compared with the rear, the forward positions here are as bare as a bald man's head!"

"Ho! Even on a bald man's head there's a chance of finding a hair or two; but in this place you won't see a single blade of grass!"

The droll remark fell instinctively from the lips of Liu Tsai-hsueh.

"Divisional Commander, won't you rest now?" bid Chang as he handed a mug of water to Tsui.

"Um? Ah, good!" said the divisional commander as he sat down. He drew a handkerchief from his pocket and began to mop the perspiration from his brow. "Now, tell me how you're getting on here."

Chang's face lit up and he spoke enthusiastically.

"Oh, fine. Everything's fine. Our cooks are really top-notch. They give us meat dumplings, meat pies, pancakes—something different every day. This morning, for instance, we had fried twists and noodle soup. Commander, why don't you stay and eat with us today? Wang Yung-fu is in charge of the kitchen, and you can sample his fare for yourself."

"True," interposed Liu Tsai-hsueh, "it's all right as far as grub's concerned." His tone was diffident as he continued to roll a cigarette. "But the tobacco ration's a bit scrimpy."

"Scrimpy!" Lin Mao-tien spat the word out with derision. "Why, with a whole tobacco factory behind you, you'd still not have enough! Commander, every non-smoker in the place gives him his ration, but he's always on the scrounge for more. He has a fag stuck in his mouth all day long. Look at his nicotine-stained fingers! Even on night patrol, right there under the noses of the enemy, he'll light one up!"

"Oh, go on. Go on"—Liu's attempted denial was drowned in a burst of laughter from the other men.

"Liu Tsai-hsueh, is this true?" the divisional commander asked smilingly. "If you go on like this, I'll have to order you to stop smoking altogether."

Liu flushed with embarrassment and he didn't even dare to light the cigarette which he had just finished rolling. The divisional commander twisted round and spoke to Chang Wen-kuei.

"I'd like to have a look round from the observation post." He then addressed his orderly.

"Here, let's have the binoculars. No necessity for your going up too."

A shaft from the tunnel led directly to the observation post, from where the whole position on Sangkumryung, every trench, foxhole, and weapon emplacement, was as distinctly visible as the lines on one's own palm. The divisional commander peered through the binoculars for about two minutes, and then lowered the glasses and sat down on a rock.

"Chang Wen-kuei, do you know the real purpose of my coming here today?" Chang remained silent for a moment and then answered frankly:

"No, I don't."

"I haven't come on any routine inspection. Nor have I come on a casual visit. Why, if I were to run round inspecting every company I'd be worn down to a frazzle before I got half way through! I wonder if you're aware that the enemy are preparing a major offensive against this position? Did you know this? It'll be no ordinary offensive, mark my words. They've been sending up division after division, and our observers' reports indicate that over 10,000 truckloads of ammunition have been brought in."

"That's right, their helicopters have been in and out four times already."

"Um-hm! That was Van Fleet—and Syngman Rhee.\fn{Lt. Gen. James Van Fleet had been sent to take command of the Eighth Army. Syngman Rhee had just been elected in August to a second term as President of South Korea at the time of the invasion of his territory by the armed forces of North Korea} They came up to look the situation over and to decide on specific strategy for the attack. The build-up's been going on for several months now, and their whole might will be thrown against you in an effort to capture this position."

"Don't worry, Commander. We'll never let them take it!"

"Of course. We can't let that happen. However, they've massed an enormous force for this drive; whereas we, on the other hand, cannot deploy a whole battalion or regiment in this confined area. So, a limited number of our men will have to stave off the enemy and annihilate their effective strength here. When the fighting starts, it's sure to be pretty fierce; and the battle's likely to be protracted. You should be mentally prepared for this ordeal. Fighting isn't like talking. Heaven knows how many thousands of tons of steel they'll pour down on these peaks."

"Commander, I've already discussed the matter with my men. We realize the strategic importance of this position, and we're determined to defend it to the last. As a key point on the central front, Sangkumryung ensures the safety of both the eastern and western lines; and from here we have complete control of the movements of the enemy to a depth of scores of kilometres. If they ever succeeded in capturing this position, they would use it as a jumping-off point for an assault on the main peak to our rear; and if the main peak fell into their hands, they would try to drive the wedge in deeper, greatly endangering our entire line of defence."

"Naturally, our enemy covets this important position. Their intention is also to step up military pressure here in the hopes of compelling us to yield to their demands in the talks at Kaesong. Further, they believe that if they can win a victory on this height it'll give them a stronger hand in demanding additionaI cannon-fodder from their satellites in the United Nations so as to extend their war of aggression. Failure on the part of you men here would mean a great loss of face before our motherland—before the whole world, for that matter—for the Volunteers.

"Safeguard World Peace—What do the words mean? As far as you are concerned, safeguarding world peace means safeguarding this hilltop! Never consider it as just another hill. Our over-all defence network and the entire land of the Korean people is made up of a series of such hills!"

The two officers re-entered the tunnel unnoticed by the group of men who stood talking together. Among them was Liu Tsai-hsueh, who held the habitual cigarette in his fingers. He was gesticulating wildly as he rambled on in a low monotone.

"I tell you, it's a cert! We'll be seeing some action soon. Why d'you think the divisional commander came here personally—"

The divisional commander looked at Chang Wen-kuei, who nodded his head and smiled. Liu suddenly stopped short, seeing that the divisional commander had returned.

"Well, what are you all talking about here, eh? Aren't you going to let me in on it too?" asked the divisional commander, looking directly at Liu.

"Er … Nothing. Nothing really, Commander," came Liu's ready reply. "We … Er … We heard that a delegation from home was coming to visit us, and we were wondering what they'd bring for us."

"Tobacco, I suppose," the divisional commander suggested humorously. "You seem to be very concerned about what the motherland might send you, but what do you have to offer the motherland in return?"

"We can fight! Commander, may I ask you a question?"

"Certainly, go ahead."

"When will we get the chance of some real fighting? We've been stuck in this tunnel for months, and aside from firing a blind shot now and again, or snatching an occasional prisoner, we just sit here twiddling our thumbs. On other parts of the front our army has been scoring victory after victory. Wiping out a company here. Wiping out a platoon there. How about letting us see some action too?"

"You will. Believe me, you will. Keep your weapons well oiled—and wait!"

Long before breakfast was ready, the divisional commander had finished checking over all the ammunition and food supplies in the tunnel. Furthermore, he had made Chang take him to visit the squad on the forward position. Chang tried to protest, but he knew it was futile. His experience as the commander's orderly had taught him that when Tsui Hsin-wei asked for something, he meant it. No matter how dangerous the circumstances were, he had never once been able to prevent the commander having his own way.

"Comrade Chang Wen-kuei, this is not the time for us to take either a 'big step forward' or a 'big step backward'. We'll have to hold out on this impregnable line, matching our perseverance and technical know-how with the enemy's. And we will, perhaps, at a given time and place, have to match iron and steel with them too!"

The two men left the tunnel and hurried over a patch of scorched earth towards the communication trench. A gust of chill wind blew up, carrying away the grayish-black smoke of a recently fired shell, and heralding the approach of the Korean War's third winter.\fn{So ends the first chapter of Lu's book. The Battle of Sangkumryung was known as the Battle of Triangle Hill, or Operation Showdown in the West. It began on October 14 and finally ended on November 25, when the [United Nations] forces disengaged from the battle. In any case, the Supreme U. N. Commander, Matthew Ridgeway, had ordered Van Fleet on November 12 of the previous year to cease offensive operations; and from that time on the Eighth Army was limited to an active defense. Throughout 1952, the opposing armies "limited themselves to constant patrolling and occasional small, violent clashes along the

opposing outpost lines." [ENC,XIII,473]* It is true that during this 43 day period, 365 U. S. soldiers were killed and 1,174 were wounded; the forces of South Korea lost 1,096 killed and 3,496 wounded, and some 7,100 Chinese troops were killed with a further 8,500 wounded. One American soldier was captured and 97 Republic of Korea personnel were listed as "missing in action." But these were virtually insignificant statistics in a war which eventually cost 33,720 American, 70,000 South Korean, and perhaps as many as 960,000 Chinese battle deaths—not to mention a further 400,000 non-battle deaths the soldiers soffered from disease; some 3,000,000 North Koreans who died from disease or other causes directly attributable to the war; and close to 500,000 South Korean civilians who were killed or died from war causes. *Encyclopedia Britannica, 1966 edition, volume 13, page 473.}

150.265 Mother Fish\fn{by Xi Xi aka Cheung Yin [Zhang Yan] (1938-)} Shanghai, China (F) 9

1

At daybreak the mother fish, looking stately and solemn, was floating on its back on the surface of the water, its entire body covered with a translucent silvery sheen or extraordinary luminosity. On each side of the tank were filter tubes shaped like shepherd's pipes. Out of their tiny air holes sprayed arcs of water that joined in midair to form a single waterfall, tinkling melodiously as it cascaded back into the tank, stirring up an endless flow of effervescent spume. Silently, this raft of pearly bubbles held aloft that soul of peerless splendor and beauty now lying in calm repose.

Since goldfish have no visible sexual organs, we have no way of determining their sex when they are young. Nor can their gender be deduced from such traits as gentleness versus aggressiveness, boorishness versus refinement. Most newborn goldfish never make it to adulthood. Fluctuations in water temperature, bacterial infections, and human negligence all tend to contribute to their premature demise. The reference books tell us that, when goldfish reach maturity, the edges of the gills and pectoral fins of the male fan out with tassellike appendages, while the abdomen of the female swells up with spawn. But these features can be seen only in adult fish at least three years old, after they have survived the many perils of life to reach their prime, those years of glorious heroism and heartbreaking pathos.

*

Across the top of the piano that stood next to the tank, a luxuriant bouquet of lilies sprawled in a rich display, their stems bundled together tightly in an imitation Greek amphora. Here and there a few buds, their heads dangling gently, still slumbered in spring's soothing embrace, while blossoms in full flower spread their cleft corollas to their widest. Stamens thronged around their fairy queen, their bright yellow pollen arousing insects to take wing. The clear bright light of the morning sun made its way onto the entrance and through the tassels of the canvas awning, the tinted glass of the French windows, and the sheer gauze curtains with the lacy butterfly pattern to present, with impeccable timing, the silhouette of a single lily sticking firmly out of one ear of a bust of Beethoven. The delicate fragrance of the white blossoms wafted gently through the air, permeating the room Against the unchanging, implacable rhythm rapped out by the metronome standing its ground as majestic as one of the pyramids, I could hear the flowers singing their hallelujahs. Flowers, those trumpets of the angels.

I remember the fragrance of lilies.

*

The box that the Christmas cards came in had a glassine cover. The sides of the cardboard container were printed with illustrations of stories from the Bible—shepherds abiding in the fields, the three wise men from the east, the newborn babe in the manger. The paintings, simulating the effect of needlework, showcased the splendors of folk art and craftsmanship. The wool of the sheep was etched in identical curlicues; the shepherd's staff emerged from a procession of chain stitches; the shepherd's staff emerged from a procession of chain stitches climbing ever higher; Joseph's headdress was as ornate as a Persian tapestry; and the face of the infant was presented in *bas-relief*. In the background, the boundaries of hills and pastures dissolved into each other. Flowers and leaves were done in delicate *petit point*.

She scooped the mother fish out of the water with both hands and gently placed it in the box. The fish was still soft and tender to the touch, flawlessly beautiful as always, its eyes gleaming bright and full of life. "I am leaving the goldfish in your care, Sis." Suddenly her mind went back to that beautiful sunny day last autumn, to the airport filled with young people leaving for their studies abroad, and her younger brother, a backpack on his shoulders, smiling cheerfully as he shook hands and said good-bye to all the friends and relatives who had come to see him off.

*

"Have a smooth flight, Cousin."

"All these people to see you off!" said Grandma.
"Take good care of yourself," said Mother.
"I'm sure they'll be healthy and strong, Sis."
"Remember, you must study hard," said Grandpa.
"I promise I'll send you the biology magazines regularly," said Cousin.
"You'll find the recharger for the dry-cell batteries on top of the bookcase, Sis."
"Come on everybody, let's take a picture together."
"We'll save all the newspapers for you," said Mother.
"You'll come back for Christmas, won't you?" said Grandma.
"You should go see Paris on your vacation," said third Auntie.
"Everything in the Louvre\fn{A Paris museum complex of buildings (constructed 1546-c.1850), covering some 48 acres and housing the National Museum of Art.} is a masterpiece," said Third Auntie's husband.
"A batfish looks just like a pine cone in the rainy season, Sis."
"When it rains, make sure you use an umbrella," said Grandpa.
"Let's take a picture over here. The view in the background is really pretty."
"Here's an impromptu present for you, Cousin."
"The credit card is just a backup, in case of an emergency," said Father.
"There are two spare air canisters in the drawer, Sis."
"Who says down jackets make you look clumsy?" said Grandpa.
"They do have central heating in the school, don't they?" said Grandma.
"When it turns cold, remember to put in the heating tube, Sis."
"This present is something the Family Planning Association handed out on the street just now, cousin."
"The plane ticket is free," said Mother.
"A credit card is not a winning lottery ticket," said Father.
"I'll send you a box of instant noodles every month," said Grandma.
"If you're squeamish about the red worms, just give them fish food, Sis."
"Don't just hang around with Chinese kids," said third Auntie.
"Make lots of friends and socialize with people," said third Auntie's husband.
"Write home when you have time," said Grandpa.
"We will call you," said Mother.
"So long, Cousin."
"Thanks for taking care of the goldfish, Sis."

2

As the spell of damp, rainy weather continued into its third week, the pantry began to look like a greenhouse—the garlic and ginger were sprouting, and a bright yellow mushroom burst from a crack in the chopping block. She did not have a single pair of shoes dry enough to wear to school. The droning noise inside the house came not from an air conditioner but a dehumidifier. The city had turned into a gigantic cistern, its citizens groping their way through a miasmal haze. Foghorns called to each other all day long from the ferries plying the harbor, their din finally coming to rest on the motionless sleeves of garments hanging limply on the clotheslines. A long line of customers snaked outside the laundromats, all waiting eagerly to feed the gaping, greedy mouths of the dryers.

She thought it was the weather that was giving her dizzy spells and rumblings in her stomach, as if a road crew were tunneling inside her body. Sometimes these invaders remained in one spot, sometimes they marched single file to their other bases and continued to drill. Grandma wailed that she couldn't see anything clearly, Grandpa hobbled around painfully on joints that seemed to have rusted, and Mother said she felt like a thousand-pound load had been slung across her shoulders. As for her, she became aware of the sharp medicinal odor that hung in the air, overpowering even the smell of the various forms of vegetation growing in the bathroom.

After the second attack of nausea, she suddenly remembered the spur-of-the-moment gift presented to her brother by their older cousin on that beautiful autumn day at the airport. At the time, his baby face had instantly turned a deep pink, and he had insisted on giving the present back to his cousin. All their other cousins had broken into sly, mysterious grins. She had not actually seen the gift but she knew that it had been something that resembled a rubber glove, except, of course, a pair of gloves would have had ten digits in all. Supermarkets and

twenty-four-hour convenience stores all carried this item, prominently displayed on the counter next to the cash register. At first, she had assumed it was a new kind of spearmint chewing gum, or a specially packaged book of matches, like the kind you find in cafés.

It was all very well for the family Planning Association to hand out these free gifts to all the men passing by on the street, she thought to herself, but the ones who really needed protection were not the adults, nor the lusty young men just beginning to feel their oats, but the callow young maidens still innocent of the ways of the world. In every school and classroom, teacher should convey the facts of life to every girl, so that later their mothers would not have to sit at the breakfast table trying to cajole their nauseous daughters into drinking the scalded milk they have so solicitously prepared.

*

They were both open cities. It was early spring; the water was still cold, the secluded beach all but deserted. After a little while, they swam back ashore and lay down in the shelter of an abandoned vacation cottage, their bodies coated with tiny grains of sand. They both loved playing in the sand, and soon they wre building castles and moats on the beach, giving shape to surrealistic landscapes.

*

He was wearing a pair of swimming trunks with a marine-life print: crabs and eels and whatnot lurking among coral reefs. Idly, she began to draw shapes in the sand on his back, slowly expanding the universe in the original aquarium until it encompassed all infinity. As the fine grains rustled and rolled across her human canvas, she created thick tangles of seaweed, sunken galleons, rusted anchors, and Spanish doubloons. Under the sun's gleaming rays, she saw Portuguese men-of-war, crabs, seaweed, and eels all coming to life before her eyes.

She could hear the rain-like splashing of the surf as it rolled in. The beach was now completely deserted. The sand felt as fine and soft as pollen. He began drawing pictures on her body—a school of fish, a covey of ever-shifting clouds, a procession of undulating hills, a little house hidden deep within the forest. She could feel him removing the wooden shutters, throwing open the windows overgrown with pink, white, and purple hollyhock blossoms. Gently, he undid the latch on the silent, well-fastened front portal and began to turn the twin rings of the beautiful brass door knocker.

All the starfish, jellyfish, and mollusks she had sketched earlier now floated before her eyes. She herself was ocean and seaweed and coral reef. She felt the slithering of an eel, experienced the shock of a bite from a crab's claw. I love you, I love you. Summer had not yet arrived, its advent no more than a faint drumbeat tapping in the distance. The spring rains had brought mud and a perpetual pea-soup fog.

The mother fish's belly began to balloon rapidly. She stared intently as the docile, long-suffering mother swam slowly back and forth, back and forth, its fan-shaped pectoral fins undulating softly. As it glided along, it seemed by turns to be bearing a heavy, juicy plum; it seemed as though its belly had been wrapped around an overripe peach; seemed as though its abdomen had become a pomegranate on the verge of bursting. The skin on its underside looked extremely thin, almost filmy. The overlapping shingle-like scales had all separated, the tectonic plates on the map of its body transformed into continents, permanently adrift. But the mother fish continued to look healthy and happy; its sweet friendly eyes bright and alert, its dainty mouth and gills opening and closing with each serene breath. Its tiny tail fin fluttered elegantly, as though its bulging belly were not big with child but rather a swim bladder filled with air, accentuating the lissome gracefulness of its body. When the air-conditioner repairman—who had brought back the overhauled motor and was reinstalling it—saw the mother fish, he couldn't help exclaiming, "What a beautiful Lanchou!" But right away he sighed, "The delivery could be very difficult."

The mother fish was, in fact, a Lanchouo. Her brother was partial to this mutant breed with their torpedo-shaped bodies. They are characterized by the absence of dorsal fins, a short bulbous trunk, a tail-fin that looks just like a pair of cotyledons, and a sharp right angle where the back and tail intersect. Prime specimens of Lanchou have well-developed head muscles that ripple and bulge into fleshy protuberances, making them look as if their heads were covered with soap bubbles. After visiting every shop in the fish market, he had picked out eight Lanchous, going methodically from the very first to the very last. He even got out of bed before sunup one morning to check out the specialty market on one of those side streets near the railroad terminal. At each place he stopped and scrutinized every tank, doggedly carrying out his exhaustive search until he had found exactly what he wanted. When he brought the fish home, they were still quite small, each no more than the length of a little finger, and as flat as a willow leaf. But in the blink of an eye, they grew into handsome, elegant adults.

The reference books say that the male fish tend to be somewhat smaller, while the females are generally larger and very robust. Two years later only one of the eight Lanchous remained small and skinny; the others had all grown to the size of one's palm, at least. At the time, she had been puzzled by that single frail-looking fish. It has

seemed healthy enough and quite carefree. Thinking back, she finally understood that it must have been a male. Earlier this spirit it had lost its life to the virulent epidemic of white fungus raging at the time. Now, she realized with a start, the inhabitants of the fish tank constituted an all female kingdom

3

Easter vacation brought with it a string of family gatherings. There were Pure Bright Festival\fn{A note reads: *One of the twenty-four solar periods in the lunar calendar which generally falls in early to mid-April. It is the traditional day for people to visit their ancestors' tombs and is also known as Tomb-sweeping Day*.} ceremonies for the grown-ups, April Fool's Day pranks for the teenagers, and general high-spirited play by the children on vacation. All provided an excuse to get together for celebration and fun. Once gathered for one reason or the other, many members of the extended family who ordinarily didn't get to see much of each other took advantage of the holiday to continue the festivities at somebody's house. Her home was no exception. By midafternoon on the day of the Pure Bright Festival, the house was teeming with guests.

The living room, dining room, study, and bedrooms had all been commandeered by *mah-jongg* enthusiasts, who filled the air with the sound of their clacking tiles. Those who couldn't get together a four-some for *mah-jongg* were watching television. The screen flickered sporadically as it told the story of a girl, thin as a pencil, whose name was Rosemarie and who was just then walking absentmindedly past the colored tiles of the Long Corridor.\fn{A note reads: *A covered walkway in the Summer Palace in Beijing, famous for its brilliantly colored and glazed ceramic tiles*.} The younger children were playing electronic games in her brother's bedroom. A steady stream of squeaks and squawks came from the kitchen, where Mother and third Auntie were bustling about. Was it the vegetables whimpering in the *wok*, or the clucking of the two women as they chattered about this and that?

She sat down in front of the tank to feed the goldfish. With its bulging belly, the mother fish looked like a balloon floating in the water as it swam back and forth. She wondered whether the fish's stomach would explode like a lighted firecracker. Now whenever she walked up to the tank, the mother fish would swim over delightedly, its eyes turning toward her with warmth and affection She had been trying to help the expectant mother since early spring, but it was no use; her brother was the only one who knew what to do to save it.

She made her way to the dining-room table and began to cut the chestnut cake into equal-sized wedges, putting each piece onto a paper plate together with a little plastic fork. She poured soda from a liter bottle into glasses and garnished each one with a slice of lemon. She steeped premium-grade oolong in a Yixing teapot, brewed fresh coffee, and prepared tea with milk, English style. Then she brought the beverages and desserts into the various rooms, stopping to exchange a few greetings with the respective parties before broaching the question of how to help a pregnant fish.

With the men, the topic of conversation never strayed from the pros and cons of stereo equipment:

"What do you think of compact discs?"

"They're small and easy to store."

"They're durable and never wear out."

"But what do you do with the old LPs?"\fn{Long Playing records.}

"(What should I do about my goldfish?)"

"Keep them as antiques."

The women talked about fashion:

"(What should I do about my goldfish?)"

"Pair the gold with the black, it's all the rage this season."

:Are we getting a little too old for patterned stockings?"

"Those gray-and-white outfits by Giorgio Armani are just gorgeous."

The older folks were still grumbling about their health:

"There's no cure for bone spurs."

"There's no cure for presbyopia."

"There's no cure for rheumatism."

"there's no cure for gray hair."

"(What should I do about my goldfish?)"

"There's no cure for any of that."

The little kids were excitedly punching buttons on the video games:

"(What should I do about my goldfish?)"

"Just gobble up that green flower."
"Jump up on the bricks and knock out that flower."
"When you eat the flower you'll have the strength of Superman."
Several of the teachers couldn't keep their minds off school business:
"Not a day goes by that I don't confiscate a stack of comic books."
"Every other picture shows a skirt hiked up to here."
"Or a chemise unbuttoned down to here."
"(What should I do about my goldfish?)"
"The student who got pregnant went quietly off to Shenzhen."\fn{A note reads: *A city in mainland China just across the border from Hong Kong*.}
Suddenly a joyous shout came from the kitchen:
"Third auntie is going to be a mother!"
"What should I do about my goldfish?"\fn{Not bracketed in the text before me.}

*

Mother said, "Why don't you go shopping with Third Auntie?" Third Auntie was thirty-eight years old and not at all like other women her age. She was petite, baby-faced, and still childless after fifteen years of marriage. "I don't want to have any children," she had insisted. She was an overage woman-child who refused to grow up and balked at becoming a mother. That was why every grown-ups who heard the cry from the kitchen looked so astonished. At the dinner table, Third Auntie made only one comment: "Just one slip, and you're done for."

*

They ventured deep into the heart of the shopping center, wandering among its labyrinthine corridors and walkways. Third Auntie had always been more like an older sister to her; they often played tennis and went swimming together. Perhaps this was why Mother had asked her to go shopping with Third auntie. But she knew noting about babies and what they needed. The only thing she could offer was a pair of hands to help carry packages.

All the stores had loving, cuddly names: Little Angel, Little Darling, Care For Mothers. No one had any idea that the two women looking over the merchandise were both expectant mothers. Looking was all she could do. The place was full of things she ought to be buying but couldn't; on the other hand, it had none of the things she needed, like a wonder drug, or one of those horrible, grim-looking surgical tools. Third auntie was in high spirits. All of a sudden she had turned into an honest-to-goodness Little woman, rummaging happily through racks of tiny pink or blue baby wear and picking over pans, milk bottles, brushes, and diapers. Standing in the midst of this fairy-tale world of little white bunnies and baby squirrels, she, however, felt terribly depressed. What she carried inside her was not a little angel. Those who cared for mothers cared not for mothers like her.

*

The extravagant trappings of the arcade made it seem ornate yet somehow dissolute. Above the soaring main atrium, in the center of the high ceiling, was a bas-relief of reclining cherubs carved in alabaster; on top of the huge stone pillars in each corner loomed the howling visage of the god of the winds. The colonnades on each side supported doomed ceilings, the floors were made of marble, the walks were covered with whorls of gold-leafed sprays. Low-backed sofas upholstered in a richly textured fabric surrounded creamy white coffee tables, each of which held an amber-colored vase graced with dainty pink carnations. The afternoon sun left a yellow glaze over the glass doors, beyond which pedestrians scurried by. Shops and boutiques were arrayed on each side of the atrium. In one of the store windows, a sprig of spring flowers bloomed radiantly atop a bridal veil. The table was set with a sparkling silver tea service. Laid out on lacy paper doilies lining plates of bone china was a colorful assortment of delicacies: ham, tuna, and tomato finger sandwiches; liqueur-filled petit fours; soft and buttery scones studded with raisins; jam and Devonshire cream. The sound of an unseen piano came wafting from the mezzanine. Perhaps it was Aeolus's whistling. I could hear the murmurings of the gods.
I remember the sweet taste of the scones.

*

This was a course she should be attending.
It was already the fifth session.
The first one was about the prenatal examinations that most pregnant women should undergo.
"I had an amino, the baby's just fine."
"I saw the fetus on the sonogram. It was like a little kitten, all curled up inside me."
"It kicks me all the time. What a miracle life is!"

The second class was about nutrition.
"You must drink milk every day, you need a lot of calcium."
"Eggs every day, for the protein."
"Drink lots and lots of water."
In the fourth session a movie was shown. It was about the birthing process.
All the pregnant women in the class suddenly fell silent.
The nurse said, "You're all scared now, aren't you?"

4

She decided to make a nest for the mother fish. To get it right, she chose a densely branching alga, a daffodil-like stonewort, and a water lily whose miniature leaves looked like little pouches as they floated on the surface of the tank. The reference books say that a fully mature male fish will lure a mother fish to a secluded spot provided by the nest, and, using the pointed end of its mandible as a prod, will nuzzle and poke the female's abdomen. This stimulated the secretion of hormones that causes the ovarian membrane to break so the spawn can be discharged. However, while the tank now boasted a nest, it still lacked a male. It had never occurred to her that the bellies of female fish, even when segregated from the opposite sex would automatically swell up with eggs. how utterly different from the way females of the human species became pregnant!

When she told him about the mother fish's predicament, he immediately set out to look for a male. Soon vendors all over the market were being called on by two young people urgently seeking a male goldfish. At firs they limited their search to Lanchous, but soon they expanded it to include other varieties as Lion's Head, Paved-with-Gold, Bubble eyes, Pearly Scales, and black Peony. But no one could provide them with any clues, not even the fish sellers. In the end, they had to rely on supposition and guesswork when they bought several specimens that looked to them like adult males. Despite their efforts, they did not succeed. Well-fed and content, they swam happily around the tank, completely oblivious of the presence of the mother fish.

She had no choice but to cradle the mother fish in her own hands and gently massage its belly, hoping that this might help it release the eggs. But it was all in vain. As the mother fish's abdomen grew more and more distended, the skin over the belly was stretched ever more thinly, and the distance between the scales grew quickly. While the belly looked tight and firm, it felt exceedingly soft and delicate to the touch, as thousands struggled within for a chance at life. Meanwhile, the other fish in the tank nibbled away at the algae and water weeds, and within three days the nest had disintegrated. So they decided to take the mother fish to a nearby park where they would slip it into the pond when the guard wasn't looking. There were lots of goldfish in the pond, and if the Fates were kind, perhaps the mother fish would get a new lease on life.

When he arrived early that morning to escort the mother fish to the pond, it had already bidden farewell to this world, and the burial had been completed. She seemed utterly grief-stricken. Thinking that her anguish had been brought on by the death of the mother fish, he waited quietly for that memory to fade. But that was not what happened, and her sorrow did not subside. After watching only one of the Easter specials, Werner Herzog's *Nosferatu the Vampire*,\fn{Made in 1978 by German motion-picture director Werner Herzog (1942-   ).} she had absolutely no further interest in seeing any of the other movies. Holding her hand, he felt as though he were hanging on to a spirit flitting and gliding through the depths of night. He was stunned at how quickly she had become inhuman.

*

For her birthday he gave her two records: Horowitz's concert in Moscow\fn{Vladimir Horowitz (1904-1989), Ukrainian-born Russian-American pianist.} and his rendition of Mozart's Piano Concerto no. 23. The *maestro* was already eighty-two, but his hands were nimble as ever, every note sprang crisp and clear from his fingertips, as exquisite as a string of pearls. Only twenty-two when he fled Russia, money for the journey hidden in his shoes, he had thought he would never be able to return. He did not go back again for sixty years. At the border the guard had recognized him and said to him, "Don't forget your motherland." Now he was a wealthy man: he could afford to have his own piano shipped by air to wherever he was performing; his favorite fish dish was served to him every day without fail. He lived as lavishly as one of the Incan kings in the remote mountains of long ago. Bu this homesickness was an illness that money could not cure.

She opened the booklet inside the record sleeve and leafed through the gloss photographs—of him visiting the homes of Tchiakovsky\fn{Peter Ilich Tchaikovsky (1840-1893), Russian composer.} and Scriabin,\fn{Aleksandr Nikolayevich Scriabin (1872-1915), Russian composer and pianist.} examining the handwritten scores of his illustrious predecessors, of him sitting in front of their pianos, looking as though he had at last found peace. At his triumphant homecoming

concert, Horowitz did not perform a signature piece such as Chopin's\fn{Frédéric François Chopin (1810-1849), Polish composer and pianist.} *Polonaise in A Flat*, perhaps because it would have been too passionate, too flamboyant. Instead, he played a short lyrical composition by Schumann,\fn{Robert Alexander Schumann (1810-1856), German composer.} the seventh piece in the suite *Scenes from Childhood*\fn{Composed in 1838.}—*Träumerei*, or *Dreams*. It allowed him to conjure and ponder the early years of his life, reliving those once-distinct experiences.

She adored the way Horowitz performed Mozart\fn{Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791), Austrian composer.}—sorrowfully, yet not sentimentally. For the *cadenzas*, he had chosen to follow Busoni.\fn{I.e., the interpretation of Ferruccio Benvenuto Busoni (1866-1924), Italian composer, pianist, conductor, and author.} He played the second movement in five minutes and thirty seconds flat. She was astonished. His tempo was almost two minutes faster than Perahia's.\fn{Murray Perahia, American pianist.} but his style had always been brisk and vigorous; even the melancholy pieces were taken *con brio*. Perhaps in the end it was Horowitz who came closest to touching the soul of Mozart, whose works exuded such vitality and life, for whom sorrow always coexisted with joy and grief and happiness were never far apart.

He shared her opinion. What distinguished Horowitz was his boldness and spontaneity. Neither of them believed that a pianist should be a slavishly faithful interpreter. He said, "Horowitz is a brilliant, asymmetric pearl."

"Yes," she answered, "extremely *baroque*."

Slowly, she lost herself in the beautiful world of the music. I could hear many sounds during the recital other than the piano:—people shouting *Bravissimo*, people hacking and coughing.

I remember Horowitz and Schumann.

5

Downstairs from the office of the Family Planning Association was a shelter for the homeless. Most of the city's vagabonds, however, preferred to sleep under highway overpasses, or on stone benches in the parks, or along the covered walkways by the ferry piers rain or shine, in deepest winter or the heat of summer, they would rather brave the elements than seek refuge at the shelter. Probably for the same reason, unmarried mothers were reluctant to go to the association for help. The Family Planning Association was set up to help those women who were, or were about to be, married and starting families, she thought to herself. Agencies such as this may say they want to serve and help you, but in the end the so-called solution they propose is always the tried and true: "Tell your parents." As soon as she stepped inside the building she would, in effect, have thrown herself into a net. They would ask for her name, address, age—would all that really be kept "strictly confidential"? After all, the Family Planning Association was not the government's Anti-Corruption Unit.\fn{A note reads: *An agency of the Hong Kong government that investigates citizens' complaints of official corruption and that promises to keep whistle-blowers' identities in strictest confidence*.} the personnel would say, "It's for your own good." And then, within half an hour, her parents would arrive and take her home; within twenty-four hors, the school principal and her teachers would all be counseling her; within three days, all her relatives, friends, teachers, and classmates would be discussing and passing judgment on her morals. When news about the pregnancy of someone such as thirty-eight-year-old Third Auntie was greeted with so much surprise and speculation, what kind of reaction would she—an unmarried seventeen-year-old girl—get?

It was now only two months to Third Auntie's due date and she had already received many presents: a sterling-silver baby spoon, a backpack for carrying the infant, a portrait of a plump, healthy baby. She continued to busy herself with preparations for the imminent arrival of the little one—decorating the nursery, ordering the baby's bed and bassinet, painting the walls a soft pink. She seemed cheerful and content, full of the joy of motherhood. She even got instructions from Mother about how to make red-dyed hardboiled eggs, how to brew ginger vinegar tea, how to steep *ginseng* in chicken *consommé*.\fn{A note reads: *Red-dyed hardboiled eggs are customarily given to friends and relatives in celebration of a safe childbirth. Ginger vinegar tea and* ginseng *steeped in chicken* consommé *are both considered tonics in traditional Chinese medicine*.}

But none of these things concerned the younger woman. She had made up her mind not to have the baby.

*

She knew of a place: Shenzhen. Every day pregnant women went to this neighboring municipality to take care of their urgent personal problems. If they left in the morning, they could be home that evening, bringing back fresh vegetables, or pottery, or woven bamboo mats that they had supposedly picked up on their outing to the countryside. Shenzhen was an open secret. In the seedier sections of the city, a tangle of signs had sprung from the

sides of buildings, overhanging the streets and the heads of passersby. They advertised the services of various medical clinics, all engaged in what had become a flourishing business in the last few years.

Every year on her birthday, her father would give her a gold coin and say, “My daughter’s dowry is really building up.” And, indeed, the price of gold had risen tenfold in the last ten years. She decided to spend one, two, even ten of the gold coins in exchange for her once-lithe and –graceful body, her former carefree self. She had never imagined that her dowry would be spent not on her wedding but on something like this that was nevertheless so intimately related to marriage. What concerned her was not the cost of the operation but its consequences. What is he went to Shenzhen, only to depart forever? Would she end up like the mother fish, floating belly-up and all alone on the surface of the water? She decided she would take the risk, alone. She would put away her Hong Kong identity card and give a false name and address, so that if something went wrong, nobody would know who she was.

*

In the presence of the stranger, she would lay bare her beautiful young body. Once she had faced the prospect of death, she was suddenly filled with courage, she could see the gloomy room with its sickly green walls and dirty gray ceiling high above, lit by a hanging lamp coated with dust and grime. A rancid, putrid odor filled the room. In a peeling enamel tray, metal clanged against metal. Instead of the soft caress of war, tender flesh against her own, she would feel the coarse, slimy, toad-like skin of a large hideous snake as it thrashed about at will across her body, sinking its sharp fangs again and again in to her flesh and veins.

She remembered a news story about a young couple who got into an accident while riding in the taxi. In the collision the wife received a blow to her forehead, and her husband and the driver both jumped out of the cab to get help. But every car on the road whizzed by without stopping, until the two men managed at last to flag down a passing truck. After demanding an exorbitant rice, the owner of the truck diddled and dawdled before finally driving the injured woman to the hospital. By the time the husband had completed all the forms, complied with all the requirements, and rushed to the appropriate office to pay for the blood transfusion—in advance, please—the wife had slipped into a coma from loss of blood. Even after she was put on a respirator, the husband had to stay by her side and manually operate the pump to make sure it was working properly. Six hours later, the woman, who had originally received only a minor injury, died without regaining consciousness. That was exactly the kind of place she would be lying in.

*

Every day at the appointed hour, she fed the goldfish, using a little measuring spoon to scoop out the roper amount of fish food. The flakes smelled vaguely like dried seaweed and, once scattered onto the water, fluttered slowly toward the bottom of the tank. All the goldfish swarmed around the sinking flakes, sometimes sticking their heads into the nooks and crannies among the pebbles that lined the bottom, their upturned tails resembling flowers stalks swaying in the wind. While she fed the fish, she examined them for signs of injury and disease: were the tips of their fins broken or split, were their scales falling off, were there any cuts or scratches on their gills, were their backs covered with a thin gray film, where there white spots on their bulbous heads?

By now she had become not only a nanny to the goldfish but their doctor as well. she regularly cleaned the tan, the filtration system, and the pebbles. On really cold days, she even brought the water to room temperature by warming it on the stove before refilling the tank. She knew that a fish that swam off and stayed by itself must have come down with a disease, while one that wheeled about was suffering from an attack of worms. She had also learned how to set up a little tank as an infirmary, where she wold immerse the ailing fish in a saline solution, and she knew how to apply medication directly to infected areas.

She was no longer stumped by any of the afflictions that goldfish were subject to, except for one, pregnancy. There were still seven Lanchous in the tank, and since they were all female, each would become a mother sooner or later. At some point their bellies would swell rapidly, and then they would die from the complications of labor. In a letter to her brother she said: “Life and death are so close to each other, yet there’s not a thing I can do. Mother said, ‘Don’t worry, just three more months and your brother will be back,’ Father said, ‘Don’t take it so hard, it’s only some fish.’”

*

It was not the fish. But Father could not have known that. They saw her with strips of litmus paper day after day, sometimes red, sometimes blue, and they assumed she was checking the water quality in the tank. Was it acidic or alkaline? Was it positive or negative? Locking herself in the bathroom, she too waited for the result. The instructions said that red meant the test was negative, yellow meant it was positive. She had already done the test

many times, holding a glass tube I one hand as she measured droplets of the reagent with her other hand. When it came out yellow the first time, she felt as though all heaven and earth were spinning around her.

She should not have done the test in the afternoon. Also, she was not supposed to have had any milk, spinach, fruit, or vitamin pills. So she performed the test again in the morning. Several days in a row, in fact, she carried out this onerous task. When she saw a tube of raspberry-colored liquid, she was relieved. But why did it turn yellow at some times and red at other times? The colors confounded her.

6

He went with her to buy cigars for Third Auntie. On the telephone Third Auntie had said, "Oh dear, I forgot to get cigars." They went to Davidoff's and carefully reviewed every brand on display. Which kind should they get? He vetoed the Grand Cru series. He said, "Davidoff's biggest mistake was to name cigars after French *châteaus*. After all, cigars are not wines." She didn't like the Bouquet assortment, because those were not hand-rolled. They read out one name after another: *Larrañaga*, *Partagas*, *Juan Clemente*, *Bolívar*.

"*Bolívar* sounds good—he was a great Latin American hero."\fn{Simón Bolívr (1783-1830), South American revolutionary, responsible for the independence of Venezuela, Colombia, Ecduador, Peru and Bolivia.}

"If you were the father, which brand would you choose?" she asked.

"*Monte Cristo No. 1*, of course, because of the story, and because of Alexander Dumas.\fn{Alexandre Dumas (1802-1870), French novelist and playwright; *The Count of Monte-Cristo* was written in 1844, translated into English in 1846).} What about you?"

"*Romeo and Juliet*, because of Shakespeare, and because of a rose by any name," she replied.

What she really liked were not the cigars themselves but the boxes they came in—all made out of plain unvarnished fir with not a speck of paint, even the ornate lettering seared into the wood with a dark, smoky tint. Some had rolltop covers, others came with brass-plated latches. Suddenly she remembered the Christmas-card box that had become the mother fish's coffin. After paying for their purchase, they headed home along the embankment by the harbor. Hugging the box of cigars, she broke into tears and began to sob inconsolably. He finally found out why.

"Don't be so sad, silly girl," he said. "Why don't we just get married? We're just in love, like other people; we're just going to be parents, like other people. Why do something stupid? Shenzhen is out. That's no way to deal with this situation. A child would be wonderful—we both love kids. I am nineteen; I will make a good husband, a good father. Let's get married and have the baby. We'll go to the baby boutique and buy baby clothes and little toys, just like your Third Auntie did, and we'll also buy cigars to give to our friends and relatives. We'll give cigars even if it's a girl. If it's a boy we'll give *Monte Creisto No. 1*, if it's a girl we'll give *Rome and Juliet*. We'll still go to the university. We'll bring the baby to class. We'll both study hard, and after graduation we'll get good jobs and have a cozy little home of our own, where we'll bring our child along. We'll go to Florence to see Botticelli's *La Primavera*."\fn{Sandro Botticelli aka Alessandro di Mariano Felipepi (1445-1510), Florentine painter; *La Primavera* seems to have been created in 1478.}

"I'll go up by myself," she said.

He knew it was pointless to argue with her further, so he stayed downstairs and waited. Glancing at his watch, he told himself that if she didn't come down within half an hour, he would go upstairs to look for her. He looked up and saw the overhanging jumble of sign-boards and shingles that cluttered the space above the alley. Coming here was her idea. He didn't agree with it but thought they could give it a try. He watched as she stepped into the elevator and then turned around to give him a wave. He knew that she was scared but had put on a brave front.

She had to ring the bell twice before a middle-aged woman answered the door. The place was set up like an ordinary residence, but there was no one else in the living room, and imprinted on the glass door was a red cross. "I am here for a test," she said, beginning to relax once she realized she would not have to give her name and address after all.

"Did you come alone?"

"He's waiting downstairs."

"You don't want a baby, is that right?"

"I'm always feeling nauseous."

"Do you have problems with your stomach?"

She came out of the bathroom and gave the jar to the woman, who poured it into an array of smaller container and performed one test after another, carefully examining each reaction. During the rainy season, when water was

running and dripping everywhere, here body's canal had dried up. Now that summer was here, the sun burned off every last bloom of mildew in even the darkest nooks and crannies. And now here, in this unfamiliar room, she suddenly discovered to her great astonishment that her waterway was once again flowing. Outside the window the sun shone very, very brightly.

She came out of the elevator and saw him running toward her. The lobby appeared to be deserted except for the two of them. Throwing her arms around his neck, she blurted out, "I'm okay, I'm okay." Then, like exuberant little sparrows, they tripped out of the narrow alley overhung with signs that blocked out much of the light, Looking up, she pointed to one of the signs and said, "I thought I'd have to go to one of those places and I'd never see you again." And the tears came streaming down.

*

I am your *tousheng*, your firstborn, born out of your head.\fn{A note reads: *firstborn; also a pun on its literal meaning, "born out of the head."*} I am your fantasy. Most *tousheng* creatures are but fictional characters created by writers, brought into this world for the sake of the story. I do not belong to the story, nor did you create me in order to write a story. It was as a result of love's taking shape that you conceived and gave birth to me.

Writes take loving care of their *tousheng* characters, bringing them to maturity, breathing life into them, displaying them proudly before all. Most mothers are like this too. But you, you have spared no pains in your effort to stow me away, to keep my existence a secret; you stand ready to destroy me, because I represent darkness and shame. This is your sorrow, the sorrow of the female sex. Why do you continue to submit to a life of such humiliation and self-abasement? Out of nothingness into being-—t should have been a process of discovery, of creation, of propagation. Birth should have been the greatest joy of all—why turn it into tragedy?

It has been only three months since my birth, yet I have already lived with you awhile, through sunshine and stormy weather. Since you gave birth to me out of your head, before all else, I have become part of your memory, your consciousness, a spray of ever-flowing spindrift in the ocean of your mind. I wish you health and happiness; I pray that you will grow ever stronger, mother. Love is nothing to be ashamed of. I love you, and I love my father. He is the precious male fish.

262.128b 1. Sinking **2.** Cloud Dissects Itself **3.** Footpaths Cross In The Rice Field **4.** Vague Apprehension **5.** Woman Wall: **Five Poems**\fn{by Lin Ling aka Hu Yun-shang (1938-)} Sichuan Province, China (F) 2

1

Endlessly sinking—
My wings into the waves of your eyes.
How much I hope,
How much I hope,
That we will sink beautifully down,
Into a kingdom forgotten by Apollo,
Where we will walk and leave no footprints,
Just as the rivers there do not rise in the high mountains
But originate in the ocean.
That breeze is no more a breeze.
The wood on the hill is no more
A wood on the hill.
We are no more ourselves.
We are dust.
We are everything.
Yet everything again, all in one brief glance
Will be denied all value.
Oh, how I hope. …

2

I was born in the old home of the sun,
My tomb will be the blue green ocean,

Just like the tiny meteorite in the sky.
The lights of the fishing boats,
Returning late in the night,
Will be the tears of my mourners.
I always remember,
Many years ago there was a girl
Who loved to dress in red.
She slowly walked through the human world,
With gestures of mist,
With the rhythm of rain,
With the melody of a flowing stream.
And the flames and snowflakes
She scattered so freely
Became the Equator and the North and South Poles.
I always remember—
Like the tiny meteorite in the sky,
The ocean is my emerald tomb,
The lights of the fishing boats,
Homeward bound in the late night,
Are the tear drops of my mourners.

3

You are horizontal.
I am vertical.
We divide the heavenly bodies
And the four directions between us.
We come from the place of becoming,
Pass by here,
And encounter each other
In this final meeting
In a flooded rice field.
An egret descends on still eings.
We quietly chat about the weather,
And say, “I’ll see you again.”
Quietly make an appointment,
Climb two far apart hillsides,
And look back from the summits.
A pure white feather floats down.
As the feather floats down,
Oh, at that monment
We both hope that happiness
May also be like a white bird,
Quietly descending
We hope—
Even though birds
Are creatures with wings.

4

On your breast,
In your arms—
O night of Monte Carlo—
The man I love

Warms himself at the fire.
He did not gather enough
Pine branches to make a blaze.
Night of Monte Carlo.
He asks for my hair,
My vertebrae.

5

I have been expecting it so much.
Only I
Walked in its shadow.
*
This time, the second time that I have come,
I dream no more the vastness.
With hands behind my back,
I walk from one end to the other.
I am thinking—
How can so slight a thread tie up a city?

41.142 Excerpt from Humanity: **The Vagabond: He Jingfu**\fn{by Dai Houying (1938-1996)} Shanghai, China (F) 2

… In 1962 the university informed me that I could return from my exile and continue my studies. But I had become accustomed to living in the countryside. I had secretly taken up philosophy, in an attempt to find out how a Marxist should treat some of the basic questions of human life and personal emotions. I no longer wanted to return …

I had never felt more alone. I decided to go away. I left a note for my sister and set out, with no idea of where I was heading. I wandered aimlessly, learning whatever lessons life presented to me. The only books I had with me were *The Dream of the Red Chamber* and *Selected Works of Marx and Engels.*

I became a non-person, completely cut off from the society around me. I had no residence permit, no grain or cotton coupons, no friends or relatives to look after me, not even a postal address. No one cared who I was or what I was doing; no one asked me where I came from or where I was going. People just knew me as Old He—the charcoal burner, the builder, the stone carrier, the blaster, the carter, and even the story-teller. I made enough to keep my rice bowl full, but that was all.

*

One year, I joined a transport team near the Great Wall. I'd just bought myself a horse and cart with my hard-earned cash. It was a lousy horse, but it was cheap.

I love the Great Wall. When I first climbed from the First Pass Under Heaven up to the highest beacon tower, I forgot my vagabond existence completely. Every brick in the Wall seemed to me like an individual. The endless winding Wall was like a mighty army, and I was a new recruit. Almost every stone in the tower had the names of travelers scratched on it. Why do they do that? To make a name for themselves? But I don't think anyone has ever achieved fame in this way. I think they came to enlist, just like me. The stones were our muster roll. But I didn't carve my name on the Wall. I gave it my body instead. Whenever I could, I would climb up onto it. I was prepared to stay there for the rest of my life, and to be buried at its foot when I died.

Our transport team was "black," like each one of its members.\fn{I.e., people in Maoist China officially categorized as enemies of the State: A previous note defines them, and reads: *Landlords, rich peasants, counterrevolutionaries, and bad elements were the original Four Black Categories; rightists were added in 1957, and, early in the Cultural Revolution, capitalist roaders and "cow or ox demons and snake spirits," to make seven. Subsequently there was a revision; to the earlier five were added renegades, spies, capitalist-roaders, and intellectuals, who brought up the rear, as "stinking ninth elements."*}Most people know nothing about this of course, but outside conventional society there are all sorts of "black" societies, made up of a mixed bag of people: self-employed laborers, the unemployed, people who have been rejected by society for a variety of reasons; and of course, people whose only interest in life is to make money. We have to form gangs, otherwise we'd never be able to find work or buy grain and cloth coupons on the black market. And every gang must have its chief. I have never been one, and I don't want to be. I've never been able to handle people, no matter how hard I've tried.

Until you've been in one of those gangs you can't imagine how weird it all is. There's no greater insecurity than working in one of those deformed miniature societies. Nobody knows anything about anybody else; nobody cares for anybody else. They have joined forces to make money, and that's the only thing that keeps them together. The chiefs are mostly local thugs. They get work contracts to make things legal. The others are all terrorized by them, and let them skim off part of their hard-earned wages. Of course, I too had to pay my contribution to the chief.

This particular fellow was a ex-con, that is to say, he'd been released from labor camp. His face was fair and thin, like that of a scholar. But something about the muscles in his face gave him a ferocious look. The flesh on his cheekbones formed big bags unger his eyes, making him appear especially terrifying. He looked so greedy and vicious that everybody was afraid of him. I certainly didn't want to rub him up the wrong way.

But one day I discovered, after settling our accounts, that he had taken advantage of the fact that I was a newcomer and paid me eighty *yuan* too little. It wasn't a question of the money, I simply couldn't accept his attitude. I quarreled with him. He hit me; I hit him back. I had carried many a two-hundred-pound boulder in my day; why should I be afraid of being beaten up by this man? I ended up dislocating his arm.

I was taken to the police station, where they asked for my identity card. I didn't have one. I told them: I am He Jing-fu, always have been, always will be. But I have never done anything wrong. You can check it for yourself if you don't believe me!

The policeman wasn't a bad sort. He simply lectured me: behave yourself and don't make any more trouble. And they threw me out.

As I drove my cart back to my temporary lodgings, I was on the verge of tears. Identity card! Identity card! I don't have an identity card! Without one, don't I still count as a human being? I whipped the horse violently all the way, driving it to a gallop; I wanted to overturn the cart or to crash into the Wall. If it was to be my death then let it kill me now! What was the point of going on like this?

Just then a man drove his cart right in front of mine, but I saw him too late to avoid a collision. My cart wounded his horse, the shaft went right throug the beast's shoulder. It took the two of us a lot of effort to pull it out. Blood spurted all over the place, splashing my head and face. I took off my shirt and stuffed it into the wound to stop the bleeding.

After a little while the horse died. The carter grabbed me in case I tried to run away. His horse was state property, and I had no alternative but to hand him my whip. Because my horse was inferior to his, I had to give him my cart as well.

"Well, now I am as naked as the day I was born and as carefree as the wind again," I muttered to myself and lay down on the ground.

The carter was a kind man. Seeing me suddenly bereft of everything I owned, he felt unwilling to abandon me. He took out a small gourd filled with liquor from the inner pocket of his coat and insisted that we have a drink together. He asked me where I had come from and where I was going, and I told him my story.

"Don't worry," he kept saying, "every dog has his day. Every dog has his day."

Before he drove my cart away, he offered me the horse's carcass, saying I could make some money out of it. I didn't want it, so he dragged it away.

I didn't want to go anywhere. I lay down at the foot of the Wall. How grand and quiet it was! If I died here nobody would ever find me. The Great Wall would gradually absorb my corpse. And yet—to die or not to die, that was the question. I lay there, staring motionlessly at the stars in the sky and began like Hamlet to ponder my fate …

I was just thirty years old, the age by which a man should have made something of his life. But what had I achieved? For myself? My family? My career? Nothing. I had nothing. Not even an identity card. No one needed me. Did life for me consist only of food, drink, clothing, and shelter? Did I really have no choice but to measure the value of my life by the demands of that labor contractor, who fed off my sweat and blood? No!

I jumped to my feet and ran along the Wall up to the highest beacon tower. I took out a pocket-knife and by the light of the stars carved the three characters of my name into the stone: **HE JING FU**. Now I had enlisted myself into that army. This stone was my identity card, it certified that He Jing-fu has Chinese blood, that he is a descendant of the Yellow Emperor. I sat down and leant against the tower.

I took a look. One more look over the landscape of China. What a spectacle! Inside the Wall, all was green and luxuriant, while outside it lay a stretch of rolling yellow earth. Yet it was the yellow earth that evoked my tender affection more than anything else in the world. I could feel all the beauty and power buried beneath the earth, lying undiscovered. It enticed men to sacrifice their lives, it fired the imagination.

A shooting star sped across the sky from east to west, and fell. But the sky remained as spacious and serene as before. The stars still winked contentedly, and the “silver river” of the Milky Way still glimmered dispassionately at the separated lovers, the Cowherd and the Weaving Girl, standing poised on its banks. To them it was as if nothing had happened. In this boundless universe, who notices a small shooting star? To the rest of the world my death would amount to little more than the fading of a falling star in the night. It would pass by soundless, unnoticed.

And yet I am a human being, a man of flesh and blood. I thought of my grandmother, who had often told me stories: about the Milky Way and the stars.

“Every one of us has a drop of dew above his head, and we all have our own fate,” Granny often said to me pointing at the stars in the sky. She said that people were just like the stars, each with its own position in the firmament, each with its own right to exist. The stars still hang in the sky without needing any support or sustenance; and men live on in the world without help or assistance. The stars shine in the sky, the dew glitters on the earth. This was the earliest philosophy I was taught.

Had my own drop of dew really dried up? No! It had not! It enabled me to see my dead parents, my distant sister, all those whom I loved …

My horse was gone, and so was my cart. But I still had my hands. Why need I be afraid, just because I had no identity card? The value of my existence did not depend on some bureaucratic document.

I sat up all night in front of the tower. Early next morning I came down. I was not going back to the transport team. I needed to find a new job. I went down along the Great Wall, inquiring at every village along the way to see if I could do any odd jobs for them.

It was all in vain. When I had spent all my money, I had to tear myself away from my beloved Great Wall and made my way south, to the banks of the Huai River. …

1939

78.23 The Travels Of Erh Ts’an\fn{by Erh Ts’an aka Joseph S. M. Lau (c.1939?-)} Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, China (M) 6

… On arriving at the Boston airport that evening, Erh Ts’an boarded a bus for the Hilton, the venue of this year’s Asian Studies Association Annual Conference.

Having checked in at the desk, he followed the bell-hop into the elevator and moved into the room to which he was assigned. He was somewhat fatigued, but felt like a new man after taking a shower. Since he had eaten on the plane, he was not particularly hungry. However, it was only a little past eight, and he was not about to pass up the opportunity to sample the seafood for which Boston was justly famous. He changed into casual clothes and obtained from the hotel information desk the names and locations of a few seafood restaurants. After roaming the streets for a few blocks, he found one that caught his fancy.

The Oyster House was not only crowded, but also most of the customers appeared to be fellows of the Asian race. Aside from some unfamiliar languages which he could not. identify, the dominant language spoken appeared to be various versions of Chinese. As Erh Ts’an stood in line waiting to be seated, he could not help salivating as he watched the waiters hoisting platters of oysters and clams to their various destinations.

He was at last seated at a corner table. As he studied the menu, he was reminded of the atrocious ways in which seafood is served and eaten in America. If it is not fried, it is invariably broiled. What do they do to a luscious succulent fish? They dip it in batter and then fry it to a crisp. When brought to the table, it comes with a wedge of lemon but without its head! The more Erh Ts’an thought about it, the more his appetite left him. When the waiter returned to take his order, he settled for half a dozen raw oysters and half a dozen clams, topped off with two bottles of beer.

“No crabs tonight?” the waiter volunteered. “That’s our specialty, you know.”

“Not tonight,” Erh Ts’an replied, not wishing to seem unappreciative of the waiter’s good intentions. “Eh … I’m sort of allergic to crabs.” Oysters and clams, of course, can be eaten raw, unspoiled by the ministrations of the chef. Presently in walked two couples, speaking in a brand of Chinese that gave them away as southerners. They were shown to a table next to his.

“My dear fellow,” one was heard to remark, “let’s order the best on the menu. Since your return from Peking, I have been so occupied that I just wasn’t able to call on you. Let’s make this a welcome home party, and let me be the host tonight and remove the travel dust for you.”

“No, no!” the other protested, “it’s been quite some time since I returned from Peking. Even the clothes I took with me to Peking have made several trips to the cleaner. What travel dust is there to remove?! When in Rome, do as the Romans do, and make this a Dutch treat. What’s more, to be quite honest, after having your taste buds tickled for over two months on the mainland, American food comes off as pretty poor fare. If you insist on treating us to dinner, I’ll take a rain-check on a Chinese dinner in New York instead.”

Since the foregoing snatches of conversation were sprinkled with references to Peking and the mainland, Erh Ts’an’s curiosity was somewhat piqued. Putting down his oysters, he took a good look at the two couples. They looked a decent sort and urbane to boot. One of the men was a middle-ager, with a pipe in his mouth, and a pair of gold-rimmed glasses. His temples were dappled with gray which somehow gave him an air of poise and suavity. Erh Ts’an could swear he had seen him before, but where? *Aiyaya*; when one reaches middle-age, one’s memory begins to slip. While he was digging in the back of his mind, the man with the pipe was heard to say to the other man who appeared to be a little older:

“Po-wen, have you received your visa yet?”

“*Ai*, do you really have to ask?” the other replied. “If I had gotten my visa, would I be here attending this hustling-bustling meat market? It’s over six months now, and I haven’t heard a word. Come to think of it, since you are on such good standing with the ‘motherland,’ isn’t there something you can do to speed things up?”

“Of course I can try, but the Chinese don’t do things the way they used to. Connections don’t necessarily open doors anymore, but as I said, I’ll see what I can do.”

When the waiter came back to their table, the man addressed as Po-wen, noting the lack of enthusiasm on the part of his friend for American food, without consulting the two ladies in the party, asked the waiter:

“What’s the specialty of the house? … I know what! Bring us some shrimps, crabs, fish and oysters … and a bottle of good boujoulais if you have it.”

Having polished off the half dozen oysters and half dozen clams, Erh Ts’an put a dollar tip under the plate and left the Oyster House.

It was early spring and the wind was biting cold. He turned up his collar and made his way back to the hotel. The jumble of words like “Peking,” “mainland,” and “motherland” kept tumbling in his mind. Try as he would, he was still unable to place the man with the gold-rimmed glasses who seemed so vaguely familiar. One sure can lose touch with things when one has lived so many years in the backwaters of the South, away from the mainstream!

Back in his hotel room, Erh Ts’an broke open a small bottle of Cutty Sark he had brought from the South, and without bothering to dilute it with water, took several swigs from a glass. The whiskey, he thought, should see him through the night. His “act,” an exposition on the poetic works of Su Tung-po in exile, was not scheduled until the next afternoon. He had all the time in the world to sleep.

That however, was not to be. Just as he was dozing off, the telephone started to ring. With half-closed eyes, he asked in his customary muted voice, “Who is it?”

“Who, indeed!” the voice answered. “My dear fellow, do you realize the trouble we went through trying. to lcate you! What have you been up to anyway all by yourself? Chicken hunting, eh? Just let me give you a word of warning. Boston teems with female as well as male stranglers. Among the habitues of the wild chicken coop—"

“Hey, hold your horses! You were not expected to arrive until tomorrow morning," Erh Ts’an, now jolted sober, countered in reply to Old Buddy’s salvo. He was, however, interrupted by the voice at the other end of the line.

“Let’s come to the point. I couldn’t wait to leave the office to take the first plane to come visit you buddy- boys here. Come on down and join us at the bar.”

Without waiting for a reply, Old Buddy plunked his receiver down.

Erh Ts’an had no choice but to get dressed and make his way to the elevator. As soon as he got to the bar, he was grabbed by Old Buddy and led to a booth at the end of the bar.

“Look, fellows!” Old Buddy said to the party, “our ‘reactionary’ here has just returned from his chicken hunt and is still recuperating from the rigors of his exertions, so don’t be too hard on him if he isn’t all that lively!”

Except for two new faces, the seven or eight members of the party were all fellow alumni of National Taiwan University. Erh Ts’an was more than a little pleased to see them, the more so since the encounter came as a complete surprise. For this reason, he wasn’t overly offended by the off-colored remarks Old Buddy just made. He squeezed his way into a seat and ordered an Old Fashioned. As soon as the waitress brought his order, Old Buddy addressed Erh Ts’an again:

“My dear fellow, are we friends or aren’t we friends? Look at the gang I’ve rounded up to do you honor. We

are going to listen to your sermon tomorrow afternoon. Are you going to buy the drinks or are you not?"

"All right, all right!" Erh Ts'an replied, "but you have yet to introduce the two new friends to me."

"Oh, yes!" Old Buddy said, "this here is Ho Chia-fu, a history major, the cream of the crop at Harvard. He is in the midst of writing a dissertation on *The Role of Mao Tse-tung in the History of Modern China*. Isn't that something? And this here is Ms. Chen Chin-chang, or in 'Chinglish,' Long-love Chen, but not Miss or Mrs., mind you. That's because she is neither married nor unmarried, sort of in between you might say. You can figure that one out for yourself. She used to specialize in Yuan drama at Yale, but as a result of the change of command following the uprising in the Chinese Department there, she had to suspend her studies. Her present specialty is translations. She is particularly fond of the poetic works of Hsin Ch'i-chi. Come Ms. Chen, 'O, I search in the crowd for her a thousand times …'" That was greeted by a roar of laughter. Even Erh Ts'an was somewhat embarrassed. In the dim light, he couldn't tell whether or not Ms. Chen blushed at that remark.

"Erh Ts'an, how have you been all these years? We hardly ever get to see you anymore. That's why, when we discovered your name on the Conference program, we all decided to drive up *en masse* to be your cheerleading squad. Seriously, you've had a number of books published, it shouldn't be too difficult for you to get a teaching job elsewhere, why keep hibernating in the South? With you that far away, it's difficult even to find enough people to get up a *mahjong* game."

The speaker was none other than Hu Hsien-hua who was not only in the Foreign Languages Department with Erh Ts'an at National Taiwan University, but his roommate to boot. After coming to the U.S., he had switched to Library Science and later found a job in New York. As for Erh Ts'an, he took a major in English. Upon graduation, he found a job teaching English in a small college in the South.

Aside from Hu Hsien-hua and Old Buddy, Erh Ts'an's other classmates included Chang Ta-feng, Ouyang Pu-hsiu, and Liu Fang-chang. After coming to the United States, Chang majored in Political Science, Ouyang in History, and Liu in Chinese. Like Erh Ts'an, they all graduated over ten years ago. At that time, jobs were not as difficult to come by as they are now. They all found jobs and settled down in their respective homes.

Since they were scattered all over the country, it was rare that they got to meet. When they first went their separate ways, they made a pact to keep in touch every two or three months. In the first couple of years, they managed somehow to honor their "gentlemen's agreement." Later on, however, as one by one they got married and had kids, it became impossible to keep their promises. Except for sending Christmas cards, they hardly ever corresponded. Fortunately, annual conventions have become an honored tradition in this country. In addition to the MLA, there is the Asian Studies Association, both of which duly held annual conventions in the big cities in the East, Midwest, or the West Coast. It was at such annual conventions that these old chums usually managed to get together. In the last two or three years, however, Erh Ts'an had been teaching English and the only conventions he attended were those sponsored by the MLA. And since this association was dominated by interest in European and American literature, it was rare to find Chinese friends at its conventions. His attendance at the Asian Studies Association convention to present his paper was, professionally speaking, in the nature of an "amateur," so Old Buddy was justified in his remark about the difficulty in getting to see him.

Hu Hsien-hua's quip about his "hibernating in the South" gave Erh Ts'an's heart a sour jolt. Though not particularly prestige-conscious, and English being his specialty, he never considered teaching English in the South as "hibernating." In fact, he took a certain pride in being a Chinese teaching English to Americans. Nevertheless, aside from a certain satisfaction derived from this "ego trip," he had become less and less enchanted with the teaching of English. Shakespeare and Milton may be great, but they are not the same as Li Po or Tu Fu after all. Every time he gave a lecture on English poetry, he wished his blue-eyed fair-haired students could read and appreciate, in the Chinese original, such lines as, "Do you not see the Yellow River cascading from heaven?" the way he himself appreciated the original version of "Thou hast nor youth nor age, but as it were an after dinner sleep, dreaming of both." How wonderful that would be! It was precisely because Erh Ts'an had succumbed to this silly missionary zeal that five years ago, he accepted a visiting professorship with the Chinese Department at a big university on the West Coast. If he chose to switch to teaching Chinese on a permanent basis, the head of the Chinese Department assured him, he would take the matter up with the university.

Something, however, changed all that into an empty dream. Erh Ts'an remembered it well. One morning, he was teaching a class in modern Chinese literature and the subject was the poetry of Li Chin-fa. One of the students, without raising his hand, addressed him by name and asked him point-blank:

"Erh Ts'an, do you realize that all the poets you selected, the like of Li Chin-fa and Hsu Chih-mo, moan and groan without cause, and are totally devoid of social significance?"

"Oh?" Erh Ts'an was somewhat taken aback. Before setting out from the South, he had been warned by friends

that the school he was going to had the reputation of being "tough," that the students and teaching staff took inordinate pride in being known as die-hard liberals and that any attempt to curtail their freedom of expression would be met with dire consequences. But when it's your turn to exercise the same freedom by expressing your differing viewpoint, they would take issue with you in relentless opposition. Now Erh Ts'an was confronting what he had only heard about before.

"Well, in that case," he responded, "which poets, in your opinion, do not fan into the category of those guilty of moaning and groaning without cause?"

The student was prepared. Holding a collection of poetry in his hand, he rattled off the names of Kuo Mo-jo, Ai Ching, Tien Chien, and needless to say, comrade Mao Tse-tung himself.

"Let me read for your benefit this poem by Tien Chien entitled *To My Comrades*." With that, he read in stilted Romanized Chinese the following:

Comrades, mount your horses,
The Revolution is our home.
Look at the horse's back.
How like a mountain range!
A mountain range crested
By an iridescent river of clouds and mists.

Erh Ts'an had not read this poem before. Worse still, the halting way in which the student handled the poem in his Yankee accent didn't help Erh Ts'an comprehension either. About all he could make out were words like "comrades" and "revolution." Since he was not in a position to comment on the merits of the poem, he said, "Granted, the poem you have just read is not without social significance. Nevertheless, we cannot downgrade a poem just because it is lacking in social significance. Poetry is poetry whether the subject is revolution or love, and they can co-exist, don't you think? What's more, this being a class on *Selected Readings in Modern Chinese Literature*, it stands to reason that I cannot give comprehensive coverage of all the modern poems that have been written over the last thirty years."

"That may be so," the student countered, "but that does not excuse you from your responsibility to include socially-conscious poets in your lectures."

Erh Ts'an may not have completely understood the definition of a socially-conscious poet, but he certainly had no doubt about the meaning of "responsibility."

Responsibility? He himself wasn't so sure what the word implied anymore. So far as he was concerned, the responsibility of being a teacher was to teach his students all he knew and to the best of his ability. Since there was no written stipulation by the university as to what to teach, and since a university was neither an elementary nor high school, he felt he was under no obligation to select any particular material or any particular writer or any poetry with "social significance." He was not opposed to teaching socially significant poetry per se, but that was his option, not his "responsibility."

The more he thought about it, the surer he was of the soundness of his position. Not wishing to create an impasse, however, he explained courteously to the student that since he was not too familiar with the works of Ai Ching and Tien Chien, he would be happy to study these poets with him individually, but that he did not feel sufficiently competent to deal with their works in class.

This conciliatory gesture on the part of Erh Ts'an had no effect on the belligerent attitude of the student. He could feel his hackles rising. He remembered saying to the student bluntly:

"I have my freedom to teach what I please, just as you have your freedom to select what courses to take. This is not a required course, and besides, as a visiting professor, I'm here for only one year. If you are not happy with my teaching and the material I selected for the course, there is nothing to prevent you from taking it next year instead."

This exchange led to something Erh Ts'an had not anticipated. It developed that the student took it upon himself to report the matter to the dean and the head of the department. That happened to be a year marked by student demonstrations and slogans demanding "student power." The matter put the department head John Liberal in quite a spot. It would have been too awkward to summon Erh Ts'an to his office for a formal "discussion." Instead, he invited him to a nearby bar for a late afternoon drink. After downing half his drink, John Liberal said, by way of opening the conversation:

"Dick came to my office yesterday." He was an American in his late fifties, a Harvard man. He had taught English at Peking University before the Communist take-over. By education and background, he was steeped in

the concepts of freedom and democracy. It was obvious that even before he opened the conversation, he felt himself to be in a ticklish situation. After breaking the silence, he took out his pipe, rubbed his tobacco and lit it, stalling for time.

"I'm not surprised," Erh Ts'an picked up the conversation to ease the tension. "I can also imagine the gist of his complaint. What I can say to you is very simple. I have tried to be reasonable and conciliatory. If Dick chooses to adopt a belligerent attitude, I have no choice but to respond in kind. The Chinese of my faith have lost the entire country, losing a job is no great disaster in comparison."

"Erh Ts'an," the head of the department said, "aren't you taking this more seriously than necessary? Dick is only a young whippersnapper, so why take issue with him? If that's what he wants to study, you could select one or two pieces just to make him happy. Why bring the matter to a head over a difference in political opinion?"

"Well, boss," Erh Ts'an addressed John Liberal in Chinese, "let's not lose sight of the fact that what is involved is not a matter of political opinion. If I am anti-Communist, that's my business as a Chinese. I have no wish to impose my views on anybody in your university. I myself may not appreciate the politically motivated poetry of Tien Chien and Ai Ching, but as a teacher, I realize only too well that politically motivated poetry is also poetry. My refusal to accede to Dick's demands yesterday had nothing to do with politics. First of all, it was Dick's belligerent attitude that got under my skin. Having lived in this country for over ten years, I am in many respects Amercianized, but please understand that insofar as human relations are concerned, I'm still a Chinese. The second point is, I have not made a serious study of the poetry of Ai Ching and Tien Chien. That is not my specialty. If I were to try to appear enthused about it just to satisfy Dick, I would not be honest with myself or with my students."

"Yes, I understand that very well," John Liberal remarked. "Nevertheless, the Dean's instructions—"

"Actually, there is no problem at all," Erh Ts'an broke in. "You could tell the Dean that I'm only a visiting professor, and that although my contract has a year to run, I would be quite willing to leave at the end of the semester. That way, the university could save half a year's salary. Please convey to him also that as a Chinese, I have entertained the highest respect for the American tradition of freedom and democracy, and that I hope to continue to do so."

It was apparent that what Erh Ts'an had said had a somewhat unsettling effect on the department head.

"Erh Ts'an," he said, in an attempt to reach a satisfactory solution, "let me talk to Dick tomorrow. I'll tell him to drop the course for the rest of the semester, and we'll settle the matter after the storm has blown over."

"I appreciate that very much," Erh Ts'an replied, "but whether or not the storm blows over, as soon as my contract runs out, I will return to the South."

"You mean you really won't consider staying on?" John Liberal asked in disbelief. To his way of thinking, it was inconceivable that anyone from some obscure university in the South could pass up an opportunity to teach in his prestigious institution.

"No, I think it's best that I go back to teaching English in the South," Erh Ts'an replied.

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"Hey, Erh Ts'an," Hu Hsien-hua could not help asking when he saw Erh Ts'an nursing his drink as if in reverie, "what's on your mind?"

"Oh, I'm sorry. I haven't been sleeping well the last couple of nights," he said by way of apology, and forced himself to liven up a bit. Not particularly noted for his social grace to begin with, Erh Ts'an had an aversion to baring his innermost thoughts in the company of strangers. Aside from the monologue carried on by Old Buddy, the party was not particularly convivial.

After the party had broken up, and sensing that Erh Ts'an had something on his mind, Hu Hsien-hua pulled him aside.

"Come, if you are not too tired, come to my room and talk about old times, just you and me and Ouyang Pu-hsiu. How about it?"

"Sounds like a good idea," Erh Ts'an replied, "and let's call room service for some coffee." Whereupon, he followed Hu Hsien-hua and Ouyang Pu-hsiu into the elevator.

Hu and Ouyang occupied a double room, much more comfortable than Erh Ts'an's. After the coffee had been brought, they puffed furiously on their cigarettes. Strange to say, although the three of them had known each other for close to twenty years and despite the fact that they had not met for a number of years, they seemed to be at a loss for words. All they did was blow smoke rings into the air. After a long pause, Ouyang Pu-hsiu said, somewhat tentatively:

"Did you know, Erh Ts'an, that Chang Ta-feng made a trip to the mainland recently?"

“Oh?” he asked casually. “No, I didn’t. Where I come from, even a copy of the Sunday Times is not that easy to come by.”

“Then you are not surprised?” Ouyang Pu-hsiu couldn’t resist asking, noting his apparent lack of curiosity.

“Should I be surprised?” Erh Ts’an remarked flatly. “Visiting the mainland is no big deal.”

His attitude had undergone a drastic change. . Only three years before, when he first heard that Wu Chien-jen, a fellow National Taiwan University alumnus and a distant cousin, had gone on a visit to the mainland, he couldn’t sleep a wink all night. “What made him do it?” he kept asking himself. Since Wu Chien-jen’s parents and brothers were all in Taiwan and he was not known to have relatives on the mainland, did he go just to watch the tidal bore at the Chientang River? It was only later that he learned that following his visit to the mainland, Wu Chien-jen’s stock skyrocketed in academic circles, and that the business at his wife’s restaurant increased by ten or twenty full-course banquets on an average night. In fact, a full-course banquet “*a la* Nixon” had to be ordered two weeks in advance.

Since Wu Chien-jen’s visit to the mainland, Erh Ts’an discovered that many of his former cronies at National Taiwan University began to keep their distance. He thought at first that he had somehow offended them, until he learned that they were all awaiting visas to visit the mainland. Since that time, it was no longer news to Erh Ts’an who did or did not visit the mainland.Knowing Erh Ts’an’s feelings on the subject, Hu Hsien- hua could not help bursting into laughter.

“Erh Ts’an,” he said, “snap out of it! At least, you can trust me and Ouyang. We have not visited, and we have no wish to visit the mainland. Are you satisfied now?”

At that, he himself broke into a smile. It was only then that the ice was broken. The best friends are those who know what’s in each other’s hearts. After all, what’s the point in friends talking when they have to hold things back?

They settled down to exchange the latest tidbits. It turned out that Ouyang Pu-hsiu had been teaching Chinese history at a university in the midwest noted for being ultra-activist, and that in the last few years he had had a number of confrontations similar to that Erh Ts’an had experienced. More nimble-minded than Erh Ts’an, Ouyang, claimed to have a secret weapon, so that he could handle any situation without allowing it to get out of hand.

“What’s your secret?” Erh Ts’an wanted to know.

“Nothing can be simpler,” Ouyang replied, after lighting his cigarette and taking a sip of coffee, “but you’ve got to stare death in the face in order to survive. If the opponent is an American, I would say to him, ‘Americans like to meddle in other people’s business, and yet, when other people meddle in what you consider to be your business, you start to scream bloody murder. I am a guest in your country. If you don’t like me., you can take whatever measures as are appropriate to get me out, but you leave my country alone! If you can tear Nixon to shreds, why can’t I do the same to Mao Tse-tung? If, on the other hand, the opponent is a fellow countryman,” Ouyang continued, warming up to the subject, “the problem is even simpler. I’d keep my cool and simply say, ‘It is your prerogative to love your “motherland” just as it is mine to love Taiwan. Let’s put our love where our mouth is by serving the people we profess to love. Why don’t we both surrender our permanent residence in the United States? You start applying for a visa to return to the mainland and I do the same to return to Taiwan. The one who sneaks back to the United States is a son of a turtle.’”

“The ploy is guaranteed to work every time,” Ouyang concluded with finality. “Here in the United States, they cannot intimidate you with the little Red Book. The most they can do is to call you a poisonous weed.”

Carried away by his own eloquence, he burst into laughter.

“How about that, Erh Ts’an?” Ouyang asked. “If I were on the spot to pass on to you some tricks of the trade, you would not have had to take any gaff from the kid. Do you still want to change jobs? I understand that the University of Central California is looking for somebody to teach Chinese literature. Why don’t you give it a try?”

He dismissed the idea.

First, his application might not be successful.

Second, now that he was a family man, he felt he ought to stay put.

Third, there were ways to transmit Chinese culture other than teaching Chinese literature. For the past few years, in addition to teaching English, he had been translating Chinese literature into English on the side. There was little tangible advantage in delving into Chinese literature while teaching English. Perhaps more so because of this, he felt somehow that he was doing his bit in passing on the cultural legacy bequeathed by his forebears.

The three of them talked about this and that for two or three hours. Soon it was past three o’clock in the morning. Remembering next days’ agenda, Erh Ts’an got up to take his leave.

"Erh Ts'an," Ouyang grasped his hand tightly and said in a serious vein. "Now that you know that I and Hu Hsien-hua have not become turncoats, let's keep in touch. Too bad there are only the three of us left, not enough to get up a *mahjong* game." …

39.151 & 113.110 1. Grandma Qi **2.** Chinese Roses: **Two Short Stories**\fn{by Li Tuo (1939-)} Hohhot, Inner Mongolian Autonomous Region, China (M) 9

1

First came the pungent aroma of chives mixed with scallions and ginger. Must be the Changs in the north house getting ready to make dumplings—pork-and-chive dumplings. Then came the smell of burnt wheatcakes. That's probably Lil' Four, fourth daughter of the Liu's to the west. The girl was forever lost in a book—must have forgotten to give the pancakes a flip. Still later came the delicious smell of fish stewing. But Grandma Qi had no idea whose house this was from, nor could she be bothered. She was too busy minding the goings-on in her own kitchen. The little cookhouse was right across the courtyard from her room, and bustling about inside was her daughter-in-law Yu-hua, just home from work. With difficulty Grandma Qi managed to raise herself a little so she could look out the window. But smack on the windowsill were two pots of cactus blocking her view. Worse yet, her glaucoma had been getting so bad the last couple of years, all she could make out was a shadow here, an image there, even though she gazed long and hard in the direction of the kitchen.

No telling what that woman was up to now. Just for a few moments, though, she'd had the vague feeling that Yu-hua was stoking the fire. If only she weren't half deaf! Then she'd be able to figure out what was happening just by listening to the sounds from the kitchen—and she wouldn't be far off the mark. But now, now she had no way of knowing whether Yu-hua was actually stoking the furnace. This filled her with alarm. Straining to peer around those two pestiferous plants, she propped herself up on her arms and tried to ease toward the edge of the bed. But her legs, still crossed together, seemed rooted to the bed and refused to budge. Undaunted, she struggled to lean forward, stretching her arms until both hands were grabbing onto the edge of the bed, then summoned up all her strength and gave it another try. But it was no good. What used to work every single time just wasn't working today.

She refused to give up. Clenching her teeth, she kept tugging at the edge of the bed as if her very life depended on it, even though her heart was pounding and her breath came in short gasps. A sudden bout of coughing finally made her let go, a coughing fit that seemed to turn her inside out and in no time at all had covered her face, neck and back with large beads of sweat. She felt as though she were choking on a plug of cotton so that even her eyes were popping out of her head, and it was all she could do to gasp for air in that brief spell after one attack was over, before the next one began. She was terrified she wouldn't be able to breathe, that she would die just like that.

Even so, she had no thought for anything but the kitchen. Was Yu-hua puttering with the coal stove or not? What was that woman really up to? Eyes swimming in tears as well as sweat, she could no longer even see shapes and shadows, nothing but a pale shimmering blur. Just now she'd sensed that the fire had gone out in the stove and Yu-hua was poking about trying to rekindle it. In that case she would have been able to smell it by now, that white smoke from the kindling just before the fire roared to life. But at the moment there wasn't even a hint of smoke in the air. Instead it was the pleasant aroma of dumplings—pork-and-chive dumplings, freshly cooked—that came wafting over from the Changs' house. Fresh out of the pan, dumplings always smell so good.

*

What a sharp nose she had when she was little! She was famous for it. Back then her father used to drink—not much, really, just a jigger or so as soon as he came in the door after pulling a rickshaw all day, and then he'd go straight to bed. It was she who went to buy the liquor every day, carrying a little tin flask and shuffling along in her mother's cloth shoes, the ones that were so worn the heels had fallen off. Every day she did this, even when it snowed.

How cold winters were back then! Each time it snowed there'd be half a foot on the ground, at the least ankle-deep. One New Yea''s Day—which year she couldn't recall now—there had been a big snowfall overnight, and in the morning nobody could open his front door. If you so much as coughed, a clump of snow would tumble off a branch. Back then things were so different. Now, heaven knows, winters aren't winters and summers aren't summers. But back then things were different.

Take drinking water, for instance-now there's something you don't see anymore. Just imagine—delivered door-

to-door every morning, in a creaky wagon pulled by a little donkey who knew where to stop without being told. Then there's the layer of moss covering the water wagon—how pretty it was, so green and moist and lush. And the water? Straight from a well, none of that bleaching powder nonsense. Back then even business was done differently. In the evenings the wonton peddler would come right up to your door with his little pushcart, the wontons bubbling away in the pot. She never ate any, though—couldn't afford them. But she did taste those yundou\fn{A note reads: *A kind of bean*.} *pies. They were sold at night too, late at night, when the streets were almost empty. It was then that the peddler would come around with a wooden bucket on his back.*

"Yundooouuu—" His voice rang like one of those Peking opera singers, his cry could be heard several alleys away. These days "home delivery" is something special, but back then everything was delivered to your door. Smash a pot or break a bowl, you could get the tinker to fix it all right on your front step.

Except for the wine sellers—they never made deliveries. So every single day she'd have to carry that tin flask with the big dent in the middle to buy wine, no more than a jigger each time. Every single day she'd flop along in her mother's big shoes that no longer had any heels. Rain or shine, winter or summer, she had to bring this wine home or she'd be in for a thrashing. What a good nose she had back then. One sniff and she could tell if water had been added to the wine, and how much. Every day she'd have to go around to several shops to find the strongest drink. Once she had to go all the way to Sipailou be/ore she found wine that didn't have too much water in it. When she got home she was spanked but good, so hard even the broom handle snapped. What a sharp nose she had back then.

*

She was growing more and more alarmed. Who knows, maybe it was this very panic that made the awful coughing fit go away, just like that. Quickly she wiped her tears with a sleeve and struggled to look out the window again, but the two cactus plants were still blocking her view. How many times had she told them to move those things! Her son had promised, but never did anything about it. Now suddenly a thought popped into her head: Yu-hua must have been behind it all. Of course! It must have been she who stopped her husband from moving them. On purpose. That woman was so mean she was capable of anything. Time and time again Yu-hua had lied to her, pretending to cook with the coal stove, but each time Grandma had managed to see through the trickery. Not for a moment could she let her guard down with this woman. Something fishy was going on right now. Dimly she could tell that the door to the cookhouse was open (she had laid down the law to her son about this: anytime Yu-hua was in there cooking the kitchen door had to stay open), and through it she could see a figure stirring about that had to be Yu-hua.

But what was she actually doing in there? If she had been chopping firewood for the stove, then where was the smoke? It should have begun drifting over a long time ago. All these years Grandma had been breathing in this stuff, she'd never mistake it if it was in the air. But at the moment all she could smell were the pleasant odors of cooking from the other houses, no matter how long and hard she sniffed. That's it, Yu-hua must be up to her tricks again.

All at once Grandma could feel her hairs standing on end. Though the coughing had stopped earlier her heart was still racing and her breath still came in gasps. Now she became worse. Her heart thumped away even more furiously and she could hardly breathe. Once again she felt like she was choking on some- thing. She tried to shout, but a fit of coughing rattled her from head to toe, as though someone had seized her by the shoulders and was shaking her vigorously, violently. Even so, she still tried to shout, shouted inwardly, but not a sound came out.

*

That's what Uncle Chang said, and he never talks through his hat. There was this household with a propane stove that had somehow sprung a leak. It was in one of those apartment houses, not sure how many stories exactly, but anyway a pretty tall building. The people in that household had all gone to work, so nobody was home at the time. The leaking gas went all over the apartment, then seeped out onto the balcony, slid down to the balcony below, and snuck into the apartment downstairs like a thief in the night. Not a soul saw what was going on.

But it so happened that someone was home downstairs—most likely the man of the house, who wanted a smoke, who struck a match. And the whole place went up in flames—sheets of fire hanging in the air, fire shooting up his nose and into his lungs, lungs that were filled with gas. That was how the man died, burnt alive. What's more, said Uncle Chang, it could have been much worse. If the canister itself had exploded, the whole building would have been blown sky-high.

Now what kind of a person would invent such an evil, evil thing? Just the thought of it was enough to make her flesh crawl. To put a bomb in your own home and then to cook on it—how vicious can you get?!

*

Ever since the day she fainted she had not seen that propane stove again. They stuck it in a corner along the north wall of the cook-house so she wouldn't be able to see it at all, even when the door was wide open. At first she thought her son had wanted it out of sight, out of mind, so as not to upset her again. It was only later, after she found out that many a time Yu-hua had cooked with the gas stove, that she realized she had been fooled. Yu-hua would pretend to use the coal stove by setting a pan on top of it, but she wouldn't bother to light the fire. Now each day, every day, as soon as it came time to cook, Grandma Qi's heart would begin to pound and her hands, legs and eyelids would all begin to tremble. Even after the food was set down in front of her she'd still be afraid and suspicious, now even meals cooked on the coal stove would taste of gas to her.

Since Yu-hua had come home later than usual today she might well try her old tricks again. She had to watch that woman. What she should do is call Uncle Chang over and have him look in on Yu-hua. Get him to keep an eye on her. It'd be all right, by now he should have eaten enough dumplings already. But she was coughing so hard she could barely catch her breath, never mind calling out to anyone. This coughing just wouldn't let go of her today.

Out of desperation she began to pinch herself in the thighs, pinched them hard. But her legs, which were almost numb to begin with, didn't feel any pain at all, nothing—as if they weren't even connected to her. She tried slapping herself, left hand against left cheek—thwack!—right hand against right cheek—thwack!—back and forth, a dozen times and more. But even this didn't hurt much. For one thing, she was shaking so hard from the coughing, like a tree in a storm, that she had hardly any strength left in her arms. For another, her face was so slippery with sweat her hands kept sliding right off. Finally she had to stop.

Again she looked over at the kitchen, again she could see nothing but Yu-hua's figure flitting about. That was enough to fill her heart with dread and send a shiver through her body. All of a sudden she had an idea. A pair of scissors lay on the bed, several feet away from her. Now if she could only hurl them against the window and break the glass, Uncle Chang and the other neighbors would hear the crash and come running to see what had happened, and then she'd get her chance. But even though she bent down as far as she could the scissors remained beyond her reach. Nor could she stay in that position for long. Coughing while bent over like that, she thought she'd suffocate on the spot. She had to wait till the worst of the hacking was over before she could lean forward again and continue to stretch and grope. Once or twice her fingers brushed against the scissors, but she just couldn't get a firm grip on them.

In desperation she began pinching herself in the thighs again. That gas canister kept spinning before her eyes. She seemed to hear a loud rumble, followed by bodies and blood splattering everywhere. A cold sweat broke out beneath the layer of warm perspiration that already covered her. But somehow all that desperation paid off, and at last she closed her fingers around the scissors.

Just when she was about to throw them at the window, however, she began to have second thoughts. What a pity it would be to smash the glass! Almost fifty years of living in this house, and in all that time she had never broken anything, except for one goldfish bowl. That bowl must have been at least a foot wide. She lifted her arm to toss the scissors, but still couldn't bring herself to let go.

At that very moment a faint whiff of smoke drifted over. In an instant she had dropped the scissors and was sniffing hard. That's it all right, she knew this odor only too well. Thank goodness she had held on to the scissors. What if she had broken the glass for nothing? She'd never have forgiven herself. With the smell of smoke in her nostrils she began to relax.

Somewhere a child was throwing a temper tantrum. Grandma listened. The cries were coming in through the rear window, which opened onto a narrow alley. Someone was spanking the child right under this window. She seemed to hear the little one screaming:

"A donkey roll!\fn{A note reads: *A kind of sweet pastry*.} I want a donkey roll!"

*

Donkey rolls aren't all that good, they stick to your teeth and make you gag. But as a child how she too had loved them! First time she ever tasted one was when her father took her to Longfu Temple. That was also her first visit to the fair. After that she must have gone back umpteen times, but they were never as much fun as the first. Now the Longfu Temple grounds have been turned into the People's Market. She went there once, a couple of years after the change, but what a far cry it was from the hustle and bustle of the old fair. Call it a market if you like, it was no more than a department store without the big building. What's so special about that?!

On the little street right opposite the main gate was her favorite place at the old Longfu Fair, a bird market where she used to hang around watching all the activity and excitement. What a lot of birds there were—mynahs,

parakeets, guinea hens, love birds, peacocks, pheasants, even a kind of bird that was supposed to have black bones (its meat was delicious, or so people said)—every kind of bird under the sun. She'd heard tell that even tigers were sold there sometimes, but she never saw any. Nor could you buy a donkey roll there—for that you had to go into the fair.

Inside Longfu Temple were three streets. The one in the middle was always the busiest because that's where most of the acts were set up. You could watch Third Treasure doing his wrestling and acrobatics, Mr. and Mrs. Mutt in their "Family Fun" show, Cloud Flier and his comic operas, plus storytellers, picture lantern shows and magicians galore. Mixed in with these booths were food stalls selling things like fermented soybean drinks, wontons, fried sausages, seasoned millet mush, plum cakes, cotton candy, and buckwheat noodles. Further along you'd find the face readers, fortune-tellers, and peddlers who sold those picture cards that came inside every packet of cigarettes and were collected by children.

Beyond these was the back gate, where she once saw a beggar sitting on the ground pounding his chest with a gray brick. His hair and whiskers were snow white, but his body was filthy black. Next to him sat a big black dog. People said the animal was actually sent by the chief of beggars to watch his followers. If any of them tried to pocket some of the money, the dog would pounce on the poor jellow and tear away at his delicate parts. No telling if the story was true.

The street on the west side of the temple had a lot of food stalls as well. Right inside the west gate was a big stand selling every kind of rice-flour cake you could imagine. In winter there were bean cakes steamed in straw baskets and served piping hot; in summer there were chilled custards, cool and refreshing; autumn meant chestnut cakes, of course; and spring brought those little date pastries glazed in a syrup seasoned with fresh roses. Much tastier than donkey rolls, all of them. Back then her family lived right near Longfu Temple, and she never missed the fair days on the ninth and tenth of every month. So as not to get a licking at home she'd always bring her little brother along. She would buy him taffy shaped into a monkey, or a noisemaker, or some marbles. That monkey-shaped taffy was the best thing for keeping a kid happy, it was so cheap and filling—but now you can't find it anymore.

How many years ago that was! She wasn't afraid of dying, but oh, how she wished she could visit the fair one last time. Three nights in a row last week she dreamed that she was back at Longfu Temple with her little brother, strolling around buying a feather duster here, a goldfish there, a steam basket further along. These days people use pressure cookers instead. She heard tell those things could also explode and blow your head wide open. These newfangled doodads in the home nowadays—why is it that all of them behave just like bombs? What is this world coming to?

*

She must have dozed off for a little while. Then with a start she woke up again. She was forever doing that. Night or day, she never could get a sound sleep, never any rest. No wonder she was all tuckered out. Raising herself slightly, Grandma Qi looked out the window at the kitchen again, but, just as before, couldn't make out a thing. Those two cactus plants were such a nuisance. What's more, some time ago the Lius' big black-and-white tabbycat had jumped onto the windowsill and plunked itself down right between the two flowerpots. Now she couldn't even see the kitchen door.

The afternoon sun cast its slanting rays onto the tabby and the plants, and then, carrying the shadows of the cat and the cactuses, found its way onto Grandma's bed, and onto her hands, knees and feet, warming them through and through. Once more she started to doze off, but with a jerk she came to again. Right away she sniffed the air and became suspicious. What happened to that smoke? Was the kindling all burned up already?

Then suddenly it hit her: Yu-hua must have fooled her again! That smoke must have been another one of her tricks. The woman was a real live fox spirit, she knew exactly how to cast a spell on people. Why else would her son have insisted on buying the propane stove, come hell or high water? Yu-hua must have been behind it all, it was all her doing! If it weren't for that woman there'd be peace under heaven. If it weren't for that woman, Grandma would never have ended up paralyzed from the waist down, a useless lump stuck on a bed, not quite alive and not quite dead. Without realizing it she began to grind her teeth, making all kinds of loud, crunching noises.

*

That day she and Uncle Chang were sitting under the trellis, sipping tea and shooting the breeze. Uncle Chang was singing her son's praises to her:

"That boy of yours, heh, he's like this!"

And he raised his right fist, then stuck out his thumb. At that very moment her son came into the courtyard

pushing his bicycle, and there tied onto the back was a metal doohickey, kind of round and kind of long. As soon as she saw that thing she felt all her hairs standing on end.

Once when she was a child she had seen a ghost. It was just getting dark when she passed by a graveyard surrounded by cypress trees, and she could see fireflies twinkling here and there among the branches and in the clumps of overgrown weeds. The ghost was standing right behind a headstone, ashen white from head to toe and not a single feature on its face, just like one of those blank tiles in a mah-jongg game. That scared the living daylights out of her. Every hair standing straight up on her head, she ran home like a wisp of smoke. Afterward she was sick for three whole days.

But keeping a gas stove in the house was even more terrifying than keeping a ghost at home, it would make your hairs stand on end every single day. The ruckus that day shook all the neighbors in the alley. If she hadn't collapsed in a dead faint right then and there she would have blocked the cookhouse door for at least three days and three nights. At the time she was also coughing and wheezing so hard she couldn't get a word out. How she had wanted to give that wench a few good swings of her walking stick! But her arms refused to obey. For the rest of her life she would never forget those eyes, those ferocious eyes.

She had wanted to go down on her knees before her son, right there in front of the whole neighborhood: I'm begging you on my knees! Look, everyone! See how this mother is kneeling to her son! But somehow, as soon as she saw those eyes of her daughter-in-law's she fainted dead away. Death is like a light going out. If only she had died right then.

*

Even though she didn't hear that crackling at the beginning, she could tell from the delicious aroma that the minced scallions had just been tossed into the hot oil and were still sizzling away in the pan. That must be Yu-hua getting ready to stir fry. The smell was so close by it could only have come from their own little cookhouse.

Right away Grandma relaxed. It's going to be all right now, she'd finally made it through another day. And not just her, but all dozen or so families in their courtyard, plus the people in the immediate neighborhood, fifty or sixty households in all—they too had made it through another day. Only the tabby on the windowsill was none the wiser, still fast asleep. But at last even it had had enough. It stood up and rubbed itself against the flowerpot, then, arching its back and lifting its head, let out a great big yawn before jumping off the ledge and scampering away. Now the space between the two pots was empty once more.

Quickly she raised herself and stared out the window at the kitchen again, only to find the sun shining right in her face. The wider she opened her eyes, the more blinding the light, so bright and harsh that tears came to her eyes. With the back of her hand she wiped them off, but as soon as she lifted her head and looked out the window tears would gush out again. Tearing, wiping, wiping, tearing—she kept this up for a long time, although she knew in her heart that, even if the sun was not blinding her, she still would not be able to see clearly into the kitchen.

But she had to keep looking. Some time later it occurred to her to scrunch her eyes up into tiny slits and shade them with her hands. There, that's better. She could look over at the kitchen again. Now for some reason her heart began to thump and she had a feeling that something was about to go wrong. But what? She couldn't say. Nevertheless the pounding of her heart grew worse. In her mind she kept telling herself: steady there, steady does it. That seemed to work. She could see something at last. She could sense a figure like that of Yu-hua's stirring about the cookhouse, though she still couldn't see what she was up to. Again she told herself: steady there, steady.

And that was when she finally saw something not quite right about the kitchen. If Yu-hua was actually cooking with the coal stove, then she should have been facing the south wall. Why then did she keep bustling around on the north side of the kitchen? Grandma Qi felt a sharp cramp in her chest, as if someone had gripped her heart tightly and was squeezing it. for dear life. Frantically she sniffed and snorted, but she could smell nothing unusual in the air. She had long heard that gas had a special odor to it, though she could never tell what it was. She must be getting old, after all—her nose just wasn't what it used to be. No, no, she couldn't just sit there, she had to think of some way to look into the kitchen and get help if need be. She must move herself over to the edge of the bed, must try again even though she had tried just now but failed.

Taking a deep breath she thrust herself forward again, stretching her arms until her fingers closed around the edge of the bed, then pulled and tugged and hauled as if her very life depended on it. This time, she thought, this time she had a chance. She held her breath. She felt that come what may she could not let go of this breath, she had to pull herself over, do what she had to do while she was still holding on to it. How was she to know that just when she could feel her legs beginning to budge, another fit of coughing would seize her like the dickens and turn her inside out again?

But this time she didn't let go. Her hands gripped the edge of the bed ever more tightly. She had only one

thought on her mind: she had to see what was going on in the kitchen, even if that was the last thing she ever did.

2

Lu Xiaoling loved flowers and her favorites were Chinese roses, so when she saw a pot of them in the florists, she hesitated for minute or two and then bought them.

Chinese roses are a rare variety of rose. When Lu Xiaoling boarded the bus she carefully placed the flowers beside her on the seat. The snow-white blooms, the size of saucers, were shaking and rocking with the rhythm of the bus. A light perfume came from the petals, immediately attracting the attention of the other passengers nearby. Many unabashedly looked a both the flowers and their owner, and it was evident from their gazes that they appreciated what they saw.

Lu Xiaoling of course was sensitive to their stares: she knew perfectly well that although she was over thirty she still looked very youthful and in fact was quite beautiful. She was especially attractive today as she was wearing a new pleated, print skirt. The skirt was a light purple and it really complemented the blooms beside her. But she appeared nonchalant, her eyes on the traffic.

The bus quickly drove out of the city and closer and closer to her stop. She was no longer thinking about the flowers but instead was anxious about her home. For one thing, her husband, Li Mingyan, had not come home for three days. Would he return today? Before he left they had quarreled. If he returned today how should she greet him? Should she pretend to be angry still and force him to apologize? That might work. But there was his temper to consider. If he refused to admit he was wrong, then neither could back down.

Another idea was to pretend she had forgotten the whole unhappy incident and they could cheer each other up admiring the pot of roses. However, this plan had its shortcomings. Of late Mingyan was often impatient with household matters and .this really upset her. If she let him win every time he would probably become even bossier and this would not be good either.

After several stops to rest, Lu had managed to carry the flowers up to her fourth floor flat. Her new pleated skirt was soiled from holding the pot but she did not have time to worry. She hurriedly checked the wall beside her front door. There, she had pinned a small note:

"Comrade Li Mingyan, when you come home please remember that I've just polished the floor. Don't tramp all over it and ruin someone else's hard work."

The note was still there. Lu was disappointed as it meant her husband had not come back. At the same time she heaved a sigh of relief as she had worried that if he had returned he would be oblivious to the note and tramp dirt all over the clean floor. In order to polish the floor she had risen around four o'clock that morning and slaved alone for ages—even now her back still ached.

Lu placed the flowers in the hallway and from the top of the radiator, picked up two small mats to use as foot pads. She opened her door and placed them on the floor. She stepped gingerly on the foot pads like a novice ice skater and then stood dumb-struck. What was she looking at? Li had returned and was fast asleep on their bed. While polishing the waxed floor, Lu had used today also for a general clean-up. She had put on a new quilt cover and sheets and had changed the pillow slips, but now here was Li, still wearing work clothes that were filthy from top to bottom, stained with sweat, scorch marked and covered with factory dust, and in trousers so extraordinarily dirty that you could not even guess their original white color—here he was, wearing this outfit, fast asleep on their bed. Evidently it had crossed his mind how appallingly filthy he was and how the bed would be if he lay on it, as he had put a plastic cloth and a towel underneath, but they were far from clean. Lu had used the plastic today as a dust cover, and the towel in fact was a dish towel. How could he?

When Lu saw him she was furious, hurt and resentful. Apart from that, she felt numb, a feeling she had never had before, as if Mingyan had suddenly become a stranger to her. Could this man in work clothes sprawled asleep on her bed be her husband? He had come home from work filthy before but never quite so filthy as now—what's more, and to Lu this was the crux of the matter—in the past he had always been careful to change in the hallway and had never worn his work clothes into the flat. How could he have slipped so badly?

It was not that Lu despised the dirt on the work clothes. As she was a factory worker herself she knew the grime was part and parcel of industrial work, even for a technician like Li. It would be ridiculous to expect him to be spotlessly clean. But that was not the problem. What really infuriated and hurt her was that Li had become more and more indifferent to her, to their home and to the many things that they had both cherished so much over the years. Of late they seemed to be always at loggerheads and snapping at each other. This was the trouble.

Lu suddenly felt utterly drained and was about to lie down on the sofa for a rest. When she kicked off the

slippers she realized the floor was already filthy with muddy footprints everywhere. She did not know why but this really was the last straw. She saw that a pair of heavy suede work boots had been flung down beside the bed. Rushing up, she grabbed the boots and threw them into the corridor, and then peeling and yanking the socks off Li's feet, she tossed them away as well. Then she opened all the windows including the windows of the "conservatory." This was in fact a room which Li had made four years ago by glassing in the sun porch. After this Lu ran back to the bed and began shaking Li and screaming,

"Still sleeping? Get up!"

She shook him quite hard but still he kept on sleeping. Finally she grabbed both of her husband's shoulders and really heaved, and then he stirred. He blinked several times as if he did not know where he was, until he caught Lu's furious gaze and sat up with a start.

"What's the matter, Xiaoling? Why are you so angry?"

"What's the matter! Look at the mess you've made of the flat!"

Li looked down at the bed, looked at the opened windows, looked down at his boots and socks in the hallway and realizing the seriousness of the situation, gave a long sigh. He had not slept in days. Was it three days and four nights, or *vice versa*? He had lost track. The time had gone by like a whirlwind, a whirlwind caused by their steel plant's frenzy to cast a two hundred and eighteen ton steel ingot. That afternoon, when the last of the steel had been poured, all the workers and cadres had crowded around the red hot blast furnace. No one had wanted to leave and instead had gazed with admiration and pride at the towering colossus in the furnace sand pit. This was an engineering feat of international stature.

Li Mingyan was not in the crowd. He was off to the side, alone, quietly smoking a cigarette. This was quite in character, for he preferred to slowly mull things over by himself rather than join the general hubbub. He had taken a few puffs when the party secretary, Liu, came over and sat with him on the pile of bricks. Liu said in a grave voice:

"There's something I'd like to discus with you." Li thought it was about a new job assignment.

"What is it?" he asked. Liu just as solemnly said,

"Go home and sleep." Li was surprised at this and said,

"I can't. Tonight I've got a class to teach, I've got to coach some young people from neighboring factories in physics. I've already postponed. it once, I can't put it off again."

"Well, at least go home and see if everything is okay. Today's your wife's day off."

So, Li had come home. Who would have thought it would cause so much trouble. In truth he was really exhausted. He had only intended to rest a short time, not sleep through until Lu's return. Now, looking at the filthy bedclothes and his wife's face, white with anger, he did not know what to say. Should he explain that he was so short on sleep that he felt dizzy? Should he tell her of their triumph in casting the two hundred and eighteen tons of steel, and thus calm her down? No, it was no use. He looked at her silently and suddenly his heart was filled with sorrow. How miserable it was when they could no longer talk to each other.

"You, come on, say something, why don't you?"

What did she want him to say? She was at a loss herself. All she knew was that she felt angry and vindictive.

"Xiaoling, don't be mad. I'll wash everything. As Lu spoke he got up, rolled up the bed clothes and took them into the kitchen. He could not find the wash pan in the kitchen so he went into the hallway to look for it. The wash pan was in the corner, along with a lot of odds and ends, and in their midst were the roses. Without thinking he placed the flowers on the heater and bent down to pick up the pan.

The action of suddenly lowering his head made him quite dizzy, and afraid that he would black out, he reached up to grab something. His free hand knocked the flowers off the heater and the pot came down with a crash.

Hearing the commotion Lu rushed into the hallway. For a minute she did not realize what had happened but then she stopped and saw the broken pieces. Not only was the pot smashed, but the soil had spilled everywhere, exposing the roots of the flowers. The two main stalks were bent, and the snow-white petals were scattered.

She could not help bursting into tears. The most piercing sorrow was the change in Mingyan. He had become a stranger to her. She recalled someone comparing love to a flower. No matter how precious and wonderful it is in first bloom, with marriage must come eventual withering. When she thought of this she stood, in a frenzy, alternately sobbing and screaming at Li:

"You're selfish, you're selfish! If only I'd known this before …"

Without completing the sentence she turned and ran back to the main room, flung herself on the sofa and gave herself up to bitter sobbing.

While all this was happening, Li. still felt wretchedly dizzy. He held the wash pan in one hand and steadied

himself on the heater with the other. After a while the flickerings and blackness in his eyes receded and the swaying ceased. He blinked and looked around to see what he had done this time. He had not taken in his wife's outburst but her sobbing was enough to make him realize what must have happened.

He slowly squatted and inspected the damage. He was also a flower lover. In the past, particularly during the recent political turmoil of the Anti-Confucius, Anti-Lin Piao campaign,\fn{Lin Piao (1908?-1971), former Commander of the People's Liberation Army and the officially designated heir to Mao Tse-tung, apparently made an unsuccessful attempt to assassinate Mao, but died with his family when his aircraft was shot down and crashed over Northeast China. Confucius and Confucianism were attacked as an individual and a philosophical system essentially in a fundamentally incompatible conflict with the direction in which the Chinese Communist Party wished to lead the people of China.} he would sit for hours alone in the conservatory with the flowers. Thus when he saw what a lovely plant he had ruined he was really upset and immediately tried to salvage it. He could not find a suitable flower pot so he took a cracked ceramic pot from the kitchen and tenderly transplanted the flowers into it.

He then carried the pot back into the main room. thinking to cheer Lu up. But when he saw her, her face buried, sobbing her heart out, he stopped dead.

Obviously cheering her up would be no easy thing. What should he do? Apologize to her? But for what wrong should he apologize for? In fact the problem now was not who should apologize to whom. The basic problem was their estrangement. In nearly every respect they had grown apart, and now had conflicting views on life, their family and love. But this estrangement was only a recent thing, so surely he could think of a way to heal the rift before it worsened.

But how difficult it was! That afternoon, when he and Party Secretary Liu were walking through the gate on their way out of the steel plant, Liu had casually commented (why had he brought this up? Had he perhaps heard about their rows? Yes, for sure!):

"Little Li, in my opinion, love can't be philosophically dissected and analyzed. You can compare it to a tree, and you know how difficult it is for a tree to mature without mishap. From the seedling onwards, you have to watch for insects, disease, drought, storms: you really can't afford to take it for granted."

Well, if their love were a tree it really was stricken. What was worse, even as a seedling, there must have been something amiss …

A shrill bell interrupted his thoughts. Before he had nodded off he had set the alarm in case he did not make his night class. Now the alarm hurried him on.

"Xiaoling, I've got a class tonight and I have to run. When it's over we'll discuss this, OK?"

She did not answer, she did not even lift her head, so woeful was her crying …

*

When Lu Xiaoling finally stopped the flow of tears the sky was already dark. Outside she could see the neighboring apartments' lights diffused through the rustling poplar leaves. Further away she could make out the silhouettes of a few factory chimneys, still clearly risible in the fading light.

Lu stood up, and whilst gazing out the window, came to a decision. She would go to Li's factory straight away to drop off his key, which he had left behind in the rush, and then would go to her mother's house. In any case, that was where her children already were!

*

When Lu arrived at the plant, it was easy to locate Li. As soon as she had inquired she was told,

"Oh, he's giving night classes in the building over there."

The building they pointed out was dwarfed by the enormous workshops of the plant, but even from afar it seemed all of its windows were especially well lit, as if it were a big auditorium.

She hesitated to enter it. As it was almost nine o'clock she had supposed classes would have been over by now. She was in a dilemma. A group of young workers who had given her directions asked,

"Aren't you Li's wife? Go in and sit in on his class for a bit. Have you ever heard him lecture? If I were his wife I'd want to attend everyone of them. Go on! The class will be over in a minute."

After opening the small metal door to the building Lu was immediately hit by the odor of machine oil. Then she heard Li's voice over the microphone,

"Well class, today we've finished going over this lesson on electricity from the senior high school physics text. We should stop now, but before we do I'd like to leave the text for a minute and say a word or two of my own about electricity."

As soon as Lu had entered the room she had been astounded. It was in fact a workshop, but there were people everywhere, not only on the workshop floor itself, but perched on machines, on window sills, on cabinets, on the

metal stairs leading to an overhead crane, even in the half empty crane itself, everywhere there were people avidly listening. Among them were workers wearing blue visored safety helmets, electrical welders with their canvas work clothes, machinists whose sleeves were thick with machine oil and molders who had. rushed to class without washing their faces. Even more people had changed from work clothes and now sat holding pens and balancing notebooks on their knees, their faces alert. Everyone's gaze was focused on the blackboard on which were written numerous physics formulas and mathematical notation. Above the blackboard was the slogan:

Let's mobilize, struggle and accomplish the great task of the New Period.

Next to the blackboard was a floor model microphone, and there stood Li. He still wore his stained and scorched work clothes, and his cap with the dark blue safety goggles. His enthusiasm, lively speech and magnetism were communicated to everyone there.

"Class, I want to take the discovery of electricity and its application as an example to point out the speed of human progress. We all know that it was the discovery of fire and its application that allowed primitive man to differ from animals. That was an enormous advance for mankind. How long did the process take? At least five hundred thousand years. In 1782 in North America there was an ordinary printer, named Franklin, who one stormy evening used a kite to conduct the electricity from a lightning flash to the ground, thus igniting some methylated spirits. From this the study of electricity was founded. How long ago was that? Only two hundred years. But what gains we have made since that time! The discovery of electricity has spurred the development of production—we all acknowledge this. But we should also note that the invention of electronic computers only dates back a few decades. The tremendous industrial changes brought about by computers are also self evident and I don't need to point them out. But from these examples we can see that the possibilities of technology are limitless, and as we come closer to the present age, the faster such advances come. In short, modernization can't be waited upon. If we miss one step, it won't be easy to catch up."

Lu was really amazed. She would never have thought Li could speak so well. She had slowly become engrossed in the subject, but then she heard his say,

"Okay, my lecture ends here. If any of you have questions, come and see me anytime. You can find me in my office, or feel free to drop by my home."

Lu's ears appeared to be ringing and she did not hear anything else. What, all these people are "free to drop by?" Then when will we ever have any peace? How often will I have to wash the sofa cover? And all those cigarette ashes on the floor, who is going to clean them up?

Utterly confused and disconcerted, Lu did not go to her mother's but made for her home. The scene in the factory classroom had really affected her and now she examined her conscience. Why did she not have such spirit? Could it be her own interests were too narrow? The memory of Mingyan's animation and energy continued to haunt her thoughts and she felt rather ashamed of her attitude towards him. But then the thought of all those young workers invading their cozy home! She could not help but panic.

Suddenly, she heard footsteps in the hallway, and Lu knew at once Mingyan had returned home. In that instant she realized she had been longing for his return. But what should she say? On the other hand, she did not want to speak first. What should she do?

Musing, she went into the conservatory, switched on the light, and went to rearrange the pot plants. The first one her eye fell on was the pot of Chinese roses, now in their cracked ceramic bowl.

Lu's heart raced, and picking up a small watering can she watered the roses. At the same time she could not help questioning: how would she go on from here?

78.116 Our Family's Cook\fn{by Mu Guozheng (1939-)} Jinxi, Liaoning Province, China (M) 11

For the last. few days complaints about the quality problem of every meal had been flying right and left in our house. Think for a moment: if you lift the lid of a rice pot only to have a pasty, overboiled smell assail your nose, or the rice is as sticky as thick gruel, how can you get it down? Can yellowish steamed buns covered with blackened spots the size of broad beans do anything but weaken a person's appetIte? Not only did stir-fried cabbage become a usual dish on our table, it did not even taste as good as it could have. But even though complaints were heard everywhere, we only muttered them jokingly: no one dared to speak up in protest.

In our family of seven you could say that I have special status, because I am the only girl in the house. One day after chewing through yet another steamed bun with blackened spots, I could not contain myself. I snapped at my second brother:

"Second Brother! Every day we get this stuff to eat. Now is not like a few years ago when we could use time in the factory to store up energy—the work is rough now. I even have to run when I want to go to the toilet."

My sister-in-law put in her two cents too. For a newly promoted research associate—a no-nonsense scholar—she is surprisingly quick and interesting in conversation. As she washed the dishes she looed at Second Brother and said:

"Shouldn't the comrade who does the cooking study 'Serve the People' with the problems of his job in mind?"

Second Brother laughed. His grave smile was only a twitch at the corners of his mouth that did not even reveal a glimpse of teeth, so it did nothing to diminish his melancholy look. He stated his position:

"All I do is help out: I'm not the cook. Don't bring your opinions to me."

"Whatever has Papa been thinking about these days? From morning till night he studies the *People's Daily* and *Reference News*, and he has us go look for speeches by leading cadres. When it comes to cooking, though, his mind just isn't on it." I turned to Mama and said threateningly:

"Mom, I'm going to eat at the factory tomorrow!"

Mama was at the desk straightening up a big heap of student composItion books. Lifting her eyes, she said laughingly:

"Wherever you eat is all right; it's not my business."

Mama was sixty years old and taught English in middle school. Daily struggles to squeeze onto the bus seemed to make her more and more sturdy. No matter what we said, she wouldn't retire. Oh well! Even her retirement would not do anything to improve our daily fare—she was not in charge of the household! Sister-in-law said:

"Yanan, don't be difficult! Wouldn't Papa's feelings be hurt if everyone left?" My little nephew Peipei stamped out of the inner room, stood in the center of the floor, waved his little arms and said:

"All right! You're saying bad things about Grandpa. Auntie started it and Mama went along. I'm gonna go tell Grandpa!" With that he turned and ran for the door.

I caught him by the arm:

"Don't you want to be friends with Auntie?"

"If you say bad things about Grandpa, I won't be friends with you!"

This little squirt was only six years old, and he was a barrel of fun. He had a big forehead, a flat-bridged nose and a pair of black eyes just as pretty as Sister-in-law. Everyone in the family liked him. Even the dark clouds on Second Brother's melancholy countenance would clear quite a bit when he held Peipei's little hand. But little Peipei's favorites were Grandpa and Grandma—especially Grandpa. Back in the days when he did not go to nursery school he would carry a blue metal bucket, ambling along behind Grandpa all day long, bearing messages for Grandpa, fetching things and bringing newspapers. Elder Brother and Sister-in-law sometimes joked that he was Grandpa's "personal guard." Trying to tease him, I would say to him that he played up to Grandpa. At this, point I said:

"All right, you go tell. I knitted the sweater you're wearing, and I bought your bell-bottom pants. Take both of them off!"

"You gave them, so you can't ask for them back!" He ran towards the door laughing.

A cough sounded outside the door. Sister-in-law and I exchanged looks of warning, held our laughter in and quieted down. The door opened. Papa—our family's cook—came in. Peipei rushed towards him. I stamped my foot nervously. Mama hastily called:

"Peipei, come help Grandma grade homework papers."

Do not underestimate Peipei. At three the little squirt started learning English every day from my Papa. The two of them, one old and one little, often spoke together in English. Peipei was even better at it than I. Helping Grandma grade middle-school English exercises was something in which he took the utmost pride and pleasure. Sure enough turned and ran to Grandma, climbed onto a chair and forgot about telling on us.

Papa seemed to sense something strange in the room's osphere. He looked around without seeing anything amiss, then pulled up a chair beside Peipei and listened rapty to him calling out in a cutely affected voice:

"Right! Right! Worry! …"

Seeing him yell until his face was red and his cheeks ere puffed out, Papa patted his little head and said, "Not so loud, not so loud. You'll get tired."

A near argument faded away along with my and Sister-in-law's suppressed laughter.

*

Papa is the figure of authority in our house. This is definitely not because he is the head of the household: there are plenty of fathers who are not respected by their children. My father is really worthy of respect. His knowledge is quite vast. Elder Brother and Sister-in-law work at the Chemical Engineering Research Institute, and their research topics are pretty difficult. Just looking at their notebooks full of cluster after cluster of formulae makes my eyes glaze over. But when Papa reads rough drafts of their articles he is able, seemingly without much trouble, to point out where ideas are set forth imprecisely, and they nod their heads in agreement. Second Brother does research in classical literature and spends his time buried in a pile of musty-smelling woodblock books. When he runs into an unpunctuated text that he cannot parse, he goes to ask Papa. Papa can always put a punctuation mark in just the right place so that the passage falls into one piece. And even when an insignificant second-grade worker like myself asks about technical problems, Papa can start to give me an answer before I have finished speaking. We respect and love Pa but, aside from Peipei, no one dares to get close to him. Time has made his eyebrows and whiskers gray, but it has not added a tinge of benignity to his long, narrow, stern eyes. Only Peipei is favored with kindly, loving glances.

When I was little, I barely saw his shadow except on holidays. Even while at home he always holed up in his study, working at designing projects or reading heaps of suggestions or whatever—he was so busy that there was never an end to it. If I ran to his door, Mama or my brothers would call me before I pushed it open:

"Come back, Sis, see what I have here!"

Sometimes, knowing that they were deceiving me, I pushed open the door with a thud, but as soon as my eyes met Papa's reproachful, vexed gaze, I hurried back to leap into my brother's arms. Elder Brother held me and said, "Papa's working now!" As he said this he tiptoed to the study door, respectfully took a look at Papa and quietly closed the door.

I too turned my head to look. Papa was wearing a tight brown sweater that made him seem even thinner and taller than he was. One hand braced against the table, the other holding a yellow T-square, he was looking at the diagrams on the desk before him. Though it was daytime the desk lamp was on, illuminating Papa's dark, sturdy face. His expression was so intent, so unfathomable that he resembled a general inspecting battle plans. As I look back, a sense of something sacred and forbidding looms in my memory.

Papa seldom spoke with us, and if he did occasionally say a few words at mealtimes, he spoke in short judgmental sentences without adding any explanations. We were accustomed to thinking that he was right as a matter of course.

During the Cultural Revolution, Papa, who had possessed such exalted status in our home, was actually reduced to being solely responsible for the cooking in our house. In 1971 or 1972—I cannot remember which—all work units were carrying out the policy on purifying class ranks granting "Imperial amnesty" to "demons and monsters" who had been collared on trumped-up charges a few years before. But somehow a "reverse wave" was stirred up in Papa's factory: an "underground Petofi Club"\fn{A note reads: *It was a term used in accusation of those allegedly intending to launch a counterrevolutionary coup against Chairman Mao in the fashion of the Petofi Club, a Hungarian literary group associated with the Hungarian Uprising of 1956*.} was unearthed among technical workers. Papa, who had just been rehabilitated and released from among the "targets of distatorship" was almost pulled in again. Thanks to Papa's rigid conventionality and ineptitude at socializing, he was, after some in-fighting, finally cleared of suspicion. However, the special investigatory committee still put pressure on him to expose others. He would neither accept the hints and inducement, nor would he give in to threats. Finally his blood pressure climbed to 220 and he could not go to work. I lived in the factory then, ardently spending my youthful years demonstrating in the streets and arranging all sorts of minor dread-inspiring activities. I only made it back home when I got around to it. Though my poor mother, elder brother and sister-in-law were not in on any misfortunes, in that combative atmosphere ("whatever you think about, keep the class struggle in mind") they spent their days acting only with utmost caution, half out of their wits with fear. They were honest and upright, and they would never kick people who were down in order to gain favor with power-holders.

On the other hand, being antagonistic was not such a good idea, so the only choice was to look to their own safety by working long hard hours.

What was on Papa's mind as Mama and Sister-in-law dragged their tired bodies to the kitchen to fix supper? Was he indignant or despondent or maybe pained by deep regrets? Whatever it was, one evening he suddenly said to Mama:

"I'll fix meals for you! Make me a list of what to buy."

In an instant Mama's eyes were full of tears, When my brothers and were small—a time when Mama's work

was hardest of all—the thought that he ought to help Mama wash vegetables or check the rice now and then had never entered his mind. And now, his hair turned gray and children grown, he turned around and started worrying about household work.

"I'll give it a try," he said insistently.

Next evening, as soon as we got home we rushed to the kitchen to see what Papa had cooked for us. The kitchen light was on, but stove and pots were cold. A piece of raw pork was on the counter; tomatoes, cucumbers and cabbages were spread out on the floor. They had not even been washed, let alone cooked.

Papa probably heard our footsteps. He walked out of the study, one hand at the frames of his bifocals and the other holding a book. What a character! He had forgotten all about cooking the meal.

"Papa, let's eat," I said, being intentionally stupid. "Let us appreciate your skill!"

Papa ignored me and asked Mama:

"How much is a 'small amount?'"

"You and your knowledge!" I said. "A 'small amount' is a little bit."

Papa threw me a stern glance, then held the book up to Mama's face and pointed to a short sentence, saying: "This 'small amount' stumped me." I stretched my neck for a look; the sentence was:

"Add a small amount of soy sauce."

The book was *PopuLar Recipes*. Papa was a scholar through and through: he had to look in a book for "manufacturing techniques" just to make stir-fried cucumber. Mama, Elder Brother, Sister~in-law and I burst out laughing. Mama pushed the recipe book aside and said:

"All right, old master! Go take a rest."

"'Small amount' and 'large quantity' are not absolute. A drop of soy sauce is a 'small amount,' but there is nothing that says a large spoonful cannot be called a 'small amount." Papa sheepishly tried to justify himself: "It should specify a certain number of grams in the book. 'A small amount;' that's not scientific! Not scientific!"

As this bookwormish point was being made, I fell laughing against Sister-in-law's shoulder. She too turned her face away and chuckled without end. When Papa had gone into the kitchen she said:

"We still don't have the good fortune to eat food prepared for us. Who would have thought that Papa's intelligence would work against him?"

Papa's precise mind only recognized the existence of concrete, definite numbers; it did not allow for vague "small amounts." He threw the recipe book aside in irritation and practiced at making every-day dishes for a few days with Mama and Sister-in-law.

The first dish he made on his own was ground meat stir-fried with pickled mustard greens. That day I had just come in the door from work when he pompously barked out an oraer for us to hurry up and wash our hands for supper. Before the table was set, he had already brought in a platterful of dark green mustard greens. I took the first taste. The flavor was really good: our supply of oil and meat had probably taken a beating! I yelled in applause:

"Hey! This is more flavorful than what Mama and Sister-in-law make."

Papa looked at me with self-satisfaction and, exceptionally enough for him, cracked a joke:

"Well, you know, 'the pupil often surpasses the master,' that's the rule."

Suddenly I let out a clanking sound; an expression that must have been frightening came over my face.

"What's wrong?" Papa asked hurriedly.

"A piece of grit." I spit it out with a *ptui*. By that time, everybody had taken their places and the spitting spread as if by contagion. *Ptui*, went Mama. *Ptui*, went Elder brother and Sister-in-law, Second Brother *ptui-ptuied* without stopping.

Papa looked at us in shock, picked up a bite with his chopsticks, and munched it gingerly. He did not *ptui*, but he did not have the courage to swallow it either. Sister-in-law said:

"Papa, didn't you rinse the mustard greens?"

Papa gave no answer, but the answer was written clearly on his face. Everyone seemed to feel cheated; a hubbub of protest arose. I picked up the mustard greens and dumped them in the garbage can; when I went back to the room Papa defended himself:

"Can Sichuan pickled vegetables be rinsed? If they are rinsed what happens to the peppery taste? That's what I was thinking. . . . Oh well, I have to admit it was a false step! …"

Second Brother leaned back in his chair listlessly, neither taking part in our protests nor paying heed to Papa's explanations. I reproached him crossly:

"Second Brother, you could have helped him with a little advice. You might as well be made of wood."

Second Brother turned up his eyes at me and walked out without a word. I felt terrible about saying that to him. How could I have said he was made of wood? By doing so was I not deliberately opening a wound that had not yet healed?

In 1969 at the height of the campaign to clear up class lines, his girlfriend was implicated by a bunch of no-good bastards because she had written a word incorrectly on a political poster. They framed her at random and branded her an active counter-revolutionary. Subdued and delicate though she was, she had an extremely unbending temperament. She accepted interrogation, but she refused to be insulted. One winter night as the snow flew thickly, she quietly ended her life in its spring. I still remember how Second Brother, when this news reached him, locked himself in his room without eating, drinking or speaking for.a whole day. Mama could not contain her fear. She knelt at the door, sobbing a wailing, and begged him to open the door. Finally Elder Brother smashed a window and climbed in clumsily. Second Brother came out, but his heart had died—or perhaps flow away together with his beloved girl—leaving only a numb wooden shell. In that period his work unit lost its original building because of repeated changes in the administrative set-up: the workers had nowhere to work. Stewing all day at home, he had no outlet that could dissipate his suffering

That evening we had no choice but to help our rice down with salty, hard canned carp in black bean sauce and Sister-in-law's tomato egg soup.

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There were quite a few other amusing incidents connected with Papa's cooking. However, whenever a person —particularly a talented, meticulous person like Papa—concentrates his energy on one thing, there is no difficulty he cannot overcome. Soon Papa picked up *Popular Recipes* again. For him a "small amount" was already a concrete quantity that could be understood flexibly.

I really did, not understand why Papa suddenly developed such prodigious enthusiasm for cooking. Soliciting our opinions, he picked a few dishes from the book and tried them one by one himself. His serious manner made him look as if he were working on a scientific research project at the factory. He often handed us slips of paper and had us go to Xidan Market to buy the groceries he needed; sometimes in the dead of winter he had me run to markets all over the city looking for mugwort stems. If one ingredient for the dish he wanted was missing, he could not make do with what he had. He would gravely say:

"This is beancurd with fresh shelled shrimp. Do you expect me to use dried shrimp instead? The color, aroma and flavor would all be wrong."

While cooking he tied a piece of blue muslin around his waist and carried himself in a solemn, dignified way. He chased Mama and Sister-in-law out of the kitchen, leaving only Second Brother as a helper. At first we got a kick out of this; taking it to be the child-like quality of an old man. No one had high hopes for his cooking. Mama said:

"Don't any of you meddle in this. He makes over 200 *yuan* a month. Let him waste a little of it."

I knew that Mama was protecting Papa. It was as if there were something eating Papa from the inside, and only she knew what was on his mind.

One day Elder Brother, having finished one bowl of rice, lifted his chopsticks and let them hover indecisively over a plate of sliced meat and green peppers. According to the diet he was on, he should have left the table and rinsed out his mouth right then.

"What, can't you tear yourself away?" Sister-in-law often joked with Elder Brother.

"No more for me." Elder Brother looked at his protruding belly and put down the chopsticks. "Papa's cooking is really up to high standard—much better than yours. These slices of meat are so tender, so juicy!" We intently savored the taste for a moment: sure enough, it was not a run-of-the-mill dish. Everyone praised it in unison. Papa's eyes crinkled with a bIg smile as he picked up a piece of green pepper and said:

"That's the trick—bright green and almost translucent, as if it had just been picked, but it has been cooked."

Everyone knew that Papa was going to mouth that old cliche about "color, aroma and flavor," but this time no one acted indifferent. Elder Brother praised him:

"Papa used the same hand that works a slide rule to add seasonings." Sister-in-law chipped in:

"Papa used the same eyes that observe the chemical reaction in a test tube to make sure that it was cooked just right."

Papa laughed humbly, accepting our compliments. Ma and Sister-in-law were giad to yield the honor to him. It was a matter of course that Papa should become the cook in our family. He took great pleasure in this. On every holiday and festive occasion he liked to demonstrate his skill by putting together a multi-course meal for us to feast on. When Peipei could sit up to the table, he became even more enthusiastic and went so far as to celebrate

each of our birthdays according to the household register book. Each time he ran around busily, making lots of food, but when it was time to eat he only drank a small glass of brandy, ate a few bites and withdrew to the sofa to smoke. Or else he sat beside Peipei, picking up whatever morsels Peipei pointed to. Looking at the grease of food sticking to Peipei's cheeks and nose and listening to his high-pitched yell—"I want that; I want it!"—Papa was as happy as could be. However, if you looked under the surface of his happy-looking face you would discover faint hidden feelings of dejection and loneliness.

Actually it would not be right to say that Papa was always so enamored of cooking. Papa seemed to have a lot of things on his mind; 1 could not get a clear idea of what they were. Often he hid in his study smoking, pacing back and forth and letting out long sighs. No longer did he throw his energy into work that could never be finished. In my child-hood memories his desk had always been too small to hold the spread out books, diagrams and papers, but in the last few years all of this was gone. A finely made purple ashtray of cut glass, a covered china bowl with blue flower pattern and a layer of fine dust that looked like down in the sunlight made the desk look wide and untouched. The slide rule that he had hardly ever put down was put away somewhere and the yellow T-square hung forlornly on the plaster wall.

Sometimes Papa stood before it and set it in motion with a touch of his finger. It swung like a pendulum, but before it to stopped Papa had already turned around to resume his seemingly ceaseless pacing. There were times when he read, proping a thick technical book on his knees in deep concentraion for two or three hours straight—not like me, humming to myself as I read. But sometimes he would abruptly clap the book shut and bury his face in the palms of his hands. Sometimes he walked agitatedly up to Mama:

"Where is that Number 37 notebook of mine?"

Mama immediately put down her work—no matter how important—and went to help him look. The two of them went through three glass-door bookcases, raising clouds of dust. At last Mama found it behind a pile of books. Pleased and yet angry, she said:

"They were here all the time! Like I said, nobody touches your things."

By this time Papa no longer felt the pressing impulse that had made him look for the notebook. Glancing at it indifferently he said, "Leave it there. It's no good to me—completely unnecessary!" Whenever this sort of situation arose, he spent more time than usual in his lonely room, and Mama seemed not to know what to do with herself. Every so often she looked in the window of Papa's study, and finally she said to me softly:

"Go take Peipei in there. Let Peipei play with him a while."

Seeing the sorrowful look in Mama's eyes sent shudders through my heart.

Once when Papa was in the kitchen cooking and Second Brother was attending a meeting at his work unit, Mama had me give Papa some help. I walked in the kitchen door and saw him in his muslin apron cutting bitter melons. For some reason he suddenly flung the vegetable knife clanging on the counter in a burst of irritation. The two bitter melons tumbled onto the floor. Without bothering to pick them up he narrowed his eyes and gazed through the small window at the faraway sky for quite some time, not moving in the slightest. The look in his eyes was really somewhat frightening—so lonely, so isolated. It was as if he were not somone who belonged to a loving family but a solitary man traipsing through a bleak desert, being tossed on raging sean or wandering in limitless black night!

After a moment he gave a long sigh, reached for the knife with lowered head, and tapped the dull edge lightly of the counter. In the drawn out tones of classical poetry recitation he said to himself:

"What a little man you are, Han Guanfang!"

This lament issued from the depths of his heart! The air of chilling misery it left in the little kitchen took a long time to disperse. I was shocked by his dejected expression.

"Papa, what did you say you are?"

He seemed startled, but in the blink of an eye he straightened his tall frame and the usual sternness came back to his face.

"What are you doing here?"

"Mama sent me."

"I don't need you."

I ran away in fright.

*

We had already grown accustomed to enjoying Papa's fine cooking during the past few years. Who would have thought that lately he would start being negligent of his duties! On a few occasions he waited until we had come home from work to throw down his *People's Daily* or the transcript of a leader's speech and start cooking. He was

either in too much of a hurry to chop scallions or he forgot to add soy sauce. Sometimes he did not even buy vegetables, in which case he would scour up a few seeds or a head of cabbage from some dark corner of the kitchen, scrape them around in the pot for a minute and call it a meal. Anyone else who had done the same would have been duly reproached, but no one did this to Papa. For one thing. we did not feel right about Papa's having to cook in the first place and there was no way to stop him. And so, no matter what his cooking was like, we had to put up with it. Anothr thing was that Papa's temper had changed over the past er years. It would be too much to say that he was obstinate, but he did lose his temper sometimes for no good reason. Elder Brother was old enough to be respected. Second Brother had gone through a personal tragedy, and Peipei was the pearl in his palm: they could all get by without any trouble. I was the unlucky one who often became the object of his rebukes. Everyone knew about his pent-up frustration, so they did their best to keep from getting him angry. Even though we were quite displeased with the recent fare, we vented our complaints without his knowledge.

This Wednesday was Peipei's birthday—one of the happiest days of the year for Papa. We had expected to enjoy a delicious repast because of Peipei, but, unexpectedly, when the time came there was only yet another platterful of tasteless cabbage. This really took us aback. What was wrong with Papa?

*

On Saturday evening Papa asked Elder Brother: "Do you have anything planned for tomorrow?" According to Papa's accustomed usage, this "you" included Sister-in-law.

"I have to read two articles," Elder Brother said. "Meng-jia has had an experiment going for over two months. She hasn't had a chance to go back to the teacher's college, so she's going to take Peipei tomorrow to see his grandma and grandpa."

"Have Mengjia call them and say she'll go next week," Papa ordered without a moment's thought. Then he asked me:

"What about you?"

"It's not tomorrow yet. How should I know?" I answered.

"You stay home tomorrow." Papa then turned to Second Brother.

"Get up early tomorrow; we'll go to the market together."

Elder Brother and I exchanged delighted glances—at last Papa had taken pity on us and was going to boost our morale with a good meal!

Next morning when I went to get a basin of water from the kitchen, Papa and Second Brother had already returned from the market. On the floor were things not often seen in winter—lentils, leeks and tomatoes. Dried pressed shrimp, cuttlefish and yellow croakers were soaking in a basin. Pork was lying on the counter, while a bottle of brandy and three bottles of beer stood in the corner. There was an awful lot of food there! I went and asked Mama:

"What day is today? What's Papa making such a banquet for?"

Sister-in-law laughed:

"I just got done leafing through the calendar and the household register book. Today is neither a holiday nor the birthday of anyone in the family. Papa may feel that his prestige has slipped, so he's not sparing any cost to get it back."

Elder Brother lifted his head from his magazine and said laughingly:

"Wrong! Papa's not one to be so aware of his own failings." I hugged Mama and asked:

"Is today your and Papa's wedding anniversary?"

Mama pushed my arms aside with a smile.

"Nonsense. We don't have that custom in China."

Just then Peipei pulled a little toy car carrying his blue metal bucket into the room, rocking his head from side to side.

"I know! Papa must be making up for this little brown-nose's birthday celebration. Wasn't Wednesday Peipei's birthday?" Peipei shouted as he jumped into my arms:

"You're calling me names, stinky Auntie! I'm gonna tell Grandpa."

I placated him by diverting his attention:

"There are lots and lots of good things to eat in the kitchen. You go ask Grandpa if he is going to celebrate your birthday late."

In a moment Peipei came running back and said, "Grandpa said to ignore you. He says you are a blabber-mouth." I called into the kitchen:

"Second Brother! Second Brother! Come here!"

Second Brother came in shaking his dripping hands. The minute I saw his melancholy air, I knew I had called him for nothing. Sure enough he spoke as if I were not there:

"When you help Papa in the kitchen there is no need to think—just having a pair of hands is enough." On his way out he turned his head. "Go ahead and ask Mama."

"What do I know?" said Mama with a laugh. "Your Papa has never told me what goes on in his mind. He keeps the lid on so tight that he's like a pressure cooker."

But I discerned something ambiguous in Mama's smiling face. Shaking her shoulder, I said:

"You know. You must know!"

"Go help Second Brother wash the vegetables. Meng-jia, you two bring down that purple chest: I want to look for something."

Elder Brother and Sister-in-law went to get the chest. I went to the kitchen. Papa was cutting the cuttlefish. drawing his knife across it to make a dense pattern of angular slashes. It looked like he was making cuttlefish twists.

"You're going to a lot of bother," I said. "Wouldn't friing it in strips be just as good?"

Papa only stared at me. My tongue darted out of my mouth as I realized my mistake.

"All right, assign me a task!"

Papa had me clean the yellow croakers. Before long I had scraped off the scales, cut away the fins and gutted them.

"Did you pull out the vein next to the bone?"

According to Papa's theory the vein up against the spine must be cleaned away or the flavor will be too fishy. Not having learned this by experience, I naturally skipped this part of the job.

"What are you acting so lazy for? Out! Out!"

Second Brother threw a look my way; I scurried out in a fluster.

Mama's room was permeated with a thick smell of camphor so biting that I sneezed again and again. A heavy old-fashioned chest of hard wood was sitting in the middle of the floor, its lid slanting open. It was packed with old clothes which Papa and Mama had no use for but could not bring themselves to throw away. Bending over, Mama pulled out a flattened old red briefcase from among dresses she had grown out of long ago and Papa's old suits, then tossed it on the floor. To little Peipei, who had pressed against Mama for a better view, it was a treasure, and he lost no time in picking it up.

"Why are you back?" Sister-in-law asked.

"I was driven across the border," I said. "Don't laugh. Papa is not like himself today. Whenever he used to treat us to a nice meal, he may not have laughed, but the merriment showed around his eyes. Today Papa is holding his head like this. Like this!" I imitated Papa as I spoke. Elder Brother and Sister-in-law both laughed. Mama pulled out Papa's foreign-cut vest of worn leather and hung it on my arm, saying:

"Hurry up and air this, blabbermouth!"

In the courtyard I ran into my former classmate Chen Ying, who wanted me to go with her to a movie shown to a limited audience. That was great because I was just preparing to sneak away. When I ran back into the house to let Mama know, she did not approve, nor did Elder Brother and Sister-in-law.

"It's not the right mood for a banquet today anyway. When I get back I'll eat by myself: it will taste better that way."

"All right! If you want to leave, I'm going to tell Grandpa." Little Peipei tore off my scarf and ran towards the kitchen. In a moment Papa stood at the doorway.

"What's going on?"

"I said yesterday that I didn't know whether or not there would be something to do today."

"Watching a movie is nothing."

Judging from Papa's tone, there was no room for further discussion. I stared hard at Peipei, who was behind Papa's back laughing at me, that little rat!

*

Usually our family ate at two different tables. Sister-in-law and I ate at a small table with Peipei. Today, at Papa's instructions, we moved two tables with three drawers together to make a big one, just like at New Year's and other holidays.

To tell the truth, Papa had outdone himself on this meal. The dried pressed shrimp stir-fried with leeks had vividly contrasting colors to delight the eye. The cuttlefish twists looked like plump little hedgehogs with their quills up; just looking at them was enough to make me hungry. The yellow croakers simmered in tomato sauce

and lentils stir-fried with meat strips were also excellent in color, aroma and flavor. The food was really great, but the pity was that no one knew what to make of Papa's intentions. Snow like heads on the beer rose with a fizz and overflowed onto the table, but nobody raised a glass for toast. Everyone seemed to be waiting for some sort of signal from Papa.

Papa sat at the head of the table smoking a cigarette and holding Peipei. His face was calm and composed: Perhaps he was satisfied with our silence. At last he stubbed out the cigarette and began to speak.

"I've been convalescing at home now for seven years, two months and three days. I've been a cook for exactly six years today."

Aha! So Papa was celebrating the sixth anniversary of his change in occupation. If he had only told us earlier we would not have gotten all worried about nothing and sat looking at the table covered with delicious-smelling food, too suspicious to get started. How silly! I took a sip of beer and my chopsticks moved towards a cuttlefish twist. Sister-in-law poked me, under the table. Her laughing eyes seemed to say: "Listen. Papa is making a speech before the toast."

I looked at Papa. Sure enough, he was looking right at me. His glance was not a rebuke: but it was definitely not meant to encourage my outstretched chopsticks. I quickly pulled my hand back.

"I can't bear to look back on those years. In my unit everyone was out to get everyone else. It was just like a cicada about to be pounced upon by a preying mantis. Behind the preying mantis was a sparrow, and behind the sparrow was a boy drawing a slingshot. Twenty years of study here and abroad taught me to save our country through science, to respect teachers and honor friends, and to be loyal and honest. Though this antiquated mentality of mine was modified quite a bit after liberation, I still could not appreciate the 'philosophy of struggle' that was popular at that time. Having tasted the bitterness of being the object of struggle, I did not have the good fortune of being able to stomach attacking other people. Thinking it over, I decided that the only thing to do was to stay at a respectful distance—to hide in the sheltered cove of home for comfort and and find solace in pots and bowls and ladles."

Ah! His words were enough to break a person's heart! No wonder Papa showed such great enthusiasm for cooking: it was a way of numbing himself. That enthusiasm had arisen from the ashes of his ideals. How painful this must have been for a high-level intellectual who aspired to making a contribution to his country. I suddenly remembered that scene in the kitchen when Papa had hit the counter with the knife and chanted:

"What a little man you are—Han Guanfang!"

How stupid I had been! For years I had been eating Papa's food without realizing that this misery which could not be told had been hidden deep in his heart.

"I am a political mediocrity. I was disheartened by everything then, and I thought there would be no way to contribute to this country in my lifetime—I threw more than seven years of my life away for nothing."

Papa sighed heavily, as if those dark, futilely spent years were before his eyes. His creased eyelids drooped as he painfully shook his grizzled head.

A family banquet that had begun depressingly became even more depressing. Mama, Elder Brother and Sister-in-law all had somewhat delicate nerves. Nowadays they were never willing to mention the psychic humiliations they had suffered in those years of senseless strife. Hearing Papa's words, they hung their heads dispiritedly as flashes of red and white went across their faces. Second Brother turned his face, and the sunlight caught the corner of his eyes, lighting large, crystal-like teardrops. Fondly devoted Second Brother—at thirty-five he still could not forget that subdued and delicate, yet unbending, young woman.

Peipei could not endure the depressing atmosphere bearing down upon him. He tugged lightly at Papa's sleeve. Papa took his little hand and grasped it lightly, meaning that he was not to interrupt.

"Now the focus of our country's work has turned to economic reconstruction. I'm embarrassed to say that I have no ability to fight the class struggle on an expanded scale; as for reconstruction, however, I like to think of myself as a seasoned veteran. I can be of use! I did not dare to say this before."

"Why?" I asked.

"Starting in 1957 Chairman Mao announced that large-scale class struggle had for the most part come to an end. He called upon us to do battle with the natural world and to develop our economy. For the past twenty years his summons has been interfered with from many sides. The crests of political movements have followed one after another, while surges of economic development have been few and far between. During the Cultural Revolu-tion, in particular, I was sure that I would live out the remainder of my years in the midst of political movements."

"Weren't you being a bit pessimistic?" laughed Sister-in-law.

"Maybe. I never expected then that there would be a Third Plenary Session of the Eleventh Central Committee

of the Communist Party like this one! It signifies that we Chinese are going to open up a new era of prosperity and strength. I've been waiting decades for this. There is no question of what I should do."

Here Papa stopped, pulled open a drawer, pulled out ration books for non-staple foods, meat and grain, and put them down in front of Mama.

"From now on all of you will have more work to do. I'm quitting."

Papa's expression showed that he was in earnest. A flush of vitality shone again on the wrinkled face that for years had been lacking in liveliness.

Papa's grand gesture earned the applause of the whole family; even Second Brother expressed support with a controled smile. Only then did I understand why the whole family had be present at this dinner. Of course Papa resigned from his duties as cook in front of the whole family in order to impart an air of solemnity to the proceedings, but at the same time he was educating us too. Normally Papa seldom conversed with us, but this was definitely not the same as letting us do whatever we pleased. Through his actions he told us *how* we should study, work and live. With his words just then he had bared his soul, and he had made a new demand of us—from now on we were to march to the same drum as he.

Mama took the ration books, her eyes filling with tears, and laughed again. Pointing through the window at the leather vest hanging on the line, she said:

"Isn't that your battle dress?"

Papa looked out the window. He nodded, overcome with emotion, as if he had caught sight of an old friend not seen for years.

"Peipei, what about your grandpa's briefcase?" Mama asked.

Well, what do you know! Second Brother had kept a sharp eye on things after all—Mama really knew what was on Papa's mind and had already made preparations ahead of time for his reinstatement. The leather vest and briefcase were precious objects for Papa's work. In the winter Papa always wore the worn leather vest to work. He said that in the machine room he could conveniently slip out of his quilted jacket and into work clothes. And the red briefcase was something Papa never went anywhere without. When I first laid eyes on Papa twenty-four years ago at Maternity Hospital, I probably saw it too. Then it bulged tightly, but in the chest it had been pressed flat as a pancake.

Elder Brother asked cautiously, "Is your health good enough to take it? Your blood pressure is still high."

A somber shadow passed over Papa's face. He seemed unwilling to answer this question. After pondering it for a while, he said:

"As far as I know, a lot of the illnesse suffered by intellectuals in the past years have not stemmed from purely physical causes. As individuals they may have been as insignificant as blades of grass, but they took upon themselves the concerns of a whole nation. Furthermore they were not in a position to do anything. And so they got tense; anger burned inside them; weariness oppressed them; and they became confused and despondent. These psychic afflictions alone are enough to make a person ill.

"'Anxiety can injure' is no lie. The saying goes: 'An illness of the heart must be cured by medicine of the heart.' I'll entrust my health to my future work." As Papa said these things his mood was grave and even somewhat indignant. I was deeply moved. Papa then turned his head and looked probingly at Second Brother for a long time before speaking these carefully thought out words:

"What I said is applicable to you too. I think the best memorial to the dead is to shoulder their unfulfilled responsibilities.. You ought to accomplish something."

Second Brother lowered his head; his lips quivering, but he did not speak.

Actually this was unfair to Second Brother. For more than a year he had been annotating the poems in Du Mu's *Collected Works of Fan Chuan* and he had completed more than half. While cleaning up his room I had seen the crispy copied second draft.

Peipei popped his head through the crook of Papa's elbow and asked, "Won't you take care of the cooking at all any more, Grandpa?"

"No more," said Papa, stroking Peipei's face and leaning towards him. "If I did cook, I couldn't make it taste delicious any more.

I spoke up brazenly:

"There are still people now who agree with the current policies of the Central Committee of the Party. Whgat if things get turned around again?"

As Papa glanced at me, his expression clouded over. His withered, bony hands slid slowly off Peipei's shoulders and his eyes became vacant. He looked as if a sore spot in his heart had been struck again. The atmosphere in

the room, which had just become exuberant, plummeted again like lead. I sensed Mama's and Elder Brother's reproachful looks. I felt terrible for saying it. I had killed Papa's enthusiasm.

Sister-in-law, ever the quick thinker, said merrily:

"This is the last meal Papa will ever make for us. This opportunity is not to be missed: eat it while it's hot!" She stood up and placed food on Papa's and Mama's little plates. Papa lifted his wine glass and spoke with slow assurance:

"Those who gain the people's hearts will gain the country; those who lose the people's hearts will lose the country. So it has always been. The Party Central Committee's present course of working at the four modernizations and trying hard to upgrade the people's standard of living has won the hearts of the people and of Party members, and no one can bend their allegiance!"

I had never thought that Papa had such clear awareness of these things! Sister-in-law said with a laugh:

"A little while ago Papa said that he is a political mediocrity, but now he shows his firm political opinions. Maybe Papa was being humble just now, or maybe he was suddenly anointed from above and became enlightened." Everyone laughed and Papa laughed along, saying:

"It definitely wasn't all of a sudden."

Thinking about what Papa said, I realized for a fact that it had not been all of a sudden. That he carefully studied the communique of the Third Plenary Session of Eleventh Central Committee of the Communist Party, the *People's Daily*, *Reference News* and the speeches of leading cadres goes without saying, but the enthusiasm which gradually ignited in his heart some time ago was shown in little things which I previously overlooked. In the past Papa retired to his room after dinner, but recently he would stay on the sofa listening to us chat. Mama talked about English parties at school; Elder Brother and Sister-in-law talked about new scientific research projects at the institute; I talked about enlightened production techniques at the factory; and sometimes we talked of exciting news we had heard by word of mouth—Papa was interested in all of this. He sat smoking and quietly listening; he never broke into the conversation. From the amazement that occasionally flashed in his eyes I am now sure that he sensed the genuine vitality in the air as the whole country buckled down to the four moderniza-tions! Last Sunday, the new secretary of the Party committee at his factory and the factory manager came to visit him, accompanied by a few "Petofi Club" members who had just been cleared of all blame. Perhaps this is what spurred his resolution to change. They talked very amiably for an entire half day. I changed the tea leaves in the teapot three times, and the cigarette smoke was so thick that it made me cough. That day was the first time in years that I had heard Papa laugh heartily. I exclaimed:

"No wonder! These few days Papa has been guzzling oil of anointment himself, while he makes us eat. nothing but cabbages." Everyone laughed. Little Peipei shouted:

"Auntie and Mama are talking bad about Grandpa again. That's not allowed!"

"Now Grandpa will leave you at home and forget about you," I kidded him. Peipei set up a ruckus and held tightly to Papa's arm. Papa hugged him around the shoulders and whispered:

"You come sleep in Grandpa's and Grandma's room. No matter how late Grandpa comes home, he can see you, all right?"

Little Peipei's disturbance loosened things up completely. Elder Brother raised his glass and, facing Second Brother, said:

"Now, to this epoch-making change in our country and to the opportunity that we intellectuals have to do something for our country …"

Second Brother unabashedly raised his glass towards Papa.

Peipei knelt on a chair, lifted his plastic bowl brimming with orange juice, and pushed it towards where the glasses were meeting in midair. The glasses made clinking, sounds. What nice-sounding music!

The next day Papa—the chief engineer of Swallow Hill Chemical Products Factory—assumed his office.

79.126 Are You A Communist Party Member\fn{by Zhang Lin (1939-)} Faku County, Liaoning Province, China (M) 9

Liu Dashan, Director of the Northern Railway Bureau, will be sixty in two years, and will then be joining the rank of the old. To him, his past life has been marked by numerous twists and turns; all very complicated indeed, and yet he also feels that essentially it has been a simple life.

In his early years, when he was not even as tall as the small carbine he firmly held in his hands, he took part in the guerilla war against the Japanese, together with a group of sturdy and strong young men. That war over, al-

most immediately he found himself fighting against the Kuomintang. On a rainy night, when the Liaoxi-Shenyang battle was about to begin and the army was getting ready to leave for the South, the regiment commander summoned Liu to the headquarters and told him that he was to remain with the divisional commander and that his job from now on was to look after the railways. Upon hearing this, tears came to his eyes as he was holding his rifle in his hands. The whole night he wept, and his tears came faster than the rain outside. He obstinately demanded that he should be marching south with the regiment. His tears moved his comrades-in-arms, who went to appeal to the regiment commander on his behalf. But they were reprimanded and came back in silence.

Early the next morning, the divisional commander came to their barracks. He shouted as soon as he entered the room:

"Who is Liu Dashan?"

Liu stood up sulkily.

The divisional commander shrugged his shoulders under his overcoat and walked towards him. He shook his broad and black eyebrows and bawled:

"Weeping like a young wife! Are you a Communist Party member?"

Then he left.

Liu Dashan was dumbfounded, his ears filled with the echoes of the roar of the divisional commander. Finally, he stealthily kissed his rifle, handed it over to another soldier, and stayed behind with the divisional commander to look after the railway tracks. Gradually he developed a fondness for iron rails, as if he could feel the warmth of the icy cold tracks, as if he could hear a heart throbbing therein. The former divisional commander, caretaker director of the railways, passed away many years ago. Liu, however, still frequeptly thought about him, that very hot-tempered old man.

Liu Dashan was born in the Jiaodong district of Shandong Province. His father was a farmer; so, too, his grand-father and his ancestors. In appearance, he was a typical tall and sturdy man from Shandong, with a large nose, a wide mouth and a head of thick, bristly black hair. At one time, he wanted to have a more stylish hair-cut, but his hair was too wiry and it could not be pressed down. So he had to be content with a crew-cut, and let his hair stand erect like the bristles of a shoe brush. Appropriately, however, the stiff hair signified his strong character. Totally uncompromising, he would never desert his principles. During the ten years of the "cultural revolution," he refused to bend to the political opportunists' will and, naturally, had to suffer on account of his "stubbornness." That nightmare over, after the implementation of the Party's policy, he was given a very high post which did not involve much work. He did not like it and said that it was worse than the job of digging graves. It was only very recently that he had been reappointed Director of the Railway Bureau.

Though young, the secretaries of the Railway Bureau were all smart and knew very well the ways of the world. But they did not know much about Liu Dashan. From what they heard, he liked to swear. He would swear when he was angry, and swear when he was in a good mood—there was a difference in tone of course.

Before his arrival, the secretaries had rearranged everything in the office for him. There was a desk bigger than a double bed with legs shaped like those of a tiger. On the desk were three telephones. The walls had been painted cream yellow, which, scientifically speaking, was a warm color, and it was supposed to help create a genial atmosphere for the irritable director. However, the director stayed in this "warm nest" only one day. The next morning he summoned Secretary Zhou Feng to his office and said:

"Let's move out! We'll use that room near the railway station."

The secretaries were busy again for a whole morning. The work of changing the office room was finally done and they were all exhausted. The new office was a smaller room overlooking the station. The walls were not painted. Through the wide window, which looked rather like a big TV screen, one could see clearly everything that was going on in the station. The voices of the dispatchers, the cries of the loaders, the shouts of the inspectors and, above all, the loud whistles of the locomotives—all these combined to pierce the air. Now Director Liu felt comfortable and relaxed as if he had drunk some good wine or was listening to some soothing music. Sitting in his chair facing the window, and grinning from ear to ear, he exclaimed:

"Good! That's how it should be!"

It was not difficult for the secretaries to find out more about their new director. Before long, they succeeded in digging out some particulars about his past, among which two incidents were of particular importance.

Incident No.1:

In the extremely cold winter days of 1965, the railway lines in the area were all covered with snow and the switches were not working properly. The trains, when ascending the slopes, soon got stuck. In that terrible weather, there was once a serious accident, but at the time the director of the Longhe branch bureau was not in his

office. He was fast asleep at home. When Liu heard about this, he was livid with rage, and at six o'clock that evening when the shifts changed, he rang up the director. As soon as he answered, Liu cleared his throat, frowned and started swearing at him:

"Damn you! Our men are out there day and night in the wind and snow, but you, as soon as the shift was over, hurried off and back home after drinking two ounces of your damned smelly wine, snuggled down in bed under your wife's quilt. Are you a Party member? From now on, all branch bureau directors will be on night duty. I'll call the roll by telephone at twelve o'clock every night. If you're tired, you can sleep with the tracks! No one is allowed to go home!"

So the directors of the branch bureaus were at their posts, there were no more accidents and things ran smoothly.

Incident No.2:

In 1964, many workers grumbled that the hospital of the Railway Bureau was in a state of disorder. The medical services were very poor and the staff didn't care very much about their patients. Two patients had died because of a wrong diagnosis. One of the doctors even examined his patient without even using the stethoscope. When Liu heard about these reports, he did not swear; instead, he bit his lip. One night, several days later, he suddenly complained of a stomachache. He did not take a car or allow anyone to accompany him to the hospital. He walked slowly to the emergency ward. The doctor on duty was of course sleeping soundly, his mouth foaming. Liu called him several times. The doctor opened his heavy eyes, closed them again, and began to inquire what his trouble was. Then, showing signs of impatience, he told Liu to lie down on the bed, casually examined his abdomen, yawned, and concluded that the patient had appendicitis and should have an emergency operation. Liu jumped up on the bed, glaring at him, and shouted:

"Damn you! You and your appendicitis! What kind of doctor are you? You are a disgrace to your white overcoat!"

The doctor instantly woke up and, rather confused, stared at the unusual patient.

"You?"

"Yes, I'm Liu Dashan. I have come especially to call on you today, my dear doctor!"

The doctor's face turned pale, and his shoulders slumped. Liu jumped down from the bed, buttoning up his clothes.

"Go and ring the administrator and ask him to come here!"

After a while, the administrator arrived in a car. He did not know what had happened because the nervous doctor had not told him anything. When he pushed open the door, he found the Director of the Railway Bureau standing before him in a rage.

"Are you a Communist Party member?" Liu asked him in a mild tone.

The administrator nodded his head, not knowing why Liu was asking such a question. Liu frowned and said coldly:

"You say you are a Communist Party member, but I think you look more like a member of the Kuomintang!"

There could have been some minor inaccurate details as reported in the above accounts. Exaggerations were inevitable as the stories circulated among the railway workers. It was also known that Liu had been told off by the authorities that his rudeness and his partiality for swearing were the habits of guerilla fighters. Liu accepted this criticism and expressed his determination to get rid of these undesirable habits.

But not more than a week later, he was cursing and swearing again. He felt that he could express himself more forcibly by using such language, just as some writers were fond of using exclamation marks! When the "cultural revolution" began, he was one of the first persons to have a large board hung round his neck, as a sign of public disgrace. His "crimes," as listed, were numerous; even that slight remark of his about a Communist Party member behaving more like a member of the Kuomintang was enough to make him suffer hell on earth. When he was publicly criticized for this very crime, the hospital administrator jumped up on the platform and testified on his behalf that he did not mean that as an insult to the Party and that his criticism of the hospital was very fair indeed. But then, as a result of his defence, the administrator was condemned as a "royalist" and he, too, had a board hung on him. Liu Dashan was very appreciative of his integrity and bawled at the so-called revolutionists:

"Damn you lot! This is utter nonsense!"

Of course, what happened after that could be easily imagined.

All these were things of the past. Liu Dashan had become a legendary hero and his numerous anecdotes were well known in the Railway Bureau.

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Liu also had the habit of dropping in each day on the various departments and offices of the Bureau to see how the workers were getting on. As he saw it, the railways were the main arteries of a country, and they'd better be functioning well. So, too, the bureau that looked after them. The bureau should not slack off in attending to all its duties.

One afternoon at four o'clock, after inspecting the transportation and finance departments, Liu came to the typing room. He did not come here often. When he entered the room, he saw a typist, more than forty years old, trying on a light blue embroidered woollen coat. She took a long time in trying it on, her eyes gleaming with excitement. Another girl, about twenty years old, clapped her hands lightly in admiration. Liu felt very awkward, but he did not shout or swear, for he knew that if he did, they would be very upset. He usually tried to control himself in front of women. He was thinking of saying, "If you must try that on, please do it at home. The office is not a place for this sort of thing." He also intended to speak gently.

But before he could open his mouth to say anything, the two typists had already noticed his presence. The younger one stuck out her tongue, and they both sat down hurriedly at their typewriters and began to work as if nothing had happened. Liu left the room without saying anything. He thought to himself: a woman of her age still wearing light blue colored clothes embroidered with cream yellow flowers? Was that really appropriate? People said she was an old maid and, in her younger days, had tried to find herself a handsome young man. Surely, such a man existed only in her dreams, for God had not yet created him! Now that she was already over forty, of course she realized she couldn't be so choosy in her search for a partner. She only wished to have a cadre, even an elderly one, for husband.

Liu was a little preoccupied with these thoughts, as he went to the secretariat. There was no one there, however. He was told that the transportation department had managed to get some fresh fish and that the whole staff had gone there to have a share each. Liu felt his anger mounting. He thought: How irresponsible! Leaving their work at the smell of some fish! I'll sit here and see when they will return! He sat on a chair, and looked at a picture under the thick glass on the desk. It was the picture of a pretty girl, looking like a ballet dancer. It was probably cut out from a pictorial magazine. Then he saw a letter on the desk, addressed to "Director Liu Dashan." He opened it and read it at once. And he was mad with anger.

"Damn it!" he swore as he read the letter. It was a letter, giving him all the details of a train collision that had happened at the Baita Railway Station the previous month. It exposed how the Baita Railway Station and the Beicang Branch Bureau, had together tried to deceive the authorities by describing a major accident as a minor one, in their report. Liu had already dealt with this accident, as he had been led to believe that it was something ordinary. But, according to the letter, it was a major accident indeed! He banged his fist on the desk, and the ink bottles were jumping.

"Damn it!" he yelled. "You've played a dirty trick on me! I have been totally deceived! If what this letter says is true, just you watch out!"

Then he wondered if the letter was giving a false accusation. After all, since the "cultural revolution," false accusations had been quite common. He read the letter again to see whether or not it was signed. If there was a signature and address, it was at least eighty or ninety per cent true.

Yes, the letter was signed:

"Lü Jiucai, a pointsman at the Baita Railway Station."

Liu licked his lips and exclaimed, "Good! He has the guts to put down his name and address. He's a man!"

There was the clatter of heels in the corridor, rather like that of girls. Secretary Zhou Feng came in joyfully holding in his hand several fat fish on several strings; the tail of one of them was still wriggling. Zhou Feng produced the best of the lot and said:

"Director Liu, these are yours."

Liu Dashan kept a straight face and asked, "Where on earth did you get these?"

Zhou Feng did not reply, but smiled awkwardly.

Liu's face twitched, the corners of his mouth also quivering:

"I've caught quite a big fish too, and, in addition, some small ones." He waved the letter in his hand.

Zhou Feng was somewhat taken by surprise and he nearly dropped the fish.

"When did this letter arrive?" asked Liu.

" ……………."\fn{So the text.}

"Tell me the truth!"

Zhou Feng looked at Liu and felt that it would not do him any good to tell a lie. So, he answered:

"Three days."

"Why didn't you pass it on to me immediately?"

"Bai Fan, the Chief of the Beicang Branch Bureau, telephoned me to say that a worker there was making a fuss about the whole matter. I thought that since you were in detention for two years together with Bai during the "cultural revolution," you'd be embarrassed if I gave you this letter."

Liu blinked his eyes. "Did Bai Fan know about this letter?"

Zhou Feng looked timidly at Liu and nodded. "Yes. He telephoned to say that the branch bureau would soon be given a red banner for winning the competition. But if this leaked out …"

Liu Dashan's facial expression changed again. He was biting his lip, breathing heavily through his nose.

"Humph! You couldn't care less about principles when people flatter you and give you presents. I see, you have been an excellent secretary! How long have you been in this dirty business?"

He was walking about, absolutely furious. The trains were whistling outside. A train-load of wood had just left the station. Suddenly, he walked towards the secretary and asked him:

"Have you seen the film *Lenin in 1918*? Rememeber that captain of the guard at the Kremlin? He was truly a fine fellow, a man of iron! The capitalists offered him pots of money. Did he waver? Wouldn't you waver if so much money were given to you?" He yelled so loudly that he did not notice the door had been stealthily pushed open and then closed again by someone.

The secretary stood there petrified unable to utter a word. He had seen the picture, but he had never thought about what he would do if he were the captain of the guard.

Liu paced the room. Then he suddenly picked up the telephone receiver and said, "Hello. Is that the Party school? This is Liu Dashan. I want to recommend a student to you." A somewhat husky voice replied:

"Our classes began a week ago."

"That doesn't matter. His name is Zhou Feng." Liu put down the receiver, blinked and said:

"Listen, my handsome young fellow, you can go to the Party school tomorrow to register. Knock some sense into that head of yours, will you? Go and see *Lenin in 1918* a few more times."

Zhou Feng nodded and picked up the fish again. He was about to say something, when Liu shook his head:

"Send them back to where they came from! I've already caught my big white fish."\fn{ A note reads: *"Big white fish" refers to the Branch Bureau Chief, Bai Fan; the character* bai *means "white."*.}

Zhou Feng's white face was sweating. He thought, "Oh shit! When there are so many people in the world, why did I have to come up against him?"

*

That afternoon, Liu called a meeting and organized a special investigation group which included the chief of the transportation section, the chief of the technical section and, of course, the chief of the discipline inspection section. They were to proceed to the Baita Railway Station. Before they started, Liu called them to his office and warned them:

"You are all Communist Party members … Good! When you are at the Baita Railway Station, don't drink. Whoever invites you to a meal, refuse. Keep your mouths shut. If you accept sqmebody's hospitality, you will find it difficult to say anything against him later. Make sure you won't be bribed. If you really want a drink, I'll treat you when you come back."

They set off that afternoon on a freight train, because there was no passenger train available. Two days later, they returned and went straight to Liu's office. He was at a meeting. After a while, he came back, his face flushed. The meeting was not yet over, in fact, and there were probably some very heated. discussions going on. He left because he heard that the investigation group was back. They reported to him in detail all that they had learned. The statements made by the pointsman were true. The group had questioned the workers and examined the scene of the accident and the damaged trains. The accident was truly a major one. While there, somebody did try to invite them to dine at his home. That man was none other than the station-master, a smart fellow and a lively and persuasive talker. His words were like the grapes of Turpan, much sweeter than any produced elsewhere. Of course, the members of the group did not accept the invitation. The report on the accident was written by this very man, who had also made a verbal report by telephone to Bai, giving his reasons for what he had written. He then received the following praise from Bai:

"You've got a good head on your shoulders!"

"Damn them! These people always mess up everything!" Liu exploded after listening to the report. Suddenly he stood up, stroked his bristly hair and said, "Get me through to the Baita Station and ask Lü Jiucai to come here at once. Dismiss that smart-ass, the station-master, and appoint an honest man for his job!"

Everyone left except Liu. He closed his eyes, listening to the whistle of the trains. He thought: How shall I deal

with this big white fish? Yes, I was demobilized and transferred to work on the railways with him, and we were in detention, through no faults of our own, for two years together. There we talked endlessly and it appeared as if we had talked about all the problems in the world: We said that the earth was round. I said that it was a place filled with all sorts of problems. Wasn't that so? Some questions we could answer, but most of them we could not.. When we were unable to answer a question, we felt miserable. Gradually we started to drink. We used to ask that sissy young man, who was supposed to be keeping an eye on us, to get us some wine without being noticed. The wine cost us one *yuan* a *catty* and so we called it "the *yuan* spirit." We often drank from the bottle when we could not get to sleep at night. After having some wine to warm our stomachs, we would talk passionately about this and that. Sometimes, Bai drank so much that his face became as red as a lobster. He would half close his eyes and sigh repeatedly:

"*Ai*, *ai*! Old Liu, when we do get out of here, will you still work on the railways? I've had enough of it. I've worked on the railways for twenty years, and all I've got to show for it is this!"

Liu would then gulp down another mouthful, smacking his lips, and move nearer to Bai, confiding:

"I can't leave these tracks any more than I can leave my wife. Tell me, Old Bai, do you ever think of your wife?"

Bai's eyes would redden, and he would ask in reply, "Do you?"

"And how I do! How can a man not think of his wife!"

Then, they stopped talking; the wine was all drunk and they fell silent, in deep thought. After a while, several rats appeared and ran along the foot of the wall. Then their squeakings were heard. Liu thought, "Those squeaks probably come from baby rats, looking for their mother. That's their world. But isn't that the same in our world? There are men and there are rats. There are good men and also bad men. There may be more good men than bad men. But wouldn't it be better to have still more good men?"

After their release from confinement, they also frequently met and drank together. They used to drink straight from the bottle. They were not accustomed to the use of fine wine glasses. Although it was proper to drink from these glasses, it was not mouth-filling. Later, Liu's wife admonished him that drinking from the bottle was the way of the American soldiers. So they used white porcelain jars on their drinking sessions. Sometimes, when Bai had drunk a good deal, he would unbutton his clothes and show the scars on his body, the marks of the beatings he had received from the so-called revolutionists. But Liu refrained from showing his, saying with a flushed face:

"Why bother? They only reveal the dreadful past!"

An ear-piercing whistle brought him back to the present. Liu stood up, and walked towards the window. The railway station lay before him; it was a key railway transportation station. Several hundred trains arrived and departed daily, but all its installations were old, looking somewhat like present-day people dressed in the clothes of the Qing Dynasty. The dense smoke from the stream locomotives rose, blackening half of the sky. Some of the engines were from the days of the anti-Japanese war. He muttered to himself:

"Oh, so backward! China's backwardness is the shame of us Communist Party members. There are men who tell lies openly, and there are also those who listen happily to those lies and believe in them. What is evidently false\fn{I.e., false because of evidence to the contrary.} is taken seriously as if it were true. Damn them! A branch bureau chief has cheated his subordinates and fooled his superiors. What will the men think of us? The Party's prestige is already low and it will suffer even more if things continue like this. People will lose all their faith in us. This is the greatest shame for Communist Party members! Bai, I've caught you today and I won't let you get away with it. I'll have to deal with you, and announce it in the bureau bulletin."

He picked up the telephone receiver and rang up Bai.

"Hello, I want to speak to Bai Fan. Old Bai? You can change your job! … What new job are you after? … Go and be an actor! … You're laughing? What a good actor you are! You can turn lies into truth! Damn you! I was nearly taken in by you! Where did you learn such tricks? You've lied to the bureau over the Baita Station accident. One Communist Party member cheating another! … I've investigated the whole matter thoroughly. I heard you wanted to give Lü Jiucai trouble. Damn you! You just try it! But I'm on his side. Your little glib-tongued station-master must be dismissed, and you also will have to face punishment!"

Bai's arguing and pleading could be heard over the telephone. Liu threw the receiver down on the table, walked round the room, and picked it up again.

"Listen Old Bai, are you still a Communist Party member? Wait till you see the consequences!"

Then, he banged down the receiver.

A meeting of the bureau Party committee was held that evening, and a decision was reached regarding the penalty to be imposed on the Beicang Branch Bureau for not giving the real facts of the accident. Someone felt

that the penalty was too severe and that it might affect the present emphasis of our unity and stability, but Liu looked grim and held on to his opinion. He said, penalty and unity and stability were two different matters; they should be considered separately. In order to maintain discipline, a serious warning was to be given to Bai Fan and recorded in his file. The chief of the safety supervisory office of the Beicang Branch Bureau was to be dismissed, as was the station-master of the Baita Railway Station. Furthermore, a reward of fifty *yuan* was to be given to Lü Jiucai. The above measures were to be published in the bureau bulletin the following day.

After the meeting Liu felt tired. His back ached. He returned to his office, pummelling his back. He had only just sat down when a stranger wearing a railway worker's uniform came in. He took off his cap, showing his white hair and he had a wrinkled face. Holding the cap in his hand, he walked towards Liu and said:

"I want to see Director Liu."

"Here I am. Please take a seat." Liu pointed to the chair opposite him. The old man, however, did not sit down.

"My name is Lü Jiucai, I am the pointsman of the Baita Railway Station," the old worker said slowly and softly.

Liu slowly stood up, looked tenderly at the old worker and asked in a low voice, "Are you a Communist Party member?"

"Yes, I joined the Party in 1950."

"Me too. I joined the Party in 1942."

The two men remained silent. They felt that words were unnecessary; it was just right to be silent. The power of language was limited, but the power of sentiment was boundless. The two men looked at each other, each finding in the opposite's face the honest eyes of a Communist Party member. Suddenly Liu embraced the old worker, and, with tears in his eyes, said:

"Old comrade, you are really good." Then, controlling himself, he asked, "How old are you now?"

"Fifty-nine years and four months."

"You are older than me by one year. You're my elder brother, my elder brother!" Liu exclaimed joyfully. He gazed at the old worker, at his gray hair and the many wrinkles on his face, and said sadly, "What a pity! If only you were ten, even five years younger! How do we need honest men like you in so many places!"

The old worker shook his head. His lips trembled slightly.

"Don't wish me any younger, that's impossible; but try to help the younger men to mature faster than they can. It's up to you!"

Liu nodded his head in approval. The old worker continued:

"I'll retire next year. I've been working on the railway switches for thirty-two years. I know how many pebbles there are in the switch-room. I really hate to leave …"

Liu's mind was in a turmoil. He wanted to pay respect to this old Party member. Embracing him again, Liu said, "You rest here in our hostel tonight and go back tomorrow." After saying this, he took up the telephone.

"Hello, is that the hostel? This is Liu Dashan speaking. We have a guest who will be staying here tonight. Prepare dinner for him … What? What rank of cadre is he? Wait a minute."

Liu smiled, covered the mouthpiece with his hand and winked at Lü Jiucai. "They're asking what rank you are."

"I am only a worker," said Lü.

Liu again spoke into the telephone:

"What rank? He's my superior!"

*

At ten o'clock that night, Liu Dashan walked back home with an empty stomach. His wife had already warmed the wine for him. Although Liu was tired out he looked relaxed and he grinned at his old wife.

Liu fell in love with a peasant girl many years ago when his army unit was stationed in a village. But his unit commander, on learning this, cautioned him that they were fighting a war and that it was not the right time to consider having a wife. That must wait until the war was over. Though Liu had to leave, he left his heart behind. After he was demobilized and transferred to work on the railways, he went again, in 1950, to that village to look for the girl. The villagers told him that she was already married and about to give birth to a child. On hearing this news, he left the village like a wounded animal. Finally, he pulled himself together and took a train to his native village in Jiaodong, where he married a girl who was now his old mate. Although she was not as pretty as the girl of his first love, she was simple, honest and very considerate. His love for her grew and he knew that he could never leave her.

Liu drank his wine; his wife was beside him. She had something to say to him today, but she would wait until

he had drunk so much that his face was red and his eyes beamed with smile. About half an hour later, she looked at his face and began:

"You've done it again. The same old mistake."

"What mistake?" Liu asked, holding his wine jug before his mouth.

"What mistake? Your bad temper. Why did you penalize Old Bai?"

Liu stared at his wife, banged his wine jug on the table and declared, "Women should keep themselves out of politics! When women interfere in politics, they're bound to mess up everything!"

His wife knew that he was in a comparatively better mood after drinking, so she continued:

"Don't forget the lessons of the 'cultural revolution.'"

Liu raised his voice and said slowly as if singing:

"We cannot allow bad people to do as they like even if there is another 'cultural revolution.' I'll give up only when I die."

"No! You must help Old Bai and do something about his penalty."

Liu raised his eyebrows and said grimly, "I'll do nothing! It was I who proposed his penalty to the Party committee!"

"Then—" His wife was not going to give up. Liu pushed the wine jug away from him. He would not drink any more. "If you say one more word, damn it, I'll divorce you!"

Unable to bear it any longer, his wife retired to the inner room to weep. Liu sat still for a while, thinking: "Shit! The guerilla habit has got me again!" Then, he went inside and lovingly embraced his wife.

"I'm sorry I lost my temper. I wouldn't part with you for all the young girls in the world! You are my dearest treasure!"

His wife looked hurriedly at the door, and said reproachfully:

"Let go. What if our granddaughter should see us!"

Several timid knocks were heard, so Liu went outside with his wife and opened the gate. A young man entered, his head down. He was about thirty years old. Quite lean, he had a small white face and was carrying a large bag.

"Whom are you looking for?" Liu asked.

The young man did not answer. Suddenly he covered up his face and began to cry bitterly. This made Liu feel very uncomfortable. He gave the young man a chair and asked:

"What's the matter? Come on, tell me."

"I was the station-master of the Baita Railway Station … but now I am no longer … I've made a mistake …" He sobbed still more, as if his parents had just passed away. Although Liu was a man of experience, he was rather taken aback by this peculiar scene. He walked round the young man, studying him from different angles. Suddenly he stopped before him.

"You bastard! Are you crying because you've lost your job? Or are you sorry for your mistakes? Don't put on an act! Will crying help you get your job back? Don't think I'm a merciful-faced Buddha!"

The young man's shoulders heaved for a while and then he stopped crying. Liu couldn't help laughing. He thought to hirmself: what an actor! How many good actors had been trained these past ten years!

The young man moved his hands away from his face. There were no tears on it, though it was quite flushed. He darted a brief glance at Liu and then pursed his lips in disapproval.

"Director Liu," he cautioned, "if you go on like this …"

"What will happen? Tell me."

The young man shook his head and sighed as if he pitied Liu.

Liu began to laugh. He stroked his hair.

"So you think the sky's going to come crashing down just because I';ve kicked you out! You're not very old, but you're a tricky customer. You began by flattering me; when that failed, you resorted to tears, then threats. Damn you! Are you a Party member?"

The young man looked up and met the furious gaze of Liu. Then he timidly bent his head again.

"Go on, try to be an honest man! Don't give me this nonsense any more. I'm sick of it!"

The young man had prepared some other "moves," but as soon as he put them forward, they were dismissed by this big Shandong man. He left, finally, and when he was far away from the house, he took out two bottles of wine and several cakes from his bag and hurled them away, swearing, "Let the blasted dogs eat them!" Soon, the aroma of strong sweet wine filled the night air.

*

When the penalty was published in the bureau bulletin, it seemed that a minor earthquake had occurred all

along the tracks. Some people were awakened from their deep slumber, and one man seemed to have been struck by lightning. Bai Fan collapsed with a coronary heart disease that very day. When Liu heard of this news, he thought: was he faking illness because he was ashamed, or because he felt he had been wronged? How many incidents of this kind had occurred in our society these last few years? People had the tendency of falling ill, in order to prove they had been overworked!

Liu decided to visit Bai that night to see for himself how he was getting on. Most people would avoid such a confrontation, but not Liu.

At night, the stars and the moon were in the sky. There were not many people on the road. A few pairs of young men and women were heading for the woods not too far away.

Liu reached a newly-completed apartment block. He went to the first flbor and walked straight into a room without knocking at the door. There he found Bai lying in bed, with several pillows placed under his head. On the bedside table were many bottles of medicine, including some imported Japanese and German ones. The seriousness of his illness was quite evident. When Bai Fan saw Liu he tried to lift his body towards the wall and he closed his eyes. Then, the door leading to the inner room opened. Lingling, a pretty young girl stuck her head out. On seeing Liu, she shut the door again with a bang. Liu stood there, thinking, “Such haughty airs!” Then he took a chair and sat down.

On the table he saw a photo of a pretty woman. She was Bai’s wife, who died two years ago. When she was still a girl, she was a well-known beauty. Bai Fan was originally named Bai Erzhu. In wooing this girl Bai changed his original name to Bai Fan, in order to give it a somewhat romantic air. Liu Dashan objected to the change at that time. Bai Fan asked for the help of a university student to draft his letter to the girl. The letter began with the words “My dear,” so that the girl thought that Bai had been to Europe for study. She disliked the words “My dear” very much. Because of these unlucky words, she prolonged her period of examination of Bai Fan by three months. Now this beauty had vanished from this world, and could only look at her home with sorrowful eyes as if saying to Bai Fan and her daughter Lingling, “Without me, how can you go on living?”

Liu sat for quite a long while. Bai did not move. Liu looked at the door, coughed and called, “Lingling, we have a guest here. Can you bring in some tea?”

There was still no response from the inner room. Liu raised his voice and called again, “Lingling, have you also got coronary heart disease?”

Nothing stirred in the inner room. Suddenly, Bai turned round and called loudly: “Lingling, this is something between grown-ups. Keep out of it and bring in some tea!” His voice was very stern. Then he turned his back again and closed his eyes.

Lingling appeared, pouting. She poured out a cup of water and placed it before Liu. He noticed she had tears in her eyes.

“Uncle Liu,” she said, wiping the tears from her face. “You treat my father like this. If he dies, what shall I do?”

Liu stroked her head and said very much moved, “No, he won’t die.” Then he added, “If he dies, I’ll be a father to you.”

Lingling smiled. Liu moved his chair nearer the bed and said to Bai, “Damn it! You should at least speak to me.” Bai moved a little, but he did not turn his face. Liu continued:

“You’re suffering, I know. But do you think I’m so happy? When Lingling wept, I also felt very bad! But what, can we do? Give up our ideals and principles? Quit the Party? You know more than I do. Come. Let’s have a drink.”

“Drink?” Bai turned to face Liu and asked, “For friendship? For our two years in detention? For your penalizing me?”

Liu did riot answer. After a while, he said, “Damn it! Why are you so stubborn?” He opened the cupboard, took out a porcelain jar and a bottle of *erguotou*.\fn{A note reads: *A strong spirit usually made from sorghum*.} He removed the cork and poured out half a jar of wine. Then he picked it up and toasted:

“To our friendship!”

Liu drank a large mouthful and pushed the jar towards Bai, who did not move. Liu again toasted:

“To the end of the steam locomotives and to automatic switching!” He gulped another big swig and again offered Bai the jar. Bai still refused to pay any attention. Liu then took up the jar for the third time and declared:

“To both of us, members of the Communist Party and to my recommendation, quite rightly I hope, of you for membership of the Party!” He drank and held out the jar to Bai.

This time, Bai rose his face all red, his hands trembling, as he took the jar and slowly drank the wine.

Liu stood up, took his leave and went out. He did not hear anyone follow him. He left and, after going some distance, turned round and saw Bai, supported by Lingling, standing outside the door looking in his direction. Liu again felt touched.

"Ah! So he's not a log of rotten wood."

The night deepened. Liu felt that there was something on his mind as he was walking home. A pair of lovers went past him, the girl with her head on the young man's shoulder; neither of them was saying a word. Liu did not give them another look. He was reminiscing about his past life. He saw in his mind's eye the land of Jiaodong, red dates and the faces of his dying fellow fighters. He saw the face of the old divisional commander and heard his roar:

"Are you a Communist Party member?"

He felt that he must answer this question properly, as should Bai and every one who had joined the Communist Party.

81.89 Train 257\fn{by Ching Mu aka Ching-p'ing aka Thunder, Wild, Armor, Light-blue (1939-)} Kueichou Province, China 5

Another sunset. More than one thousand suns had set since Chang Gin-yi's hopes vanished like the sun at evening into the deep dark sea. Gone were the thousand dismal, fine, windy, misty, cold, warm suns, yet they were only daily burdens to him:

Moving like a dinosaur, train 257 crawled away from Lou-Tong station toward the far distance, belching heavy smoke. Chang Gin-yi felt that the hope of his father's return was crushed under the wheels. He looked to the horizon and saw the sunset, and tears came to his eyes. As the evening grew it seemed the wind blew his tiny, lonely, shadow away and darkness swallowed him. His thoughts were far away.

He remembered the words of his father whispered into his ears long ago:

"If I become rich, I'll be back by train 257." He couldn't help sighing,

"Oh! Pa, the train has come and gone over a thousand times, but you didn't show up, you must have forgotten us."

His feet, taking short lonely steps on the streets of the old town of Lou-tung were heavy as if walking on quicksand, and seemed too frail to bear his burden of sorrow and yearning. Yet all through the past three years, they had carried him and his burden home each time after train 257 passed through his town.

Gin-yi hated to go home and see his mother's sad face but there was no other place for him to go to.

"Did Pa really forget?" he wondered. "He loved me so much." He recalled the winds on Li Je Gien. His father had left many footprints on Li Je Gien Beach, he remembered him as the ruler of the beach. He remembered clearly being on the beach, carrying a fish-basket in his hand and staying close at his father's heel. There he had tried to pick up the sand which held his father's big footprints but he failed. He recalled he had measured those prints with his own foot and stated awesomely, "Oh boy! They're enormous!" His father was a giant to him, and he thought that nothing in the world could be greater than he.

"Pa, you're a giant!" he once exclaimed.

"Giant?" his father questioned and looked as if he was not aware of his greatness.

"You have left huge footprints," he explained.

His father looking back at the clear footprints thought, "What a poor greatness—footprints on the sand." Then he had laughed and said, "So, I leave footprints in the sand."

"Yes, Pa, every time you walk." The sincerity of his words silenced his father, making him sad to think he was good for nothing but leaving footprints on the sand. His father, sitting on a rock at his usual place, started fishing. Gin-yi sat next to his father, very close. Suddenly his father said,

"I will leave the world nothing."

"Oh! Yes, you will Pa," Gin-yi reassured his father. "Whose footprints are so big and deep?"

"Do you know how many people have walked on the sand?" his father asked; "but where are their footprints now?"

This confused Gin-yi, because he thought nobody except his father had walked and left deep foot-marks in the sand.

"Yes, there should be a lot of footprints," he thought. So he went back searching and found nothing but the footprints of his father. He wondered why there were no other footprints.

His father watched the fishing-rod silently; a little fish was swallowing the bait. He pulled the rod and knew it

was not a big fish so he retracted the line and then put the bait back in.

"Found any other footprints?" asked his father.

"Not a single one, even the footprints we left last time have also vanished."

"The tide washed it away," said his father.

"We can follow the tracks coming and going had those not been washed off," he said, "and it'll save us a lot of trouble."

His father smiled, his face wrinkling so that the lines on his forehead looked more distinct. People said that those special lines on his forehead meant. that his father would someday make good. But Gin-yi wondered when that fine day would be. His father, having always been poor, would never make it. Li Je Gien beach was beautiful; the blue sky was at the end of the sea, as one could see clear to the horizon. In the small yard at home, one's vision was limited within the square confines of the yard.

"No wonder Pa enjoys coming to Li Je Gien beach. Everything here belongs to him," he thought.

"Pa," he suggested, "if you tread deeper next time you come here, the footprints will not be washed away."

"It won't work, because it is sand." His father shook his head wondering why this boy kept thinking of foot prints in the sand. He said, "Why do you want to keep those footprints?"

"Then when you are busy I would be able to come alone and walk in your prints," He answered.

"No! Don't keep on thinking of walking in my footsteps, walk by yourself, and make footprints of your own," said his father.

The rod jolted, his father jerked the rod and the reel started to whirl.

"It's a big one," said his father. The fish struggled for quite a while. Finally, it was pulled up on the sand where it flopped up and down. It was a big fat fish, at least weighing two *cattys*.

"Boy! It's a big one, Mom will like it," Gin-yi praised.

"Huh! had wanted to catch a whale, but it is still a fish," Father answered, not at all excited as he was. He picked up the fish, looked at it for a while, then tossed it back into the sea.

"Pa, you—"

"The fish looks unhappy," said his father.

"But Mom will nag you when you get home."

The lines vanished from his forehead and his face became sullen and cold as the wind which blew along the coast.

*

"I say you're born to be poor. If I wait for you to support me with your fishing, I would be so thin my bones could be used as drumsticks!"

"One day I'll catch a whale as long as the Li Je Gien beach, you'll see, Ah-shi."

*

His father's words were answered by a cold sneer from his mother. He had read in storybooks that a woman's love was warmth and security. He thought; mother is a woman.

"Enough, En Shiou. We don't want any whale. Just give us enough food to eat, and enough clothes to wear. We'll be running out of rice by tomorrow."

This was a problem mentioned quite often by mom. And this problem, like a difficult mathematics problem, always made Pa wrinkle his eyebrows.

*

"Let's borrow some from someone; or—"

"Borrow? Not even if we starve to death!"

"You're born poor, yet you're so proud, you think you can support us by catching the wind."

*

And so his mother would go on complaining; she'd say it was unlucky for her to have been married to his father. It'd be better if they divorced. She would go on and on, over and over like a record playing. But last night, his mother's words really hurt his father like a knife. His mother said that she would go to the tea-house and be a tea-house girl so as to keep the family going.

*

"What did you say you were going to do? You!"

"People may look down upon a poor woman, but not a rich whore—"

His father slapped her to stop her from finishing the sentence.

"What right do you have to hit anyone, you who fail to support your wife and child! And you won't let me do

the supporting!"

"I have my pride, understand? The pride of a man, a husband." His father's eyes were red.

"Pride?! You are unable to support your own family, and you are talking about your pride?"

"Ah-shi, we're still alive, we can't just do anything cheap because we're poor."

"Doing anything cheap is better than being poor yet not admitting it." His mother wept. Her tears made his father feel ashamed and guilty. So he murmered gently:

"Ah-shi, its not that I don't want to give you a better life. I've tried everything. What else can I do? Poverty is always my shadow. I can't go and steal or rob. Be patient. It's good enough that we are still alive."

"Just to be alive is not good enough. The children have to go to school, and I want to be clothed, a house to live in. Do you think that just having enough to eat is everything?"

*

His father lowered his head in silence. The fish that was tossed back into the sea disappeared into a whirl of bubbles.

"Pa, you deserve Ma's scoldings."

His father looked at him speechlessly, then heaved a deep sigh, reeled in the fish line, and readied for home. The fish-basket was empty just as it always was.

"Look! Pa." He showed his father the empty fish-basket. What he meant was that when they got home they would have to listen to the endless complainings from his mother again. The basket was empty, the opening was like his mother's mouth.

"I've caught a basket of nothing, a beautiful nothing!" His father shrugged his shoulders in a nonchalant way.

His father's words made him wonder—caught a basket of nothing? A beautiful nothing—how could nothing be beautiful?

"What is beautiful about nothing, Pa? How can nothing be beautiful?"

"You won't understand until you grow up." His father thought a while, then as if he felt he should try to make it clearer, he explained, "Man catches nothing but nothingness."

The explanation still meant nothing to him. His thoughts were like his mother's: to have enough to eat and wear; then to be able to have good food to eat and nice clothes to wear. would be more beautiful and also better than nothingness. For example, that fish was much better and more beautiful than nothingness.

But perhaps Pa had a point there? He had read a lot of books. His father had once said that knowledge was power, that knowledge was wealth; then why was he still poor although he had read a lot? Did he come all the way to the beach to catch nothingness? Was what he was doing in the carpenter shop also nothingness?

Every time was the same. He didn't remember why or when his father began to change; perhaps it was because of the quarrel that night, perhaps not. Maybe it was because everyone in the family looked so undernourished. But his father no longer caught nothingness, he swallowed his pride.

His father asked for some loan from his uncle who ran a soap factory, and also from many other relatives of theirs. Every time he went out with high hopes but came back with disappointment. During their days of poverty relatives and friends were still relatives and friends, but since his father began to borrow from them they began to turn their backs, and even when they met on the street, they would turn away, becoming strangers.

"When you are rich, relatives come from afar to see you, money is everything. Only with money do you have honor, character and love."

"Love?!" Chang Gin Yi's father smiled wryly at the irony of it all. Ah-shi had said she would love him to the end of the world. And now where was that love? Without money, love changed and vanished.

*

Only money can bring good fortune. His father became so sure of that, that he began to change and change thoroughly. He wanted to go searching for money. He had spent half of his lifetime in Lou-tung but it was just like the sands of Li Je Gien beach, he could never leave any footsteps behind him. He made up his mind to go far away. He wanted to go and get drunk, because only when drunk could he forget his pain. He left the carpenter shop with the little money he had earned and went into the small wine shop. He drank the Red-Rice wine, which created for him a beautiful world.

Chang Gien-yi remembered that cold midnight three years ago. His father had come home very late.

His mother was angry and had barred the door. His father shouted outside the door, "Open up! Ah-shi open up! Ah Shi"

His mother lay unmoving with eyes wide open. It was as if she didn't hear his shouting at all.

"Ma! Shall I go and open the door?" he asked timidly as he started to get off the bed.

"Such a father! What's the use of having him back?!"
"Open up, Ah-shi!"
The knocking was gentle and timid, and the voice was full of pitiful pleading.
Finally his mother got up to open the door. The smell of wine was blown inside by the cold wind, and that added to her anger.
"Why don't you just drop dead outside, you …"
"Ah-shi! You …"
"How nice for you to have the money to go and drink while the whole family is hungry and cold.":
"Oh! I feel pain in my heart—"
"Feel pain, so you go and drink? Hah!"
"This will be the last time, Ah-shi."
"That's enough, since you don't care about us, then let's split up."
"Split up? You must be joking?"
"Who is joking? Just let me go my way and let the children have their lives."
His mother's words were just like bullets piercing right into his father's heart and made him twitch with pain.
Poverty had made love a lie. His father looked woodenly at the ordinary flat face before him. He couldn't even keep a wife like that even she wanted a divorce.
A useless man indeed.
Thus the tragedy began; his thoughts of going far away became firmer. He would go away, for their sakes and for his own. Seeing the children sobbing she had said:
"No way to go on—my leaving may lessen your burden."
His father's face had turned pale. "I'm sorry, Ah-shi." The giant on the beach had fallen. He knelt down before her, holding her legs, looking up at her.
"I am the one who should go. Let me go." He told her that he wanted to go and try his luck in Taipei.
She caressed the rough hair on his father's head with regret, the rough hair that was a symbol of his pride and stubbornness. It was his pride that she had fallen in love with and had married. When had this begun to change?
His father got up and looked at the undernourished faces of the family, then he said with shame and guilt, "It's all my fault."
Chang Gin-yi knew that his father had always felt guilty every time he was on the Li Je Gien beach.
"Where will you go?" said his mother. He could hear his mother's voice was trembling.
"Taipei, I'll go to try my chances there." His father said, "If you want to be rich. you have to go to a big city."
"We could stick together although we're poor. What did I say? Has poverty driven me crazy?" His mother did love his father, who could say that she didn't?
"Ah-shi. I know how the children are suffering, please stop it."
"You must understand I only want you to better yourself."
"Yes, I know."
"It isn't necessary to go to Taipei. I just want you to control your strong temper."
"Not exactly. Ah-shi! I swear that I won't come back before I get rich. I will never see you again for the rest of my life unless I become rich."
"You!" His mother was shocked. She had never thought that things would turn out this way. Chang Gin-yi could see that both their eyes were clouded. He knew that his father had never left Lou-tung before, neither had their ancestors. But this time his father was going far away. Taipei was just like the tide of Li Je Gien sea, it would swallow his father. But poverty also swallowed people. They were all unwilling to have their father go, but he went anyhow. And now he had been gone for three whole years.
Was it the 257 train or was it the next train which bore his father away?
He seated himself where his father had sat three years ago and it seemed that his father's shadow was alive, sitting there in that chair.
That day, truly an unforgettable one. Train 257 came into the station, letting down so many people! The station was like a stage, presenting so many comedies as well as tragedies of life. His father was huddled in the corner of the waiting room with a little bag in his hand.
"Pa! Are you really going?" He clung to his father.
"Yes. It's true, I am really going."
"Please stay! Pa," he cried.
"Silly boy. Pa is going to make money so Pa can buy you a new school bag, a new pen and—"

“No, Pa! I don’t want anything. I just want you.”

Those new things were tempting, but at this moment, he wanted nothing but his father.

“My Child Oh, you are so good.” His father caressed his soft hair with his hand, and his touch was full of love and care.

“Pa! When will you be back? Please come back soon.”

“I will come back when I have made a lot of money.”

“And how long will that be?”

“Maybe soon, maybe.”

The train whistle blew, it was ready to move away.

“When I come back, I’ll take this same train.”

“Then, I’ll be here every day at the same time, waiting for you.”

“Don’t be silly. I don’t know what day that will be.”

The north-bound train started moving along, and his father picked up his bag and hurried toward the railing of the station. The railing came between him and his father. The wheels started rolling. The earth started shaking. The wheels crunched over the iron tracks and it was as if they were crunching over his heart.

His Mother had hurried in just as the train had already started. Grasping the railings, she looked as if she had wanted to rush into the station, her heart and soul yearning to fly away with the train. He saw her mouth gaping—not laughing, not crying, with such depths of pain, there was no way of showing it.

His father became a vague shadow in his eyes. He was holding the railings—his whole body leaning against it, his whole heart reaching out in an agony of love.

Most probably, there had been many other hearts and souls right there on the train and on the station that were feeling the same pain as he did.

The eyes and hearts of his mother, his brother, his sister and of his own were dragged along by the train his father had taken. His father’s face became vaguer and vaguer, then vanished in the whirling of the wheels. It was like the tide at the Li Je Gien beach, his father would never appear again in all that blank stretch of space.

“I wonder how far is Taipei from here?”

“It must be far away, otherwise, why should mother be crying?”

Father was separated from us by such a distance, a distance that was like a knife—sharp enough to separate flesh and blood, to kill love.

He was waiting—with his elbow against the railings to brace himself while his thin legs dangled to and fro. In his young mind, he tried to recall his father’s face, but somehow he could hardly do so. The profile of his father was now like the footprints left on the Li Je Gien beach—to be washed away by time. He didn’t want to go home. He wouldn’t go home until the train arrived and then left. And then his heart would wander along the tracks leading to Taipei, that remote place.

*

His father appeared suddenly at the door of train 257. It was the same father as the one on Li Je Gien beach. Father came running, with a big handbag which he put down before hugging him and holding him up in the air. Though he was not what he was like when father had left, being fourteen now, Father was always father and he still had strong arms.

“Pa! Pa!”

“Child! Child!”

“Pa, you forgot your bag.”

Father unzippered the bag and out came silver, gold, pearls, diamonds. Then Poverty fled. And the happiness that had been taken away by father was brought back again. He hid himself in his father’s arms. Father was great and in his arms, poverty became nothing.

“How did you know I’d be back today?”

“I’ve been here waiting for the five-ten train for the past three years.”

He was crying in his father’s arms. He did not care about the people, about being shamed; he had to cry out this once all of the tears of the past three years. At that instant, all his tears flowed like the tide at the Li Je Gien beach. He sobbed out all the sufferings his mother working as a servant, his brother being a laborer—he wanted his father to feel his mother’s hands, which were as rough as a chisel. Those hands were the reason for their being alive today, the price paid for the glorious survival of the family. He wanted to tell his father that life was like fire, burning them all; and that poverty had frozen their laughter.

*

The train arrived and left, like a dinosaur from whose belly came so many wandering fathers, but not a sign of Chin-yi's father.

The train left again, the wheels crushed all his rosy dreams. A thousand dreams-like the bubbles in mother's washing.

A pitiful dream.

He had but gathered a disappointment at the station. He had grown up in hardships. He had learned much. He had picked firewood after school. He had gathered sawdust from the carpenter shop. He had learned to share the burden of supporting a family. This time, he had brought home with him the same disappointment, the faces of his mother and brother were as if covered with frost.

"What's wrong?"

He could not find any answer from their faces.

"Oh!" Mom sighed a long sigh. Young as he was, he understood. It was a wordless sound expressing her regrets, intermingled with yearning for his father. He understood it very well. All too well.

"Mom … you …" He put down the dried twigs. Silence was more noisy than any words, mother's wrinkles had deepened, she was stooped over, worse than ever. Her hair had suddenly turned white although she wasn't as yet the age for it to be so. Every lock of white hair penetrated his. heart and pained him.

His brother was silent. He was always like that. He had known the hardships of life all too soon.

"Mom, don't sigh like that, we have gone through all kinds of hardships, what can't we face now?" Poverty had made him mature beyond his age. The fourteen-year-old Chang Gin-yi comforted his mother. His words brought tears again and his mother sobbed:

"Since your father left, the family has depended on me and your brother and now here comes this draft!"

"That's all right, mom, men are supposed to be soldiers."

"But what about us? How shall we manage to live?"

This was like a thunder bolt from the blue. After his brother went into the service, the whole burden of the family of five would fall on mother alone. Sister and another brother were too young to be of any help. What now? What now?

"Mom, let brother go. I can quit school. and help out with the family."

He would try to do what his father had done—make footprints on the sand at the Li Je Gien beach. His feet were small, but they would leave prints. He would walk to the place under that rock where his father used to sit on. He had followed his father's footsteps before, and although those footprints were gone now, he would still go on searching. Things always come from searching. Even if he had not tried it, I would go on trying. His mother nodded with bitter smile.

He came out from that damp wooden house for a breath of air. It was late and lights glimmered from all the houses of Lou-tung.

I will go wherever there's light, and gold, I will go to search for a living.

But he was too small. He tried for several days and his efforts failed. Staring up at the little square of sky above the yard, he called softly.

"Pa, where are you?"

"Pa, why don't you come back?"

"Pa, have you really forgotten us?"

*

There was no answer from above. The application for the postponement of his brother's draft was granted, so he didn't have to go into the service now. All the same, his father did not come back. Night after night, staring at that little square of sky above, he would call out softly.

81.110 Tainted Love: Five Parnas\fn{by Lei Hsiang (1939-)} Shanghai, China (M) 2

1: Lotus Seed-Pod

The monk crouched high on the alter. His *kasaya* hung down from his thin and lean shoulders, covering his rush mat. He looked like a splendid flower of Buddha.

The monk was giving a sermon to eight hundred believers in a large hall. No breeze blew through the various styles of windows which had been thrown open. The believers sat on bended knees, stuck tight side by side, streaming with sweat and staring at the necks of the people in front of them. But the flower of Buddha sat still and

looked straight ahead expositing and explaining the meaning of “tainted love.”

“I thought it was a Japanese phrase in Chinese characters!” he said in his heart.

“A pure mind disturbed by lust is polluted—leading one to committing endless sins and rendering one incapable of cultivating his/her mind. This is what a Buddhist should guard against,” the monk said.

He fanned himself with the printed handout, trying to get the air to circulate. He felt that it was just his obligation to accompany his elders here, yet he had planned beforehand to pick an aisle seat close to an exit. Then he excused himself with an inscrutable gesture, and he walked out of the auditorium after making a respectful and cautious kowtow.

The explanation of “tainted love” continued as he walked beside the building. “Indulging, in, obsessed with, and lusting for love …,” the speech of the monk was repeated by a female voice in Taiwanese. He could see the cherry-red lips of the nun utter the words without difficulty.

He looked at the scenery around the monastery. His yearning for the hills and woods knew no bounds at this instant, as if he had discovered for the first time in his life that lust and landscape were actually an integral whole. He imagined a naked girl standing under the shower head shaped like a lotus seed-pod, lifting her head to let the water run down her body, and with one of her hands she spread her thighs to let the water flow into that most hidden place …

The chanting of a sutra could be heard from the hall.

2: Fetus

He wished his unborn child would look like his young wife, and have her wide forehead and long neck. He did not know that at birth the similarities among babies far exceeded the characteristics of their mothers or fathers.

Sometimes he silently looked at his wife’s swollen belly, which protruded as if something strange had invaded and stationed itself inside her; her nipples, like flower buds, were full, to the point of bursting. “I am entirely under its control,” his wife said smiling and panting.

Even when she was in a deep sleep, he could tell when her heartbeat had quickened, because sweat clung to the tip of her nose even though it was winter. Her body was transformed almost beyond recognition but her face remained pretty. Her big eyes under her arched ink-dark eyebrows, her high nose, and her soft mouth all gave her an unconstrained air—but now she was utterly constrained. Sometimes, for no reason; his wife’s face made him think of young Akutagawa.

His mother who lived nearby was very happy about her daughter-in-law’s pregnancy, and started making preparations. She bought a guidebook on postpartum care by a woman doctor. It was said that this OB\fn{Obstetrics.} doctor became famous by curing a certain queen’s sterility. The doctor professed that all Chinese medicinal tonics should be prepared with wine, instead of the usual water. How could his wife, who generally detested wine, bear this? All their relatives and friends said, “It would be better to die than to follow such a method.”

After that the whole family sank in to an inextricable atmosphere of uneasy expectation.

3: The Blind Person’s Flute

On a dark night, she finally met the blind masseur on the street. In order to record the night sounds, she had made tremendous efforts in seeking out the sound of a flute that only consisted of two or three scales and that was heard in the alleys a long time ago. First she went to Beitou to ask the advice of the cab drivers who took the masseurs to the hot springs there. She then visited some professional masseurs who told her that they no longer had to play flutes at night to solicit business and that a phone call was now enough. However, she found out through a retired teacher from a blind and deaf-mute school, that there was still a masseur who still notified people of his services by playing a flute in the streets at night.

“It’s hard to believe that the person who gave me directions was a blind person,” she told me later. “His detailed description of the place where we were supposed to meet was incredibly clear, much better than that by people who can see like myself.”

She let me listen to parts of the unedited live recording. In the recording the masseur said, “The streets are completely different day and night—you can tell from the hollow or muffled and garbled sounds in response to my flute!” The sound of a car driving by in the distance interrupted her—demonstrating that she was “looking” with her sense of hearing. “I listen to my flute, and at the same time I listen to see if there are any sounds in response to it. If I hear a window open, I know there is business for me.”

A week later, during the final broadcast, I heard the wind rustling first, then her voice came on, saying, “In a piercingly cold wind, a blind masseur like an armed escort in an overcoat, playing a short tune, walked toward us, closer and closer …”

4: Castanets

Standing on the bustling streets where the shops stood one next to another, I heard the *rat-tat* twice, first distant then near, then near then distant. It didn’t matter if the buses were roaring down the street around noon, if music was playing in the shops, or if there was a busy hum of shoppers—the concise and sharp sound of castanets overwhelmingly stood out from the human clamor.

That regular and measured staccato *rat-tat* shook my eardrums and made me turn my head and look. I saw approaching along the narrow arcade in front of the shops the, silhouette of a person with sloping shoulders and a limp. In one hand that stout silhouette of a man carried an old briefcase shiny from use; with the other he clapped a pair of black wooden castanets, which sounded clear and loud.

He wore sunglasses and walked with difficulty. It seemed that he had to kick out his left foot in order to take a step. He passed me in no time and kept on walking without a pause. Was he in a hurry to examine a patient, or to help people handle some public business? He never looked around, nor dilly-dallied. Presumably his castanets were a way of soliciting business— most likely to divine by trigrams or to tell fortunes.

He seemed to anticipate that there were customers on this street who needed his help because he walked to the end and back again—in a hurried manner. He never stopped except when someone called him. However, no one from any of the shops called him. The ruthless street stood by while the sounds of the castanets passed farther and farther away.

5: A Cart

Every morning a stooped old woman sold her home-grown vegetables in a rural village in the east. The vegetables were put in a cart which she pushed to a stall that she had leased.

Sometimes, when she sold all her greens before noon, she would buy some from a neighboring stall at a trade price to continue her business till the market closed. Then she bent over and pushed her empty cart home. Taking a napa cabbage out of the empty cart, she said to her daughter-in-law:

“This is gain for nothing. You can have it.”

The piece of land where she grew vegetables was a rent-free vacant lot eight hundred meters from her house. Only when she first began cultivating the land did she need her children’s help. After that, she did the sowing, fertilizing and weeding all by herself. She always pushed a cart containing her tools: shovels, a water bucket, a basket and a small stool, on which she sat and moved along inch by inch while weeding or loosening soil.

She used to be a diligent and prolific woman. She never stopped working from her pregnancy to the time of her labor. One time when she was in the middle of carrying the night soil and water mixture with a shoulder pole and buckets to the farmland which her husband worked, her labor pains started. She stopped a neighbor, asking her to carry the manure to the field, then she tidied up herself to give birth to a boy—in this same way, her eight daughters had also luckily survived.

Now she was eighty-three years old. Her husband died just the year before, and her children were filial and supported her, yet she worked hard as before. She pushed her cart no matter what she did as even for her morning exercise, for she was too rickety to stand up straight. Without the support of the cart, she might fall down.

83.94 Fog\fn{by Yin Dih aka Ko Ching-hwa (1939-   )} Chekiang Province, China (M) 2

For a very long time now, I had been living in fog; for an interminable fall, a whole spring, and half a summer. It was not until a rain-soaked night that I saw the sun again; and yet the sun was black.

It was Kang Chun’s birthday. We ate and drank our fill until evening, and then the bunch of us headed for *Sweet Lotus’s* to get some ice cream. The bunch of us, that is, Kang Chun, Li Pin, Chen Chin and I. We were all regular customers of *Sweet Lotus’s*; and we always had the same thing there—strawberry ice cream. Needless to say, the humid, blazing May had nothing to do with it. *Ai*! through the bleak winter and damp, moldy spring, we had been coming here every day. To make it clear, we came only for the two girls here: Lai Hsiu-chi and Lin Pi-chiao.

"Lai Hsiu-chi's got the roundest hip there is!"

Intoxicated, Li Pin was babbling to himself all the way. "Roundness is the perfection of beauty. It betokens maturity. That's it, maturity! That's what turns me on."

He liked maturity, but it was Lin Pi-chiao that I cherished. However, I never could reveal my feelings to her. I did not have Li Pin's ways with women. He could tease any woman into giggling, even if they had been total strangers and meeting for the first time. But these two girls always held their grounds. They would receive us with friendly but professional smiles. They served us ice cream, but never condescended to joining us in a chat, as the so-called coffee girls would. But this time, Li Pin was obsessed. The minute he stepped into *Sweet Lotus's* he grabbed Lai Hsiu-chi into his arms without any warning. Apparently he was playing drunk, thinking that we could not blame him this way. But right after that, he threw up and made a mess of the place.

Seeing that he really was drunk, Lai Hsiu-chi loosened up her stiff face.

"Some friends you are! Why did you make him drink so much?" Saying this, she cleaned up the table and chairs that Li Pin had made a mess of. She looked down with tender affection at Li Pin's sweating forehead, gave a shrug, and fetched a glass of water. Affection! Now how do you explain that? Perhaps, such is woman. Li Pin had long ago given his last word on it: Women were just like that-the less serious you were, the more so they become.

Somewhere deep in my heart, I was serious about Lin Pi-chiao. She was not so mature as Lai Hsiu-chi, but she looked so amazingly classically beautiful. Naturally it is more lovely than being mature. She sat timorously in her corner, looking as if her heart was still beating violently over what had just happened. When she felt that I was watching her she immediately lowered her head. She was always like that, looking so .innocent, so easily embarrassed.

Only you know no embarrassment, I said to myself. Coming to *Sweet Lotus'* again and again, just to watch her, to silently admire her classical beauty!

"Bye-bye!" Having thrown up all the wine, Li Pin was his own careless self again. He finished his glass of water, and shook his head at Lai Hsiu-chi with a dry smile.

"I was drunk. I didn't know what I was doing!" As he said this, he tossed a crumpled-up ten NT dollar bill, much as a dead shot basketball player would toss his ball. Whist! it went and landed inside Lai Hsiu-chi's low, round collar.

"Bye-bye!" he said again. Outside *Sweet Lotus's*, Li Pin cocked his head and announced his crooked idea: "Let's go to Flower Street;\fn{A note reads: *The euphemistic name given to the red-light district. In Taiwan, green lights are used instead of red lights*.} what do you say?"

"Flower Street?" Chen Chin stopped, nailed where he was.

However, under our urging and pushing, this tough Conservative finally became our "leader." All in a hurry, he took the lead, as if catching the last train, and walked into the street that could be the dampest and gloomiest one in the world.

"Not so fast!" Li Pin caught up with him, and gave him a slap on the shoulder. "Now that you are here, you got to tear down that mask from your face. Don't be so damned Confucius-like."

Flower Street. Every door was wide open. And from the inside of each door shone a green light. Just as Chen Chin was hesitating between continuing to walk forward or turning to flee, a woman emerged out of the green light and grasped hold of him, with a depraved smile on her face. This was too much for Chen Chin.

"What are you trying to do?" he shouted at her in desperation.

"F - - - you!" the woman answered off-handedly, as if she were born with the expression. Chen Chin stared in amazement. He was stunned for quite a while. Then he turned and fled.

"Never mind him," said Li Pin. "Let him go home and make love to his pillow!"

Turning a corner, Li Pin took Kang Chun and me to the third floor of a hotel.

"Three by five; that makes a hundred and fifty. That's money enough," he said, feeling in his pocket. "Fat ones or skinny ones, you guys? I'm going to get myself one slender in the waist and round in the hip."

Kang Chun seemed very hesitant. I felt my heart beating violently. Thud, thud, thud it went. An unquenchable burning was at duel with a voice that could not be heard.

The duel was going on. A very fat woman came to the third floor.

"Want girls?" she asked. Her eyes squeezed into two tiny cracks in her face.

"Yeah. Young ones. Nice and tame. Got it?"

The fat woman piled up a face-full of I-got-it, and went downstairs. Li Pin pushed the window open and took out his cigarettes and lighter from his pocket. The air inside the room seemed to freeze, silent and heavy. Time

ticked by, second by second. There seemed to be a fog rising up before my eyes. If I were told to go downstairs at that time, I would not have known which way to go.

Footsteps rang on the stairs, up from the first floor. No doubt about it. It was a woman's high heels, tapping up to the second floor. It got closer. Third floor now. On the porch. *Tap tap tap*. The woman showed up at the door.

She covered half her face with a fan and looked at us, wearing a professional expression. So this was the goods? There was no curve at all in her figure. The impression was that of a gasoline barrel, a tall and big one. She was about thirty. Her skin was covered with red pimples. Her hair resembled a bird’s nest, done up in what they called the Elizabeth Taylor\fn{After Elizabeth Rosemond Taylor (1932-   ), American actress.} style. It could contain at least a basket-full of rotten oranges. That was it, a basket-full of rotten oranges. The woman was herself a rotten orange.

Naturally rotten oranges were not welcome. She left. A weighty silence was spreading among us. Someone else was on the stairs. The door opened. The fat woman brought a big girl this time. White flat shoes, grayish dark, narrow skirt, light blue blouse, without any make up, not even lipstick, the girl looked so green, like a newly peeled green pea. She smiled awkwardly at me. A faint scent of fragrance emitted from her smile.

Li Pin gave me a nudge. Should I take her? I did not know. I had the first pick among all the girls we ordered tonight. Li Pin and Kang Chun had generously agreed upon that before we came up here. If only I would, this girl in front of me would be mine tonight. But, would I? I did not know. Blood seemed frozen inside me, and I kept still. Kang Chun thought I did not like her, and took her away with a shrug. They went to a room next door.

Wind swept over the windowpanes with a swishing sound. For the first time I noticed it was raining. The curtains were occasionally blown open. Gusts of fine, dense raindrops sprayed inside, like fog.

Fog. I was losing myself in fog. Kang Chun took her away. I suffered an unspeakable sense of loss. It was real loss. He and she were right in the next room.

“I don't get it," said Li Pin. "Are you picking a lover, a wife, or a simple whore to solve your inflation?”

“ …”

He didn’t understand; as if I did! All I felt was the suffocation and bewilderment in the fog. The world looked so strange to me. Kang Chun and the girl were right next door.

“Dumb!” Li Pin was almost shouting at me. He swept around and dashed out. He went downstairs and left me all alone in the room.

Most of the space in the room was taken up by a large bed, and the bed was expanding towards me, seeming about to swallow me up. Suddenly I was possessed by a nameless sense of horror. Life, youth, love, past, future, present—what are you doing at present? Whoring!

The fog lifted. The door was gently opened. I thought it was Li Pin coming back. Looking up, I caught a glimpse of a girl hurrying out, as if she had been pushed from behind. Following her was an instinctive reaction. She was not alone. There was another one ahead. They were in such a hurry, as if panic-stricken. They looked so familiar from behind. I hastened to catch up, but they had turned the corner and started downstairs. The stairs were a spiral one. Looking straight down from the third floor, one had a fine view of everything in sight. God! I was barely able to suppress a cry. There could be no mistake. It was them!

I stood petrified: fog sealed my eyes again. Lurking pain now sprang to tear me into shreds like a hungry wolf. Life could be so cheap! What was this thing called love? No one knew my secret. For a year now, I had been going to *Sweet Lotus’s* for ice cream every day with Li Pin and the others. God knows! A hundred reasons for my going there were pitiable enough excuses. What really attracted me there was that little woman, that silent little woman sitting in her corner. It was she. And yet, she was all along so easily to be gotten. All one needed to do was pay the price, and she would come naked into your arms. I was the one who could not be naked. I never dared to express my love to her. Even stretching my lips and smiling at her was beyond me. I was mortally afraid, afraid that it would have offended her!

Li Pin rushed upstairs again, almost running into me.

"Guess what? Boy! Would you be surprised at this!” he said with his finger tip on my nose. He thought I did not know.

“ …”

“What are you thinking about? Didn’t you hear what I said?” he was almost shouting again. “I’m telling you. You get Lin Pi-chiao, and I’ll get Lai Hsiu-chi. OK?”

Stepping out of the hotel, I saw women streaming, flooding the streets; and I could not tell which was that kind of woman and which was not. The streets were chilly at midnight. Streetlights were arguing with each other in silence. Suddenly fog fell in front of my eyes again, gust after gust.

One is always hearing them say, “Women in ‘business’ are all over the place.” All over the place! Should I believe that or not, by now?

The fog grew thicker. Tomorrow, and the day after, would Li Pin and Kang Chun still be going to *Sweet Lotus's* every day? Not I, I'll never go again, not ever, ever.

118.219 Flaw\fn{by Wang Wen-Hsing (1939-)} Foochow, Fukien Province, China (M) 5

I must have been eleven that year, because I had just enrolled in junior high. At that time we were still living on Tung-an Street, our earliest home in Taipei, and had not yet moved to Tung-hua Street, after which we moved again to Lien-yun Street. But it has always been my impression that the earlier the home, the better it seemed; every time we moved, it was to a less attractive place. Perhaps it was the nostalgia for early childhood, strongest for the earliest years, that gave rise to such an illusion.

Tung-an Street was a quiet little alley, with less than a hundred families along its entire length. Slightly curved around its middle, the street stretched all the way to the great gray river at the end. Actually, viewed from the vantage point of the river bank, there were very few pedestrians on the street, which, with its palish body and meandering path, was virtually a small river itself. Such was the tranquil picture when I was eleven; later, as small cars were allowed to pass through the street, the atmosphere of quiet seclusion was lost altogether. My present reminiscences hark back to the era before the arrival of the cars.

In any event, on Tung-an Street at that time cats could be seen strolling lazily along the tops of the low walls, from one house to the next. The whole landscape was filled with glistening green foliage and delicately fragrant odors from the profusion of flowers and plants growing in the front yards. Flowers especially took to Tung-an Street; they bloomed in the spring and in the fall. Most unforgettable, however, were the evenings of that tiny street, when silent street lamps illuminated the darkness of the road. Night seemed even quieter than day. The little grocery stores, unlike their counterparts in the crowded city, closed at half-past nine. Midnight began at half-past nine. Night enjoyed its deepest and longest sleep on this street. Light breezes rustled among the leaves while remote stars twinkled in the skies, and after a few hours, night passed and day broke. In the early morning mist, the owners of the small grocery stores, still unlike their counterparts in the city, began taking down the wooden panels of the shops.

In spring that year, a young seamstress opened a shop at the end of the street near the river. It was at a time when Taipei, still untouched by affluence, was just beginning to prosper, and a number of three-storied buildings could be seen cropping up here and there. Ever since the previous winter, we children had been watching with interest the construction of such a building on the vacant lot in front of our houses. Our feelings were excitement mingled with sadness; we were excited because, as children, we felt an immense satisfaction with all novel experiences—new sights, new sounds, new objects, new undertakings—and sad because we were losing our favorite playground for after-school ball games. The building was completed in spring, and the young woman moved in. The house consisted of three compartments, and was three stories tall. The young woman and her family occupied the entire compartment on the right, while the second and third floors served as family rooms. It was said that she owned the entire building and we children had naturally assumed that she would occupy all the space herself, but it turned out she reserved only one compartment for her own use and offered the others for rent. A week after they had been taken she changed her mind and sold them off. And we felt a slight tinge of regret for her that she had been able to occupy only a part of the building.

I was a precocious child then, although I looked at least two years younger than my eleven years. Like all underdeveloped children however, my mental growth compensated for my physical weakness by being two years beyond my age. One day, I discovered that I was in love with the young woman. The realization dawned upon me during the spring vacation, right after the soft spring showers, in the blossom-filled month of April.

Being a sensitive and inward child; I had an instinctive fear of glamorous and sophisticated women, and took only to those with kind faces (I still do even now). The woman at the dressmaking shop was exactly the type I like.

She was about thirty-five or so, and did not wear much make-up (this was very important). She wore neither rouge nor powder on her face and only a tiny trace of lipstick on her lips, which were often parted in a white warm smile. Her eyes were not only beautiful, but, even more important, glowed with gentle kindness. My love for her stemmed not only from approval of her looks, but was rooted in sincere admiration for the goodness of her character as well.

Love in a precocious child, like a heavy blossom atop a frail stem, was a burden too heavy to bear. Only then

did I realize the consuming nature of love; if the blazing flames were the joys of love it was the burning of the fuel itself which made these flames possible. I found it impossible that true happiness could consist in achieving joy from the masochistic burning of one's own self. Although I had been in the world for a mere eleven short years then, I had undergone enough minor suffering to be able to devise a means of avoiding pain. That was: if you happened to form an emotional attachment to a certain thing or a certain person, the best thing to do was to immediately look for a fault therein, upon which you would then be able to withhold your affection and thus lighten the burden. During the next few days, I often concealed myself directly opposite her shop and scrutinized her with cold detachment, in an effort to discover some ugliness in her. But the longer I watched, the more beautiful she seemed. I realized then that love had so deeply embedded itself that there was no way of uprooting it. I would have to live with it.

It was already the last day of the spring vacation. I made up my mind to enjoy it to the full by playing outdoors for the whole day. Early in the morning, I went over to our new playground (which had been relocated at the vacant lot in front of the garbage heap beside the grocery store) to wait for the other children to gather. We started our ball game much earlier that morning than usual—it must have been before eight o'clock, for our shrill cries woke an office worker living in one of the wooden buildings. Still clad in his pajamas, he opened the window and leaned out to scold loudly. Our ball often hit the ragged old woman who kept a cigarette stand next to the garbage heap and she tried to chase us away with a broom, but as she lacked the strength and energy, could only stand brandishing her broom like a sentinel in front of her stand, hitting out at whoever ran near her, but we were all careful to stay away. On top of it all, Ah-chiu's pet mongrel kept dashing among us madly. For some reason or other he seemed to have picked me for his target, jumping on me repeatedly and causing me to fall several times. It was only when Ah-chiu's mother appeared and summoned him and his four brothers back to breakfast that we finally broke up the game and dispersed. The sun had splashed the entire street golden by then. Thick greenery clustered over the tops of the plaster walls. Market-bound housewives were already holding summer parasols to ward off the sunlight, whose beams had become so strong lately that some buds were bursting into flower before their time. I felt thirsty and wormed my way into Liu Hsiao-tung's yard in order to drink from their faucet. Water flowed over my face and neck, where I left it for the sun to dry. As I passed the dressmaking shop, I saw the young woman standing in the doorway talking with another lady, teasing now and then the baby the latter held in her arms. I climbed up the incline at the end of Tung-an Street, walked down the steps on the other side and headed for the river.

The river under the sunlight was alive with undulating glitter, like a million thumb-tacks rising and falling in rhythm. On the opposite bank, two ox-carts were crawling along the sandy beach. Standing under a newly budding tree, I could smell the fragrance of the baked earth along the river bank and feel the coolness of the river breeze on my skin. As I walked away from the tree, I raised my voice and started singing *Crossing the Sea in Summer*. Keeping time with my hands, I went singing all the way up the river. I walked into a bamboo grove, found a relatively flat patch of land and lay down.

In front of me stretched the river, glimmering through the bamboo leaves; at my back was a piece of farmland colorful as a Persian rug. The huge patches of green were rice paddies; big blocks of rich dark brown were earth freshly plowed but yet unsowed; slender strips of light green, like the thin glass squares used under microscopes, were bean tendrils, while the golden patches were vegetable blossoms, swaying in the spring breeze. The short dark figures of the farmers could be glimpsed working in the distance, and occasionally the faint odor of manure drifted in from the fields.

I lay quietly, thinking of all kinds of whimsical things, but they were all happy thoughts; I allowed my fancies to roam like the breeze-driven clouds in the sky. I turned over, and, resting my chin upon my arms, gazed at the river through the bamboo leaves. I thought of the young seamstress. I had no one in whom I could confide my love, only the river. Later this river also became the witness to my pains in learning to swim. I would often steal away from home, make my way alone to the river under the summer sun, and, bracing myself against fears of drowning, would try to teach myself the art of floating above water. But 1 never did succeed. I gave up my efforts finally, because I no longer had the courage to struggle.

The river could not respond to my confidences. I returned to my former position on my back and covered my face with a hand- kerchief.

I lay until the sun had traveled directly overhead, then removed the handkerchief and sat up. Thinking that my mother would be waiting for me to go home for lunch, I stood up and headed for home. The farmers had all disappeared from the fields.. Probably they too had gone home to eat.

At home I saw our Taiwanese *amah*. She had not gone home yet and was still doing the ironing. As soon as she

saw me, she asked:

"Young Master, have you seen my Ch'un-hsiung?" I replied that I had not.

"Weren't you playing with him outdoors?" I said I was not.

"I can't think where he could've gone. I told him to come and help me mop the floors, but there hasn't been a trace of him all morning. My Ch'un-hsiung just can't compare with Young Master, Ma'am. Young Master is smart, and works hard; so young and already in junior high; he'll be in senior high next, and after that, a top official," she said, shaking out one of my father's shirts.

Our *amah* often praised me thus, remarking that I would proceed to senior high school after finishing junior high. She could not imagine a college education beyond that of senior high, so after that, I was to become a high official.

Mother answered her in broken Taiwanese, "It'll be the same with you. Ch'un-hsiung will also go to school, also earn money and support you."

"Thank you, Ma'am, thank you. But I was born to suffer, Ma'am. Ch'un-hsiung's father died early, leaving me alone to raise him. I have no other .hopes, only that Ch'un-hsiung will be like Young Master, work hard in school, study in junior high and afterwards in senior high. No matter how hard I have to work, wash clothes all my life even, I want him to be educated."

"He won't disappoint you," my mother replied. Amah only sighed.

That kind old woman. I still remember her broad tan face, like a piece of dark bread, warm and glowing, the perfect blending of simple goodness and unpretentious love. Where she had gone, no one knew. As I grew older, gentle people like her were harder and harder to come by. They are not the kind to adapt easily within an increasingly complex society, I suppose. I also recall another minor detail about her, the result of the peculiar powers of child-hood observation: I often noticed her bare feet, with ten stout toes fanning out, pattering along on the shining floors of our house. The reason I found this extraordinary perhaps was that we all wore slippers in the house and there were many pairs of spare slippers in the hallway reserved for guests. *Amah* probably had never become used to this alien custom and thus never wore any. I often mused to myself then that even if she consented to wear slippers like the rest of us, where would we find such a large pair to fit her?

That was the last day of the spring vacation. Another detail I remember was that I went out and bought a diary that afternoon. A certain fascination for the surrounding phenomena, interest for the musings within my mind (for my newly-sprung love), and for spring itself urged me to imitate Liu Hsiao-tung's elder brother and keep a diary. All my thoughts for the day were faithfully recorded that evening in the first entry of my diary.

After the spring vacation, love continued to plague me, as if. urging me to some action, to do something which would bring me closer to her, albeit only in my feeling. I thought of taking something to her shop and asking her to mend it for me (a sorry means of courtship, I admit). But that shop of hers took only women's clothing. I could not think of anything else, so one day I finally brought along a Boy Scout jacket with a missing button to her shop.

Her shop was tastefully furnished. Pictures cut from Japanese fashion magazines adorned the walls, and a vase of bright red roses stood on a small table in one corner. Four girls were sitting in the room, talking and laughing among themselves as they pedaled on machines spread with pieces of brightly colored material.

"What do you want, little one?" A rounded-faced girl wearing a string of imitation pearls lifted her head and asked.

"I want a button sewn," I said, turning to the seamstress, who stood at the table measuring a dress, "Can you do it?"

The woman took my jacket and said: "Ah-hsiu, sew the button on for him." She handed the jacket over to the round-faced girl, then turned and went on with her measuring.

I felt the sorrow of rejection.

"Which button is it?" the girl asked me. I told her, with my eyes on the woman.

"How much?" I asked the woman.

"A dollar," replied the girl. .

The woman seemed not to have heard my question, for she did not even lift her head. My grief sank its roots into the depths of my heart. But after a while I saw the woman put on a pair of glasses, and curiosity took the place of sorrow. I found it strange that she should wear glasses, as if it were the least probable thing in the world. I did not like the way she looked with glasses; she no longer looked like herself. Moreover, she was wearing them too low. They made her look old and gave her an owl-like expression.

Suddenly aware that I had stood gazing in the shop much longer than necessary, I asked the round-faced girl:

"Can I come back and get it later?"

"No, stay. It'll be ready in a minute."

I waited nervously in the shop for her to finish. I glanced again at the pictures of the Japanese women on the walls. They were all very pretty, with dazzling smiles, but strangely, their eyelids all had only single pleats. I looked again at the roses in the corner. They were still flaming red. Feeling that they seemed to be redder than roses usually were, I took a more careful look and discovered that they were plastic flowers.

After a while, a boy came down the stairs, munching a piece of fruit. He was taller than I, also in a Boy Scout uniform, and was wearing a pair of glasses. With sudden intuition, I realized this was her son. I had seen two smaller children with her, but had never seen this one; like all newcomers to the neighborhood, he never came out to join our games. Amidst surprised confusion I, who was secretly in love with his mother, watched him as he went upstairs again with a water bottle.

After the button had been replaced, I hurried out the door with the jacket. In the doorway I met our *amah* coming in. Afraid that she would report me to my mother, for I had come to the shop without her knowledge, I slipped away as unobtrusively as I could.

Despite the fact that I had been received with cold indifference at her shop, that I had seen a son of hers who was much older than I, my love did not change; the love of a child does not change easily. I still gave her all the passion of my eleven years.

Thus I loyally allowed my love to continue, without hope, without fulfillment, and without anyone's awareness. This hopelessness, however, colored my love with a nuance of melancholy beauty. Actually, I could not tell whether this sense of futility gave me sorrow or happiness. But I was sure of one thing, that with such love I was happier than adults in one respect. I was spared any unnecessary anxiety; I did not have to worry over the fact that one day my love would suddenly come to an end. As long as my admiration existed, my love existed. Looking back now, I should say I was quite happy then.

The trip I made to her shop, I recall, was the only time I undertook such a venture. I never found another opportunity; besides, for some reason I suddenly lost all courage, and found myself deeply ashamed over the incident. Whenever I thought of myself going into her shop on the mere pretext of replacing a button, my shame would grow until the experience became a positive terror, causing me to sweat in anguish. For three days afterward I did not have the heart to pass in front of her shop. Courage is a strange thing: the first plunge should never be merited as true courage until tested by subsequent tries.

Although I was never in her shop again, I was often in front of it. Opposite her shop was a dry-goods store which sold all kinds of tidbits for children and at which I frequently stood vigil. Munching on a cracker, I watched as she moved around in her shop. Sometimes I would see her husband, a man of thirty-some, riding a motorcycle and said to be working in a commercial bank. Strangely enough, I never felt a trace of jealousy for this man. This showed, I suppose, that I was still a long way from maturity. I did not seem to realize the full significance of the word "husband." I thought of him as merely another member of her household, like her brother, her uncle, or her brother-in-law. But should she be talking with another man, for instance if she chatted momentarily with the barber next door, my jealous rage would lead me to visualize the barber lying on the ground with a dagger in his heart.

Thus the days slipped by, one after another, like the turning pages of my diary. Soon it was summer and the end of the school term approached. I began to worry about my grades; I was very weak in algebra, and was afraid I would not be able to pass the finals. My algebra teacher had already warned half-jokingly that he expected to see me again next semester. I shook with fear; I had never in my life had to repeat a grade, and now the threat loomed large. Yet mingled with the anxiety was a sense of unbound expectation, expectation for the freedom, the happiness, and the unlimited possibilities of the summer vacation. Under the dark shadow of the finals, I sat for hours on end with the algebra text in front of me, but, instead of studying, I often simply gazed at it anxiously. I grew thin and pale.

Finally, the heavy, burdensome finals were over. All the students hurled themselves into the free skies of the summer vacation like birds escaping from captivity. I was merely one ecstatic soul among thousands. Countless youngsters, burdened by the exams, had eagerly awaited the arrival of the summer vacation, and, in waiting had imagined that it would never become a reality, otherwise their joys of expectation would have been canceled by the pains of suffering.

That first morning of the vacation, I opened my eleven-year-old eyes to the riotous singing of birds and a world brilliant with sunshine. Exams were a thing of the past. No matter how badly I did on them, they were no longer on my mind. All children, perhaps, are unable to worry over the past. Sitting up in bed, a shiver of

excitement told me beyond a shadow of doubt that the summer vacation had finally arrived. That certainty did not come from any indication on the calendar, but from a certain sound, a certain odor, a patch of sunlight, all distinctively characteristic. I heard the shrill buzz of the cicadas, saw the reflection of a basin of water shimmering on the ceiling, smelled the cool fragrance of mothballs as my mother took out our winter clothing from the trunks and laid them out in the sun-and I knew that this was it. Happiness was that child as he jumped out of bed.

Each year with the awareness of summer came the reminder to sort out our fishing gear. We would rummage among the coal bins in the kitchen and come out with a slender bamboo pole which our mothers had put aside (and which we had painstakingly whitted ourselves), take it to the bathroom and, with great effort, try to clean it, thinking of the great catches in store this year, although for the most part we were only able to catch frogs.

I found my fishing pole that day as usual, and cleaned it up as before. But holding it in my hands I all of a sudden felt that it was much too homely. It was my own handiwork, of which I had once been so proud, but now I saw its crudeness. I felt that I needed a brand new fishing pole, a *bona fide* one, not a plain home-made one like this. I wanted one with a reel, a tinkler, and one that was gracefully pliant like a whip. I made up my mind to ask my father to buy me one. I had high hopes of getting it, because I had an indisputable reason: I was *eleven.*

I threw my fishing pole back into the coal bin. I headed for the garbage heap to look for my friends. It had been two whole weeks since we played our last ball game, all because of the final exams. Our mothers would not let us play.

I passed by the dressmaking shop, hoping to catch a glimpse of the young woman, but today her shop was closed. She must be out with her family. I felt a little disheartened. I saw her every day, but one day in which I did not was enough to give me that feeling of voidness.

My friends were already in the middle of a game. I hurriedly joined in and immediately became involved in the ferocious battle. We played happily until noon. The side I was on lost and they blamed me, while I blamed myself for joining the wrong side. But we all determined valiantly to fight again tomorrow and win. As I walked home, the dressmaking shop was still closed. Again I experienced a loss.

At home my mother was complaining over the fact that Amah had failed to show up that morning to do the laundry, and that if she was too busy to come she should have sent Ch'un-hsiung over with a message. Then she turned upon me and said that I had disappeared all morning like a pigeon let out of the cage; she wanted me to go and look for Amah, but she could not even find me. I was surely headed for trouble if I played like that every day, and I should not spend all my time in ball games even though it *was* the summer vacation. Naturally, these words were ones I liked least to hear.

After lunch I felt drowsy. The white-hot sunshine outside made it hard to keep my eyes open; in the room a few flies were buzzing intermittently upon the dining-room table. Unconsciously I dozed off for about ten minutes. Awaking, I gazed at the bright sunlight outside the window and the flies on the table in the room and a familiar sensation dawned upon me. How could I have forgotten? Summer vacations were always boring after all.

Just then Mrs. Liu, who lived next door, came over for her daily chat with my mother. With hair curlers bobbing she stepped in the doorway and asked:

"Is your mother at home, little one?"

"I'm in the kitchen, Mrs. Liu," my mother called. "Find a seat and I'll be out in a minute." But Mrs. Liu had already traced the voice into the kitchen.

Then they both emerged. My mother's hands were covered with soap suds. She found a piece of cloth and started wiping them.

"How come you're doing the wash yourself?" Mrs. Liu asked as she sat down.

"Amah didn't show up today, I thought I might as well."

"That's what I came to tell you," Mrs. Liu said, setting her curlers bobbing again. "You know what's happened to Amah? She's lost all her money. Twenty thousand dollars of savings, and she lost it all last night. No wonder she's sick."

"Oh? Is that so? I didn't know she had so much saved up," my mother remarked in surprise.

"All the money she earned by working day and night as a washerwoman, saved up bit by bit. She says she was saving for her son's education. Bad luck that she should lose it all. But this time lots of other people on our street were hard hit too. Mrs. Yeh lost ten thousand—seems like she just put the money in a couple of days ago, and it being the money for the fuel coupons of her husband's office at that. Mrs. Wu lost three thousand. It's all that witch's fault, and now the whole family's skipped."

"Who're you talking about?"

"That woman in the dressmaking shop. You can't imagine how unscrupulous she is. One hundred fifty thousand, gone just like that. Who'd believe she was capable of doing such a thing? Everyone saw that her business was good and trusted her, saw that she offered higher interest, of course, and never dreamed she would suddenly skip out like that. Sheer betrayal, that's what it is."

"Unbelievable," my mother mused, "she seemed to be such an honest person. Oh, poor Amah, what is she going to do …"

I did not stay to hear my mother finish. I ran out of the house and headed straight for the dressmaking shop.

The shop was still closed. A few women were standing near the doorway chatting. I stood gazing at the shop as pieces of the conversation nearby drifted into my ears.

"They left in the middle of the night. No one knows where they are now."

"They could report her to the police, have her arrested."

"No use. All she'll have to do is declare herself bankrupt, and she wouldn't have a care in the world. Besides, now that she's got the money, the law can't touch her."

"It was all planned," another said. "You notice she was in a hurry to sell most of this building as soon as she moved in."

"They say she sold this shop of hers last week too."

A few maids were peering in from the windows on the right. I went over and looked in through a small pane of glass: the room was empty, all the sewing machines and the furniture were gone.

"Just imagine, she didn't even pay the girls their wages. How mean can one get?"

Hearing this I suddenly felt my ears bum with anger.

Mrs. Liu had already left when I got home. Seeing me, my mother murmured:

"Unbelievable, just unbelievable. People are getting worse and worse. More people get rich and more cheating goes on. People are getting prosperous, but if morals go bad, what's the use of all this prosperity? Luckily we aren't rich; otherwise, who knows? We might also have been duped."

Our family was not rich. My father was teaching in a high school then, and, in Taiwan, a teacher was by no means well off. But was Amah well off? Why cheat her out of all her money? And those girls who had worked for nothing, why deprive them of their wages?

I went with a book up to the rooftop that evening; I had decided to heed my mother and do a little studying. The sky above was a soft quiet blue. I sat on the reddish tiles and leaned my head against the railing.

I could see the dressmaking shop down across the street. The door was still closed; the chatting women had gone.

Thinking of the young woman, of her comely yet gentle face, I found it hard to believe that she was a fraud. But she was a fraud. Every time I told myself the truth, my heart contracted in pain.

I still cherished my love for her. I wanted to keep that love. I closed my eyes and thought of her lily-like face—yet I was always reminded of her flaw. I saw the. ugliness of that face; and the flower hung down and withered.

Dusk slowly enveloped Tung-an Street; wisps of pale smoke began to curl from the chimneys nearby. The scene in front of me got misty, and I discovered that my eyes were filled with tears.

Oh, youth, perhaps my sadness then was due not only to a woman's having disappointed me, but to the discovery that some element in life had been deluding me, and had been deluding me for a long time. The sorrow and the anguish of the discovery disturbed me deeply.

From that day on, I understood a bit more; I learned that disillusions were an integral part of life, and that more disillusions were to come. From that day on, I forgot the beauty of that woman, although I never could forget the details of this incident. No wonder; that was my first love.

188.15 Excerpt from **Hunger Trace**\fn{by Adrienne Poy Clarkson (1939-)} Hong Kong, China (F) 12

When I tell a man that he is a marvelous lover, I mean that he makes me believe he loves me when we are in bed together. I once explained this to Tiercel and his bare shoulders shook with relieved laughter because he thought I had meant something to do with his technique or his capacity or some of those other things that apparently haunt the post-adolescent male ego. And I suppose he laughed because it was so easy for him to make me believe he loved me, I wanted him to so much; a bird feeds on crumbs and doesn't know whether there is another handful coming or not.

With Tiercel, I ate every crumb and never asked if there was more, for with him, as with no one else as much, it was not just a question of appetite. Often we met, in an hour in the afternoon or very late at night, and I thought

with one part of my mind that this time would be the last—after this I would not want him again—but it was never true. Never, and not yet. I can feel Tiercel caught in my craw even when I hunger for other things or other people. I know I have to swallow past him and I do, but he is there all the same.

There are nights when I have awakened to find that I have formed his name on my lips, willing myself to believe that he is there breathing lightly in sleep beside me. If I am not alone, I think of him, even while I realize that it is not his skin I touch, that his neck does not join his shoulders in quite that way, that the hair at the base of his neck is longer, and I repeat *Tiercel*, *Tiercel* with my tongue, because it is a name which doesn't require the lips to form it fully. I told him this once—that I could say his name anywhere, anytime, without revealing it and still feel the joy, tbe delight of having even that tiny bit of him, like the paper label of a rare wine, inside me.

Because of Tiercel, I have become a kind of whore, lying with my body and heart, because I have wanted to forget him, or because I have wanted to remember him while someone else is holding me and touching me and thinking he possesses me. I can't count the number of times I've cheated men at the very moment when I should be closest to them by saying Tiercel's name under my breath to the rhythm of their momentary love. Of course I'm exaggerating when I say I can't count the number, but I really don't know exactly and I'd rather exaggerate than face any precision. I would rather think of the quality of those nights when I cannot escape from thoughts of him, when I reach out to hold, not just a body which is warm and welcoming and demanding, but a person whose name was Tiercel and who did not always love me.

We met when I had just returned to Toronto with Jos, after that delightful passive period of looking at baroque churches, of eating with the eyes and sleeping with an empty head. I had began to work in Jos' stockroom, expediting gross upon gross of licorice sticks to deepest, darkest Manitoba. At the time, I hadn't made my peace with Aunt Maeve or my mother and I was staying in a tiny room off Jos' office with just enough space for what Jos called my three body coverings, my large economy size bottle of *Chant d'Aromes* and my Penguin edition of Auden.

I never own many things at a time: I have a horror of houses filled with precious furniture, of minds filled with objects. I like space and emptiness around me and I will throw away, break or destroy anything that clutters it. So far, I had stayed close to the office (it was winter and I was adjusting, I told myself) except for excursions to Jos' mother's house to be crammed full of meat with thick sauce and cakes covered with cream or caramel or custard. If all things were equal (as they never are) I would be a vegetarian—a head of lettuce and three cups of yogurt a day would content me. Jos' mother was horrified at my thinness, which she said was twenty pounds below the average weight for my height in the Canada Food Rules; at each meal, while Jos half-ignored her and smiled enigmatically, she put cream on everything, trying to make up for my thirty-two years of gastronomic deprivation in a single meal.

Jos received an invitation to a party on the morning of March 22, 1967 (I just looked it up to make sure) and he tossed it across the desk we shared. It was a hastily-scrawled note from someone named Marion inviting him to come to a party at 63 Cluny Drive any time after nine.

"Go and wear your breastless dress," he challenged.

He was referring to a Russian smock which we used to take turns wearing after we bought it in Kiev with our black market rubles; it is made of lawn so sheer that I never wear anything under it. I feel that underwear emphasizes rather than protects, but I realize, too, that a lot of people don't share this view. At any rate, since my breasts are so small as to be practically non-existent (my sister always referred to me as the titless wonder) the question is purely academic. In the end, though, after scrutinizing my three dresses, we decided that the thick, white caftan Ahmud had given me would be best for 63 Cluny Drive. I put on the two yards of silver pennies on a chain; they needed polishing but clinked beautifully all the same. Jos and I decided that I should wear my hair twisted into a figure eight and pulled tight over the ears. Then Jos splashed me with *Chant d' Aromes* and announced that he wasn't coming with me. At that stage, I never questioned Jos' intentions or statements, because he never gave reasons.

I roared down Mount Pleasant, pushing the Mini-minor as far as it would go in second before shifting into third. At times I coasted in neutral, which I love to do (although Jos used to screech at me that it was so bad for the machine). I feel I'm saving gas and I have a remarkable sense of being barely in control, which is superb. Driving is one of the things I can do with a really reckless gaiety, regardless of the fact that it is basically mechanical. I got a bit disoriented in Rosedale and ended up passing Aunt Maeve's house twice (instant guilt, quickly swallowed) but I felt comforted that she wouldn't have recognized me with the large white scarf I had twirled around my head and the bottom half of my face. The scarf I would have worn all the time if I had become Ahmud's second wife and gone to live in that obscure Arab country in Africa of which his brother is president. Ah-

mud, who took me to see the Norwegian fjords, who taught me to eat *cous-cous*, who hummed the arias from *The Magic Flute* (he had seen it eleven times) and who made love to me much in the way that he had learned to drive his brother's Chrysler Imperial—somberly, earnestly, and with a determined effort to master Western expertise. Darling Ahmud, if he had possessed a single grain of self-consciousness, he could have conquered all the women in the world with his elegantly-etched walnut beauty. But being shy and feeling the underdevelopment of his country as his own, he concluded only two affairs with any success—the phenomenally virtuous but aging Middle Western wife of the librarian at the U.S. Information Services—and me. I often think that if he remembers Paris in terms of us, he has a highly original vision of the function and purpose of American technology.

I was thinking of Ahmud when I finally lurched upon Cluny Drive and identified Marion's house—the caftan tangled a bit in my legs and I stumbled up to the door clutching the large inlaid music box which Jos wanted me to give to Marion. The door was opened by a pleasant-looking matron with short, prematurely gray hair. String of matched pearls and red wool molded decorously from neck to knee.

"Yes?" she asked inquiringly.

Elegant as she looked, she didn't hide the fact that she had no idea who I was; it was obvious and funny. I began suddenly to enjoy myself. The Arab messenger service with a message from Morocco; I could hear Aunt Valancy whispering that play-acting without the consent of the intended audience was puerile.

"Hi, I'm Regina. A friend of Jos. He can't or won't come, make up your own mind which, and he's sent me instead. Are you Marion?"

She immediately smiled and I felt that I would like her. Just chemistry—no judgment involved.

"How like Jos! Do come in, Regina."

She paused, debating whether or not she would ask me to remove my caftan; she held out her arm tentatively to receive it and then swiftly withdrew it.

"You look extraordinary."" And her tone told me she meant it as a compliment. I smiled and charged into the living room to relieve her of any awkwardness and I knew then that I really did like her.

Some men stood together in front of the fireplace which was crackling behind their legs; the women were arranged in a group in the bay window. One of the men, tall with a ruddy look about him, detached himself from the group, and politely trying not to stare, asked me if I would like a drink. Then Marion propelled me towards the fireplace (astute of her, I thought) and introduced me.

A thin blond clergyman smiled warmly at me and told me his name was Peregrine Margrave; the others, all of whom wore shades of deep gray, introduced themselves, presenting me with the garland of their Anglo-Saxon names, impeccably and modestly intertwined. Suddenly, a man who was obviously drunk pointed at the music box which I was still holding and asked brusquely,

"What the hell do you have in there? The family jewels?" I stuck my tongue out at him, causing a slight, barely perceptible ripple in the group.

"None of your business," I retorted, and turning to talk to Peregrine, saw the drunk man make his way, limping slightly, to the bar. I moved myself over to where he had been standing and felt the rug pushed down and smooth under my bare feet.

No, I didn't love Tiercel Margrave at first sight, or on second sight either, the way you're supposed to in the enchanted-evening or strangers-in-the-night tradition; I didn't feel any warm electric waves or mystic illuminations or any of that crap. What I did see was a man in his fifties, about my height, definitely drunk but still in control, tired-eyed, his features a blurred version of his brother Peregrine's. We chatted when he came back from the bar, our initial skirmish forgotten or mutually forgiven, and I remember now with amazement how easily I turned away from him to find Marion and give her the music box—how eagerly I went towards the group of women who watched my approach with curiosity, some hostility and a singular lack of amusement. I stretched my toes a bit to draw attention to them and answered their polite inquiries about Jos.

They had all been at college with him and apparently they considered him to be the village eccentric—he had gone to Marrakech by jeep, he had been an extra in numerous Italian movies starring either Steve Reeves or Lex Barker and he had managed his candy factory while going to divinity school. The theological part of Jos' life thus revealed surprised me, but I quickly realized that I had known that Jos prayed; there was something going on in the back of those hard blue eyes which could not be explained by emotion, humor or detachment.

Those neat, inconspicuous, expensively-dressed women! How easily I could have become one of them if I had heeded my mother or Aunt Maeve, instead of tearing off to be with Aunt Valancy, the "world's greatest unjustifiably ignored bilingual novelist" (her own words) and being ruined and undermined (my mother's phrase) from the age of seventeen on. How regular and ordered my life would have been, with one or two semi-serious engage-

ments and football weekend love affairs and then marriage and a ten-room house and drip-dry clothes for the children and a connubial interest (feminine, constant but never threatening) in company law or chartered accountancy! I knew as I stood in Marion's living room that I was beyond the string of matched pearls and the weekend dinners with college friends; I would never be one of those women. I was aware that they looked well-kept and were probably reasonably content most of the time and that I was rangy, squalidly-dressed and had a wild look in my eye. Let's forgive one another, I said to them silently as we chatted about their children, and I had a kind of instant nostalgia (add a little rationalization and stir) for what I could never be. One of the illusions I guard about myself is that I am capable of being anything—a murderer, a veterinarian or even a wife; the difference lies only in what I want to be. I can never imagine life without this variety of possibilities and my choosing between them. The illusion of freedom, Aunt Valancy would have said mockingly, is more important to the prisoner than the freedom itself.

As we were all leaving, I saw that the Margrave brothers were not collecting women around them and I heard Tiercel say, in his slurring tenor which sounded so un-Canadian and yet wasn't foreign, that Betty would be sorry that she hadn't been able to come, but he was sure that she would call Marion when Gretchen was better.

I was about to say a collective good-bye to them with the distance of the front steps between us when Tiercel came directly towards me, and gripping my elbow, said,

"You can't go on working in a candy factory, even if it is owned by Jos Leyden. I'll give you a job."

I tugged my arm away, more as a gesture than anything else, because I had liked his touch but I always felt, until I knew Tiercel, that drunk men should have things made hard for them.

"What have you got against cheap candy?"

"Never eat it. Come for dinner tomorrow night. A nice party. Perry will bring you, he likes you."

I looked at him, at the shape of his head against the porch light and I saw how intent he was. It changed his whole appearance, that intentness; it sharpened him and I suddenly thought that he wasn't drunk anymore.

"Yes, I'll come with Perry. But only with him."

I could feel myself deliberately holding his look and was astonished to feel a kind of self-loathing for using that trick—the suddenly-widened eyes and the slight frown. But his expression didn't change as he said,

"Good. Where are you staying?"

"Jos' office." He paused.

"All right. Jos' office. Perry will pick you up at seven."

When I got back to Dufferin Street, Jos was still there, going through some files. He made me some Postum while I called the hospital and they told me that Da had had a restless night. Jos brushed my hair in that competent, even way he has and when he thought I had had enough, he fluffed it up with his fingers and then separated it and put a piece over each of my shoulders. He made no comment when I told him I was going to Tiercel Margrave's for dinner the next night but he did look intrigued when I said I was to be picked up by Peregrine Margrave.

"What's the matter? Is he married?" A trace of a smile shadowed Jos' face as he shook his head.

"Well, I liked him a lot. Better than his brother. He won't try to convert me, will he?"

"No, Regina, never fear. He has enough to do without that."

I wanted to ask what that was, but I could see Jos wanted to call a halt to the conversation and I decided to play the good sport by telling him to go home and go to bed.

I hadn't had to meet a group like Marion's party for some time, and I guess the impact of social converse had overstimulated me; at any rate, I couldn't sleep. Mind you, that isn't unusual for me; I have a whole twilit insomniac existence in which I try to read (thereby avoiding the issue of night and sleep entirely) or prowl around my room in the darkness having imaginary conversations with Aunt Valancy or the man who reads the ten o'clock news on the radio.

Sometimes I want to tell Jos about these conversations, especially when we are working late with our tallies in the stockroom. All the green and yellow and red jellybeans, the rosebuds and the imitation Smarties would be lying on trays and in jars and we would have stock sheets in front of us and Jos would look up and say,

"Regina, did you eat two bags of Rosy Crystal Drops? They have disappeared as though they had never been." And I would answer,

"Woe is me, caught in the act! Can I be forgiven for my intemperate lust for sweet things?"

Then we would return to our work—our ritual and fictitious communication done for the moment. Actually, I hate candy, and Jos Leyden's candy factory is the least tempting place I have ever worked in. Even when I tested

television tubes, I was more tempted to steal one than I am to take a raspberry jujube. A question of taste, not essential, but real all the same. I wouldn't be working there if it hadn't been for Jos and that first morning in Austria.

*

There had been a pile of apricots in the heavy brown net by the wall. I was really quite hungry—I hadn't eaten for two days except for some coffee and some raisins—and was trying to eliminate the rotten and wormy ones. It was the hour just before dawn, which Jean-Gilles used to call *entre le chien et le lour* (it was the hour when he left to creep home to his wife, his briefcase and his respectability) and a gray-pink light was slowly spreading over the apricot tree, over the white wall of the goat-house against which it grew and over the lake below us. There he was, thin and accidentally brown-looking, like a piece of pine furniture stained walnut by mistake, picking through the fruit with me.

"Hungry?:" His voice was cool and clinical. He handed me an almost perfect fruit.

"Very." I jammed the apricot in my mouth, separated the pit from the flesh with my tongue and spat out the pit.

"You American?" He took some of the greener fruit that was still hanging on the boughs and put them in his haversack."

"No, Canadian. You too?"

He nodded. We ate in silence. His features were sharp and his hair looked burnt-out, as though it had suffered from a flash-fire.

"Hitch-hiking?"

And then I found myself telling him why I was there in Hallstadt, how I had left Madame Gratien at Cabris when things had become too difficult with Jean-Gilles, how I was thinking of drowning myself in that cold Austrian lake. I wasn't really, but I thought I'd try him out with a little emotional extravagance right at the start and see how he could take it. He said nothing, but looked interested—I silently gave him top marks for *sangfroid* and for seeing through me. We walked on towards my hotel; he stared at it.

"How can you afford to stay there when you have to steal the birds' fruit to eat?"

I explained to him that I had come to Hallstadt determined to stay in the room with the best possible view of *Salzkammergut* and the lake; I had money enough to pay for that if I didn't eat.

Well, Jos paid for my meal—and for two months of meals after that. I wasn't entirely broke (I still had my watch and gold earrings which made me rich) but I wanted him to pay for me, because he was getting nothing in return. Over that first bowl of coffee, I suppose I had naïvely assumed that we would sleep together and all my problems, financial and emotional, would be solved for at least ten days. Not that I was particularly attracted to him, but he didn't repel me either and that was a start. I was just waiting and seeing. Curiously, though, my feeling for Jos (and I assume his for me) never went beyond that first day of calm talk beneath a placid morning sky with a cold lake directly below us. Whenever I think of a completely neutral country, I think of Jos Leyden; to me he is a human Switzerland—self-contained, respected and inviolable. After all that has happened, I still feel this, though now we are kept apart by the chasm of total understanding.

I remember how he reached over for my haversack that morning and casually ransacked the contents of it until he found my passport.

"Mary Regina Adler," he said aloud, pronouncing my name the Latin way which I love—Raygeena—perfectly seriously, as though it were beautiful and not the capital of Saskatchewan, for which, God help me, I was named.

"The name of Kierkegaard's great love," he noted dryly. "I'm writing a musical comedy all about that. The greatest love story of the nineteenth century. The world is hardly ready for it yet." He eyed me with mock appraisal.

"And you're not yet, either. But sometime." I didn't know whether to believe him; I found it easier to listen to his account of his thesis about star imagery in Victorian poetry and his passion for Scrabble.

"Also," he concluded somewhat breathlessly, "I've seen every movie ever made" (there was a curious tone of genial deprecation), "and Susan Hayward is my favorite actress. Did you see her in *The President's Lady*? A great star." He drew out of his pocket a small white card on which was printed:

JOSIAH LEYDEN
Manufacturer of candies and delicacies.
1234 Dufferin Street,
Toronto 17, Canada

I was rescued from destitution and hunger by an immigrant producer of gumdrops. Of course, I didn't realize at the time that Jos' business was quite phenomenally sucsful and that practically every vending machine in the country carried his candies, made, bagged and distributed by him. His father had started the business when he came out from Holland in 1948 with three hundred dollars and Jos had taken it over at age nineteen, when his father died. Except for an incidental loss when Jos decided to challenge the dairies' monopoly of popsicles, the profits have steadily mounted.

But I am getting ahead of myself, talking about the success of Jos' business (my ill-disguised longing for the crass and secure, Tiercel would have said). That morning in the Hallstadt was the beginning of our relationship. How I hate that word! I would like to use something simple and meaningful like "friendship" instead, but I don''t really know if it applies to Jos and me. He is much more a background, a frame, than a real presence; sometimes we hardly speak for weeks—out of habit, not animosity—and yet there are so many things which I have never told him, and also too many things which I have told him. He always smiles and asks the right questions and lets me talk or not talk, but we never get at each other. With Jos, I never feel relief, or change or joy; I just feel—well, Jos.

We traveled for the rest of the fall together, looking at baroque mainly because that was what Jos wanted to do and I tagged along, passively looking when told and appreciating in tune to Jos: thousands of cubic meters of marble altars the color of raw legs of veal with nubile anges and puffy blue skies painted above them. We stared at a great deal of wrought iron, which Jos caressed when the guards weren't looking as though the black curves. were human flesh; we compared the quality of stucco at Melch with that at the Hermitage. With Jos, everything was effortless—traveling in the Soviet Union (where he bought black market rubles with a dry ease which I, even at my most larcenous, was too terrified to emulate), getting rooms or taxis where there weren't any (at Salzburg and Bayreuth at the height of the festivals and we in our dirty shorts) and generally never taking no for an answer. We've never been lovers and we never will be and neither of us seems to be sorry. I used to wonder in the first few months whether things wouldn't have started out differently if I hadn't been grieving for (romantic phrase calling up Ruth in fields of alien corn and solitary maidens weeping into their golden hair) Jean-Gilles, the bastard. Anyway, I told Jos about Jean-Gilles, the aging seducer of the working girl (I lied a great deal about him at first—less later) with his apartment in the *rue* Dominique which had been in his family for generations and which I, naturally, have never seen. Jean-Gilles, passionate and smelling of garlic in the pungent late afternoon, with his quick, tiny wife and two children (the second one an accident), going to the country on Saturday mornings in his Renault Dauphine, leaving me to wander through the streets of Paris as though they were museum corridors. It seemed important to me at that time in Europe to paint him to Jos as a wicked despoiler, but in reality, he was so far from that that you could almost say that I seduced him. Yes, I did really, but my mind was only half-committed to it, and he was saying *je ne peux pas me passer de toi* with damp eyes, before you could count three, and there was Regina Adler with another mess on her hands, initially caused by pity coming up in her like a burp.

Because Aunt Valancy was in Italy, I was living in a little hotel on the Quai d'Anjou and my work consisted of having lunch each day with a group of French businessmen to give them practice in English conversation. It was easy, I gained weight, and I met Jean-Gilles. When I realized how much he cared for me, I began to be deliberately unreasonable, demanding things—presents, more time, a meeting with his wife. He did the first two (the l watch, the earrings) but steadfastly refused the last.

It is a funny contrast, but the first thing Tiercel did after meeting me at Marion;'s was to introduce me to his wife. It was as though Tiercel was the French one and Jean-Giles the hypocritical Canadian. But Tiercel wasn't ever ordinary; he was himself. Tiercel always wanted to challenge me; I never stopped being surprised or alarmed by him.

Well, Jean-Gilles became quite agonized and even stopped eating; I demanded more gifts and more time and he finally told me that he would have to stop seeing me. I cried and became hysterical (O ritual, thy name is Regina!) and the next day I received a money order by *pneumatique* which enabled me to go to Cabris to accept a job from old Madame Gratien whose companion was dying of advanced virginity. Then a cable arrived from Jean-Gilles, begging to be forgiven for his clumsiness and stupidity and offering me not only a meeting with his wife but a holiday in Brittany with them. How that poor, anguished, *gauche* man could have managed that, I can't imagine. But I cabled back

NON MERCI MOI JE PEUX: TRÈS BIEN ME PASSER DE TOI

and ran off to Austria. I have an instinct for total destruction and like to pull darkness around me when I leave. That last phrase was Tiercel's, then, he was a poet and poets often will do anything for an image.

Halfway through my trip in baroque Europe, I received a cable from my mother (I think she would catch up with me if 1 went to Hell; in fact, she often used to tell us when we were children that she would):

STAY AND ENJOY YOURSELF HOUSE BEING PAINTED YOUR FATHER IS DAYING.

Jos realized more quickly than I that the cable meant my father was dying and we paced up and down between the acts of *Taminauser* arguing about whether I should go home or not. I didn't want to go; I couldn't believe the cable. I felt I would know, deep inside myself (where my mother said there was a soul—albeit a wicked one) if it was true. I felt nothing, no loss, no knowing. And so I could not believe that my father the falconer was dead. And I was right; he didn't die that quickly, but my mother was also right, he was dying faster than the rest of us. So I didn't go home and I didn't answer the cable and there was a kind of amusement and a shocked respect in Jos' eyes when he looked at me from time to time after that.

*

How can I describe Betty Margrave? She is the kind of woman who looks as though she wears glasses, but doesn't. She is Tiercel's wife and the mother of his children. She was chosen in his youth and hope as the suitable accompaniment to his desires and dreams (I always phrase things this way when I feel both emotional and awkward.) And if anybody ever loved Tiercel Margrave as much as I did, it was Betty Margrave. Which is probably why I find it difficult to describe her. If I can take myself back to that first evening when Peregrine and I walked into the Margraves' living room, perhaps I can recapture the feeling that I had about Betty, before I began being obsessed by the idea of her as Tiercel's wife.

We were late arriving because I had rushed over to Jos' house at the last minute to borrow his Italian gold silk bathrobe which he bought just before we got on the plane in Milan. Jos, in case I forgot to mention it, is 6 feet 5 inches tall and his bathrobe makes a lovely dress for me. But his mother had different ideas and we had a small altercation when she wanted me to "wear a dress like all the other girls." Jos' mother is strong, uneducated and has fixed ideas about feminine beauty, garnered mainly from Eaton's catalogue. By the time I got back to the factory, Jos had disappeared and the special order of marzipan had been left lying on the molding table (probably by him-he loves marzipan and tests the quality of each batch himself) so I put it into trays and into the cool room. Peregrine turned up, apologizing, suddenly making me realize that we were, in fact, late.

His clerical collar was narrow and it effectively cut off his head from the rest of him, emphasizing the length of his skull, the prominence of his jaw and the pale gold of his hair. I asked him to wait in the main workroom while I put some vaseline on my chin and forehead (a trick I learned when I modeled; it gave what Billy Brustein called "that innocent never-seen-it-all-before look"). Peregrine looked at me calmly as I walked out of the tiny bathroom and asked,

"Don't you ever wear shoes?"

I had really forgotten about my feet and was annoyed with myself because I didn't want Peregrine to think of me in a barefoot free-spirit stereotype. I realized then that I valued his opinion of me, as I valued Jos', objectively and unemotionally. I found my ballet slippers and Peregrine explained to me that he was late because one of his boys had had to be bailed out that afternoon.

"What boys?" I asked.

Peregrine told me that he ran a halfway house for male prisoners out of his run—down parish. He put it in a humorous way, but I could see immediately how important the work was to him. He asked me to drive, as he felt somewhat preoccupied. I was delighted; my idea of the perfect job would be as the chauffeur of a homosexual millionaire who would like me to drive him on photographic safaris through the zoos of Europe and the parks of East Africa. I would be driving continually, I would have all my time for myself and I could see as many animals as I wanted. I was having such a delightful fantasy about this that I got us lost somewhere west of Christie and missed the opening to Wychwood Park several times. The technique of driving is one thing, the direction another.

Betty Margrave's first words to me, after Tiercel introduced me, were "Miss Adler," which surprised me by its formality. Then she smiled and a warmth fell out of her, spilled out, so that her presence filled the space between us. Slightly overweight, her black hair drawn into a soft and inefficient bun at the nape of her neck, she was as tall as I was, her hands and feet smaller than mine, her voice strangely flat, but soft.

Tiercel brought me a drink and instead of handing it to me, he took my right hand in his and clasped it around the glass for me. Perhaps that was the first time I looked at Tiercel and saw the hard tiredness of his eyes, the lines

grooved around them, the eyes themselves opaque and hazel, somberly challenging. I felt those eyes for the first time, as though I were a piece of film on which an image was being imprinted. His hand remained around mine, as though I were insulating him from the frosted coolness of the glass, and when I looked down at that hand, a great exultation raced through me, as though every cell in my body were cheering. When I look at a man's hands, I know whether I want to be in them or not. Tiercel's hands were the most extraordinary that I have ever seen: lean, strong, the fingers half again as long as the palm, the nails flat and rectangular. And the skin on them dry and warm and seeming to be exactly the same temperature as my own. Yes, I count that as the first sight of Tiercel Margrave. I knew then that I wanted my body to be in those hands, but I didn't know yet about my heart.

"You are an incredible looking girl, Regina Adler. 'Hollow of cheek as though it drank the wind and took a mess of shadows for its meat.'"

I was disappointed by this opener, even with the nice dose of Yeats; I didn't want Tiercel Margrave to be banal. Of course, I am an incredible looking girl: I am as tall as the average man, my skin is dead white and I am twenty pounds underweight, according to the Canada Food Rules. What's more, I have a certain sullen appreciation of myself that I manage from time to time to foist on others.

"You look like a schoolgirl let loose in Malabar's—a perverse popsy."

"I'm thirty-two years old next week. Very mature. Not a popsy." He shook his head, smiling in such a way that his lower lip completely covered his upper one.

"No. A popsy. I'm old enough to be your father."

His hand dropped from mine and I had a sudden frenzied moment of missing it. I hastily took a long swallow; it tasted so fresh and clear, that double Scotch. Happy medicine, Willem used to call it.

"My father's dying. Are you?" He didn't flinch.

"Aren't we all?"

"Yes," I answered. "Yes." And I moved away from him to a crowd of people I didn't know, to be introduced, to have my bathrobe commented on (it comes from Milan—the newest look). But he followed me and took my elbow; it felt so different from the night before in front of Marion's when I had felt his grip as an intrusion.

"Let go." I said it over my shoulder without looking at him.

"I haven't finished yet. Very rude popsy."

I put down my drink in an ashtray (there didn't seem to be any coasters and I decided that Betty Margrave would mind if I left a ring on the inlaid mahogany side table).

"Glad you didn't let go."

I wheeled on him suddenly. He lit a cigarette and said softly,

"What am I supposed to do, grovel in appreciation for that remark?" I grabbed at a cherry tomato as it was whisked by in a bowl.

"Was the hem of my robe what you had in mind? Why is your voice so un-Canadian? Do you want to talk about death? Are you morbid?" We were speaking in very low tones for there were people all around us.

"What is your father dying of?"

"Cancer."

"Do you love him?"

"I don't know."

"Where did you get that scar?"

"From an untrained, frightened goshawk. My own fault." As I said this, I thought of his name, Tiercel, and his brother's, Peregrine. "Are your names family names?"

"Yes. We're a pair in a series. Family's sadly decayed, though. Dying of creeping middle-classness. Death by caution."

"Everyone in Canada is middle-class. It's the unavoidable national pastime. We'd feel guilty being anything else."

"You're right. You're not stupid. We were storekeepers in 1821. But we aren't now. Neither Peregrine nor I would be the least good at keeping a store."

"What do you do?" He looked at me, and blinked slowly with amusement.

"Everything. But basically, I'm a Senator."

"You can't be!"

"I take it you mean that as a compliment; I'm flattered. I'm also a stockbroker. Shall I invest your money for you?"

"Have none. But maybe I'll have a bit someday. My great-aunt who lives in Paris has paintings and things."

“You see—I might be useful after all.”
“Perhaps. I hate the principle of saving money.”
“What about all the silver pennies you were wearing last night?”
“Given to me. By a beautiful Arab with lust in his heart.” Poor gentle Ahmud, I always throw him into conversations with an extravagant disregard for his true character. "I sold myself to him for them.” Half a lie only—I don’t have a price; that’s what my mother means when she says I was undermined at an early age; she thinks always in terms of barter. “He could have bought two horses and a saddle with them.”
“Do you always make up stories as you go along?”
“Always.”
Apparently dinner had been announced, for everyone began moving towards the small dining room table laden with cold beef, cold ham and thank God, lots of salad. Peregrine caught up with me and smilingly detached me from his brother.
“Tiercel likes you.” It was stated flatly, as an observation.
“I like him. And you.” He squeezed my hand and it made me think of Jos.
“Hungry?” he inquired.
“I’m never hungry. I’ve been trained to eat; I’d never do it if I didn’dt have to. Waste of time.”
“Not silly ideas about dieting, I hope. You’re pretty close to the bone.”
“Hell, no. I couldn’t care less.”
“Your outfit is getting you lots of comments.” I shrugged.
“I don’t do it for that.” Which is not entirely true, but I already trusted Peregrine enough to tell him something positive and let him sort through the truth or falsity of it.
“You’re an ascetic.” Again that flat tone of observation.
“Very far from it. I was first seduced by my vocational guidance counsellor at the age of fifteen in the equipment room of the gym. There, in the shadow of a wooden horse, I decided for a life of arrogant sensuality rather than education, and here I am.”
“Flamboyant, if true.” He put a piece of ham on my plate and helped himseH to some alarming-looking cold macaroni with little red things all through it.
“Nice of you not to say lying! I don’t want to tire you with confessions.”
“Not a question of being tired.” I put the ham back on the silver serving platter. “How dreary. The same actions, all thirty-four of them, straight out of Leviticus via Saint Paul, repeated to you over and over again.”
Peregrine was about to reply, but Betty came up to him and told him there was a phone call. She turned to me and I was suddenly assaulted by her softness; it was like running into a massive soft curtain in the dark, trying to find your way to the bathroom.
“Are you enjoying working with Jos Leyden?”
So she knew about me. Tiercel had come home and said I’ve met an unusual young woman and I’ve invited her for dinner; she’s Jos Leyden's bookkeeper; be nice to her. I could see it in my mind; she had been sitting up waiting for him, her hair in braids, reading the paper that she hadn’t had time for all day because of her sick child.
“Yes. Jos is an entertaining boss.”
I said it that way in order to detach Jos from me in her eyes. Don’t think I’m so easily taken care of, lady; I have an eye on your husband. Betty paused for a moment, flicking her eyes over her guests, caring that they should eat her dreadful hams and stodgy salads, all lovingly prepared.
“We used to *see* a lot of Jos. When he was in Divinity with Perry.”
“Were they in the same year? Jos is a bit younger, isn’t he?”
“Perry was a schoolteacher for seven years before going back. He’s only been ordained for four years.”
I leaned on the edge of the sideboard and shoveled in some salad. Betty broke open a bun thoughtfully, examining its interior as though it might yield a secret.
“Make them yourself?” She nodded slowly.
“Is your little girl better?” Her face opened in a smile which transformed her face.
“Yes, thanks. Just some kind of bug that’s going around. Violent for a day or two and then today, not even a temperature. Would you like to see her? I don’t think she’s contagious any more.”
I was led upstairs over the beige broadloom into Gretchen’s room. It was painted white and there were tiny chairs and tables with plush bears and a Raggedy Ann sitting at them. By the low bed there was a night light with a merry-go-round slowly turning on it, the golden light tracing a pattern across the ceiling. As we peeked into her

bed, she stirred but did not awaken. The night light showed tendrils of blond hair, like Peregrine's, surrounding a face whose soft rounded features were a miniature of Tiercel's.

"She looks like Tiercel," I volunteered, in a whisper. Betty hovered over the bed and adjusted the blankets gently.

"My little luxury," she said softly, almost cooing.

I would normally have felt embarrassed or contemptuous of such a tone, but I didn't that night. There was a step behind us and I sensed that it was Tiercel. Betty put her finger to her lips without turning. He put his arm around his wife and around me and we hung over that child's bed, like some kind of unholy trinity, each with our own thoughts about love.

*

Gratton Fairfield, lean of body and pink of face, scion of the Hamilton Fairfields but with the daring to break away and found his own firm in Toronto, drove me home from that first party at Tiercel's. When I came down from Gretchen's bedroom, Peregrine was in the act of rushing away to meet a new arrival for his house at Union Station and he apologized, but didn't offer to take me along. Betty parceled me out to Gratton, as he was the only person who seemed to be driving west and he gallantly behaved as though 1234 Dufferin Street were not out of his way at all.

Gratton is a healthy-looking man who plays squash; he is full of decency and fair play and never forgets Mother's Day. He probably even believes in it. His wife is a championship golfer whose elegant legs I had noticed earlier in the evening, but she had rushed home just after dinner to placate an edgy baby-sitter. Her husband, meanwhile, stayed on to give Regina Adler a kindly lift back to her factory (full of genial bonhomie for the working classes), and in the act of reaching over to open the door for her (to unlock it, he said) he made a not-undetermined pass at her.

Determined but awkward; my head bumped against the window and hurt so much I said ouch. At which point, he seemed to regain both courage and facility and kissed me with an expertness and desire to please which engendered my total cooperation. As his tongue slid perceptively along mine, I decided (a) that he was not drunk and (b) that I wished he were Tiercel. The last thought surprised and stimulated me and Gratton Fairfield received a vicarious bonus caused by my mind knowing bloody well what my body was doing. But as suddenly as he had begun, Gratton stopped; I suppose he'd told his wife he'd be home at a certain time. I really began to think of Tiercel then, while exchanging a quite delicate, ludicrously demure good night with Gratton and saying Yes, it really would be very nice if he would call me.

I never cease to be surprised by something which must for want of any other phrase be called sexual compatibility. Gratton, until the moment when our heads bumped, had been a tan, ruddy-faced man—nothing more. I was not warned by any of my responses to him that he would be the least bit sexually attractive to me. But he had been, even though I had thought of Tiercel throughout that stimulating and incomplete grappling in the car. I suppose we all begin with romantic notions that we will have a hint from a voice or gesture that this is really going to be it.

I remember being suddenly swooped upon ten years ago by a handsome and famous man in a moonlit orchard; I had heard his name for years, I had admired him all evening and the setting was perfect. Yet when he kissed me, I thought I might break out in hives. I let him make love to me, just to make sure, and it was a distinct and pallid failure. Certainly there is such a thing as a chemical reaction which has nothing to do with romance or technique or will, and men find it more difficult to face than I do, especially the ones, like my handsome and famous friend, who think that everyone is more or less a good lay. I always make a point of telling them immediately if it won't work, and it is then that I am always surprised at how incurably, wretchedly romantic men are, even when all evidence is to the contrary.

Gratton called the next day, offering me lunch—very civilized and not at all necessary. I had already decided that I liked him well enough to take him on as a lover, but the preliminaries seemed to be necessary to him, the simple man, so I said Yes. I told Jos about the whole evening including Gratton, but leaving out my new reactions to Tiercel. He listened and offered the observation that Gratton Fairfield was a devout Roman Catholic, a lieutenant in the Royal Canadian Navy Reserve and a pillar of the symphony.

"Why in hell should I care about all that crap?" I handed Jos a cup of coffee.

"I don't know that you should care. But you should know."

"Not interested." And I wasn't. The person I wanted to hear about was Tiercel Margrave, but Jos probably knew that and for some reason any information he had was not forthcoming.

That afternoon after lunch at Gaston's and a bit of soulful glancing during dessert, Gratton and I went to bed together in his father's company's suite at the King Eddie. From the first (excluding that unfortunate head- bumping incident) Gratton has been adroit and careful. As he undressed, folding his suit and waistcoat neatly (he had to return to his office later to pick up calls), he inquired as to whether I took the pill. I answered Yes as I slipped into the bed; then he asked whether I wanted him to wear a prophylactic or not. That question annoyed me so intensely that I turned my head into the chilly hotel pillow and murmured, "Fuck off, you stupid bastard," in English and French, against the cold case. Gratton said innocently,

"Pardon me? I couldn't hear what you said, Regina."

And then I remembered what Jos had said about his having been in the Navy; I guess his V.D. drill had always stood him in good stead. So then I said gently that I didn't think so. (Question A in the *Gratton Fairfield Selection Examination for Suitable Sexual Partner*: Do you now have, or have you ever had, syphilis or gonorrhea?) Then he lay down beside me and I discovered that he was not the type of man who is only interested in getting a woman into bed but doesn't really care what he does once he's got her there. For all the iciness of his preliminaries, Gratton was satisfying and grateful and I was sorry that I had wanted to snap at him. I remember that afternoon so well, because that was the first time I thought entirely of another man while enjoying sex with someone else. And I really did enjoy it; I would give Gratton a certificate or three stars or Michelin crossed forks and spoons any time, Tiercel notwithstanding.

I am trying to remember whether it was merely that no one had made love to me for seven months (since Jean-Gilles) that made my initial encounter with Gratton work so well. I have never longed for sexual contact until I meet someone with whom I want to have it; then suddenly it becomes interesting, and in the case of my love for Tiercel, almost uncontainable. I have never just needed a man, although I suppose sometimes a headache or a stomach upset or inebriation after one beer might be what my sister (who is a psychologist) would call sublimated need. My great-aunt Valancy who is so aged and selfish that she has never loved a man in her life draws the distinction between brutish activity and resolved activity.

Whatever you call it, I know that I can only appreciate a lover who talks well before and after and is good during. Before Tiercel, resolved activity always meant someone like Ahmud. Willem, Jean-Gilles or Gratton—chemical compatibility, consideration and a certain amount of confusion as to what I was really up to. I don't mean that I deliberately set out to mystify, but I have found that men are always confused by a woman who is in full control of all her faculties and yet makes no demands, emotional or otherwise, before what my Aunt Maeve quaintly refers to as her "surrender."

Aunt Valancy went to great pains to teach me that pleasure does not bring love nor love pleasure; that there was in fact, no necessary correspondence between them (she had absorbed Gide to the point where she was sure that most of his ideas were her own), and I had never found out what the correspondence meant until Tiercel.

*

My visits to my father in the hospital were not auspicious. For one thing, I dreaded meeting my mother or Aunt Maeve there; my total contact with my mother since my return had been my sending her my Air Canada ticket with *Arrived* scrawled across the back of it. In return I received a receipt from the Longstreet Housepainters and an agenda for a Voice of Women weekend seminar. In this way, my mother and I were aware that we were both alive and in Toronto, without having to risk the inevitable abrasions of personal contact.

My mother and I had reached the stage of cold peace where we did nothing that might cause a spontaneous eruption of the bitterness and anguish which is latent between us. It is one of those unspoken family understandings which my mother's family, the Hobbes, are so good at.

Your father, my mother used to say to us when we were small, was never received in Toronto by my family because he was foreign. The word *foreign* came to have a meaning associated with the Hobbs, a special meaning which only had a significance in relation to them. My mother would go on to recount that only Aunt Maeve (her eldest half-sister) had been good enough to receive us at tea when we were making our way from Saskatchewan to Ottawa. Relations between Aunt Maeve and my mother gradually achieved a tepid state approaching an understanding and from the age of eleven on, I used to spend some time in the summer (usually around Exhibition time) with my sister Alta (yes, she was born in Edmonton), with Aunt Maeve and her strange husband, Clough, in the house where my mother was brought up in Rosedale.

Nothing in that house had changed in sixty years, except the dust. Uncle Clough spent the better part of his days in winter polishing silver and doing something unspecified in the attic; in the summer, he rode his balloon-tired C.C.M. bike around the streets and slept between lunch and dinner. I only realized when he died three years ago that poor Uncle Clough had been an alcoholic for most of his life, but naturally we did not learn it from Aunt

Maeve. It was tacitly assumed that we understood and that we would never speak of it. For the Hobbses, understanding and subsequent silence are linked like confession and absolution.

So my foreign father lay dying in the Toronto General Hospital for nearly a year but I didn't know then that it would be for so short or so long a time. I can see his head against the pillow now, that large, thin nose with the hook in it so close to the bridge that the rest of that remarkable feature seemed to hang down from it with an eerie elephantine grace. My mother used to tell us regularly how relieved she was that none of us had inherited our father's nose, although some of us (namely me) had inherited his surly, unruly temperament.

"Temperament" was a word used by my mother to describe anything which she didn't feel herself. It was temperament which drove my father from Germany to France to England to a homestead during the Depression, to school-teaching in Regina, to selling sod in Ottawa; it was temperament which made him unsure of what his income was from year to year (once when I had to ask him for a school questionnaire, he laughed and said, "Pick a figure"); it was temperament which made him take up falconry as a hobby.

My father got his first falcon before I was born, when we were living in Saskatchewan in that place I was named after, and he trained it patiently in the garage, making it hop farther and farther each day for food, hooding it between encounters, letting it suffer the weight of the jesses on its claws, until he was sure enough of it to take it out and let it fly for him. Fly it did, straight at me, leaving a two-inch gash just above my right eyebrow, and then away from my father, until it disappeared over the horizon. But some dream of emperors and kings made him persist and he obtained another one shortly after, training it more successfully this time.

There were a series, but only one was important. Her name was Calliope and she had bright, mad, yellow eyes, a wingspan of 4½ feet and tense claws; she was a good hunter and caused him to have a visit from the local Humane Society, who not only thought he was crazy, but also thought he was ruining game for the good, civilized hunters with their twenty-twos and their shotguns. We were strange enough anyway in that prairie town: my father with his English accent, clipped short by his faintly Germanic intonations, his small pointed brown beard, his concern for the uncommercial; my mother pale and publicly quiet, a concern for good works masking a latent hysteria and rage which became the constant background of our lives, like the slow drumming of percussion in a Wagner opera.

There was a large, brown Easter egg sitting on the night table beside my father's head and 1 knew at once that it must be a present from my mother. My father dislikes sweet things as much as 1 do, and even if he hadn't, cancer of the stomach would have inhibited his activities. But my mother is fond of the celebration of small events (I myself had received a chocolate bunny three days previously—talk about coals to Newcastle) and she insists on celebrating them, regardless of circumstance. I began to tell my father about working with Jos (I thought he would be pleased with my salary) and Jos' thesis on star symbolism and Jos' interest in baroque churches, but he interrupted me with his eyes closed, reaching for an Export.

"Doing any modeling?"

I said No, I wasn't; the one photographer who likes to use me, Billy Brustein, was doing a large assignment for the government ("Boost the White Fox Industry") somewhere near the tree line.

"I'm tired of it. I'm wasting my life."

I always speak like this to my father. Mutual optimism has never been one of the games we've played with one another. He shrugged his thin shoulders.

"You were born to do that. Not like your sister."

Alta wanted to be a psychologist from the time she saw James Craig rescue Olivia de Havilland from madness in *The Snake Pit*; she married a man who reminds me a lot of Olivia de Havilland. Thank God they live in Vancouver.

"Your mother giving you any money?"

"I don't need it; I just told you what Jos is paying me." My father shook his head upon the pillow, his long, white hair crackling.

"I'm not saying you need money. Get it from your mother. It's yours by right."

I didn't answer, letting my father rave on about the Hobbs fortune which rightfully belonged to his daughters; it is the one area where he cares anything about money as a thing in itself and where he is totally unreasonable. The Hobbses perhaps did have money of a certain kind once, but my father made them sound like Canada's Rockefellers, which they most certainly aren't. My mother had had a useless and elegant education to prepare her to be an upper-middle-class matron; it was all wasted, she pointed out to us frequently, when she met and married my father in London. Fortunately for her, her share of the Hobbses' assets was intricately bound up in trusts and agreements and inviolable capital; our Canadian wanderings were financed (as were my father's singularly futile

business ventures) by the tiny bank-strangled income on forty thousand dollars. Once when I asked my father whether he had been aware of my mother's quasi-heiress status, he said,

"I was crazy to marry her, even if she had a million dollars." Which was not really an answer nor was it meant to be. The nurse asked me to leave when she came in with some bottles and a white tray and I said to my father,

"Do you want me to bring you anything? I'll come the day after tomorrow."

"Your mother does all that. Go and see her; it'll make her happy."

Typical of my father to say something like that at the end of a visit. And so typical too that it should be a half-meaningful statement, recalling all the emotions that I refuse to feel for either my mother or my father. Happiness has never been a concept in our family: survival, triumph, hatred, resentment-yes—but happiness—no. I remember telling my mother when I was five or six that I wasn't happy; her crisp, white-bloused back was turned to me as I said it and she replied over her shoulder,

"Of course you're not happy; children are never happy; you'll be happy when you grow up."

Since it was a promise that her own maturity had not fulfilled, I remember it as a saying only, barren of any significance except the delusion of thinking of happiness as temporally possible.

My father asked me to bring Jos the next time I came, if he could spare the time from his overdue thesis. Then he asked,

"Any interest in women?"I caught the nurse's curious look, traveling from my father to me.

"Likes them. Likes me most. But not particularly hungry for female companionship."

Female companionship was my father's general circumlocution for intimate relations between the sexes; he is really a very shy man. My father lay back and closed his eyes.

"Hunger, hunger. What kind of word is that to describe delicate emotions? Make sure your mother feeds Calliope a little less than usual; she's not getting any exercise." I hadn't realized that Calliope was still alive and suddenly wanted to see her very much.

"Bye-bye, Mrs. MacGregor; mind your carrot patch."

My father always likes to remind me of my earliest childhood, before I could read. I bent to kiss his dry, slightly mottled cheek and he neither accepted it nor rejected it; he was passive, but at least he didn't cringe the way he did when my sister Alta, determined to turn us all into the average Canadian family, full of love and trust, threw her arms around him when she greeted him.

My father never held my hand when I was a child, nor did he seek or give kisses, pats on the cheek or hair-rumplings. He didn't reach to help me when I stumbled beside him, determined to keep up with him as he marched across the fields, his arm held rigid in front of him, supporting his falcon; if he felt kind, he would watch silently while I picked myself up and brushed off some mud from the scrapes; if he was not, he would mutter "stupid" or "careless" to the wind that blew around us. But it never occurred to him (or to me either) that he would help me or pity me. The closest we ever came to embracing was when we stroked Calliope together, when she had had a bad day with no prey caught and her hunting blood had to be stayed by gentle hands. Then when I saw my father soothe Calliope, I felt as though I were the bird, hooded, leather-thonged and captive, allowing myself to accept an alien will with sympathy and love as the price of my surrender.

"Bye-bye, Da. I'll bring Jos."

I went directly to meet Gratton at the Ward-Price auction preview. We met by pre-arrangement in the old-books room and proceeded slowly around the gallery, examining Louis Quinze furniture made the day before yesterday and Kroehler dining room suites. Gratton was looking at Royal Crown Derby china (Edna collects pattern 1432) and he put in a reserve bid and then we went next door to Fran's for coffee. Gratton was always very careful about establishing the proper alibi (unlike Tiercel whose carelessness was arrogant and who kissed me in plain view of three hundred people on the grounds of Government House, but more about that later) and he vented a great deal of what in another person might be called fantasy on contriving situations in which it was plausible that we could have met by accident: the HOME show at the C.N.E., St. Lawrence Market late on Saturday morning, the A&A record shop. When I think of the amount of organization that Gratton put into our meetings, I realize what a very competent man he is.

This second encounter of ours was less pleasing than the first; Gratton ejaculated while he was still undressing me and we had to wait three quarters of an hour before he could manage a second erection. Then he was hurried and oblivious and seemed to want to get it over as quickly as possible. I know he was disturbed by his lack of timing; like most men, Gratton holds great store by his ability to perform according to a certain pattern—erection, entrance, ejaculation and exit. The four E's of virility are very important to someone like Gratton; they are the sign-

posts of self-assurance. I am always glad that I don't depend on such mechanical physical manifestations; if sex is nice, that's very good, but if it isn't, that's too bad but nothing is there for tears.

Gratton was overcome with embarrassment and anxiety, and turning his head against the pillow, he confided that Edna allowed him to make love to her only two or three times a year—usually Christmas Eve and her birthday, and sometimes the weekend they opened up their cottage. I pretended to be incredulous, but I have heard this sort of thing before. He nodded wretchedly.

"And then she feels terrible for three days afterwards. Headaches, nausea, bitchy. Not worth it. Honest to God, it isn't."

I sometimes think I should write an anonymous treatise on the sex life of the married woman whose husband has affairs. I've got reams of material stored in my head, most of it objectively astonishing. Like Edna Fairfield, for example—a sexy-looking blond in anyone's terms. I felt sorry for her with her remorse hidden in that perfectly articulated athlete's body, her dislike of something her husband was very good at. God knows what happens in other people's marriages; that is why I have never envied the wife of any man with whom I have ever had a love affair. Usually I am having my love affair because of them and for that, I owe them a small deference, like the excise stamps that used to go on checks.

Betty Margrave is the only wife I have truly envied, whose husband I was not content to let be her husband; Tiercel Margrave is the only man whom I loved so much I could never find it in my heart to pity him. …

256.76 Excerpt from **Scream Quietly Or The Neighbors Will Hear**\fn{by Erin Pizzey (1939-)} Tsingtao, Shantung Province, China (F) 8

… It would probably take a Charles Dickens to do full justice to the labyrinth of indifference, red tape, callousness, and simple incompetence that exists between people in need and so many of the agencies that are meant to help them from the DHSS\fn{Department of Health and Social Security; abolished in 1988} to the NSPCC.\fn{National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children. This book was published in 1977:H}

The women and children who end up at Women's Aid are living evidence of just one corner of that maze. They show that when a woman tries to gather herself and her children away from the muggings of a brutal husband, she can limp to her GP, stagger to the casualty ward, drag herself to the social worker, cry out to the police, beseech the Marriage Guidance Council, implore the Family Service Unit, plead with Dr. Barnardo's, beg the NSPCC and come away, through the swish of hands being compassionately washed in all directions, with only a babble of conflicting advice and not one jot of practical help.

5,500 women have come through Women's Aid so far, and every one of them adds evidence to the case that says the agencies which we might like to believe in as proof that ours is a humane society simply do not work. This chapter looks at some of the main agencies and how they fail.

In the rush of coping with so many cases in two and a half years, documentation at Women's Aid has sometimes been erratic. But 270 cases that I did manage to record in detail over one period give an idea of how widespread are both battering and official failure to deal with it. Incidentally in sixty-seven of those cases it wasn't just the mothers who were battered but the babies and children as well.

The cases were referred to Women's Aid by the social services, the police, the probation service, the Citizens' Advice Bureaux, St. John's Ambulance, doctors, hospitals, the Samaritans, Shelter, the NSPCC and the press.\fn{There follows a list of the locations of the referrals, and the text resumes as follows:}

Now let's look at some of the agencies who referred these cases to Women's Aid, and who still are referring cases, and see how they fail.

*

The motive behind the work of all family case-work organizations is the support and strengthening of the family. A battered wife struggling to break away from a disastrous marriage can expect little sympathy from a social worker, and in many cases she will experience downright hostility.

The social worker is trained to consider both sides of a marital problem, which is normally a just and fair approach, but where the woman is being savagely beaten it seems hardly reasonable to pause and weigh the merits of the case.

In the majority of cases where a battered woman presents herself at the social services she will be told that there is nothing that can be done for her because (a) she is technically not homeless, as she has a home to go to and a husband to maintain her, and therefore she is not the responsibility of the State; and (b) the social services cannot make a moral judgement on a marriage. By that they mean that they don't want to take sides—and giving a

wife refuge presupposes guilt on the part of the husband. However, it never occurs to them that by refusing her refuge they presuppose that the husband is innocent.

The only real offer of help she will get is an offer by the social worker to visit the husband. This puts her in a dilemma because if she agrees and goes home after the social worker has visited him he may well beat her severely for putting him in a humiliating situation. Many is the husband who has promised total reform to a social worker only to round on his wife and black both her eyes half an hour later. It always amazes me to hear a social worker telephone and say,

"Mr. Jones has promised never to hit his wife again and I feel she should give it another try."

In that particular case the woman had been married for nineteen years. She had been battered so badly that her face looked like a ploughed field and both the children had been beaten ever since they were born.

Women's Aid was the first place that had offered her refuge in all that time. She had tried to get away many times and her case was well known in her area. Yet here was the social worker who knew the husband and his reputation and even admitted that he was frightened of him, saying that on the strength of a promise he advised this woman to go home. How any social worker believes that a man who has been violent for years can just suddenly stop overnight is beyond me. I feel that most social workers know very well that the man is not going to change, but when the wife has moved away they become the recipient of some of the man's aggression. Many of the husbands do make a menace of themselves, particularly if they believe the social worker knows where their wife is and is not telling them. Some social workers don't bother to keep it a secret. They give the husband our phone number or address, thus removing the burden from their own shoulders.

As most of these husbands have been violent since well before they married, it is hardly fair to insist that the problem lies within the marriage. But the social worker, trained or brain-washed into this limited form of thinking, will continue to plaster over the cracks, telling the mother that her husband is ill and needs her and that she must stay for the good of the children. This last comment is made in spite of overwhelming evidence from school, neighbours, etc., that the children are being severely damaged in the situation.

As social workers mostly deal with problem families they have come to accept that violence amongst their clients is the norm. They will produce arguments to prove that an uneducated man who beats his wife is showing an inarticulate form of love for her. When you point out that wife-battering is not a working-class syndrome and is spread right through society, they are amazed. This is because they have probably never come across a middle-class woman asking for help.

Social workers must learn to respect the woman they are there to help. Too many accept that beatings are a part of life and urge women to put up with them. Every time the mother turns up at the social services she is told that nothing can be done except to have her children taken into care. This is a terrible trap to fall into.

Once she agrees in desperation to hand over the children, she is then no longer considered a family. On her own without children she can probably find a bedsitter, but to get the children back she must find suitable family accommodation. But because she no longer has the children in her care she cannot be considered for council accommodation, so she faces the usually impossible task of finding and paying for a family house in the open market. Usually she loses the children for good except for visits. Then, all too often, nature takes over and she replaces them with yet more children.

Social workers who offer to take the children into care are well aware of these consequences but they don't ever warn the mother and they don't consider the inhumanity of depriving the children of the one parent that does love them.

Many social workers are angry and upset over the problems of battered wives but few take any steps to alter the situation. These problems have been allowed to exist for years in a supposedly sophisticated and caring welfare state. All social workers stand condemned by default because they knew and did nothing about it.

Social services have referred cases to Women's Aid from all over the country but none has ever paid us a penny for taking the mothers in. Hammersmith, who are one of our biggest customers, promised to pay but ignored our bills. Ealing, our second biggest customer, agreed that we took their families but said that as we were persona non grata they were unable to contribute to the cost. We have always been in a difficult position because the mothers matter far more than the money. When a social worker says that unless we take the family he will be forced to send them home we ask for money even though we know there is no chance of getting it—but we always take in the family.

Sometimes the social worker packs the family into a taxi and sends them off to us. The mother arrives with a piece of paper in her hand with our address but no idea of the social worker's name—some social workers make a point of not mentioning their name. Once the mother has spent the night in our boruogh the social workers from

the original area can and do refuse to have any more to do with her because she has technically moved out of their area and thus lost all rehousing rights. Our borough quite rightly resents this approach because they now have some 200 extra mothers and children in Chiswick joining the already lengthy queue for housing.

It seems ridiculous that social services and social security are run from separate buildings because they are inextricably entwined. Instead of hand-in-hand policy between the two departments a rivalry exists and if, for example, a mother has had her gas and electricity turned off for non-payment, social services will argue that social security should pay part of the bill, and both sides will haggle while the mother sits in the cold and dark with her children.

Social workers are bound by all sorts of cumbersome rules and tied in official red tape. A major problem is that their only way towards better pay and job prospects is up the administrative ladder, so you soon lose the really gifted, humane social worker who has a family and a mortgage and cannot survive on the disgustingly low pay given to the field-workers. Within a few years he can be found with a long title, pushing an administrative pen for more money but less job-satisfaction and at the expense of the people who really need his skill and talent.

One bright ray of hope are the new community workers who are seconded to Women's Aid for a three-month training period. These people come from North London Polytechnic, LSE, Chiswick Poly and other places. They have been trained in community work and they are the future for the social services. They don't see themselves as some sort of guardians of society's conscience and handers-out of advice and bounty from above. They are moving away from the old idea that help from the social services is of an advisory nature and towards the idea that what the majority of people need is practical help to solve immediate problems.

I would like to see the present social services dissolved. In the place of these offices full of desks, typewriters and instructions in triplicate there should be large community houses with area social workers coming in daily to talk with the people who come in for advice or for a cup of coffee or to see the health visitors. The administration can be carried on in the Town Hall but the actual records kept on the clients could be reduced to a bare minimum.

At the moment there is little point in trying to get hold of a social worker in the morning because he will be in a meeting. These meetings go on all morning and then there is lunch and then he goes out to do his visits. This means that most of his clients who do not have telephones must lurk surrounded by children at phone kiosks and it can take days to get through to him.

I once asked a social worker what would happen if an emergency arose during one of the meetings and the client was unable to contact her social worker. The social worker said that there was a maxim used in his office to the effect that "If there is an emergency call, ignore it for twenty-four hours and it will go somewhere else." During the meetings the duty officer can be called to the phone, but of course he knows nothing of the case and is even less help than the social worker.

As most social workers come from a middle-class background or have been educated into middle-class prejudices, their attitudes to mothering and caring are largely inappropriate in working-class situations. Many times you will find a social worker more concerned about the cleanliness of the children than the quality of the loving, and far too ready to resort to the children's home should he feel that the mother is not coping. Many social workers will complain that the battered mother is a slut because she is dirty and dishevelled, never stopping to think what repeated vicious assaults must have done to her personality. Instead of a helping hand the mother gets the cold glare of disgusted authority, and it is no wonder that mothers arrive at Women's Aid full of hostility towards social workers and the welfare state.

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The police attitude to wife-battering reveals an understandable but unacceptable schizophrenia in their approach to violence. Imagine that Constable Upright is on his beat one night and finds Mr. Batter mugging a woman in the street. Mr. Batter has already inflicted heavy bruises to the woman's face and is just putting the boot in when Constable Upright comes on the scene. The constable knows his duty and does it. He arrests Mr. Batter, who is charged with causing grievous bodily harm and goes to prison for ten years.

Ten years later Constable Upright is on his beat when he is sent to investigate screaming which neighbours have reported coming from the home of the newly released Mr. Batter. Mr. Batter is mugging his wife. He's thrown boiling water at her, broken her nose, and now he's trying for her toes with a claw hammer. When Constable Upright arrives what does he do? Does he make an arrest? Of course not.

He knocks on the door and Mr. Batter tells him to "sod off". He tells Mr. Batter that the neighbours are complaining and he wishes to see his wife. Mr. Batter says they have been having a minor row and he gets his wife who is looking bruised round the face and crying. The policeman will not arrest. In one case the husband even assaulted his wife in front of a policeman but still there was no arrest. All that he did was to advise her to go

to the local magistrates' court the next morning and take out a summons against her husband, but he knew that she was unlikely to do this because she would have to live in the same house as her husband while she was taking him to court.

Some policemen are sympathetic and show a degree of understanding of the battered women's predicament, but the usual attitude from the police force is one of growing hostility as they are called out again and again to the same house and each time the woman refuses to take action. Soon the family gets well known to the police station and they take their time about going round.

I think the police become immune to violence, dealing as they do with so many forms of violent crime. It is far easier to fall into the habit of thinking of the woman as an ill-deserving slut than to watch helplessly as she reappears time and again, getting more and more desperate each time.

The police never seem to feel that it is their responsibility to notify social services or the NSPCC even when it is obvious to them that the children have been beaten. Time and time again we have had arguments with police stations when a mother has been beaten up and thrown out leaving the children with the husband. Usually the man has a history of violence and is already known to the police. The mother's first place of call is at the police station, where she will be told that as far as the children are concerned, possession is nine tenths of the law and there is nothing that the police can do about getting the children out. It would seem obvious that the police station should then notify one of the caring agencies that the children are at risk. But they don't.

One night we had a call from a couple who had found a small boy down the road, crying bitterly and covered in bruises. They called the police, who took a long time coming. While they were waiting, the couple thought of phoning us. We gathered that the boy was terrified. The bruises had been inflicted by his father in a drunken rage, and he didn't want to go home. We suggested that the couple bring the boy to us for the night and we would call in the NSPCC. Unfortunately, before this happened the police arrived at the couple's home and took the child off. We checked with the police station the next day and we were told that they had simply called in the parents who had taken the boy home. Had they notified the social services?

"Of course," came the prompt reply. I checked and they hadn't.

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This congested organ of the welfare state\fn{Social Security} exists to alleviate suffering by handing out money to the poor and needy. By outlook and training the staff that sit behind the counter tend to consider that anyone coming to ask for money is shiftless and idle and to treat them accordingly. Yet the clerk at the counter is often taking home less than the families who are claiming, so they can't be blamed for being shitty sometimes.

As usual with huge organizations, too much emphasis goes or administration and too little on results. Too much money goes on the machine and too little to those it was set up to help Large sums are spent on snooping and prying in order to catch the relatively minuscule number of people who are cheating thereby proving to the public that social security is mindful of it duty as guardian of the public purse.

The first person a battered mother is likely to see will be the woman behind the reception desk at her local office. She will be told that they have no intention of giving her money becaus she has a home to go to and a husband to maintain her. Only if she can show proof that she is taking legal proceedings will they perhaps reconsider the matter.

Tears will not move them because there are usually two or three people in tears either of misery or rage at the treatmen they are receiving. Small children clinging to her skirt will have no effect either. But if the hour is late enough and the mother is brave enough to refuse to leave, a payment of a few pounds may be made for a place for the night.

If she comes back the next day having seen a solicitor they will tell her that before she can have money for rent she must find somewhere to live and wait for a visit there from a social security officer. It is almost impossible to find somewhere to ive if you cannot put down a deposit and rent in advance. Catch-22: the poor mother gives up and has to go home to violence.

Women's Aid are lucky in that we have managed to build good relationship with our local social security branch. They are flexible and generous towards all the women who have come us. But even they could not help us when it was decided that the total rent we could be allowed for a family, however many kids it included, would be £3.50 a week. Even the meanest hostel subsidized £6 for each adult, plus more for each child, but seem to get nowhere when we try to argue.

This is not the fault of the local office; it is regional policy. But until voluntary bodies like us can begin to rely on an imaginative approach from social security, they may well be killed at birth by lack of funds. What could be helpful and beneficial attempts at solving pressing social problems will wither and die.

The Department of Health and Social Security may want to think that there have been “several developments” since we first presented a dossier to Sir Keith Joseph in summer 1972. If they’ve come a long way, they’ve got nowhere in particular.

Jack Ashley has shown me a letter from Edward Heath, who was then Prime Minister, saying that any woman who presented herself at social security and asked for help to escape from a brutal situation would immediately be given money for accommodation and food. This statement was either a bare-faced lie or a reminder that politicians and the civil servants who advise hem are too often the last people to know and understand the real situation. The experiences of the women coming to the centre have proved this.

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Hospitals have their heads buried firmly in the sand. They resolutely mutter that their job is to heal and what happens outside the hospital is no concern of theirs.

A woman married to a taxi-cab driver was rushed by ambulance with a police escort to a local hospital. The medical social worker telephoned us to say that, though she had been badly shocked, the woman would be ready for discharge after a few hours’ rest, but was too frightened to go home, and would we take her? We agreed, but by the time we got through to casualty to say we would come and collect her, a doctor had persuaded her to go home and the police had driven her back.

The next-morning the police telephoned me and said that she had come into the station wearing a coat over her bra and pants because she had fled from her husband after another battering. They wondered if they could bring her to us. When she arrived we were all shocked into silence. Her whole body was covered with enormous bruises and she was bleeding from several gashes. The night before when the police had returned her to the house they found that her husband had gone out, locking the door.

The police had forced an entry and left her there. Later the husband came back drunk and beat her.

I talked to one orthopaedic surgeon in a hospital, who calmly agreed that he often repaired a woman’s nose five or six times at vast expense to the public and a great deal of discomfort to herself, but he did not see it as part of his job to question how her recurrent injuries were inflicted.

I often find a reluctance on the part of the staff of the hospital to confirm any diagnosis that might cause them to be called to court to give evidence, or to take any steps that might involve them in controversy. In one case, a three-month-old baby was admitted to hospital after a blow to the side of the head which made him vomit continuously and made it necessary to insert tubes to drain fluid from the brain daily. The hospital would not confirm that the blow was relevant to the fluid collecting, even though this would have been one way of getting a court injunction to keep the very violent husband away from the baby. The hospital stuck to its safe, non-committed position and merely said that the trouble could have been caused by a knock or a blow but might possibly stem from natural causes. As I write, the father is waiting to get the baby back, if it lives. He has a history of violence and is a drug-addict. It is this kind of pussy-footing that keeps the hospitals like huge ships afloat, separate from the communities that they should be serving.

If they have a difficult case to deal with they call a case conference and decide that the case is indeed difficult and by the time they all have a long chat and a cup of tea it has probably gone away in desperation.

Violence just does not occur inside nice clean and tidy hospitals. And if anyone is bad-mannered enough to show temper there are plenty of competent, cool people around to subdue him with a well-aimed needle. This was one hospital’s solution to the problem of having one violent man assault his wife in the casualty ward. They took no further action.

A hospital will have no compunction in discharging a woman who has been dreadfully assaulted. A West Indian nurse arrived at Women’s Aid three weeks before she was due to give birth. Her neck had been dislocated and her body was covered in scratches and bites. She was moaning and crying and we couldn’t get much sense out of her. I telephoned the hospital which had put her out and asked them what they were doing, only to be told by a disapproving nursing sister that this girl was carrying another man’s child. The unspoken attitude was, “she’s only got what she deserved”. A few hours later the poor woman swallowed all the pills the hospital had given her and we had her taken to another hospital. However, this was yet another case where it would be fair to say that though that extent of damage inflicted on an ordinary member of the public would have kept them in hospital for a week, because this was a woman who had been beaten by her husband she was patched up and sent out as though she somehow had deserved to be beaten.

The sooner large hospitals are no longer considered the best way of serving the community the better. The bigger they are the more impersonal they become and the easier it is for the staff to get out of touch with the

people they are there to serve. In the days of small cottage hospitals there was much more care and concern for the individual.

Above all no hospital should be allowed to discharge any patient who has been a victim of assault without making sure she has somewhere safe to go to and notifying the appropriate social services.

Dora had fifteen pregnancies and ten children and the only holidays she ever had were in the maternity ward and the times she was in for injuries received from her husband. Four times the hospital had called in the priest to perform the last rites but they always sent her home to more violence. They were more concerned about the state of her soul than her body.

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A battered woman is likely to find herself in the local mental hospital on several occasions. In the majority of our cases she is admitted because she has taken so many overdoses that the local hospital is fed up with her and passes her on to the psychiatrist, who puts her into the mental hospital for "depression". The staff know that she has been beaten over a long period, but the matter is conveniently forgotten while she is heavily tranquillized for a few weeks, told that she is much improved, and sent home.

The psychiatrists are usually male and many hold the belief that subconsciously she needs the violence. If only she could look deep inside herself and admit her faults all would be well and her husband would not batter her any more.

This approach fills her with guilt and uncertainty. Is it her fault? She begins to wonder. It is easy to make her feel a failure when she already feels she's failed in the main purpose of her life—her marriage. She usually believes the psychiatrist and goes home determined to do better.

But she goes home to a husband whose pattern of violence was evident well before she married him and soon she is back at the mental hospital again, even more depressed. She gives up and neglects herself. She wrings her hands and cries because she has left her children at home but feels safe in the hospital and dreads going back. Meanwhile, the psychiatrist, bored with her crying, decides sometimes that the most useful move would be to perform a leucotomy\fn{Pre-frontal lobotomy} and remove the anxiety.

We see the results of this operation when the women come in and recount their horrifying life histories with utter indifference. The operation does indeed remove all their anxieties and usually their children have been taken away and put into care because the mother has also lost all sense of responsibility. The husbands continue to beat them but now they put up with it with cheerful indifference. A surgical triumph?

It is sad for us because the mothers who have had this operation usually come in to ask us to help them get their children back. We feel very bitter because though they've paid a terrible price for their husbands' violence, it is far too late, and gently we have to persuade them to leave them where they are.

It is more common to see mothers who have had ECT,\fn{Electro-convulsive therapy} or "shock treatment" as it is commonly called. Nobody really knows how or why it works but it does relieve depression. Unfortunately it also erases memory and has other side-effects if used too often. Again many of our mothers go into the mental hospital and are given a course of ECT. It helps for the moment, but they go home and are repeatedly battered until in the end you find a confused, witless forty-year-old sitting in front of you, trying to remember when and where she was last jolted out of her rapidly deteriorating mind.

When a husband comes to court and is put in prison, the prison doctor or psychiatrist will often, if he sees that the man is sick, try to have him put into a mental hospital for treatment, as prison is of no therapeutic value. However, the prison psychiatrist will run up against a major snag.

Mental hospitals are geared to treating the mentally ill, but the majority of the husbands have a "personality problem". In other words, there is nothing organically wrong with their minds, but their personality needs re-educating. To cure a man who is suffering from a recognized mental illness such as schizophrenia is a complicated but not necessarily impossible task. But to cure a man with a long-term personality disorder will take years and cost an enormous amount of money.

So far our society has made almost no provision for the people we term "psychopaths". Given that most mental hospitals are hopelessly overcrowded and understaffed it is not surprising that they usually refuse to take on a man who is not mentally ill, but is liable to be intractable, disruptive and dangerous. The hospital usually reports that there is nothing mentally wrong with him and sends him home.

Most psychiatrists are men, most are middle class and wealthy. In order to train as a psychiatrist they have to spend years studying and inevitably they tend to become buried deeper and deeper in theory and more and more remote from the problems of a battered woman in a working-class home. When faced with a weeping woman complaining of violence from her husband, the psychiatrist's training is likely to blind him to her real needs and

reinforce in him the simple notions that a woman’s place is in the home with her husband, that even if he is violent that only shows his need for her, and that if she won’t stand by him he will be destroyed. Faced with a woman who has put up with years of battering, the psychiatrist is induced to blame her. He doesn’t understand the social conditions that make it impossible for her to escape. I have often had psychiatrists say to me in puzzled tones,

“She must have liked it to have stayed for so many years.”

It is hard for these men to understand the economic and social dependence women have on men, because they have money in their pockets to buy a roof wherever they choose, and they’ve been brought up as men to act independently and make decisions. They really cannot imagine how financially and psychologically difficult it is for a mother with children to strike out on her own and find accommodation and money to live on,

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Very often the first person a battered woman goes to see is her doctor, and he is the first person to ignore the evidence in front of his eyes. Marie tells me that when she showed a fresh set of bruises to her doctor he laughed and said,

“Call that a beating! Go away and don’t waste my time.”

This is a fairly typical attitude. The doctor does not want to make a note of the injuries because it means swearing affidavits for courts, which takes time. He is middle class and has been brought up to believe that the working class cannot communicate verbally and always resort to fists and that this is quite acceptable. Therefore he is not sympathetic to battered women who clutter up his clinic and he hands out bigger and bigger doses of tranquillizers.

I think all doctors should be obliged to notify a health visitor at the first sign of bruises on either a mother or child so that she can visit the family and take the necessary action. I doubt that the doctors would bother, because it would take a radical change in attitude to get them to accept that women have a right not to be beaten, and, as the doctors rarely see the middle-class wife who is battered because she hides behind her front door, they assume the myth that battering is a working-class syndrome which, like poverty and disease, will always be with us.

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If you shop at Habitat and cook a la Elizabeth David and your marriage is going gently wrong then Marriage Guidance will probably suit your needs. You can discuss “where it all went wrong”, secure in the knowledge that your councillor will have gone to the same kind of school as you attended and the same kind of dances and probably sold out to the highest bidder. You can also console yourself with the knowledge that “your case” will be discussed with fervour at tea-tables and coffee-mornings in the areas advertised by Roy Brooks.

If a woman comes to see us and wants to try Marriage Guidance we are always told that there is a waiting list, however desperate she may be.

None of the mothers who have come to Women’s Aid found Marriage Guidance any help at all. They didn’t understand most of what was said to them and usually found that the councillor was sitting behind her desk with her fingers interlocked, breathing in-phrases like “marriage is a fit” and relapsing into meaningful silences.

If a wife who left her home town to live with us wanted to attend the same Marriage Guidance centre as her husband so they could at least share the benefit of the experience, she would be told that it’s against the rules. Each must go to the office nearest to where they are living.

How Marriage Guidance, with its £300,000 subsidies from the government, has managed to avoid the problem of battered wives for so long baffles me. It isn’t as though battering is confined to the working classes who don’t go to Marriage Guidance. Rather, I see it as a failure of the organization to fulfil its aims of helping and caring with marriages of all types. They have avoided the problem by taking a comfortable well-heeled position behind their desks and being politely useless whenever it comes up.

The people who benefit most from Marriage Guidance are, I think, those who become councillors. For them it offers instant therapy under the guise of helping others, and under the motherly wing of a tutor it gives them a chance to absorb a bewildering vocabulary of psychiatric jargon suitable for impressing their friends and entertaining at parties.

Marriage Guidance needs guidance itself—towards a role where it can really help people with genuine needs, and away from its present character as the ineffectual illegitimate offspring of the psychiatric consulting room.

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The Family Service Unit has existed as an organization for twenty-five years. It was set up to deal with the “problem family”. It is a voluntary agency staffed by social workers and helpers and funded by local authorities

and voluntary contributions. The following passage was quoted in the Family Service Unit's quarterly journal of winter 1973:

> We feel that it is important to differentiate between sporadic "battering" which can be regarded as part of a normal marriage, particularly in certain cultural groups, and more persistent beating.

Because of that attitude many women who have come into contact with this organization have been encouraged to remain in dangerous situations—sacrificed to the FSU's belief that the family must be kept together at all costs.

In a case where a woman with a child had been cohabiting with a habitual drunkard who was consistently violent, the FSU officer would come into Women's Aid demanding her return. Even though this woman was going to court to get a non-molestation injunction and an eviction order, the FSU worker insisted that time, love and patience could bring them together again.

I do not expect to get "sporadically battered" in my marriage; neither does the woman who helps to clean the house, nor my dustman's wife. The three of us fail to understand how FSU can have reached their conclusion.

In another FSU article on baby-battering, they draw the conclusion that battered babies grow into battering parents but insist that the male confines inherited violence to his children, and that any violence that he inflicts upon his wife is her own fault:

> women usually make use of other weapons, e.g. of nagging but they frequently provoke, consciously or unconsciously, a violent response in their husbands, often in order to relieve tensions in the relationships.

In other words, she gets what she deserves. When a reputable organization condones violence in family life as a normal part of marital wear and tear, what chance have the mothers of getting away?

These kinds of remarks are usually made by case-workers who have never been on the other end of a punch or a kick. They are never there when the damage is inflicted. They only arrive hours later when the mother has pulled herself together and is coping again.

One FSU worker told a mother who had been beaten over many years that she should consider herself lucky that he beat her because it proved that he still cared about her and was trying to communicate with her. She didn't go to the FSU again.

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The probation officer can play quite a large role in the life of a battered wife. Often when a woman goes to court to take out a summons she is first referred to the probation office. There they will listen to her case and, though they're not legal experts, they will help her decide her best course of action. If they decide that she does have a case they will help her through the humiliating business of appearing in front of the court and exposing her private life to the scrutiny of those sitting on the bench. If they feel her case cannot succeed they will suggest that she seek legal advice and tell her where to find a solicitor.

When the court decides to put a man on probation for battering his wife, he will also come under the care and control of the probation officer. But, of course, it's not an easy task to control a man who you know is violent towards his family and who may be violent towards you if you thwart him.

Sometimes the only relationship that the husband has with anyone except his wife is with his probation officer, so their relationship can be very constructive. Most of my experience with the probation officers has been very heartening. Certainly, the old-style officers seem to have a robust and realistic approach to life and a clear view of the people they are there to serve.

But I don't feel quite so happy about the young officers who are coming in. They seem to have been painted with the all-embracing "case-work" brush—the instant psychiatry that too often dilutes action—and they see so many sides of the situation that they are in danger of falling down the hole in the middle.

Fred was a very famous tramp in our area. He was always in trouble and had been in prison on and off for most of his life. He had been a safe-cracker and, when he described his life's work, his long white fingers would move like restless butterflies and his wrists would become liquid as he mimed the excitement of opening a safe. He did odd jobs for me at Women's Aid and his probation officer would come round to try and track him down.

This probation officer was one of the new ones, enthusiastic but naïve. He used to tell me that though neighbours complained about the twelve or so dogs in Fred's grotty flat, he felt that they were the old man's only

companions, and how Fred had explained with tears in his eyes about his wife running off with another man. I didn't like to tell him that Fred was the local dog thief, and that he starved and beat his dogs just as he had starved and beaten his wife.

Nothing in that probation officer's training seemed to have alerted him to the possibility of anyone conning him into believing those wild stories, whereas the old probation officer could smell them a mile off, and, while being just as caring, seemed to retain a sense of humour and reality. Perhaps, given time, the young probation officers will learn, but it would be a pity if, in the race to obtain more and more qualifications, the service loses the kind of officers who react at gut level and goes over to an academic, pseudo-psychiatric approach.

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Wherever she turns for help the battered wife finds every agency blind and deaf or worse, except one.

Health visitors are a source of real comfort and help. Time and again wives tell of the help they have sought and of the unhelpful attitudes that were shown to their problems, but they speak highly of their own health visitors.

One of the principal reasons that this organization is such a success is that its women go into the homes. They really roll up their sleeves and are prepared to give any aid they can. Sometimes they will scrub out the house, another time they'll have a cup of tea and just listen. They cuddle the children and know their birthdays. They will often enter a house where the man is known to be violent, even when the doctor and the social worker make a point of standing on the doorstep.

In our early days it was the health visitors who referred their clients to us, often bringing them by car and keeping contact all the while their mothers were with us. Our own social services stayed away but the health visitors came in to see what we were doing and stayed to help.

Their organization is always treated as the Cinderella of the social services, yet it is these dedicated women who really are the backbone of any help the families receive. I would like to see their number increased and their influence extended. Then perhaps a little of it might rub off on some of the high-minded theorists who staff the other agencies and make them so useless to a battered woman.

87.57b Excerpts from **Born In Tibet**\fn{by Chögyam Trungpa (1939-1987)} Kham Region, Tibetan Autonomous Region, China (M) 1

[Enroute over difficult terrain out of Tibet:] … The porter looked very cheerful and said, "It's only a ladder; just follow me." I was still rped to the two porters. When I got on the ladder I saw how immensely long it w3as; we seemed to be so high up that a man at the bottom looked like a mere dwarf. It was made of single pines lashed together from end to end, with notches cut in the wood for footholds. When I climbed down the first few notches I could see the siwirling green waters of the river underneath; a few more steps, and I felt I was poised in space over an expanse of water. There was a cold wind coming up from a large cave under the rock into which the river was pouring; worst of all, the ladder shook in a terrifying way with the weight of the many porters who were trying to help me …

*

… Our journey to India must be thought of as a pilgrimage; something that in the past few Tibetans have been able to make. Whether or not India has changed, the spiritual blessing imparted to that country by the presence of the Buddha remain: the places where he lived, freed himself from the bondage of *Samsar*, taught, and died have an eternal value … It is fortunate for us that our way is hard and that we are struggling against greater difficulties than the pilgrims of the past, for by this me3ans we shall learn and profit the more from o9ur journey. We should not be thinking only about the enemies threatening us from without …Each moment we should be aware of ourselves and of the forces of destruction that threaten each man from within. If we fail in this, we are indeed putting the spiritual object of our journey in jeopardy; each step along the way should be holy and precious to us.

*

[Somewhat later, on journeying by plane across the Indian border:] … This, our first flight, was a strange new experience, skimming over cloud covered mountains, seeing far below us the small villages and footpaths leading up to them; only by the moving shadow of the plane on the ground could we gauge how fast we were traveling.

We thought about the teaching of impermanence; this was a complete severance of all that had been tibet and we were traveling by mechanized transport. As the moments passed, the mountain range was left behind, and the view changed to the misty space of the Indian plains stretching out in front of us …

292.150 Excerpts from Between Worlds: Women Writers Of Chinese Ancestry: **1. "Preface" 2. "Chinese Women In America"**\fn{by Amy Ling (1939-1999)} Peking, China (F) 8

1

Like Alice Walker, but from a different cultural background, I too have felt compelled to go "in search of our mothers' garden," and this book is the fruit of my search. Born in Beijing, brought to the United States at age six and educated here from first grade through a PhD in comparative literature, at a time when the "Classic" authors were white and nearly all male, I had never encountered in all my reading any Chinese American authors or even Chinese characters except Bret Harte's *Heathen Chinee*.

I can still remember the red hot humiliation I experienced as my fourth grade teacher in Mexico, Missouri, read Harte's verse aloud to the class. I remember, too, her sudden embarrassed realization that my perspective on the poem was radically different from hers; she had never had to consider the Chinese perspective before.\fn{This is the text of the poem in question: "Which I wish to remark, | And my language is plain, | That for ways that are dark | And for tricks that are vain, | The heathen Chinee is peculiar, | Which the same I would rise to explain. * Ah Sin was his name; | And I shall not deny, | In regard to the same, | What that name might imply; | But his smile it was pensive and childlike, | As I frequent remarked to Bill Nye. * It was August the third, | And quite soft was the skies; | Which it might be inferred | That Ah Sin was likewise; | Yet he played it that day upon William | And me in a way I despise. * Which we had a small game, | And Ah Sin took a hand: | It was Euchre. The same | He did not understand; | But he smiled as he sat by the table, | With the smile that was childlike and bland. * Yet the cards they were stocked | In a way that I grieve, | And my feelings were shocked | At the state of Nye's sleeve, | Which was stuffed full of aces and bowers, | And the same with intent to deceive. * But the hands that were played | By that heathen Chinee, | And the points that he made, | Were quite frightful to see, -- | Till at last he put down a right bower, | Which the same Nye had dealt unto me. * Then I looked up at Nye, | And he gazed upon me; | And he rose with a sigh, | And said, 'Can this be? | We are ruined by Chinese cheap labor,' – | And he went for that heathen Chinee. * In the scene that ensued | I did not take a hand, | But the floor it was strewed | Like the leaves on the strand | With the cards that Ah Sin had been hiding, | In the game 'he did not understand.' * In his sleeves, which were long, | He had twenty-four packs, -- Which was coming it strong, | Yet I state but the facts; | And we found on his nails, which were taper, | What is frequent in tapers, -- that's wax. * Which is why I remark, | And my language is plain, | That for ways that are dark | And for tricks that are vain, | The heathen Chinee is peculiar, -- Which the same I am free to maintain." }

Thus, when I first read Maxine Hong Kingston's *A Woman Warrior* and was asked to review Nellie Wong's chapbook of poems, *Dreams From Harrison Railroad Park*, I was thunderstruck. Here were people like me creating moving and artistic literature from our shared Chinese American experience. They expressed the struggle for personal balance that is the experience of every American of dual racial and cultural heritage, but, specifically, they wrote with pride and affirmation out of our common Chinese American background. My reading of these writers followed upon discoveries in the 1960s and 1970s by African American and feminist scholars working to reclaim their literary history, unearthing such neglected masterpieces as Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Willow Wallpaper*. I wondered if other Chinese women in America had produced memorable literature, if Kingston had had forerunners. If so, who were they? What had they chosen to express of our bicultural experience, and how they had done it?

Then, I began the journey "in search of [my] mothers' gardens." Walker spoke for me when she wrote in *Saving the Life That is Your Own*:

> The absence of models, in literature as in life … is an occupational hazard for the artist, simply because models in art, in behavior, in growth of spirit and intellect—even if rejected—enrich and enlarge one's view of existence.

The lack of models is an occupational as well as an emotional hazard, not only for the artist but for everyone. My search for models, however, brought together the scholarly and the personal in a way that I had never experienced before. I felt a harmony and a wholeness, for each author uncovered, not only enlarged the general field of American literature, as I saw it, but enriched and validated my existence. I learned that I am not a unique and peculiar aberration, that not every Chinese in America is an engineer or a scientist, that others have also gone the literary route. I realized that uncovering these writers and publishing this book may make the way easier for those who follow.

Alice Walker has written that black women with calloused hands have appeared to her in dreams to shake her hand and to thank her for speaking for them. I too have seen certain of my writers in dreams, and I have spoken with others in the flesh. As Walker says:

> If we kill off the sound of our ancestors, the major portion of us … is lost.

I hope this book will capture the sound of my ancestors and speak to others yet to come.

In one way, this book is also an answer to my father, who asked me a question that has rankled in me since it was posed, when I was 13 or so.

"Why is it," he asked in an innocent tone, "that those who excel in every field, even those considered women's specialties—cooking, hairdressing, fashion design—have always been men?"

Virginia Woolf, of course, has answered that question in *A Room Of One's Own*, and others have answered it as well. That men have excelled is not because women are essentially inferior, which he was slyly implying, but that women have been denied the same opportunities as men. They have been kept out of the libraries and in the kitchen "barefoot and pregnant." So it was especially gratifying to me to discover that in this very specialized field, literature written in English by ethnic Chinese and Chinese Eurasians and published in the United States, he women not only outnumber he men but the women's books are more authentic, more numerous, quite simply—better.

It has been an exciting search, a rewarding project. Abd a difficult one. First, I did not have such common research tools as he card catalogue and he Library of Congress subject heading directory. In 1960, when I began my research, there was no listing for "Chinese American authors." At the Library of Congress, I asked why and was told no one had yet published a book on this subject, and if no book has been written the subject does not exist, as far as their directory is concerned. Under the heading "Asian American literature" I had better luck, for three anthologies had been published: *Asian American Authors* by Kai-yu Hsu (Boston, Houghton Mifflin, 1972); *Aiiieeeee*! By Frank Chin *et al*. (Washington, DC, Howard University Press, 1974), and *Asian American Heritage* by David Wand (New York, Washington Square, 1974).

These pioneering collections gave me a start in identifying some authors. Wayne Millar's *Handbook of American Minorities* (New York, NYU Press, 1976) and Priscilla Oaks' *Minority Studies: An Annotated Bibliography* (Boston, G. K. Hall, 1976) were also helpful. Elaine Kim's *Asian American Literature* (Philadelphia, Temple UP, 1982) was published after most of my basic research had been completed, but Professor Kim gave me some names I had not known. A colleague at Rutgers, Marjorie Li, told me about Lin Tai-yi; another colleague, Peter Li, introduced me to Eileen Chang; and one of the auhors I interviewed, Diane Chan, lent me her copy of Chuang Hua's *Crossings*, which she had purchased for one dollar at a garage sale. For a while, I combed the national Union Catalogue and scoured the shelves of secondhand bookstores looking for Chinese surnames which, fortunately, are not numerous, and in this antediluvian manner I discovered Hazel Lin and Janet Lim.

The next problem was obtaining the books. Those with copyrights as recent as five years were already out of print and most were not available in local libraries. It was further disturbing to discover that the books my university library did not own, such as Maxine Hong Kingston's *China Men*, were shelved as sociology or, as in the case of Mai-mai Sze's *Echo of a Cry* or Winnifred Eaton's *A Japanese Blossom*, as juvenile books, mainly because they dealt with Asians or were illustrated and had children in them.

Again, the very idea of Chinese American *literature* seemed nonexistent to the Library of Congress cataloguers who determine a volume's call number. The exception was the Wasson collection at Cornell University, which has nearly all of Winnifred Eaton's novels and from which I obtained many interlibrary loans. I was disappointed to find no listing for the "Asian American Woman's Experience" in the index to Patricia Addis' *Through a Woman's I, an Annotated Bibliography of American Women's Autobiographical Writings 1945-1976* (Metuchen, Scarecrow Press, 1983), though the index identifies "American Indian Women's Experience" and "Black Women's Experience" and though the bibliography itself includes at least five Asian American women writers.

However, the tide is turning. Not only are Asian American writers increasing in number but they are also gaining wider recognition, beginning in the early 1970s when Lawson Fusao Inada's *Before the War: Poems as They Happened* (1971) was published by William Morrow, a major New York press; and Frank Chin's two plays, *Chickencoop Chinaman* (1972) and *The Year of the Dragon* (1974), were produced at New York's American Place Theatre. In 1976 Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* won the National Bpook Critics' Circle Award for the year's best work of nonfiction. Her second book, *China Men*, won the American Book Award in 1980.

In 1981, the Obie Award for the Best New Play went to David Henry Hwang's *F.O.B.* In 1982, Cathy Song won the Yale Series of Younger Poets competition with *Picture Bride*, published by Yale University Press in 1983. *Island Poetry and History of Chinese Immigrants on Angel Island 1910-1940*, edited by Him Mark Lai, Genny Lim, and Judy Yung, published in 1980, demonstrated that the literary impulse among Chinese in America has a tradition and a history. In 1982, Elaine Kim's *Asian American Literature*, the first book-length study of the field, proved that the body of work was large and significant enough to merit serious scholarly attention. In 1985, Genny Lim's play *Island* was aired on National Public Television. In 1987, Garrett Hongo's *M. Butterfly* won the

Tony Award for Best New Dramatic Play on Broadway. In 1989, Carolyn Lau's book of poetry, *Wode Shuofa*, and Frank Chin's collection of stories, *The Chinaman Pacific and Frisco Railroad Co*., won the American Book Awards from the Before Columbus Foundation.

Our numbers are growing, our voices swelling. We are no longer a silent minority.

I have had several purposes in writing this book. My initial impulse, to uncover literary gems, I later abandoned, for axiology itself, the study of evaluation and value judgments, is now in dispute among literary theoreticians and critics, Barbara Herrnstein Smith and Jane Tompkins among them. Barbara Herrnstein Smith's finely reasoned essay, *Contingencies of Value*, among other works, brought to the open the questionable but hitherto unquestioned systems of evaluation within the academy, among critics, reviewers, publishers, and librarians governing notions of "classic" canonical, or Great Literature. She calls into question the assumptions that "objectivity" governs the evaluator and that "universality" is a gauge of "quality." Jane Tompkins, in reexamining *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, asks her reader "to set aside some familiar categories for evaluating fiction—stylistic intricacy, psychological subtlety, epistemological complexity." She wants us to see the texts she examines "not as an artifice of eternity answerable to certain formal criteria … but as a political enterprise … that both codifies and attempts to mold the values of its time." Tompkins' request for suspension of the "familiar categories" for evaluating texts is particularly pertinent since these conventional criteria are not always applicable to the writers of my study. Without understanding the social and historical contexts of these authors' work, full comprehension and appreciation would not be possible, and judgment without full comprehension is useless.

And yet, so often the mistaken attitude prevails: if a writer falls into oblivion it must be because s/he\fn{So the text: apparently *she/he* is meant; but it could be a typographical error:H} was unworthy, and therefore fully deserving of oblivion, for surely, if a writer is "truly outstanding," this greatness cannot help but be apparent and "will stand the test of time," as cream rises to the top.

But such an attitude does not take into consideration fluctuations of taste; personal idiosyncrasies and individual purposes; political and historical conditions; perspectives and proclivities of the scholars and critics who keep an author's work in the limelight and thus in the canon. That the canon has changed may be readily seen by perusing the table of contents of literary anthologies over an extended period.

Thus, fully aware of my personal interest in the subject and equally aware that this project had never before been undertaken, yet was worthy of the undertaking, I plunged in. Setting myself a narrow focus, I have attempted, nonetheless, to be as comprehensive as possible.

This book, then, is an introduction, and a history, as well as my own readings of the full-length prose narratives (autobiographies, memoirs, fictionalized memoirs, and novels) written in English and published in the United States by women of Chinese or partial Chinese ancestry. I have arranged my material roughly in chronological and thematic order to give my readers a sense of the length and breadth of the tradition. The diversity of their themes has been great, yet all the writers have obviously been conscious of their difference in a white society, a society whose attitude towards them as "other" has fluctuated depending on political circumstan-ces. How each author has reacted to this consciousness of difference, to the between-world condition, and to the political and social environment around her is my major unifying theme.

My purpose in writing this book has been to show off the flowers in my mother's garden. I want to put these writers on the scholarly map, to give them a heading in the Library of Congress Subject Catalogue, to validate their existence and their work, to retrieve them from oblivion. With this study I hope that other women like me will not grow up without models, in ignorance of our own history.

Among these writers and the books, I hope such readers will find a source of inspiration and of communal and personal pride. Women and readers from other bi- and multicultural backgrounds will understand much in this book, for the experience of marginalization and the need for self-affirmation is common to us all. And for hose who are neither Chinese American, bicultural, or female, I know that the kind of curiosity, openness, and stretching that leads such readers to investigate the experience of the Other will bring its own reward.

2

Initially, Chinese women in America were a rarity; in fact, they were such an exotic curiosity that money could be made by simply putting them on display. Afong Moy was one of these "displays" and was reportedly the first Chinese woman to come to America. She "caused a sensation in New York" in 1834 by just sitting "amidst the exotic Chinese trappings in vogue at that time." She was followed by others, most notably Pwan-Yekoo, age 17, whom Barnum's touring Chinese Museum billed as

> the Chinese belle, with her Chinese suite of attendants, [who] is drawing all Broadway to the Chinese collection. She is so pretty, so arch, so lively, and so graceful, while her minute feet (2½ inches) are wondrous!

In contrast to this effusive and sensationalist praise, the author of a later article in *Harper's Weekly*, January 30, 1858, had quite the opposite view of Chinese women:

> I defy any but the most catholic women-worshippers to admire the women of Southern China. The taste for the baboon-like faces of Hong Kong women is, I fancy, like that for mangoes, an acquired one. I have learned to like mangoes, but my tailor's wife still excites in me only unmitigated disgust.

Apparently, in judging Chinese women, Americans were divided into two extreme camps: one cloyingly sweet, the other overly sour—both unrealistic and based on fixed concepts within the perceiver's head.

When Chinese men traveled to the States—first enticed by the discovery of gold in California in the 1850s, by western railroad construction bosses desperate for manpower in the 1860s, and by sugar planters in Hawaii from 1851-1884—they customarily left their women at home because marriage before departure was thought to ensure the traveler's return; furthermore, the wife's place was to serve her parents-in-law, and the journey was believed to be too dangerous for women. But there were two nonconformists who braved the journey and became the first Chinese women to immigrate to the United States; they present an interesting contrast, for one was a domestic servant, the other a prostitute.

The first Chinese woman immigrant was Marie Seise, who debarked in San Francisco from the *Eagle* in February 1848 with the Charles V. Gillespie household. She was one of three Chinese servants; the other two were men. At an early age, she had run away from home in Guangzhou (Canton) to avoid being sold by her family as a slave. She found work with\fn{The text has: *for*} a Portuguese family in Macao, and adopted their dress and their Roman Catholic religion. Later, she married a Portuguese sailor, who abandoned her shortly thereafter. She then found a position with an American family who, in 1837, took her to what were then called the Sandwich Islands, now Hawaii. Six years later she returned to China, and in 1838 recrossed the Pacific with the Gillespie family to settle in San Francisco. Her story may be found at the Trinity Episcopal Church in the records of Bishop Ingraham, who baptized her in 1854.

The second Chinese woman to immigrate to the United States was Ah Choi, who arrived in San Francisco late in 1848 or early 1849. she was a prostitute, a free agent, and not only popular but enterprising. Within two years of her arrival, she was the owner of a brothel. She charged one ounce of gold (then $16) per visit and had a flourishing business.

These first two Chinese women to immigrate to the United States—the servant and the prostitute—neatly fit the stereotypes of the Chinese, or Asian, woman (for distinctions among Asians by Caucasians are rare), that are widely held in the West. To stereotype, G. W. Allport in his classic study *The Nature of Prejudice* tells us, is to place a newly encountered entity into a pre-established category to save oneself the effort and time of getting to know this entity and in having to think about it. To stereotype is to shortcut thought, an economy measure we all take.

However, not to allow facts to change the stereotypes we hold is to be prejudiced. Two main stereotypes persist for the Asian woman in America; they are polar extremes, roughly parallel to the whore-madonna or to the "madwoman in the attic"/ "angel in the house" dichotomies for white women. At one end of the spectrum is the Dragon Lady, a female counterpart to the diabolical Fu Manchu. With her talon-like six-inch fingernails, her skin-tight satin dress slit to the thigh, she can poison a man as easily as she seductively smiles and puffs on her foot-long cigarette holder. An "Oriental" Circe, she is as desirable as she is dangerous.

At the opposite end of he spectrum is the Shy Lotus Blossom or China Doll: demure, diminutive, and deferential. She is modest, tittering behind her delicate ivory hand, eyes downcast, always walking 10 steps behind her man, and, best of all, devoted body and soul to serving him.

Like all stereotypes, these contain a kernel of truth, though Japanese and Chinese cultural traits are jumbled together. The kernel is generally a visible trait—long fingernails, slit dress, smiling behind one's hand. However, these visible cultural signs have been misread. In nineteenth-century China long fingernails were indeed the fashion, affected by the empress and ladies of high station and considered marks of beauty. As winter tans are coveted in the Western world today because they signify that one can afford to take expensive vacations in warm southern climates while everyone else is confined indoors by the winter cold, so long fingernails in nineteenth-century China indicated that one could afford to hire other peoples' hands and not need to use one's own. In

reality, long fingernails, then, were no more a weapon than tans, now, indicate negroid blood. In fact, special jeweled cases were created to protect such nails because, as anyone who has tried to grow long nails knows, they break easily.

The deference to men, the modesty and shyness of the "lotus blossom," are indeed traits historically inculcated in Asian women from girlhood, as we have seen in the historical overview above and particularly persistent among traditionally reared Japanese women even today. However, laughing behind one's hands is not a sign of modesty but of politeness, akin to the Western custom of covering the mouth when coughing or sneezing. In polite society, teeth are not to be displayed; Chinese men, as well as women, still use toothpicks under cover of their hands.

Allport has stated that stereotypes are self-reflexive, telling us more about the person holding the stereotype than the one being stereotyped:

> Whether favorable or unfavorable, a stereotype is an exaggerated belief associated with a category. Its function is to justify (rationalize) our conduct in relation to that category.

Though little research has been done on the origin of these particular stereotypes, negative images of the Chinese were sent home by Western missionaries attempting to gain support for their "civilizing" cause. However, both the dragon lady and lotus blossom stereotypes have a strongly sexual component, and would seem to point to an origin suggesting a greater intimacy. Using Allport's theory to hypothesize on the particular "self-reflexive" circumstances that spawned the "dragon lady" and "lotus blossom," we may imagine that these two stereotypes were created by Western sailors or soldiers of fortune who had sexual contacts with Chinese women in the early days of trade between Asia and Europe. The dragon lady stereotype may have been the result of a sailor's mishap with an experienced prostitute who robbed himn of his entire voyage's wages. His own drunken stupidity and guilt became transferred to her treachery and wiles; therefore, she became the tawny deceiver, he the lily-white victim. The lotus blossom perhaps stemmed from an affair with a docile, even a virginal girl, whom the sailor/soldier seduced and then abandoned, *à la Madame Butterfly*. With time and distance, her image took on an idealized, romantic aura—particularly if she killed herself. Ah, she was everything a man could desire, but, alas, she had an Asian face, spoke no English, and could never be taken home to mother.

Whatever their origin, these stereotypes were disseminated and perpetuated through the popular media and continue to distort the way in which Asian women are portrayed and perceived in the Western world. In the 1960s, Madame Nhu, the First Lady of Vietnam, was labeled a "Dragon Lady" by the press, and the "classic" dragon lady reemerged in 1985 in Nicholas Meyer's film, *Volunteers*, a parody of Peace Corps volunteers and the undefined Asian people who hosted them. The 1950s films *Teahouse of the August Moon* and *The World of Suzy Wong* combined the dragon lady and shy lotus blossom into a third variant: the prostitute with the heart of a child.

As a result of these stereotypes then, Asian women, when powerful, are seen as dangerous and treacherous; and when powerless, as sexual objects and submissive servants not to be taken seriously. The stereotypes continue to serve as blinders for dominant Americans and to stand as barriers to the fullest acceptance and development of Asian American women.

Examples that belie stereotypes are considered aberrations and quickly forgotten. One of these was Sieh King King, the first voice for Chinese women's emancipation in the United States. Sieh King King (Xue Jinqin) was a 16-year-old foreign student at the University of California, called by a Chinese editor "the Joan of Arc of her people," whose impassioned speech delivered on November 2, 1902, before a theatre full of men and women, as reported in the San Francisco Chronicle the day after,

> boldly condemned the slave girl system, raged at the horrors of foot-binding, and with all the vehemence of aroused youth, declared that men and women were equal and should enjoy the privileges of equals.

Later that evening, undoubtedly as a result of the new ideas she had expressed, women were allowed for the first time to sit down at the same tables as men at a banquet in her honor.

Sieh King King's father was an enlightened Tienjing merchant who had hired foreign teachers for his daughter and had imbued her with progressive ideals. A year later, according to historian Judy Yung, she gave another "eloquent and inspiring speech" to an audience of 200 women and again "expounded on the role of Chinese women and the need to abolish outdated Chinese customs. The revolutionary feminist ideas Sieh King King had expressed became a general concern in the Chinese community in America and, as Yung put it,

> what she advocated on behalf of Chinese women—unbound feet, equal rights, education, and public participation—remained at the heart of social change for Chinese women for the next three decades.

A foreign student, Sieh King King most likely did not remain in the United States, for the local newspapers did not report on her activities after 1903. Furthermore, the number of immigrant women from China to the United States was extremely small until the mid-twentieth century. In 1852, for example, of the 11,794 Chinese in California only 7 were women. By the 1880s, the ratio of Chinese women to men in the United States was sill no greater than 1 to 20. From the late nineteenth century until the middle of the twentieth, harsh laws severely limited the immigration of Chinese, particularly Chinese women. In 1882, the Chinese Exclusion Act, renewed until 1943, prohibited entry into the United States for all Chinese except diplomats, merchants, tourists, teachers, and students. In 1924, Congress passed a special law whose effect was to prohibit all immigration of Chinese women, including wives of American-born Chinese, ostensibly to reduce the number of prostitutes, but actually to prevent proliferation of an undesirable alien race. From 1924 to 1930, when this act was revised, no Chinese women were admitted into the United States. Only after 1943 could Chinese women immigrate more freely, and only after 1954 did their numbers in the United States reach parity with Chinese men.

The majority of Chinese women immigrants to the United Stats in the late nineteenth century were working class with neither the education nor the leisure to write books; their lives were engulfed by the duties of childbearing childcare, and the business of earning a living. Contemporary authors have researched and recreated the daily life of these pioneers. Monfoon Leong's nineteenth-century unfinished novel *Precious Jade*, for example, vividly recreates the life of a nineteenth-century Chinese woman in the western United Sates, whose youth and energies are sapped by the grinding work of her husband's small hand laundry. Ruthann Lum McCunn's *Thousand Pieces of Gold* is a fictionalized biography of the eventful life of Lalu Nathoy, or Polly Bemis, who as a young woman in 1872 was sold naked on the block in San Francisco to a saloon keeper from Oregon and who ended her life as a respected homesteader on the Salmon River (the River of No Return) in Idaho. Her life bore certain general similarities to that of Negro slave women, but she had neither the time nor the inclination for writing her own story as did ex-slaves Harriet Wilson and Harriet Jacobs. Lalu Nathoy's story remained untold until nearly 100 years later, when McCunn, a former librarian who is herself one-quarter Chinese, researched and reconstructed it.

Thus, through cultural and historical circumstances, the majority of authors in this study are not only foreign-born but also upper- or upper-middle class in background. Because of the immigration restrictions, many come from families in diplomatic circles, often Christian families, who educated daughters as well as sons in Western cultures and languages. The majority are first-generation immigrant women. Some, such as Edith Eaton, Mai-mai Sze, Chuang Hua, and Bette Bao Lord, immigrated as children. Others (Helena Kuo, Hazel Lin, Eileen Chang, Yuan-tsung Chen) immigrated as young adults. One (Han Suyin) maintains a residence in New York where she spends three or four months a year and the rest of the time in other parts of the world. Another (Lin Tai-yi) lived many years in the United States, then lived in Hong Kong, but she continued to write in English and has recently returned to the United States. Only 5 (Jade Snow Wong, Virginia Lee, Diana Chang, Maxine Hong Kingston, and Amy Tan) of the 18 authors in this study were born in the United States. One (Winnifred Eaton) was born in Montreal.

Though some readers may consider this group unrepresentative of Chinese Americans or overly narrow in its perspective because of the preponderance of *émigrés*, we must remember that since racial characteristics have an immediate visual impact race has always played a more significant role in the lives of minorities in white America than has class. Thus, the experience of an upper-class Chinese *émigré* in white America is closer to that of a working-class American-born Chinese American than to that of any white person. And, thus, Mai-mai Sze, daughter of Ambassador Alfred Sze, could say to an African American woman whom she had seen snubbed at a lunch counter in Wellesley, Massachusetts, in the 1940s,

"We're cause people, whether we like it or not."

In addition to the difficulty of writing in a second language, another handicap peculiar to women in the upper- or upper-middle class, despite their Western education, was social constraint, as expressed by Han Suyin in the forward to *Destination Chungking*: writing was frowned upon as an activity lacking in respectability. Modesty and reticence were the ideals established for women; writing was extreme egotism, even self-exposure. Therefore, in order for a Chinese immigrant woman to write and publish a book in English, she must be something of a rebel, for writing, an act of rebellion and self-assertion, runs counter to Confucian training. Also she has to possess two basic character traits: an indomitable will and an unshakeable self-confidence. She must also be propelled by the

undeniable drive to communicate with the readers and speakers of the dominant language of the society into which she has been transplanted, either because of the rightness of her cause or because of the force of her need to express herself.

In addition to nationality or ethnicity, one's sex is a third factor significant to the experience of immigrant and minority groups in the United States. The women of a minority group, whether Asian, African, Indian, or Hispanic, have received a different treatment at the hands of the white majority than have the men of their race, and for this reason their writing, their record of their particular experiences, thoughts, and feelings are separate from those of the men of their ethnic group. Though their men may feel, with resentment, that "the dyad of Asian women and Western male [is] … the essence of any relationship between East and West," and though physical beauty may, in individual cases, seem to offset certain liabilities of race, beauty itself is short-lived, and the notice or status gained by it momentary and borrowed.

Without doubt, the female sex itself is a liability in any patriarchy, and the ethnic minority female is triply vulnerable: as Chinese in a Euro-American world, as a woman in a Chinese man's world, as a Chinese woman in a white man's world. How these women writers responded to their between-world position and how they manifested this response in their writing will be the subject of this study. And not only do their texts tell us something about individual women of Chinese ancestry, but, as responses to living in the United States, they tell us something about Americans as well, reflecting a portion of American cultural history.

When comparing books written by men of Chinese ancestry and those written by women, I discovered three startling facts: first, women writers have been more numerous; second, women have written more books; and third, women's books have been more authentic, meaning that fewer women have fallen into what I call the alien observer trap.

The Chinese as alien observer may be traced back to Oliver Goldsmith's *Letters from a Citizen of the World* (1762), which purported to be written by "Lien Chi Altangi", a Chinese traveler to England; these letters derived their humor and charm from he unexpected and unfamiliar angle of vision given to things familiar to the readers themselves. Since then, Chinese have been asked so often to write their impressions of life in the Wet that we may call this form a subgenre.

The rational behind this subgenre is simple: everyone knows that the Chinese come from the other side of the globe and thus do many things in an upside down sort of way—for example, reading books from the back cover to the front, from the right to the left, and up and down on a page; beginning their diners with a sweet and ending with soup—thus, one can assume that their initial reactions to unfamiliar customs they encounter in the West cannot help but be amusing to the Western reader. The popularity of the series of more than one dozen books published by the painter/writer Chiang Yee, from *The Silent Traveler in Lakeland* (1937) to *The Silent Traveler in San Francisco* (1964) may be attributed in part to this appeal. (Since the Chinese have lost a modicum of their strangeness, the most recent manifestation of the alien observer is now the extraterrestrial, as seen in such television shows as *My Favorite Martian* and *Mork and Mindy*, and such films as *The Man who Fell to Earth* and *Star Man*.)

The other side of the "alien observer" was the "tourist guide" role, in which the alien was asked to describe how things are don in his country with the expectation that he would provide titillation by his exotic and quaint revelations. Lee Yan Phou's *When I Was A Boy in China* (Boston, Lothrop, Lee & Sheppard Co., 1887), Wu Ting Fang's *America Through the Spectacles of an Oriental Diplomat* (New York, Frederick Stokes, 1914), and New Il-Han's *When I Was A Boy in Korea* (Boston, Lothrop, 1928) are representative samples of this genre.

Though a few women have written books that fall into the category of "alien observer" or "tourist guide," there are fewer of this type written by women than by men. Women writers account for most of the novels and the more personal, rather than the official, autobiographies. The very first Asian American fiction writers were women: the Eurasian sisters, Edith Maud Eaton and Winnifred Eaton. Thus, to concentrate on the women writers of Chinese ancestry is not to spotlight a minority within a minority but to focus, in the areas of fiction and autobiography at least, on the most significant texts and writers.

How can we account for this great productivity among the women and for the greater authenticity of heir voices? Restrained by a traditionally oppressive background and blocked by a society holding alien and negative views of her, what would prompt a woman of Chinese ancestry in the United States to draw attention to herself by writing?

The answer lies in the very oppression itself. Physicists tell us that every action has its equal and opposite reaction, and this also holds as well in the animate world, where the greater the repression, the greater the force for liberation, or, as Emily Dickinson put it,

"A wounded deer leaps highest."

In the case of Chinese women, whose repression has been protracted and extreme, the reaction from one who has managed to break free will be strong and vocal. Such a woman is imbued with so intense a sense of her own identity and the validity of her personal experience and perspective that despite, or perhaps more accurately because of, opposition, her perspective must come forth and be expressed. Her expression may fall into one of two types, or, as in he case of poet Li Qingzhao, into a conjunction of the personal and politial Her work may have its source from her own internal and individual well-spring, or a catalyst may come from outside, from a consciousness of social wrongs and injustices to he larger group with which she identifies and from her desire to right wrongs by writing them. In either case she must have faith in herself—that her words deserve a hearing—and faith in the power of the word, either to recreate her interior world by giving substance to the insubstantial or to move people and create social change, or both.

If it seems incredible that greater oppression can result in greater creativity and productivity, one might, as a useful analogy, think of the damming up of a stream; when one route is cut off, the water finds other channels in which to low, for flow it must. What Julia Kristeva has noted as an unexpected result of foot-binding seems applicable in the present case as well. Kristeva writes, perhaps somewhat romantically, that along with the suffering of foot-binding comes

> the symbolic premium as well: a sort of superior knowledge, a superior maturity, because it is in her feminine world that the difficulty of the social contract is felt, in all its most painful, impossible, murderous aspects. Thus, the depreciation of woman becomes its own opposite: the refuse of society retains society's secret … As if the first archaic matriarchal model had avenged itself on the patriarchy by slipping in under the door and drawing certain advantages from the very oppression itself.

The same paradoxical principle seems to be at work in the case of these writers: the result of silencing has been stronger voices; out of humiliation and handicap has emerged beauty and strength.

Not only have women of Chinese ancestry in the United States not been entirely silent and demure, but loud and vocal warriors who, like African American women, in the words of Alexis DeVeaux, are

> fighting the central oppression of all people of color as well as the oppression of women by men.

This study, then, is a work of what Elaine Showalter has coined "gyno-critics," or "the study of women as *writers*, and its subjects are the history, styles, themes, genres, and structures of writing by women." It is a work of literary archaeology, excavating and bringing to light the "word warriors" of Chinese ancestry who have had he courage and rebelliousness to express themselves, despite silencing forces, through the written word, in English, in prose, and in the United States. My purpose in unearthing them, in gathering them together so that their light can shine collectively for the first time, is manifold: to break the old stereotypes of demure lotus blossoms and treacherous dragon ladies, to give young Asian American women much-needed models and a female literary tradition in which they may root themselves, and to contribute to feminist scholarship by retrieving the work of women.

1940

21.1 The Iron Inspector\fn{by Wang Hsing-yüan (1940?-)} Kwangtung Province, China (M) 5

Everyone for miles around is full of praise for the way Apricot Village has gone from poverty to prosperity by increasing production over the past year or two. All the villagers think that this year will be better than ever, and anyone who goes there can see the truth of it. The soil has been improved in sixty or seventy per cent of the village's two hundred or so *mu*\fn{A note reads: *A mu is a fifteenth of a hectare, or about one-sixth of an acre*.} of paddy fields, and each *mu* has already been given sixty to seventy carrying-pole loads of fertilizer of some sort or another.

Hoeing and the care of the rice-shoots are all up to date. The mountain streams have been cleared, the paths between the fields have been weeded, the dikes round the paddy-fields have been trimmed neatly into shape, and the way the fruit trees have been pruned and heaped around with earth has made the mountainside orchards look like gardens. Since the beginning of spring the peasants have been working hard, competing with each other in skill and ability. As soon as the team leader gives the order they set to work like a platoon of soldiers. This whole atmosphere should be enough to convince anyone that this year will be even better than ever.

How was it that Apricot Village, which used to be called Three Kinds Village, improved so quickly? Ask any of the villagers and they will tell you, “We’ve got the Communist Party to show us the way, there are good cadres in charge, and we’ve trained able men like our ‘iron inspector’ who can cope with anything.” But not so fast. You’ve never heard of this “iron inspector.” If you are curious enough to inquire further I can guarantee that anyone who asks more about him will be full of admiration for his unselfish sense of justice.

The reader does not know who this “iron inspector” is, does he? He is no bigwig, only a humble work-point recorder called Li Zhenping, a seventeen-year-old with parted hair, a boyish face, clever eyes, and a very strong character. His mother will tell you that he is a poor orphan who lost his father as soon as he came into the world. He was reared on thin rice porridge and salt vegetables, and he grew up wandering through mountains and fields as he clung to his mother’s skirt. He only started primary school in 1956 at the age of eleven. Although he had hoped to go on to secondary school, it happened that when he finished his primary education the team’s work-point recorder had just walked out on them. As the villagers wanted Zhenping, the Party secretary said to him, “Come back and take over. You can’t let the accounts get into a mess by refusing to help us.” The secretary persuaded him in this one conversation to go home and enter “The University of Work.”

He made a start worthy of a tiger or a dragon, and the villagers were pleased with him from the moment he left his studies. He was extremely conscientious about setting quotas, assigning work to people, posting work-points on the wall, and everything else. He did it all very carefully. He was friendly too, and used to read the paper aloud to the villagers after he’d entered all the points. He put a picture of Chairman Mao on the wall of the work-team’s office to liven it up, and covered the walls of the little village hall with New-Year pictures, scrolls of birds and flowers, and newspaper cuttings, making the place look grand and cheerful.

No needle is sharp at both ends: Li Zhenping could not use an abacus to calculate work-points. He had to add them up every night with pen and paper. Seeing what a lot of trouble this was for him the members of the team urged him to learn how to use an abacus. He made up his mind to do so. But when he brought the subject up somebody coughed drily in the comer and said, “Hmmm. It’s finding a teacher that will be difficult. The only problem about learning to use the abacus is when the teacher is worried that the pupil will learn so fast that he’ll soon be better than he is himself. But if you found a teacher you’d have no trouble learning.” The speaker was Li Zhenping’s uncle Li Wanben, and his remarks drew many mocking glances from everyone else.

“That’s right,” somebody said, “it’s only natural for an uncle to teach his own nephew.”

“He didn’t get any business when he advertised for pupils,” snorted somebody else.

At this comment Li Wanben slipped off without another word.

This Li Wanben was well known in the village as a calculating monster. He was famous for being grasping and selfish like an old silkworm that gobbles up big leaves: he could work out ways of getting bones from eggs. In the old days he had been quite a rich trader with a good “reputation.” When the commune was set up he refused to use its lavatories. He used his family’s excrement to feed three big dogs he was raising at home. One morning the dogs started fighting for his shit when he went to feed them, and in the melee one of them bit his backside. He lay idle on his stomach in bed and sent his wife to tell the team leader that he had a bad cold and to ask for the money to get it treated. When the money was refused he wept and made a great fuss. Then someone told the team leader what had really happened and revealed his dirty secret. His prestige was completely destroyed. The people in the village who gave out nicknames changed his name from Wanben to Wangben (“Origin-forgetter”).

“Wangben it shall be then.”

When he accepted the nickname the villagers thought he had seen the error of his ways, but it would have been harder to change his nature than to draw blood from a turnip by peeling it. They often saw him coming back in the evening from working in the communal fields with an agonized expression on his face, walking on tiptoe, and bent double with a hand pressed to his belly. At first they thought it must be bellyache, but on repeated observation they realized that the old rogue was holding back his urine to water the vegetables in his private plot by the village.

Li Zhenping wanted nothing to do with a man who had so bad a name. He could learn from the brigade accountant. But when Li Zhenping was eating lunch the next day Li Wanben came in with an abacus under his arm to teach his nephew. '

“We shouldn’t let our sewage be wasted by flowing into someone else’s stream,” saId Li Wanben. “You must get with it and learn all the tricks.” The boy’s uncle seemed so sincere that Zhenping’s mother insisted that he should take lessons from him.

Now that Wanben had come round to their house Zhenping had to agree, unable as he was to refuse. Thus it was that Zhenping mastered addition, subtraction, multiplication, division, and the “under nine technique”—

everything except pounds and ounces—in eight midday rest periods and nine evenings.

Skill strengthens the will, as the saying goes. Now that he knew how to use the abacus Zhenping rattled away at it to his heart's content as he calculated work-points; and Wanben, feeling that he now had a well-placed supporter, started to get up to his tricks again. The way he divided the labor in his family was that his eldest son went up to cut firewood on the hillside to sell for ready cash, while his daughter-in-law had to toil away at their private plot. Thus when the commune members set out for work in the morning his son and daughter-in-law were the support troops who only reported in long after the others had started. Apart from being the last in, they were the first out when it was time to stop work. Li Wanben himself did not start late or finish early, but he carried a little bamboo basket at his waist and dropped his mattock to chase any frogs or edible locusts he saw. If they dived into one of the low dikes round a field he insisted on breaking it down. When exhausted by the pursuit he would sit down at the edge of the field for a smoke. This enabled him to feed his huge numbers of hens, geese, and ducks; and without this joint state-private enterprise he reckoned that he could not have managed to survive.

While Wanben was up to no good every day Zhenping went daily to the fields, keeping his eyes skinned to see how hard each commune member was working and whether those who were not on the system of contracting to carry out a particular job were up to the minimum standard; he also inspected the quality of contracted work. Seeing how disgracefully his uncle Wanben was behaving he went up to him and said, "You must fill your quota, uncle."

"Quota my foot! I've eaten more salt in my life than you've eaten rice." Wanben gave his nephew an evil glare and started resentfully to work.

One day Li Wanben had been extremely lucky: he had caught two basketfuls of frogs in one go. This was going to be the day on which the commune members put Zhenping's integrity to the test. The job Wanben had undertaken to carry out for the work team was to plough and harrow a piece of land in the date orchard somewhat bigger than a *mu*. He had put too much weight on the plough, leaving the ground looking as though it were covered in mountain ranges, and even after he had harrowed it the soil was still uneven and not properly broken down. Among the villagers some were worried that Zhenping might not be clever enough to avoid being taken in by Wanben. Some were making all sorts of critical remarks and others were warning him. Aniu, the work team leader, slapped him on the shoulder and said, "Now we'll see whether you're a pillar of strength or not."

Zhenping wondered how, feeling more on his guard than ever. That evening he was still pacing up and down in the date orchard examining the land his uncle had ploughed and harrowed. He really had dont a very shoddy job. When calculating the work-points that evening Zhenping felt awkward with the abacus and used pen and paper instead. He was bursting with anger and determined to humiliate his uncle that night. He worked out everyone else's work-points first, deliberately leaving his uncle's to the last.

Li Wanben was as pleased as punch that day. He squatted in a chair by the accounts desk with a grin so broad that his eyes were half closed while he waited for his points to be worked out. As he saw his nephew passing over him again and again to work out the others' points first his face darkened. Was his own nephew, the student he himself had taught, daring to turn on him like this? He coughed occasionally as a hint to Zhenping.

When the points of everyone in the team except Wanben had been worked out Zhenping thought for a while before saying to the commune members, "I hope you will all report anyone doing shoddy work." After a long silence the deputy team leader lost patience. "Write down the truth," he said decisively. "I'll back you up if there's any trouble."

"Hmmm. How can I know how shoddy it was? Everyone must report on him."

Zhenping had been intending to say straight out who it was who had worked badly, but he decided to give his uncle a chance to show a little political awareness. The owlish gaze his uncle fixed on him showed that there was no hope, so he said to Wanben, "You're the one who's worked badly, uncle. I think you ought to re-do the piece of land in the date orchard."

"What?" said Wanben with an evil glare, adding through clenched teeth, "Very well. Write it down then. I've finished with you." He slapped the desk and stalked out.

Zhenping sat there quietly as Wanben's clogs could be heard stamping out through the door. The commune members burst out laughing. "Zhenping," someone said, "you're like the barber's apprentice whose first customer was a hairy old man. We're going to see what you're like with the razor now."

"It's a steel one," said Zhenping with determination. "Unless he does it over again I'll only give him three-fifths of the points. If he doesn't like it he can lodge a complaint against me." With that he wrote down the points. To pay off the favour Wanben had done him, and to leave himself under no obligation to anyone as work-point recorder, Zhenping transferred five of his own points to Wanben as a very fat fee for teaching him the abacus.

Although the team members said the points should be given to Wanben from the general pool, Zhenping refused, generously wrote down the transfer, and went. The people who had been waiting to see Zhenping face this test had to clap and laugh.

"Good. Apricot Village really has got an iron inspector."

When an unhappy Li Zhenping went home and opened the door he saw that hin uncle and hin mother were chatting about something. "No need to ask," he thought, "he's complaining to mother. I don't care. He can complain as much as he likes." He went straight into the inner room, climbed into bed, burrowed under the bedclothes, wrapped them around himself, and waited for the complaints to begin.

"You're getting much too big for your boots," said his mother. She was very embarrassed by Wanben's complaint and at the sight of her son she lost her temper. Without going into the rights and wrongs of the question she grabbed the bamboo pinchers she used for driving her hens and started to belabor Zhenping as he lay there on the bed. "Nothing will stop you. How could you show so little feeling, and you an educated boy?" Giving one whack with every phrase she made the dust fly out of Zhenping's bedding. He neither moved nor cried. His mother went on beating him till Wanben snatched the pinchers from her and said,

"That's enough. Don't be like a puppy chewing a stone that somebody has thrown for him. It doesn't really matter if I've been hard done by. It must be because my ancestor Shunxing didn't leave a legacy of good deeds. That's why his descendants are all like worms in the ground that get chopped up by other people's spades. You'll have to eat your way through many more sheaves of rice yet before you're in a position to lay down the law, my lad."

Zhenping's mother turned to Wanben and apologized to him profusely. When at last she saw him out she said, "The boy is still very inexperienced. He'll need a lot more of your advice in future, uncle."

That night she went on and on at the boy as if she were reciting scriptures, scolding him for "trying to block out the sun with a chopstick." At first he ignored her, but when he could bear her nagging no longer his temper flared up. He leapt out of bed and shouted at his mother, "The more you go on with your capitalist and lousy feudal ideas the more they stink." After this outburst he went back into his quilt and shut his ears to all his mother's abuse. He felt that what he had done was honorable and right and did not care who attacked him for it. At the same time he was aware of how sharp and complicated the struggle in the villages was and how difficult it was to do the right thing.

When the commune members went to the fields to harvest the winter wheat and pick peas the next morning Zhenping went with them as usual. Li Wanben's family started work particularly early. Everyone noticed that he had no basket at his belt and was working very conscientiously. When he had to watch the frogs that he could not catch leaping around in the fields, it was as if lumps of his own flesh were jumping about. The other commune members were quietly delighted. Seeing how well Wanben was now behaving the team leader Aniu said to Zhenping, "As long as you bake it in ashes the prickly eel can't do you any harm." Then he turned to Wanben and said provocatively, "How terrible. Such a pity to see all those frogs hopping about with nobody to catch them." Grinding his teeth so hard that he almost broke them, Wanben angrily raised his sickle and cut a frog in half.

As several days went by Wanben had to watch his ducks laying smaller and smaller eggs or even stop laying altogether. But it was not worth catching frogs for them if he lost work-points for it. Neither could he bear to feed them on rice. For Wan ben, a man who calculated his every move, to be reduced to such a state made him hate Zhenping to the very marrow of his bones.

After four days of solid hatred he managed to think up an evil plan. When nobody was looking he threw a packetful of broken glass that he had collected into the team office through the crack between the doors. "That'll cut his feet to shreds," he thought. "Now we'll see if he can come into the fields to spy on me."

You cannot be on your guard against a danger you do not know about; and as Zhenping, his bare legs covered in mud, was the first to unlock and go in at midday several jagged pieces of glass cut right into the soles of his feet. He collapsed, blood gushing out. The commune members helped him, as soon as they heard about it, by removing the glass and bandaging his wounds. Wanben too pretended to sigh when he heard the news, but really he was chuckling to himself, "Try boiling the head of an ox and a chicken in the same pot and you'll see which has more flavour."

This sneak attack on Zhenping meant that he was unable to go to work. He had to stay at home and recover. The cadres, the team leader, and he decided that this must have been a trap set by some evil person. The cadres urged him to carry on and not to weaken. He was also greatly consoled and encouraged by the concern the commune members showed for him. Now that he could not go out with the others the bamboo basket reappeared at Wanben's waist and disaster struck the frogs in the fields once more. When one horse stops the others rest.

Those who shared Wanben's stinking outlook began to slacken as well. Zhenping could no longer go on sitting around when he learnt of this. He could not let anyone make trouble and hold up production now that it was well into spring and the rice shoots would soon have to be transplanted. Even though he could not work with the others he could sit beside the fields and help the team leader to keep an eye on things. He would sort them out.

Three days later he limped out to the fields on crutches. When his mother and the other commune members tried to hold him back and make him rest, he threw the crutches away and said, "They don't hurt at all." When he reached the field he sat beside it and watched. Thus Li Wanben's plan to get rich was foiled by the iron inspector once again.

After the spring harvest the rice shoots were transplanted. Apart from what was sold to the state or kept for the seed nearly all the wheat, peas, and sweet potatoes were shared among the villagers on the basis of work-points. It worked out that each point was worth a little over four pounds of wheat and three of peas, as well as some sweet potatoes. They had worked hard and now they were being amply rewarded. They were all delighted to receive the fruits of their labour—apart from Li Wanben. He went round with an evil face, making snide remarks and saying that he had been robbed and bullied by the cadres. He and his sympathizers made a lot of bother. They threatened not to work and demanded transfers to other teams.

These troubles were the work of Wanben too. The team leader Aniu was an imperturbable man who knew how to cope no matter how Wanben twisted and turned. As for Li Zhenping, his feet were now toughened up again and he was determined to carry this battle through to the end. Several days after the share-out his cousin came from the county town to visit them, and Zhenping's mother talked about the rights and wrongs of what he had been doing. Wanben came along too to make his complaint. When he had heard both sides of the story the cousin, who was a government worker, took Zhenping to one side and said, "It was right of you to put the common good above your personal feelings; but all the same, we cadres have to weigh up the character of every commune member and be patient in educating and reforming them …" This explanation made Zhenping realize that he had not done nearly enough to change his uncle's way of thinking. Then he thought that trying to change his thinking at this stage would be a waste of time, like a hen pecking at a closed clam.

At last an answer came to him. At noon the next day, when his mother was not there to know, he slipped over to his uncle's with a scoopful of his own family's wheat in the hope that this would mellow Wanben so that he could then tackle his uncle's attitude of mind. But when he reached his uncle's front door and called out to him, Wanben came out and spat at him and gave him a vicious glare like that of a ghost seeing a fire.

"Damn you! My evil star." With that he slammed the door.

As Zhenping stood under the eaves wiping the spit from his face, he glared back at the door feeling humiliated and angry.

"If you won't reform that's your look-out," he said at last, marching off in a great fury.

One day about a fortnight later Zhenping went to the marketing and supply co-operative to arrange for the sale of some home-made baskets, brooms, and such things. Instead of going straight back that afternoon as he had intended, he went to the clinic to buy some basic medicines for the village's first-aid worker. While he was there Li Yongfu happened to ring up the clinic asking for a doctor to visit his sick son. The doctors were all out. Rather than let one take the mountain path by himself, Zhenping felt he'd better wait till one came back and go with him. The pediatrician did not return till evening. Zhenping took him back to Apricot Village that night, and it was nearly ten by the time they reached Li Yongfu's place. Zhenping hurried back to the office without stopping at Li Yongfu's.

He unlocked the door, went in, and turned on the light. A tray had been turned over. When he switched on his torch for a closer look he found to his horror that a basket of wheat and another one of beans were missing. A desperate search failed to reveal any sign of them. Who had stolen them? Another hunt round the room revealed a cigarette end that he recognized as his uncle's. Wondering how it had got there he hurried over to the team leader Aniu's house.

It was a pitch-black night with not a star to be seen, and as he rushed along in his impatience his torch danced around like a firefly. When he was past the second lane he heard scurrying footsteps in the third, and he looked up just in time to see a dark figure flit across it. His eyes probed the night like searchlights now that he was thoroughly alerted. He ran after the figure to the beginning of the third lane and shouted, "Who's there?" Then he heard a sound and saw the dark figure drop something. Running up and shining his torch on it he saw that it was the wheat seed stolen from the team office: **Third Team** was painted on the basket in big red letters. He started off in pursuit again, shouting, "Stop thief, stop thief!" All the dogs in the village started to bark as his shouts woke the sleeping commune members.

With Zhenping after him the dark figure stumbled and ran in terror past the third lane and back into the first lane, not realizing that it was a cul-de-sac walled off at the end. “Stop thief. He’s stolen the team’s seed,” shouted Zhenping when he reached the entrance to the lane. Zhenping’s mother was the first person to open her door, and she came to the threshold brandishing a carrying-pole.

“Where is he?” she asked Zhenping. “Where is the damn thief?”

“At the end of the alley. Catch him, mother. He’s stolen the team’s wheat seed.”

“Right then.” After a quick search she saw a piglet jump squealing out of the sty of the house opposite. Without a moment’s hesitation she charged at it, waving her carrying-pole. Just as she was about to bring it swinging down she heard a hoarse, imploring voice saying,

“It’s … it’s me.”

“Oh … it’s you.” She recognized it immediately as Wanben’s. As she stood rooted to the ground with shock, not knowing what to do, she saw Wanben shoot out of the pigsty and into her house.

She shut the door and shouted, “He’s got away. Stop thief!”

“Where did he go?” asked Zhenping, shining his torch around in his own house. By now everyone in the lane had opened their doors and joined the hunt, and in answer to all their questions Zhenping’s mother waved and said, “The thief went over the wall.” They all came rushing down the lane. When Zhenping reached the wall at the end of it he saw that as there was no ladder the thief could not have got over it. This made him curious. He searched the woodpile and pigsties nearby. No sign of him. The way his mother was shaking all over as she shut the door aroused his suspicions.

“Afraid of the thief?” he asked.

His mother made a tutting noise and said, “Forget about it. He’s miles away by now. Go to bed.”

“All right. But I’ll cook a bowl of rice first—I’m hungry.” He pushed his mother aside and went into the kitchen. As she could not stop him she went in with him, shutting the door of the room behind her. He shone his torch under her bed, on the stove, and in the corners. He was just going to climb up into the loft, which she knew would be disastrous, when she grabbed hold of him and whispered,

“Son, this is terribly important, terribly important.”

“I’m seeing this through to the bitter end,” he replied, shoving her aside and storming up the ladder. In the beam of his torch he saw Wanben crouching like a dog under a cupboard and gazing pathetically at him.

Wanben, who had been dissatisfied with the share-out after the spring harvest, had been watching for a chance to destroy Zhenping. That evening he had taken advantage of his absence to go along to the team’s office with skeleton keys and steal some wheat. Now he was caught—like a junior devil who had run into the great wizard’s net. Zhenping hesitated for a moment at the sight of him, stunned at meeting his enemy so unexpectedly. He glared malevolently at his uncle.

Now that the cat was out of the bag Zhenping’s mother pointed at the tip of her son’s nose and began to scold him under her breath: “You’ll be the death of me. Even an ox’s horn bends inwards so you ought to show some consideration for your own family. The gods themselves sometimes make mistakes. If your uncle has gone wrong the right thing to do is to criticize him on the quiet. What else can you be thinking of?”

“That would be like wrapping dogs muck up in clean white paper,” said Zhenping, flaring up. “You’ll see what I’m going to do.” He turned to go downstairs.

“I’m not dead yet,” she said, hanging on to him with both hands and not letting him take a step. “Even if you have no consideration for him please show me some.”

“I’ll show none for anybody.”

Seeing the hard expression on Zhenping’s face Wanben pretended to be tough and said, “Let him go. It must be the fault of our ancestors that we’re in this state now.”

Zhenping ignored him and insisted on going downstairs, dragging his mother to the top of the ladder with him as she would not let go. “*How* can you be so heartless,” she pleaded.

“You’ve no more chance of stopping me than of pouring all the water out of the reservoir in the mountains.”

At this his mother lost her temper. “I’ll do it, I’ll do it,” she said, slapping him in the face and making him so angry that his hair stood on end. As he thrust her forcefully aside he heard the team leader Aniu shouting, “Where’s the thief, Zhenping?”

“Here,” Zhenping shouted back, his voice shaking the whole village and making all Wanben’s cronies tremble.

The cocks crowed. The “iron inspector,” the public-spirited recorder of work-points, realized that this was his moment of victory at last.

20.110 The Moon On A Frosty Morning\fn{by Fang Shumin (1940?-)} Hopei Province, China (M) 5

Cassia had just fed her one-year-old baby and was covering her head with a towel to go to the fields, when her four-year-old son Shigour said to his granny, “Why are you making shoes for my father? He’s away.”

“I’m not making them for that spineless father of yours.” She rubbed the awl against her hair and thrust it hard and angrily through the sole of the shoe. “I’m making them for your mother.”

“But her feet are too small for those shoes,” Shigour protested solemnly.

“Out of the way, brat.”

With Shigour driven away the old lady handed her daughter-in-law the black canvas shoes for which she had just finished making the sole.

“Oh well,” she said, smiling till her eyes creased right up, “you can’t blame the boy. You’ve been so busy these last few months rushing all over the place through mud and water. No wonder these great boots aren’t proper women’s shoes. Try them on.”

Cassia tried on the new shoes and found that they fitted perfectly. Even she could not help laughing. Then she tucked a sickle in her belt and hurried off to the threshing-ground.

The threshing-ground lay to the north of Bean Hamlet, as the village was called. It was bigger than last year, and heaped within new fencing in the middle of it were two huge mounds of bright red sorghum that had yet to be milled; the corn-cobs stacked in frames built of sorghum stalks gleamed in the autumn sun like a golden palace, and the piles of late millet were pushing at the fence round the threshing-floor, making it lean like an overhanging cliff.

The rich fragrance of grain drifted across the threshing-floor. Although it was now late autumn and the light north-west wind blowing across the fields was reminding everyone that the cold season had begun, Cassia felt only warmth at the sight of the fine harvest on the floor as she cut off the sorghum tops with her sickle.

Eyes sparkled as people returning to other counties from market passed the threshing-floor. They sighed with admiration and said, “What a good harvest they’ve had in this team.”

“Indeed,” somebody agreed awkwardly. “Looks even better than the Cherry Orchard Team we passed earlier.”

“A fat lot you know. They left the famous Cherry Orchard Team behind months ago.”

“Which team is this then?” asked the ill-informed man with another sigh.

“Bean Hamlet.”

“At last. So this is the famous ‘Poor Bean Hamlet,’” a voice said with a hoarse chuckle. “The paupers have managed a decent harvest this year—like a blind man catching an eel.”

This last remark stung Cassia as she worked. There was an explosion in her head as she flung a bundle of sorghum tops to the ground, flicked her short, untidy hair back and shot a furious glare at the hoarse, middle-aged man. He blushed in fear and embarrassment. She softened her expression, suddenly realizing that she had no reason to lose her temper like an eighteen-year-old. A woman of thirty-two should be more tolerant; besides, she was deputy work-team leader. She waved to the men in the road and smiled at them.

“Are you thirsty, friends? Take a rest on the threshing-floor.”

“No thanks,” one of them replied. “Looks like a good harvest you’ve had this year.”

“It certainly is,” she shouted happily, stepping back with her strong legs. An old man in a little felt hat jumped off his grey donkey and croaked, “Hey, comrade, come here, comrade.”

A cheeky youth beside him who was grinning all over his face grabbed him and whispered: “You’re asking for trouble, you shameless old devil. You’re not on comrade terms with her.”

When Cassia heard this she ran to the fence and said to the old man, “Never mind that nonsense, Uncle. You go and and call me ‘comrade’ as bold as you please. What do you want to say?”

The old man shifted the pouch-sack on his shoulder before relaxing and letting himself reply.

“I came through here on the way to market during the floods in July, and the oceans of water covering the fields made me think that you’d been washed out again. Aafter two bad years running I was sure you’d be going hungry again this year. I’d never have dreamed you could get this good a harvest.”

Cassia waved her sickle and laughed, her eyebrows raised.

“You can’t have been to market since then. You may have seen the floods, but you didn’t see how we fought against them.”

The old man now apparently understood everything. He took off his hat, nodded, jumped back on his donkey, and rode away.

Cassia smiled as she watched them go off towards the Grand Canal ferry. The full evening sun cast a golden

light over her tanned face. The boundless plain beyond the village and the fields of green wheat shoots that covered it gave her a feeling of expanse and excitement. At the same time she was a little depressed. She had wanted badly to tell those strangers who did not know the story how their village had fought against the flood. But she must put all such ideas out of her head. Anyone would think that Bean Hamlet was not tough enough.

As she gazed into the distance deep in thought she saw a trail of yellow dust rising from the road behind the brick-kiln. She knew it came from a rider and trembled as she realized that it must be Big Wu galloping at that speed. Just then she heard some women on the threshing-floor crying out,

"It's Big Wu."

"It's him, it's Big Wu."

Unable to think of anything else she dropped her sickle and ran after the other women and the children towards the road. Shielding her eyes with her right hand she made out a chestnut horse pounding through the dust, and the bare-chested man astride it was indeed Big Wu, the team leader.

"Big Wu!"

She was waving and shouting. The chestnut horse carried its rider to the fence. The tall rider, a man in his forties, dismounted with a leap into a cloud of dust and put his hand on the horse's back.

"Have you been impatient waiting for me to come back? Come and take a look at our horse."

Cassia was the first to reach it. "It's a fine sturdy beast," she said.

"It's kicking," shouted Big Wu, deliberately frightening the women and children so that they scattered like chickens. Cassia alone stepped forward and grabbed it by the mane. When it shook its head violently, she pinched its nostrils shut and forced its mouth open.

"Be quiet, you devil." It whinnied, pawed the ground, and then calmed down.

"What did you want to make it do that for?" she said to Big Wu, adding, "Tell me quickly, how old is it?"

"Six. It's a strong one all right."

As she kneaded the horse's back she could not hold back her praises. "And such a glossy coat. What breed is it?"

"It's Mongolian—from beyond the Great Wall."

"Good." Then she anxiously asked, "Have we bought her yet?"

"I paid on the nail and I've got the papers to prove it."

"Good." Cassia tugged at the reins as she said, "Yesterday Tiedan and I built the stable, and last night Grandpa Baishun was chosen as stock-keeper. He's so pleased he's spent the morning cooking and rolling feed. I'll take him along to be watered and fed. I've got the cart with iron-rimmed wheels ready at the granary door to take the state grain, so you'd better go there and check the grain. Now that we've got our horse we must load the cart tomorrow morning, and I'm going to drive it. After two years on relief grain from the government our team must be first to deliver."

"Fine, fine," Big Wu cut in. "You take him over to Grandpa Baishun for a feed, and I'll be with you when I've checked the grain."

Just as they were about to move Big Wu suddenly remembered something.

"Cassia," he shouted. "Wait a moment. I've got good news for you!"

"I didn't hear a magpie this morning," she said,\fn{A note reads: *A magpie is thought to bring luck in China*.} turning her head, "so I don't see how there can be any good news for me."

"Shigour's dad, your husband Waizi, is coming back from Cherry Orchard tonight!"

Cassia was shattered. This sudden news was like being hit on the head with a brick. Try as she did to control the anger that surged up inside her she could not help her face turning pale and her voice shaking as she replied, "Don't you dare mention his name. Our family is getting along very well without him."

"Keep your temper, Cassia," said Big Wu. "If he's seen he was in the wrong and is willing to come back you should be ready to help him. The return of the prodigal is something to be pleased about."

"So am I expected to send a bridal chair with eight porters to fetch him?" Cassia asked indignantly. ":If he had the nerve to leave he can have the nerve to sleep out in the village's reed beds."

"Hmmm," said Big Wu. "Waizi wasn't in that sort of mood at all. When we met at the market he grabbed hold of me and wouldn't let me go. And when he asked me about his mother, yourself, and the two kids, his eyes were red although he is a grown man."

"It's none of his business," Cassia cut in, sounding as if she were gnashing her teeth. "We haven't starved to death."

"Listen," said Big Wu. "'Waizi,' I said to him, 'your wife has changed. These last months she's really been

doing things. She's a candidate Party member and has been elected deputy team leader—"

"You seem to have enjoyed gossiping with him, you old gas-bag," she interrupted again.

"The best part of the story is still to come," grinned Big Wu. "He hung on to my hand until I said, 'Let me go, I've got to buy a horse for the team.' Tears were pouring down his cheeks, so I asked him if he wasn't all right staying with his in-laws. 'Don't ask me about that,' he said. 'I've heard all the news from Bean Hamlet. If they'll have me back again I'll …' 'Wha'll you do?' I asked him, and he started howling. 'Never mind, Waizi,' I said. 'If you know you've gone wrong you should come back and admit it; from now on you must forge ahead with all the rest of us. I'll back you up this time. When will you be coming home/' His answer came back like a shot: 'Tonight.'"

Cassia was so angry that she stamped her foot and flung out her arm.

"I never signed any undertaking to have him. Even if he does come I won't have him back."

"Oh well," said Big Wu, still trying to win her round, "you should at least let him stay tonight. He's coming back this evening, whether you let him stay on can be decided later. After all, we can't ignore him now he's turning over a new leaf. Look! The horse is eating Old Deng's fence. Take him away this moment!"

*

It was night by now. The north-west wind that had been blowing across the plain had dropped, and the frozen stars shivered in the late autumn cold. Cassia let the horse relieve itself, then watered it beside the well. Grandpa Baishun tethered it in its newly-built stable and fed it as carefully as if he were fingering a jewel. A moment later Big Wu was there, standing under the swinging hurricane lamp and saying happily, "Mmm. That feed smells good." With a nod to Grandpa Baishun he said to Cassia, "I've checked the state grain. The stuff in the sacks is all up to standard—first-rate stuff—so it can be taken in first thing tomorrow. When I've had a drink of water I must be off to the river bend to hear how the laborers from our village are getting on with the canal. Which of the men should take the cart?"

She stretched out her arm.

"I told you I was going to drive, didn't I?"

He shot a sidelong glance at her and, seeing the determined way her eyebrows were raised, could only smile. It would have been a waste of time to say anything more.

She was a long time settling in the new horse with Grandpa Baishun before going home. As it was the end of the lunar month there was not even a sliver of moon above the -trees. She felt her way into the courtyard and grimly remembered to wedge the gates shut by sticking a pole hard against them. In the house she heard her mother-in-law ask sleepily from the darkness, "Is that you back? Shall I light the lamp?"

"No," Cassia replied quickly. "Are the children asleep? Why are you still awake?"

"I rocked them to sleep. Why did you have to make such a noise shutting the gates? We haven't used the date-wood pole for months, so why shut the gates with it tonight?"

"I thought the wind would blow them open."

"Fool," the old woman went on, "idiot. Didn't you notice that the wind had dropped ages ago?"

Cassia did not want to tell her mother-in-law that Waizi was coming back that night in case the news gave her a seizure and killed her. She climbed on to the *kang*, but no matter which way she lay she could not get to sleep. She gritted her teeth and hardened her heart, longing to hear him trying to force the gates while she lay there on the *kang* and would not get up to open them. He could freeze—he had asked for it. As she lay there her heart would start to pound at the slightest sound from the yard, but as she waited she heard no loud noise to follow.

An evening in July flashed before her eyes. That night when, with one cloud-burst following another, she had waded home from a team meeting through the floods, her feet heavy with mud, supporting herself with difficulty on the vegetable-garden fence. Just as she and her mother-in-law had been looking for a big spade in the shed they had heard squelching footsteps in the yard. She had opened the door and said, "Oh, you're back."

The stocky Waizi had come in and was wiping the mud off his feet while she lit the lamp and asked him, "Where've you been? We shouted ourselves hoarse trying to get you to the team meeting."

"I went to Cherry Orchard," he had said.

"What a thing to do," she had replied, flari.ng up. "You just don't care about the team's crops. Big Wu's been elected team leader and he'll be a good one. He's taken men and women from our village down to the river bend as fast as they can go to drain the water out. But you had time to go and visit the children's granny. What do you mean by it at a time like this?"

"You want to know what 1 was doing?" said Waizi with a laugh. "I was negotiating. It's all settled. Tomorrow the whole family moves to Cherry Orchard."

Cassia had been stunned. “What? What did you say?”

“What’s the point of thinking about nothing but work all the time? Can’t you see that this poverty-ridden hollow has been a frog pond for two years running? Even the team’s donkey has starved to death. Now this year’s rains have drowned us again. There’s nothing to stay for. The sooner we find some dry land the better.”

Cassia had realized at once what he was thinking.

“Frightened of starving?” she had said. “Want to sneak off, don’t you?”

Waizi had tilted his head to one side and replied, “Say what you like as long as you understand that tomorrow we’re shutting the place up and going, bedding and all.”

“Who’s going?” she had asked.

“All of us,” he had said.

At this she had flared up and shouted furiously, “You can clear off by yourself. You may have it all nicely worked out, but nobody’s going with you.”

The stocky Waizi had rushed forward and grabbed her. 'Stay where you are. Where are you going with that spade?”

“Get away from me,” Cassia had said, breaking away from him. “I’m going to drain off the water and guard the dike with Big Wu. This is a crisis. I’ve got no time to waste talking to you.”

Waizi had raised his hand, but Cassia had moved her spade instantly to parry it, screaming, “Don’t touch me. If you lay a finger on me you’ll get a dose of this.”

With their quarrel. the room had felt as hot as a kiln; gongs were being beaten outside to tell everyone to go to the dike at once, the boy was crying, and the adults were shouting at each other. It had been too much for the old woman, who released a torrent of abuse on him: “Worthless wretch, evil son, get the hell out of here and eat and drink as well as you can.”

When Cassia had come back the next day from her work at the river she had tried to win him round, but he was so set in his twisted ideas that when she had finished he just replied, “The flood waters are here to stay. This dump won’t ever get rich. Are you coming with me or aren’t you?”

“No,” Cassia had said, steeling herself, “I won’t go.”

“If you’re not coming that’s your lookout. Mother and Shigour are coming with me.”

The old lady had jabbed her finger at his nose and said, “You’re not going to take even a hair of any of us, not one hair.”

Red-faced and hoarse, Waizi had issued his last warning:

“Very well then; don’t come if you don’t want to. But don’t expect me to be nice to you when you come begging from me in the autumn.”

This had made the old lady angrier than ever:

“If that’s how you’re going to talk to us you’d better clear out at once. Go off and hatch your plans, my fine lad. There may not be much flesh on us but our bones are hard, really hard.”

Waizi had wrapped up his bedding and gone, his pipe between his teeth.

His last superior glance at them was deeply etched on Cassia’s mind. The thought of it still made her almost burstwith indignation; she gave an involuntary and contemptuous snort. This woke her mother-in-law, who rolled over and asked:

“Are you cold?”

“No, mother, I’m boiling hot.” She tried as hard as she could to calm herself down as she lay there in the dark, her eyes wide open, struggling; to drive away the image that flickered ill front of them. But it hovered there more clearly than ever. She imagined him coming back and apologizing to her. She would tell him straight out that what he’d done had been completely wrong, and it had all been because he had not had confidence in the group and the people’s commune … She fell into a doze.

When she woke again a little later there was still no sound from the courtyard.

“He hasn’t come back,” she thought. The crescent moon setting in the south-west was filtering its light through the window, and she could hear the first cock-crow of the morning. She could stay in bed no longer. The old lady leant over to her and said:

“Why are you tossing and turning so?”

“Keep your voice down, mother.” Cassia sat up smartly and felt for her clothes. “I’ve got to get up early to take the tax grain in.”

“You’ll be frozen right through this early in the morning,” the old lady said, “so mind you wear a jacket over your green tunic. I finished the soles of your new shoes last night and put them by your pillow. Have you found

them?"

"I've put them on," Cassia replied.

"It'll be a long, cold journey, so wait till I've boiled you some noodles and egg."

"No thanks." Cassia got down from the *kang.* "I must be on my way before the third cock-crow. I can get something to eat on my way through Zimu township."

She groped lightly for her child's head, kissed his lips, and went out. She felt the cold in the courtyard at once, pulling her warm hands straight away from the frozen window-sill and sucking in her breath. There had been a frost that night, the first since last winter, and the young crows perched in the locust tree in the yard were cheeping miserably. Some dead leaves, covered in white, were drifting to the ground. She looked up again at the golden crescent of the moon in the southwestern sky and at the stars shimmering in the cold air, overcome with a warm feeling of pity. It had been the height of summer when Waizi left wearing only a thin shirt and trousers. He would choose the cold season to come back, the pig-headed fool. Well, if he wanted to come back he'd have to change his way of thinking.

She regretted her anger of the previous night. He hadn't come back, so she need not have blocked the gates so securely. She went over and worked the heavy date-wood pole loose. As she stepped through the gates all her courage could not stop her from gasping with fright: there was somebody squatting in the shadows outside.

"Who's that?" she called.

The man did not look up. He stayed there with his arms clasping his shoulders and his head buried in them.

There was no need to ask any questions. The faint moonlight was bright enough for her to see that it was Waizi.

83.42 Nausea\fn{by Yen Chu (c.1940?-)} Shantung Province, China (M) 5

"Do you feel nauseous when you brush your teeth?" The doctor turned around and asked me as he washed his hands. He sounded genuinely concerned as any doctor new at his job would be, or, for that matter, any teacher, drill officer, or pastor. He looked much younger than I, yet he aroused in me a feeling of admiration arid trust.

"No." I answered after some deliberation.

"Do you get car-sick?"

"No."

"Is your stomach upset by filth?"

"No."

The doctor pulled up a chair from near by and sat down. His fair-complexioned face began to show a trace of pink. He covered his face with his right hand, bowed his head, and thought hard for a moment. Then he lifted his head and looked at me through the cracks between his fingers and asked, "Do you feel nauseous when you smell something odorous?"

"No," said I, apologetically. "On the contrary I love to eat smelly foods such as smelly duck eggs, smelly bean curd, smelly salted fish."

He got up uneasily. He contemplated me for a while, hands akimbo, and said, "Have you ever suffered from stomach disorder, urinary troubles, ulcers or any organic disorder of the stomach and the intestinal tract?"

"I have gone through many examinations, but they never could find anything wrong."

"But you are quite sure that you are suffering from nausea."

"Yes, doctor," I hastened to answer, trying the best I could to sound and look as earnest as I possibly could. "I feel nauseous every day. Lately it is getting worse because it makes me restless and not able to do my job. That was why I asked for a day off to come to this hospital for a thorough check-up. Doctor, please tell me if there is anything the matter with me."

"There is a trace of abnormality in your glandular system, but nothing else seems to be wrong." He seemed at a loss, but a moment later his eyes began to twinkle and the lost look vanished from his face.

"Did you say you feel nauseous every day?" The way he asked that question brought to my mind a picture of a village boy trying to beach a slippery catfish.

"Right!" Now that he showed a renewed interest in me, 1 felt excited and my heart quickened. I had found a friend after my own heart. At previous examinations doctors found nothing the matter with me, and they generally smiled a smile that did not reach their eyes, and stood up to signal dismissal. "I feel nauseous every day, and I want to throw up all the time."

"Exactly under what conditions do you feel nauseous?" he asked immediately, and he pulled his chair up

closer.

"I can't be specific." I said timidly. I sensed that we were approaching an embarrassing moment. "For instance, when I am watching TV, or reading newspapers and popular literary works, or when I am listening to the radio, to lectures, or to certain people; even riding on a bus, or walking in the streets, or in a public lounge, I get the painful feeling of wanting to vomit and yet I can't."

At this point he stood up suddenly. He looked anxious and ill at ease. The expression on his face once again reminded me of the village boy who had to let go of the slippery catfish in his hand because its gills stung him, but just then he saw another fish, much larger. My words seemed to have stung the doctor where he hurt, and what I felt seemed to be exactly the feeling that was troubling him too. He shouted at me hysterically, as one would try to shake off the hold of a recent nightmare by telling about it in a loud voice.

"You! You are some joker! Are you saying that everybody is ugly to look at, dull to listen to, and they all make you want to puke?" He got carried away as he went on. He was practically pointing at my nose and screaming at me, and he said, "The way I see it, your kind of people are nauseating! You people pretend to be ill; you put yourselves above all others, and you are always whining! You are nauseating!"

As I watched him throwing a temper fit, the unexplainable depression I felt in my chest began to melt away. The truth was, no one had spoken to me in such an angry voice for a long time. When I told people about this sensation of wanting to vomit, the response was usually silence, or a knowing smile, or a change of subject. The painful feeling of being unable to communicate made me feel that I was living in a callous world. I began to feel that the pleasure of conversing with friends was a thing of the past. The way the young doctor criticized me for my attitude toward life without mincing words was a luxurious experience. Hence, his accusation did not make me mad, on the contrary it felt like a soothing tonic which cleared the head and chased away my melancholy. It hit directly at my troubled spot. I looked up at him like a school boy who had been wronged for a long time. I tried to refute him, and I said,

"Doctor, I am not feigning an illness, absolutely not! And I surely do not have the mental energy to think that I am above everybody else. Think about it, if this sensation of wanting to vomit does not really make me sick why should I brave this heat and—"

"Life makes you nauseous." He sounded quarrelsome. "You are a misanthrope, a person who hates all mankind."

"I am not a hater of all mankind."

"What are you if not a misanthrope when people make you want to vomit?"

"Not everyone makes me want to vomit. For instance … for instance …" It was hard to put my thoughts into, words. "For instance, I just love the smiling faces of infants … for instance … in short … I don't hate everybody, only those—"

"Only women, right?" He sounded dogmatic. He seemed intent on misinterpreting me, or, maybe, on drawing his own conclusions. "Then you are a misogynist, a woman hater."

"Please don't venture wild guesses." I was quite piqued. "I don't hate all women. On the contrary I love women and I respect them."

"Ha! Ha!" He leaned back and laughed loudly. I discovered, to my surprise, there were very fine crow lines at the corners of his eyes. The pink glow on his face had now receded behind his ears, much as a colorful sunset would be blown away by an evening breeze. His nose no longer looked handsome. The look of determination around the corners of his mouth disappeared. His trembling, twisted body made him look much older all of a sudden. He was aware that I was staring at him, and he made some small motion to cover an unguarded moment. He put both hands in the big pockets of his white coat, then immediately took out a book from one pocket and put it on top of another book on the table. All of this was done in a very casual manner. A while later, he seemed ill at ease and put it back in his pocket again. But I had already made *out* that it was a Chinese translation of the French author Albert Camus's\fn{(1913-1960, born in Algeria.} *L'etranger.* The book on the table was *The World as Will and Idea,* an English translation of Arthur Schopenhauer's\fn{German philosopher (1788-1860).} *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung.*

After a short moment of unease, he recovered and was once again relaxed and sure of himself. He returned to his chair and said to me, with all the concentration he could muster, continuing from where we left off way back.

"You like women, and you also respect women. What kind of women do you like? What kind do you respect?"

"I like … I like …" I let myself go and said, "I like Yun in *Fu Sheng Liu Chi*,\fn{Six Chapters of a Floating Life.} and I like a student of mine who wanted to open up a sky light in her bedroom so that she could lie in bed and watch the stars with the farmer she was going to marry. I respect the young nun I met on a bus, and Beatrice in

Dante’s *Divine Comedy.*”

“And who else?”

When he asked me that question his expression was so solemn, so serious that I could hardly believe my eyes and ears. I had expected him to lean back and have another good laugh.

“I like all those who are pure and beautiful and yet do not think of themselves as pure and beautiful, and I respect all those who are virtuous and great and yet do not think of themselves as such.”

I saw tears flicker in his eyes, but I did not know whether they were tears of joy or of pity. Then, he covered his face with his palms and muttered, “No wonder you want to vomit.”

I looked at him with a question mark in my eyes. He wiped his face with his left hand, took a deep breath and said, “You were just saying that those who make you nauseous are … are only those kind of people?”

“Only those who are favored yet who have no respect for themselves; and those who do not care about the fate of a nation, but only their own individual freedom; those who pretend to commiserate, to promote the pure and eliminate the evil, but actually, in the name of one ‘ism’ or another, try to cut a figure for themselves; those who because they make a few rotten dollars think that they are one notch above all others, and that they have the right to blaspheme human nature; and those who look most like angels but—”

“But are actually the devil’s disciples!”

He did not let me finish, but he finished it exactly the way I wanted to. I was not surprised because I was quoting a famous American gynecologist, now retired.

“But those are the people who are most likely to catch the eyes of the news media, and are most active socially.”

I went on to say, “The young people model themselves after these people, copying their words and deeds.”

“Was it the words and deeds of these people that made you nauseous and wanting to vomit every day?” He propped his elbows on the table and covered his face with both hands and said,

“Think about this: if a high school graduate was interested in literature, but his parents forced him into medicine because they were interested in status and money; what was he to do? After he was accepted by a medical college he found that those friends and relatives who used to be aloof were now bringing their daughters around and were very ingratiating; what was he to do then? And, when he discovered that many of the students in his class were killing themselves over their courses solely for the purpose of making a lot of money and attracting a tremendous dowry; what was he to do now?”

At this point he raised his head and looked at me. Seeing that I was just listening and had no intention of answering him, he smiled sadly and went on,

“After he left medical college and walked into a hospital, he was determined to give his all to the sacred mission of saving the world and saving lives. He was determined to sacrifice everything for the sick and suffering people. Then there were his other colleagues flirting with the nurses in front of dying patients and their worried families. What was he supposed to do then? What was he supposed to do when he saw his colleagues pretend to be very professional when meeting with reporters, but show a decidedly different side of themselves when faced with imploring families? And, when he read in the newspapers that someone in his hospital sold a big block of ice used on a corpse to a vender of cold drinks, what was he to do? What do you think? Should he feel nauseous? Should he vomit?”

I wanted to say something, but I had no answer.

“He endured this, this indescribable suffering, day after day, month after month. He tried his best to push away the urge to vomit, because he felt that a doctor on whom suffering people depended had no right to vomit.” He sighed deeply and said, “Sometimes he is so weak he has to seek enlightenment and strength from certain personalities in the past, both Chinese and foreign; sometimes he felt so lonely he had to look for solace in the works of pessimjstic authors.” His face and his voice which a moment ago seemed so resolute now turned very soft, yet they had the effect of a spring breeze on me, making me feel good all over, making me feel that he was a good doctor who cared for the distressed and would sacrifice himself for others.

“But, Doctor,” said I, “it is not that easy to suppress the sensation of wanting to vomit.”

“Have to try your best to endure and to be sympathetic. The reason that Prospero in Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*\fn{Written c.1611.} could forgive his enemy was because he understood human weakness. The reason Schweitzer\fn{German doctor, musicologist, theologian, philosopher, missionary, and Nobel laureate (1875-1965) born in Alsace, now part of France.} left civilization to practice medicine in the African wilderness was not because the backward natives there were more likable than his compatriots or more pleasing to the eyes."

Just then a nurse came over and announced loudly that there was someone to see him. As she finished she

turned right around and walked away, but she found time to pause and joke with another doctor. Suddenly I realized that since I had walked into that room, the other workers talked and laughed among themselves, but not one of them looked him straight in the eye. As he was going away, he turned and said to me,

"The sensation of wanting to vomit that you mentioned generally indicates that a person's moral courage has reached a limit. It indicates this person's mental condition is in a state of confusion and that his nerves are very fragile. If this goes on, he will first despise others, and may eventually despise and destroy himself. You have reached a very serious state; better be very careful."

On my way home I kept thinking of the story of Prospero in *The Tempest*. I thought about the ancient philosopher Hstin-tze and his theory on human nature, or Mencius'\fn{Chinese philosopher (371?-289BC).} about man and beast, of Confucius\fn{Chinese philosopher (551?-479?BC).} on forgiveness, and about the transcendentalism of Emerson\fn{Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882) American philosopher.} and Russell.\fn{Probably Bertrand Arthur Russell (1882-1970), English philosopher.} Lastly my thoughts returned to Schweitzer and Camus and the young doctor. The image of the latter, a mixture of youth and senility, of determination and discontent, lingered in my mind.

Although this picture evoked in me an indescribable feeling of sadness, at the same time it cleared my mind the way alum works on a pool of dirty lake water, precipitating the filth to the bottom, thereby clearing the lake gradually. At the bus stop I noticed once again some women who threw icy glances at their more fashionable counterparts, yet I felt no resurging desire to vomit. On board the bus I saw two hippies take seats reserved for the disabled and the old, completely oblivious of the old and the young standing right there in front of them. The sight of this did not make me nauseous either. Not only that, I was even light-hearted enough to enjoy the scene of a seated lady tapping a middle-aged woman standing in front of her with her fingertips then pointing at the floor. The fat lady in her wooden clogs was standing on the lady's toes. Incidentally, I recognized the fat lady as one who operated a shoe stand at the entrance to our alley. She was a courteous person, so my wife and I often bought our shoes there. Now, the fat lady moved her foot away and apologized automatically, out of habit as a saleswoman I presumed. She then looked over the casually dressed lady and at her own maxi outfit and beaded colorful bag. Then, in an annoyed tone of voice, she tapped the lady on the head and said, "Hi, Miss, if you want comfort you should have taken a taxi."

Even months after my conversation with the young doctor my moods had decidedly improved, along with the old sensation of wanting to vomit. I was even able to watch certain TV and news programs. But as the days went by my inner tranquillity was once again disturbed, my peace of mind was once again troubled by many annoying matters. And when it was difficult for me to get rid of the waves of nausea once again surging in my chest, I appeared once more in front of the young doctor. He asked me to sit in a chair beside a table and sat down himself. Before he asked me about my condition, he put a cigarette in his mouth. When he lit it, his hands shook; when he puffed at it, he also looked very clumsy. One could tell right away that he was new at it.

"How have you been?" He threw the match in an ashtray and took the cigarette from the corner of his mouth. There was a sliver of brownish tobacco on his lower lip; he looked awkward.

"Nothing much." I smiled awkwardly. "Am having intense feeling of nausea again."

"You should know better than to look for trouble."

"Do I look like I am at the looking-for-trouble age?" I said. "I can hardly keep them away; no way would I look for them."

"Be more broad-minded." He was looking at the tip of his nose when he said that as if he were talking to himself.

"It is easier said than done."

"What is there to do if one does not keep an open mind and take it easy?"

"Nothing."

We looked at one another and threw each other troubled smiles, like two old friends. Just then I, quite by chance, saw on another side of the room a few doctors, nurses, and a working student in uniform whispering to one another. Shortly afterwards the student-worker walked huffily towards the back. When I turned around the young doctor pushed into my hand a prescription in English and said, "Get this medicine later."

I did not understand.

"It will help your digestion; does you no harm to take."

"Didn't you say that I don't—"

He pressed his lips with his right index finger indicating that I should not ask too many questions. At the same time he stood up to greet a doctor who was approaching from behind me and whose stomach reached the table before he did.

"This gentleman is—"
"My friend."
"A friend? In the clinic—?"
"Also my patient."
"Oh?" He lifted his left eyebrow and asked, "What is wrong with him?"
"Umm!" The young doctor pointed at the prescription in front of me. Big Stomach picked it up, glanced at it and threw it back. Before he left he muttered a few words in Japanese-English and added at the end of it, "They say you are here not quite a year yet, and you are already switching to psychiatry."

"Chief, you—" The young doctor was going to say something, but Big Stomach was already gone. The young doctor returned to his seat, dejected. He said,

"It is all because I was critical about the pharmacy he strongly recommended at a conference. How can we use medicines that are out of date and of unknown sources? Some of the white robed angels who once upon a time held holy candles in their hands and swore that they would follow the foot- steps of Florence Nightingale\fn{British nurse, hospital reformer, and humanitarian (1820-1910).} are now helping him to find fault with me. Even the student worker … even she … was his willing stool pigeon." At this point, he suddenly put his right hand on his chest, stretched out his stiff neck, closed his eyes tight, his mouth partly open, his tongue suspended, his face red, like a cock who was about to crow. I knew from my own experience that he was trying very hard to suppress an upsurge from within. After a while he massaged his chest with a thumb. As he was doing that, he opened his eyes, his lashes laden with tears, and he said in an angry voice, his head lowered,

"Sir, what makes you nauseous is just the superficial filth in society, but what I witness every day is a new class of patricians who built their wealth and arrogance on the pain and anxiety, the tears and the pleading of other people."

I did not have the heart to bother him in person after this. There were two or three occasions when I looked him up as I was passing by the hospital. He grew thinner and older every time I saw him. His back, once straight, was now bent. He seemed to work as if there were no tomorrow. There was always a cigarette in his hand. He was so alone and so busy, yet there was still a look of stubborn persistence about him which was typical among the young and which was hard to kill. But I dreaded to see the pain in him, the same pain of a cock trying to crow. I wanted to cry every time I saw him. He reminded me of the monk who could not get along with the abbot. He listened attentively to his patients about their symptoms, his thin neck stretched out. I wanted to cry.

83.76 A Woman Like Me\fn{by Hsi Hsi (c.1940?-)} Canton, Guangdong Province, China (F) 6

A woman like me is actually unsuitable for any man's love. So the fact that the emotional involvement between Hsia and me has reached this point fills even me with wonder. I feel that the blame for my having fallen into this trap, from which there is no escape, rests solely with Fate, which has played a cruel trick on me. I am totally powerless to resist Fate. I've heard others say that when you truly like someone, what may be nothing more than an innocent smile directed your way as you sit quietly in a corner can cause your very soul to take wing. That's exactly how I feel about Hsia. So when he asked me: Do you like me? I expressed my feelings toward him without holding back a thing. I'm a person who has no concept of self-protection, and my words and deeds will always conspire to make me a laughing stock in the eyes of others. Sitting in a coffee shop with Hsia, I had the appearance of a happy person, but my heart was filled with a hidden sorrow; I was so terribly unhappy because I knew where Fate was about to take me, and now the fault would be mine alone.

I made a mistake at the very beginning by agreeing to accompany Hsia on a trip to visit a schoolmate he hadn't seen for a long time, then later on, by not declining any of his invitations to go to the movies. It's too late for regret now, and, besides, the difference between regretting and not regretting is too slight to be important, since at this very moment I am sitting in the corner of a coffee shop waiting for him. I agreed to show him where I work, and that will be the final chapter. I had already been out of school for a long time when I first met Hsia, so when he asked me if I had a job, I told him that I had been working for several years.

"What sort of job do you have?" he asked.
"I'm a cosmetician," I said.
"Oh, a cosmetician," he remarked. "But your face is so natural," he said.
He said that he didn't like women who used cosmetics, and preferred the natural look. I think that the reason his attention had been drawn to my face, on which I never use makeup, was not my response to his question, but because my face is paler than most people's. My hands too. Both my hands and my face are paler than most

people’s because of my job. I knew that as soon as I divulged my occupation to him, he would jump to the same erroneous conclusion that all my former friends had. He has already assumed that my job is to beautify the appearance of girls in general, such as adding just the right touch of color to the face of a bride-to-be on her wedding day. And so when I told him that there were no days off in my job, that I was often busy Sundays, he was more convinced than ever that his assumption was correct. There were always so many brides on Sundays and holidays.

But making brides-to-be beautiful is not what I do; my job is to apply the final cosmetic touches to people whose lives have already come to an end, to make them appear gentle and at peace during their final moments before leaving the world of man. In days past I had brought up the subject of my occupation to friends, and I always immediately corrected their momentary misconception, so that they would know exactly what sort of person I am. But all my honesty ever brought me was the loss of virtually all my friends. I frightened them all off; it was as though the me who was sitting across from them drinking coffee was actually the ghost of their own inner fears. And I never blamed them, for we all have an inborn, primitive timidity where the unknown mysteries of life are concerned. The main reason I didn’t give a fuller answer to Hsia’s question was my concern that the truth would frighten him; I could no longer allow my unusual occupation to unsettle the friends around me, something for which I could never forgive myself. The other reason was my natural inability to express what I think and feel, which, over a long period of time, has led to my habit of being uncommunicative.

“But your face is so natural,” he said.

When Hsia said that, I knew that it was a bad omen for the emotional road he and I were taking; but at that moment he was so happy—happy because I was a woman who didn’t use makeup on herself. Yet my heart was filled with sadness.

I don’t know who will someday be applying makeup to my face—will it be Aunt Yi-fen? Aunt Yi-fen and I have one hope in common: that in our lifetimes we will never have to make up the face of a loved one. I don’t know why, after the appearance of this unlucky omen, I continued going on pleasure excursions with Hsia, but maybe, since I’m only human, I lack self-control and merely go where Fate takes me, one ordained step after another. I have no logical explanation for my behavior, and I think that this might just be what humans are all about: much of our behavior is inexplicable, even to ourselves.

“Can I come and see you work?” Hsia asked.

“That shouldn’t be a problem,” I said.

“Will they mind?” he asked.

“I don’t imagine any of them will,” I said.

The reason Hsia asked if he could see how I worked was that every Sunday morning I have to go to my work-place, and on those days he never has anything else to do. He offered to walk me to work, and since he’d be there already, he might as well hang around and take a look. He said he wanted to look at the brides-to-be and their maids-of-honor and all the hustle and bustle; he also wanted to watch me as I made the pretty ones prettier or the attractive ones plain. I agreed without a second’s thought. I knew that Fate had already led me up to the starting line, and what was about to happen was a foregone conclusion.

So here I am, sitting in a small coffee shop waiting for Hsia, and from here we’ll go together to my workplace. As soon as we get there he’ll understand everything. Hsia will know then that the perfume he thought I was wearing for him actually serves to mask the smell of formaldehyde on my body. He’ll also know then that the reason I wear white so often is not a conscious effort to produce an appearance of purity, but merely as a convenience in going to and coming from work. The strange medicinal odor that clings to my body has already penetrated my bones, and all of my attempts to wash it off have failed. Eventually, I gave up trying, and even got to the point where I no longer even notice the smell. Hsia knows nothing of all this, and he once even commented to me:

“That’s a very unusual perfume you wear.”

But everything will soon become crystal clear. I've always been a technician who can fashion elegant hairdos and tie a bow tie with the very best. But so what? Look at these hands of mine; how many haircuts and trims have they completed on people who could no longer speak, and how many bow ties have they tied around the necks of totally solemn people? Would Hsia allow me to cut his hair with them? Would he allow me to carefully tie his tie for him? In the eyes of others, these soft, warm hands have become cold; in the eyes of others, these hands, which were made to cradle a newborn infant, have already become the hands for touching the white bones of skeletons.

There may have been many reasons why Aunt Yi-fen passed her skills on to me and they can be clearly perceived through her normal daily remarks. Sure, with these skills, no one would ever have to worry about being

out of work and would be assured of a good living. So how can a woman like me, with little schooling and not much knowledge, compete with others in this greed-consumed, dog-eat-dog world? Aunt Yi-fen was willing to pass the consummate knowledge of her lifework on to me solely because I was her niece. She had never let anyone watch her when she was working until the day she took me on as her apprentice, when she kept me by her side instructing me in every detail, until I lost my fear of being alone with the cold, naked corpses. I even learned how to sew up the sundered bodies and split skulls as though they were nothing more than theatrical costumes.

I lost my parents when I was very young and was reared by Aunt Yi-fen. The strange thing is that I began to resemble her more and more, even becoming as taciturn as she, as pale of hand and face as she, and as slow in my movements as she. There were times when I couldn't shake my doubts that instead of being me, I had become another Aunt Yi-fen; the two of us were, in fact, one person—I had become a continuation of Aunt Yi-fen.

"From today on, you'll not have to worry about your livelihood," Aunt Yi-fen had said. "And you'll never have to rely upon anyone else to get through life, like other women do," she had said.

I really didn't understand what she had meant by that. I couldn't figure out why I wouldn't have to worry about my livelihood if I learned what she had to teach me, or why I wouldn't have to rely upon anyone else to get through life, like other women do. Was it possible that no other profession in the world could free me from worrying about my livelihood or let me avoid having to rely upon others to get through life? But I was only a woman with little knowledge, so of course I would not be able to compete with other women. Therefore, it was strictly for my own good that Aunt Yi-fen had taken such pains to pass her special skills on to me.

Actually, there is not a single person in this city who doesn't need help from someone in our profession. No matter who they are—rich or poor, high or low—once Fate has brought them to us, we are their final consolation; it is we who will give them a calm, good-natured appearance and make them seem incomparably gentle. Both Aunt Yi-fen and I have our individual hopes, but in addition to these, we share the common hope that in our lifetimes we will never have to make up the face of a loved one. That's why I was so sorrowful last week: I had a nagging feeling that something terrible had happened, and that it had happe.ned to my own younger brother. From what I heard, my younger brother had met a young woman whose appearance and temperament made her the envy of all, a woman of talent and beauty. They were so happy together, and to me it was a stroke of joyous good fortune. But the happiness was all too short-lived, for I soon learned that for no apparent reason, that delightful young woman had married a man she didn't love. Why is it that two people who are in love cannot marry, but wind up spending the rest of tbeir lives as the bitter victims of unrequited love? My younger brother changed into a different person; he even said to me:

"I don't want to live anymore."

I didn't know what to do. Would I someday be making up the face of my own younger brother?

"I don't want to live any more," my younger brother had said.

I couldn't understand how things could have reached that stage. Neither could my younger brother. If she had merely said, "I don't like you anymore," he would have had nothing more to say. But the two of them were clearly in love. It was not to pay a debt of gratitude, nor was it due to economic hardships, so could it be that in this modern, civilized society of ours there are still parents who arrange their daughters' marriages? A lifetime covers many long years, why must one bow to Fate? *Ai*, I only hope that during my lifetime I will never have to make up the face of a loved one. But who can say for sure?

When Aunt Yi-fen formally took me on as an apprentice and began passing her consummate skills on to me, she said: "You must follow my wishes in one respect before I will take you on as my apprentice." I didn't know why she was being so solemn about it. But she continued with extreme seriousness:

"When it is my turn to lie down, you must personally make up my face; you are not to permit any stranger to so much as touch my body."

I didn't feel that this would present any problems, but I was surprised by her inflexibility in the matter. Take me, for example: when it is my turn to lie down, what will the body I leave behind have to do with me? But that was Aunt Yi-fen's one and only personal wish, and it is up to me to help her fulfill it, if I am still around when that day comes. On this long road of life, Aunt Yi-fen and I are alike in that we harbor no grandiose wishes; Aunt Yi-fen hopes that I will be her cosmetician, and I only hope to use my talents to create the "most perfectly serene cadaver," one that will be gentler and calmer than all others, just as though death were truly the most beautiful sleep of all.

Actually, even if I am successful, it will be nothing more than a game to kill a little time amidst the boredom of life; isn't the entirely of human existence meaningless anyway? All my efforts constitute nothing more than an exercise in futility; if I someday manage to create the "most perfectly serene cadaver," will I gain any rewards

from it? The dead know nothing, and my efforts will surely go unnoticed by the family of the deceased. Clearly, I will not hold an exhibition to display to the public my cosmetic skills and innovations. Even less likely is the prospect that anyone will debate, compare, analyze, or hold a forum to discuss my cosmetic job on the deceased; and even if they did, so what? It would cause as much of a stir as the buzzing of insects. My work is purely and simply a game played for the benefit of myself in my workroom. Why then have I bothered to form this hope in the first place?

More than likely to provide a stimulus for me to go on working, because mine is a lonely profession: no peers, no audience, and, naturally, no applause. When I'm working, I can only hear the faint sound of my own breathing; in a room filled with supine bodies—male and female—I alone am breathing softly. It's gotten to the point where I imagine I can hear the sounds of my own heart grieving and sighing, and when the hearts of others cease producing sounds of lament, the sounds of my own heart intensify.

Yesterday I decided to do the cosmetic work on a young couple who had died in a love-inspired suicide pact, and as I gazed into the sleeping face of the young man, I realized that this was my chance to create the "most perfectly serene cadaver." His eyes were closed, his lips were pressed lightly together, and there was a pale scar on his left temple. He truly looked as though he were only sleeping very peacefully. In all my years of working on thousands of faces, many of which had fretful, distressed looks on them, the majority appearing quite hideous, I had done what I felt was most appropriate to improve their looks, using needle and thread or makeup to give them an appearance of unlimited gentleness. But words cannot describe the peaceful look on the face of the boy I saw yesterday, and I wondered if his suicide should be viewed as an act of joy.

But then I felt that I was being deceived by appearances, and I believed instead that his had been an act of extreme weakness; I knew that, considering my position, I should have nothing to do with anyone who lacked the courage to resist the forces of Fate. So not only did I abandon all thoughts of using him to create the "most perfectly serene cadaver," I refused to even work on him, turning both him and the girl who had joined him in stupidly resigning themselves to Fate's whims over to Aunt Yi-fen to let her carefully repair the cheeks that had been scalded by the force of the powerful poison they had ingested.

Everyone is familiar with Aunt Yi-fen's past, because there are some around who personally witnessed it. Aunt Yi-fen was still young at the time, and she not only like to sing as she worked, but she talked to the cadavers who lay in front of her, as though they were her friends. It wasn't until later that she became so uncommunicative. Aunt Yi-fen was in the habit of telling her sleeping friends everything that was in her heart—she never kept a diary—letting her monologues stand as a daily record of her life. The people who slept in her presence were mankind's finest audience: they listened to her voluble outpourings for the longest time, yet her secrets were always completely safe with them.

She told them how she had met a young man and how they had shared the happiness of all young lovers whenever they were together, even though there were times when they had occasional ups and downs. In those days Aunt Yi-fen went to a school of cosmetics once a week, rain or shine, fifty weeks a year, to learn new techniques, until she had mastered all that the instructor could teach her. But even when the school informed her that there was nothing left for her to study, she persisted in asking if there weren't some new techniques that they could pass on to her. Her interest in cosmetology was that keen, almost as though it were inborn, and her friends were sure that someday she would open a grand salon somewhere. But no, she merely applied this knowledge of hers to the bodies of the people who slept in front of her.

Her young lover knew nothing of any of this, for he was convinced that physical beauty was a natural desire of all girls, and that this particular one was simply fonder of cosmetics than most. That is, until that fateful day when she brought him along and showed him where she worked, pointing out the bodies that lay in the room and telling him that although hers was a lonely profession, in a place like this one encountered no worldly bickerings, and that no petty jealousies, hatreds, or disputes over personal fame or gain existed; when these people entered the world of darkness, peace and gentleness settled over each and every one of them. He was shocked beyond belief; never in his wildest dreams had he thought that she could be a woman like this, one engaged in this sort of occupation. He had loved her, had been willing to do anything for her, vowing that he would never leave her, no matter what, and that they would grow old together, their mutual love enduring until death. But his courage failed him, his nerve abandoned him there among the bodies of people who could no longer speak and who had lost the ability to breathe. He let out a loud yell, turned on his heel and ran, flinging open every door that stood in his way.

Many people saw him in a state of complete shock as he fled down the street. Aunt Yi-fen never saw him again. People sometimes overheard her talking to her silent friends in her workroom:

"Didn't he say he loved me? Didn't he say he would never leave me? What was it that suddenly frightened him

so?”

Later on, Aunt Yi-fen grew more and more uncommunicative. Maybe she had already said everything she wanted to say, or maybe since her silent friends already knew all about her, there was no need to say anything more—there truly are many things that never need to be spoken. When Aunt Yi-fen was teaching me her consummate skills, she told me what had happened. It was I whom she had chosen as her apprentice, not my younger brother, and although there were other factors involved, the major reason had been that I was not a timid person.

“Are you afraid?” she asked.

“Not at all,” I said.

“Are you timid? she asked.

“Not at all,” I said.

Aunt Yi-fen selected me as her successor because I was not afraid. She had a premonition that my fate would be the same as hers, and neither of us could explain how we grew to be so much alike, although it may have had its origins in the fact that neither of us was afraid. There was no fear in either one of us. When Aunt Yi-fen was telling me about what had happened to her, she said: “I will always believe that there have to be others somewhere who are like us, people who are unafraid.” This was before she had become so uncommunicative; she told me to stand by her side and watch how she reddened lips that had already become rigid, and how she worked gently on a pair of long-staring eyes until she had coaxed them into restful sleep. At that time she still talked now and then to her sleeping friends:

“And you, why were you afraid? Why do people who are falling in love have so little faith in love? Why do they not have courage in their love?”

Among Aunt Yi-fen’s sleeping friends were many who had been timid and cowardly, and they were even quieter than the others. She knew certain things about her sleeping friends, and sometimes, as she powdered the face of a girl with bangs on her forehead, she would say to me:

“*Ai*! *Ai*! What a weak girl she was. She gave up the man she loved just so she could be considered a filial daughter.”

Aunt Yi-fen knew that this girl over here had placed herself into Fate’s hands, of her own accord, out of a sense of gratitude, while that one over there had done the same by meekly accepting her lot. She talked about them not as though they had been living, feeling, thinking human beings, but merely pieces of merchandise.

“What a horrible job!,” my friends said.

“Making up the faces of dead people! My God!” my friends said.

I wasn’t the least bit afraid, but my friends were. They disliked my eyes because I often used them to look into the eyes of the dead, and they disliked my hands because I often used them to touch the hands of the dead. At first it was just dislike, but it gradually evolved into fear, pure and simple; not only that, the dislike and fear that at first involved only my eyes and hands later on included everything about me. I watched every one of them drift away from me, like wild animals before a forest fire or farmers before a swarm of locusts.

“Why are you afraid? I asked them. It’s a job that someone has to do. Is it that I’m not good enough at what I do, or that I’m not professional enough?”

But I gradually grew to accept my situation—I got used to being lonely. So many people search for jobs that promise sweetness and warmth, wanting their lives to be filled with flowers and stars. But how does a life of flowers and stars give one the chance to take firm strides in life? I have virtually no friends left today; a touch of my hands reminds them of a deep and distant land of ice and cold, while a look into my eyes produces innumerable images of silent floating spirits, and so they have become afraid. There is nothing that can make them look back, not even the possibility that there is warmth in my hands, that my eyes can shed tears, or that I am warmhearted. And so I began to be more and more like Aunt Yi-fen, my only remaining friends being the bodies of the deceased lying in front of me. I surprised myself by breaking the silence around me as I said to them:

“Have I told you that tomorrow I’m going to bring someone named Hsia here to meet you? He asked me if you would object, and I told him you wouldn’t. Was I right in saying that?”

So tomorrow Hsia will be here, and I think I know how it’s all going to end, because my fate and Aunt Yi-fen’s are one and the same. I expect to see Hsia as his very soul will take wing the moment he steps foot in here. *Ai*! We cause each other’s souls to take wing, but in different ways. I will not be startled by what happens, because the outcome has already been made clear to me by a variety of omens. Hsia once said to me: “Your face is so natural.” Yes, my face is natural, and a natural face lacks the power to remove someone else’s fear of things.

I once entertained the thought of changing my occupation; is it possible that I am incapable of doing the kinds of work that other women do? Granted that I'm not qualified to be a teacher, a nurse, or a secretary or clerk in an office building, but does that mean I can't work as a saleswoman in a shop, or sell bakery products, or even be a maid in someone's home? A woman like me needs only a roof over her head and three square meals a day, so there must be some place I could fit in. Honestly speaking, with my skills I could easily find work as a cosmetician for brides-to-be, but the very thought that lips I was applying color to could open to reveal a smile stops me cold. What would be going through my mind at a time like that? Too many memories keep me from working at that occupation, which is so similar to the one I have now.

I wonder, if I did change jobs, would the color return to my pale face and hands? Would the smell of formaldehyde that has penetrated to my very bones completely disappear? And what about the job I have now, should I keep Hsia completely in the dark about it? Hiding the past from a loved one is dishonest, even though there are countless girls in the world who will do anything to cover up their loss of chastity and the authentic number of years they have lived. But I find people like that despicable. I would have to tell Hsia that for a long time I had done cosmetic work on the sleeping bodies of the deceased. Then he would know and would have to acknowledge what sort of woman I am. He'd know that the unusual odor on my body is not perfume, but formaldehyde, and that the reason I wear white so often is not symbolic of purity, but a means of making it more convenient for going to and coming from work. But all of this is as significant as a few drops of water in a vast ocean. Once Hsia learns that my hands often touch the bodies of the deceased, will he still be willing to hold my hand as we cross a fast-flowing stream? Will. he let me cut his hair for him, or tie his tie? Will he be able to bear my gazing intently at him? Will he be able to lie down in my presence without fear? I think he will be afraid, extremely afraid, and like all my friends, his initial shock will turn into dislike and then fear, and he will turn away from me. Aunt Yi-fen once said:

"There can be no fear where love is concerned."

But I know that although what many people call love is unyielding and indomitable on the surface, it is actually extraordinarily fragile and pliable; puffed-up courage is really nothing but a layer of sugar-coating. Aunt Yi-fen said to me:

"Maybe Hsia is not a timid person."

That's one of the reasons why I never went into detail with him about my occupation. Naturally, another reason was that I'm not very good at expressing myself, and maybe I'd botch what I wanted to say, or I'd distort what I hoped to express to him by choosing the wrong place or time or mood. My not making it clear to Hsia that it is not brides-to-be whom I make up is, in actuality, a sort of test: I want to observe his reaction when he sees the subjects I work on. If he is afraid, then he'll just have to be afraid. If he turns and flees, then I'll just tell my sleeping friends:

"Nothing ever really happened at all."

*

"Can I see how you work?"he asked.

"That shouldn't be a problem,"I said.

So here I am, sitting in the corner of a coffee shop waiting for Hsia to arrive.

I spent some of this time carefully thinking things over:

Maybe I'm not being fair to Hsia by doing it this way. If he feels frightened by the work I do, is that his fault? Why should he be more courageous than the others? Why does there have to be any relationship between a fear of the dead and timidity where love is concerned? The two may be totally unrelated. My parents died while I was still young, and I was reared by Aunt Yi-fen. Both my younger brother and I were orphans. I don't know very much about my parents, and the few things I have learned were told to me later by Aunt Yi-fen. I remember her telling me that my father was a cosmetician for the deceased before he married my mother. When they were making their plans to get married, he asked her:

"Are you afraid?"

"No, I'm not," she said.

I believe that the reason I'm not afraid is that I take after my mother—her blood flows in my veins. Aunt Yi-fen said to me that my mother lives on in her memory because of what she had once said:

"I'm not afraid, and love is the reason."

Perhaps that's why my mother lives on in my memory too, however faintly, even though I can no longer recall what she looked or sounded like. But I believe that just because she was my mother and that she said that love had kept her from being afraid does not mean that I have the right to demand the same attitude of everyone else.

Maybe I ought to be hardest on myself for accepting my fate from the time I was a child, and for making this occupation that others find so hard to accept my life's work. Men everywhere like women who are gentle, warm, and sweet, and such women are expected to work at jobs that are intimate, graceful, and elegant. But my job is cold and ghostly dark, and I'm sure that my entire body has long been tainted by that sort of shadowy cast. Why would a man who exists in a world of brightness want to be friendly with a woman surrounded by darkness? When he lies down beside her, could he avoid thinking that this is a person who regularly comes into contact with cadavers, and that when her hands brush up against his skin, would that remind him that these are hands that for a long time have rubbed the hands of the dead?

Ai! *Ai*! A woman like me is actually unsuitable for any man's love. I think that I myself am to blame for all that has happened, so why don't I just get up and leave and return to my workplace; I have never known anyone by the name of Hsia, and he will forget that he once had such a woman for a friend, a cosmetician who made up the faces of brides-to-be. But it's probably too late for that now. I see him there through the window, crossing the street and walking this way. What's that in his hand? What a large bouquet of flowers! What's the occasion? It is someone's birthday?

I see him enter the coffee shop; he spots me sitting in this shadowy corner. The sun is shining brightly outside, and he has brought some of it in with him, for the sun's rays are reflected off of his white shirt. He is just like his name, Hsia—eternal summer.

"Hey, happy Sunday!" he says.

"These flowers are for you," he says.

He is so happy. He sits down and has a cup of coffee. We have had so many happy days together. But what is happiness, after all? Happiness is fleeting. There is such sadness in my heart. From here it is only a walk of three hundred paces before we arrive at my workplace. After that the same thing will happen that happened years ago. A man will come flying through that door as though his very soul had taken leave of him, and he will be followed by the eyes of the curious until he disappears from view. Aunt Yi-fen said:

"Maybe somewhere there is a man of true courage who is unafraid."

But I know that this is just an assumption, and when 1 saw Hsia crossing the street heading this way, a huge bouquet of flowers in his hand, I already knew, for this was truly a bad omen. *Ai*! *Ai*! A woman like me is actually unsuitable for any man's love; perhaps I should say to my sleeping friends: Aren't we all the same, you and I? The decades fly by in the blink of an eye, and no matter what the reason, there's no need for anyone to shock anyone else out of their senses. The bouquet of flowers Hsia brought into the coffee shop with him is so very, very beautiful; he is happy, but I am laden with grief.

He doesn't know that in our profession flowers symbolize eternal parting.

146.32 1. The Filial Son **2.** The Despised Scholar: **Two Folktales**\fn{by Shih Lich (c.1940?-   )} Hopeh Province, China (M) 3

1

In the Chinese cultural tradition, the true foundations of the nation are the respect and honor that children pay to their parents. For this reason there are twenty-four stories which have been handed down from generation to generation, and each one tells of acts of filial piety. .

This story is not one of the traditional twenty-four, but is the true story of a filial son who lived in my own native village, a place in Hopeh Province, called Hua-yang. In Hua-yang there was a family of the surname Liu which consisted only of the father and his young son. They were very poor because the father had fallen into bad habits. Although they were entirely dependent upon one another, the father assumed no moral responsibility for his son. He was continually drunk or gambling or playing cards or associating with prostitutes. No matter what people said, he refused to behave as a father should.

The son, on the other hand, gave proper attention to his studies and, in spite of his father's bad habits, was always obedient to his father's commands and wishes, and at all times paid him the respect and courtesy naturally due from a child towards its parents. In all this, the son gave no thought to the idea that there was anything unusual or special in his attitude and behavior towards his father. People all said,

"There goes a truly filial son."

One day the father fell ill and was in a very grave condition. It seemed as if there was no cure and no hope. When this happened, the son was stricken with grief and could neither eat nor sleep. He spent all his time looking

after his father. One day, the father turned to his son and said,

"I want something to eat; I want cakes made of freshly ground new maize."

Now maize-cakes are plentiful at certain times of the year; but the father had specially yearned for cakes made of freshly ground new maize. And there was none to be had. No, not anywhere! In the season just before harvest, the grain is still heading into cobs and has not yet hardened. So where could the boy find freshly ground, newly ripened maize to make cakes for his father? The boy was so concerned about what seemed to be his father's dying request that he went out to the family field to see if he could find any cob which was well formed and hardening to ripeness. He searched carefully throughout all the rows of maize, weeping as he did so. What devotion to his father! What a true desire to meet his father's need!

Of course, he was attempting the impossible; he was inviting disappointment even as, with a heavy heart, he went on with his search, weeping and sighing as he did so until his whole body ached with weariness; for you must remember that he had been watching over and looking after his father day and night. Therefore it was natural that he felt in need of a short rest. There was a shady tree at the end of the last row, so he sat down under it for a few minutes. Then, without intending to do so, he fell fast asleep. He slept for an hour or so and then woke up with a start. He looked around him.

"Where am I?" was his first thought.

He soon realized that he had fallen asleep on the edge of the family maize field. Then, while he was still rubbing the sleep from his eyes, he saw that the cobs of maize at the edge of the field nearest to him were ripe and ready for harvesting! This was totally unexpected. It was indeed a miracle. It was the kind of thing we Chinese people have in mind when we say,

"Filial piety moves the heart of Heaven."

The doctrine of filial piety indeed honors God and is expressed in compassion towards men. But the boy did not stop to think about moral teachings. He gathered the ripe cobs as quickly as he could, carried them home, rubbed the corn off the cobs, took out the grindstone and ground the freshly ripened grain into flour. Then, as quickly as he could, he made the maize-cakes his father had asked for. His father ate the cakes and then fell into a restful sleep. When he woke up, he knew that he was going to get well again.

You may be asking me whether this is a true story or not. Is it just a traditional tale which has been handed down through: countless generations—a story that people tell?

I assure you that it is true.

There was a very great man who was passing through Hua-yang not very long ago. He had heard about this boy and was so deeply moved by what he heard that he went to visit the father and son in their home in order to find out for himself whether this thing had really happened—whether the story had any foundations in fact. When he entered the house there he found the boy Liu and discovered that he was indeed the filial son of my story.

At the time of the great man's visit, the father was well again, and had been so deeply moved by his son's devotion and filial behavior that he was letting everybody know about this wonderful example of filial piety.

2

The Linhsien District of Hunan Province is famous for producing five outstanding persons, namely the Emperor Shen Nung,\fn{The legendary emperor (c.2838BC) who supposedly introduced husbandry into China.} the man of genius Chung K'uei, Prince T'ieh T'ou,\fn{"The Iron-headed Prince."} the exemplary filial son Loh P'u\fn{Customarily referred to as Loh P'u Hsiao-tzu.} and that paragon of women Mrs. Meng Chiang.\fn{Whose husband was conscripted to work on building the Great Wall of China and who never returned; and whose weeping so moved the emperor to compassion that he gave her permission to take her husband's bones home for burial.} The story I am about to tell you concerns the second of this group of five, Chung K'uei Ts'ai-tzu.\fn{A genius, a man of distinguished talents.}

Chung K'uei Ts'ai-tzu was a man of outstanding scholarly ability. His literary works, both in poetry in its different forms and in prose, were spontaneous compositions. In the course of his studies, he had learned that Shantung Province had produced the Sage Confucius but, although he looked upon Shantung as setting the standard for Chinese culture, in his heart he doubted whether Shantung scholars could really surpass him; so he set out for Shantung to find out for himself what standard they actually set there. With this purpose in mind he hired a horse and cart and set out on the long journey from Hunan to Shantung in order to visit the ancestral home of Confucius and call on the descendants of the famous sage. He would then measure his own scholarly ability against theirs.

The men of the K'ung\fn{The surname of Confucius—K'ung Fu-tzu.} family received him at their home. Then, the

one among them who had attained the highest level of scholarship stood up and challenged Chung K'uei Ts'ai-tzu to solve a given problem within the next three days.

The problem consisted of taking a roll of cloth about ninety yards in length, having it held stretched out taut and then taking a writing brush and, with a single dip of ink, inscribing one Chinese character which would fill the whole length of the cloth—but the character should not be the one-stroke character *yi*\fn{Which resembles nothing so much as a dash.}

Chung K'uei saw no difficulty whatever in taking up the challenge.

"That's easy," he said. "I take up your challenge. Please have a sufficient quantity of ink ground for me."

"There's no problem in having that done," replied the challenger. "The K'ung family has plenty of sticks of ink and plenty of servants too to grind the ink for you."

"I shall also need the biggest writing brush you can find," added Chung K'uei. "I'm afraid three days will not give you time enough to get ready these things which I need."

"We assure you we shall have the brush made and enough ink ground for you within the next three days," said the men of the K'ung family.

They forthwith gave orders for the biggest writing brush possible to be made, while they themselves all set to work to grind enough ink. They also procured the biggest bolt of cloth obtainable, saying among themselves,

"We specified ninety yards long; this bolt consists of a hundred yards. We'll see now whether this man is able, with one dip of the brush, to write a single character which is not a "grass character"\fn{I.e., a running hand style of writing in which the brush is not lifted for the various strokes of which a complex character is formed.} and is not the character *yi*, and which will fill the whole length of the cloth."

While the K'ungs were busying with preparations, Chung K'uei stood aloof smiling to himself and treating the matter almost as a joke—as if the challenge constituted no problem at all. And so the men of the K'ung family were puzzled and angry and said,

"How dare you, a greenhorn from Southern parts, a man of no family background whatever, one who has never studied the works of Confucius or of Mencius, how dare you come here and hold in question the undoubted scholarship of members of the K'ung family! What effrontery, that you, a man of no cultural background, should come prying into our private affairs!"

Meanwhile people around were talking about Chung K'uei in similar terms and discussing him from different points of view. Some said,

"If Chung K'uei isn't careful, the challenger is out to make a fool of him." Others said,

"The challenger has not laid down any conditions to govern the way in which Chung K'uei should solve the problem set—no conditions to control how he is to write that one character." When three days had come and gone, Chung K'uei sought out the men of the K'ung family and said,

"Is the writing brush ready? Have you ground a sufficient quantity of ink? And the bolt of cloth—is that ready too?"

"Everything is ready," they replied.

"That's good!" replied Chung K'uei. "If you're sure everything is ready, I want the most eminent scholars among you to stretch out the cloth for me as tightly as possible, another to hold the vessel of ink, and yet another to hand me the writing brush. Now I'm ready to write." The men of the K'ung family had no difficulty in meeting these requests.

"But hold a minute," said their spokesman. "There is another condition: if you, you upstart creature, fail in the attempt, or if you, in the course of writing, lift your brush from the cloth or if you end up by writing *yi*, I myself will punish you."

"Just as you please," replied Chung K'uei. "And what punishment will you mete out to me, pray?"

"You came here riding in a cart. I will force you to return on foot. Moreover, before you leave I will put up public notices everywhere, notices in which you confess that you are an uneducated fellow who has dared to come here to try to make scrambled eggs of our learning." To this Chung K'uei replied,

"What you will do to me if I fail is not my concern. The question is, what will you do if I succeed?"

"If you succeed we of the K'ung family will not only send you back by cart but will provide a fine horse and gifts of gold and silk for you to carry home with you. In addition, we will recognize that your scholarship surpasses ours."

"Agreed," said Chung K'uei. "The matter is now settled in the presence of everybody here."

Then Chung K'uei took up the writing brush and, using both hands, let it absorb ink until the bristles were full. Then he turned to the outstretched length of cloth and, with one steady stroke wrote one long *yi* character. Then,

with one upward fling, he threw down the brush and turned bowed to them and began to walk away. The spectators at once dragged him back saying,

"That won't do! You've broken the conditions! You agreed that the character *yi* was not acceptable, yet that's what you have written!"

"Please look again," Chung K'uei calmly replied, "and see whether I have written the *yi* character or not."

"Very well," said the spectators, "we will do as you say."

Then the scholars who were assisting unrolled the length of cloth and everybody looked at what Chung K'uei had written. And there, for all to see, was not *yi* but *p'u*.\fn{Which resembles a dash with a tiny down-ward slanting jag depending from the upper right of the dash and about a third of the way down it.} You see, the upward thrust of the brush as Chung K'uei threw it down, had made a brush-stroke which had changed the *yi* character into the *p'u* character.

So the men of the K'ung family had no choice but to acclaim Chung K'uei's success in meeting the challenge. They forthwith invited everybody to a celebration feast at which many cups of wine were quaffed in Chung K'uei's honor. Then they brought out gifts of gold and of silk and a fine horse for him to take home with him.

But this notable scholar was not satisfied with this achievement. He next proceeded to the capital to sit for the next highest imperial examination. When the results were published, Chung K'uei's name, designated as Chuang Yuan, headed the list. The next formality was for his thesis to be carried in to the Emperor to receive the royal signature and for the Emperor in person to confer the Chuang Yuan degree upon the successful candidate. The Emperor took up his pen to sign the thesis, but before he did so, he took one look at Chung K'uei and decided that the man's appearance was too uncouth for the degree to be conferred. His bearing was not impressive enough, and men would certainly despise him.

"He is such an ugly, repulsive looking man. It passes my belief that our country can produce no better candidate than this for our leading appointment! If we approve this fellow as Chuang Yuan, our country will lose face."

So the Emperor withheld his signature. There was, however, in attendance a high-ranking official who spoke up and said,

"Your Imperial Majesty, our country needs men of outstanding ability rather than of handsome presence. Men's abilities are of more service than handsome faces. If Your Majesty does not approve this man as Chuang Yuan we shall, Sir, be acting unjustly." A second official then spoke up and said,

:"Whether or not we are unjust, we have to consider the reputation of our country; that is of prime importance." Then followed a lengthy discussion, at the end of which the verdict was given:

"We are unable to approve this man as Chuang Yuan. The matter of his appointment to any post must be dropped." On hearing this, Chung K'uei protested,

"Sirs, consider my outstanding academic achievements—I have achieved the rank of Chuang Yuan—and yet I am now turned down not because of my scholarly deficiency but because of my uncouth appearance and ugly face! Allow me to tell you what happened when I visited the K'ungs in their family home. When I took the wind out of their sails, they gave me respect and heaped honors upon me. Yet, when today I come into the presence of the Emperor I am dropped from the appointment list."

With the thought of this he was so enraged that he bashed his head against one of the pillars of the hall and fell down dead. When the Emperor saw this happen, he was overcome with remorse and said,

"We have done wrong in not approving as Chuang Yuan this man of such outstanding ability and scholastic achievement. We have thrown away a man of unusual talents and, moreover, we are responsible for his death. We stand abashed before the very thought of him."

The Emperor's regrets knew no bounds and so, as a sign of his remorse, he bestowed upon Chung K'uei the posthumous title of "The Great Apprehender of Ghosts." That means that, after death, Chung K'uei became the official ghost-catcher.

Throughout the Linhsien District there are stone statues of Chung K'uei and pictures of him too. People affix a district government seal to these pictures and then paste them on the walls to frighten off ghosts and keep them away. You may think that this practice is only superstition, but the origin of the practice is the historical person, the highly talented Chung K'uei, who lived in Linhsien.

146.22 The Horses Leap Over Tan Torrent Lake: **A Folktale**\fn{by Lu Chi-fang (c.1940?-)} Hupeh Province, China (M) 1

In Hupeh Province, not far outside the west gate of Hsiang-yang City the river T'an flows swift and deep and

widens out to form the T'an Torrent Lake. The lake is several score of yards across and, on the mountain-shore of the lake, there is a big stone which bears the deep imprint of a horse's hooves. My story is about how that imprint, so deep, so beautiful, so clear-cut, came to be there.

In the period just before the establishment of the period of the Three Kingdoms,\fn{221-c.264AD.} there were three generals, sworn blood-brothers, Liu Pei, Kuan Yü and Chang Fei, who fought against the rebel leader Tsao Tsao and eventually, with the help of Chu-Ko Liang, brought comparative peace to the region. The period of fighting was long,\fn{168-221AD.} and the three brothers suffered many defeats before the end of their struggle. After one of these defeats, Liu Pei was forced to retreat to Hsiang-yang.

While he was in Hsiang-yang his host plotted to betray him, so Liu Pei escaped from the dinner-party and mounted his horse which was waiting for him in the courtyard.

Liu Pei was very fond of his horse which bore the name Thousand *Li* Steed, but most people feared the creature, regarded it as a horse of ill-omen, and called it "Tilu," which means The Vicious One.

As soon as Liu Pei was in the saddle and took up the reins, Thousand *Li* Steed galloped away carrying his master out at the west gate of the city. There, the road of escape was blocked by the T'an Torrent. What was to be done? Liu Pei pressed on to the place where the torrent widens into the lake. There was no bridge. Liu Pei could hear his enemy in pursuit. There was no turning back. At a signal from his master, Thousand *Li* Steed took a mighty leap into the deep and dangerous waters.

Liu Pei, up above his waist in swift-flowing water, was truly very anxious and not a little frightened. But, after a moment of hesitation, he took a firm hold of the reins, bent forward, and whispered into his horse's ear,

"Tilu! Tilu! You won't let your master down, will you?"

That word from a familiar voice was enough. At the whispered word, Thousand *Li* Steed gathered together all his strength and, with one flying leap carried Liu Pei up out of the water, across the remaining part of T'an Torrent Lake and landed him safely, fifty or so yards away, making, as he landed, a deep imprint with his hooves on the rocky shore.

Some people declare that Thousand *Li* Steed did not leap across the lake but across the river. Such people are wrong, for I have lived near T'an Torrent Lake and have seen for myself the historic hoof-marks on the rocky shore not of the river but of the lake.

What a magnificent horse that was! What superb strength and powers! But we know many more things about Thousand *Li* Steed besides his historic leap across T'an Torrent Lake.

For one thing, he was extraordinarily fleet-footed and had unusual powers of endurance. He could cover a thousand *li* in a day and eight hundred *li* in a night. That's why he was called Thousand *Li* Steed. He could travel a day and a night without any rest between and, on many occasions, put big distances between his master and the enemy and so helped Liu Pei in many exploits and escapes.

Among its remarkable powers, Thousand *Li* Steed could scale high mountains and cross deep rivers as if on level ground. One of its accomplishments could not be matched by any other horse, for Thousand *Li* Steed could walk steadily across a long, narrow, single-plank bridge, drawing one hoof and then the other alternately up behind its fellow until, step by step, he had carried his master safely across.

Thousand *Li* Steed's outstanding characteristic was that he would obey nobody except his master. If anyone other than his master got into the saddle he stood stock-still for a while, and nothing would induce him to set off and then, he would throw the strange rider. But, if he saw his master hand the reins to a guest rider, it was as if the horse recognized that his master had handed over authority for he was then willing to respond to the reins handled by the guest. But, if he had not seen the reins handed over, he would, without fail, throw the stranger.

Another of Thousand *Li* Steed's characteristics was that he usually did not utter a sound, but when he did so his loud neighing warned his master of impending danger.

The imprint of this horse's hooves, mad3e when he leapt so magnificently across T'an Torrent Lake, is there to this day, clear-cut and deep, an abiding proof of the truth of T'ilu's historic leap across T'an Torrent Lake.

186.170 Narrative Of An Earthquake Survivor\fn{by Mrs. Yang (c.1940?-)} Tangshan?, Hebei Province, China (F) 2

… "My husband had died a year before, and my daughter and I lived in a fifth-floor flat allocated by the work unit. We had only one room, and shared a common kitchen and bathroom. It wasn't a big room, but we didn't find it cramped. Because I hate extremes of heat and cold, my half of the room was by the inner wall, and my daughter's was by the outer wall.\fn{The disaster involved was the great Tangshan Earthquake of 1976, which killed some 300,000

people:H}

"That mormng, I was woken suddenly by rumbling, banging and a violent shaking. My daughter called out, and tried to get out of bed to come over to me. I tried to stand, but couldn't stay upright. Everything was tilting, the wall was leaning towards me.

"Suddenly, the wall by my daughter disappeared, and we were exposed on the edge of the fifth floor. It was very warm, so we were only in our underclothes. My daughter screamed and wrapped her arms around her chest, but before she could react more fully, she was thrown over the edge by another falling wall.

"I screamed her name as I held on to some clothes hooks on the wall. It was only after the swaying had stopped and I could stand still on the sloping floor that I realised this was an earthquake. I looked frantically for a way to get downstairs, and staggered off, shouting my daughter's name.

"I hadn't realised that I wasn't dressed. All the other survivors were wearing very little too. Some were even naked, but nobody thought about these things. We were all running around wildly in the half-light, weeping and shouting for our relatives.

"In the cacophony, I screamed myself hoarse asking everyone in sight about my daughter. Some of the people I approached asked me if I had seen their relatives. Everyone was wild-eyed and yelling, nobody took anything in.

"As people gradually realised the full horror of the situation, a grieving silence fell. You could have heard a pin drop. I was afraid to move, in case I made the earth start shaking again. We stood surveying the scene before us: collapsed buildings, broken water pipes, yawning holes in the ground, corpses everywhere, lying on the ground, hanging over roof beams and out of houses. A pall of dust and smoke was rising. There was no sun or moon, nobody knew what time it was. We wondered if we were still in the land of the living.

"I'm not sure how long it took, but I began to feel thirsty because I had shouted my throat raw. Someone echoed my thoughts in a weak voice, 'Water …' reminding everyone to turn to the immediate matter of survival. A middle-aged man stepped out of the crowd, and said,

"'If we want to live, we must help each other and get organised.' We murmured in agreement.

"It was starting to get light, and everything before us became more distinct, and more horrible. Suddenly someone shouted,

"'Look over there, someone's alive!'

"In the wan light, we saw a girl wedged in mid-air between the ruined walls of two buildings. Although her hair hung over her face, and her lower body was trapped and hidden from view, I knew from the colour and style of her bra, and from the struggling movement of her torso that she was my daughter.

"'Xiao Ping!' I shouted.

"I called her name over and over again, wild with joy and grief. She continued writhing desperately, and I realised that she could not hear or see me. I pushed my way forward through the crowd, gesturing towards her and sobbing hoarsely that she was my daughter.

"Rubble blocked my path. People started to help, trying to scale the wall my daughter was trapped in, but it was at least two storeys high, and they had no tools. I shouted Xiao Ping's name over and over again. She still had not heard me.

"A few women, then some men joined in shouting to help me. Soon, almost everyone was calling, 'Xiao Ping! Xiao Ping!'

"Xiao Ping finally heard us. She raised her head, and used her free hand—her left—to push her hair off her face. I knew she was looking for me. She looked confused; she couldn't find me in the crowd of naked or near-naked bodies. A man next to me started pushing everyone around me aside. None of us understood what he was doing at first, but soon it became clear that he was trying to clear a big space around me so Xiao Ping could see me.

"It worked; Xiao Ping shouted 'Mama!' and waved to me with her free hand. I shouted back, but my voice was hoarse and faint. I raised my arms and waved to her instead. I don't know how long we spent calling and waving. Finally, somebody made me sit down. A big empty space was still left around me, so Xiao Ping could see me. She was tired too, her head was lolling and she was gasping for breath. In retrospect, I wonder why she never screamed for me to save her. She never said anything like 'Mama, save me', not a word.

"Someone shouted to Xiao Ping, 'It's 5.30 in the morning, there'll be someone coming to rescue you soon!' He wanted to comfort her, to help her hold on. But seconds, minutes and hours passed, and nobody had come to the rescue. What kind of a country was this in 1976? A big city lay in ruins and three hundred thousand people had died, yet no one knew. How backward China was! I think that if we had been more advanced, many people might not have died. Xiao Ping might have survived."\fn{"When did the rescuers arrive?"}

"I can't say for sure. I can only remember that the army came first. The soldiers were all sweaty from running, but not one paused for breath before they split up and went to the rescue. Equipped with ropes and pitons, two soldiers started to climb up the wall in which Xiao Ping was trapped. It looked like it might collapse at any moment and crush them all. I could hardly breathe as I saw them edge closer and closer to her …\fn{ "She fell silent for a few minutes"}

"When Xiao Ping saw that someone was coming to rescue her, she burst into tears. The first soldier to reach her took off his uniform jacket to cover her. She only had one arm free, so he had to wrap half the jacket around her like a Tibetan robe. The other soldier held a water bottle to her mouth. The two soldiers started pulling away the bricks and stones around Xiao Ping, and soon freed her right arm, which was bruised and bloody. For some reason, they suddenly stopped digging. I shouted to them, asking what the matter was, but they couldn't have heard me.

"After a while, they climbed down and walked over to me. Gesturing with bloodied hands, tttey told me that the lower half of Xiao Ping's body was wedged between the reinforced concrete slabs of the wall, which they couldn't dig away by hand. I asked them why their hands were all bloody. They put their hands behind their backs and said that they were not allowed to use tools to dig people free, for fear of hurting them.

"After it was all over, I found out that some soldiers' fingernails and fingertips had been worn away by digging, but they had bound their hands in cloth and carried on. Some soldiers shouted madly as they dug, because they could hear moans and cries for help deep within the rubble. How much could they do by hand? The heavy rescue equipment couldn't get to the city because the roads were destroyed. How many people died waiting for rescue?"\fn{ "Xiao Ping must have been very strong"}

"Yes. She used to howl over a scratch from a branch, and blanch at the sight of blood. But in those last fourteen days she was so strong, she even comforted me, saying,

"'Mama, I'm numb, so it doesn't hurt a bit!'

"When her body was finally freed, I saw that her legs had been crushed to a pulp. The person who laid her out for the funeral said that her pelvis had broken under the pressure. I hope she really had lost feeling in her lower body in those fourteen days, when she was exposed to the elements. I counted every minute. Throughout that time people tried all sorts of different methods to rescue her, working round the clock, but nothing worked.

"Finally, the soldiers helped me to climb the wall up to Xiao Ping, and piled up a makeshift seat for me so I could sit holding her in my arms for long periods at a time. Her small, weak body was icy cold, though it was summer.

"For the first few days, Xiao Ping could still talk to me, and waved her hands about as she told stories. After the fourth day, she grew weaker and weaker, until she could barely lift her head. Although food and medicine were brought to her every day, and someone came to nurse her, the bottom half of her body must have been bleeding all the time, and gangrene must have been setting in. More and more people were concerned about her fate, but there was nothing anyone could do. The whole of Tangshan lay in ruins: there just weren't enough emergency workers or equipment to go round, and the roads to the city were impassable. My poor daughter …"\fn{"'Auntie Yang,' I murmured. We were both crying."}

"In the last few days, I think Xiao Ping might have realised that there was no hope for her, though people made all sorts of excuses to keep her spirits up. She lay helplessly in my arms, unable to move. On the morning of the fourteenth day, she forced her torso upright and said to me,

"'Mama, I feel like the medicines you've been giving me are taking effect. There's some strength in me, look!'

"When they saw her sit up, the people around who had been watching her attentively for fourteen days all started clapping and cheering. I thought a miracle had happened too. When Xiao Ping saw how excited everyone was, she seemed to get a new surge of strength. Her face, which had been deadly pale, flushed bright red and she spoke to her well-wishers in a clear, loud voice, thanking them and answering questions. Somebody suggested that she sing a song, and the crowd clapped in approval. At first, Xiao Ping was shy, but people cheered her on:

"'Sing a song, Xiao Ping! Xiao Ping, sing a song!' At last, she nodded weakly, and started singing:

"'The red star is shining with a marvellous light, the red star is shining in my heart …' Everyone knew this song back then, and many people started to sing along with Xiao Ping. The sound of singing amid the desolation was like the flowering of hope. For the first time in many days, people were smiling. After a few verses, Xiao Ping's voice faltered, and she slowly sank back into my arms.

"Xiao Ping never woke again. I thought she was sleeping, but when I realised my mistake, it was too late. She had no last words; her last experience of this world was of people singing and smiling around her. When the doctor told me that she was dead, I was calm—those fourteen days and two hours had wrung me dry. It was only

four days later, when they finally dug out Xiao Ping's body, which had started to smell, that I began to weep. Her body was in such a state … my own flesh and blood … I hurt, how I hurt!

"Poor child, in her fourteen years she only saw three films, *Tunnel Warfare*, *Mine Warfare* and *The Battle of North and South*, and eight model operas. She never laid eyes on a pretty dress or a pair of high-heel shoes …"\fn{"'That is a great sadness in Chinese history. I came out of those times too, and had virtually no experience of youth or beauty.' Mrs.Yang sighed."}

"Some people say the earthquake was divine retribution for the events of the Cultural Revolution. But who were the gods taking revenge on? I have never done anything to offend them or anything immoral. Why did they destroy my daughter?" …

186.172 Narrative Of An Earthquake Survivor\fn{by Mrs. Chen (c.1940?-)} Tangshan?, Hebei Province, China (F) -1

… "Not a day goes by when I don't think of that day.\fn{Of the the great Tangshan Earthquake of 1976:H} I don't think anyone who survived it can ever forget. Everything was so unreal.

"That morning, before it was light, a strange sound woke me, a rumbling and hooting, like a train was being driven into our house. I thought I was dreaming—dreams are so strange—but just as I was about to cry out, half the bedroom caved in, along with my husband in his bed. The children's bedroom on the other side of the house suddenly appeared before me, like a stage set. My elder son was staring, mouth open; my daughter was crying and calling out, stretching her arms towards me; and my little son was still sleeping sweetly.

"Everything happened so quickly … the scene before me suddenly dropped away like a curtain falling. I was terrified, but I thought I was having a nightmare. I pinched myself hard, but didn't wake up. In desperation, I stabbed my leg with a pair of scissors. Feeling the pain and seeing the blood, I realised this was no dream. My husband and children had fallen into an abyss.

"I shouted like a madwoman, but no one heard me. The sound of walls collapsing and furniture smashing filled the air. I stood, trailing my bleeding leg, facing the yawning pit that had been the other half of my house. My husband and my beautiful children had vanished before my eyes. I wanted to cry, but there were no tears. I simply did not want to go on living.

"It's been nearly twenty years, but nearly every day at dawn, I hear a train rumbling and hooting, along with the cries of my children. Sometimes I'm so frightened of those sounds, I go to bed very early with the children and put an alarm clock under my pillow to wake me before three. When it rings, I sit up until it gets light, sometimes I go back to sleep after four. But after a few days of this, I crave those nightmarish sounds again, because my children's voices are in there too."\fn{ "Does it make you feel better to have so many children around you now?"}

"Much better, especially at night. I watch them sleeping and feel comforted in a way I can't explain. I hold their hands to my face as I sit by them. I kiss them and thank them for keeping me alive." …

186.173 Narrative Of An Earthquake Survivor\fn{by Mrs. Ding (c.1940?-)} Tangshan?, Hebei Province, China (F) 1

… "You must have heard many times about how much destruction the earthquake caused—I don't need to go over it again. In fact, words cannot fully describe that scene. You only know what it feels like to be at the end of the world if you experience it yourself. In a situation like that, you think of your family first.

"The aftershocks had not yet died away when my husband and I managed to leave the building we had lived in, which was on the point of collapse. We discovered that the room where our children slept had been torn apart, but they were nowhere to be seen. My heart contracted with fear. Because there was a military airport near us, we were quickly rescued by the garrison.

"They soon dug my son out, but his legs had already been crushed, so they were amputated above the knee, as you see today. It's lucky he was rescued in good time, otherwise, on such a hot day, his wounds would have turned gangrenous and put his life in danger. After two days had passed and my daughter had still not been found, I was close to losing my mind. I saw injured, maimed and dead people dug out and carried away every day; almost never a whole person with nothing missing and no injuries.

"When I had almost given up hope, someone told me that many injured people had been taken to the airport runways. As long as there was a thread of hope, I had to go and have a look.

"But when I made it to the airport I was speechless with shock: the long runways were packed solid with

groaning bodies, laid out in four or five rows. Only then did it really sink in that the earthquake had not just shaken our building, it had destroyed an entire city of hundreds of thousands of people. Filled with dread, I started to try to identify my daughter from among the rows of dead and injured people; they must all have been alive when they arrived, but some had died before there was time to administer first aid.

"It was difficult to identify anyone: hardly any of them were wearing clothes; some of the women's faces were covered by their hair; some people were covered in mud. After half a day, I had gone over less than half a runway. When dusk fell, I went to the tents the garrison had provided for us. I planned to continue my search the next morning.

"Many people were sleeping in the tent I was in. There was no distinction between the sexes, and no distinction between rich and poor either. People collapsed in any empty space they could find, exhausted from rushing about desperately, searching without eating or drinking, living on hope. Just as I was nodding off, the voices of two men drifted over from close by:

"'What are you up to? Still not sleeping?'

"'I'm thinking about that girl—'

"'Still?'

"'I'm not thinking about *that*. I was just wondering if she mightn't die after being dumped in that place.'

"'Damn, I hadn't thought of that!'

"'What we did was bad enough, what if she dies?'

"'What do you mean by that? Do you want to go and check? If so, we'd better go quick. Then there'll still be a space for us when we get back, otherwise we'll get soaked by the rain if we sleep outside.'

"I looked around to see who was talking, and was shocked to see a length of multicoloured string trailing from one of the men's shorts. It looked like the string my daughter used to tie her hair back. I didn't want to believe that it was my daughter they were talking about, but what if it was?

"I rushed over to the men and asked where the multicoloured string had come from. They wouldn't give me a proper answer, which made me even more suspicious. I shouted at them ferociously, asking them where the girl they had been talking about was; frightened, they mumbled something about a ditch by a distant runway, and then they fled. I could not ask them for any more details, let alone catch them; all I wanted was to know if the girl was my daughter.

"I ran off in the direction the men had indicated. When I had reached the edge of a ditch, I heard faint groans, but could not see who it was in the dark. Just then, two soldiers on patrol came over to me; they had electric torches and were guarding the injured people on the runways. I asked them to shine their torches into the ditch. In the weak torchlight, we saw a naked girl. At that moment my feelings were thoroughly confused; I both hoped she was and was not my daughter. When the two soldiers helped me carry her on to the runway, I realised that she was indeed my daughter.

"'Xiao Ying, Xiao Ying!' I shouted her name, but she looked at me in confusion, without the slightest reaction.

"'Xiao Ying, it's Mama!'

"Suddenly, I noticed that the lower part of her body was sticky and wet, but there was no time to think any more of it as I hurriedly dressed her in clothes the soldiers lent us. Strangely, Xiao Ying pulled the trousers down again. When I asked her why she had done that, she just closed her eyes and hummed. She was so tired, she soon fell asleep. I lay dazed for a long time before I too, fell asleep.

"At daybreak, the roaring of a plane woke me. When I saw Xiao Ying lying next to me, I was dumbstruck: she was pulling down her trousers with an idiot grin on her face, and her legs and groin were all bloody. Just then, I remembered the words of those two men. Had they taken advantage of the disaster to rape Xiao Ying? I dared not believe it. And my daughter, a radiant, vivacious girl, had lost her mind.

"The doctor said that Xiao Ymg had had too great a shock, and told my husband and me that Xiao Ying had definitely been gang-raped. That was all I heard before I blacked out.

"When I came to, my husband was holding my hand, his face wet with tears. We looked at each other speechlessly and wept: our daughter had been brutalised and gone mad, our son's legs were gone …\fn{"May I ask if you sent Xiao Ying for treatment?"}

"We did, but we didn't understand that she would still feel the terror even if she recovered. Two and a half years later, just as her memory was starting to get back to normal, the day before we were planning to take her home to start a new life, she hanged herself in her hospital room. In the letter she left for us she said:

Dear Mama and Papa.

I'm sorry, I can't go on living. You shouldn't have saved me. There is nothing in the memories that are coming back but everything falling apart, and the cruelty and violence of those men. That is all that is left for me in this world, and I can't live with those memories every day. Remembering is too painful. I'm leaving.

Your daughter, Xiao Ying.

"She was sixteen, her brother was eleven. My husband tore his hair out with grief, saying that he was the one who had hurt the child, but of course it wasn't his fault. That night, he did not come to bed until very late. I was exhausted, and went to sleep, but when I woke up, his body was cold, and his face was frozen in sadness. The death certificate issued by the doctor states that he died of a heart attack from extreme exhaustion."\fn{"But you carried on."}

"I made it, but I wasn't really brave. I am one of those who are strong in front of other people, a so-called tower of strength among women, but when I'm alone I cry all night: for my daughter, my husband, my son, and for myself. Sometimes, I can't breathe for missing them. Some people say that time heals everything, but it hasn't healed me." …

83.1 The Water Lilies\fn{by Chen Shao-tsung aka Nora Chen (c.1940-)} Shantung Province, China (F) 3

As Chao Yi's car drove onto the suspension bridge over the lake, the first things that came to view were the clusters of water lilies in the lake, white, pink and creamy yellow, set against the dark green lotus pads and scattered among the floating water weeds. Ring after ring of this vision of charm and grace extended all the way to the center of the lake. Chao Yi could not help but feel a quickening of her heart beat.

Though it was not the first time this scene had appeared before her eyes, it had never failed to move her, filling her with a sense of happiness, and also leaving her with a faint feeling of loss. It was only a mere trace of euphoria, a sensation which nobody else could detect and she herself could not describe. At the same time, a feeling of weariness which had been hovering far, far away, seemed to be surfacing from the very bottom of her heart.

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This was a Friday afternoon. This was the day she went to the psychiatric clinic in the small town of Carnation every week. The weekend was coming up and Chao Yi felt particularly light-hearted. There were only two of them at the clinic, she and an aide. The work was never hectic nor did it constrain her as the daily routine at the main hospital did. Besides, there were not too many patients; she usually had only two or three appointments in the afternoon. When she finished early she could even run out to the field to pick strawberries to bring home.

Among her patients from town Mrs. Logan was a regular. She had long been the laughing stock of the town. She even looked different, and she talked incessantly, taxing the patience of one and all. Chao Yi, though, took a liking to this patient. The symptoms of her disease were very peculiar, even bordering on the absurd. That is: she complained all the time of her loss of memory. Ever since the birth of her fourth child ten years ago she had not been normal. She constantly muttered to herself that she simply could not remember what kind of person she was in the past.

Before Chao Yi came to Carnation, Mrs. Logan had gone through many psychiatrists and had taken many kinds of medication. There was nothing abnormal in Mrs. Logan's everyday conduct. Her life was just like that of any country housewife, cooking, washing, and endless other chores. Her husband was an auto mechanic working in a gas station. Her children were either attending school or working. A ten-year-old daughter was the only one still at home.

Chao Yi thought about the first time she met with Mrs. Logan. It was on a spring day a year ago. Chao Yi was just starting to work at the clinic in Carnation. She had to go over a small hill before reaching Carnation. Along the road the peach blossoms and plum flowers were in full bloom, and in the field several milk cows were grazing. The whole town of Carnation had only one street which was not even half a mile long. There were only two restaurants in town, one bar, a post office, a clinic, a general store, a market, a gas station, two other small stores, a sort of beauty parlor, and a church. There was, of course, the famous Carnation Milk Plant.

One Friday afternoon shortly after Chao Yi started coming to Carnation, as she was parking her car she saw at a distance, a long-haired middle-aged woman standing by a peach tree near the entrance to the clinic. She was wearing a tight fitting black T-shirt with a huge head of a white tiger on the front, her stomach sticking out. Chao Yi could not help glancing at her a few more times.

Chao Yi went into the clinic and the woman came in too. So she was the Mrs. Logan who had an appointment

that day. Chao Yi had gone over her history and was not at all unfamiliar with her case.

They sat down facing one another, and before the doctor opened her mouth, Mrs. Logan began her famous recitation for the thousandth time like a machine.

"Doctor, do you think I have amnesia? I got to be this way ten years ago after my youngest Annie was born, and I have become a different person ever since. I have never recovered from it. Some called it a nervous breakdown, but what exactly is a nervous breakdown? Will I ever get over it? Doctor, do you think that I may one day regain my memory?"

Chao Yi told the patient to describe in detail her so-called "amnesia." She asked if the patient remembered her childhood; if she remembered her parents and brothers and sisters, her life after her marriage, etc. Chao Yi wrote down in great detail all that Mrs. Logan said while observing her expressions and tone of voice as she related the events.

"I do remember," said Mrs. Logan. "However, I seem to remember them only in a vague way. They don't seem real at all; they don't seem to be part of my life. Doctor, do you understand what I mean?"

Chao Yi shook her head. She listened attentively and was observing Mrs. Logan's facial expressions at the same time. Mrs. Logan had a simple childish-looking face, but her gray hair and wrinkles made her look like a woman over fifty. Aside from the fact that she dressed comically and talked absurdly, one could not detect any general symptoms of a nervous breakdown.

Mrs. Logan repeated her story every time she came for treatment.

"I cannot remember anything. It is ridiculous to go on living like this. I feel like a stranger in this world. They all make fun of me, my family and the others. They say that I am ridiculous. Why don't they understand? Why doesn't anybody believe me. I say I don't know how the days have gone by, that I don't know how the years have passed on from one to the next. These last few years my days have been passed in a daze, and life seems to have slipped by me. I have no recollection of what happened during this time. How come I seem to have no sensation at all."

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While Chao Yi's thoughts were so occupied, her car had already reached the middle of the suspension bridge. The vision of clusters of water lilies left a sweetness in her memory and excited her for no special reason. She began to hum a long forgotten tune, Toselli's *Serenata Rimpiant*. Instantly it brought back memories from over twenty years ago of far away Taichung Park.

It was the twilight hour of a summer day. She was standing next to the lily pond in Taichung Park. The colorful evening clouds were drifting towards the horizon; people were beginning to drift away too; only the wisp of a fiery red cloud lingered in the distant sky. The air was soft with moisture; it was almost damp. There certainly were a lot of mosquitoes and gnats near the pond, and they kept finding their way up her sleeves and under her skirt so that she had to flap her skirt continuously. She was wearing a new full pink skirt with gray stripes. Her blouse was made of broadcloth with a white lace-trimmed Peter Pan collar, and she wore a pair of sandals. She strolled around the pond again and again. She lingered for a long while and could not bring herself to walk away, hoping against hope that a miracle would happen, hoping that the person she was waiting for would suddenly appear beyond the bushes or on the path leading to the pavilion; or he might possibly be among the cyclists …

He had not made a definite commitment to meet her here. He only mentioned in his letter that within a week he would be accompanying his father to visit the city she lived in. He mentioned no specific date. In his letter he said he would get word to her through her neighbor Hsiao-ling as to when they could meet. He was Hsiao-ling's cousin, and Hsiao-ling was her bosom friend. This was of course a secret among the three of them. It would never do to let the grownups know that she had a boy friend, because she was not quite seventeen, and he was barely nineteen then.

For several days during that time she left home right after dinner, telling her mother that she had to go to school for a rehearsal, while in fact she ran directly to the Park and waited around the pond hoping that he would appear unexpectedly from one of the corners and nooks right before her eyes. She was watchful and did not miss any tall, lean figure in light brown khaki uniform.

On the evening of the third day Chao Yi had become extremely agitated and felt a little faint. She sat down dejectedly on a stone bench, her eyes wet. It was at that moment that she heard the melody of Toselli's *Serenata Rimpiant*, played on a recorder by some passerby. The music was so sweet and so haunting that for a moment she forgot her own melancholy. She just sat there quietly listening. When the music was over she got up and left, however, the melody haunted her the entire evening.

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This had happened twenty years ago, and after all these years whenever Chao Yi happened to hear that tune or when she happened to hum the melody, memories of the lily pond and of her thoughts that day would hit her with full force; so much so that she seemed to smell the fragrance of the park and visualize the creamy white and pastel green lily petals fluttering in the evening breeze.

This kind of very intense reflection usually lasted only a few short seconds. In fact, in the last twenty years, Chao Yi seldom thought of this episode. Where would he be now, that nineteen-year-old boy in the uniform of those bygone days? The bitter sweet taste of first love had also long disappeared without any trace.

Come to think of it, Chao Yi was not at all sure about the trivial details of life during the past twenty years. At this point she could only remember a series of names of places and people and of dates and events, and maybe some general descriptions of certain years as "hard ones," certain years "smooth," or "unlucky" or "happy" ones. Did putting together all these adjectives and names and dates and events represent the sum total of the past twenty years of her life? Such thoughts troubled her; they depressed her.

After the car had crossed the suspension bridge, it went eastward for another twenty miles and crossed over a small hill before entering the town of Carnation with its many plum trees and peach trees. The melody of the nocturne lingered in her ears the entire afternoon. When she reached the clinic, Mrs. Logan was already there, waiting.

Today Chao Yi seemed to have a different feeling towards Mrs. Logan. As they sat facing one another she seemed to sense a gradual dissipation of the curtain of thick fog between them.

Mrs. Logan, as always, began her usual speech without deviation just like a record player.

"Dr. Chao, why do people not believe me when I say I have amnesia? I really do not remember my past, and I also cannot savor every aspect of life as I did before. In any event, life seems to pass me by, day after day; it's not the same as before. I feel numb. Things that mattered or were exciting before do not move me anymore. How very meaningless this kind of life is …"

Chao Yi gazed deeply into the light brown eyes of her patient. She sensed in Mrs. Logan's eyes the passage of time. The sensation was the same as when she looked at herself in the mirror in the morning and saw in her own eyes the traces of bygone days. She had felt the same way just now at the lakeside among the clusters of water lilies, that she was peeping at her own youth of long ago and far away.

For the first time Chao Yi called Mrs. Logan by her first name and said,

"Louisa, the past is long gone and impossible to recapture. If this is amnesia to you, then everyone has it. I have it too."

"Really?" Mrs. Logan was wide-eyed and unbelieving.

Chao Yi told her about the memories the water lilies had brought back to her. Talking about the doctor's own life broke all rules and principles of therapy.

"Louisa, today it dawned on me all of a sudden what your so-called amnesia is. In my opinion, the symptoms you mention are not in themselves related to loss of memory. You seem to wish for a revival of old feelings in all their detail and intensity. What you are longing for is to once again experience all those feelings deeply. But this is impossible, and you, therefore, are disappointed and pained. This is what you call amnesia. Am I right?"

Louisa listened very attentively, as if not fully understanding, but she nodded hesitantly. She then lowered her head.

When she lifted her head again, there were tears in her eyes. She turned and looked out through the window at the field of bright green strawberry plants. The summer sun shone brightly on the jade green outdoors. Far away a milk cow was swishing her tail. A bee was buzzing around the windowpane singing her song. Chao Yi seemed to hear the melody of the nocturne swirling vaguely all around her …

Mrs. Logan turned her eyes back from the strawberry patch as if she suddenly remembered something. She said in one breath,

"In those days we went to pick strawberries or cherries by the bushel. We brought them home and I made jam and stored it in jars. The two older children were in elementary school then; the third child was only a toddler, and I was pregnant with Annie. The kids just loved jam. You have no idea how strong I was. I worked long days taking care of things inside the house and out. In those days Sam had not stopped drinking. He did not care that we were poorer than church mice. Fortunately my brothers were around and they helped out, and we were able to eke out a living. We were young then and did not mind. Later, after Annie was born and I became ill, things were never the same again. I am like a vegetable. I keep hoping that I will recover, for I know that if I keep nagging like this, Sam and the children will all lose their patience with me. I asked my second child something the other day, and he stuck out his tongue and made a face at me. He has no regard for his mother at all …"

Louisa played with her fingers as she told her story with helpless pain.

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What Louisa referred to as the “later” events Chao Yi had read about long ago in the patient’s history and had heard the patient mention them. It was a series of nightmarish catastrophes which all happened in a short period of time. To this day it is still hard to tell if some of the happenings were Louisa’s mistaken recollection in her confused state of mind, or if they really did take place. Time moved on; things were different now, and there was no way to check or prove it one way or the other.

All these things happened ten years ago in the countryside around the town of Carnation. It involved the murder of her twin brother. The culprit was never found. It also involved a relationship between her husband Sam and a niece who was staying with them. While all these calamities were taking place one on top of the other, Louisa’s beloved dog was killed by a car. That very same night Annie was born. She had a difficult time, and her life hung in the balance for quite a few days afterwards. In the middle of one night she was screaming and yelling, pointing at the foot of her bed, and looking terrified. She claimed that her dead dog was there staring at her. The doctor had to give her a heavy sedative to calm her.

After she left the hospital Mrs. Logan was described as having had a “nervous breakdown” and as being “psychotic.” She had worn these labels ever since, unable to shake them off.

Mrs. Logan came from a poor family and only had a primary school education. She was badly abused by her alcoholic mother, ran away at eighteen and married Sam who was ten years her senior. She had four children in ten years and had been gravely sick once, so now at thirty-nine she looked well over fifty. Sam used to be a loafer and an alcoholic, but it was said that he had stopped drinking and had been working regularly at the gas station in town and acting like the head of a household now.

It seemed that while Mrs. Logan turned “psychotic,” the Logan family life took a turn for the better. Mrs. Logan’s illness brought the family peace and tranquillity. The price was high, indeed.

Chao Yi thanked God silently for giving man a “subconscious” mind when He created the body with all its other functions. This “subconscious” mind worked in secret ways; sometimes it brought endless sorrow; sometimes unexpected miracles. What happened to Louisa was the latter.

Based on her observation and analysis of the year past, Chao Yi could only come to the conclusion that Louisa’s illness was indeed brought on by the trauma of all those events happening at the same time. It drove her crazy, but the madness of the following ten years was really the working of her subconscious mind. You couldn’t say she feigned it. To protect her from further blows and deeper collapse, and to enable her to live on under all sorts of adversity, her subconscious mind urged her to remain muddled. Why return to the miserable environment of the past? So long as she continued to be ill, Sam had to continue to abandon his wayward life and walk the straight and narrow. Her relatives would not bother this poor woman or exert relentless pressure on her.

At the same time “forgetfulness” alone could make her forget and forgive. Those horrible and fearful happenings were mere dreams, something that appeared on a distant shore; were they real or were they imaginary? Other people denied their happening, so she claimed forgetfulness.

Only through actual loss of memory was she able to live on. Not only that, but it also enabled her to begin another leg of the journey of life. Draw the curtain; the past is the past. When the next act begins, the set is new; all the excitement and all the earth shattering events begin to fade away and eventually die.

The subconscious mind took over the sense of reality. Louisa saw what was real as unreal, and after a while she really could not remember her “past.”

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On her way home Chao Yi munched on the strawberries, tasting their flavor and tanginess. Before she realized it she was on the suspension bridge again. The water lilies once again appeared right before her eyes. The pink and white petals of the lilies were swaying in the evening breeze, blooming leisurely … the past came alive in her mind again.

In the shadow of the lilies, Chao Yi seemed to visualize a shy young girl looking uncertain and agitated. She also saw a village woman picking strawberries in the field. All these were surely things of a long ago past, and yet they seemed to be taking place just then. Ripples of shadows of the past, together with the melody of the *serenata* were drifting away in ever widening circles.

187.32 Excerpt from **Grandmother Had No Name**\fn{by Alice Murong Pu Lin (c.1940-)} Chengdu, Sichuan Province, China (F) 9

The water surrounded me. I had fallen into the river. The tadpoles I had been trying to catch must have been darting away from me now. But I couldn't see a thing. I swallowed the river water, an unpleasant taste of underwater weeds. After that, I remembered nothing.

When I came to, I was being carried up the slope to my house on the outskirts of the city of Chengdu, on the back of a teenager, a girl in Girl Scout uniform. I felt my wet and clammy clothes and shoes clinging to my skin and feet. I had completely ruined the new red leather shoes Mother had bought for me for celebration of the traditional Children's Day. I was supposed to attend the school picnic later that day with my classmates from the kindergarten class. With a bottle and a notion of my own, I had slipped away to catch tadpoles in the river. Luckily for me the teenager had happened by just as I fell into the river, and rescued me. I was less than three at the time.

From my own partial and disjointed memories and Mother's reminiscences, I was probably not an easy child to raise. While I could turn on the charm and win over any adults in the family, I had a mind of my own and was very stubborn. It would show up in some unusual circumstances.

My entry into school was one example. Mother loved to tell how, at age two, I had followed my cousin Zhenli, three years my senior, into the kindergarten class and refused to leave. The teacher, a good friend of Mother's and unaccustomed to small children showing a keen interest in school, did not order me out. Instead, she offered me a special table and chair complete with her own drinking cup, and there I stayed.

I would go on to complete the first grade by age four, under the same unorthodox arrangement. Not that I was an exceptional student in those early years. My interest in school probably had more to do with group activities than anything else.

The city of Chengdu, where I was born, is in western Sichuan province. Here I spent the first few years of my life before we returned to Hubei province, my mother's birthplace. Life seemed easy and comfortable there, even with the Sino-Japanese War going on and lowered living standards. I was growing up in a completely female household, with Mother, First Aunt, my cousin Zhenli, and Grandmother Li. The occasional male visitors were usually close relatives. Nurtured and protected, I had no memory of pain or discomfort even when the adults were facing their own crises.

I remember one summer evening I was abruptly awakened by my first aunt and was rushed out, bed-covers and all. I looked up and saw a flaming red light through the window. A fire! In no time I was deposited safely on the grass of the front yard with the rest of -the family. Together we watched a big fire in progress down the hill. It was the elementary school, the beloved school where I went daily for stories and cookies. I heard the adults' urgent conversation, but did not quite get the gist of their discussion. Still half asleep, I was fascinated by the bright glare, the smell of charred wood, the burning buildings. Years later I learned that arson had been suspected, evidently engineered by the superintendent of the school to cover up the irregular books he had kept, because he anticipated an outside audit. To me, however, that evening was more or less a summer interlude-1 loved the colors of the sky above and felt safe in my first aunt's arms. Fear was foreign to me.

Children in China were often held and carried in the arms or on the backs of the adult women who could not afford to have their daily household chores interrupted. Carrying the child close to the body was convenient and comforting for both the adult and the child. Chinese men and women, however, rarely showed physical affection toward each other in public, contrary to their responses to children. I sensed, even then, that the adults played by an entirely different set of rules.

After the end of the Second World War in 1945, we all moved to grandmother's house in Wuhan, Hubei. There my second uncle and aunt gave me my first lessons in adult- hood and its problems. They were the first couple I had the opportunity to observe close-up. Second Uncle was some sort of bank clerk. Hi,S marriage to Second Aunt, Mother's second eldest sister, was considered a good match: both families were Muslim. In addition, Second Uncle was from an educated, professional family, his sister being one of the few women at the time studying for a medical degree. Living next to Grandmother's house in

Wuhan, both Second Uncle and Aunt were regular visitors to the family. Second Aunt was a competent homemaker, her culinary skill was the equal of First Aunt's and her needlework surpassed that of most of her sisters. My mother was very fond of her second eldest sister. Both quick-witted and quick-tempered, they spent lots of time in each other's company. It seemed logical for me to stay overnight with Second Aunt's family when Mother's work took her out of town. It was to be an eye-opening experience for me.

Second Uncle evidently had his after-work routine down pat. Upon entering his front door he would call in a commanding voice for the chambermaid.

"Spring Flower!" he would bellow, "come and get me my slippers!"

Spring Flower, a girl not more than fifteen or sixteen, would scurry forward with a pair of clean slippers and a warm hand towel. I was mesmerized by what I saw: Second Uncle's total dominance over everyone in the family and poor Spring Flower's thankless task. Not knowing the root of my feelings, I felt indignant for Spring Flower. Why did Second Uncle order her about as if he were so much more important? Why couldn't he get his own slippers? For reasons that were not clear to me at the time, since I was only about four or five, I never developed any warm feelings toward Second Uncle. I would hear whispered conversation between Mother and her sister, my second aunt, when they thought they were out of everyone's hearing (not counting a little girl like me). They insinuated some irregular activities on the part of Second Uncle, that he was not shy about making advances toward female servants of his household nor visiting certain brothels in town. Typically, Second Aunt would lament her fate, being trapped in this predicament, and Mother would be consoling. I was puzzled by the complexity of the adult world and the seemingly helpless positions in which women found themselves.

Nor was I to escape, even as a tiny girl, from being an easy target for male attention. One of my older cousins, a teenage boy, was developing an unnatural interest in me. When we were out of the adults' sight, he would call me in private his "future darling little wife." He would bring me candies and cupcakes and show me nude pictures of movie stars. When we were alone he would expose himself and make lewd gestures. Sensing these to be inappropriate behaviors, though I was genuinely fond of his storytelling, I finally told Mother about these episodes.

Mother was putting me to bed one evening when I told her what my cousin had said and done that day. Face white, she got up from the bed and walked out, muttering that she was going to have a good talk with his mother. Moments later she came back and we had a talk, mother to daughter. Mother told me that men always tried to take advantage of women and that this had been true throughout the history of China, and that she was glad I had confided in her. She commented on the absence of a male in the house and wondered about Father's return to China.

Father did return, in 1947, two years after the war ended. Mother and I took a riverboat from Wuhan to Nanjing, where Father had set up housekeeping for us. On the boat, two young men, complete strangers, struck up a conversation with me. Impressed with my ability to read and write at such a young age (I was probably showing off as usual), they asked me to write down the names of my parents, at which point Mother quickly walked over to retrieve me from them. She seemed nervous and worried, and insisted that I sit with her during the remainder of the journey. I sensed her discomfort and obeyed, not totally understanding the natural fear of single women traveling in China during the post-war era. The social order was not strong enough to assure young women of their personal safety and stories about extortion, kidnapping, and worse were fairly common.

Mother probably had another good reason to be anxious. She was on her way to meet her husband after more than four years of separation. She kept reminding me to call my father by his name when I met him. I nodded. Father had been only a concept to me up to then. He was the greeting cards during holidays and birthdays, pictures on the wall, and presents in the boxes sent from overseas. I knew I had a father in the United States. I was told he was there to pursue graduate studies. I repeated it each time people asked me, but I had no feeling about him as a person.

I finally had a glimpse of Father. A tall, dark man. He came onto the riverboat after an inordinate wait and waved to Mother, who had become very emotional upon spotting him. I stood next to Mother on the deck and looked at this stranger. He was not like any of the pictures I had seen, for he seemed much bigger and stronger. I saw them hugging each other. Then Mother patted my shoulder, turning me to face him and said,

"This is your father, Rongrong."

I found my voice and called him "Dad," as if in a dream state. He picked me up to give me a big hug. Then all three of us left the boat. In his shiny new jeep, Father took us, our baggage, and all our years without him, to our new residence. Our jeep crossed the wide boulevards of Nanjing, with huge trees along the roadsides. It started to drizzle, clouding the street lamps with a heavy mist. I had no idea where we were going, but I knew instinctively that this stranger, my father, was taking us to a dry and comfortable place, a place that would hold much hope and promise.

Father had joined the Nationalist Air Force after graduating from the Shanghai Communication and Transportation University with a degree in aeronautical engineering. He had easily won the award to study in the United States, sponsored by the air force as part of the government's move to modernize. He had subsequently earned a master's degree in aeronautical engineering from Brooklyn Polytechnic Institute and went on for a doctorate. But his stay was cut short by his commitment to the air force to return to his duties.

Father returned to his homeland with new ideas and strong ethical standards. Promoted to the rank of lieutenant major in the air force, he found himself pursued by staff seeking personal favors and businessmen seeking lucrative contracts. Father's response to these attempts was a uniform rejection coupled with his eloquent speech on the patriotic duty of citizens to abide by the rules of proper conduct. I remember one afternoon when a lower-ranking officer brought two boxes of imported goods, a rare find during the last years of the Nationalist regime when inflation and food scarcities hit all urban centers without warning. The man was hoping to get Father to grant him a personal favor at work. Father shoved him and the two boxes of gifts out the front door. He sternly told him never to return, because he was a disgrace to the entire air force. Mother and I rushed out to see the commotion. I saw the hurt and awkward expression on this poor man's face and Father's explosive anger. My father had a real temper, I noted to myself.

But most of the time Father was a caring and compassionate man. Friends and colleagues came to the house seeking his counsel on domestic as well as work-related problems. Those managerial positions were responsible not only for the staff at work but also for their family affairs at home. This was true in the military services, business, and the academic community.

Having been without a father for more than four years—Father had left when I was a few months old—I was delighted to have him with us. I quickly adjusted to the new routine of rushing to the door when he came home from work, and going out with him on summer nights to sit under the sky. Father would carry out a big bamboo seat and I would sit on it while he told Mother and me stories—stories about far away places and things he had done over the years. He would show us a miniature statue of the Empire State Building in New York City. He told me there were miniature people hiding in it—for years I believed his stories and would look gingerly through the little windows to get a glimpse of these tiny people. When I was too tired to stay awake I would fall asleep on the bamboo seat and be carried back to the house. We also had outings to the memorial tomb of Sun Yat-sen, the tomb for the founding emperor of the Ming Dynasty, and to the Xuanwu lake for a boat ride.

We shared the big house in Nanjing with another family, that of Father's schoolmate in the United States, who had also returned to China to start his own manufacturing factory. The common ground between the two families was the central courtyard. So once again I was to be witness to the goings-on of a typical courtyard, where visitors came in to chat, where families met face to face, privacy temporarily forgotten, where the fundamentals of human life and relationships could be so easily observed.

Our neighbors, the Zhang family, had two children, a boy and a girl, about my age. We became fast friends in no time. I took a special liking to the boy, a couple of years my senior, who had a pair of lovely dimples and big, brown eyes. 1 spent more time however with his sister, both of us sharing an enthusiasm for baby dolls.

The Zhang family had a maternal grandmother living with them, and soon my paternal grandmother came to live with us, bringing her newly adopted son, Jing, a ten-year-old boy. Grandmother Pu, having raised four sons and one daughter, had decided to adopt another boy to keep her company at home.

The two grandmothers were treated in totally contrasting ways. Grandmother Zhang had no standing in the family; she was maid, cook, and washerwoman for her daughter's family. Frugal and tightfisted, the Zhangs insisted that Grandmother Zhang use the rainwater to wash clothes, whereas most families with means would get fresh water from the faucet down the road, paying a price for it. I remember watching Grandmother Zhang doing a full load of laundry in the central courtyard, her hands swollen and scaly, her silent tears dropping into the wooden bucket.

"Your grandmother has such a good son and daughter-in-law. She does not have any housework. But look at me," she said, holding out her hands. "Look at my poor hands!"

I would feel so sorry for her that I would rush to my room to get her some of my butter cookies, the only token I could think of to console her.

"I wish you were my granddaughter," she would say smiling, after eating my cookies, for she was not allowed nibbles between meals in her own family. I felt so good about relieving some of her pain that I thought about soliciting help for her from the family, but obviously I was not getting very far in changing her plight.

The visit of Grandmother Pu was itself not without trauma. At an advanced age, after a life of hard labor, Grandmother Pu was looking forward to joining her third son in family harmony. She would find that life with Father, Mother, me, and her newly adopted son was not an easy one to get used to. The boy, Jing, in frail health, was chronically incontinent. Given his lack of interest in school, and the need to change his bed linen often, Mother began to complain to Father about the burden of caring for him. Grandmother Pu, on the other hand, was protective of her adopted son and saw Mother's duties as the expected services of a daughter-in-law. She was particularly troubled by Mother's quick temper and outspokenness. Mother and Grandmother Pu spoke different

dialects and had difficulty communicating with each other, which compounded the tension between them. Caught in the middle, Father would be the peacemaker when he could, and ignore them both when he could not.

One night I was awakened by voices in my parents’ room. Half-awake, I got the drift of their argument: Mother was complaining about Grandmother Pu and her adopted son, Jing, while Father was getting defensive. Then I heard Mother’s muffled crying. The next morning when Mother came to dress me for school, I asked her what had been the matter, but by then she had evidently resolved whatever differences she might have had with Father and was her cheerful self again.

I knew that, despite this argument, my parents cared for each other. After a while, feeling homesick and uncomfortable in the cold winter of Nanjing, Grandmother Pu took her adopted son Jing home, back to Guangzhou, where the climate was warmer and more pleasant for her.

Life for us in Nanjing seemed to return to normal. My parents would go out together in the evening to a show or to dance. I was often left by myself in the house with instructions not to touch the electric stove. And I would venture out into the courtyard to chat with the Zhang children. All three of us would sit on our individual wooden benches under the sky and make up stories about our future.

It was the same sky, on those evenings when I was alone, that I had watched while living with Grandmother Li in her big house in Wuhan and it was the same flaming red sky over Chengdu, when I and my family watched the fire at the elementary school from the top of the hill; it was the same sky under which I listened to Father’s storytelling. For me, the sky was the universe, where dreams could be pinned to the stars, where fantasies could run wild and deep—the sky of my childhood.

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My maternal grandmother had no name of her own. I never knew the significance of this until I returned again to China in 1982, my second visit since Liberation. The fact is, I had learned years ago that grandmother had no name. During my early teens I came upon photos of her among old family documents. Two photos stood out in my memory. One was a three-by-five glossy black-and-white picture, showing her in a velvet turban with a piece of jewelry, probably jade, right in the center. Grandmother had a rather long face, unlike most moon-faced Chinese women of her generation, and her features looked distinctly Western—large double-lidded eyes, high-bridged nose, high cheek bones, and a wide mouth. I thought she looked at once exotic and beautiful. Only years later did I associate her Western features with her Muslim background. Another photo had her sitting in a rattan chair in the courtyard, with her children standing beside her, all five girls and one boy. She looked powerful but lonely in this picture, without Grandfather’s presence—he had passed away when the children were young. As I searched through the old family albums and documents, I saw an old household registration, commonly used in those days as a substitute for individual identification, in which Grandmother was listed as Mrs. Li—no first name, no maiden name, just Mrs. Li.

I remember asking Mother if Grandmother’s first name had been inadvertently left out. Mother explained that it was the proper way of registering married women in the old days—a woman was known only as a wife in her new family. Mother did not recall Grandmother’s given name, if she had one, for she was always Mu-ma to Mother, Mu-ma meaning Mom in the local Wuhan dialect. Though I thought at the time the situation odd and archaic, I did not pursue my curiosity further. I was then more interested in Grandmother’s life as wife in the Li family.

Mother told me that Grandfather Li had come from an old Chinese Muslim family whose ancestors had emigrated to China via the old Silk Road, ending up in Xian centuries ago. The family later moved eastward into Hubei, in central China. Li was not their original Muslim name, but the imperial name of a Ming emperor, given to Grandfather’s ancestors in recognition for good services performed for the emperor.

This association with the imperial family would have a profound impact on the occupational choices of the Li men. No longer limited to the merchant trade, they began to assume various government and military positions during the next centuries. By the time Grandfather was born, his immediate ancestors had developed a strong family tradition in military service. Thus it was not surprising that Grandfather found himself enrolled in the Wuhan Military Academy,\fn{China’s West Point under the Koumintang:H} demonstrating a keen interest in a military career. Grandfather was one of the few graduates of the Academy chosen to go on to study in Japan. But to his deep regret, he never made the trip. Instead, he settled down in Wuhan with the Muslim girl chosen for him by his parents, a girl he had not met before the wedding.

Arranged marriage was still practiced well into this century. This could be done through a matchmaker or arranged by the parents of both families, depending on their relative social status, economic ability, and the ties between the two families. As a child, I was only dimly aware of the trauma a couple must have gone through

facing the unknown, namely each other and their new life together. One sunny morning, while living with Grandmother, I joined other children to watch a wedding procession in the neighborhood. The bride, under a heavy veil of scarlet brocade covering her entire head and face, was being led to a waiting carriage by her family, her mother sobbing incessantly. Face unseen, the bride also seemed visibly shaken.

Puzzled by the sad and tearful scene, I followed the carriage to the house of the bridegroom's family. Watching brides arrive at their new residence was a favorite pastime for neighborhood children. They had practically surrounded the house, fighting to get a closer look at this bride. I joined the crowd and after considerable struggle reached the bedroom window. I looked in.

The new bride was sitting on the bed, wiping tears from under her veil. I was disappointed in not getting a good look at her, but I heard an older child next to me muttering,

"Wait until she sees the bridegroom. He's as ugly as a toad."

After his marriage to Grandmother in 1904, Grandfather's military career began to prosper. He was soon appointed the military envoy to supervise affairs along the border with Burma, far away from his family in central China. Rarely home, he left the running of the household to Grandmother (although, despite his protracted absences, they still produced six children). As we expected in those days, Grandfather soon felt the need to set up a household away from home; he was seriously contemplating taking a concubine.

When the news of his intention reached Grandmother, she wasted no time. Despite this common practice among well-off males, Grandmother was not about to be left out of the arrangement. Feet bound and inexperienced in travel, she gathered her expanding family brood and headed for the Burmese border, traveling one thousand miles to get there.

The concubine-to-be was so terrified of Grandmother's arrival and her potential negative vote that she pulled out all the stops to make Grandmother's stay comfortable. Mother recounted the first encounter: the middle-aged matron and the slip of a girl sizing up each other. The concubine, recognizing her own inferior status in the family hierarchy, knelt down in a deep kowtow to pledge her loyalty to her "elder sister" and to their master. Grandmother soon warmed to the girl's attempts at sisterly affection and felt comfortable enough to return home to Hubei, only to learn a few months later that the concubine had eloped with Grandfather's lieutenant.

One woman had out-witted another, and in the end, outsmarted the man in their lives.

Grandfather and Grandmother seemed to become closer after the affair of the concubine. Grandmother declared that she needed to take over the matter of looking for another concubine. For whatever reason, she never found one. Grandfather, on the other hand, was growing tired of his constant travels, and contemplated an early retirement from the service.

Mother was close to Grandfather Li. Being the fourth daughter, she was treated more like a boy by Grandfather, who by then had given up any hope for a son—he would go on to have another daughter before the only son was born—and seemed to take particular liking to Mother's outgoing personality.

"My fourth one," he would call out to her on returning from an extended absence. "See what I've got here for you!" Mother would jump into his lap, an unusually affectionate gesture toward a father for a little girl at that time; and delightedly examine the souvenir he had brought for her.

Grandfather's constant travels had also expanded his knowledge and awareness of the outside world. A believer in education, even for girls, he encouraged Mother's schooling. Hence, unlike the three sisters before her, Mother was able to receive a regular public education. Grandfather Li also brought ideas about the "natural feet" movement from the Guangzhou region, where women at the turn of the century had stopped the practice of footbinding. None of his daughters would have to go through this inhuman treatment, he declared, even if their prospect of marriage was diminished by a pair of big feet. While Grandfather was loud and demanding, accustomed to commanding armies during his military career, he was unusually gentle around Grandmother and deferred to her in most domestic decisions. Grandmother, on the other hand, secure in her position in the family, never flaunted her hold on Grandfather in front of the children.

Grandmother held the purse strings in the family, a practice common among the Chinese women of her generation, based on the belief that men should take care of the affairs outside the home, women in the home. After Grandfather retired from military service, he decided to go into the confectionery business, but not being a businessman nor interested in becoming one, he quickly lost the family fortune. Mother recalled the final years of Grandfather's management of the business: food was freely given away to friends and relatives; baskets of black sesame seeds, used in cookies and pastries, were pilfered from the store with no accounting; the books were in disarray.

This would have a profound impact on Grandfather. The once powerful military commander became an unhappy old man, squandering his time in the teahouse swapping stories with old friends. Grandmother, on the other hand, remained stoic and serene throughout those financially turbulent years. So adept in financial matters, she single-handedly raised the six children without outside financial help.

I grew up in Grandmother's household. Mother went home to stay after my birth, while Father was studying in the United States. By then, most of Grandmother's children had left home. The only son had died during the Sino-Japanese War as a pilot in the air force, and his surviving daughter, Zhenli, three years older than I, had been left with Grandmother by her mother, who had eloped with another man after my uncle's death. Also living with Grandmother, in addition to Mother, Zhenli, and myself, was First Aunt who had returned home following the death of her husband, long before the rest of us joined Grandmother in her big house.

To supplement the family income, Grandmother had to rent sections of the house to distant relatives. I remember watching the comings and goings of countless uncles, aunts, and cousins from the center courtyard. In my childhood memories, Grandmother was a petite, frail woman, moving quietly in the background, who in her final years had relinquished the major household responsibilities to First Aunt, her eldest daughter. Grandmother seemed to speak little, and when she did, it was in a low whisper.

With her reduced responsibilities at home, Grandmother spent a lot of time with me and my cousin Zhenli. Her bound feet limited her movements. She had to walk slowly and every step put a sharp pain through her entire body, so Zhenli and I would act as her substitute for a walking cane whenever we ventured outside together. She had developed a love for the waterpipe, a popular activity among ladies of the leisure class, and I was assigned the task of making long straws from yellow rice paper to light her pipe. After supper, we would all sit in. the back yard, watching the stars in the sky, listening to her storytelling, and the burbling of her waterpipe. 1 would often be lulled to sleep and carried back into the house. But, more often than not, after a long story, Grandmother would ask me to massage her back.

"I want those tiny fists pounding on my back, Rongrong," she would say to me, and I would oblige her by using all my might to pound her backbones as hard as I could. Most of the time I thought of Grandmother as a hopeless and dependent old woman. I would be proved wrong soon enough.

The occasion was the visit from my paternal grandmother, Grandmother Pu. A native of Guangzhou province, she had big feet, spoke the hard-to-understand Cantonese, and, worst of all, was a pork-eater—a non-Muslim woman. Evidently Mother had broken with Muslim tradition by marrying a non-Muslim from another province, an event close to being open warfare with the parents in a Muslim family. Since Mother usually got what she wanted, she had gone ahead and married my father despite her family's opposition, and Grandmother Li had to become resigned to having a non-Muslim son-in-law.

With this as a backdrop, the visit from Grandmother Pu was a critical one for Grandmother Li, who was determined to show utmost civility and hospitality. Having met Grandmother Pu before and having picked up some of the Cantonese dialect, I was the chosen family interpreter for the two grandmothers. The most immediate concern was food preparation, since Grandmother Pu loved her pork dishes and Grandmother Li forbade any pork products in the house. However, Grandmother Li hoped to convince Grandmother Pu that the healthy, delicate Muslim foods—Qingzheng cuisine—would be sufficient for her during her short stay with us. Grandmother Pu, on the other hand, had very little awareness of the importance of this issue and was soon asking for cooking utensils for herself so that she could cook in a separate section of the house. Eager to help and not recognizing the severity of the situation, I obtained the necessary cooking utensils for her.

When the aroma of pork—the "evil smell"—penetrated the thin walls of Grandmother Pu's room and escaped into the central courtyard, Grandmother Li became outraged. Along with my hapless Mother, I was summoned to Grandmother Li's room. Sitting on top of her high rosewood bed, Grandmother sternly told me I had offended Allah's wishes and that I was a naughty, sinful girl. I stammered, "But … Grandmother Pu can't have our kind of food,: but was stopped short by the cold stare, the only time I had faced real anger from Grandmother Li. Mother intervened at the appropriate moment and quickly ushered me out of Grandmother's room.

It was in 1982, when I visited Grandmother's house for the first time as an adult, that I began to see her in a new light. Here I was, standing in what had once been the central courtyard, the decayed stone pavement worn and darkened by years of neglect and abuse, recalling it as it had been more than three decades ago, with its very different inhabitants. The blurred image of Grandmother, in photos and childhood memories, became clearer. This exotic and mysterious woman had once put her life and soul into this. house, but she did it in silence and anonymity. She came to the house nameless, and she left without leaving her name. Yet I did not imagine

Grandmother sad and wistful, nor angry and resentful. She went about her own business quietly accepting it all. The imprint of her influence could still be felt decades after her departure.

As I reflected on this during my brief visit to Grandmother's house, I passed through her old bedroom, now occupied by a distant aunt. I looked in. The same rosewood bed was still there, with a starched white mosquito net hanging from the ceiling. Suddenly an old image came back to me. I saw Grandmother sitting on the bed, her bound feet on a stool, unwrapping her bandage—a daily ritual that never ceased to fascinate me. I saw her concentrated attention to her poor deformed toes, bent deeply into the soles of her feet, as she slowly and meticulously put her unwrapped feet in a basin of warm water. Fresh flower petals floated on top of the basin, adding to the aroma of the fragrant oil Grandmother had put in the basin to soften her feet. She looked up and smiled at me. She seemed so proud and so undaunted.

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Whenever I think of my first aunt, I am reminded of the passages in typical Chinese romantic novels depicting the first day in the life of a newlywed girl in the old society.

> Awakened before dawn, she slipped out of her bed quietly so as not to disturb her husband's slumber. The dim early morning light shot through the rice-papered windows onto the mirror on the dressing table. She made herself up meticulously before preparing the morning tea for her new parents. She could not help but notice the critical scrutiny from her mother-in-law as the tea was served, who was undoubtedly looking for clues that the newlyweds had been properly active the night before.

Like the heroine, my first aunt went through the torment- ing experience of a young girl married into a powerful family of the 1920s. But, unlike the brides of the fictional romances, her marriage did not have a happy ending.. She was a victim of marriage throughout her life.

First Aunt was sixteen when she was married into a Muslim family more prominent than her own. Her father, my grandfather Li, had considered the match suitable because First Aunt was to wed the eldest son of an important family, an enviable position for any girl seeking a marriage prospect.. According to Chinese tradition, the eldest son, in addition to occupying the senior position among the siblings, holds.the second most powerful rank in the family hierarchy. Second only to the family patriarch, he stands to inherit the bulk of the family fortune.

By then, Grandfather's confectionery business had been failing steadily. For him, marrying off a daughter, particularly the eldest, was a logical step to alleviate .the burdens of a financially troubled family.

According to First Aunt;'s own account, she knew nothing about her future husband except for his being the oldest son. As was typically the case with arranged marriages, she was in no position to voice her own reaction to the match. At age sixteen she was considered old enough to marry, and marry she did.

The first shock for First Aunt following the marriage was learning about her husband's physical condition. At a young age he had contracted tuberculosis and was now an invalid with a heavy opium addiction. Apparently his family had considered the marriage the proper way to turn around his poor state of health. The use of a wedding to bring good luck to the family and the bridegroom was called *chongxi* or "filling up happiness."

His family had kept the illness from outsiders, including First Aunt's family. Needless to say, Grandfather was furious that he had been tricked into accepting the marriage proposal, but the shame of terminating a marriage after its consummation was so strong that he could not take any action. Grandmother Li, though pained by her daughter's unfortunate position, attributed the circumstances to fate. She advised First Aunt to be patient and loyal to her new family.

As if this discovery of her husband's condition was not enough, First Aunt found herself a nursemaid to her invalid husband who, on days when he was more lucid and drug-free, would demand her toral attention in waiting on him. He rarely left his bedroom, because his condition had excused him from taking up a vocation and the family continued to support his idle lifestyle. First Aunt would stay with him, filling his opium pipe, bringing food to his bed and escorting him to the toilet when he was too weak to help himself. He was especially tyrannical in his demand that First Aunt, not any maid or manservant, be the one to perform the most intimate tasks for him.

As a young bride, First Aunt also had the obligatory morning ritual of kowtowing to her parents-in-law and serving them breakfast tea. The breakfast tea ritual, practiced well into the middle of this century, served to demonstrate the power hierarchy in the bride's new family. Not only were the bride's delicate manners in serving tea appraised, but so was the bride herself, like a specimen to be tested and molded—not one strand of hair out of place, nor any misapplication of makeup, nor improper choice of clothing. Otherwise, the bride would be confronted with her shortcomings and told to correct the deficiencies.

It was difficult for me to picture First Aunt as the delicate, ill-fated bride, for when I knew her, she had lost all her youthful looks. She was a rather masculine woman, big-boned and tall (considered uncomely in those days), with an awkward gait and unusually high cheek-bones and square jaw, her straight hair tied up in a severe bun at the nape. She seldom smiled at us and often gave her horrifying stare at our mischievousness. I and my cousin Zhenli were more than once intimidated into silent obedience by First Aunt's stare. Only years later did I understand the self- protective function of her lack of femininity. Her gender had brought her nothing but misery in life.

My aunt's first year with her in-laws was oppressive, especially for a girl of sixteen. At the same time, contact with her own family was limited and frowned upon. A bride's return to her old family, other than at the acceptable holiday season, was considered a betrayal of her new family. Not being able to share her miserable state of mind, least of all with her husband, First Aunt took the step many women before her had taken. She attempted suicide by swallowing a large amount of opium from her husband's supply.

It was the fear of scandal that finally brought a change of attitude in her new family. First Aunt was laid up for a while, to recuperate from the failed suicide, and had some respite for the first time since entering the household. Miraculously, she also became pregnant, thereby enjoying the pampered state of an expectant mother who drew attention and delicate treatment from all, to ensure the birth of a healthy child.

Her good fortune in being left alone did not last long, however. Before long her husband died of an opium overdose, while First Aunt was still pregnant. The only son, Lianfeng, would be born without knowing his father. What went through First Aunt's mind at her husband's death would never be known, for she never discussed it with Grandmother Li or her four sisters. Grandfather Li passed away soon after, in the same year, leaving First Aunt completely at the mercy of her in-laws.

Luckily, giving birth to a healthy son was viewed as the single most important accomplishment a married woman could make, and this dramatically changed First Aunt's status with her in-laws. Having suffered the loss of the eldest son, they now devoted their full attention and care to the eldest grandson. Thus First Aunt, despite the absence of any male support from her own family, was able to gather some strength on her own, and her life became less stressful for a few years.

But then her in-laws passed away. A fight for the family fortune erupted. With a large number of relatives fighting for their share of the family fortune, First Aunt, being meek and agreeable, did not fare well in the ugly struggle for control of the estate. In the end, she was given a big family house as the sole inheritance for her son and herself. Discouraged and anxious to sever ties with her husband's family, she sold the house and moved in with Grandmother Li. The two widows, mother and daughter, formed a team of mutual support to raise the rest of the family, four girls and one boy, plus First Aunt's own son.

Mother, the fourth of five daughters, was brought up more by her eldest sister, First Aunt, than by her own mother, partly because the ten years difference between them fostered First Aunt's maternal affection toward her younger sister, and partly because Mother relied heavily on First Aunt's support during her student years. First Aunt, though largely self-taught, was more educated than her own mother, and could take a more enlightened view of Mother's carefree ways in school and her less-than-brilliant performance as a student. First Aunt also helped Mother with her home economics assignments from school, for Mother was hopelessly inadequate when it came to cooking and sewing and all the other domestic activities expected of young girls of her day. During Grandmother Li's final years, the household responsibilities had been transferred to First Aunt, who took them over effortlessly; she became the true matriarch of the Li family. Though skilled in sewing and needlework, she did these mostly for others, she herself maintaining the same plain-looking exterior.

First Aunt also cared for me during my stay in Grandmother's house, while Mother was working and Father was studying abroad. As the years went on, Mother became more critical of First Aunt's ways as she outgrew her dependence on her. She was particularly dissatisfied with the way First Aunt dressed me.

"You make her look like a peasant boy!" Mother often complained.

Due to her work schedule and the distance of her work place, she was only home on weekends. Thanks to my Muslim lineage, I was born with a full head of curly hair and Mother took great delight in fixing my hair with ribbons and bows. She was therefore shocked, on returning home one weekend to find me totally bald. First Aunt had decided I should have my head shaved, like all little girls, to get rid of the "baby hair" and foster the healthy growth of thicker, straight black hair.

Mother was beside herself. She cried and carried on for days. Fortunately, my hair grew back with some wave, even into adulthood, a saving grace for my first aunt.

First Aunt was without a doubt the most popular and helpful neighbor in the district where we lived. Always quick to assist anyone in need, she cooked for the poor, helped nurse the sickly, and seemed to be forever doing things for others. While indulgent of her younger sisters, she was rather severe with their children, my cousin Zhenli and me. We were the ones always underfoot whenever she was busy cooking or sewing. First Aunt's cold stare was employed as a special tactic to deal with our mischievousness. With eyes bulging almost out of their sockets, she would let out a stern yell,

"Zhenli! Rongrong! That's enough!" Without fail, Zhenli and I were brought into line.

I had the uneasy impression that First Aunt favored Zhenli over me, probably from First Aunt's protective instinct of giving more care to the less fortunate. Zhenli was born without a father, and her mother abandoned her to elope with someone else when Zhenli was just a few months old, whereas I had Mother's undivided attention, and a distant father abroad who showered me with presents. Besides, Zhenli, though a few years older, cried easily and was often scolded for her frequent crying bouts, contrary to my unflappable, stubborn demeanor. I seldom cried, even under trying circumstances.. I also managed to get on the good side of the adults in the family and stayed out of trouble more skillfully than Zhenli.

Zhenli and I fought a great deal. As *naïve* and cruel children sometimes do, I would let Zhenli know during some of our ferocious arguments that she didn't have the love of real parents, which inevitably reduced her to tears. First Aunt would come to the rescue by slapping me on the behind or taking Zhenli away from me.

In 1979, when I visited Zhenli again, she had left Wuhan, to work in Peking, after graduation from college. Neither of us had seen each other for thirty years, and I was finally able to apologize for my childhood follies. Zhenli, her own memories altered by the subsequent suffering of the Cultural Revolution, seemed perplexed by my apology:

"What are you talking about, Rongrong? Those years were the best times in my life!"

After Liberation in 1949, First Aunt had continued to live with Grandmother Li and Zhenli in the same old house in Wuhan, while my family had gone to Taiwan with the Nationalist government. Cut off by the communications blockade between the mainland and Taiwan, Mother could no longer write home and we lost contact. Zhenli told me, when we met again at last, that First Aunt never had any true joy in her life. Her only son, Lianfeng, had been captured by an aboriginal tribe during the retreat of his Nationalist army unit, and First Aunt died without ever seeing him again.

In the same big house in Wuhan, Zhenli and First Aunt became the sole inhabitants after the death of Grandmother Li. Fortunately the death was uneventful and a Muslim burial was arranged with the approval of the new government. Without any means of support, First Aunt had continued to rent sections of the house to relatives and friends until even this meager income was discontinued when the government took over all private properties and allocated them to other residents of the neighborhood. First Aunt took in sewing and laundry to help support herself and Zhenli, who, as the daughter of a war hero, received a small stipend and free education.

Zhenli recalled the harsh years during the Great Leap Forward movement in the 1950s when the entire country had a serious food shortage. Zhenli had longed for a red sweater for the upcoming Chinese New Year but dared not hope to get one in light of the financial situation at home. Sensing her desire, First Aunt had said,

"I'll see what I can do. Don't you worry about a thing."

A few months later, returning home from school, Zhenli found a flaming-red sweater, brand-new and inviting, on top of her bed, evidently the fruit of First Aunt's ingenious ways of saving money and knitting the sweater herself. Zhenli showed me the same red sweater on my 1979 visit to her apartment in Peking. The flaming red had faded, both elbows were patched and worn, but it was kept clean and fresh, carefully wrapped in a plastic bag, as a reminder of a lovely, selfless lady.

Zhenli told me of First Aunt's sudden death, from a fall and fatal stroke. First Aunt had just returned from the store, carrying a heavy bag of rice, when she slipped on the doorstep and fell, never regaining consciousness. Zhenli was in school when this happened. Barely a teenager and not very strong physically, Zhenli managed to have First Aunt taken to a local hospital, where First Aunt was pronounced dead.

A Muslim burial was arranged by Zhenli with help from the neighbors. All in their individual ways had received help from First Aunt who, in her last few years of life, had in fact been elected leader of the powerful neighborhood association, and had been considered one of the best local leaders.

The day of the funeral, everyone in the entire neighborhood turned up to pay their respects to First Aunt, each with individual memories of this woman, their friend and helper. The entire alley was lined with people who had come to pay their last tribute, their public recognition of her selfless devotion to family and community. It is sad that she could not witness this public testimony, and that mother and I could not be present to express to her our

joint gratitude for all those years of loving care. Sad too, that she died before her only son returned home after long years of hard labor for the aboriginal tribe and then in a reform camp, that she never saw the pain and tears he brought to her tombstone after being away for more than thirty years.

She could never know how I had observed her and learned from her, that her example would finally teach me the courage and determination to break free from the shackles of tradition, the bondage, the suffering that women of her generation had endured in powerless silent dignity. …

73.9 The Consultation\fn{by Lin Yeh-muh (1940-)} Shanghai?, China (M) 9

Up on top of the Wai T'an Customs Building a clock announced the time with the song, *The East is Red*—it was exactly seven o'clock in Peking. Li Yen was already making his way through the hospital gates, reporting for work an hour early.

He had been coming to work early practically every day for the last month or so. Ever since he was transferred back from the May Seventh Collective Farm by the hospital's Revolutionary Committee he had often thought"

"The Committee's decision to recall me to the hospital must mean that my case has essentially been cleared. Perhaps it won't be much longer before the leadership announces my liberation. I'll be allowed to pick up my stethoscope again and devote my time to treating patients again."

The pleasant thought of his soon being able to don a white coat and sit in the consultation room diagnosing ailments brought an involuntary smile to his face and even a new briskness to his steps.

Li Yen was not a blind optimist. He had given these wishful fantasies his careful scrutiny, always looking for the worst, just as he would in diagnosing symptoms of a highly complex and difficult case. But even then, among all the twenty-odd problem cases at the May Seventh Collective Farm, had he not been the first to be called back to the hospital? Granted, his work since returning continued to be very much in the nature of compulsory re-form—his daily duties consisted of sweeping the floors, emptying spittoons and washing bedpans. But compared to shoveling earth and hauling buckets of manure, this was less strenuous by far. Even better, he now finished his day along with the rest of the revolutionary masses and could return home each day to his wife.

And Li Yen had more than that to be happy about. Since his return he had often been called upon by the hospital's Workers' Publicity Corps (for the Propagation of Mao Tse-tung's Thoughts) to attend the consultation sessions held by the doctors to discuss difficult cases from both the out-patient and in-patient departments. On these rare opportunities when his medical opinion was sought, Li Yen would always give his best, wishing that he could somehow transmit all the knowledge and experience within him to the younger and less experienced doctors so they would be better able to make precise and informed diagnoses, and bring quick relief to the patients. These occasions were of great importance to him. Ever since the Cultural Revolution, anyone who was politically suspect was not allowed to treat patients. It was extremely unusual political treatment for him to be asked by the Workers' Publicity Corps to participate in these conferences, and perhaps a really significant omen.

He recalled that time in the lavatory when Supervisor T'ang had come in to use the toilet and had seen him kneeling on the floor, vigorously scouring the urinal. He had called out a friendly greeting and had even spoken to him in a solicitous tone:

"Old Li, the skills you have are to your advantage. All you need to do is be resolute in your desire to reform and thoroughly turn away from your capitalist ways of thinking, then the people will be sure to accept and welcome you."

Supervisor T'ang was not only a member of the Workers' Publicity Corps, he was sent by Chairman Mao to occupy a top level position in the hospital and to re-educate the intellectuals. Were his words not to be taken as a hint of what the people at the top thought of him?

He. looked back at all these little things that had happened in the last month or so since his return. Soon after coming back, the leadership had ordered him to report to work at seven thirty, half an hour earlier than the rest of the hospital's revolutionary workers. But after he saw how the three years' Great Cultural Revolution had left the entire hospital covered with dirt and debris, he decided on his own that he might as well make it a whole hour earlier and come at seven o'clock. In that way he could be of even greater service to the people and it would also constitute a greater act of atonement on his part. He became determined to give the entire place a thorough cleaning both inside and out; he was going to make the hospital into a clean and sanitary environment!

As he stepped into the building he was confronted with the sight of a long winding row of people lined up in front of the Registration Office, some of whom had already collapsed onto the chairs and were asleep. These people, Li Yen knew, had all come at some absurd hour of the night to stand in line and wait to be registered the

next morning. He had become a familiar sight to some of them and drew silent looks of friendly compassion as he passed. Li Yen lowered his head to avoid their eyes and quickly strode across the waiting room into the long corridor which was lined on both sides with signs indicating the various departments.

The doors to each of the departments were ajar. Inside the rooms the lights were still on and the doctors and nurses of the night staff had already shed their whites, rushing through the last of their duties. Walking past each of the rooms, not one person inside spoke to him or even called out a greeting. It was as if he were a stranger, some one they didn't even know.

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Li Yen pushed open the swinging doors of the lavatory. A wave of foul odor assailed his nostrils. Rubbing his eyes, he paused on the urine-drenched tile floor. It only took a moment to brace himself against the smell, then he took out his glasses and put them on.

"*Ai*, clogged again. No wonder it stinks so much."

He tied an apron around his waist and bent down to inspect the urinal. This sort of thing would never have been permitted to happen when he had been Director of Internal Medicine at the hospital. He had set a number of rules and regulations that had to be followed. Not only had he personally inspected the sickrooms and each patient's chart every day, he had also been highly exacting in his standard of cleanliness. He had a pet slogan, and he was fond of using it during meetings or even in conversation with the doctors and nurses on his staff:

"We must provide our sick comrades with a clean, comfortable, and quiet environment in which to convalesce."

During the Cultural Revolution, however, his brand of capitalist revisionism was very quickly ripped to shreds, bag and baggage, and dumped into the Garbage Heap of History. Even Chu the janitor in his own department had joined the Labor Guard and was going about militantly inciting rebellion. So now, in accordance with the great directives of Chairman Mao to "Spit out the old and accept the new" and "To let all three—old, middle-aged and young—unite and work together," Little Chu had not only become a Party member, but had also been given official status as Deputy Director of the hospital's Revolutionary Committee. And there had been no one to take over the responsibility of the cleaning and sanitation of the wards of the Department of Internal Medicine until Li Yen had returned from the farm.

Li Yen worked from dawn to dusk every day. Though still not spotless, the wards were on the whole kept decently clean. Quite unexpectedly it was the patients who were moved to sympathy, seeing a man of his age whose hair was already specked with white mopping and sweeping all day long. Although they had heard it said that he was undergoing re-education through labor, they could clearly see how hard it was on him. And so they always made an effort to keep their rooms clean, carefully disposing cigarette butts, fruit peels and waste paper in the proper places. In fact, it was the doctors' and nurses' offices and the lavatory that Li Yen found difficult to keep clean, no matter how hard he worked.

The lavatory was practically impossible to clean. Almost every other day or so the urinal would clog up and spill urine all over the floor. It was not only unhygienic, it had given Li Yen an additional set of problems to worry about. At first, Li Yen had written a sign saying, "Please do not discard cigarette butts or waste paper in the urinal" and had posted it in a spot where it could be easily noticed. Days went by with no effect and it was almost as if everyone was illiterate until one day, as he was clearing the drain, he came upon a slip of paper that had been torn from one of the hospital's medical chart forms. On it was written:

"Li Yen has not tried hard enough to re-educate himself through labor, for that he must eat shit and swallow urine every day."

Only then did he understand why the urinal was always clogged. Members of .the revolutionary medical staff had purposely intended it for him.

Li Yen got down on his knees with great difficulty and using a pair of prongs, began to remove one by one the cigarette butts and clumps, of paper from the pool of urine. Then, after prodding with a piece of thick wire, he finally managed to get the pipe to drain freely. He got back on his feet, took out a mop and began to wipe the floor with broad, vigorous strokes. By the time the tiles were cleaned to their original white surfaces, Li Yen had lost track of how many moppings it had taken or how many times he had had to rinse the mop. All he could feel was the pain in his back and an insufferable heat all through his body. He put aside the mop and stood in front of the window to rest for a while then went over to scrub the toilets. By the time he was done cleaning all six toilets, including the doors and walls of each of the stalls, his shirt was soaked with sweat and stuck to his skin. Stopping only to wipe his glasses and forehead with a handkerchief, he then went over to the corner where the nurses had dumped a pile of dirty bedpans. The patients would be needing them at any moment; they should be washed right

away.

Sunlight streamed past the branches of the tall *wu-t'ung* tree and in through the window. As the loudspeaker on top of the tree began to play "The East is red, the sun rises …", one by one, voices began to join in until the entire building was echoing with the song. At eight o'clock every morning, all the revolutionary cadres and workers in the hospital reverently expressed their morning obeisance to Chairman Mao. Following this ritual, they then began anew their revolutionary work as directed by Chairman Mao. Working to the refrain of the revolutionary tune, Li Yen's hands began to move with great speed. By the time the song ended with its "Heigh and Ho" he had finished washing all the bedpans.

"They'll be making the rounds at nine. I'd better hurry if I'm to clean out all the spittoons before they come."

He slipped on a pair of rubber gloves and dashed out of the lavatory to collect the spittoons from each of the rooms. Hands and feet in constant motion, he seemed to be on a merry-go-round as he whirled from room to room. The sound of his footsteps mingled with the waves of muffled chanting that floated down the long corridor —the revolutionary hospital workers were now reading the *Three Old Tales* out loud in unison. Mean- while the patients were all lying quietly in their rooms, waiting for the doctors to start their rounds as soon as their morning obeisance was made. There was no one else in the corridor. To the chanting of "Serve the People," Li Yen alone worked si1ently and ceaselessly.

At the end of the first of the *Three Old Tales*, he had emptied the spittoons in five of the rooms. By the end of the second piece, he had finished up to room eleven. When they came to *The Old Fool and the Mountain* he had taken all sixty-odd spittoons from the fifteen rooms to the lavatory, cleaned and dried them and then put them back into the rooms.

When the solemn recitative was over Li Yen was panting from exhaustion. Bent over and gasping heavily, he dragged himself back to the lavatory. He had high blood pressure and this time he had over-exerted himself. He felt dizzy, nauseous; his eyes blurred. By now, the doctors and nurses were on their rounds, so very few people would come in for the time being. Li Yen pushed open the door to one of the stalls, flipped down the toilet seat cover and sat down to rest. He leaned against the water tank and sat there panting with his eyes shut. Gradually he began to recover.

He tried to get up but the pain in his back was so agonizing he couldn't straighten up and had to collapse back down on the toilet. His back had been bothering him for over two years, ever since the beginning of the Cultural Revolution when he had undergone a "struggle" and had been whipped like a dog and thrashed like a snake. It had been permanently damaged by the Red Guards and their "shooting air method." And now, the least bit of exertion or even a change in the weather would make it start acting up again.

Li Yen sat on the toilet massaging his back with both hands. At times like this, when the pain was unbearable,. his point of view seemed to waver. The ray of hope that had shone earlier now appeared distant and obscured, with hardly a glimmer in sight.

"What crime have I committed, why must I suffer such torment."

He searched and probed but failed to come up with any reason. All he felt was pain and a sense of having been wronged for some unclear cause. He groped for some understanding until finally, tired old tears streamed down his cheeks and on to his thighs.

"Li Yen! Li Yen!"

A woman's voice was sternly shouting his name down the corridor.

Li Yen burst out of the lavatory as if shot from a spring. He stood in the corridor, his head bent low, waiting for her command.

She was a Red Guard leader in the Department of Internal Medicine, a radical in the cleansing of the ranks campaign, once known to him as Little Chang, a nurse whom he himself had trained. She stood with her head held high and without bothering to look at him, relayed an order in an icy tone.

"Li Yen, the Revolutionary Committee and the Workers' Publicity Corps want to see you at once. You are to go to them immediately, without delay!"

"Yes, yes," answered Li Yen, as he swiveled around quickly and headed for the stairs.

He went without hesitation yet his alarm grew with each step.

"I wonder what I've done wrong this time. What makes the Revolutionary Committee and the Workers' Publicity Corps so anxious to see me?"

He went back over each day, trying to recall everything that he had done, but saw nothing that could possibly be construed as an error or negligence on his part.

"Could it be they're prepared to announce that I've become liberated and want to see me first to discuss the

self-criticism that I'm to write?" His eyes brightened at the thought and his heart pounded with excitement. But when he thought of the prospect of being the subject of a public self-investigation and self-criticism session, his joy was soon extinguished, as short-lived as a sparked match. He wasn't sure he could pass through that. A plain and honest man, every inch a "bookworm" in his clumsy and artless manner, he just didn't have it in him to put on a good show of denouncing himself before everyone in the hospital, and to curse himself as if he wasn't worth a dog's fart, finally sobbing and pleading for Chairman Mao to recognize his confession. And if his confession wasn't convincing enough, it would only incur the wrath of the radicals. They'd suspect him of trying to confess only the petty offenses while concealing the more serious ones. Who knows how many more sessions of criticism and struggle might be in store? The day of his liberation receded even further into the distant future. And the liberation he had looked forward to in such eager anticipation developed into a deeper fear and anxiety. Suddenly, he was struck with an odd feeling:

"If I have to revile myself against my own conscience, I'd rather not be liberated. I'd just as soon spend the rest of my days sweeping floors, washing bedpans and emptying spittoons."

Li Yen came to the office of the Revolutionary Committee. He stood indecisively outside the door for a long moment before finally mustering the courage to knock.

"Reporting!" he called out in a loud voice.

The door opened. The people inside seemed to be chatting, yet it also looked as if they were holding a meeting. The room was filled with smoke so thick that it sent Li Yen into a fit of coughing. Supervisor T'ang came forward, reached out and slammed the door shut with a bang. The room was again filled with the sound of talking and laughter.

"Old Li, a foreign visitor has fallen ill. She has been seen in our out-patient department twice in the last two days, but hasn't gotten any better. The Revolutionary Committee and the Workers' Publicity Corps have studied your case and consider your performance during this period quite satisfactory. They have decided to send you to the Foreign Guest House to see what you can do."

Having said this, Supervisor T'ang fixed Li Yen with a steady look and began to speak in an extremely solemn voice.

"A directive has come down from a high level in the Party. The foreign visitor must be cured as soon as possible. You are to take great care and not make any mistakes. What happens will have a direct effect on how Chairman Mao's revolution will be carried out in important issues concerning our foreign policy. It also concerns our national prestige. In entrusting you with such great political responsibility, the leadership is expressing its faith in you, and also giving you an opportunity to, ah— Supervisor T'ang hesitated for a moment, then continued—"to distinguish yourself in service of the State. You must do your utmost to fulfill this mission."

Li Yen's nerves had been stretched taut as a bowstring as he listened to Supervisor T'ang. Now he gradually felt himself relax. He was almost sure Supervisor T'ang had wanted to say "an opportunity to serve and exonerate" but, for some unknown reason, had left out the word "exonerate." He felt his heart fill with a sudden surge of heat.

"Supervisor T'ang, when should I go to see the foreign guest? May I first take a look at the foreign visitor's medical history?"

"Go back to the office of Internal Medicine. I'll call and have them deliver it to you there. Then go home and change your clothes. Now this is very important, be sure that you wear your best clothes when you go see the foreign. visitor—do you have a white coat?"

"Me?" Li Yen shook his head with discomfiture. "Not since a long time ago."

"I'll have them get you one." Supervisor T'ang paused to consider, then spoke again as if something had just occurred to him. "Have a bite to eat at home before you go. If the foreign visitors offer you food, you must decline it graciously. Be aware of the possible consequences of all your actions, do you understand?"

"I shall remember."

"All right, you may go and make your preparations. Go home and wait. At eleven o'clock someone from the Revolutionary Committee will come for you."

Li Yen walked out of the office feeling relieved and happy. There was nothing on earth that could give him greater pleasure than to heal the sick. He walked down the cement path lined with shrubs. The grass was yellow and dry, the air was filled with falling leaves of the *wu-t'ung* trees. No flowers bloomed, but to Li Yen's eyes, everything around him looked beautiful. For the first time in a long while he walked with his head up. In his excitement he looked up at the sky. The rich blue autumn sky stretched high above, echoing with the cries of flying birds. Li Yen drew in a deep breath of the clean, fresh air.

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Li Yen wolfed down the bowl of shrimp noodles his wife had especially prepared for him. The hands of the small clock on the bureau pointed to ten twenty-five: still another half-hour to go before the appointed time. He rushed to wash up and get ready. By nature a very punctual man, he had never once in seventeen years been late to work or to a meeting, even in rain or snow. Now, under such extraordinary circumstances, he didn't dare delay for a second. It was difficult for intellectuals like him to conduct themselves to everyone's satisfaction these days. It didn't take much to make a person accuse you of being an elitist; he might just be in a bad mood at the time, or something about your appearance might not suit his eye. Li Yen decided it would be better to be ready early and waiting when they came, than to be rushed and make a bad impression..

His wife had dug out his blue serge Sun Yat-sen suit from their trunk and was helping him put it on with painstaking care. The pungent smell of mothballs pierced his nostrils.

"This suit seems to have grown larger lying at the bottom of the trunk for the last three years." The wool suit didn't seem to fit at all and it made him feel very uncomfortable. He had gotten so used to his blue cotton work clothes that it made him feel a little awkward and self-conscious to suddenly switch into a stiff wool suit.

His wife had been surveying him in his suit and the tears welled up in her eyes.

"How can the suit become larger? It's you who lost so much weight in the last few years."

She thought of all that he'd had to suffer in the last three years. She quickly bent her head and wiped her eyes with the front of her blouse.

"So I've lost some weight—nothing to worry about! Actually, I've never felt better."

Li Yen patted his wife's shoulder lightly and said to her comfortingly, "What's past is past, no point in thinking about it too much. The government's policy now is to bring intellectuals down from their ivory towers. Later on everything will get better."

Seeing that it was still early, Li Yen pulled his wife down to sit with him on the bed. Sadness filled him as he saw how thin her hair was and how deep her wrinkles had grown. During the last few years, she had experienced the same fears, suffered the same insults and scorn that he had. He grieved over what this had done to her. In his sadness he lay his hand over hers, thinking in silent grief:

"What these, three years have done to her spirit—the trials and humiliations! It has made her older and more tired than ever."

A car honked its horn in the street outside. Li Yen hurriedly got into his white coat, snatched up his doctor's case and ran downstairs. Deputy Director Chu—the one who had been a janitor in his department—stood outside the gate. He was waving his arms about, directing a small, gray, Shanghai-made car as it made a U-turn. The neighbors from both sides of the street had come out to their doors and were looking on with curiosity; some even bent their heads together whispering. Li Yen understood that it was right that he ride in a car. He was going to treat a foreign visitor, and it was for the sake of his country's honor and reputation. Still, he couldn't help but feel that it was a little ostentatious. With his head bent low as if he were doing something he didn't want seen, he walked quickly to the car and got in.

The car sped through the flourishing Huai-hai Chung Road and then turned onto beautiful Hsi-tsang Road. Soon, they stopped in front of a large building. Deputy Director Chu led Li Yen into the lobby of the Guest House and told him to sit down on a sofa and wait while he went in first. Ten minutes later, Deputy Director Chu came out with a young man. Li Yen followed the two into an elevator. They rode to the fourteenth floor, where they were taken by the young man to Room 147.

Inside, Li Yen saw an anxious looking foreigner sitting on a sofa and a woman lying on a luxurious bed. Most likely she was the foreigner's wife, he thought. The foreigner quickly stood up when they entered the room.

The youth who had been their guide was an interpreter. In stiff and awkward English, he spoke to the foreign gentleman at great length. The general meaning was that because they were concerned about his wife's condition, the hospital's Revolutionary Committee had specially sent over one of their doctors to attend to her. The foreign gentleman nodded politely to express his thanks. He even reached to shake hands with each of them.

When he grasped Li Yen's calloused hand, a strange look appeared in the foreigner's eyes. He quickly turned to the interpreter and asked in English:

"Is this gentleman the doctor?"

The interpreter nodded his head. But the foreigner turned back to stare at Li Yen, and laughed knowingly.

"No, no! I've taken my wife to the hospital twice and both times we've seen this man sweeping the floors, emptying spittoons …!" Then he slumped his shoulders and motioned with his arms, as if he were using a mop. He shook his head disbelievingly and looked over at his wife. She had pulled herself up to a sitting position on the

bed and was staring at Li Yen with alarm.

"My wife is sick and she's getting worse. I beg you to help us find a qualified doctor and bring him here." Saying this, the foreigner threw his hands up in despair and sank back on the sofa. His wife, grasping the situation, cried out in a shrill voice:

"My God, Charlie! What's going on? Why have they sent some old spittoon cleaner?"

Li Yen had studied abroad and knew both English and French, but the leadership had not specified that he was permitted to speak. Under the circumstances, he could only stand and bear it in silence. Deputy Director Chu, who had appeared full of dignity and highly pleased with himself during the hand-shaking, now began to get nervous. He saw that the foreigner was very angry but he couldn't understand what was being said. Unmindful of the fact that the foreigner couldn't understand, he tried to reassure him, tugging at. the interpreter's shirt at the same time.

"Your wife's going to be all right," he said, "I'll make sure she'll be taken care of, don't you worry! Hey, what's bothering this foreigner?"

Only after the interpreter had explained the situation and asked what he should say did Deputy Director Chu recover his dignity. Puffing out his chest, he answered without hesitation.

"Why is that so hard to explain? Just tell him the man's a snake-demon ox-devil anti-Party anti-socialist rotten egg! That's why he has to sweep floors and empty spittoons."

The interpreter replied uneasily, "That doesn't sound very good. If we've brought a man like that to treat the foreign visitor, won't the foreigners laugh at us for not having anyone more qualified to do the job?"

"Then …" For a moment Deputy Director was at a loss. He scratched his head, then quickly changed his tune. "Then you must say that it's the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, and all sorts of strange things can happen. Hospital workers become leaders. Workers—lots of them—learn to treat illnesses. That is the great achievement of the Cultural Revolution."

"But if we say that, the foreign visitors will still think we've insulted them by irresponsibly sending them some barefoot doctor to mess around. If something goes wrong and it gets out, we'll all get punished."

Deputy Director Chu again scratched his head but couldn't come up with a more appropriate response.

Li Yen felt terribly insulted by what the two men were saying. He looked over to the foreigners and saw the bewildered and suspicious expressions on their faces. He could see that an explanation of the situation had to be given or it would eventually be known to the entire world outside and told as a monstrous joke to ridicule his country. At the thought of what it might do to his country's reputation, he decided that it was time for him to speak up, regardless of the consequences that he might have to face.

"Sir, you are correct. You did see me mopping floors and emptying spittoons. However, I have also been a doctor for thirty years, and I was once the Director of Internal Medicine at the hospital. But I was criticized during the Great Cultural Revolution because of my errors and for having followed the path of Liu Shao-chi's revisionist health policy. Now the revolutionary masses have given me the chance to reform and I have been allowed to re-educate myself and to correct my past mistakes through physical labor. That is why I must labor every day. As for being a physician, that has always been my profession. You and your wife have no need to worry."

The young interpreter was struck with surprise at Li Yen's fluent and thoroughly correct English. His surprise gave way to displeasure and anger darted from his eyes. As for the two foreigners, they were filled with delight at this sudden enlightenment.

The foreign gentleman quickly stood up to say, "Pardon me, pardon me." He reached out a hand to Li Yen and pulled him to the sofa and made him sit down. With renewed courtesy, he turned to Deputy Director Chu and the interpreter and also asked them to take a seat. He went on to apologize to Li Yen again, saying:

"My wife and I thought you were just a cleaning man at the hospital, we had no idea you were once the director. You Chinese sure can pull surprises on us foreigners! Please forgive my stupidity."

"No matter, please think nothing of it. I myself, through studying the works of Chairman Mao, am slowly beginning to realize the necessity and the importance of re-educating the intellectuals in their ways of thinking."

Li Yen saw the meaningful glances Deputy Director Chu was casting in his direction and hastened to end his conversation with the foreigner. "May I ask you, sir, where your wife is feeling discomfort?"

"You speak English so well, I'm sure you'll be a great help in treating my wife." After he had added this, the foreigner finally led Li Yen over to the bed and began to describe his wife's condition.

Li Yen put on a face mask and drew out a thermometer and sphygmomanometer from his bag. After he had taken her temperature and blood pressure, he put on his stethoscope, and proceeded to carefully examine the patient …

*

A careful examination promptly. led Li Yen to conclude that the foreigner's wife had typhoid fever, not a cold as the other doctors had diagnosed. To prevent the infection from spreading to the peritoneum and causing further complications, his advice was that she immediately enter the hospital for treatment. Upon hearing this, Deputy Director Chu and the interpreter decided that the situation had become serious and that immediate consultation with someone from the Foreign Visitors' Reception Committee was necessary. Li Yen was told to return to the hospital.

Li Yen took a streetcar to go home before returning to the hospital. As soon as he got home he took off his wool suit and got back into his coarse cotton work clothes. He quickly ate a bit of the meal his wife had warmed up for him. When he put down his chopsticks, he got up to leave for the hospital immediately. His wife was worried, noticing how little he had eaten.

"Do you feel all right?" she asked. "Why did you eat so little?"

"It's only been two hours since I ate that bowl of noodles. My stomach hasn't even had time to digest it yet!" Li Yen answered with a laugh.

"Don't you worry, there's nothing the matter with me."

"You're not so young anymore and you have high blood pressure. You mustn't strain yourself. Whatever you do be sure to take care of yourself."

Her words caught in her throat. However cheerful Li Yen might be at the moment, she could never be rid of the shadow that hovered over them. She had felt its presence for the last two years, and from time to time it would strike her with fear. Now, it brought pain and sorrow to her wrinkled face.

"What if you should get sick? Both your children are far away: one north in the mountains of Heilungchiang, one south on a farm in Hsi-shuang Ban-na. What would become of me, just an old woman?"

"How could that ever happen?" protested Li Yen. "A doctor half my life and I don't even know how to take care of myself? Don't talk such nonsense! It's time for me to go to the hospital."

Li Yen added some words of comfort to try to cheer her up, then headed on downstairs. She followed him down and stood at the gate, watching him go. Her eyes were fastened on his retreating figure: stooped back and graying hair. Li Yen kept turning around, waving at her to go back upstairs, but for some reason, she wouldn't go. She stood there by the street as if in a daze. When Li Yen reached the corner and turned to look back again, his wife was still standing there like a wooden figure, sighing soundlessly.

But Li Yen was feeling unusually elated today. As he went on his way to the hospital his mind was engrossed in a treatment plan that would cure the foreign woman. When he reached the hospital he went straight to the office of the Revolutionary Committee to report to Supervisor T'ang and to tell him his treatment plan. Supervisor T'ang listened to him nodding his head with satisfaction.

"Good, very good. Should any more problems arise with our patient, I'll come to you again."

Li Yen felt he had done the right thing. He was very happy. A proper diagnosis had been made. Now all that was needed was to place the foreign woman under intensive care in a special room in the hospital and she'd recover in no time. The thought so pleased Li Yen that he smiled with childlike glee.

This was the way he had been all the years of his practice. Whenever he had met with a difficult case, it would be as if he himself had come down with something. The worried expression would never leave his face; he'd lose his appetite and become restless, unable to sit still. Needless to say, he was even worse when a patient was in critical condition. He'd stay with the patient night and day, even refusing to go home. But once his patient was better, the joy that Li Yen felt was tremendous, surpassing that of the patient's own family. Before the Cultural Revolution, not one of his patients could have claimed that he was not conscientious. No one had anything but praise for him.

In his happiness, the queasy feeling he had felt earlier was gone. He went straight back to the lavatory over in the medical building, got out a broom, a mop and a bucket of water, and began to clean the floors in the sickrooms. The patients were secretly happy to see the sunny expression on his face. They all looked at him with quiet smiles.

A rush of thoughts came to Li Yen as he mopped. In what ways could he assist in curing the foreign visitor's wife? After his liberation, how would he help the younger doctors to compensate for their lack of bedside experience so that they could master the ability to diagnose quickly and treat patients with greater competence? As his mind soared to even higher flights of fantasy, Nurse Chang came up to him.

"Li Yen, Director Chu wants you!" she said.

She stood in the doorway waiting. Li Yen hastily put his mop and bucket out in the corridor and followed her to the Office of Internal Medicine.

Deputy Director Chu sat behind his desk with a cigarette in his hand. Near him sat Nurse Li and the new director of the Department, Dr. Hu, who had been appointed the year before the Cultural Revolution—just after graduating from medical school.

Li Yen stood at the door and asked cautiously, “Director Chu, you wanted to see me?”

Deputy D.irector Chu ignored Li Yen as he smoked his cigarette. He smoked until the cigarette was about to burn his fingers, took one last sharp puff, spat the butt on the floor and grounded it with his foot. He raised his head and with a cold stare, signaled Li Yen to enter.

Li Yen went in and stood before Deputy Director Chu. His head drooped instinctively; he stood rigid as a pole. Deputy Director Chu glared at him with a livid look:

“Li Yen, when you paid your visit today, we would like to hear you tell us what you were thinking about in front of the foreigners?”

Li Yen couldn’t make head nor tail out of this. He looked about furtively and noticed Nurse Li had a notebook and was taking notes. There was a sneer on Dr. Hu’s face as he looked over mockingly.

Nurse Chang sat in front of Deputy Director Chu with pursed lips, her face full of anger. Something was obviously wrong but Li Yen couldn’t figure out what it could be. All he could do was answer frankly.

“At the time, my whole mind was on making an accurate diagnosis of the foreigner’s illness so as not to disgrace my country—I thought of nothing else except that.”

Dr. Hu cocked his head and raised his eyebrows. He spoke in a sarcastic tone, saying:

“Your loyalty to the fatherland is extremely admirable.”

Nurse Chang bolted up in anger and said accusingly:

“Old Li, your attitude is insincere.”

Deputy Director Chu started to speak, enunciating slowly and placing heavy emphasis on every word.

“Are you going to pour it all out like a bottle or are you a tube that has to be squeezed? Think it over carefully, which attitude would be best for you to take.”

“I really wasn’t thinking of anything else,” Li Yen protested. He felt they were being unjust and rushed to defend himself. “I was only thinking about how the foreigner ought to be treated—”

“Damn you, do you think you can fool us?!”

Nurse Chang slammed her fist on the desk and shouted at him.

“You were pouring out your grievances to the foreigner, thinking you could get his sympathy! You blamed the Cultural Revolution for having lost your office. You spoke resentingly about your re-education. Do you pretend to deny that?”

Dr. Hu joined her in pounding on the desk in anger, saying:

“You told the foreigner that it was because we made the wrong diagnosis that his wife’s recovery was delayed. Why? What were your motives? A little thing such as that and you used it to slander and attack the Great Cultural Revolution! A rattle snake could not be more poisonous!”

Li Yen felt as if he had been struck on the head, as if they had thrown a bucket of cold water over him. A chill rose from his heart and spread over his entire body. He was speechless and stood like an idiot.

“Speak up! Speak up! Do you think you can hoodwink the revolutionary masses and get away with it by acting dumb, pretending you’ve gone insane? You sly old fox!”

Nurse Li jabbed her pen at Li Yen’s nose, trying to make him confess.

Li Yen woke from his fear and turned his eyes to Deputy Director Chu, saying:

“The diagnosis was wrong and that is the truth. But I never told that to the foreign visitor. I only mentioned it to Deputy Director Chu.”

“Do you persist in telling us lies?”

“Li Yen, tell the truth.”

“You are fighting a losing battle, you’re signing your death warrant.”

Nurse Chang, Nurse Li and Dr. Hu all screamed at him at once. Li Yen took one look at them, opened his mouth and started to speak, then changed his mind. Experience had told him that it was useless to say anything, even if he had a thousand good reasons. He decided it was better to retreat into silence and let them yell at him.

Deputy Director Chu had lit up another cigarette and was puffing away madly as if only that restrained him. It seemed like he wanted to make it clear that he stood on a different level from the others, that he was a leader, a man of policy, guided by the will of the Party and not his own personal emotions.

“Li Yen, you know and we know all the filthy lies that you told to the foreigner. You know very well what you were thinking about, and we can figure it out. The Party has always been lenient towards those who confess, and

strict with those who resist. I'm sure you are acquainted with that fact. Whatever the crime, as long as one confesses, we act leniently. We deal with the concrete circumstances and don't delve into the past. Even those who deserve death or imprisonment can be pardoned. You have, of course, already studied the experiences of our six factories and two schools here in Peking. Go and think it over, and after work, put it into the hands of the people. I've shown you the paths open to you; now it's up to you to decide which one you will take."

As if struck by a thunderbolt out of a clear blue sky, Li Yen stumbled out of the office on numbed legs and returned to the lavatory. He was terrified, but the fear slowly gave way to confusion.

He had never thought his good intentions would sow such disaster. "Put it into the hands of the people." That meant he would have to go onstage for a struggle session right after work. Forcing himself to calm down, he tried to remember all that had happened that morning. There simply wasn't anything he had said that was wrong. If anything, his one mistake was not to have kept his mouth shut and let that embarrassing scene drag on with that foreigner continuing to ridicule and insult him.

The more he considered it all, the less it made sense and the more unjust it all seemed. But then he remembered Supervisor T'ang. He had to go find him, he would understand. Supervisor T'ang was unbiased, a man who stood firmly on Party principles.

He raced out of the lavatory. For a moment, everything turned black and he almost fell. That session had made him feel as if he had been physically beaten and his head was reeling. He reached for the wall to support himself and leaned against it. The corridor rocked from side to side like a ship at sea. The floor seemed to slip away under his feet as he staggered over to the stairs. Grasping the railing he slowly went down the steps, one by one. But halfway down, he was gasping for breath and couldn't go any further.

Li Yen stood on the platform at the curve of the stairs where there was a large window. He reached over to grasp the two sides of the window frame and propped himself up to catch his breath. Looking out he saw a group of people outside the office of the Revolutionary Committee putting up huge posters on the wall. Steadying himself, he was able to read what was written on one of them.

"Stand up with resolution and bring down the anti-revolutionary Li Yen."

Li Yen was paralyzed with fear. In the past, he had been accused of being a reactionary, then somehow he had become an evil remnant of the Kuomintang. Now he was suddenly an anti-revolutionary. Li Yen stood woodenly by the window. A hundred thoughts passed through his head, but not one could explain what was happening to him. What on earth was the Cultural Revolution aiming for? Why were they mounting such a campaign against him, each charge more ferocious than the last? He peered at the people outside as if the answer could be found in their bustling movements.

Suddenly he saw Supervisor T'ang. He looked again in amazement to see if he wasn't mistaken. Yes, it was Supervisor T'ang. He was holding up a large printed exclamation mark. He was gluing it to the wall that Deputy Director Chu had smeared with paste. On the wall was a poster reading:

Death and destruction to Li Yen if he does not surrender!

Li Yen's eyes blurred. His spirit was crushed to see this last pillar crumble, the last glimmer of hope extinguished. He stood hopeless on the steps, unable to decide whether to continue down or go back up. His heart felt like a potful of boiling water; all the events of the past which had settled down to the bottom now came bubbling back up again.

For seventeen years he had diligently served the sick, yet had been condemned as an academic capitalist reactionary. He had never in his life joined any party, but had been accused of being a Kuomintang remnant. Forced to write an endless number of confessions, he had been attacked to the point of exhaustion, never permitted to sleep. His heart wrenched at the thought of all he had been through. During the anti-Japanese Resistance, he had left France without completing his studies to rush home and fight on the front line. On the eve of liberation, he had followed the rest and had joined the revolution. And now, he was cursed as a scum of the Kuomintang, as a vile traitor …

The memories all came back to Li Yen. How unjust the world was! His chest burned like fire.

"Let them do what they will. I am not guilty!"

Li Yen turned from the window to go back up. The stairwell and the ceiling above rocked from side to side.

After a few steps he reached hurriedly for the railing; the entire building began to revolve. He felt a floating sensation; he was being lifted up, flying …

A patient saw him stagger and fall down the stairs.

“Something’s wrong!" he shouted. “Someone come quick!”

A group of men in white coats came rushing over. Other patients had also heard the cry and came running from their rooms. They looked below and saw Li Yen lying head down at the bottom of the stairs, saliva running from the corner of his mouth. Some of them went down and carried him back up. They laid him down on the floor of the corridor.

A middle-aged doctor knelt down, quickly loosened Li Yen’s clothes, and put a stethoscope to his chest. His face darkened. Putting aside his stethoscope he reached over and opened Li Yen’s eyelids. The light was gone from his eyes. The doctor rearranged Li Yen’s clothes, slowly rebuttoning the shirt.

Nurse Chang was looking at the doctor with suspicion in her eyes.

“Do you think he committed suicide out of guilt?”

The doctor stood up and spoke in a cold voice.

“He had high blood pressure. Most likely it was a cerebrovascular accident.”

He looked down again at Li Yen for a moment, then turned and walked away without another word. The other doctors quietly followed him.

The patients went silently back to their rooms. Some wiped tears from their eyes with the sleeves of their pajamas.

The sun set and the corridor grew dark. The hospital was unusually quiet. The only sound was the loudspeaker on the *wu-t’ung* tree outside.

“Urgent! This is urgent! The struggle session scheduled for six o’clock has been postponed.”

73.115 The Hole\fn{by Chang Jhy-chang (1940-)} Peking, China (M) 8

Even P’an Man-kuei himself could not recall clearly when his habit of drinking alone had begun. He remembered only that in his boyhood he had been afraid of the pungent taste of liquor, and that the drunken scenes he had witnessed had disgusted him. At New Year’s time and during other holidays, as well as at *poi-pais*, the Taiwanese worship festivals, there were always a good many guests who, along with his father, would drink until they were red in the face. Their finger-guessing games and their shouting would continue late into the night until they finally stumbled off a few at a time to their own homes. They would leave behind them a floor cluttered with chicken bones and shrimp shells.

On each occasion P’an Man-kuei’s two elder brothers would scramble up onto the tables in order to scrounge a few pieces of boiled meat left behind by the guests and, while they were at it, drained the glasses of the few drops of wine that remained. P’an Man-kuei could never win out over his brothers, so he didn’t even try. He would simply wait until the two of them had left, then sneak up onto the tables to look for crumbs of meat that they had missed. But he would not sop up the dregs of wine.

Yes, from the time they were small, his brothers were just like his papa: big eaters, heavy sleepers, coarse and fearless, and knew how to drink. All of this was in direct opposition to the mild disposition of P’an Man-kuei. Their papa seemed to favor the elder brothers because of their ability to drink. Often, during slack seasons on the farm, he would take his three sons out into the front yard, where he would lay out the wine bottles, cups, and some peanuts, and, as they drank, tell them stories of selling herb medicines in the wilds of the mountains.

Now although P’an Man-kuei liked to eat the snacks, he hadn’t the nerve to drink any of the wine, so he just stood off in the distance. Once in a while his father would call him over and teasingly force him to take a drink, but he would keep his mouth tightly shut and angrily run even further off, passing up not only the snacks, but the stories as well. At such times his father would laugh at him for being too eccentric and too soft, and would chide him for being no match for his elder brothers—in other words, a sissy.

Papa had been dead now for eleven or twelve years, and Mother had remarried, to a cabbie. Eldest Brother was very accomplished in the martial arts, traveling the year round throughout the world with an acrobatic troupe, demonstrating his manly skills. He had made a great deal of money. The other brother used his brain and his glib tongue to sell pharmaceutical products. In a letter sent the previous week he had written about his purchase of a 1973 Mazda.

And what about P’an Man-kuei? He had spent two years in a trade school before dropping out, and was now employed in the composition room of a newspaper, setting type. His wages were only slightly over three thousand

Taiwan dollars a month. Staring him in the face every night were rows of cold, gray lead type; he spent the night busily engaged in this tedious work.

"When will I finally be able to make some real money and live an interesting life like my brothers?"

One day, after drinking more heavily than usual, P'an Man-kuei had dreamt that all those rows of lead type had turned into gold nuggets, all gleaming brightly and neatly stacked in the type tray. Excitedly, he had picked them, and picked them. Covered with sweat and exhausted, he had awakened somehow, only to find that he was sleeping, as always, in his steamy, oppressive room, his back soaked with sweat.

Although P'an Man-kuei read no deep meaning into this dream, still he was reminded of it every time he drank to relieve his boredom. Worn out by his work every evening and bored by the tedium of his daylight hours, he had begun to take his pleasure in drink, and this gradually became a habit.

After pouring himself another glass of rice wine, P'an Man-kuei picked up a couple of slices of dried squid and began chewing on them. He had lived in this forty-tatami third-floor apartment nearly a year, and he had no thoughts of moving. First of all, it was near the newspaper office, so on rainy days he had only to take his umbrella and, leaving his bicycle at home, could walk to work in fifteen minutes. Secondly, the rent wasn't too high; the place cost twenty-four hundred a month, and since he shared it with two college students—each of the three had his own bedroom—it came to eight hundred dollars apiece. The two students were away at school during the day, leaving the three bedrooms and the living room exclusively to P'an Man-kuei. He could drink, eat some hoodles, or simply lie on the run-down sofa that belonged to the landlord and think about anything and everything, without anyone around to bother him.

As for the two college students, P'an Man-kuei considered them his best friends. That was primarily because he had no others: most of his classmates had done far better than he, so naturally he could not go to see them; the fellows who worked with him in the composition room were generally much older than he, and they had little to say to one another. But his two roommates were about his age, and although their educational backgrounds were different, they too were from rural southern Taiwan, so he sometimes had friendly chats with them.

When they weren't chewing the fat they played chess, and educational background played no role in chess—the person with the sharpest mind came out on top. P'an Man-kuei was a thinker—he liked to use his mind—so he was pretty good at chess. They often had matches among the three of them, and even though he lost once in a while, most of the time the two college students took turns challenging P'an Man-kuei. This gave him a sense of pride. Winning or losing at chess was of no great importance, but the fact that college students could not best him was a source of satisfaction.

Tap, tap, tap. His train of thoughts was broken by a familiar sound coming down the staircase. He quickly put down his glass of wine and walked over to the door, where he bent down slightly and put his eye right up to the small peephole in the middle of the door. He looked out through the small inset of glass.

The sound coming down the staircase was now joined by the familiar sight of those brown slippers and, above them, a pair of sparkling, sensual calves. Today, instead of the blue skirt of her school uniform, she was wearing a short mini-skirt, the sight of which caused something of an extraordinary sensation in P'an Man-kuei. When the calves reached the final step leading to the third floor they turned nimbly and proceeded on down to the second floor.

In the brief ten seconds that P'an Man-kuei had been pressed up against the door, a slight soreness had already begun to develop in his nose. He stretched a bit, never taking his eye from the peep-hole in the door.

"In just a moment she'll come walking back upstairs with the evening paper. At the most one minute, certainly no more than two," P'an Man-kuei thought to himself with anticipation.

Living on the fourth floor directly above him was a middle-aged couple; the girl with the lovely calves who had just walked downstairs was their only child. She was a night-school student at one of the girls' high schools. P'an Man-kuei had never once greeted the couple, even though he had lived here for nearly a year, but still he harbored good feelings towards their daughter. She was not a beautiful girl, but she had good-looking calves, especially when viewed through the peep-hole. This sight produced wild and fanciful thoughts in him and a vague sense of fulfilment. From the very beginning he had fallen in love with them, or, more accurately, was infatuated with them.

P'an Man-kuei had never been close to any women, let alone had a girlfriend. There was just the one time, when he was still a student at the trade school, that he had been taken to a nightclub by his second brother, who had just gone into business. There he had been faced with a bevy of heavily made-up, voluptuous women. Foolishly following the lead of his brother and a good friend of his in some heavy drinking, he had engaged in a good deal of caressing and fondling right there at the table. He still recalled how, after leaving the nightclub in the

early-morning hours, he had vomited on the street, after which he had been taken to his brother's place.

Looking back on the incident, it now seemed both stimulating and enjoyable, and it had had two effects on his thinking: first, any man who does not know how to hold his liquor is good for nothing; and, second, he just had to make some money some day, for that was the only way to enjoy the good life. But how was he to do that? Could he make any money at his present job as a type-setter? The lead type turning into gold nuggets had been only a dream; it could never happen in real life.

Tap, tap, tap.

Finally the pair of calves made their way back upstairs, and P'an Man-kuei quickly pressed his nose back up against the door. Since the girl was now going upstairs and was reading the newspaper in her hands as she walked, the progress of the calves was slower than it had been a few moments earlier. Possibly because something in the newspaper had caught her interest, she surprised him by stopping briefly at the third-floor landing to read the paper.

From his vantage point on this side of the door, P'an Man-kuei experienced pangs of anger over the fact that all he could see through his peephole was the newspaper and eight fingers; nothing else was within range of his sight.

TRUNK-MURDER DISMEMBERMENT CASE SOLVED:
POLICE STEP UP EFFORTS TO LOCATE HUANG CHEN-HSIUNG.

P'an Man-kuei had no interest whatsoever in this, and only wished that he could see right through the newspaper.

Finally the newspaper was folded back up, and the brown slippers, the mini-skirt, and, especially, the pair of shapely calves came back into view as they headed up to the fourth floor, one step at a time.

P'an Man-kuei liked most of all to watch the girl climb up to the fourth floor, particularly when she was wearing a skirt and he was about half-drunk. The pity was that after reaching the sixth step on the stairs she moved completely out of view. Even though his peep-hole was fitted with a convex bubble, which produced a wide field of vision, the range was still limited to the first six steps of the stairs. But even with this knowledge, P'an Man-kuei never once failed to press up as close as possible to the door and cock his head in hopes of being able to see two more steps. Naturally, he was disappointed each and every time.

When he heard the sounds of the door upstairs first open then close, and the stillness had returned, he disappointedly walked over to the broken-down sofa and sat down.

P'an Man-kuei had never entertained the thought of making the girl's acquaintance or passing the time of day with her. Neither did he have the courage to open the door and have an unobstructed look at her. All he would do was make every effort to take advantage of the ten or twenty seconds each time she walked up or down the stairs; other than that, there were the few glimpses of her back that he had from his third-story balcony as she walked to school in the evenings.

As he poured the last drops of wine from the bottle into his glass he unmindfully looked up at the peep-hole in the door.

That peep-hole was a remarkable thing: through it the inside and the outside of the apartment were connected, but it was a one-way connection; from inside one could clearly see everything that was going on outside, but from the outside looking in, nothing could be seen. He had tried it himself: leaving the inside light on, all he had been able to see from the outside when he looked in was a brightness inside the room. It was the same effect as when he had held a marble up close to his eye as a child and looked through it at a lighted lamp. Because of this, the person inside the room could be as bold as he wanted and look at whatever he desired without any fear. And, because of this, P'an Man-kuei had gotten into the habit of looking through his peephole when he had nothing else to do. Just when this habit of his had begun, he could not recall. Like his habit of drinking, in the final analysis, it was something that had started after he had begun working at the newspaper office setting type and after renting this apartment.

In addition to spying on the girl student from upstairs, he watched everything else that appeared before his door. There was another couple who lived on the fourth floor with their five children and were constantly shouting and making an uproar; but they were of no interest whatsoever to P'an Man-kuei.

The family that lived directly opposite him on the third floor was composed of a young childless couple and an older woman. Upon moving in a month ago they had brought with them two full truckloads of furniture. It had taken them nearly an entire afternoon to move all of their belongings in, an afternoon that had found P'an Man-

kuei standing behind his door the entire time. As a result, he had been bothered by sore eyes and a stiffness in his lower back as he set type that night at the newspaper office.

On the day the people across from him moved in, P'an Man-kuei had slept till noon when the loud commotion of the movers had awakened him. Out of curiosity, he had gone over to look through his peep-hole before even getting dressed.

He could see two burly moving men shouting and clamoring as they carried in a large, shiny, white refrigerator. Another mover was holding the door open and directing the other two so that they wouldn't damage the refrigerator. After the refrigerator had been lugged inside, a shapely young woman in jeans, carrying a red cosmetic case in one hand and several women's fur coats and wool overcoats in the other, entered the apartment across from him. She put the clothes and the cosmetic case down off to the side atop what was probably a table or chair—it was out of his line of sight—then gave orders to the movers to carry the refrigerator into one of the inner rooms—most likely the dining room or kitchen. Then the four of them came out in single file and headed back downstairs.

At that moment P'an Man-kuei spotted something small and shiny on the floor in front of him. Since he was seeing it through the bubble-shaped lens of his peephole, his field of vision was quite broad, and the small bright object on the floor looked even smaller by comparison. In fact, all that he could see was a glistening little doodad, which just happened to be located at the base of the bannister on his side. For that reason, neither the movers nor the young woman were aware of its presence there. He guessed that it must be something like an earring that had fallen from the load of clothing she was carrying or from her ear.

He instinctively made to open the door to go out, pick the thing up, and return it to them, but just then he heard someone coming up the stairs. He stopped where he was and looked out once again through the peephole, where he saw a young man carrying an armload of suits up the stairs. He was tall and slim like P'an Man-kuei, and about the same age, but his attire was far more stylish than P'an Man-kuei's. He was wearing a handsome, fashionable dark blue silk pull-over shirt atop a pair of sporty, loose-fitting slacks that the foreign men on TV shows so like to wear. He gave every appearance of a young man who has found success in his career and special skills in his studies. Every encounter with someone like this engendered contradictory feelings of envy and hostility in P'an Man-kuei. That was because people like this had more money than he and were more successful than he. But what does it mean to buy success? It's just a matter of luck.

"P'an Te-huei, don't come downstairs just now; the movers are bringing the TV set up."

Their name is also P'an? So this wealthy young man upon whom fortune has smiled is also named P'an?

P'an Man-kuei gave up his thought of a few moments before to return the object to them; he decided to wait until they had finished moving in before making up his mind what to do. Maybe he wouldn't return it to them at all.

The P'an family had quite a few possessions: there was a lot of beautiful furniture, two rolled-up objects that looked to be carpets, and, the last thing to be brought up, a very heavy small strongbox. P'an Man-kuei was puzzled by all of this: they seemed to be a quite well-off family, one that should, by rights, be living in a home with a yard in the suburbs, or at least in a large apartment. So why would they be willing to crowd themselves into this small third-floor apartment?

As he was thinking these thoughts he could see the four moving men standing in the doorway discussing their wages with the young man and his wife. The movers were reasoning that because of the quantity of things they had moved and the fact that they had had to climb to the third floor, there should be an extra hundred Taiwan dollars for each truck and a tip of a hundred Taiwan dollars for each of the men—altogether an additional six-hundred Taiwan dollars. The arguments of the young man and his wife were no match for the movers, and ultimately she reached into her big handbag and took out a thick wad of bills. She first counted out the amount originally agreed upon, then handed the movers six additional hundred-dollar notes, after which she sent the men away.

P'an Man-kuei witnessed the transaction, and in his mind he reckoned that the outlay of such a large quantity of money probably meant nothing to them, but if that had been his money, just think how many bottles of wine he could have bought to while away how many afternoons!

After the movers had departed and the door opposite him was closed, the shiny little object still lay in the same place on the floor. P'an Man-kuei waited for a moment, then opened his door very gently, walked out into the corridor, bent over, and picked the thing up.

It was a diamond ring! Earlier, from his vantage point on the other side of the peep- hole, he had tried to guess just what that shiny object was. Maybe it was just a sliver of broken glass, or one of the young woman's copper

earrings, or, more valuable than these, possibly a gem of some kind or a gold ring; if not, it might be a diamond.

Now here it was, much to his surprise, a diamond ring! His mouth parted in a happy grin, his heart pounded rapidly; it was as though he had just won the grand prize in the national lottery. He gripped the diamond ring tightly, walked back into his room, closed and locked the door. Then he went into his bedroom, where he turned on the light and looked closely and wide-eyed at the ring even more avidly than when he spied on the young student's calves through his peep-hole.

The setting of the ring was made of gold, the diamond in it was the size of a soybean, or maybe even larger. Beneath the light it glowed with a multicolored luster, and P'an Man-kuei was a bit frightened to be holding it in his hand.

"How many carats is it? How much is a carat worth? Maybe ten or twenty thousand? No, more than that, for sure. Maybe forty or fifty thousand; even a hundred or two-hundred thousand is possible …"

Never in his life had P'an Man-kuei been so close to anything like this, so it was only natural that he could not estimate its value.

What should he do now? Take the impoverished look he had about him, did he give the impression of one who should be in possession of an expensive thing like this? What would he do if his neighbor reported the loss to the authorities, and the jewelry store made a phone call to the police?

Should he pawn it? Absolutely not; pawnbrokers eat you alive! The year before, when he was looking for work in Taipei, he had taken an old watch his stepfather had given him into a pawnshop, and with all his cajoling, had gotten a mere 140 Taiwan dollars.

Tuck it away for the time being and see what happens. Having something like this around was just like having a gambling stash. A feeling of secure confidence and light-heartedness settled upon him. Perhaps this was just the break he needed to become a rich man and find himself a girl friend. Couldn't he open up the heart of someone on the strength of this diamond ring alone?

Where to hide it? The living room's no good, for sure, since we all use it. As for the bedroom, all it had was a bed, a table, a chair, and a vinyl wardrobe—nothing that could be locked, including, for that matter, the bedroom door itself.

Suddenly he thought of the pair of rainboots beneath the bed. Every time it rained he wore these boots home, feeling very embarrassed about them because of the terrible odor they produced. At first the two students who shared his apartment had been embarrassed to say anything about them, but later, once they had gotten to know each other, not only had they mentioned the matter to him, on one occasion they had even kidded him about it.

That's the right place, in the pair of rainboots. No one would willingly touch those boots; even if there were a thief in the room, he wouldn't pay the slightest attention to those rainboots. Who would ever think that inside the smelliest objects in the room was hidden a valuable treasure?

As P'an Man-kuei sat on his broken-down sofa deep in thought, he could not resist the impulse to go once more into his bedroom, take his rainboots out from under the bed, reach in and remove the plastic bag, open it and carefully scrutinize the diamond ring. How many times had he done this very same thing during the last month? Small though it was, each and every time that he looked at it, fantastic visions and a great many hopes filled his mind; how wonderful it would be, he felt, if he could convert this diamond ring into cold, hard cash. P'an Man-kuei had observed no signs of activity on the part of the P'an family across the hall over the past month. All he had noticed was the nattily dressed man and beautifully decked-out young woman leaving together on their way to work. Once in a while they would have a few guests over, all of whom looked like businessmen. Not only had the police never been by, the facial expressions on the man, his wife, and the old woman indicated that they were not even aware that one of their valuable possessions was missing. Could they possibly be so well-heeled that they didn't even care?

Denied the results he anticipated, his nature of rejoicing in others' calamities remained unsatisfied. P'an Man-kuei was somewhat disappointed; in fact, he was even a little angry.

The quieter things became, the more restless he grew, until he could barely contain himself. It got so bad on occasion that he was nearly driven to taking the diamond ring and stealthily slipping it underneath the P'an's door and forgetting the whole affair. Naturally, he never actually followed through on this. As time went on, the excitement over the whole matter gradually began to fade, and P'an Man-kuei found this diamond ring that was rendered useless somewhat disgusting.

His uneasy mood gradually began to seriously affect his life; he lost his taste for taking the diamond ring out of his rainboot and looking it over, and even his interest in ogling the calves of the young girl student was not as intense as it had been. He had, in fact, gotten into the routine of morosely going over to his peep-hole and waiting

for some activity in the apartment across the hall. In addition, his capacity for alcohol had increased. Where previously a bottle of rice wine had lasted him two or three days, now he finished off a bottle in one sitting. He was unaware of the changes taking place in his life until the day of that terrifying incident.

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It all happened at a little after two o'clock on a rainy afternoon. P'an Man-kuei was in his kitchen preparing some noodles, when he heard the doorbell ring at his neighbors, the P'an's. Instinctively he put down his bowl, walked over to the door and put his eye to the peephole. He could see the backs of two men who were waiting for someone to open the door.

The door opened, exposing part of the old woman's face. The two men burst through the door, the force of their actions knocking the old woman to the floor. One of the men slammed the door shut behind him, but in the instant before he did so, P'an Man-kuei thought that he saw the other man in the act of drawing a knife.

P'an Man-kuei was struck dumb with terror. In his fright, his legs felt unsteady, his mind became a complete blank, or as if filled to overflowing with something. He did not know what to do. He remained in this state for some time, before finally coming to his senses. This was not a time when young Mr. P'an or his wife could be expected to return home. The two men, naturally, would be doing just what they pleased. But what about the old woman? He did not know what was happening behind the closed door.

He did not have the courage to open the door and slip downstairs to call the police, for he was afraid that just as he stepped out the door he might run into the two men. Neither did he dare go out onto the balcony and yell for help, for if, instead of being heard by his neighbors, his shouts attracted the attention of the two men, he'd be in a real fix. He didn't even dare abandon his spot behind the door and hide in his room, for he depended upon the view through his peephole to assure himself that he had not drawn the men's attention and could rest easy on that score. And so he remained plastered against the door, staring hard through the peep-hole without so much as blinking. He saw only a quiet, deserted hallway that gave the appearance that nothing was amiss.

The door opened abruptly as one of the men stuck out his head and looked up and down the corridor. At that moment P'an Man-kuei held his breath and shut his eyes, unwilling to look; he was hoping that by not seeing the man's face, afterwards he could act as though nothing at all had happened. But he couldn't bring himself to close his eyes tightly, for what would he do on the chance that the two men came and rapped on his door? So he narrowed his eyes to fine slits and watched what was going on through a sort of haze.

He could see two men emerge quickly from the apartment, one of them carrying a strongbox. They closed the door behind them and took off down the stairs. This was followed by the sound of an automobile starting up and driving away. Strangely enough, the terror P'an Man-kuei had been experiencing left as quickly as it had come once the car drove away.

Just then he detected the odor of gas, which brought him immediately to his senses. He ran to the kitchen, where the water in the pot of noodles he had been preparing had bubbled over and put out the flame; after turning off the stove, he hastily opened the kitchen and living room windows, then the front door.

At a glance he could tell that the door to the P'an's apartment had not closed securely. Listening intently, he could not detect any sounds from within, so he screwed up his courage and gingerly opened the door with his foot. The room was on the dark side, owing to the fact that the living room drapes had been pulled shut. The old woman, who had been tied securely to the sofa, was struggling to get free. She had been gagged and blindfolded, and seemed unaware that she was not alone in the room.

P'an Man-kuei had been curious about the P'an family from the very beginning, so he gingerly took a few more steps into the room. The bedroom was a shambles: the closet doors yawned open, the contents of suitcases and dresser drawers had been dumped out onto the bed, and the floor was strewn with worthless objects like women's bracelets and lipsticks. Leaving all of this untouched, he was about to walk over and free the old woman when his foot kicked at some object on the floor; looking down, he discovered that it was a man's brown wallet.

Driven by his curiosity, P'an Man-kuei bent over and picked it up. Inside it he discovered a wad of folded bills; it had apparently been overlooked by the thieves in their haste. His first impulse was to toss it back onto the floor, but the feel of the bills in his hand was too much for him, and he began to count them. There was the equivalent of $25 or $30 in Taiwan currency folded around three one-hundred-dollar bills in American currency.

This threw a fright into P'an Man-kuei.

"Should I take it? It wouldn't be as though I stole it. Besides, no one is watching, and even if the case is broken, the guilt will fall on the two thieves. I'd be crazy not to take it!"

He made his decision: taking the bills out of the wallet, he stuffed them into his pocket, threw the empty wallet away, then walked stealthily across the living room and into his own apartment, closing the door behind him.

He was in a state of total agitation the entire afternoon. Every time he looked out through his peephole, he was greeted by an unchanging deathly stillness all around the landing. He was tempted to go across and release the old woman, but, laden with a guilty conscience, he couldn't muster up the courage. So he made up his mind to go out and take a long walk to get away from the whole scene.

Outside the rain had stopped. But since there was still water on the ground, he took out his rainboots and removed the plastic bag that held the diamond ring. Unable to think of a good place to hide it, he thrust it into his pants pocket. After putting on the rainboots, he took a look out through his peephole and, seeing that there was no activity in the corridor, opened the door and headed downstairs.

P'an Man-kuei walked the streets aimlessly for a while until the sky grew dark and he grew hungry; he went into a small restaurant and sat down. Emboldened by the wad of bills in his pocket, and feeling somewhat extravagant, he ordered a plate of fried pork liver and one of boiled cuttlefish. Then he ordered a bottle of spicy millet wine and settled back to enjoy these luxuries.

Millet wine packs a great deal more punch than rice wine, and before he had even finished the small bottle he was feeling a little giddy. Sitting there looking at the food and wine before him and at the guests at neighboring tables as they ate and drank, he was reminded of the *pai-pais* of his childhood: how he hadn't had the courage to scramble up onto the tables with his two elder brothers to scavenge for drops of wine and morsels of food. Now the three of them had gone their own ways. His two brothers hadn't fared badly; they were both well established in their careers, while he was here drowning his sorrows in wine.

It was too bad that his papa was no longer alive, for if he could see him now, having finally learned how to drink (learned too well, for that matter), it would be only logical to expect that he would praise him as he had the elder boys in the past.

A peal of thunder brought P'an Man-kuei abruptly out of his reveries. He got up, paid his bill, and headed back home. As he neared the entrance to the lane a sudden rain-shower began to fall, the raindrops as large as soybeans. He broke into a run, heading for the apartment building. Even though the lane was only a few dozen meters long, by the time he reached the entrance his coat was soaked through and the water was streaming down from his hair, dripping past his eyebrows and over his eyelids. He was a mess as he climbed the stairs.

Two cars were parked at the foot of the stairs, bright red cars with the identifying marks of police vehicles. But P'an Man-kuei hadn't noticed them. When he reached the third floor he suddenly spotted bright lights coming from the P'an apartment across the hall. Two khaki-uniformed policemen were having a discussion about something with Mr. and Mrs. P'an.

P'an Man-kuei was now in a real dilemma and was frightened, but he quickly decided to force himself to open the door of his own apartment as if nothing were wrong. He was called to a halt by one of the policemen.

"Excuse me, are you Mr. P'an Man-kuei?"

P'an Man-kuei was speechless; his heart was pounding like a drum. He felt blood rush into his face, already flushed from the effects of the wine, and his blood vessels seemed about to burst. Water continued to drip from his wet hair, and all of this made him terribly ill at ease. Forcibly suppressing the fear inside him, he answered:

"Yes, yes I am."

"There was a robbery here this afternoon. We've investigated the incident throughout the building; I wonder if you heard anything unusual this afternoon?"

"N … no."

So the police were still in the dark. Breathing somewhat easier with this discovery, P'an Man-kuei took his handkerchief out of his pocket to wipe the water off his face.

Plunk!

A transparent plastic bag came out with the handkerchief and fell to the floor. The light from the apartment illuminated the shiny diamond ring inside. Before he could pick it up, the policeman had already retrieved it and was holding it in his hand. He casually handed it back to P'an Man.-kuei, asking as he did:

"Yours?"

"Yes!" Then he corrected himself: "Oh, no, it's … it's Mrs. P'an's. I saw her drop it the other day and I … I was going to return it to her," he said, stammering nervously as the blood once again rushed to his head.

Surprise showed on the faces of both Mr. P'an and his wife, but they said nothing. With this turn of events, the policeman sensed that he was getting closer to the truth. He turned and asked Mrs. P'an:

"Is it yours? When did you lose it? Did you include it in the list of things taken?"

"It's mine, all right, but I don't know when I lost it. Maybe it was this afternoon, but it might have been some time ago. I didn't include it in the list, because it's worthless—it's an imitation."

An imitation! An imitation! An imitation diamond ring! I've been hoarding an imitation diamond ring for over a month! And now it's been discovered! P'an Man-kuei, feeling light-headed, reached out to catch hold of the bannister to steady himself, but his wrist was grabbed by the policeman.

"Mr. P'an, please come with us to the stationhouse. There are a few questions we want to ask you, and we'll want to take your fingerprints."

Fingerprints? Fingerprints?

My God, the brown wallet!

That's right! The man's wallet!

That wallet, which is even more damning than the diamond ring!

"I, I … I didn't steal anything, I didn't … I just went in … I didn't steal anything … honestly, I didn't …"

P'an Man-kuei wanted badly to confess to *something*, but he was too flustered; his lips trembled, his teeth chattered, and he merely mumbled incoherently. Partly because his legs felt rubbery, and partly because he wanted to express something—anything—he finally began to sink slowly to his knees, but was stopped by the policeman, who half-supported, half-restrained him.

"Don't be frightened. We'll straighten out this whole matter at the stationhouse."

As they made their way downstairs, P'an Man-kuei sensed that his apartment door was open and that the two college students were standing there in a state of shock. Instead of raising his head to look at them, he lowered it and walked quickly downstairs in the company of the policemen.

His thoughts turned to the money in his pocket: the Taiwan currency didn't amount to anything, but what about the U.S. bills? What about them? He would like to have secretly thrown them away, but both of his arms were being held.

This is it; it's *over.* It's all over now …

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P'an Man-kuei lay peacefully on the bed—it was the same size as the one he normally slept on, but it was a little harder and a bit cleaner. The white stucco ceiling was also about the same size as his, although the hanging fluorescent light was a little too bright. The door, which was more solid than his, also had a peep-hole, a big peep-hole; in point of fact, he had yet to try to look out through it. P'an Man-kuei's thoughts returned to that delightful little peephole in the door of his apartment; with them came thoughts of the pair of calves, the ones belonging to the girl in the mini-skirt.

The monotonous sound of footsteps drew near, invading his thoughts. He jumped quickly down from the bed and plastered himself up against the corner of the wall alongside the door.

A partially hidden face appeared on the outside of the big peep-hole. P'an Man-kuei pressed his heels up against the base of the wall and flattened his back even more tightly into the corner. He lamented the fact that he couldn't force his way into the wall itself to avoid the pair of eyes in the big peep-hole, even though he knew there was no way he could escape them.

The footsteps finally faded away, and P'an Man-kuei lay back down on his bed.

At that moment he longed to have a partner for a game of chess. On occasion during the group recreation period after dinner the opportunity for a game of chess presented itself, but the competition was different: the men here were a crude lot, and their chess skills were no better, certainly no match for his. This kind of victory gave him no pleasure. He was aware that this group of inmates included the other two men, whom he did not recognize, but who had been sentenced to even longer prison terms than he. Fearing that he might run into them, he avoided playing chess with any strangers.

P'an Man-kuei had no desire to return to the outside world; it seemed to him that the outside world had never belonged to him. He had never owned anything out there. The little peep-hole had been the one and only thing that had belonged to him.

But now he "owned" something: this small room, which separated him from the outside world, was his. No one else could lay any claims to it, and no one could encroach upon it. It was peaceful and safe.

P'an Man-kuei had no intention of crawling out of his hole, because the world at the bottom of this hole belonged to him—he could be at peace and remain forever satisfied in his hole.

73.264 Excerpt from **Soul Mountain**\fn{by Gao Xingjian (1940-)} Jiangsi Province, China (M) 11

The old bus is a city reject. After shaking in it for twelve hours on the potholed highway since early morning, you arrive in this mountain county town in the South.

In the bus station, which is littered with ice-block wrappers and sugar cane scraps, you stand with your backpack and a bag and look around for a while. People are getting off the bus or walking past, men humping sacks and women carrying babies. A crowd of youths, unhampered by sacks or baskets, have their hands free. They take sunflower seeds out of their pockets, toss them one at a time into their mouths and spit out the shells. With a loud crack the kernels are expertly eaten. To be leisurely and ca:refree is endemic to the place. They are locals and life has made them like this, they have been here for many generations—and you wouldn't need to go looking anywhere else for them. The earliest to leave the place travelled by river in black canopy boats and overland in hired carts, or by foot if they didn't have the money. Of course at that time there were no buses and no bus stations. Nowadays, as long as they are still able to travel, they flock back home, even from the other side of the Pacific, arriving in cars or big air-conditioned coaches. The rich, the famous and the nothing in particular all hurry back because they are getting old. After all, who doesn't love the home of their ancestors? They don't intend to stay so they walk around looking relaxed, talking and laughing loudly, and effusing fondness and affection for the place. When friends meet they don't just give a nod or a handshake in the meaningless ritual of city people, but rather they shout the person's name or thump him on the back. Hugging is also common, but not for women.

By the cement trough where the buses are washed, two young women hold hands as they chat. The women here have lovely voices and you can't help taking a second look. The one with her back to you is wearing an indigo-print headscarf. This type of scarf, and how it's tied, dates back many generations but is seldom seen these days. You find yourself walking towards them. The scarf is knotted under her chin and the two ends point up. She has a beautiful face. Her features are delicate, so is her slim body. You pass close by them. They have been holding hands all this time, both have red coarse hands and strong fingers. Both are probably recent brides back seeing relatives and friends, or visiting parents. Here, the word *xifu* means one's own daughter-in-law and using it like rustic Northerners to refer to any young married woman will immediately incur angry abuse. On the other hand, a married woman calls her own husband *laogong*, yet your *laogong* and my *laogong* are both used. People here speak with a unique intonation even though they are descendants of the same legendary emperor and are of the same culture and race.

You can't explain why you're here. It happened that you were on a train and this person mentioned a place called Lingshan. He was sitting opposite and your cup was next to his. As the train moved, the lids on the cups clattered against one another. If the lids kept on clattering or clattered and then stopped, that would have been the end of it. However, whenever you and he were about to separate the cups, the clattering would stop, and as soon as you and he looked away the clattering would start again. He and you reached out, but again the clattering stopped. The two of you laughed at the same instant, put the cups well apart, and started a conversation. You asked him where he was going.

"Lingshan."

"What?"

"Lingshan, *ling* meaning spirit or soul, and *shan* meaning mountain."

You'd been to lots of places, visited lots of famous mountains, but had never heard of this place."

Your friend opposite had closed his eyes and was dozing. Like anyone else, you couldn't help being curious and naturally wanted to know which famous places you'd missed on your travels. Also, you liked doing things properly and it was annoying that there was a place you've never even heard of. You asked him about the location of Lingshan.

"At the source of the You River," he said, opening his eyes.

You didn't know this You River either, but was embarrassed about asking and gave an ambiguous nod which could have meant either "I see, thanks" or "Oh, I know the place." This satisfied your desire for superiority, but not your curiosity. After a while you asked how to get there and the route up the mountain.

"Take the train to Wuyizhen, then go upstream by boat on the You River."

"What's there? Scenery? Temples? Historic sites?" you asked, trying to be casual.

"It's all virgin wilderness."

"Ancient forests?"

"Of course, but not just ancient forests."

"What about Wild Men?" you said, joking.

He laughed without any sarcasm, and didn't seem to be making fun of himself which intrigued you even more. You had to find out more about him.

"Are you an ecologist? A biologist? An anthropologist? An archaeologist?" He shook his head each time then said,

"I'm more interested in living people."

"So you're doing research on folk customs? You're a sociologist? An ethnographer? An ethnologist? A journalist, perhaps? An adventurer?"

"I'm an amateur in all of these."

The two of you started laughing.

"I'm an expert amateur in all of these!"

The laughing made you and him cheerful. He lit a cigarette and couldn't stop talking as he told you about the wonders of Lingshan.

Afterwards, at your request, he tore up his empty cigarette box and drew a map of the route up Lingshan.

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In the North it is already late autumn but the summer heat hasn't completely subsided. Before sunset, it is still quite hot in the sun and sweat starts running down your back. You leave the station to have a look around. There's nothing nearby except for the little inn across the road. It's an old-style two-storey building with a wooden shopfront. Upstairs the floorboards creak badly but worse still is the grime on the pillow and sleeping mat. If you wanted to have a wash, you'd have to wait till it was dark to strip off and pour water over yourself in the damp and narrow courtyard. This is a stopover for the village peddlers and craftsmen.

It's well before dark, so there's plenty of time to find somewhere clean. You walk down the road looking around the little town, hoping to find some indication, a billboard or a poster, or just the name "Lingshan" to tell you you're on the right track and haven't been tricked into making this long excursion. You look everywhere but don't find anything. There were no tourists like you amongst the other passengers who got off the bus. Of course you're not *that* sort of tourist, it's just what you're wearing: strong sensible sports shoes and a backpack with shoulder straps, no-one else is dressed like you. But this isn't one of the tourist spots frequented by newlyweds and retirees. Those places have been transformed by tourism, coaches are parked everywhere and tourist maps are on sale. Tourist hats, tourist T-shirts, tourist singlets and tourist handkerchiefs printed with the name of the place are in all the little shops and stalls, and the name of the place is used in the trade names of all the "foreign exchange currency only" hotels for foreigners, the "locals with references only" hostels and sanatoriums, and of course the small private hotels competing for customers. You haven't come to enjoy yourself in one of those places on the sunny side of a mountain where people congregate just to look at and jostle one another and to add to the litter of melon rind, fruit peel, soft drink bottles, cans, cartons, sandwich wrappings and cigarette butts. Sooner or later this place will also boom but you're here before they put up the gaudy pavilions and terraces, before the reporters come with their cameras and before the celebrities come to put up plaques with their calligraphy.

You can't help feeling rather pleased with yourself, and yet you're anxious. There's no sign of anything here for tourists, have you made a blunder? You're only going by the map on the cigarette box in your shirt pocket, what if the expert amateur you met on the train had only heard about the place on his travels? How do you know he wasn't just making it all up? You've never seen the place mentioned in travel accounts and it's not listed in the most up-to-date travel guides. Of course, it isn't hard to find places like Lingtai, Lingqiu, Lingyan and even Lingshan on provincial maps and you know very well that in the histories and classics, Lingshan appears in works dating back to the ancient shamanistic work *Classic of the Mountains and Seas* and the old geographical gazetteer *Annotated Water Classic*. It was also at Lingshan that Buddha enlightened the Venerable Mahakashyapa. You're not stupid, so just use your brains, first find this place Wuyizhen on the cigarette box, for this is how you'll get to Lingshan.

You return to the bus station and go into the waiting room. The busiest place in this small town is now deserted. The ticket window and the parcel window are boarded up from the inside so knocking is useless. There's no-one to ask so you can only go through the lists of. stops above the ticket window: Zhang Village, Sandy Flat, Cement Factory, Old Hut, Golden Horse, Good Harvest, Flood Waters, Dragon Bay, Peach Blossom Hollow … the names keep getting better, but the place you want isn't there.

This is just a small town but there are several routes and quite a few buses go through. The busiest route, with five or six buses a day, is to Cement Factory but that's defmitely not a tourist route. The route with the fewest buses, one a day, is sure to go to the furthest destination and it turns out that Wuyizhen is the last stop. There's nothing special about the name, it's just like any other place name and there's nothing magical about it. Still, you seem to have, found one end of a hopeless tangle and while you're not ecstatic, you're certainly relieved. You'll need to buy a ticket in the morning an hour before departure and you know from experience that with mountain buses like this, which run once a day, just to get on will be a fight. Unless you're prepared to do battle, you'll just

have to queue up early.

But, right now, you’ve lots of time, although your backpack’s a nuisance. As you amble along the road timber trucks go by noisily sounding their horns. In the town the noise worsens as trucks, some with trailers, blast their horns and conductors hang out of windows loudly banging the sides of the buses to hasten the pedestrians off the road.

The old buildings on both sides stand flush with the road and all have wooden shopfronts. The downstairs is for business and upstairs there is washing hung out to dry—nappies, bras, underpants with patched crotches, floral-print bedspreads—like flags of all the nations, flaping in the noise and dust of the traffic. The concrete telegraph poles along the street are pasted at eye level with all sorts of posters. One for curing body odor catches your attention. This is not because you’ve got body odor but because of the fancy language and the words in brackets after “body odor.”

> Body odor (known also as scent of the immortals) is a disgusting condition with an awful, nauseating smell. It often affects social relationships and can delay life’s major event: marriage. It disadvantages young men and women at job interviews or when they try to enlist, therefore inflicting much suffering and anguish. By using a new total treatment, we can instantly eradicate the odour with a rate of up to 97.53% success. For joy in life and future happiness, we welcome you to come and rid yourself of it …

After that you come to a stone bridge: no body odor here, just a cool, refreshing breeze. The bridge spanning the broad river has a bitumen surface but the carved monkeys on the worn stone posts testify to its long history. You lean on the concrete railing and survey the township alongside the bridge. On both banks, black rooftops overlapping like fish scales stretch endlessly into the distance. The valley opens out between two mountains where the upper areas of gold paddy fields are inlaid with clusters of green bamboos. The river is blue and clear as it trickles over the sandy shores, but close to the granite pylons dividing the current it becomes inky green and deep. Just past the hump of the bridge the rushing water churns loudly and white foam surfaces from whirlpools. The ten-meter-high stone embankment is stained with water levels—the new greyish-yellow lines were probably left by the recent summer floods. Can this be the You River? And does it flow down from Lingshan?

The sun is about to set. The bright orange disc is infused with light but there’s no glare. You gaze into the distance at the hazy layers of jagged peaks where the two sides of the valley join. This ominous black image nibbles at the lower edges of the glowing sun which seems to be revolving. The sun turns a dark red, gentler, and projects brilliant gold reflections onto the entire bend of the river: the dark blue of the water fusing with the dazzling sunlight throbs and pulsates. As the red sphere seats itself in the valley it becomes serene, awesomely beautiful, and there are sounds. You hear them, elusive, distinctly reverberating from deep in your heart and radiating outwards until the sun seems to prop itself up on its toes, stumble, then sink into the black shadows of the mountains, scattering glowing colors throughout the sky. An evening wind blows noisily by your ears and cars drive past, as usual sounding their deafening horns. You cross the bridge and see there a new dedication stone with engraved characters painted in red:

> Yongning Bridge. Built in the third year of the Kaiyuan reign period\fn{713-741:H} of the Song Dynasty and repaired in 1962. This stone was laid in 1983.

It no doubt marks the beginning of the tourist industry here.

Two food stalls stand at the end of the bridge. In the one on the left you eat a bowl of bean curd, the smooth and tasty kind with all the right ingredients. Hawkers used to sell it in the streets and lanes but it completely disappeared for quite some years and has recently been revived as family enterprises. In the stall on the right you eat two delicious sesame-coated shallot pancakes, straight off the stove and piping-hot. Then at one of the stalls, you can’t remember which, you eat a bowl of sweet *yuanxiao* dumplings broiled in rice wine. They are the size of large pearls. Of course, you’re not as academic about food as Mr. Ma the Second who toured West Lake, but you do have a hefty appetite nevertheless. You savor this food of your ancestors and listen to customers chatting with the proprietors. They’re mostly locals and all know one another. You try using the mellifluous local accent to be friendly, you want to be one of them. You’ve lived in the city for a long time and need to feel that you have a hometown. You want a hometown so that you’ll be able to return to your childhood to recollect long lost memories.

On this side of the bridge you eventually find an inn on an old cobblestone street. The wooden floors have been mopped and it’s clean enough. You are given a small single room which has a plank bed covered with a

bamboo mat. The cotton blanket is a suspicious gray—either it hasn't been washed properly or that's the original color. You throw aside the greasy pillow from under the bamboo mat and luckily it's hot so you can do without the bedding. What you need right now is to off-load your luggage which has become quite heavy, wash off the dust and sweat, strip, and stretch yourself out on the bed.

There's shouting and yelling next door. They're gambling and you can hear them picking up and throwing down the cards. A timber partition separates you and, through the holes poked into the paper covering the cracks, you make out the blurred figures of some bare-chested men. You're not so tired that you can drop off to sleep just like that. You tap on the wall and instantly there's loud shouting next door. They're not shouting at you but amongst themselves—there are always winners and losers and it sounds as though the loser is trying to get out of paying. They're openly gambling in the inn despite the public security office notice on the wall prohibiting gambling and prostitution.

You decide to see if the law works. You put on some clothes, go down the corridor and knock on the half-closed door. Your knocking makes no difference, they keep shouting and yelling inside and nobody takes any notice. So you push open the door and go in. The four men sitting around the bed in the middle of the room all turn to look at you. But it's you and not they who gets a rude shock. The men all have bits of paper stuck on their faces, on their foreheads, lips, noses and cheeks, and they look ugly and ridiculous. They aren't laughing and are glaring at you. You've butted in and they're clearly annoyed.

"Oh, you're playing cards," you say, putting on an apologetic look.

They go on playing. The long paper cards have red and black markings like mahjong and there's a Gate of Heaven and a Prison of Hell. The winner penalizes the loser by tearing off a strip of newspaper and sticking it on a designated spot. Whether this is a prank, a way of letting off steam, or a tally, is something agreed upon by the gamblers and there is no way for outsiders to know what it's all about.

You beat a retreat, go back to your room, lie down again, and see a thick mass of black specks around the light globe. Millions of mosquitoes are waiting for the light to go out so that they can come down and feast on your blood. You quickly let down the net and are enclosed in a narrow conical space, at the top of which is a bamboo hoop. It's been a long time since you've slept under a hoop like this, and you've long since passed the age of being able to stare at the hoop to lose yourself in reverie. Today, you can't know what traumas tomorrow will bring. You've learnt through experience everything you need to know. What else are you looking for? When a man gets to middle age shouldn't he look for a peaceful and stable existence, find a not-too-demanding sort of a job, stay in a mediocre position, become a husband and a father, set up a comfortable home, put money in the bank and add to it every month so there'll be something for old age and a little left over for the next generation?

*

It is in the Qiang region halfway up Qionglai Mountain, in the border areas of the Qinghai-Tibetan highlands and the Sichuan basin, that I witness a vestige of early human civilization—the worship of fire. Fire, the bringer of civilization, has been worshipped by the early ancestors of human beings everywhere. It is sacred. The old man is sitting in front of the fire drinking liquor from a bowl. Before each sip he puts a finger into it and flicks some on the charcoals which splutter noisily and send out blue sparks. It is only then that I perceive that I too am real.

"That's for the God of the Cooking Stove, it's thanks to him that we can eat and drink," he says.

The dancing light of the fire shines on his thin cheeks, the high bridge of his nose, and his cheekbones. He tells me he is of the Qiang nationality and that he's from Gengda village down the mountain. I can't ask straight out about demons and spirits, so I tell him I'm here to do some research on the folk songs of the mountain. Do traditional song masters and dancers still exist here? He says he's one of them. The men and women all used to form a circle around the fire and dance right through to daybreak, but later on it was banned.

"Why?" I know quite well but I ask. I'm being dishonest again.

"It was the Cultural Revolution. They said the songs were dirty so we turned to singing *Sayings of Mao Zedong* songs instead."

"And what about after that?" I persist in asking. This is becoming a habit.

"No-one sings those anymore. People are doing the dances again but not many of the young people can do them. I'm teaching the dances to some of them."

I ask him for a demonstration. Without any hesitation, he instantly gets to his feet and proceeds to dance and sing. His voice is low and rich, he's got a good voice. I'm sure he's Qiang even if the police in charge of the population register insist that he isn't. They think anyone claiming to be Tibetan or Qiang is trying to evade birth restrictions so they can have more children.

He sings song after song. He says he's a fun-loving person, and I believe him. When he finished up as village

head, he went back to being one of the mountain people, an old mountain man who likes good fun, though unfortunately he is past the age for romance.

He also knows incantations, the kind hunters employ when they go into the mountains. They are called mountain black magic or hexes and he has no qualms about using them. He really believes they can drive wild animals into pits or get them to step into snares. They aren't used only on animals, they're also used against other human beings for revenge. A victim of mountain black magic won't be able to find his way out of the mountains. They are like the "demon walls" I heard about as a child: when a person has been travelling for some time at night in the mountains, a wall, a cliff or a deep river appears right in front of him, so that he can't go any further. If the spell isn't broken the person's feet don't move forward and even if he keeps walking, he stays exactly where he started off. Only at daybreak does he discover that he has been going around in circles. That's not so bad, the worst is when a person is led into a blind alley—that means death.

He intones strings of incantations. It's not slow and relaxed like when he is singing, but just *nan-nan-na-na* to a quick beat. I can't understand it at all but I can feel the mystical pull of the words and a demonic, powerful atmosphere instantly permeates the room, the inside of which is black from smoke. The glow of the flames licking the iron pot of mutton stew makes his eyes glint. This is all starkly real. While you search for the route to Lingshan, I wander along the Yangtze River looking for this sort of reality. I had just gone through a crisis and then, on top of that, a doctor wrongly diagnosed me with lung cancer. Death was playing a joke on me but now that I've escaped the demon wall, I am secretly rejoicing. Life for me once again has a wonderful freshness. I should have left those contaminated surroundings long ago and returned to nature to look for this authentic life.

In those contaminated surroundings I was taught that life was the source of literature, that literature had to be faithful to life, faithful to real life. My mistake was that I had alienated myself from life and ended up turning my back on real life. Life is not the same as manifestations of life. Real life, or in other words the basic substance of life, should be the former and not the latter. I had gone against real life because I was simply stringing together life's manifestations, so of course I wasn't able to accurately portray life and in the end only succeeded in distorting reality.

I don't know whether I'm now on the right track but in any case I've extricated myself from the bustling literary world and have also escaped from my smoke-filled room. The books piled everywhere in that room were oppressive and stifling. They expounded all sorts of truths, historical truths to truths on how to be human. I couldn't see the point of so many truths but still got enmeshed in the net of those truths and was struggling hopelessly, like an insect caught in a spider's web. Fortunately, the doctor who gave the wrong diagnosis saved my life. He was quite frank and got me to compare the two chest X-rays taken on two separate occasions—a blurry shadow on the left lobe of the lung had spread along the second rib to the wall of the windpipe. It wouldn't help even to have the whole of the left lobe removed. The outcome was obvious.

My father had died of lung cancer. He died within three months of it being discovered and it was this doctor who had correctly diagnosed it. I had faith in his medical expertise and he had faith in science. The chest X-rays taken at two different hospitals were identical, there was no possibility of a technical mistake. He also wrote an authorization for a sectional X-ray, the appointment was in two weeks' time. This was nothing to get worried about, it was just to determine the extent of the tumor. My father had this done before he died. The outcome would be the same whether or not I had the X- ray, it was nothing special. That I in fact would slip through the fingers of Death can only be put down to good luck. I believe in science but I also believe in fate.

*

I once saw a four-inch length of wood which had been collected in the Qiang region by an anthropologist during the 1930s. It was a carved statue of a person doing a handstand. The head had ink markings for the eyes, nose and mouth, and the word "longevity" had been written on the body. It was called "Wuchang Upside Down" and there was something oddly mischievous about it. I ask the Qiang retired village head whether such talismans are still around. He tells me these are called "old root." This wooden idol has to accompany the newborn from birth to death. At death it accompanies the corpse from the house and after the burial it is placed in the wilderness to allow the spirit to return to nature. I ask him if he can get me one so that I can carry it on me. He laughs and says these are what hunters tuck into their shirts to ward off evil spirits, they wouldn't be of any use to someone like me.

"Is there an old hunter who knows about this sort of magic and can take me hunting with him?" I ask.

"Grandpa Stone would be the best," he says after thinking about it.

"How can I find him?" I ask right away.

"He's in Grandpa Stone's Hut."

"Where's this Grandpa Stone's Hut?"

"Go another twenty *Ii* on to Silver Mine Gully then follow the creek right up to the end. There you'll find a stone hut."

"Is that the name of the place or do you mean the hut of Grandpa Stone?"

He says it's the name of the place, that there's in fact a stone hut, and that Grandpa Stone lives there.

"Can you take me to him?" I ask.

"He's dead. He lay down on his bed and died in his sleep. He was too old, he lived to well over ninety, some even say well over a hundred. In any case, nobody's sure about his age."

"Are any of his descendants still alive?"

"In my grandfather's generation and for as long as I can remember, he was always on his own."

"Without a wife?"

"He lived on his own in Silver Mine Gully. He lived high up the gully, in the solitary hut, alone. Oh, and that rifle of his is still hanging on the wall of the hut."

I ask him what he's trying to tell me.

He says Grandpa Stone was a great hunter, a hunter who was an expert in the magical arts. There are no hunters like that these days. Everyone knows that his rifle is hanging in the hut, that it never misses its target, but nobody dares to go and take it.

"Why?" I'm even more puzzled.

"The route into Silver Mine Gully is cut."

"There's no way through?"

"Not anymore. Earlier on people used to mine silver there, a firm from Chengdu hired a team of workers and they began mining. Later on, after the mine was looted, everyone just left, and the plank roads they had laid either broke up or rotted."

"When did all this happen?"

"When my grandfather was still alive, more than fifty years ago."

That would be about right, after all he's already retired and has become history, real history.

"So since then nobody's ever gone there?" I become even more intrigued.

"Hard to say, anyway it's hard to get there."

"And the hut has rotted?"

"Stone collapses, how can it rot?"

"I was talking about the ridgepole."

"Oh, quite right."

He doesn't want to take me there, nor does he want to find a hunter for me, so that's why he's leading me on like this, I think.

"Then how do you know the rifle's still hanging on the wall?" I ask, regardless.

"That's what everyone says, someone must've seen it. They all say that Grandpa Stone is incredible, his corpse hasn't rotted and wild animals don't dare to go near. He just lies there all stiff and emaciated, and his rifle is hanging there on the wall."

"Impossible," I declare. "With the high humidity up here in the mountain, the corpse would have rotted and the rifle would have turned into a pile of rust."

"I don't know. Anyway, people have been saying this for years." He refuses to give in and sticks to his story. The light of the fire dances in his eyes and I seem to detect a cunning streak in them.

"And you've never seen him?" I won't let him off.

"People who have seen him say that he seems to be asleep, that he's emaciated, and that the rifle is hanging there on the wall above his head," he says, unruffled. "He knew black magic. It's not just that people don't dare go there to steal his rifle, even animals don't dare to go near."

The hunter is already myth. To talk about a mixture of history and legend is how folk stories are born. Reality exists only through experience, and it must be personal experience. However, once related, even personal experience becomes a narrative. Reality can't be verified and doesn't need to be, that can be left for the "reality-of-life" experts to debate. What is important is life. Reality is simply that I am sitting by the fire in this room which is black with grime and smoke and that I see the light of the fire dancing in his eyes. Reality is myself, reality is only the perception of this instant and it can't be related to another person. All that needs to be said is that outside, a mist is enclosing the green-blue mountain in a haze and your heart is reverberating with the rushing water of a swift-flowing stream.

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So you arrive in Wuyizhen, on a long and narrow street inlaid with black cobblestones, and walking along this cobblestone street with its deep single-wheel rut, you suddenly enter your childhood, you seem to have spent your childhood in an old mountain town like this. The one-wheel handcarts can no longer be seen and instead of the creak of jujube axles greased with bean oil, the streets are filled with the din of bicycle bells.

Cyclists here need the skills of an acrobat. With heavy hessian bags slung across the saddle, they cause loud swearing as they weave through people with carrying poles or pulling wooden carts and the hawkers under the awnings. It is loud, colorful swearing which mingles with the general din of the hawkers' calls, bargaining, joking and laughing. You breathe in the smell of soya sauce pickles, boiled pork, raw hide, pine wood, dried rice stalks and lime as your eyes busily take in the narrow shop fronts lining the street with products of the South. There are soya bean shops, oil shops, rice shops, Chinese and Western medicine shops, silk and cotton shops, shoe shops, tea shops, butcher stalls, tailor shops, and shops selling stoves, rope, pottery, incense, candles and paper money. The shops, squashed up one against the other, are virtually unchanged from Qing Dynasty times.\fn{The old Manchu Dynsty, which abdicated power in 1911.} The smashed signboard of the Ever Prosperous Restaurant has been repaired and one of the flat-bottomed pans used for frying its speciality *guotie* dumplings is beaten like a gong to announce it is back in business. The wine banner is again hanging from the upstairs window of the First Class Delicacies Restaurant. The most imposing structure is the state-run department store, a newly renovated three-storey concrete building. A single display window is the size of one of the old shops but the insides of the glass windows look as if they have never been cleaned.

The photographer's shop is eye-catching: photos of women in coquettish poses and wearing awful dresses are on display. They are all local beauties and not movie poster film stars from some place at the other end of the earth. This place really produces good-looking women, every one of them is stunning. They have their beautiful cheeks cupped in their hands and their eyes have alluring looks. They've been carefully coached by the photographer but they are garishly dressed. Enlargements and color prints are available and there's a sign saying photos can be collected in twenty days, apparently they have to be developed in the city.

Had fate not otherwise decreed, you could have been born in this town, grown up, and married here. You would have married a beautiful woman like one of these, who would long since have borne you sons and daughters. At this point, you smile and quickly move off in case people imagine you've taken a fancy to one of the women and start getting the wrong idea. And yet it is you who are carried away by your imagination.

As you look up at the balconies above the shops with their curtained windows and pots of miniature trees and flowers, you can't help wondering about the people who live here. There's a big apartment with an iron padlock on the door—the pillars are now crooked but the carved eaves and railings which have fallen into disrepair indicate how imposing the place was at. one time. The fates of its owners and their descendants fill you with curiosity. The shop at the side sells Hong Kong style dresses and jeans, and the stockings on show have a Western woman showing off her legs on the packaging. At the front door there's a gold-plated sign, "Ever New Technical Development Company," but it's not clear what sort of technical development it is. Further on is a shop with heaps of unprocessed lime, and further on still is probably a miller's and next to that a vacant allotment where rice noodles are drying on wires strung between posts. You turn back and go into a small lane next to the hot water urn of the tea stall, then turning a corner you are again lost in memories.

Within a half-closed door is a damp courtyard, overgrown with weeds, desolate and lonely, with piles of rubble in the corners. You recall the back courtyard with the crumbling wall of your childhood home. You were afraid but it had a fascination for you, for the fox fairies of story books came from there. After school, without fail, you would go off alone with some trepidation to have a look. You never saw a fox fairy but that feeling of mystery always lingered in your childhood memories. There is an old stone bench riddled with cracks and a well which is probably dry. The mid-autumn wind blows through the dry yellow weeds in the rubble and the sun is very bright. These homes with their courtyard doors shut tight all have their histories which are all like ancient stories. In winter, the north wind is howling through the lane, you are wearing new warm padded cloth shoes and are with other children stamping your feet by the wall. You can remember the words of the ditty:

In moonlight thick as soup
I ride out to burn incense
For Luo Dajie who burnt to death
For Dou Sanniang who died in a rage
Sanniang picked beans
But the pods were empty

She married Master Ji
But Master Ji was short
So she married a crab
The crab crossed a ditch
Trod on an eel
The eel complained
It complained to a monk
The monk said a prayer
A prayer to Guanyin
So Guanyin pissed
The piss hit my son
His belly hurt
So I got an exorcist to dance
The dance didn't work
But still cost heaps of money

Pale withered weeds and lush green new sprouts in the roof-tiles quiver in the wind. How long is it since you've seen grass growing in roof-tiles? Your bare feet patter on the black cobblestone street with its deep single-wheel rut, you've run out of your childhood back into the present. The bare feet, the dirty black feet, patter right there in front of your eyes. It doesn't matter if you've never run barefoot, what is crucial is this image in your mind.

After a while you find your way out of the little lanes and make it back on the highway. This is where the bus from the county town turns around to go back. There's a bus station by the road with a ticket window and some benches inside, this is where you got off the bus earlier on. Diagonally across the road is an inn—a row of single-storey rooms—and the whitewashed brick wall has a sign "Good Rooms Within." It looks clean and you have to find somewhere to stay, so you go in. An old attendant is sweeping the corridor and you ask her if there's a room. She says yes. You ask her how much further is it to Lingshan. She gives you a cold look, this is a state-run inn, she's on a monthly state award wage and isn't generous with words.

"Number two," she says pointing with the broom handle to a room with the door open. You take your luggage in and notice there are two beds. On one there's someone lying on his back, one leg crossed over the other, with a copy of *Unofficial Record of the Flying Fox* in his hands. The title is written on the brown paper cover of the book, apparently on loan from a bookstall. You greet him and he puts down the book to give a friendly nod.

"Hello."

"Staying here?"

"Yes."

"Have a cigarette." He toses you a cigarette.

"Thanks." You sit on the empty, bed opposite. It happens that he wants to chat.

"How long have you been here?"

"Ten or so days." He sits up and lights himself a cigarette.

"Here buying stock?" you ask, taking a guess.

"I'm here for timber."

"Is it easy getting timber here?"

"Have you got a quota?" he asks instead, starting to become interested.

"What quota?"

"A state-plan quota, of course."

"No."

"Then it's not easy to get." He lies down again.

"Is there a timber shortage even in this forest region?"

"There's timber around but prices are different." He can't be bothered, he can tell you're not in the game.

"Are you waiting for cheaper prices?"

"Yes," he responds indifferendy, taking up his book again to read.

"You stock buyers really get to know about a lot of things." You have to flatter him so that you can ask him some questions.

"Not really." He becomes modest.

"The place Lingshan, do you know how to get there?"

He doesn't reply so you can only say you've come to do some sightseeing and is there anywhere worth seeing.

"There's a pavilion by the river. If you sit there you'll get a good view of the other side of the river."
"Enjoy your rest!" you say for want of something to say.

You leave your bags, find the attendant to register and set off. The wharf is at the end of the highway. The steps, made of long slabs of rock, go down steeply for more than ten metres and moored there are several black canopy boats with their bamboo poles up. The river isn't wide but the riverbed is; clearly it's not the rainy season. There is a boat on the opposite bank and people are getting on and getting off. The people on the stone steps are all waiting for it to come across.

Up from the wharf, on the embankment, there is a pavilion with upturned eaves and curling corners. The outside is lined with empty baskets and resting inside are farmers from the other side who were here for the market and have sold all of their goods. They are talking loudly and it sounds like the language used in the short stories of the Song Dynasty.\fn{960-1279AD, the beginning of the "Early Modern Period" of Chinese history.} The pavilion has been painted recently and under the eaves the dragon and phoenix design has been repainted and the two principal columns at the front are inscribed with the couplet:

Sitting at rest know not to discuss the shortcomings of other people
Setting out on a journey fully appreciate the beauty of the dragon river

You go around to look at the two columns at the back. These words are written there:

On departing do not forget to heed the duckweed waters
Turn back to gaze in wonder at Lingshan amongst the phoenixes

You're intrigued. The boat is probably about to arrive as the people resting and cooling off have got up and are rushing to shoulder their carrying poles. Only an old man is left sitting in the pavilion.
"Venerable elder, may I ask if these couplets—"
"Are you asking about the couplets on the principal columns?" the old man corrects me.
"Yes, venerable master, might I ask who wrote the couplets on the principal columns?" you say with added reverence.
"The scholar Mr. Chen Xianning!" His mouth opens wide, revealing sparse black teeth, as he enunciates each of the words with great precision.
"I don't know of him." You'd best be frank about your ignorance. "At which university does this gentleman teach?"
"People like you wouldn't know, of course. He lived more than a thousand years ago." The old man is contemptuous.
"Please don't make fun of me, venerable elder," you say, trying to stop him ridiculing you.
"You don't need glasses, can't you see?" he says pointing up to the beam at the top of the columns.
You look up and see on the beam which hasn't been repainted, these words written in vermilion:

Erected during the Great Song Dynasty in the first month of spring in the tenth year of the Shaoxing reign period\fn{1127-1162:H} and repaired during the Great Qing Dynasty on the twenty-ninth day of the third month of the nineteenth year of the Qianlong reign period.\fn{1735-1796:H}

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I set out from the hostel of the nature reserve and go back to the house of the Qiang retired village head. A big padlock is hanging on his door. This is the third time I've been back but again he's not there. It seems that this door which can lead me into that mystical world has closed for me.

I wander on in fine drizzling rain. It's been a long time since I have wandered about in this sort of misty rain. I pass by the Sleeping Dragon Village Hospital, it looks deserted. The forest is quiet but there is always a stream somewhere not too far away, for I can hear the sound of trickling water. It's been ages since I have had such freedom, I don't have to think about anything and I let my thoughts ramble. There's no-one on the highway, and no vehicles are in sight. As far as the eye can see it is a luxuriant green. It is the middle of spring.

The big deserted compound on the side of the road is probably. the headquarters of the bandit chief Song Guotai mentioned by the reserve warden last night. Forty years ago, a single mountain road for horse caravans was the only access to this place. To the north it crossed the 5000-meter-high Balang Mountains into the Qinghai-Tibetan highlands and to the south it went through the Min River valley into the Sichuan basin. The opium

smugglers from the South and the salt smugglers from the North all obediently put down money here to buy passage through. This was called showing proper respect. If there was a fuss and proper respect wasn't shown, it would be a case of arriving and not returning. They would all be sent to meet the King of Hell.

It is an old timber compound. The two big heavy wooden gates are wide open and inside, surrounded on three sides by two-storey buildings, is an overgrown courtyard big enough for a caravan of thirty or forty horses. Probably in those days, as soon as the gates were closed, the eaved balconies with their wooden railings would be thick with armed bandits so that caravans thinking of stopping the night would be trapped like turtles in a jar. Even if a shoot-out took place there wouldn't have been anywhere in the courtyard to escape the bullets.

There are two sets of stairs in the courtyard. I go up. The floorboards creak noisily and I deliberately tread heavily to show my presence. However the upstairs is deserted. One after another I push open the doors to empty rooms smelling of dust and mildew. Only a dirty gray towel hanging on a wire and an old worn shoe show that the place has been lived in, but probably some years ago. When the reserve was established the supply and marketing cooperative, local produce purchasing depot, grain and oil depot, veterinary clinic as well as the village administrative office and the personnel were all relocated in the narrow hundred meters of street built by the reserve administration where there is not a trace of Song Guotai's hundred or so men and their hundred or so rifles once housed in this compound. In those times they would lie on rush mats smoking opium and fondling their women. These women, who had been abducted, had to cook for them in the daytime and sleep in turn with them at night. At times, either because the loot wasn't shared equally or because of a woman, fights would break out and wild rioting probably took place on the floors of this very building …

*

"Only the bandit chief Song Guotai could keep them under control. This fellow was ruthless and cruel, and renowned for his cunning."

The warden of the reserve does political work and he is eloquent and convincing. He says his lectures to university students here for practical work range from protection of the giant panda to patriotism and that his lectures can reduce the women students to tears.

He says that amongst the women the bandits abducted there was even a soldier of the Red Army. In 1936, during the Long March, when a regiment of the Red Army was passing through the Mao'ergai grasslands, one of the battalions was attacked by bandits. The ten or so girls of the laundry detachment were abducted and raped. The youngest was seventeen or eighteen and was the only one to survive. She was passed around several of the bandits and eventually an old Qiang man purchased her to be his wife. She lives in a nearby mountain flatland and can still recite the name of her battalion, regiment and company, as well as the name of her commanding officer who is now an important official. He's quite excited and says of course he can't talk about all these things to the students, then goes back to talking about the bandit chief Song Guotai.

This Song Guotai started out as a junior assistant, he says, for an opium merchant. When the merchant was killed by Big Brother Chen, the bandit chief who had taken over the district, he threw in his lot with the new boss. By wheeling and dealing he soon became Big Brother's confidante and had access to the small courtyard where Big Brother lived at the back of the compound. The small courtyard was later blown up by the Liberation Army in a mortar attack and is now a mass of trees and shrubs. But in those years it was really a Little Chongqing, a replica of the wartime capital, where Big Brother Chen and his harem debauched themselves on sex and liquor. The only man. allowed to wait on him was Song Guotai. A caravan arrived from Ma'erkang full of bandits who had been eying this strip of territory where all you had to do was to sit there waiting for the loot to come to you. A fierce battle raged for two days with deaths and injuries to both sides, but before any clear victory or defeat, they held peace negotiations and sealed an agreement in blood. The gates were opened and the other party invited inside. Upstairs and downstairs two lots of bandits joined in finger-guessing games and drinking liquor.

Actually it was Big Brother's plan to get the other side drunk so that he could deal with them swiftly. He got his mistresses to flit about from table to table, with their breasts exposed. It wasn't just the other bandits; who of either side could resist? Everyone was rotten drunk. Only the two bandit chiefs were still sitting upright at the table. As prearranged, Big Brother snapped his fingers loudly and Song Guotai came to pour more liquor. In one swift action, faster than it takes to tell this, he snatched the rival bandit chief's machine gun from the table and one bullet each sent the pair sprawling, Big Brother included. Then he asked: Anyone who doesn't want to surrender? The bandits looked at one another, not one dared to utter so much as half a murmur of dissent. Song Guotai thereupon moved into Big Brother's little courtyard and all the mistresses came into his possession.

He tells all this with great drama; he isn't boasting when he says he has the women students in tears. He goes on to say that in 1950 they came into the mountains to exterminate the bandits. The little courtyard was

surrounded by two companies of soldiers. At daybreak they shouted to the bandits to put down their weapons, change their wicked ways and reform, and warned that there was a blockade of several machine guns at the main gate so no-one should try to escape.

It's as if he'd taken part in the battle himself.

"What happened then?" I ask.

"At first they stubbornly resisted so the little courtyard was bombarded with mortar. The surviving bandits threw down their guns and came out to surrender. Song Guotai was not amongst them. When a search was made of the little courtyard they only found a few weeping women huddled together. Everyone said the house had a secret tunnel which went up into the mountain but it was never found, and he has never shown up anywhere. It's over forty years now, some say he's still alive and others say he's dead but there's no real evidence, only theories."

He sits back into the round cane chair and tapping his fingers on the edge where his hands are resting, he begins to analyse these theories.

"There are three theories about what happened to him. One is that after escaping he fled to another area, changed his name, and settled somewhere to work in the fields as a peasant. The second is that he could have been killed in the gun fight but the bandits wouldn't admit to it. Bandits have their own set of rules—they may be embroiled in a terrible fight amongst themselves but they won't divulge anything to an outsider. They have their own ethics, a code of bandit chivalry if you like, and yet on the other hand they are cruel and wicked. Bandits have two sides to them. The women had all been abducted but once they came into his lair, they became a part of the gang. They were abused by him and yet kept secrets for him."

He is shaking his head not because he finds it incomprehensible but because he is moved by the complexity of the human world, it seems.

"Of course one can't dismiss the third possibility that he fled onto the mountain, couldn't get out, and starved to death."

"Do people get lost on the mountain and die there?" I ask.

"Of course, and not just the peasants from elsewhere who come to dig for medicinal herbs. There are even local hunters who have died on this mountain."

"Oh?" This is even more intriguing.

"Juest last year a hunter went up the mountain and didn't come back for ten or so days. It was only then that his relatives sought out the village authorities, and we were notified. We contacted the forestry police and had them send us tracker dogs. We got them to sniff his clothes and carried out the search by following them. Afterwards we found him caught in a crack in the rocks. He had died there."

"How did he come to be stuck in the crack in the rocks?"

"Could've been anything, he probably panicked. He was hunting and hunting's prohibited in the reserve. There's also the case of a man killing his younger brother."

"How did this happen?"

"He mistook his brother for a bear. The brothers had gone into the mountain to lay traps. There's good money in musk. Laying traps has been modernized—a trap can be made with a small piece of wire pulled out of a steel construction cable and a person can lay several hundred in a day on the mountain. It's impossible for us to supervise an area of this size. They're all so greedy, it's hopeless. The brothers went into the mountain to lay traps and in the process were separated.

"It would be superstitious to believe what the mountain folk say: according to them the brothers fell foul of black magic. The two of them bumped into each other after going in a circle around the top of the mountain. There was a heavy mist. The elder brother saw his younger brother, mistook him for a bear, and shot him with his rifle. The elder brother had killed the younger brother. He went home during the night and lay his and his brother's rifles alongside one another by the bamboo gate of the pig pen so that his mother would see them when she got up to feed the pigs first thing in the morning. He didn't go inside the house but went back up the mountain to where his brother lay dead and slit his own throat."

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I leave the empty upstairs and stand for a while in the courtyard big enough for a whole caravan of horses, then head back to the highway. There still is no sign of people or vehicles. I look at the dark green mountain enveloped in a haze of rain and mist on the opposite side. A steep greyish-white logging chute is over there and the vegetation has been totally ravaged. Earlier on, before the highway was put through, both sides of the mountain would have been covered in thickly-wooded forest. I am becoming obsessed with getting to the primeval forest at

the back of the mountain and find myself drawn to it by some inexplicable force.

The light drizzle gets heavier and turns into a thin film which completely enshrouds the ridge, obscuring the mountain and gully even more. There is the rumble of thunder behind the mountain, muffied and indistinct. Suddenly, I realize that the noise of the river below the highway is much louder, there is a perpetual roar as it charges endlessly at great speed from the snowclad mountains to pour into the Min River. It possesses an intimidating and violent energy not found in rivers flowing over flat country. …

75.9 Daughter Of The Yellow River\fn{by Wang Jiada (1940-)} Lanzhou, Gansu Province, China (M) 13

People called her Granny Duo. Actually she was only twenty-five years old. But among country people, seniority carries weight, and her husband (usually greeted as Grandpa Duo) belonged to an older generation. I was then but a child, yet, by overhearing the conversations of my elders, I knew that Granny Duo was considered an improper woman.

Granny Duo's deep black eyes were very expressive. When she looked at you, her long eyelashes would flutter and a strange light would quiver in her pupils. She also had inexpressibly beautiful hands. Although she was a country woman, her hands were white and delicate. In spring when the flowers were in bloom, she would pound the petals of a nail blossom to a pulp and apply a smudge upon her fingernails, wrapping them with leaves. After ten days, she would remove the leaves and her nails would be dyed red. When gazing at people, she liked to hold her chin in her palm, shielding her face with her pink hand and scarlet nails. When Granny Duo was amused, she would burst out in raucous laughter. Then, coquettishly, she would cover her mouth with the slender fingers and flaming red nails.

Although Granny Duo was a bit short, her figure was well made; walking in town or working in the fields, her every movement was light and dainty. She was, as you might guess, the most showily dressed woman around. In summer she would always wear pink or light green. To relieve the afternoon heat, she would actually remove her shirt and stretch out under the shade of a tree. Often in winter she would wear a tight-fitting scarlet padded cotton jacket. Granny could be quite seductive.

She was also constantly hungry. The tofu peddlers often came to our village in Gansu province, their tofu and salt and pepper carried on sling poles. Sometimes Granny had no ready cash, so she would scoop up some beans and exchange them for tofu. When she got her tofu, she would immediately cut out a morsel and sprinkle it with pepper and salt. The pepper would run down her pretty lips, dying them a deeper red.

Each spring people would come and sell their newly cut leeks. They would walk about the village, calling: "Leek sprouts for exchange!" Granny Duo would always be the first to make a purchase.

Strange to say, her house was always full of people, including the people who abused her behind her back. Her large courtyard faced the sun. So it was especially popular on winter afternoons. Granny Duo would bring out long benches for her visitors. The old men would sit and pull at their long-handled water pipes, then doze away. The younger ones would squat on the steps over a game of chess. At noon Granny Duo's sweet-roots would be cooked (she boiled a potful every day); she would place the pot on the steps and her guests would help themselves. It seemed that she was constantly boiling water and serving tea.

When the snows fell, Granny Duo had fewer visitors. She would sit on her *kang,* with legs folded, a cotton padded blanket thrown over her knees as she sewed. A few young fellows would perch on the edge of the *kang* and put their hands under the blanket for warmth. Granny Duo would sit unmoving, her eyes fixed on her work, sewing stitch by stitch, sometimes passing the needle through her hair as if to wipe it.

At these times her black eyes would be like two unfathomable pools of crystal-clear water. Sometimes a hand would stray too far under the blanket and caress her feet. At these times her inch-long needle would prick at the hand and the young offender would retreat, his eyes hungrily seeking out Granny Duo's all the while. As for Granny, she went on with her sewing, unaware of anything out of the ordinary.

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This was Granny Duo, a most attractive young woman. Why people spoke evil of her was more than I could make out. Was it because she was twenty five years younger than her husband? As far as I could see, she was very good to him. His stomach was weak and she would often cook special meals for him, or send for a doctor.

My elders say that Grandpa Duo had been a first-rate raftsman in his youth. He spent all his early years carrying fruits and vegetables up and down the Yellow River. Poverty-stricken for most of his life, he only managed to accumulate a little money when over forty. He paid two hundred silver dollars—the savings of half a lifetime—for sixteen-year-old Granny Duo. (Her father had contracted lung disease, and used the money to pay a

doctor.) At the time she was but a child and had no conception of love and marriage. To her husband she expressed respect, as she would respect an elder who fed and clothed her. However, there seemed a distance between them, as if they were eyeing each other through a mist—familiar, yet strange, close, yet distant. Sometimes indeed, Granny Duo would feel a vague yearning, an undefined blankness, but her cheerful nature would quickly dispel such gloom. On the whole she did not complain; she believed that serving her husband and looking after the house was her plain duty. Later on, severe arthritis kept Grandpa from rafting down the river. By mere chance the two of them took in an apprentice, an outsider. Probably that was where all the rumors about Granny Duo started.

It was the year before liberation, during the springtime. The young man came begging his way into our village. He was dirty and disheveled, with a ragged cotton jacket on his back. Tall, dark-skinned, and spare of words, he was named Ergeze, or Second Brother.

There was a threshing ground at the south end of our village, on the banks of the Yellow River, and nearby a hut for guarding the wheat in summer. The beggar settled there. He would often stand on the bank alone, gazing into the distant mountains. Sometimes he would hum a local *huar* tune\fn{A note reads: *A tune to which words can be improvised; popular among peasants of the Northwest*.} in a low voice. His voice was beautiful—and wistful, perhaps with longing for his home. But as soon as he discovered that he had a listener, he would stop.

I once asked him about his home, but he just smiled faintly and turned to face the river. He would often stand like that for hours. Sometimes, without warning he would plunge into the river, disappear, and emerge way over on the other side; he would then swim ashore and lie down on the opposite bank, sometimes for hours. Ergeze was such a strange man.

One morning Granny Duo went to the river to fetch water. As she filled her buckets, she caught sight of Ergeze lying on the sandy bank. Evidently he had just taken a bath and was sunning himself. His muscles rippled in the sun. Granny Duo stood gazing at him for quite a while, then she approached him.

“Hey, you!” she called. “Come help Granny Duo with the buckets of water.”

Ergeze didn't move.

“Hey! Wake-up!”

No response.

“Lazybones! I’m speaking to you!” She filled a gourd full of water and splashed it over Ergeze. She laughed as Ergeze shot up, his eyes blazing, his hands clenched.

But Granny Duo soon recognized her mistake in teasing the outsider. Shouldering her buckets on her pole, she hastily backed away. From then on, everybody knew that the wandering stranger had a deep sense of self-respect and would not be trifled with.

But a few days later Ergeze helped Granny Duo of his own accord. It had been raining in torrents. Hay and lumber had been washed downstream. (The local people called this the “river firewood.”) That day Grandpa Duo took out his raft—eight inflated sheepskin air bags—and went to the middle of the river to retrieve a floating log. But the log was too unwieldy and it overturned his raft. When Grandpa Duo emerged from the water, his rafthad been carried downstream. The wind was strong and the waves high. Grandpa Duo was helpless as he saw the source of his income borne to the mouth of the river gorge, circling round and round a whirlpool.

Some of the villagers gathered on the banks above the gorge. Granny Duo stood out right in front of the crowd, lost in despair as she followed the raft with her eyes. Another wave would hurl it into the vortex of the whirlpool. But the water was so rapid, who could go to retrieve it? This was no joking matter.

Just then Ergeze appeared on the bank. He looked down into the water, swiftly took off his clothes, exposing his wide chest and solid muscles. Suddenly a soft pink hand grasped him by the arm. Granny Duo stood before him, her big black eyes dilated with fear.

“No, no!” she exclaimed. “It’s too dangerous!”

He gave her a glance, gently pushed aside her hand, and stretching his arms wide, plunged into the raging river. Time seemed to be frozen as he disappeared beneath the waters. Granny Duo paled with fear while the sweat stood out on her nose. Soon Ergeze appeared on the edge of the whirlpool, swimming toward the tossing raft. Nearer, nearer—Ergeze was on the point of reaching the raft when he was suddenly caught in the whirlpool.

“Ah!” Granny Duo cried out in spite of herself.

Just then Ergeze made his appearance on the other side of the river, far beyond the whirlpool.

“Come back!” cried Granny Duo. “I don’t want the raft anymore!”

But Ergeze didn’t heed the words. He raised his drip- ping head and plunged back toward the whirlpool. Everybody on shore started shouting:

"Come back, Ergeze! Come back!"
But Ergeze swam on.
At last he established firm footing, reached out, and with one bold sweep of his arm, caught the raft. Then he pulled it to shore. Once on shore, he didn't even glance at the admiring crowd, nor accept Granny Duo's gratitude. Tossing his jacket over his shoulders, he bit his lips, blue with cold, and made off.
That same afternoon, Granny Duo boiled a few eggs, made some pancakes, and took them to Ergeze. At the entrance to the door of the hut she heard voices. Guotai, the lame village chief, was asking Ergeze,
"Where are you from?"
"The other side of the river."
"Why are you here?"
"Begging."
"When are you going back?"
Granny Duo peered inside the hut. The old village chief was lifting his staff and shaking it in front of Ergeze.
"Three days. You make yourself scarce in three days, or else!" he threatened.
"He's not going anywhere," interrupted Granny Duo as she walked up to Guotai. "We have hired him."
"What is that? Did you say you are taking him in?"
"Yes, my husband Grandpa Duo has accepted him as an apprentice. He'll be part of our family from now on." Granny Duo signaled to Ergeze with her eyes as she spoke.
The elder was astonished.
"Do you know anything about his background?" he asked coldly.
Granny Duo laughed outright.
"Why should we care about that? You can go and find out for yourself." She turned to Ergeze and addressed him.
"Remember, tomorrow morning come over for breakfast, and then you set out rafting with the master."
She strode out of the hut, oblivious to Ergeze's look of surprise. Guotai shouted at her back:
"If something happens, you will be held responsible."
The next morning I saw a lot of people standing in the courtyard of the Duo household. It was apparent that something exciting was going on. I dived into the crowd and saw that Granny Duo was shaving Ergeze's hair.
Granny would often give the local children a haircut, not minding the trouble and the dirt. Once, my mother asked the village butcher to cut my hair. The butcher was accustomed to handling a big carving knife, and there was no delicacy in his method. He seemed to be sawing through my hair. I stamped about in pain. So Mother held my head while the butcher sawed away, sweating profusely. It really was like a pig killing. I finally escaped from Mother's grip and shook out my half-cut hair.
The next day Mother acquiesced.
"All right, Little Sheng, let's give Granny Duo a try." I knew that she despised Granny Duo and never liked my lingering around her house, but now she had little choice.
When Granny saw my hair, she laughed until her body shook.
"Little Sheng, you look as if you'd been gnawed on by a dog," she said. She hastily made hot water, brought out a towel and scented soap—at the time she was the only one in the village to use scented soap—and washed my hair thoroughly. Then she wiped the shaving knife on her knees and, holding my head in position with one hand, she performed her task deftly and gently. When she finished, I felt a slight itching, as if an ant was crawling over my pate. She patted my shiny top and laughed.
"There you go, sonny!"
But she had never been asked to cut an adult's hair. That would have been improper. Yet there she was on that spring morning, in front of the whole world, barbering a young fellow about her own age! The crowd looked on, amused, malicious. But Granny Duo did not mind them at all. She sat composedly on the steps of her house, her hand moving swiftly over Ergeze's head with the shaving knife, a ring flashing on her finger. Ergeze was somewhat embarrassed as he lowered his head.
Granny Duo kept her eyes on the moving knife. When she finished, she put her hand lightly on Ergeze's shining pate.
"A handsome young fellow like you, why shouldn't you smarten up a bit?"
She then went into the house and brought out some of her husband's clothes and made Ergeze change into them. Ergeze looked another man. I hardly knew him.
From that day on, he was part of the Duo family. Every morning he would go rafting with Grandpa Duo, and

he mastered the craft in a short time. Grandpa Duo's health went from bad to worse and Ergeze ended up doing the job alone. Sometimes when business was heavy, Granny Duo would accompany him down the river. In the daytime he shared his meals with the Duos; at night he slept in the hut next to the common threshing ground. Gradually the cloud over his face cleared away.

But still, he rarely spoke. Apart from rafting, he had to tend to the Duos' farm. He was thus busy all day long. Only at dusk could we see him squatting in his doorway eating noodles from a bowl the size of a washbasin. He kept at a distance from Granny Duo, never joking with her, rarely looking at her. He seemed to have a deep respect for his master's wife. Only once was his behavior strange and unaccountable.

It was a hot mid-afternoon. Granny Duo was washing clothes on the riverbank. As she worked, she decided to take off her upper garments, leaving on only a stomach kerchief that exposed her snow-white arms and neck and shoulders. To cool off, she sprinkled some water on her arms and neck. And then she loosened her hair and, kneeling on a slab of stone by the river, she dipped her hair into the water and washed it. When she finished, she held up her hair in one hand and contemplated herself, bending over the rippling water: a young woman in a pink stomach kerchief, clasping her long jet-black hair, gazing distractedly, full of unsatisfied longings.

Ergeze was walking back from the fields at that moment. As he passed the threshing ground, he saw this spectacle on the riverbank and stood riveted to the ground. His eyes became blank. After a while, with a low moan, he turned and flung himself down on a bundle of hay.

There was another occasion that also seemed like overstepping the bounds, but it was not Ergeze's fault. It happened when we were piling up the hay.

In our part of the province, we do not cut the wheat but pull it up by the roots and knot it into *bouquets*. Then mules or donkeys carry the *bouquets* onto the threshing ground, where they are piled up until they form pagodas with a wide base and a pointed top.

Grandpa Duo owned no cattle, so all his wheat was carried to the threshing ground by Ergeze. Granny Duo stood on top of the heap and Ergeze handed the bouquets up to her. In earlier years the wheat of the Duos would usually make up two pagodas, but on that day Granny seemed distracted. She stood on top of the wheat and kept piling and kept piling—until the pagoda was huge and towering. By the time her wheat was all tucked away, it was past noon. Except for Ergeze, everybody else had gone home to eat.

Granny Duo, standing atop a wheat pile ten feet above ground, looked down on Ergeze. Her dark eyes sparkled. Even after the morning's labor, she was so fresh, so lively, so delicate. A mischievous light shone in her eyes, and also something more unfathomable.

"I can't get down!" she cried. "Oh, what's to be done?"

Ergeze scratched his bare head, at a loss. "You must find a way."

"No, I want you to do something," Granny Duo said helplessly, her legs swaying on the tower of wheat.

Ergeze thought hard.

"Supposing I spread some hay and you jump down?"

"Jump! You silly! If I hurt myself, who would cook your dinner?"

"Well, then, I'll stand here and you can step on my shoulders."

"Me! A woman! How can I step on a man's shoulders?"

"Then what's to be done?"

"Carry me down!"

"What!" Ergeze's eyes goggled.

"I want you to climb up and carry me down!" Granny Duo looked down at the shocked Ergeze and smiled mischievously.

Ergeze stood still, not knowing what to do. Then he timidly climbed up a few feet and stretched out his arms to receive Granny. She slipped down from the pile in a twinkling and fell into his arms. At that moment both blushed deeply. When Ergeze stepped to the ground, Granny wriggled free. They separated immediately, as if struck by thunder, and stood apart, unmoving. Ergeze held down his head, his face crimson. Granny recovered her poise first and, picking up her broom, prepared to walk away. She took a few steps, then turned.

"Eh, Ergeze, do you have a wife?"

"No"

"Why don't you get yourself a wife?"

There was no reply.

"Why don't you speak?"

Still no reply.

Granny Duo walked away as Ergeze plopped to the ground, lost in thought, his eyes fixed on something far away. After a while he started to sing a mountain tune in a low voice:

Oh my father, you left in such a hurry, the sweat of labor on your body.
Oh my mother, so hard-hearted, you too left for that faraway place.
That place of lasting peace, to be with father.
No brothers, no sisters, all all alone, what support, what warmth for me?
Found, found, warmth, here on the banks of the Yellow River.
But why is my heart so heavy?"

That was all, all that was supposedly improper between Granny Duo and Ergeze. And what did it amount to, after all? Why should they be blamed for such a little thing? Oh, those backbiting busybodies! In all honesty, it was only later, during that unforgettable raft ride on the moonlit river, that my firm belief in their innocence was shaken.

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It was the second year after liberation. Our harvest of fruit was very good. We had three huge crabapple trees, all dozens of years old, the trunks thicker than my clasp. In the summer the leafy treetops would cast their shade over the vegetable garden, and water from the irrigation canals would glide quietly by as the frogs kept up their incessant croaking. Father put up a bed under the trees, and I slept there every night to guard the fruit harvest. The fruit hung heavy and, in the seventh lunar month, the crab apples turned a brilliant red. As the wind blew through the branches, the ripe fruit would fall to the ground. Sometimes I could retrieve as much as a basketful in an afternoon.

One day Granny Duo strolled along and said:

"And so, Little Sheng, now that your fruit is ripe, you don't know your Granny anymore! You little rascal, how are you selling your fruit this year? By sea route or land route?"

"You better ask the elders," I replied. "I know nothing."

"But I'm asking you, Little Sheng," she said as she knocked at my forehead playfully.

That evening I brought the question to my father; he pondered a little and replied, "By the land route. Taking the river route means hiring a raft. That is too expensive."

A rutted road winds its way from our village to the city; when not raining, the road is always covered with dust. Father was referring to this road when he said the "land route." At that time there was no bus on this road, only a horse-drawn cart to carry passengers. The cart had a carriage-like covering and two rows of wooden benches on each side, seating ten passengers altogether. We would convey our fruit to the city either on this transportation cart or, more often, by use of our legs.

The advantage of walking was that we didn't have to spend a cent on transportation. But it was very slow and inefficient. We were able to carry and sell only one hundred *jin*\fn{A note reads: *A measure of weight, equivalent to half a kilogram*.} of fruit—or less—every day. Later that season my father reconsidered this routine and said to Mother:

"Let's hire the raft after all."

Unfortunately, the next day Father hurt his back in a fall and couldn't move about. The picked fruit lay in heaps waiting to be sold. If we waited, the price would drop. I came up with the solution.

"I'm grown up," I said. "I'll sell the apples on my own."

Father looked at me, as if seeing me for the first time. He nodded.

"Very well, go ahead. You're a big fellow."

That same night I ran over to the Duos to tell Ergeze the news.

"You're so young," Granny said. "Let me go along and help."

So while Ergeze went to haul the raft to the river, Granny helped me pack the fruit.

Ergeze hauled the raft to the riverbank. He then unstrung the sheepskin air bags and blew air into them with all his might, until his face was all swollen and red. Then he placed the inflated raft on the water and the three of us lifted the containers of apples aboard. Ergeze was very clever. He placed the containers carefully one on top of another in the middle of the raft and left empty spaces both in front and behind. His place was at the front, holding the oars, while Granny Duo and I sat at the back. We could only see Ergeze's head and shoulders by lifting our heads where we sat.

We started out at midnight. To be on a raft going down the Yellow River! My heart pounded with excitement. I looked around me. The moon was hidden behind clouds. A thin mist floated above the river.

The banks on both sides were also hidden behind a screen of thin fog, as light as silk tapestry. On shore,

likewise, the orchards, melon patches, and fields of grain stretching into the horizon were all enveloped in a mysterious, phantasmal mist. In far-off cottages we could hear someone singing an aria from an opera to the accompaniment of the plaintive Hu violin. Suddenly the sound of the instrument wavered and stopped and then was swallowed by the all-pervasive night.

We took off our shoes, rolled up our trousers, and dipped our feet into the water. Immense stars reflected in the water played around our feet. Suddenly a night breeze blew over, ruffling the waters, and all the stars disappeared, leaving a chain of ripples circling out wider and wider. The breeze wafted the sweet scent of melon and wild pear and the soothing smell of the soil under the autumn harvest. The Yellow River, caressed by the breeze, lay quiet and beautiful, like a weary traveler, finding rest at last.

"Take a nap," Granny Duo advised me. "You have plenty of work tomorrow."

I shook my head.

"*You* take a nap. I'm not tired." This was my first raft ride on the Yellow River. Wrapped in all the mysteries and wonders of a moonlit night, I was bursting with excitement. It would be impossible for me to sleep.

"All right then. If you won't, I will." She curled up on the edge of the raft, with her back to the containers. She fell right to sleep. After a little while she even started to snore softly.

I stretched to get a look up front. Ergeze was paddling softly, his head and shoulders moving up and down as the raft glided forward.

Water carts on either bank backed away from us one after another as we went forward. Their great wooden wheels covered with moss revolved lazily, lifting the water in buckets. The croaking of frogs broke the silence in the fields—first one, then another, and finally a chorus, bringing life into the night. The moon crept out of the fields and shed its light on Granny Duo's face. She was more beautiful than ever. Her long eyebrows, thin and curved, were slightly puckered. One pink hand hung down from the raft and drifted on the surface of the river, letting the water play over it.

At last I got sleepy too. Granny Duo stirred and sat up, saying:

"You lie down, Little Sheng. Don't be afraid. I'll stay next to you and shield you."

So I lay down, squeezing against the containers, while Granny sat on the edge of the raft, her bare feet playing in the water. A cloudy mist rose in front of me; I was lifted onto it and wafted to a strange place. It was one mass of silvery water, which disappeared into a bluish mist.

A low-keyed, hearty voice sang out:

A high cliff overhangs the Yellow River.
Two clouds are hovering over the gorge,
The clouds make up a bridge for you to cross.
Come over, flower of my heart.

A voice familiar to me replied:

The crystal-clear water keeps flowing.
The water cart aloft keeps turning.
If I'm in your heart, keep thinking,
Keep on hoping against the months, the years.

The first voice was now urgent:

Thinking, thinking all the time.
Longing, longing all day long,
Until the tears keep running.
My tears could set a mill turning,
The mill turning, spinning; the bird alights.

Again that sweet soft voice:

The stars in heaven cluster together.
The star keeps close to the moon.
The moon caresses the Suoluo tree.
Little sister Duo nestles against her love.

The sounds were very soft, hardly discernible, wafted from afar as if heard across a sheet of water, then again right next to my ears. It was like the lapping of the Yellow River, fashioned by a heavenly art, most appealing to the senses, flowing naturally into each other.

I opened my eyes. Everything had been a dream. The moon was again behind the clouds. It had turned very dark. The river looked like a dark satin ribbon swaying slightly in the wind. The trees on either bank looked like huge pieces of rock as we flashed past. The silence was eerie. Suddenly, in fear I called out:

"Granny Duo!"

No answer.

I sat up, but was held down by something. I stretched out my hand and touched a thick rope that was wound protectively over my waist so that I wouldn't slip overboard. One end of the rope was tied to the containers, the other over the edge of the raft. I untied the rope and looked about me. Granny Duo was nowhere to be seen. I put my ears against the containers to catch some sounds at the front. But everything was dead quiet. I couldn't even hear the sound of oars slapping the water. I got into the kneeling position and looked over the containers.

The two of them were there. Ergeze had put the oars beside him and was letting the raft glide forward on its own. Granny Duo sat close by him, her cheek against his broad chest, one arm encircled around his waist. Ergeze lowered his head and touched her forehead with his cheek, smelling the sweet scent of her hair. Ahead on an islet in the middle of the river, a pair of cranes were resting quietly. When they saw the raft, they opened their wings and swept upward as they emitted their sad cry:

"*Gah, gah …*"

I was so frightened. I lay down immediately, tied up the two ends of the rope, and closed my eyes. After a while Ergeze sang again in a soft whisper:

The stars above are locked in pairs.
The brightest one is over the mouth of the river.
Little sister Duo's eyes are deep and dark,
Her lips are burning red.
Her looks tug at my heart.

And Granny Duo responded:

The peony is king among flowers.
Youth comes first among men.
My brother is linked to me shoulder by shoulder.
No separation ever,
Until the waters of the Yellow River run dry.

Ergeze:

Go up the mountain to look at the plains.
The grapes in the plains grow in clusters.
I cannot disentangle myself from my sister Duo.
Will sister Duo stay with me?

Granny Duo:

The east is turning white; dawn is at hand.
The cows and sheep in the plains are stirring.
Sister Duo has cried her eyes dry.
The city of Lanzhou is right before us.

Their songs stopped. There was a long silence, broken only by the sound of the river beating against the edge of the raft. Finally 1 heard Granny Duo say in a weak voice, "I must go back." She climbed toward me over the wooden containers.

"Little Sheng, Little Sheng!" she called softly.

I made a snoring sound.

"Fast asleep," she said to herself as she sat beside me.

*

In the distance a cock crowed. I opened my eyes slowly. A dark red light suffused the eastern skies, and then

burst out into all the colors of the rainbow to light up the river. The mist that hovered over the river through the night slowly lifted until it finally separated itself from the folds of the earth. With the mist lifted, the trees, the undulating hills, the high white pagodas, and the green melon fields bathed in dew now stood out vividly. Then smoke began to rise from hidden chimneys from both sides of the river. Soon after we could discern the faint murmur of the marketplace.

Our raft trip was coming to an end. I looked at Granny Duo. Her eyes were shining with a fierce light; her face glowed with happiness. She held her chin in her hands and looked far away. Her eyelashes fluttered as if she was thinking, or hoping.

The market was on a piece of open ground on the bank of the Yellow River. There was a wooden arched bridge ahead called the Sleeping Bridge. Across that bridge was the gate to the city. And just outside that gate was the marketplace.

Ergeze steered the raft to shore and jumped up on the bank. Granny Duo and I helped him to unload the fruit. Granny and I carried the fruit while Ergeze shouldered the raft. In minutes we arrived at the heart of the market.

The huge market space was bustling. There were stalls with all kinds of fruits and vegetables. At that time things were cheap. Melons were sold in heaps, apples by wooden containers. A whole crowd of retail dealers carried baskets on shoulder poles and hawked their goods through the market, looking for a favorable deal as they strolled around.

On the side of the Sleeping Bridge was a row of stalls selling beef noodles, baked bread soaked in mutton broth, and soups of assorted innards. Some of the peasants who had finished their business would sit under the canopy of woven bamboo, hang up their straw hats on the wall, roll up their sleeves, and get into noisy conversations. They discussed the market, extracting information from each other, nodding and laughing boisterously as they ate from the huge bowls of coarse white pottery until the sweat ran down their faces.

Ergeze stood the raft upright, held it in place by placing the oars against it, and ordered me to keep an eye on it. He and Granny Duo left the center of the market. I watched after them until they disappeared into the gateway of the city.

I unfastened my containers, took off the covering of wild lotus leaves, and exposed my crab apples. A middleman with a little mustache came forward and patted me on the head.

"Where are your elders, sonny?" he asked.

"I am the elder here."

"That's talking big!" He laughed. "Well, master, how are you selling your goods? Will you hawk them yourself, or shall I help?"

"Would you sell them for me? I don't know how." And so he squatted down and started his spiel.

"Bright red crab apples—the sweet scent of one will last for half a month!"

A crowd came over. The middleman set a high price; the buyers offered very low figures; and thus a fierce bargaining campaign was sparked. Soon a compromise was reached. The middleman counted out the money, took two *jiao*\fn{A note reads: *A unit of* renminbi *(RMB), the Chinese currencyu, that is one-tenth of a* yuan*; the current* [1988] *rate of exchange is about 3.6 RMB = $1.00*.} as commission, and gave the rest to me with the warning:

"Be careful, my boy!"

Lighting a cigarette, he set off again looking for business.

By this time Granny Duo and Ergeze were back. Granny now wore a green kerchief over her head, while Ergeze had a pair of rubber-soled shoes on his feet. The pair smiled at me. Granny handed me some meat packed in rice. They had bought it specially for me.

"Eat, little fool," she said, and looked at me knowingly. I had no trouble obeying her command.

Then Ergeze shouldered the raft. Granny Duo and I followed and we left the market. The Yellow River is very rapid. You can only float downstream; you cannot row upward. So the only way back home was by foot, carrying the raft. This raft was made of eight big-sized sheepskin air bags, two in the middle and three on each side. The insides were lined with tar to prevent leaking cracks. With the rowing pole and the plants, the whole affair weighed almost thirty *jin*. For a weaker man, carrying that raft back was out of the question. But Ergeze was incredibly strong. He actually carried it on his back and walked the first twenty or so *li*\gn{A note reads: *A measure of distance, equivalent to half a kilometer*.} without stopping. He had a knack of changing shoulders every now and then without slowing down. The raft swayed with his movements as if to the rhythm of a lighthearted dance. Granny Duo walked close behind him, with one hand on the raft, her steps quick and light. I somehow felt that she was keeping pace with Ergeze not only in her walk, but also in her heartbeat. Her eyes looked so fondly on him.

We arrived at the foot of the section of the Great Wall by sunset. This was quite near home. Ergeze put up the

raft and we all sat by the wall to catch our breath. Granny extracted a few pieces of candy from her bosom and shared them with us. She looked at Ergeze with longing and Ergeze returned her gaze with significance. Slowly they both averted their eyes. Ergeze drew something on the ground with his fingers while Granny Duo was lost in thought. Later Granny Duo raised her head, looked at the brilliant sunset beyond the river, and sighed deeply. We had to go. After the break we walked even faster. Nobody said a word and we reached home presently.

After hearing about the trip downstream, the rumor mongers in the village went wild. As far as I could see, Granny Duo and Ergeze resumed normal relations. They seemed quite distant. Even so, the rumors about their scandalous behavior spread.

Guotai, the lame village elder, was a distant cousin to Grandpa Duo. In fact, the latter was Guotai's senior by one year, so he always greeted Grandpa as Elder Brother Duo. Actually Grandpa was a bit intimidated by his cousin's presence. As for Guotai, he both pitied and despised Grandpa. As to that minx Granny Duo, he could not bear the thought of her!

He had always held that it was the misfortune of the clan that Grandpa Duo had taken such a wife. Such a shallow flirt, so wild and unruly, giving rise to so much gossip. That woman was an outrage to their ancestors! When the rumors were at their most feverish, Guotai felt he could keep his silence no longer. One day he flatly asked his cousin:

"Elder Brother Duo, let me ask you. Exactly whose wife is Granny Duo?"

"What do you mean?"

"Don't you know what's been going on behind your back?"

"What?"

"Your wife and Ergeze. They have been acting like a married couple!"

Grandpa Duo smiled.

"Don't be foolish. Ergeze is a poor orphan. He and Granny enjoy one another's company. That's all."

"Ha!" Guotai was so angry his face turned purple. He stared at Grandpa in speechless fury, then lifted his head and laughed mirthlessly. "Just you wait and see!"

*

And Guotai didn't give up his efforts to attack Ergeze and Granny Duo. In time his malice precipitated the final disaster.

The beginning of the end was the eve of the New Year Festival. The provincial leadership sent down a young woman to organize the New Year festivities. She brought with her a revised edition of a traditional local opera, a Qin Qiang play called *Roaming the Turtle Mountain.* We were all overjoyed that *Roaming the Turtle Mountain* was to be staged for the lunar New Year. When it came to picking actors, many young people volunteered. The most coveted role was that of the heroine: Hu Fenglien. Several village girls auditioned with prepared verses and songs. The female official was clearly not impressed with what she saw or heard. Her eyes wandered over the little crowd who had come to witness the auditions—and her eyes lighted on Granny Duo.

"Come over, please," she said.

Granny Duo edged over, very embarrassed.

"Would you like to take a part?"

"Me?" Granny Duo was so surprised that for a moment she was speechless. Grown women never took part in acting in our village.

"Yes," the official replied. "I want you for the heroine. You are the living image of Hu Fenglien."

Granny Duo was elated by this vote of confidence. She blushed and nodded.

Other actors were then chosen. All the minor roles were settled very quickly, but they could not find a suitable actor to play the hero-lover, Tian Yuchuang. Granny Duo gathered up her courage and said:

"Let me choose somebody. Ergeze! He would be perfect. He has a beautiful voice."

When Ergeze learned that he was being solicited to act in a play, he shook his head repeatedly.

"No, no, no!"

Then he felt a pair of burning eyes fixed on him and saw Granny Duo looking at him earnestly. He swal- lowed his unfinished words of refusal and silently joined the group of actors.

Later events proved that Ergeze was indeed a good singer. For years he had sung the local *huar,* and since the impassioned Qin Qiang tunes had much in common with the *huar,* he gave a masterful performance. And so did Granny Duo. But one person in the audience was not pleased: Guotai. For him, the pretend lovers were not play-acting. Rather, they were both sending out covert messages of love.

Directly after the performance, he dashed over to Grandpa Duo's in a fury.

"Did you watch the play?" he demanded.
"Yes," Grandpa Duo replied.
"What do you think of it?"
"Nothing."
"What!" Guotai gave him an angry look.
"Not bad, considering it's just peasants acting."
"Your wife and Ergeze's acting was the personification of lewdness!" Guotai laughed dryly.
"This is the new society," Grandpa Duo said complacently.
"Nonsense!" Guotai couldn't contain himself any more. "What has the new society to do with a bitch in heat!"
"Cousin!" interrupted Granny Duo, who had just arrived home. "To whom are you referring?"
"You better be careful," Guotai warned, looking at her threateningly. "People are talking about you!"
"Which of those shameless busybodies is slandering their grandmother? Let them bite their own tongues!" said Granny Duo.
Guotai's face turned black with anger.
"Didn't the whole world see you making eyes at each other onstage? Do you think everybody is blind? Damn your impudence!"
"Let them think what they want! I don't care a whit for their opinion!"
"Well, I care. I can't stand there and see people bringing shame on their ancestors."
"My body and my heart are my own! I don't need other people's meddling."
"I must and will interfere!" Guotai stood up suddenly.
"It's none of your business."
"You're shameless!"
"You're a hypocrite."
"Harlot!"
"Bully!"
Guotai's face changed from white to crimson and then to purple. Nobody had dared speak back at him, not to mention abusing him to his face. This was not to be tolerated! A vicious stream of choler shot up to his head. He picked up a piece of firewood and hit out at Granny Duo.
Granny hurled herself at the old man and laid her nails into his face. Guotai was now furious beyond bounds; the end of firewood in his hand beat like hail on Granny Duo's body and hands. Granny Duo continued to curse him, and even though it brought more blows on herself, she kept on cursing.
Grandpa Duo, at first frozen in shock, finally thrust himself between the two. With tears streaming down his face, he implored Guotai:
"Hit me! Hit me instead!"
Guotai gave him a contemptuous look, then stamped his feet in exasperation. Throwing away the stick, he left. That same night Ergeze came back from working in the fields. He saw the bruises on Granny Duo, but didn't say a word. He just sat silently on the steps, unmoving, until the cock began to crow. Then he glided away like a ghost to his own bed in the hut near the threshing ground.
The next morning we heard that Ergeze had given Guotai a severe beating. He broke two of Guotai's ribs.
Of course, the incident was reported to the district. The authorities were very angry. They held that Ergeze had already committed an offense by flirting with the wife of his master, and now to beat the village chief! Ergeze must be punished severely! But Ergeze was nowhere to be found. It was said he had run far away.
With Ergeze gone, Granny Duo pined away. She began to look quite haggard. I seldom heard her talk, much less laugh. On moonlit nights, she would sit on a grindstone by the threshing ground and sew a pair of thick soles, stitch by stitch; her hands worked with loving care while her eyes brimmed with tears.
Once, she took out the raft and drifted on the river; she laid heaps of crab apples on the raft. As she steered the raft hither and thither, she dropped the apples one by one into the water. Suddenly it flashed upon me that it was exactly one year ago that we made that trip on the raft. The words of her song floated across the water:

The curved moon has risen.
A thousand stars are twinkling.
If my love is living, send a sign.
If my love is dead, send a dream.

Her song broke my heart..

*

One afternoon, as I walked by their home, Granny Duo beckoned to me. In fact, she had been on the lookout for me and hastily drew me inside her kitchen, saying to me very affectionately:

"Oh, Little Sheng, Granny has a special word for you. Little Sheng, do you miss Ergeze?"

I noticed that Granny's face was alight with excitement as she looked at me.

"Oh, yes," I said, without even having to think. "Is he back?"

"Yes, he's back." She nodded to me and whispered into my ear. "He's in hiding in the mountain canal."

"Why there?"

"They still want to arrest him."

At that she pushed a little basket into my hands. In it was a heap of pancakes covered with leaves.

"Take this to Ergeze, but be careful. If you meet anybody, just say you're collecting pig's feed."

I took the basket, walked to the door, and turned around.

"Does Grandpa Duo know?"

She nodded vigorously.

The mountain canal she alluded to is to the west of the village, running parallel to the Yellow River. That section of the river runs close to the mountain cliffs. The water lifted through the water cart runs right through this canal—actually a deep cave cutting through the mountain. The cave was a good two *li* deep and very spacious and very forbidding.

Now, for the sake of Ergeze, I puffed up my courage and crept inside the cave. It was very dark and the farther I went, the darker it became, until finally I could barely see a thing. My heart began to beat wildly, so I called out timidly:

"Ergeze, Ergeze."

Suddenly a hand stretched out and caught me. There was a burst of laughter. Ergeze was right in front of me, a sly twinkle in his eye. He looked much thinner, with an untidy growth of stubble over his lips.

I collected my wits and looked about me. On the dry bank overlooking the running water was a bundle of hay. And a stone, evidently used by Ergeze for a pillow. So this was his retreat. He seemed glad to see me and asked, while gulping down the pancakes:

"Little Sheng, how's your family?"

"Well, thank you," I said. "And where have you been the last six months?"

"Why, I've been to the Flower and Fruit Mountain."

"And where is that?" I asked, never having heard of such a place.

"Near the Water Curtain Cave."

"And where is the Water Curtain Cave?"

"Little brother, don't you even know that?" He looked at me pityingly. "They're all in *The Monkey King*." He chuckled and passed his hand over my head. "You've never heard of *The Monkey King*?"\fn{Apparently a reference to the novel *Journey to the West* by the 16th century Chinese writer Wu Chengen, in which the Chinese Buddhist monk and pilgrim Hsuan Tsang (600?-664AD) relates a series of adventures which happened to himself and his companion, the Monkey King, on their way to India.}

"No," I admitted.

"You poor country child. All right, then, I'll tell you the story of *The Monkey King*."

So he told me of the Monkey King taking over the Cave of the Water Curtain. It was a wonderful story.

"And how did you know all this?" I asked when he had finished.

"I read."

"Do you mean to say you've been to school?"

"Yes. But, look, Little Sheng, it's late now. It's time for you to go home."

He saw me off to the mouth of the cave and stood under the water cart and watched me walk away. I looked back. He was still there, standing in the moonlight. His long shadow flickered upon the water.

After that I was sent several more times to take food to Ergeze. Each time he told me a new story: *Making Havoc in Heaven*, *The Princess with the Iron Fan*, *The Cow Monster*, and *The Flaming Mountain*. Oh, what indescribable joy these stories brought to me, a poor boy who had seen nothing except the Yellow River. They opened to me a marvelous new world; they enabled my imagination to soar. I could neither sleep nor drink for thinking of the Monkey King and of his somersault leap over one-hundred-thousand-and-eight *li*.

Then for several days running, Granny Duo did not send me. One night I lay alone under the grapevine,

looking into the starry sky and wondering about all the wonderful things that happened up there. I couldn't sleep any longer, so I got up, dressed, and slipped out the gate and made straight for the mountain canal.

I entered the cave and walked to Ergeze's hiding place. He was lying on the hay, covered with a new jacket that Granny Duo had made for him. He slept soundly. I wanted to wake him, but then I reconsidered. So I sat by his side, and before long I fell asleep myself.

I don't know how long I slept, but I was suddenly wakened by a rustling sound. In the darkness somebody was moving furtively. My hair stood on end. I thought it was Guotai. I squeezed myself against the wall, hoping Ergeze would wake up and run away. The shadow had made its way over.

"Ergeze, my love, I am here."

"Is it you?"

"Yes. Nothing can stop me!"

Two pairs of eyes searched each other in the darkness. Granny Duo bent down; her long hair fell over Ergeze's face. Their lips crushed against each other.

I crept away silently, stealing out by another opening in the cave. Once out of the cave, I began to run. My heart was beating madly, my whole body burning.

*

Evidently Guotai had smelled trouble. One day he brought over a contingent of searchers and invaded the cave. Luckily the cave was so deep, they walked a long way without finding anything and finally retreated.

Every day I prayed that Granny Duo would send me into the cave with food for Ergeze, but she never did. One night I was restless; I crept in on my own.

There was nobody there. Ergeze was gone, and all his belongings with him. Only the bundle of hay was left behind, and the stone he had used for a pillow. I felt the hay. It was still warm. Ergeze had just left. I came out of the cave and looked. Under the glimmering moonlight I searched for him, under bushes speckled with dew, in the shadow of willow trees, by the water cart. As I searched, I called his name softly.

Not a sound, not an echo.

The ancient water cart continued its never-ending revolution. One circle, then another. My eyes watered. I felt something wet and salty running down my cheeks.

I started back, keeping alongside the riverbank. Suddenly I saw a little raft floating silently on the turgid waters, heading out where night was thickest. Under the glimmer of the moon I could make out that the figure in red steering the raft was none other than Granny Duo. Ergeze was crouched behind her. Suddenly I understood. I shot off after them, running along the bank of the river. I wanted to shout but I dared not. I waved my hands, crying in my heart:

"Granny Duo, stop! stop! Let me say goodbye, I want to wish you—"

I stumbled and fell into the mud. When I raised my head again, the raft had become a speck and then it disappeared from view. The tears welled up in my eyes and I was blinded.

*

Thirty years have passed since that night. I have been to school, settled in the city. The peasant boy survived all the intervening years of upheaval and he has metamorphosed into a wage earner.

Looking back, indeed, what have I not passed through? But everything has gone by like whirling clouds. Only the Yellow River, the glimmering moonlight, Granny Duo persecuted by the likes of Guotai, and the wanderer Ergeze—only they have stayed on in my memory. These long years I have been to many places, seen a lot of life, met all kinds of men and women—but the minute I close my eyes, the image of Granny Duo rises before me: her bright eyes, her light figure, her pink palms. And with her arises the image of Ergeze, his big strong body and the firm expression on his handsome face.

Thirty years ago … and here I was back in my home village, during the festival in commemoration of Souls of the Dead.

I went to the grave of my parents. The yellow sands of the plateau were steeped in the warmth and tender green of spring. The peasants came out in families; the young, supporting the old, went to the graves of their ancestors, bringing food and wine. At the grave site, the villagers performed the memorial rites to their respective ancestors, and then gathered together to eat the food they brought, enjoying a simple comradeship, as in a primitive community.

After the villagers left, I stood on the top of a knoll, contemplating the mountains and rivers of my native land, which I had not seen for so many years. In the gloaming I walked to Granny Duo's grave.

*

That night Granny Duo and Ergeze were discovered very soon after they sailed away. Guotai brought out a contingent of men who raced after them on four rafts. Around midnight, Guotai and his cohorts overtook and surrounded their raft. Ergeze slipped into the water and disappeared. Granny Duo, in trying to make her way out on the raft, caused it to overturn. When they fished her out of the water, she had stopped breathing.

*

The day of the burial, the townspeople turned out to bid a last farewell to the woman so many of them had considered evil. When the coffin was lowered into the open grave, a last rite was performed: the opening of the coffin for people to have a last look at the departed. Right at that moment there was a disturbance in the crowd. Ergeze appeared, very thin and worn, his face completely expressionless, his eyes calm and steady.

The people watched him silently. He leapt down into the open grave, bent over the coffin, and looked long and hard at the face of Granny Duo. She was dressed in white; her face was calm, as if asleep. Only her eyes, once so expressive, were parted slightly. Ergeze stretched out his hand and closed her eyes with the long lashes. A tear dropped on Granny Duo's pink palms.

Then he stood up and people made way for him automatically. He made a slight acknowledgment, then walked away in big strides, never looking back.

*

At the insistence of Guotai, Granny Duo was buried in an isolated spot, away from the burial site of her ancestors. Grandpa Duo had loved her deeply. It was a very special kind of love he had for this woman twenty-five years younger than himself, something of an elder's tolerance for a beautiful and capricious young woman. He had carried with him a burden of guilt for his seniority. Whenever he saw Granny busy brewing his medicine, sending for doctors, and looking after him so carefully, his heart would swell with gratitude. Thus when he realized what was going on between his wife and Ergeze, he was not jealous; he forgave them with the understanding of an elder. After Granny Duo's death, he was heartbroken; what with loneliness and illness, he died soon after. The villagers buried him next to his wife, according to his last wishes.

I was shocked to see these two graves so forsaken. Nobody had come to put new soil over their graves; nobody had come to perform memorial rites. It was true, Granny Duo had no children, and their closest relative, Guotai, would not allow anybody to add so much as a spadeful of new earth over their graves. I stood and looked at that desolate scene, unable to check my tears.

A flock of sheep climbed up the slope, nibbling the tender grass as they shook their big fat tails. Following them was an old shepherd in a short fur jacket, with a spade under his arm.. His calmness betrayed a trace of sadness. He walked to the two graves and started to pile new earth onto the gravetops-until they were higher than the surrounding graves. At last he covered them with a layer of turf. Then he squatted down in front of the graves while his bleary eyes welled with tears.

I recognized him as the scene brought back that moonlit night of thirty years ago. He also recognized me. He stretched out a rough palm and held me tightly, shaking my hand up and down as the tears ran down his face.

He was not at all the image of Ergeze that I remembered. He seemed to have shrunk. His brows were furrowed with wrinkles. His hair was gray, as was his ragged beard, and he was stooped. He was every inch an old, old man.

We sat down and talked about old days. He told me that after Granny Duo's death he went back to his native village. Soon land reform was implemented, and with his land allotment, he settled down. For the last thirty years, during every festival commemorating the dead, he would come and add some new earth to the graves of Granny Duo and Grandpa Duo. Sometimes, if the hour was late, he would curl himself up near the graves and spend the night there. With that admission his eyes gave forth a strange light. In that one instant I saw again the young raftsman of the old days.

The lingering rays of the sun finally melted away into the flowing river. I said goodbye to Ergeze and walked down the slope with a heavy heart.

It was dark as I descended. Ergeze had already spread his fur jacket on the ground beside the graves. He said it was too late to go back; he would spend the night there.

I looked back again at the grave of Granny Duo. On the outer border of the grave, the young grass bent slightly in the wind, full of the vigor of life.

79.76 The Moon On The South Lake\fn{by Liu Fudao (1940-)} Hanyang County, Hubei Province, China (M) 10

Some years ago, there was only one state-operated factory on the strip of land which skirted the curve of the

South Lake. That was the Wuhan Third Pharmaceutical Factory. Over the last few years, however, the chemical plants in the city had been moved here one after another, consequent upon the vociferous protests of the residents against pollution. This strip of land had now become a chemical industry center.

What factories were these? On the eastern side of the winding asphalt road, a row of signboards pointed out to the passers-by the location of these factories: the Central-South Chemical Factory, the Red Flag Chemical Plant, the Spark Chemical Factory and so on. Their names were all quite imposing and well chosen. But, in truth, they were what one would call "street-operated" workshops, which had only a hundred or so workers each. Some people naturally looked down on them and refused to call them factories; no, they were not worthy of such a designation! Nevertheless, they flourished defiantly and many of their products had no rivals in central and south China.

Take the Spark Chemical Factory for example. It had a pathetic look indeed, and nobody would think much of it. But it turned out a wide variety of products, such as anti-aging tincture, ferric chloride, ferrous chloride as well as small rubber caps for soya-bean sauce bottles with an annual output value of over a million *yuan*. Its ferric chloride alone was indispensable water-purifying agent for the whole Wuhan triple city.

The full name of this small "street factory" was the Spark Chemical Factory of Lion Street, Wuchang District, Wuhan city, but on its official seal the characters "Lion Street" were deliberately left out. In order to get approval, the factory's Party Secretary Wan had had to do some explaining to her superiors. She said:

"The young men in our factory are all quite worried that the girls they want to make friends with will turn away upon hearing the words 'street factory.' Besides, these two words won't help in business matters. Once people notice them in our letters, they will not take their content seriously."

All this sounded rather absurd, but the explanations, given in earnest by Secretary Wan, seemed quite reasonable and convincing. In view of the seriousness of the young workers' romantic interests and, more important of course, the future of the factory, the authorities concerned, being reasonable, gave their tacit consent. However, had the elevation of status, at least as shown on the factory's official seal, turned out to be a help? Whenever the factory wanted to buy some material, it still had to go through the whole process of imploring people for their understanding of its needs, as if asking for a favor. It also had to do with the fact that the products of this small "street factory," however good, were not for any domestic use; neither were they any good as playthings. And, what's more, whenever people heard the names of its products, they would be nervous and frightened. What the hell were these products? Some poisonous stuff? If so, surely nobody should help in its production.

That was how things stood. Now the fifty-year-old woman Secretary Wan had another problem. The factory's principal source of profit, ferric chloride, had to be changed from a liquid into a solid product. A two-storied workshop had been built for that purpose and all the necessary equipment installed. But the factory had not been able to get a boiler. In the words of Secretary Wan, "The fire is singeing our eyebrows!" It was indeed a desperate situation.

How should one describe Secretary Wan? It was not wrong to see her as a Party cadre, but it was also quite correct to look upon her as a housewife. Her ways and methods of work did not seem to proceed from any well-founded theory, but everybody had to do as she said. When the factory needed something, she would strike the "bell," a piece of steel, two feet long, and summoned all the workers. She then put the problem before them, asking them to suggest a solution. The workers would go home and consult the members of their family. They would, if necessary, call upon their relatives and friends, or go out of their way to ask their acquaintances in certain organizations or larger factories to help. After a verbal promise had been obtained, a formal letter would be issued, with the factory's seal on it. Usually, in order to get as soon as possible the materials of equipment the factory needed, Secretary Wan would have to go and see various people herself.

But this time, in spite of all the usual efforts, there was still no boiler to be obtained. Eventually, some workers got hold of an important piece of information: the Jiangnan New Waterworks had recently purchased a large boiler. Their original small one was. left in the courtyard of their living quarters. Immediately, a messenger was sent to make inquiries about the boiler, but the waterworks refused to sell it. They merely replied that the old boiler was still needed for their own use. Shortly after this, the workers of the "street factory" learned that if Assistant Manager Yuan, who was in charge of supplies at the waterworks, would agree to sign an order, the boiler could be obtained with or without a letter of introduction. The strategy was worked out: obviously, somebody had to go and see Assistant Manager Yuan. However, since he was rather difficult to approach, no one offered to take up the mission.

Dong, dong, dong

Secretary Wan again struck the steel bar. She asked if anyone was willing to accept the assignment but no one responded. The workers were all looking at her in silence.

“It’s no use staring at me like this! What are we going to do?”

“Let me try!” suddenly someone said in a muffled voice.

Under normal circumstances, no one would take any notice of this speaker. But now, caught in this awkward predicament, Secretary Wan and the workers were as anxious for help as starving people waiting for the provision of rice. Whoever accepted the task would appear a savior to them. However, when they looked at the speaker, both the leader and the workers had doubts and their hearts sank.

The volunteer was a young man named Ke Ting. Now that all eyes were set on him, his pale face at once turned a deep red. He was tall, about 1.85 meters, and certainly appeared conspicuous.

“Well, you may go and have a try. Anyhow … anyhow, you must get the boiler for us.” Secretary Wan looked at him with half-closed eyes, not really impressed. She had almost wanted to say, “Well, since no one else volunteers to do it, go ahead, but, I don’t expect miracles from you.” Finally, she thought it best to give him a positive order.

Though Ke Ting held no respectable position or title, he was a well-qualified technician, and, as far as work was concerned, he had a good reputation in the factory. The solid ferric chloride workshop which would soon be put into operation was a large and somewhat modernized one. The blueprints and technological processes for setting it up had all been worked out by this young man, who had never taken any courses in a technical college. Indeed, the road he had taken was very much the same as those followed by most of the Chinese urban youths: soon after graduating from senior middle school he was sent to the countryside for two years and then he entered a street-operated factory after having been brought back. That seemed to be the pattern for the educated youths these days, and he had had no other choice. Yet, not long after his arrival, Ke Ting was able to solve the factory’s numerous technical problems. Whenever some new technology was to be adopted, one could rely on him. As a rule, he would study both the new equipment and the directions carefully, and carry out repeated experiments till he understood exactly how things worked. He never let his colleagues down. All the youngsters in this factory admired him and even the old workers thought he was an extraordinary person.

However, what was regrettable was that, though honest by nature, Ke Ting was far too shy. He had many ideas in his mind and wanted to be sociable, but words always failed him. No wonder the older workers were all greatly surprised when such a shy young man, who had never before done any public relations work for the factory, suddenly offered to go and see Assistant Manager Yuan and try to get the required boiler. Indeed, even Ke Ting himself doubted whether he would succeed.

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Now let us talk about something else.

In the flourishing shopping center of Wuchang, two rather attractive girls could sometimes be seen, dressed alike, with similar bobbed hair, and they were about the same height, roughly 1.72 meters. No matter how crowded the streets and how numerous the pedestrians on the pavements, they would always walk together, arm in arm. Because they were tall and had well-balanced figures, these two attractive girls used to catch people’s attention. Even the arrogant youths had to make way for them, admiring them as the two of them went by. The girl with a round face was called Li Lu, while the other, who had an oval face, was Yuan Xia. The two of them had gone to the same school, but they were in different grades. However, their similar build, common inclinations and interests somehow had brought them together. As close friends, they had a lot to talk about whenever they got together. They also advised each other in their love affairs. Their fundamental requirement was: the young man should not be less than 1.85 meters tall. Good heavens! That was a tall order! At present, when the percentage of tall people in the whole country is not too high, it was certainly not easy to find a young man of 1.85 meters who was about their age and residing in the same city, let alone the other considerations such as family background, occupation and monthly salary!

They also agreed that they would listen only to each other and not to any of the advice or orders of their parents or match-makers. For example, if anyone introduced a boyfriend to Li Lu, Yuan Xia would have a good look at him. If her dignified nose twitched, signifying disgust, as she pronounced, “Oh, what an ugly dwarf!” Li Lu’s expression would change at once. And that was the end of the poor young man.

I mentioned above that the two friends frequently went out for a stroll in the flourishing district. That was half a year ago. And now, Li Lu had found a boyfriend, approved by Yuan Xia. On Fridays, their day off, Yuan Xia could no longer be with Li Lu as she used to before. True, Li Lu would come to see her with her boyfriend, but Yuan Xia understood that they did so out of consideration for her feelings, that they did not want her to feel neglected. Yet whenever Yuan Xia saw them off she could not help feeling enchanted by the sight of the two of them cycling joyfully, shoulder to shoulder. Yuan Xia’s mother advised her time and again not to stick so

stubbornly to her terms. Why not consider a young man who was of the same height, or even a bit shorter? But her suggestion was usually greeted with strong opposition from both Yuan Xia and Li Lu. For example, Yuan Xia's mother said at one time:

"Look at your father. He's shorter than I, but that doesn't bother me." Yuan Xia looked at her mother coldly, saying:

"You want everybody to be like you!" Then, in a single phrase she summed up what she would be looking for in her future husband: a tall, honest young man. She openly announced this at home: she wouldn't settle for less. Father became angry and demanded:

"Don't you think you ought to put political standards first?" Yuan Xia replied stubbornly:

"All right then. I'll say an honest, tall young man. Any more objections?"

Yuan Xia worked in the state-operated Third Pharmaceutical Factory, and she went there and back every day on her bicycle.

One fine spring day in March, she thought of calling upon Li Lu on her way home for a heart-to-heart talk. The road lay along an embankment of the South Lake. The evening sun was shining obliquely on the lake, gilding its ripples, and a circular range of green mountains was reflected in the water. Yuan Xia now and then glanced at the scene far and near, as she complacently rode past several "ugly dwarfs." To her surprise, a rider on a "Phoenix 12" bicycle swept past her. She speeded up and soon got ahead of him again. Looking back, she noticed that the cyclist was a tall young man, about the same height as Li Lu's boyfriend. That was certainly interesting. After riding a bit farther, she looked back again to see if he was trying to catch up. This in a way was an insult to the young man, who was none other than Ke Ting going home after work. Now, we know that he was an honest man. But an honest person sometimes may also behave in a peculiar manner. When he realized that the girl was challenging him, he too speeded up and passed her again. But Yuan Xia didn't like that. Bending both her arms backwards and lowering her body almost parallel to the ground, like a cyclist in a race, she rode with all her might, and soon got ahead of Ke Ting. Without having time to straighten up, she suddenly heard a clanking noise and the pedals suddenly gave way. She glided on scores of meters more and then her bike stopped. She got off and saw Ke Ting riding past her. The "ugly dwarfs" behind also caught up and hurried past her, talking and laughing loudly at her misfortune. On hearing their laughs, Ke Ting looked back and saw the girl was in terrible trouble, not knowing what to do. He felt sorry for her. Turning back, he did a half circle with his bike and stopped beside her.

"Let me have a look," he said, as he took out a test pencil on which was attached a small screw-driver. Then, he got a small spanner\fn{A tiny wrench.} out from his key-ring and started working on the "Phoenix 18" without waiting for any word from Yuan Xia. He tried the pedals and found that the chain was broken. Helplessly, Yuan Xia stared at the young man and could not do anything while he was repairing her bicycle. She sighed:

"What a mess!"

Night was approaching. A chilly gust of wind was blowing across the lake, which changed in color from green to light blue and then to bluish black, appearing as mysterious as the evening sky. Although Yuan Xia was tall she was after all at girl. In the company of a stranger and in this desolate place, she could not help gradually feeling uneasy.

Imperceptibly, the slowly rising moon lifted the veil of darkness off the South Lake, and the evening sky was clearly reflected in the water. In this quite spring night, the moon and a few street lamps shone on the young man and girl who had met by chance. Yuan Xia was worried about her bicycle and she was also a bit scared. Her heart was full of gratitude and she kept wondering how she could thank him properly. Then she reflected: was it not better to let herself suffer alone for what she had done? Why should she involve other people in her trouble? But what would happen if he gave up and went away? Push her bike all the way home or carry it on her shoulder? She was genuinely confused. After considering the question once more, she decided that she had no choice but to rely completely on this stranger, who was working hard to repair her bicycle and whose name she did not yet know.

"Look, let's do it this way," Ke Ting said at last. "If you trust me, you can go home on my bike, so that your family won't be worried about you. I'll be able to fix your bike, but it will still take some time. Tomorrow we'll get our own bikes back." He decided to wheel the girl's bike back home if he failed to have it repaired on the spot.

"But I don't like leaving you behind here," Yuan Xia said sincerely.

"You don't trust me, do you? You're afraid that I may play a trick on you and exchange your fashionable bike for my old one. Don't worry. There is a license plate on my bike. You can go to the police and easily find out my name and address."

"No, I absolutely don't mean that!" Yuan Xia hurried to explain.

"Then why stay here? There's no need. I'll get up earlier tomorrow and bring your bike to the gate of your unit. Are you from the Central China Agricultural College or the Third Pharmaceutical Factory?"

Yuan Xia replied that she was from the latter. But she was still reluctant to go. Apart from her sense of obligation to keep him company until he had finished repairing her bike, she could not think of any other reason for not going home. Ke Ting repeatedly urged her to leave him, and even threatened to stop repairing if she didn't, until she was finally convinced that there was really no need for her to stay. Then she rode away on his bicycle; her brain was in it whirl.

Early the next morning, Ke Ting arrived and waited in front of the gate of the pharmaceutical factory. The exchange ceremony was very simple. There was no handshaking and no signing of names. It was all over after a few brief remarks. In joyful surprise, she asked:

"You've fixed it?" He replied,

"Yes."

Yuan Xia was full of gratitude and was wondering how she could reward him. She was about to ask his name and address but the young man smiled, got on his bike and rode away. Yuan Xia ran after him and called out loudly, "If you need my help, you can find me at the New Waterworks living quarters."

Having heard the above romantic story, Li Lu, acting as Yuan Xia's adviser, slapped the table and expressed her surprise. She thought Yuan Xia was too negligent. If she had taken down his license number she would have been able to find out his name and then it was quite possible that the two could meet again.

However, Yuan Xia defended herself:

"If you had been in my shoes, you'd have been just as careless as I was. I was rather confused."

That was what she said, but she had her regrets.

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All practical Chinese people are well familiar with the ways of the world. In order to survive, they know they must depend on one another. "To help one another" is the spirit in all their daily affairs. Ke Ting had helped Yuan Xia by repairing her bicycle, but he had never dreamed that he would soon need the help of this girl whom he had met by, chance. Of course, he had no ulterior motive in helping her. It was only when Secretary Wan spoke about the boiler in the New Waterworks' living quarters that he recalled what the girl had said to him.

On coming off duty, he rode directly to the New Waterworks' living quarters. In the courtyard he saw three blocks of new four-storied buildings and some old houses. Not knowing her name at all, how could he find her? He could not simply say he was looking for the girl whose bicycle broke down one evening while she was on her way home along the embankment of the South Lake. Ke Ting was at a loss. Suddenly, he realized it was a ridiculous idea, offering to try and get the boiler for his factory. Still, he was not going to give up. He watched every window, hoping to see that oval face he faintly remembered. Eventually, it grew dark and he left the place in dejection.

The next day, when Secretary Wan saw him she asked at once, "Young Ke what's happened to that boiler you were going to get?"

"I tried, but I failed," he replied.

"Did you see anybody?" she asked again.

"No, I didn't," replied Ke Ting. Secretary Wan became impatient.

"Then go and try again!" she said. "Whom did you ask for last time? Perhaps I can give you some help. If you don't know what to say, I'll tell you."

The young man dared not tell her the truth. He could only say, "I'll go and try again when my shift is over."

Upon hearing the word "try," Secretary Wan became even more impatient.

"I'm telling you, my boy," she said. "This not joking matter: If you have any difficulty, or if you must give them something, tell me. Anyway, take a packet of cigarettes with you."

"Leave me alone! She … doesn't smoke!"

Strange how Secretary Wan could tell Ke Ting had a girl in mind. Had he given himself away somehow? She laughed and began to see a ray of hope.

"Young man, how can you hide that from an old woman like me? Of course, I'll support you if you fancy her. Talk about love and the boiler together. Surely, you can ask her to help you!" Ke Ting said gravely:

"Secretary Wan, you shouldn't be making fun of me."

Displeased, she asked, "And why not?"

Embarrassed, Ke Ting ran away. He worked quietly that day and left half an hour early to find her. After a short wait outside her factory, he heard the whistle. A couple of reckless young workers rushed out first and

hurried to the bus station trying to occupy a vantage point. Then, a host of cyclists emerged, gliding down the slope and were soon some distance away. Because of his special mission, Ke Ting looked only at the female workers. He saw many of them, but not “her.” He wondered if she was decking herself out after work. Then, suddenly, she appeared, very neatly dressed, yet not in the current fashion. She was pushing her “Phoenix 18,” surrounded by her girl friends, who were all at least a full head shorter than she. Yes, there she was! Tall and slender, with an oval face and very conspicuous! She was wheeling her bike and when she came to the gate, Ke Ting hesitated for a moment. He plucked up courage, and was about to call her, but she had already got on her bike, ready to go. At this “crucial” moment, Ke Ting’s courage took over and he yelled:

“Hello, comrade!”

The girls had noticed this young stranger and they smiled at each other, wondering which of them he was addressing. Yuan Xia was taken aback for a moment, but she recognized him at once. Yes, it was he, whom she had been thinking of night and day, wanting to repay his kindness.

“Ah, Young … Is it really you?” She was both surprised and happy, her face fully flushed. Her companions all got off from their bikes. Looking at this tall couple, they all had the same thought. One of the girls started making faces and called to Yuan Xia: “Hello, comrade! Do you still want us to wait for you?”

Of course, she didn’t want them to wait! Yet Yuan Xia said: “As you please.”

The girls’ teasing, however, went on. “Come on! Why not tell us to leave you alone?” Then, they “flew” away like a swarm of bees.

Ke Ting said awkwardly to Yuan Xia, “I’ve come to see you about something.”

Such a declaration under such circumstances would hardly mean anything, yet the girl, finding him so embarrassed, giggled and said, “Don’t worry about them, let’s go that way.”

They got on their bicycles and set off in the opposite direction. They talked as they rode along.

“I went to the New Waterworks’ living quarters to look for you.”

“When?”

“Yesterday, after I finished work.”

“I was at home the whole evening.”

“There’re so many apartment blocks in that courtyard.”

“My home is in the second building, second entrance, on the second floor. It is very easy to remember and find. Just ask for Yuan Xia. They all know me.”

This time, Yuan Xia’s reply was quite positive and definite.

“Your father and mother are both old workers in the waterworks?”

“You can say father is an old worker in the waterworks. Mother was formerly in a street-operated factory. Later she was transferred to the waterworks.”

At the mention of the word “street-operated,” Ke Ting felt his most sensitive nerve .had been touched. If he were not in a street-operated factory, he wouldn’t have to come here to ask for help. Feeling uncomfortable, he continued with some reluctance:

“Oh! Your father’s an old worker. What’s he in charge of?”

“Everything and nothing!” Yuan Xia replied mischievously.

Ke Ting caught on.

“You mean he's a cadre, not a worker.”

At this Yuan Xia was somewhat displeased. She retorted, “What if my father is a cadre and what if he is a worker?”

The girl’s words were so abrupt and sharp that the young man could only say honestly, “I guessed you were from a cadre’s family and your father is in a leading position. I didn’t mean that an old worker could not be—”

On hearing this, Yuan Xia thought, “So, like all the rest, you are nothing but a snob!” She lost interest in him and bent down her head, pedaling hard all at once. In a second or so, she was well ahead of the young man. When Ke Ting caught up and was about to say something, she made a gesture to him as if meaning to say “see you again” (or “not see you any more”) and rode away even faster.

“I’ve been blind,” the girl, upset, thought to herself, looking sad and perplexed. Since she accidentally met Ke Ting in the spring, she had kept firmly in her mind Lu’s criticism of her “tactlessness,” and the young man had found a place in her heart. On her way home after work, whenever she could get away from her companions, she would come to that memorable spot on the embankment road. How she hoped that she could find him there again and recognize him at once! She would then be able say to him in a low voice, “See, how sharp-eyed I am!” But, that had remained only a hope. However, the repeated disappointment had only increased the fascination of her

first love. With a somewhat guilty conscience she often felt that other people might have noticed the secret yearning in her heart, and she reasoned with herself by saying that she would like to see him again simply because she wanted to repay his kindness. But the unexpected meeting today had made her betray her secret joy, and all the excuses she had given herself for lingering on that memorable place were not to be taken seriously after all!

Yuan Xia pedaled away carelessly. Before long, the memorable place suddenly came into view. It broke her heart as she thought to herself, “When you were repairing my bike then, you looked so simple and sincere, but now you have become so vulgar. Was I really blind?”

Left far behind, Ke Ting wondered why the girl was so offended. Had he said something which annoyed her? However, the boiler was on his mind, and he was not going to give up. He speeded up, shouting as he was getting near her:

“Stop for a moment, please! … I’ve something to say to you.”

To appeal to a girl was, after all, much easier than appeal[ing] to God. It was probably because of the young man’s sincerity revealed on his anxious call, or because of her fresh memory of their first meeting which had since made her heart throb with excitement, or because of her own excuse of repaying his kindness—whatever it was, when the two of them came to the place where they first met, Yuan Xia stopped and got off her bike.

Ke Ting did the same. Realizing he had offended her, Ke Ting changed the topic and spoke to her about the boiler.

The heavy burden in her heart gone, she was rather amused by the thought that the young man did not know she was Assistant Manager Yuan’s daughter. So she said to him gently:

“Don’t worry! Leave everything to me!”

“Leave it to you? Are you sure? I heard that Assistant Manager Yuan is rather difficult to approach. Does your father know him well?”

Annoyed and amused at the same time, Yuan Xia replied, “I’ve told you to leave it to me. What more do you want?”

Ke Ting added: “Well, if an arrangement can be worked out I’ll bring you a letter of introduction.”

“Don’t be so fussy! Let’s talk about something else!” Yuan Xia stopped him. She felt that it was spoiling their fun being together, all that talk about the boiler.

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After he entered the living quarters of the New Waterworks, Ke Ting suddenly saw the desired boiler lying in the corner, took out his steel tape to take its measurements. Yuan however, was getting impatient and said:

“Even if the boiler is exactly what you need, you don’t know if they’re going to give it to you.”

Ke Ting then hastily followed her into one of the apartment blocks.

They reached the second unit, and went up to the second floor. Ke Ting, however, was oblivious of his surroundings. He was still trying to calculate in his mind the volume of steam the boiler could produce. Yuan Xia pushed open the door, grinned mischievously and announced, “This is Assistant Manger Yuan’s home.”

This Ke Ting had not expected at all. His heart sank and he asked doubtfully, “Didn’t you say that we should talk it over with your father first?” The oval-faced girl gave an equivocal reply in the manner of an experienced actress:

“It’s all the same.”

Inside the small drawing-room three or four people were shrouded in dense cigarette smoke. They looked up and stared at Yuan Xia and Ke Ting. Tightly knitting her eyebrows, Yuan fanned off the smoke with her hand, exclaiming, “Abominable!” She was tired of all these uninvited guests who frequently came to her home.

A middle-aged guest was about to leave. He said, “Manager Yuan, I’ll do as you’ve just suggested. When the time comes, I hope you will personally put in a good word for me.” The two others also rose and said, “Manager Yuan, without you help, our problem can never be solved. We may have to come back and trouble you again.”

By now, Ke Ting had already taken a good look at Assistant Manager Yuan. He was a small man, not even of medium eight, but his bald-head and shining forehead somehow gave him a certain dignity. After all the guests had left, Yuan Xia said to Ke Ting:

“Why don’t you stay here and make yourself at home? I’ve something else to attend to for the moment, but I’ll be back very soon.”

Then she closed the door and went out.

Now that Yuan Xia was gone, Ke Ting felt even more uneasy. He didn’t know what trick the girl was playing on him. Was it because Assistant Manager Yuan was such a difficult man to talk to that she had deliberately left after the first introduction?

"Assistant Manager Yuan—Manager Yuan, I'm sorry to trouble you—"

"No trouble at all! Do sit down, and let's talk it over."

Assistant Manager Yuan took the tall young man seriously. He smiled faintly and asked Ke Ting to sit down on the rattan chair beside the tea-table and gave him a cup of tea. Ke Ting felt that the manager was not so unapproachable as people said. Manager Yuan leaned against the desk in front of the window and sat back. He began chatting with the young man.

"You and Yuan Xia have known each other for a long time. Right?"

"No, we didn't know each other before."

"Well, how did you become acquainted?" Manager Yuan saw that the young man was clearly eligible as far as his height was concerned.

Ke Ting replied shyly and respectfully, "It was by chance."

The manager did not probe further. He picked up a small bottle on the desk, took out some pills and swallowed them with a little water. Then he ran his fingers through his sparse hair and said kindly, "You didn't know each other before, I see, but you are going to see more of each other from now on, and understand each other better, eh?"

Ke Ting felt something was wrong; he flushed and his heart was beating fast. He recalled that when they were talking about the boiler on their way here, the girl had insisted several times, "Leave it to me!" And on entering the house she was completely, at ease, as if it were her own home. Could she be the daughter of Assistant Manager Yuan? Well, she certainly had the same surname. But when he looked at the dwarfish manager, he was again in doubt and could not be sure. However, he hoped that genetics might have played tricks in the present instance and the problem of getting the boiler would be solved. What luck if Yuan Xia turned out to be the daughter of Assistant Manager Yuan!

Nevertheless, the young man held on to his views regarding heredity. He turned the: subject of their talk to the business he had in mind.

"Manager Yuan," he said, "it is this. Our factory wants a boiler—the one in your courtyard. I've seen the brand and measured its size. It's exactly what we need. Yuan Xia brought me here. Will you please help us by giving your consent?"

That had done it! Till then Assistant Manager Yuan had been dreaming of being a future father-in-law, but now he had to resume the status of manager. He was disgusted. "About that boiler again!" And he kept silent for a long while.

Ke Ting begged again. "Our small factory needs your help, Manager Yuan."

After a long pause the manager asked, "What does your factory produce?"

"Our first product is called 'anti-aging tincture.'"

"'Anti-aging … tincture?' Ah! So you're making this! Is it really as good as it says?" The manager got interested, as he toyed with the bottle of pills on his desk.

"It's not bad. Customers in other cities and the armed forces have placed orders with us."

"Oh! That's proof enough. But I don't believe it can really prevent aging. I don't think it's really all that effective."

"It's been tested and approved by the chemical research institute. Besides, our customers are also satisfied."

The manager took up the bottle from the desk, and asked, "How does it compare with these life-prolonging pills?"

"That's something completely different," Ke Ting replied.

The manager laughed heartily, tilting his head backward and resting his weight on the two rear legs of his chair. He said, "I think they're all the same, really. I've taken many bottles of these life-prolonging pills produced by Yuan Xia's pharmaceutical factory, yet I'm still going bald!" Then, as if to prove his point, he again ran his fingers through his hair backwards. "'Life-prolonging pills,' 'anti-aging tincture,' they're lovely names, all right. They won't do you any harm. Don't you agree?"

After a little while, the manager sat up and both his head and the legs of the chair resumed their normal position. He said candidly, "Now here's what we'll do. You go back and talk it over with your Party secretary and factory director to see whether you can provide us with some of your product; then I can discuss your request with our other heads."

It suddenly dawned on Ke Ting that the manager had mistaken the prevention of the aging of rubber for a tonic which would prolong life. He wanted to laugh, but he dared not. He thought that if he told him the truth it would make the manager look a fool. So he could only say tactfully:

"So far we haven't sold it to any private customers, because its price is too high. Moreover, it can't—"

Manager Yuan, irritated by his roundabout reply, frowned and said, "Yes, nowadays we all do everything according to the rules. Which factory is yours?"

"The Spark Chemical Factory of Wuchang District," the young man replied.

The manager queried, knitting his brows: "Has Wuchang District such a factory?"

Ke Ting replied, "Its full name is 'The Spark Chemical Factory of Lion Street, Wuchang District.'"

"Oh, I see, a street-operated factory!" The manager didn't bother to hide his contempt. "Now, we must act according to the rules. I'm not the only one in charge here, so it's not just what I say that counts. Isn't that right? Moreover, we may still need that boiler ourselves. Anything else?"

This sounded like the end of their discussion. Ke Ting at once felt chilled all over; he shivered as if he had caught malaria. Humiliated, he thought that he shouldn't have attempted to play the hero for his factory.

"Young man, you need experience. Perhaps you haven't often been out on business before. From now on, when you try to make contacts, you must bring a letter of introduction." The manager stood up, with a forced smile on his face.

This short man with his bald head! Ignorant! Foolish.! Greedy! Snobbish! Ke Ting almost spat the words out. He was nursing his anger: a street-operated factory. So what? Haven't street-operated factories created millions of dollars' worth of wealth for the country without any financial backing from the government?

In truth, he himself at first had also been prejudiced against them. After work, he studied for the college entrance examinations and begged Secretary Wan to give him a chance. To him that was the only way to get out of the street-operated factory. Secretary Wan, however, said to him:

"Our old master-workers have treated you well nursing you as old birds would nurse the young. Now your wings are strong and you want to fly away. Don't you feel sad at all leaving us?" With a sigh she continued, "Of course, if you insist, I couldn't stop you even if I wanted to. It would be selfish to consider only our interests and not those of the country as a whole. In short, I wouldn't do anything to harm your future. But I hope you'll wait until I've found someone to replace you."

The young man's heart was softened; he wept, touched by her passionate words. Emotions and his personal future were in conflict, and eventually the former won. He could not let down the old masters and Secretary Wan. He felt sorry for his leaders. Secretary Wan should have been at home taking care of her grandson, but instead she was up at half past four every morning, and had to take three buses from north to south to get to work. Why was she working so hard?

As for the sixty-five-year-old factory director, he had to ride on a ramshackle bike a hundred-odd *li* back and forth each day. Why was he so hard on himself? Having seen Manager Yuan and, comparing him with Secretary Wan and his factory director, Ke Ting appreciated their dedication all the more. Their stature grew all at once taller than ever before in his mind. They were so good, so kind to their workers!

Ke Ting stood up as if he himself, too had become taller. In this small room he had learned a great deal, only to value his integrity the more. He wanted to ask, "Mr. Manager! Is that boiler your private property, or is it the property of the People's Republic of China?" Ke Ting looked at the manager in disgust and said, emphasizing each word as he uttered, "Thank you, manager, for your instructions!" Then he left.

He went down the stairs hastily. He was about to unlock his bicycle when someone grasped his hand. He turned round and found a woman carrying a basket of food.

"Hey! Why are you running away?"

Ke Ting was baffled.

"Look, I've just bought some food for you. When Yuan Xia told me you're here, I ran to the market as quickly as I could. Don't go yet; she'll be back very soon. She's been gone such a long time! Why don't you go up and wait a little longer with her father?"

In this tall, warm-hearted, frank woman, Ke Ting could easily recognize Yuan Xia. But he had been insulted, so he thought that the three of them were all the same; they were all making a fool of him. He replied glibly, "No, I haven't brought the thing required."

Not knowing what he was trying to say, Mrs. Yuan asked hurriedly, "What do you mean? What is it that you need to bring with you? I'm happy you've come just as you are. You haven]'t had a bite and now you want to go. That won't do! Yuan Xia will blame me when she comes back. If you hadn't kindly helped her repair her bike that evening, I really don't know what would have happened to her."

Ke Ting, however, freed himself from the grip of her hand, saying, "I'm too young and don't know anything. I didn't bring a letter of introduction!"

He got on his bike and rode away.

Mrs. Yuan gazed at his back, not quite knowing how she felt. He struck her as a decent young man. The old man must have said something which had upset him! A letter of introduction! Nonsense! Such airs! Did he know what he was talking about?

Yuan Xia was serious—she went straight to Li Lu's home without having first called her on the phone. Having learned that her "man" turned up, Li Lu was most curious to meet him. She grabbed her bike and hurried off with Yuan Xia. The two "phoenixes" flew side by side; the two girls were talking and laughing merrily, leaving the street lights, trees, pedestrians and streams of traffic quickly behind them. It seemed that they were the tallest and happiest girls in the whole world. Good fortune was beckoning them on.

As usual, Li Lu gave a warning signal before she entered the flat. She shouted, "Uncle Yuan, Aunty Yuan, it's me again. Am I welcome?"

However, no one came out to welcome her, so she went in quietly. Oh, no! The small drawing-room had the look of a battleground. Uncle Yuan was, obviously, the wounded captive, bending awkwardly over the desk. Aunty Yuan was standing before him in full glory of victory.

"Where's the young man? Gone?"

Aunty said angrily, "Ask him!"

The manager begged for mercy. "He has helped us, so of course I'm going to help him! What more do you want me to do?"

Mrs. Yuan, seeing that reinforcements had arrived, launched at once a greater attack:

"I don't care about your boiler, what I want now is that young man!"

Her husband pleaded, "Where can I find him now? Tomorrow you can ring up his street-operated factory and say that I've agreed."

Upon hearing the words "street-operated," Li Lu's heart sank. She wanted to ask Yuah Xia privately about it. She therefore tried her best to persuade Mrs. Yuan to go and prepare the meal. The old woman, however, was not so easily pacified. Taking Li Lu by the hand, she harangued the old man for his insensitivity as well as his disgusting airs. How could he have asked the young man for a letter of introduction? She declared she was not going to cook for him. She would rather "let the old devil starve to death."

At this juncture, fearing that any further quarreling might upset Li Lu, the manager decided to keep silent and admit defeat. Of the three, he was the shortest and the most unfortunate. But his wife did not stop giving him a long lecture until she was exhausted.

As soon as she entered Yuan Xia's room, Li Lu asked, "Tell, me. Is he from a street-operated factory?"

Yuan Xia answered reprovingly, "What's wrong with that? Does it mean we think the less of him simply because he is a worker in a street-operated factory? A second-class citizen?"

Li-Lu said, "No! Of course not. Don't get mad at me! I only fear that your parents may have objections."

Of course, Yuan Xia was not venting her anger upon Li Lu. Neither did she think it necessary to explain everything to her good friend. She said, "With his iron rice-bowl in his hand, my dear father has long forgotten the broken basket he once used when begging for food in the past. Indeed, if he had any respect for street-operated factories at all, he wouldn't have pulled every string to get my mother transferred to a state-run factory. So, whenever I hear others criticize bureaucracy and the privileges of high-ranking officials, I always feel both glad and sad at the same time. Sad because I've been deprived of my right to make such criticisms!"

Then Yuan Xia went on to make her stand clear to Li Lu. She held that if a man had a good character, there was no need to worry about his lack of status. Li Lu, out of concern, wanted to know more about the Spark Factory. Yuan Xia told her all she knew and what Ke Ting had explained to her. She said that the ferric chloride produced by the Spark Factory was needed by the Wuhan Steel and Iron Company in a big project. A specialist from West Germany had once suggested if they couldn't produce it, they could import it from his country. But, somehow, this small street-operated factory finally succeeded in producing it. Li Lu, finding Yuan Xia so passionate, could no longer remain indifferent. The two girls quickly agreed that he was the right man. They worked out a plan for action at once.

*

The next morning, Yuan Xia and Li Lu arrived very early at the Spark Chemical Factory. There was really nothing much to be said of its appearance. Of course, if you looked at it from another viewpoint, bearing in mind that they had been struggling against numerous difficulties, it would appear quite different. Standing before the gate of the factory, Li Lu could see everything at a glance. She remembered the numerous products, including the ferric chloride needed by the modem steel plant that Yuan Xia had told her about the night before. Now, having

seen with her own eyes the practical condition of this small factory, she couldn't help exclaiming in admiration,

"Who would have thought it could do so much!"

"He's coming," Yuan Xia whispered.

Li Lu looked up. The young man was pushing his bicycle up the road in front of the factory. He was good-looking and tall. Her first impression was quite favorable; he wasn't in any way inferior to her own boyfriend. Then came another exclamation of hers:

"Who would have thought it possible!"

She admired Yuan Xia's choice. Her round face became even rounder. She quietly urged Yuan Xia:

"Be more assertive, more encouraging and more enthusiastic."

Her three suggestions did not seem very effective, though. Yuan Xia had come to apologize, and also she had something on her mind. She usually carried herself with ease and confidence, but now she had become rather tense.

Ke Ting had also changed. After his baptism of fire in Manager Yuan's small drawing-room, he now appeared cool, his eyes steady, and behaved like a crusader determined to fight against all evil. He was surprised to see Yuan Xia. Why had she come here, and what's more, with a companion? He racked his brains to search for the most sarcastic words and the most offensive phrases to irritate both of them. He was going to ask her where on earth she could find the time to come here. What were her instructions for him now? If she wanted to purchase Some anti-aging tincture so that her respectable father could prolong his life, he would be only too happy to comply with her wishes.

"You've come very early," Yuan Xia went forward to greet him.

"You … you are earlier than me," Ke Ting stuttered. He was not used to fighting verbal battles. Moreover, he did not have the heart to ruffle the calmness reflected in her beauty and shyness. All the harsh and offensive words he had prepared in his mind at once vanished.

Silence and deadlock followed. In international discussions, it is not unusual to have a long lapse of time, say a few years, as a result of the postponement of further meetings. But on an occasion like this, the silence of even a few seconds could increase the tension. Silence was now more terrible than open war.

Secretary Wan came out, chewing half of a fried dough cake. She called when she was still some distance away,

"Young Ke, have you got that boiler?"

"They want a letter of introduction!" KeTing replied. That remark was aimed at Yuan Xia of course.

"If you have already made arrangements, writing a letter of introduction won't cause me any trouble." Secretary Wan, not aware of the circumstances, was pleased. On coming, nearer, she asked with great admiration, "Who are these two girls?"

Li Lu quickly said, "Assistant Manager Yuan told us to come here. Yesterday, after Comrade Ke left, Assistant Manager Yuan said, 'Don't let him waste time coming back and forth again. We are all very busy with our work for the four modernizations.' So he personally wrote an order and told us to bring it here as soon as possible."

Yuan Xia very much admired Li Lu's ability to gloss over her father's faults. She did not know what to say. The fact was, the girls were afraid that the matter would not be dealt with at once, and that the boiler might be assigned elsewhere. Li Lu also wanted to see Yuan Xia's young man herself so that she could better play the role of her friend's personal adviser.

So, the two of them had forced Assistant Manager Yuan to write the order himself!

Secretary Wan was full of gratitude. She wanted to invite the two girls to come in for a chat in her office, but was afraid that her oily hand might spoil their clothes. Li Lu, however, said she didn't mind and she followed her to her office. She told the secretary something about what had happened. At the same time, she learned from the secretary some particulars about Ke Ting. The secretary was so pleased that she gazed at Yuan Xia outside for a long time with her smiling eyes. Among their girl workers, some had married young workers of Third Pharmaceutical Factory. Now, such a pretty young girl worker of that pharmaceutical factory, and moreover, the daughter of Manager Yuan, had come over herself to their street-run factory! This would certainly add prestige to its Secretary too! She felt grateful to Assistant Manager Yuan for his generosity: he had not only given her factory a boiler, but had added a pretty young daughter in the bargain!

"Don't look down upon our small street-run factory; even Assistant Manager Yuan himself has a good opinion of us!" she thought to herself with a sigh of satisfaction.

Yuan Xia sincerely apologized to Ke Ting. But Ke Ting was still in a bad mood. He didn't say anything. Then the steel "bell" sounded again and he had to go on shift. Yuan Xia did not know whether or not he had forgiven

her.

That same evening, on the embankment of the South Lake, on the same spot where Ke Ting had repaired her "Phoenix 18" bicycle, Yuan Xia was waiting. She saw many bicycles pass quickly by. She wondered, looking a little melancholy, "Will the moon be enchanting tonight? Will Ke Ting turn up as he promised? Or, will he avoid her by taking a roundabout route home? He ought to see the difference between her and her father …"

1941

21.17 The Unexpected Tide\fn{by Dai Qing aka Fu Ning (1941-)} Chongqing, Sichuan Province, China (F) 10

One might well say that human life is like a ship sailing on the sea. Who can tell how many perils she faces once she leaves port and launches into the surging waves of the open water? Who can tell what treacherous rocks, what hidden shoals lie unblinking under the placid waves? Without doubt, there are buoys to guide her path. But who can tell when an evil wind might blow from nowhere and sweep everything away, snapping in two the rudder?

Anyway, *her* ship of life is stranded. Perhaps it may even overturn. But then, if she sticks to her resolve to sail on, who knows? Perhaps her boat may one day sail again into the tide rushing to meet her. Perhaps …

"Ready to go! Ready to go!"

Old Zhang's voice boomed from somewhere, loud and assertive. Old Zhang had a trick of imitating the famous Peking opera actor Hou Xirei's unique exclamation: *Wa-ya-ya!* He also had some pretense at spotting sports talent. ("See that young fellow? He's cut out to be champion at the hundred-meter dash," was one of his oft-repeated lines.) That was the extent of his accomplishments as far as culture and sports were concerned. But in our sedate research academy, anyone who had the slightest interest in anything beyond his own specialty was a rare bird, and thus Old Zhang had been honored with the chairmanship of the Sports and Culture Department for twenty years running.

But perhaps the tide did not know the limits of its own strength? It surged upward and then retreated. And the boat riding on its crest? It had high hopes one moment, only to see them dashed in the next..

"Little Wei, why are you still dawdling? It's late!" The aforementioned chief of sports and culture—who doubled as an amateur Chinese-opera singer—pushed open the door to my office and hollered at me.

"Wei, you are the only one missing in the show."

I put aside my ships and tides and fished for my running shoes behind the wastepaper basket.

"She's not going!" Old Mother Liu, whose desk was across from mine, butted in. She kept her eyes on the knitting in her hand.

"Not going? But wasn't everything agreed on ages ago?" Zhang was alarmed; he turned his sweaty unshaved face toward me and searched my face.

This was the eve of the lunar New Year in Beijing, the day for the championship marathon race for government workers. Certainly there was no lack of girls at our academy to take part. But they were so delicate, like swaying reeds as they minced along in their high-heeled shoes. Besides, the significance of the annual marathon was way down the scale of priorities, lumped together with such items as sanitation, birth control, and fire prevention during the holidays. Thus, the task of striving for the championship on behalf of our academy devolved on me, as it had always done in the past.

During morning and afternoon breaks, right in the corridors of our office building, I practiced monkey shadowboxing, which I had learned as a child. That helped keep me in shape. The marathon is no joking matter. This, I thought to myself, was the one important event under Old Zhang's jurisdiction. He was nearing retirement age, and had finally gotten himself a department chair, even though it was the least noteworthy account, mainly in charge of ordering train tickets or booking hotel rooms. I vowed not to let him down. Yet today …

"Little Wei, please!" Zhang pleaded as I stood undecided, my running shoes in my hands.

"You silly old man, why don't you take a hint?" Old Mother Liu declaimed. "Didn't I tell you that she's not running today? What do you know about girls' affairs?"

The old woman stood up from her chair with its battered old cotton-padded cushion and waddled over to us. She always calls me *girl*, although she knows that I am thirty-three. Once she even knitted a little red cap for my six-year-old daughter.

Old Zhang didn't mind Old Mother Liu, but kept working on me.

"Little Wei, if you let us down, it will be over for our academy."

I hesitated for a split second and began to put on my running shoes.

"Foolish girl," Mother Wei scolded, "you are playing with your own life." She was alluding to my having donated blood a week or so ago. If she had known that I had not slept a wink last night …

"If I must, I must!"

I steeled myself to put on the other shoe and pulled out an old army pullover. The way I see it, my ship is stranded. I must resort to the heavenly oracles to decide on my next step.

*

Old Zhang was not bluffing. We were indeed late. A host of women decked out in all the colors of the rainbow were assembled at the starting line, the starting gun gleaming over their heads.

"We're coming!" Zhang shouted in his eighty-decibel voice. "Wait a sec—"

I saw a wisp of smoke emit from the pistol, followed by a muffled sound.

It is all over, I thought to myself. I have failed, Wu Guo. It's no use striving. Don't you see the smoke dissolving? So it is with everything else in life …

"What's gotten into you?! Run!" croaked Old Zhang as he gave me a shove on the back.

What's the use of running under such circumstances? I turned to answer back. As I turned I noticed that there was still a crowd huddled at the starting line. With two or three hundred people in the race, not all the entrants would start off at the sound of the gun. I quickly pinned on my number and joined the back of the pack.

*

So, Wu Guo! The moon had swerved from its course and decided to give the tide full play.

I found myself running with a few girls taller than myself by a head. I let my legs swing and was careful that I kept my shoulders relaxed. I inhaled every four steps and exhaled every four steps. My sports instructor in middle school had repeated this rule a hundred times. I trained under her for six years and went through twelve pairs of running shoes.

Before we had put five hundred meters behind us, several girls dropped out. They turned green round the gills and collapsed into the arms of their attending beaux. Poor girls, they knew hundreds of knitting patterns, knew how to pile their hair atop their heads without showing a seam, but what did they know of the trick of controlling the soles of the feet and the muscles of the shoulders? Did they know that one must not wear turtleneck tops and tight underwear when running? Did they know about setting your teeth and surviving the first stage of exhaustion and then distributing energy according to a mysterious formula known only to the initiated? All these I knew—I who was their senior by ten years, I who was educated under teachers who were not beaten as theirs had been during the Cultural Revolution. So what if I was thirty-three?

Unobstrusively, I made my way forward—from the three-hundredth to around the one-hundred-and-fiftieth. I still had to force myself to overtake another hundred. That would be devilishly hard, as exhausting as tying the mast in a hundred-mile wind. But I had no choice. I wanted the marathon itself to resolve my dilemmas.

I overtook another dozen. I had my eyes on a girl in white sportswear. She had elasticity, but her movements were too showy. like an under-rehearsed amateur actor. I knew she wouldn't last—that once we turned into the Avenue of Eternal Peace, I could dispose of her.

My boat was not really stranded in treacherous sands, after all. One way or another, I had always made it. Like the time when I had meningitis and was at death's door. I iurvived that. Then I had been cheated when I was working as an office temp; someone cheated me so thoroughly that I had no money left to buy a meal. I had also been labeled a counterrevolutionary—and then became a hero on the same grounds—for copying and clandestinely printing verses in the momentous year of 1976. Looking back, I wondered if it was worth all the passion spent on it. But all these were nothing compared with the last ordeal—just as I was happily feeling my baby kicking inside me, news arrived that my husband and his comrades were caught in the Tangshan earthquake and buried under the barracks they had erected with their own hands. And this on the anniversary of our marriage! But I came through everything. No wavering, no need to seek advice. I knew what I had to do and did it.

How long had I known him? Twenty years? One week? He lived in the building behind us and was in the same class in primary school as my little sister. The two of them shared a desk; the desk was cut by several dividing lines, the exact line of demarcation never having been decided. Whoever's elbow happened to stray over the line would be immediately pushed back. Yes, I knew him as the child who often played in our garden, who would often sit on the wall and count the passing cars or spend hours in our backyard digging holes in the soft soil.

Then I joined the army and forgot about him. Once I came home for a visit and saw a young fellow at the gate to our compound, tall and thin with stiff black hair standing up on his head like a brush. He stopped in his tracks to give way to me, saw who I was, and blushed.

“Sister Liming,” he mumbled, and slunk away by the wall.

“Who was that?” I asked my sister.

“From the apartment building behind ours,” came the reply. “Don't you remember? His name is Wu Guo. He’s now a blacksmith. A little blacksmith. Such a joke.”

I didn’t see him again until 1975, after I was demobbed. It was a hot day and I was pregnant. I had two sets of china in one hand and with the other I was pushing a pram I had just purchased. I was exhausted and could barely keep on my feet. Suddenly a hand relieved me from behind.

“Oh, you, little blacksmith.” I gazed at his thick hair and equally thick eyebrows, helplessly fishing for his name in my memory. “Are you going to work?”

He didn’t specify. The parcels that had weighed me down were like playthings in his hands. He accompanied me upstairs. Just as I was fumbling about for a teacup, he vanished.

When my daughter, Xinxin, grew up, she often came back from play with trophies from a mysterious source. Balloons, chocolates, comic books. When asked, she would say that they were from her little uncle. I did not pay attention at the time. My fatherless daughter was always spoiled by many uncles and aunties among my acquaintances, and I never associated these trophies with Wu Guo.

Even less did I imagine that the shy little blacksmith would accomplish in seven days what conventional people never dreamed of doing in a lifetime. Anyway, my little ship was stranded, and I saw no way of setting sail again. This was why I decided in spite of everything to join the marathon. This race, like all momentous events—the launching of a space missile, for example—was counted backward:

“Four-three-two-one Go!”

So it was with my ship waiting to set sail.

I was barely in my office when Little Sister rang. She said that Wu Guo rang up a friend of hers, inquiring through that friend to ask me if he could take a few photographs of my little Xinxin. There’s not a mother on earth who could resist having her darling’s picture taken. So what were all these convoluted negotiations about? And who was Wu Guo?

“Don’t tell me you don’t remember Wu Guo! The little blacksmith in the apartment building behind ours!”

“The blacksmith? Is he an amateur photographer?”

“Not amateur anymore. On the upward move, I’d say. He’s working as decor artist for a big enterprise. He wants to photograph Xinxin for their print-ad campaign!”

“Oh, him!”

“Come on, what do you say?” Little Sister was losing patience. “She can wear the one-piece woolen dress I just gave her.”

“All right, all right.”

“Don’t fob me off with your *all rights.* If it’s yes, phone him immediately. Number 553-864. Have you got it? Immediately!”

“All right, all right.”

So I dialed the little blacksmith’s—rather, the little decor artist’s—number to settle this momentous business. The phone barely rang before someone picked it up. It was Wu Guo himself.

*

It was Sunday. Xinxin was still in bed when he arrived. He had a lot of odds and ends with him, strips of cotton cloth and pieces of cardboard.

“Didn’t you bring your camera?” Little Sister loved anything trendy and couldn’t wait to have a look at his camera.

He didn’t say anything. Just put down the paraphernalia in his hands and fished out of a ragged bag a camera worthy of the status of his enterprise, an Olympus OM-10.

“This trash …” Sister touched his cardboard and cotton strips with the tip of her shoe.

“Oh, no!” Wu Guo put down his camera to protect his treasures. “These are for the light adjustment. And I’ll need your help with them.”

We were busy with the photo session for two hours, but Wu Guo spent another four hours because Xinxin insisted on being taken to the zoo.

I saw the two of them off. They had not gone a few steps before Wu Guo stooped to pick up Xinxin and put her on his shoulders. The tears leaped to my eyes. Xinxin had never had a father and never knew the luxury of riding on a father’s shoulders. She had to use her own feet as soonas she could walk.

That same night, Wu Guo called on me. You know, of course, that our academy has a resounding reputation but

no housing to match. For four years we have had to make do in prefabricated shacks. As for me, having no family, I became the Permanent Officer for fetching hot water mornings and afternoons and for security duty on holidays. That was Old Zhang's title for me. I had one corner of the office room screened off. There, I set up a plank over two benches and that was my bedroom. Wu Guo brought the package of barely dried photos, the edges not yet trimmed.

There was Xinxin laughing, Xinxin dancing on one foot, Xinxin contemplating the camera with a serious look, Xinxin making faces … She was six years old, yet it seemed that this was the first time I saw my child so closely. How like her father she was, especially the restless eyes twinkling in the shadow of the heavy lashes. My mother gave me a pair of eyes that are perfect as far as vision is concerned, to the satisfaction of doctors and reconnaissance commanders, but they were just narrow slits in shape, not to the taste of artists or photographers. I sometimes regret, but mainly am relieved, that Xinxin's eyes are not like mine.

"Let's use this one. What do you think?"

Wu picked out one picture among the lot. It was Xinxin bundled up like a ball at the moment of stepping on ice. Her arms were stretched out and her little coat was going to burst at any moment. As I looked at the picture it flashed across my mind that Xinxin's eyes are similar to Wu Guo's, too. The thought made me blush.

"You see, everything depends on this button. And that's the ad for our company," Wu explained.

"I'd say it's thanks to the thread that holds the button," I retorted. "It seems more like advertising for the thread factory."

"But only high-quality buttons stay sewed. Otherwise, they will be gnawed through in a couple of days. Didn't you know that?"

"Gnawed through?"

He smiled and drew out of his pocket a handful of buttons of all shapes and sizes. He told me which designs were pressed, which were drilled, where they should be rounded and where back-angled. Then he told me about air traffic accidents in Pakistan:

"On average, one pilot crashes down every year because there is a back-angle missing on the shoulder of the main axle of the generator." He told me this in all seriousness.

"So what if the back-angle is missing?"

"Lack of balance in internal stress."

Wu blew some warmth into his freezing hands and proceeded to demonstrate on a piece of paper the distribution of internal stress. I looked at him, a tousle-headed young fellow. He was twenty-eight, one year older than my little sister. Under normal circumstances, he should have been five years out of the university with five years of work experience behind him. Nowadays, people like Wu Guo were often written off as heady youths who can't be trusted. But of course, the generation of Wu Guo had only had primary-school education.

"Where did you get all this information?"

"Do you mean all this about internal stress? Well, that's the essential of a blacksmith'' job, internal stress. Of course, there's also the problem of hardening by quenching …"

Thus, sitting on the corner of my desk, he began to tell me about the ancient practice of hardening iron by pissing into the fire. He wanted to know whether it was just an ancient hoax or had some basis in chemistry.

"Hardening by quenching is a physical operation, I'm afraid," I reminded him softly.

"Is that so?"

He raised that pair of burning eyes and blushed.

Suddenly I saw myself in one of the photos. I was holding up Wu Guo's self-made contraption for light adjustment and doubled up with laughter.

He snatched it away. He blushed as he rubbed the picture against his trousers and tried to fold it up and stuff it into his pocket.

"Come on." I tried to stop him. "It's very nice. Give it to me. I never had such a flattering picture taken of myself."

"Is that so?"

He handed me the picture hesitantly.

"You are not angry? You were lost in laughter and I couldn't resist clicking. All these years, I had so wanted you to laugh like that. Of course, according to the rules of our profession, it is rude to take your picture without asking permission."

"What rubbish! Who cares about these fine points? Give it to me."

"Certainly. I still have the negative." He took up the photo to have a close look. "In the future, if we need an ad

on equipment for light adjustment, we’ll use this.”

Thus we chatted until eleven o’clock. He was on the point of leaving when he saw the stamps under the glass top of my desk.

“Elder Sister, do you collect stamps?”

“I used to, just for fun. Take these if you like them.”

“Oh, no, I can’t do that,” he said as he bent over my stamps with interest. “But we can exchange. I’ve got lots. I’ll bring them tomorrow.”

“All right, all right, but you must go now.”

“Wu Guo, how did you come by such a name?” I asked him the next day. *No-fault*—who would name a child that?

Wu Guo sniffed. “I didn’t name myself. Don’t blame me!”

I laughed and with a movement of my foot overturned a thermos flask that was on the floor.

He took out a hot-water bottle from his greasy bag.

“I spent three hours here yesterday and went back with a vicious cold. Elder Sister, how can you bear it, night after night, in this place?”

How? Something stuck in my throat. In the old days, when I was in the army, I had been through marches and campaigns and untold hardships. But that was nothing compared with the last several years. Nobody could imagine the difficulties of a woman bringing up a child on her own. If Wu Guo had said, “I''s so cold here, let’s go somewhere else to look at the stamps,” or “It’s disgraceful, how can they turn off the heat at night! Talk to the chief tomorrow,” it wouldn’t have hurt so much. After six years I had grown used to having nobody care for me. But Wu Guo was just a young friend. How could I accept anything from him?

“If you refuse, I’ll cut it into pieces. Now you decide.”

Thereupon he reached into his pocket. I was sure that he had brought the scissors.

“All right, all right,” I said, and picked up another thermos flask to fill the bottle.

I slept very well that night.

*

The next day, Wu Guo was on the night shift. It was seven o'clock in the evening. I had just finished my supper. I spread out a sheet of paper and prepared to copy a manuscript for a friend. The telephone rang.

“Sister, guess what I am doing.”

“What?”

“Listen, can you hear it?”

I put my ear to the receiver. There was a medley of soud but I could still make out the strains.

“The Fifth Symphony! Fate!”

I put down the receiver. How can there be such a coincidence? Seven years ago, when Husheng and I decided to join our lives together, we were sitting on a little knoll outside the barracks and the moon was shining brightly. Husheng turned on his radio and the strains of this very same Fifth Symphony nearly took our breaths away. At the time, felt that the sails of my ship of life were full and heading for unknown waters. “Husheng!” I cried, grasping his big rough hands, a man’s hands. And he had said deliriously, “Yes, fate is knocking.”

At the time, I did not recognize that these were not Husheng’s own words. Far less would I have foreseen that I was to hold the fatherless Xinxin on many a chilly night and immerse myself in that refrain for solace. It was a vital and lasting fount of memory that Husheng had left with me, a unique mysterious knot tying us together.

Except for the even more mysterious link between us: our daughter Xinxin. She grew up with this symphony in her ears. I remember the time when she was watching the Japanese cartoon series *Atumu* on my mother’s TV. When the little mechanical figure leaped into the air to the strains of the Fifth Symphony, Xinxin turned to me in surprise. “Mummy, how did he know …?” How did Atumu know her own music? she wondered.

“Heh, Sister Liming, do you hear it? It is thus that fate knocks at the door.”

Wu Guo was still at the other end.

“Stop it, Little Wu. The telephone company is going to interfere.”

“But do you hear it?”

“No, there’s too much noise in the background. I’m going to hang up.”

“Sister Liming, what’s wrong with you today?”

“Nothing. I’ll hang up.”

I did not leave myself any time for hesitation, but put the receiver firmly back into its cradle.

It was very quiet, except for the wind and the occasional sounds of laughter from a TV somewhere. Only my

own heart was pounding wildly.

I put my hands, stiff with cold, under the hot-water bottle and felt a hot spring bubble up under the placid surface of my river of life. Six years had passed! Xinxin, from a pink-faced infant, was now ready for primary school. And with time, I had found my place in life. It was not that I lacked suitors. Only the other day, a good friend had talked to me long into the night about her brother's offer. And there were many more before that. Six years was a long time. I could have gone through a dozen suitors—but I had refused them all. I couldn't step into the role. We were too cool and calm, going over the terms rationally, according to conventional standards. It was literally looking for a partner. Is that love? No.

That was not how I and Husheng had grown together. We were like two fighting cocks, squabbling all through the three years that we had known each other, and suddenly we couldn't tell how it happened, but we realized we couldn't do without each other. After that, everything was like a dream: writing applications for permission to marry, waiting for approval, getting the use of a little room, putting two wooden planks together to make a bed. And then being together as man and wife three or four times, even though we were in the same regiment. We were not like a couple at all in the usual sense of the word. No pillowcases and tea set. Just a burning love. We figured the rest could wait, commonplace occurrences like going to restaurants or taking long walks together. We had all the time in the world. Who could have foreseen the earthquake that snatched away Husheng in one swoop?

I had Husheng. How could I love anybody else? Besides, Xinxin is vitally important to me. My poor fatherless daughter. I could not bear to think of someone being my husband and indifferent to Xinxin.

"This is fate knocking at the door," Wu Guo had shouted to me from the other end of the phone.

Could it be that there was an invisible link between our two souls?

I knew that Wu Guo was born to a cultured family, but we never discussed music. And anyway I barely knew any tune except the one Husheng had brought into my life. Wu Guo was so young. I wondered if he could also love this kind of music? Could he understand its heartrending impasse and then its cascading overflow into the joy of victory? Perhaps he was just showing off. More likely, though, he just wanted to share his understanding of the world. I should not let my fancies run away with me.

My mother had long said that Wu Guo and my little sister would make a pair. As a matter of fact, they have known each other for twenty years. Wu Guo had been over to my place for several days running. Was his presence merely camouflage for paying attentions to my sister? I was the big sister, after all—big sister to both of them. Should I step aside, I wondered, and benignly supervise the affairs of these two young people? But I felt instinctively that that was not the point. I could sacrifice everything—my time, my little corner, my meager salary—but that was not the point.

Wu Guo had already announced on the telephone that fate was knocking at the door. I knew that if this situation continued, I was going to lose the peace of mind I had acquired so dearly. I decided that on the following day I would bring matters out into the open. I would channel this stream of disaster, or perhaps of happiness—depending on the outcome—into the port of my little sister. Healthy and lively at twenty-seven, she was a flower waiting to be plucked.

I had considered a hundred ways of activating my plan. Eat out? Hepatitis was rampant. Meet at my mother's? Mother was sometimes in the way. Get together at my own corner here? That would send all the wrong signals, making me the center of attention. And anyway it would be too cold. Little Sister is delicate. Go to a park? That wouldn't do. The park with all those couples in it, the women in middle-length coats of the same cut and pattern and hair clasps with the same kind of eight-ring embellishments, accompanied by men in corduroy jackets of the same design, walking in the same listless way while keeping an eye open for a spare bench—it gave you the feeling of being packed off wholesale. Now what was to be done? As I was about to fill my hot-water bottle for the fifth time from the office thermos flask—over the protests of my fellow workers—Old Zhang remarked, "Very likely you are feverish. Just as well. There are not enough tickets to go around for tonight's ball anyway."

My hand caught his in a vise.

"Yours and Old Mother Liu's and my own. Don't say no. I must have all three for tonight. It's an emergency.

The three of us went together. Little Sister, decked out like a flower in full bloom, was invited to every dance. Her face was streaming but she kept on dancing. I had many acquaintances, so I flitted in and out of the crowd, chatting, drinking soda water, introducing my sister and Wu Guo to everybody.

"This is my young friend. That is my sister, the one in the purple sweater. She has style, hasn't she?"

Wu Guo got tired of being shepherded around and edged himself toward the sound equipment. At first he just stood by silently. Then he lent a hand changing the cassettes and helped with the tuning. Later, when I stole over to the group, I saw him in deep conversation in technical jargon.

I was at a loss. Now, I had set up this meeting. Was it going to end up like the countless times they had met in the last twenty years? I had brought them together, like hundreds of thousands of matchmakers from time immemorial. I had done it unthinkingly, following old established practice. But if they had not felt a ripple of emotion toward each other for the last twenty years, could an outsider's meddling fingers stir up those dormant waters? Well, I decided to give up and go home. The manuscript I had promised to copy was still on my desk. As far as I was concerned, she could go on with her dancing and he could stick to his machines.

It was a moonless night. I was trying to locate my battered Flying Pigeon among a sea of bicycles.

"Sis, ours are right here."

He had followed me out! All my surreptitious maneuvers to put on my hat and coat and sneak out didn't work.

"If you don't like dancing, why didn't you say so?"

"I came for the music and to watch the dancing. It's quite fun. And anyway, if I'm not here, who's to see you back?"

"I don't need anyone to see me back. I've walked on darker nights than this, alone, in the country. If you are not interested, you might as well go home. Or you could wait for Little Sister."

"Little Sister?" He smiled. In the darkness, his smile seemed to exude warmth. "She doesn't need me to worry about her."

Did I need him to worry about *me*? We rode our bikes shoulder to shoulder in the silent streets.

"Sis, why?" he asked.

"Why?" That was his question. It could mean several things. Why did you maneuver this threesome dance party? Why did you not dance yourself? Why did you leave so early? Why rush back to your freezing shack? Why live like this? He could mean any of the above questions. Or anyone of them could include all the rest.

"Wu Guo, you are very young. There are matters that are beyond explanation."

"No. They can be explained. You just don't want to talk." He pressed hard on his bicycle horn for no special reason; the streets were empty. "You think that even if you do explain, no one will understand you."

"Is that what you think?" I countered, feeling that this was treading on dangerous grounds.

"But supposing there is someone who understands. Supposing there is someone who is sick and tired of being misunderstood, who one day discovers that he understands you and that you understand him …?"

"But …"

"Are you willing? Are you willing to give up going it alone, hiding your bitterness from everybody—friends, relatives, colleagues?"

"That's not true!"

"Your cheerfulness is forced." He jumped down from his bike and caught hold of my handlebars. "Now don't rush to deny it. To put it another way, there's something missing in your life. Of course nothing on earth is perfect, but supposing we have the power to make it better?"

His eyes were piercing, forcing me to face the question.

"It's not worth the try. Think of all the inhibitions, enough to suffocate."

"But supposing there is someone who doesn't give a damn, who is above it all."

"Wu Guo, my mother has asked me to approach you, about you and Little Sister …"

"Sis; is this what you really think?"

Perhaps I should have told him that I have put my own brains aside. I was just following ancient patterns …

"And the heart. What does your heart say?"

"Wu Guo!"

"Sister Liming, perhaps this is neither the time nor the place to say this. Perhaps my speaking out now is offensive to you. But what I want to say is: the weather will always turn warm, flowers will bloom, and the waters of the stream are bound to flow. How can one cold blast freeze up a whole river? Why should we let ourselves be bandied about like puppets? Why don't we take our affairs into our own hands? Sis, last night the truth suddenly dawned on me. Isn't the whole situation as clear as daylight? What are we waiting for?"

He grasped my hand across the bicycle. I felt a strange warmth suffuse my body. I raised my head and saw his somewhat childish eyes looking at me earnestly.

No! It was precisely on this account that I must protect him. I extricated my hands slowly.

"Wu Guo, it is impossible. Think of the difference in our ages, my young friend. And my child. I am no beauty. And I am not a good housekeeper. You can see for yourself. I've never had a home, my salary is very small, and I've squandered it all."

"Sis, is this all you have to say to me?" His voice was constrained.

"What will the people around you say? Won't you be ashamed to be seen with me in public? What about your parents? Can you do this to them? I'm used to living alone. I don't need sympathy, much less sympathy at another's expense …"

I got on my bike and rode off, leaving him under a solitary street lamp swaying in the wind.

"Wei Liming," he shouted after me, "you place idle gossip above the treasure of your own heart?"

I flew on my bike. My refusal was weak and unconvincing. If he had caught up with me and caught hold of my hands, I might have risked everything just for the happiness of a few years, a few months, or even for the moment, in gratitude for his understanding.

He did not catch up with me, although he could easily have done so.

*

"It is a dream," I kept saying to myself the next morning. "See, now the sun is out and I am awake."

I emptied the hot-water bottle and put it away in a drawer.

In the afternoon, the porter rang to say there was a letter for me. I ran. It was in an official envelope printed over with BEIJING HOUSEHOLD WARES FACTORY BRANCH 2.

I ripped it open. Inside was an official letter stamped over with a red seal:

To the East District Public Security Office:

This is to certify that Wu Guo, male, twenty-eight years old, unmarried, staff of our factory, has our approval to register for marriage with Wei Liming, female, thirty-three years old, widow, staff of the Art Institute.

Sincerely,
Beijing Household Wares Factory Branch
2 January 24, 1982

The calligraphy was beautiful, probably from the hand of an elderly person who had received proper training. Was that all? I shook out the envelope and a note fell out:

I'll come over agin tonight.

No name of addressee, no signature of sender. Of course, it could only be my young friend who would scrawl such a misspelled note.

I didn't want to see him. I was awake and didn't want to lapse into dreams.

I asked Mother Liu to give him a ring, telling him not to come, that I was away.

My poor little ship had endured so much buffeting, I wanted to dock her for a while, to spread my net under the sun, to dry my sails as I greeted passing boats on their way. Who would have thought that the tide would turn unexpectedly and carry me into open waters, to start again on a soul-stirring, perilous new journey!

The problem came upon me so suddenly it was too brain racking. I was always quick to act—not a thinker. But it was then and there that I decided to compete in the marathon. And I bargained my own terms: if I succeeded in the race, I would ask for a letter of approval to match his; if I dropped out, I would never see him again.

*

I kept on running. By an optimistic estimate, there were probably two hundred behind me, but somehow I seemed further away than ever from the goal. It was like the prospect of communism. It seemed closer in 1921 than in 1971. The more distance you cover, the further away it seems.

I was out of breath, dizzy. I wanted to throw up. My stomach ached first in one place, then in another. Omens. I knew that these aches and pains were illusory, not physical but psychological, a test of will. They were always there to meddle with one's life.

I had long ago announced that I was an atheist, like thousands of good, bad, or mediocre people before me. But only now, through every inhalation, through every movement of my legs did I truly realize that God does not help. Of course he might have been off on holiday. This dilemma came upon me so suddenly, I gave him very short notice.

The crowd of bystanders was getting thicker. They were so relaxed standing there, laughing and chatting. Some shouted out: "Step on the gas." I dragged a pair of legs that felt like logs.

Suddenly it occurred to me that though we all lived on the same planet, how different were our burdens. If I had decided not to participate in the marathon, I, too, could stand idly by, eating big chunks of ice cream. Yes, that

would be pleasant.

But what about the joy of hitting the ribbon at the end? That sensation could last a lifetime. And the doggedness of sticking it out to the end, that was also something that could last a lifetime. Not to mention Wu Guo, riding over and above worldly conventions. In my life from now on, I would need all the confidence and persistence I could command to deal with all that might descend on my head. Or perhaps we would need it for all that might descend on *our* heads.

Suddenly I realized that the bet I made was not just a bet like any other. I thought I was leaving it all to chance. Actually I was testing myself: can you deal with it or can't you?

A sea of multicolored flags greeted me on the way. And a sea of faces. The air seemed so thin. Had the crowds sucked it all up? The sun was so bright, as always during winter in Beijing. It was then I knew I had to make a dash for the finish line!

"Little Wei!" Old Zhang shouted at me, his voice ringing above the noise.

"Eighteen! Nineteen!" The timekeeper, a little flag in his hand, was keeping count of the runners who hit the line.

At that moment I knew that Wu Guo and I had made it. We had won. Our flouting of convention, our search for something better had prevailed. But I wanted it to be still better. I swung my arms as I swept on. I panted as I overtook four or five girls. One more step and …

"Thirty-three!" I had crossed the line. I was the thirty- third, exactly my own age. What a pity I had not dashed forward seconds earlier and made it to twenty-eight, Wu Guo's age.

Suddenly I realized someone was holding me. Strong manly hands. Wu Guo!

"I've never seen the likes of you. Look around, see for yourself. Is there anybody running as desperately as you are?"

I shook the sweat from my eyes and looked around me. So many pretty girls. Laughing, jumping, eating cream cakes offered by the boys.

My throat was burning. I could not bear the thought of food.

All the others had apparently run purely for fun. Suddenly I wanted to cry. Nobody else was like me, so desperate. Life for them was such a lighthearted affair.

*

Wu Guo stuffed the marriage certificate into his greasy bag. He disposed of it as casually as if it were a piece of wrapping paper. When he saw my alarm, he laughed.

"This is just the people's acknowledgment. Or to put it more grandly, the acknowledgment of the state organ. What I want is you. You have given yourself to me this morning at the marathon. Although you looked quite knocked out and can't be put in a bag."

I was still wearing that pair of running shoes and that old pullover. Two hours earlier we had gone to Hongbin-iou Restaurant for lunch. Wu Guo treated, and invited Old Zhang to join us. After the meal, the two of us hijacked Old Zhang to his office to make out the certificate of approval for me to register for marriage. Only then did Old Zhang savor the full implications of his succulent roast beef sirloin. He looked at the two of us by turns and suddenly gave his best imitation to date of Hou Xirei:

"*Wa-ya-ya*! Your humble servant … has wielded the seal of authority for twenty years. And finally the day has come … when it is put to a worthy use!"

"Well, I suppose we can start practicing the love talk now," I joked. I felt as if I had just lost in a battle to repel the enemy. The battlefield was deadly quiet.

"Why so conventional? It doesn't sound like you." He frowned in a mock imitation of a political-affairs officer. "Considering your performance this morning, we'll withhold the label for the moment. You get washed and join your husband this evening."

"And what about the thirty-five legs due to a bride?"

"Can't afford them. If you had mentioned it earlier, I would have gotten out of this, but now it's too late to back out. Let's settle for two legs, and they are for Xinxin."

*

I went to my mother's house. Mother was wiping the spotless tables in the room.

"I know everything. Last night, the Wu couple came over. They told me not to worry. They said they always had absolute confidence in Wu Guo."

Mother wiped her eyes.

"Your father always said not to worry about you. He said Liming is not the kind to end up unhappy."

"Where's Little Sister?"

"She's off to buy candy. She said you had always spent your money on us. Now we won't let you skimp for your wedding."

I spotted Xinxin's overcoat.

"Where's Xinxin?"

"The Wu family took her away this morning. At first she said she wanted to wait for Mommy, but later she changed her mind and left with them."

So everything was true? I took a bath. Soon it got dark. The children in the courtyard had started to set off firecrackers in anticipation of the New Year. I looked at myself in the mirror. My face was smooth and radiant like the evening sunset. I wonder if Husheng, from where he was, was looking at me at that moment. My thoughts were interrupted by a patter of footsteps.

"Mommy!"

Xinxin rushed in, followed by two younger boys. Xinxin had a big doll in her hands. Was that Wu Guo's contribution of the *two* legs? The other children, Wu Guo's nephews by his sister and his brother, brought up the rear with a music box, building blocks, and comic books. They made a pile of these objects on the bed. They were her devoted slaves.

"This is from Aunty; this is from Uncle; this is from Granddad; this is from Granny …"

My darling daughter, she had joined the family before her mother!

"Aunty says you must hurry and go over. Aunty knocked on Little Uncle's head …" Her name for Wu was Little Uncle.

"Why did Aunty knock on his head?"

"Aunty said—"

One of the nephews volunteered a reply. "My mommy says, you've done a smart thing after all."

I cried and held the three children in my embrace.

Wu Guo came over. He was dressed in a new suit, which made him look slightly comic.

"Weren't you told to deliver your message and go back? Off with you all!" He shooed the children away and sat down next to me.

"Liming, you are crying. Are you thinking of Husheng? Next year, we'll go and bring back his ashes. Xinxin must keep his name …" My tears continued to flow. He took out a crumpled handkerchief.

"I announced to them this morning at the factory—I'm not Little Wu anymore. I won't be ordered around anymore with Little Wu this and Little Wu that. I announced that I am a father. Not the diaper-swashing kind: My daughter will start primary school next year. Come on, don't cry. I've asked everybody to come over next Sunday. I told them, now Wu Guo is closer to the Party than ever. After all, my wife has twelve years' Party membership and that's not a joking matter!"

I picked up the doll.

"Two legs?"

He laughed as he put his arms around me and led me to our bridal chamber in his parents' house, a room the whole family had readied at a day's notice. In one corner stood a Xinhai brand piano, its two legs gleaming in the lamplight. It was the only new object in the room.

"I've thought it over. We'll just have this one child. And she doesn't have to be a pianist. The piano is there just to give a sparkle to life."

*

The moon dipped to the west. Only the stars were in the sky. Wu was deep in slumber.

"It's just seven days," I whispered in his ear.

"Seven days is long enough. God created the world and Adam and Eve, all in seven days. While I had just married a wife, the best wife in the world, unlike any other …" he murmured as he kissed me.

I realized that he was still young. Earlier, Mother Liu had said as she dragged me to a quiet comer:

"Don't let yourself get carried away for the moment. Right now I'd say you are both young. But what about ten years later? He'll still be young, while you'll be an old woman."

I knew that day would come. But even if one day he decides that he has made a mistake, I'm prepared to pay the price of a lifetime for sharing a slice of his life. It will be my way of thanking him for his kindness now. If that moment arrives, I will be very calm. I will allow him to correct his mistake, just as I am abetting his mistake right now. Life would be so drab if one could not afford one glorious mistake. That's not living. That's just hiding under a mask.

Wasn't this stupid? But stupider things were to follow. I was pregnant. I let myself become pregnant on purpose and then I went and had an abortion. I did this because I heard the whispers. People had gone through the genealogy of three generations on both sides and decided, "There must be something wrong with Wu Guo. Isn't it as clear as day?"

I let myself be pregnant and had an abortion. I can't bear to have anyone cast dirt on pure marble.

My little ship sets sail again.

Oh, you unexpected tide!

39.231 Excerpt from **The Foundation**\fn{by Jiang Zilong (1941-)} Cangxian County, Hebei Province, China (M)
15

It was shortly before National Day, and many workers in the forging shop were gathered around their director Lu Yong-cun to demand overtime for the holiday. By working three days at double wages, a Grade 3 worker could end up with $5 or so, a Grade 4 worker could get $7 or more, and workers of Grade 5 and above could do even better!

But what could they do for overtime work? There was nothing that needed to be done. Everybody pointed out that since the concrete foundation for the 500-ton rapid press—which was the most important piece of equipment in the shop—had already been poured, the press could be installed ahead of schedule over the holiday.

But Lu Yong-cun emphatically disagreed, arguing that the foundation would have to last well into the next century. He said it was essential to insist on quality as the top priority and to proceed carefully according to the established installation schedule. The workers who were hoping for overtime looked at each other and masked their disappointment as well as they could. But they did not walk away.

This man Lu was tall and thin, with a back that hunched forward and a head of fluffy white hair. His age was difficult to discern—it must have been somewhere between fifty and sixty. His rough, kindly face bore evidence of the tumultuous half-century he had lived through. There was not a trace of guile in his character; he always handled things bluntly. He had a reputation for sometimes passing things up that were there for the taking. The problem now wasn't that he could not see what was on everyone's mind but that he refused to compromise on matters of principle.

The workers expressed their opinions in a clamor of voices, saying it wasn't true that installation ahead of schedule would affect quality, declaring that they might as well just give up and go find odd jobs instead, and tossing unsavory language in old Lu's direction. But Lu Yong-cun did not get flustered or angry. He was always earnest, if somewhat preachy, in standing up for his ideas. Once he had decided something, it was hard to make him budge. He remained trapped in his office by the nagging workers until Kang Tong-yan, clerk of the forging shop, came to extricate him.

Kang Tong-yan was also over fifty, but his hair was still lacquer-black and glossy with oil. The smooth, soft flesh of his face gleamed a childlike pink. His short frame carried an especially protuberant belly which had bent his spine into a bow. But this awkward build belied a great nimbleness. Pushing his way to the center of the crowd, he addressed them in solemn tones:

"OK, everybody, don't just stand around yacking. Get back to work, I've got something important to discuss with Director Lu."

His keen eyes swept over the group. Then, suspecting they did not believe him, he added:

"'The main office has decided to withhold all bonuses in this shop starting this month. I've got to see the director right away so I'll know what to do when I take the matter up with the paymaster."

Not only failing to get the overtime pay they wanted, the workers now saw their bonuses being withheld. Realizing that things were not going their way, they unhappily left the office.

Kang Tong-yan's eyes crinkled in amusement. This was his specialty—every time Lu Yong-cun was stuck with a problem too hot to handle or when people pestered him and he couldn't get free, Kang would fabricate a yarn that contained enough truth in it to convey a sense of urgency. He would say that Lu Yong-cun had an urgent phone call from the factory manager or that something had gone wrong and required the director's attention. No one could tell that he was making it up. Sometimes old Lu himself could not detect that Kang Tong-yan was secretly covering for him. Artless person that he was, old Lu sometimes took Kang Tong-yan's fantastic improvizations at face value, thus obliging Kang to act them out as if they were real.

The workers dispersed, leaving Kang alone with Lu Yong-cun, who looked very serious.

"Who says the bonuses for our shop will be withheld?" he asked.

"I heard it on the grapevine," Kang Tong-yan said with a mysterious laugh.

Lu Yong-cun's mood brightened.

"Hah! The 'grapevine' again! If that's where you got it, why'd you announce it in front of everyone? You made it sound so convincing, like hard fact! Things like that cause trouble, you know!"

"My grapevine is at least 95 percent reliable. And when I picked up the news I had to get it straight to you. Otherwise, when the main office really does withhold the bonuses, how would you explain things to the workers?"

Kang Tong-yan was thoroughly displeased at having been reprimanded, yet smiled apologetically as he spoke. His friendship with Lu Yong-cun went back more than thirty years. Before Liberation, Kang had been the boss's son in the Kangji Iron Works, where Lu Yong-cun had worked as a craftsman. Now the craftsman had become the shop director and the boss's son an errand-running clerk.

After a moment Kang Tongyan offered old Lu some honest advice:

"You must not ignore the workers' demands, Mr. Director. I've had my ear to the ground and know that all the other shops are giving overtime. Isn't it up to the individual shop whether there's work? Forget about the foundation for now. Just find them some work—anything—and they'll have their overtime, right? That'll at least keep them from swearing at you. Why make them resent you?"

"What can I do? If we pay out an extra 20 percent in overtime when there's really nothing to do, who suffers? The country, of course! No, we cadres just have to put up with the insults, that's all."

"You have to take insults just because you're a cadre?"

Kang Tong-yan shook his heavy, mallet-like head but kept the reasons for his disagreement to himself. If the factory belonged to you, he was thinking, then it would be worth taking insults. But, no they give you the thankless task of directing this shop and only about $50 a month for doing it. Is it worth all the flak you get? So what if the workers get their overtime? It's not coming out of your own pocket, so why resist? Besides, if they get overtime, so do you. You could pick up $6 or $7 for yourself and go have a good time. Why not? Why be so obtuse? Kang figured he understood Lu Yong-cun—Lu was a *naïve* straight arrow. No wonder he had never been promoted and probably never would be. Opportunity could hit him on the forehead and he would let it go by.

Suddenly Lu Yong-cun remembered something.

"Oh, yes, Kang, the Office of Policy Implementation just called and asked you to stop by."

Kang Tong-yan's eyes flashed and widened to twice their normal size. His heart was pounding rapidly as he turned to leave, but an afterthought stopped him.

"Mr. Director!", he admonished. "Don't forget to go to the paymaster's office to ask about the bonuses."

"I'll go in a minute. On your way tell Xiao-qing I'd like to see her, OK?"

Old Lu was turning something else over in his mind.

*

Xi Xiao-qing hung up the telephone, her mind as unsettled as a potful of water ata rolling boil. Her boyfriend Lu Jie, Lu Yong-cun's son, had just called to invite her to his house for the holiday. This was called "making acquaintance with the house," which meant that she would formally pay respects to his parents and, more importantly, let all his close friends get a good look at her. Lu Jie had also told her over the phone that he had brought her some fashionable clothes and high-class cloth from Nanjing.

This put Xiao-qing in an awkward position. They had known each other only a few months, and she had not expected that Lu Jie would already start making such substantial preparations for their marriage. After seeing Lu Jie a few times, she had discovered that he was not the one for her. The two of them nearly always talked at cross-purposes, and his integrity was a far cry from his father's.

Now Lu Jie had invited her to spend National Day at his home. If she went, wouldn't it mean their relationship was definite? On the phone she had neither agreed nor refused but promised to give him an answer before they got off work that day.

Then Kang Tong-yan, who had introduced them, arrived to tell her that Director Lu wished to see her. Kang, his face beaming, lowered his voice to say:

"I have good news to tell you a little later. Lu Jie says you're still short a television set for the bridal chamber. You just leave that to me!"

With that Kang Tong-yan flashed her a mysterious smile and slipped away, his squat body as agile as a bighead carp's.

Xi Xiao-qing's looks were not extraordinary, but she did have an unassuming and wholesome beauty about her. She was quiet by nature and spoke in a subdued, steady voice. She had depth. But the reason she stood *so* high in

Lu Jie's estimation was probably that she was secretary of the shop's branch of the Youth League.

When she walked into Lu Yong-cun's office, her heart was pounding like a small drum. Lu Yong-cun gestured for her to sit down.

"Morale has been pretty low among the workers these days," he began. "They don't work very hard during regular hours, and now they want overtime during the holiday. You people in the Youth League need to do more ideological work among the League members."

Xi Xiao-qing breathed easier when she realized Lu was not bringing up her relationship with his son. She nodded her head.

"Are you having difficulties? Has your branch held its new elections yet?"

"Yes, we have," answered Xiaoqing, "but no job assignments have been made. Nobody's willing to be a League cadre. The ones who've been chosen, and who can't get out of it, will serve only on the organization committee. Nobody wants to be on the propaganda committee."

"Why not?"

"Propaganda committee members have to do propaganda, write reports on the blackboard, print up materials, and drum up motivation. It's a thankless job. Organization committee members only have to collect League dues—a snap!"

"What? They really have that kind of attitude?" Lu Yong-cun was shocked.

The branch secretary smiled wryly.

"I don't know what's going on either, Director Lu. The prestige of our League branch seems pretty low right now. We can't get people to rally around us. The members' sense of honor and responsibility isn't very strong. We still have more than ten League members in our shop, but now more people are quitting than joining. The young ones just don't come. The apprentices won't even fill out a membership application unless you give them a few pep talks."

Xi Xiao-qing was raising questions in Lu Yong-cun's mind. As he thought about the problems this branch secretary was facing, he stood up and walked toward her. He looked at her and felt a burning agitation inside his chest. In both work performance and character, Xi Xiao-qing was one of the best young people in the shop. But old Lu had always felt that she was holding something back, something she dared not reveal to him. He picked this moment to ask:

"Well, we have to keep our own thinking on firm ground. Is something on your mind?"

The girl's face reddened and she lowered her head. After a moment she lifted it again and met Lu Yongcun's eyes.

"May I ask you a few questions, Director Lu?"

"Sure. What questions?"

Doing her best to suppress her intense feelings, Xi Xiao-qing said:

"When the *Communist Manifesto* was first published, Communism was only like a disembodied spirit, yet it gave the capitalist world a terrible fright. They were really afraid of it. But now that there are so many socialist countries in the world, capitalism is no longer afraid of—and even looks down on—socialism. Why is this? If the socialist system is incomparably superior, why don't its productive forces develop as quickly as those of capitalism? Why can't socialism catch up with capitalism in economic and technical development? I might believe, as a matter of faith, that Communism will triumph, that it will eventually win out over capitalism. But whenever I listen to scientific reports or read technical magazines, capitalism is always ahead of socialism. How can we explain this?"

Lu Yong-cun, a practical man who usually stayed away from theory, was quite taken aback. These questions might not be immensely difficult, but neither were they easily answered on such short notice. He never would have guessed that Xi Xiao-qing would pose such questions.

Xi Xiao-qing had obviously been doing some deep, hard thinking. She had run these questions through her mind many times. Her voice had started to quaver as she asked them. When she saw the shop director's usually crinkled eyes grow wider and wider, she changed the subject to old Lu himself.

"Director Lu, you took part in unions and strikes before Liberation. Was your faith in Communism the same then as now? Revolutionary martyrs used to die for Communism with smiles on their faces, with no doubt that the revolution would be victorious. But how many people have such faith now? And what weight do Communist ideals have in the minds of certain old cadres, even though they lived through those times? How much of their lives is still devoted to the future?"

Lu Yong-cun was truly dumbfounded. He simply could not connect these bizarre questions with the League

secretary who was usually so enthusiastic and optimistic. His first impulse was not to address her questions but to feel sorry for her and to worry. She'd be better off if her thinking, rather than being so complex, were like that of all those feather-headed girls who wore flowery, bright clothes and talked incessantly of food and fashion. A serious look came over his face.

"What crazy things you think about."

The girl did not protest, but fixed old Lu with a stubborn gaze as if to say, "You're just as perplexed as I am, aren't you?"

*

Lu Yong-cun ran squarely into a brick wall when he went to negotiate bonuses with the Bonus Evaluation Section. As he walked back to the shop, the argument he'd been having with the head of the section was still running through his mind.

"Your shop ruined its equipment and stopped production for several months. You've operated at a loss month after month, and you still want bonuses? What a nice dream—"

While listening to this, old Lu had stared angrily for some time without knowing what to say. But now the words came to him:

"Of course, by all rights a shop that stops producing and loses money should not get bonuses. But why did our shop stop production? Who is to blame for losing money? Where in the world was there ever a rapid press that went all to hell, including its foundation, only three or four years after being mounted? As soon as the rapid press stopped working last February, we made an urgent report to the main office. Right from the start no one took notice; no one gave a damn. When the cement was there, the reinforcing rods were not. When we got the reinforcing rods, we were short on gravel. We had a terrible time getting the materials together, and then nobody would do the construction work. Things dragged on for more than half a year. You can assemble and mount a whole new press in that much time, but we had to wait eight months just to get the foundation. How could we avoid losses? Am I, Lu Yong-cun, to blame? Is it the fault of the shopworkers? Why do you have to withhold the bonuses? And another thing—all the other shops are giving bonuses. Only the forging shop is being left out. How am I supposed to go on as shop director? What will I say to the workers?"

There were plenty of good arguments, but he had been upset at the time and anger had tied his tongue. Now, as he calmed down, the arguments came to mind one by one. Old Lu was annoyed at himself. He was not actually dull-witted, and was perfectly articulate as long as he was allowed to speak in his slow, judicious manner. He never interrupted when others were talking, and he could not present his opinions well when others interrupted him. When he got involved in buck-passing squabbles and red-faced shouting matches, people needed only to butt in when he opened his mouth, and he was speechless. No matter how right he was, everything stayed bottled up inside. As a consequence he was always the whipping boy at the meetings of middle-level factory cadres. Even the factory manager, when feeling out of sorts, would swallow his anger at the other shops and take it out on Lu Yong-cun by picking on the forging shop. Lu Yong-cun was a sure bet not to get irritated or give any trouble. But although people pushed him around, everyone throughout the factory admitted that he was a great guy and a conscientious, down-to-earth workhorse.

The people in the forging shop were all waiting for the good news their director would bring back, but when they saw the way Lu was hanging his head and muttering as he walked, they cooled off right away. To them, those five or six extra dollars were no laughing matter. People began tossing off insolent remarks, deliberately raising their voices so old Lu could hear.

"Nice guys get the short end of the stick, and that's the way it's always going to be. Our boss Lu's a loser! He's the only flaming soldier in that bunch of flaming generals, and we all take it on the chin with him!"

"You can tell a good horse by how it walks, and a good man by how he talks. Our Director Lu can't pull anything off!"

Honesty is supposed to be a virtue—an expression of Party spirit—but these workers were equating it with foolishness, incompetence, and dullness. When the badgering continued for several days, old Lu pretended not to hear. The sorry state of the forging shop was due to his own failures in leadership. He could hardly blame the workers for their insolent remarks. But the longer he remained silent, the more insistent the complaints became, until some people even stopped working.

This made him lose his temper.

"So you're going to stop work just because of a few lost dollars in bonuses? Money's the only reason you work, huh? Your consciences feel comfortable with that?"

Seeing the change in the director's countenance, the workers fell silent. Everyone knew he was suffering too,

and was just as powerless as they. But one young fellow would have no part of this mood:

"Conscience?" he blared. "My conscience tells me to take pay for work, to eat food, and to wear clothes."

"If everyone thought like you, could this country ever modernize?"

"I'm a worker. I can't be concerned with all that."

Old Lu's lips were trembling with rage. The workers prevailed upon the rash young man to leave, and old Lu went back to his office. He was being pressured from above and jostled from below. Caught in the middle, how could he keep doing his job? If things kept dragging on like this, the forging shop really would go to pieces. He would just have to put up with the workers' abuse and proceed with arrangements for the work they would have after the holiday. He suddenly wondered whether Lu Jie, who was supposed to have returned many days ago, had in fact come back. He reached for the telephone.

An impact cushion was needed in order to install the 500-ton rapid press. Twenty days ago the Supply Section had sent Lu Jie south on a purchasing trip. Before his son left, Lu Yong-cun had instructed him in no uncertain terms that he must get the impact cushion and come back with it immediately. Now old Lu was dialing the Infrastructure Construction Section, where Lu Jie himself answered. When he heard his son's ebullient voice, old Lu felt better right away, assuming Lu Jie had succeeded in buying the impact cushion. But Lu Jie casually told him that he had not bought the cushion because the source factory had none. A buzz sounded in Lu Yong-cun's head. If Lu Jie had been standing before him, old Lu would have smacked him. His son had ruined it!

Meanwhile Lu Jie, failing entirely to perceive his father's irritation, prattled on about how he had brought a load of good lumber back from the south. He asked his father to leave work early to help him bring the lumber from the station to their home. When old Lu refused, Lu Jie's tone changed immediately. He complained that his father showed no concern for his affairs and pressed his point with some glib reasoning. When has there ever been a father who did not make arrangements for his son's wedding? He answered his own question with numerous examples: so-and-so's father had bought such-and-such furniture for his son; so-and-so's father had managed to get a certain kind of house for his son. The point was that Old Lu was singular among fathers in his disregard for his son's welfare.

Old Lu, furious, hung up on his son. Preparations, preparations! Lu Jie and Xi Xiao-qing had seen each other only a few times, but most of the things for the wedding had already been rounded up. What about the arrangements for the shop? What about arrangements for the factory?

Lu Yong-cun was at the end of his patience. He:was itching to do something, but there was nothing he could do. He stormed out of the office and, without thinking, found his way onto the new foundation for the rapid press. He was suddenly aware that the shop was uncommonly quiet. How could a forging shop lack the sounds of steel hammering against iron? Where was the rumble of the overhead crane? Even the wheezing, bellowing furnace stood silent. How he wished he could still hear the familiar, deafening sound of heavy impact! Such stillness in an ironworking shop was not a good thing. It was the sort of silence that could strangle a person.

Old Lu had been working with iron most of his life. The conditions and equipment in his line of work had steadily improved, but the work itself had become more difficult and less profitable. Back when he had started as an apprentice, the factory owner had earned piles of money with nothing more than workers swinging heavy hammers. With the money rolling in, the owner had bought a press with upper and lower dies, and this had brought in even more money. After a time the hammer became worn, and its stem had begun to crack around the edges. So they bound it tight with wire and went on using it, and the money kept gushing in. Who ever heard of losing money on an ironworks? How could it be that this mining machinery plant, which employed thousands of people, and this forging shop, with hundreds of workers, would lose money? What was the root of the problem?

Lu Yong-cun was squatting on the foundation, hands clasped behind his head. He stared fixedly at the mass of reinforced concrete as he thought about these questions. He could not answer them, but he did notice a place on the foundation that was not very solid. He knocked at it with an iron bar, and off came a big piece of concrete like a lump of bean curd. This gave him quite a start. He immediately went over the whole foundation very carefully.

What he found was hardly reassuring. Old Lu was not a mason, but he was an experienced ironworker, and he was sure something was wrong. The Construction Section was responsible for the rapid press foundation. He went back to his office and called the head of the Construction Section.

"Supervisor Yu? There's something wrong with the foundation of the 500-ton rapid press! I poked it with an iron bar and a piece fell off. How's it going to take 500 tons of pressure?"

"Well of course if you poke it with an iron bar you can poke some pieces loose!" the supervisor replied sarcastically. "Why don't you try using explosives? Maybe you can blast it sky high!"

"That foundation is nothing to joke about, Yu! The first time we installed this rapid press, we had to dig up the

foundation and replace it after only four years! What other country does things that way? Other people use these things for decades or even a century. A foundation is supposed to outlive two or three presses. If we go on like this, our country will lose so much money it's not funny! Why don't you take a sample from the foundation and run tests on it!"

"No need for that. If anything's wrong with the foundation, we here at Construction will take responsibility. It'll be quite enough if you just mind your own shop!"

The supervisor angrily hung up the phone.

This was rubbish. Was there no end to the wrangling, the accusations, the anger? "Just keep on wrangling," Lu Yong-cun muttered to himself. "Wrangle, wrangle, wrangle. Wrangle your hair white! Wrangle the factory to the brink of ruin! But don't stop wrangling!"

*

Kang Tong-yan was prancing along as if there were springs under his feet. The Policy Implementation Office had just absolved him of his "reactionary capitalist" label. What an immeasurable relief! He opened the office door at the forging shop to find Lu Yong-cun staring vacantly at the telephone.

"Old Lu!" he called out crisply.

Lu Yong-cun raised his head to see the look of satisfaction on Kang's face.

"What's up, Kang?" he asked.

Kang Tong-yan laughed.

"Don't play games, old Lu. You were the one who did it all for me, weren't you?"

Kang was a smooth talker. He knew it had been Party Central's decision to press the new policy, but he chose to direct his appreciation to Lu Yong-cun. Lu Yong-cun had indeed been good to him these past years. Even after Kang had been pinned with a bad label, he had not been treated as a reactionary element in the forging shop. When he got older and could no longer stand physical labor, Lu Yong-cun had appointed him clerk of the office. This allowed him to make use of his special abilities and also put a bit of authority into his hands. From then on, he had been willing to scamper everywhere, serving as the big talker for the forging shop. In his heart he was grateful for Lu Yong-cun's consideration.

Lu Yong-cun finally understood what Kang was talking about and handed him a cigarette.

"You should thank the Party for removing your label," he said. "If you want to think about something, think about how to get the forging shop back on the track."

For a moment Kang Tong-yan didn't see what Lu Yong-cun was. driving at.

"Well—how am I supposed to do that?"

"What if I were to turn the forging shop over to you, as if it were your privately owned operation; what would you do?"

"Turn it over to me?"

In his surprise Kang Tong-yan's blood coursed into his head, and his blood pressure seemed to rise. He was confident of his own abilities and was also sure that Lu Yong-cun knew he was no slouch. He had pulled the director out of many sticky situations in the past. Could it be that Lu Yong-cun wanted to promote him to vice-director of the shop now that his label had been removed? Good heavens! Would glad tidings really come twice in one day? His appetite for authority, suddenly revived, burned his face red and sent waves of heat through his body.

Seeing that Kang's thoughts had taken him elsewhere, Lu Yong-cun came back to the point:

"In the old days when your father opened the Kangji Iron Works, he had only those few hearths and a few dozen men. I remember you never came to work. You were always out in the country hunting rabbits and trapping birds, and in the evenings you visited brothels. You'd show up at the shop only if you felt like it. But the place did earn lots of money. These days working conditions are much better. We have more equipment and more people. So why do we operate at a loss?

Kang Tong-yan understood. He clearly realized the shop director's difficulties and frustrations, and replied in an acrimonious tone that he had not dared to use in over ten years.

"I think you've done a respectable job just to get the forging shop to run as well as it does," he said. "After all, it's not your private operation."

"What do you mean by that? You think I'm not giving it everything I have?"

"You've done all you can but in a blind effort. If you owned the shop and it sank to this condition, you'd have to close up. You and yours would have to commit suicide or else go begging in the streets. The unemployed workers would have to look elsewhere to feed themselves. They sure wouldn't have it as nice as they do now, earning

money while they gossip all day. The Communist Party is generous and tolerant. The superiority of socialism is in sharing the available food with everyone."

"The shop is going bad because of my inability—"

"What inability? The shop isn't yours, so you don't have complete authority over it. And therefore you have no prestige with the workers. They can listen to you or not, as they choose. Instead of controlling the workers by getting a grip on their basic interests, you have to control them through political campaigns. And after too many campaigns, you find there are certain side effects, just like the side effects of too much medicine. Party members are even less obedient than the activist nonmembers. Remember a few years ago when everybody was competing to get workers of the Four Black Categories, just because they were more obedient and hardworking than people from the Five Red Categories?! If the person in charge of a factory doesn't consider the factory his own, do you think he'll run it well? If the truth were known, there *is* no boss in our factory now. It doesn't belong to the factory manager; it doesn't belong to you shop directors; and of course it doesn't belong to the workers. You'll probably say it belongs to the Party or the country. But since when can the head of a national government concern himself with every single factory?"

"There you go talking nonsense again."

Lu Yong-cun stared furiously at his former boss's son. What really made him furious was that Kang Tong-yan's words were not entirely nonsense. In fact they made him think of what Xi Xiao-qing had been saying. These two people—completely different in their experience, political background, and age—had expressed some of the same things. This was so uncanny that Lu Yong-cun's fury gave way to a shudder.

But Lu Yong-cun's remark had sent a chill through Kang Tong-yan and had brought him quickly back to his senses.

"What an ass I am," he thought to himself. "I get pleased with myself and forget who I am. Good thing Lu Yong-cun is a decent, kindhearted sort. If he were somebody else I could get reported, and that label I just got rid of would be pinned right back on me."

He broke out in a cold sweat. Wreathing his face in an apologetic smile, he hurried to say:

"I was just letting my mouth flap, Mr. Director. Don't take me seriously."

"You didn't have to feed me that line. Look at the act you put on!" Lu Yongcun said, showing disgust. "There's a problem with the quality of the rapid press foundation, but the Construction Section won't run a check on it. Can you do something?"

Kang Tong-yan perked up. He was always ready to help Lu Yong-cun with a problem and was confident that there was nothing in the factory he could not handle. He pulled a pack of cigarettes from his briefcase and turned it over in his hand.

"Leave this to me," he said with a laugh. "I'll find a way to get somebody over there to do it."

As he finished speaking, Kang Tongyan turned to go. Then something else occurred to him. He pulled a wad of money from his briefcase and put it in Lu Yongcun's hand.

"This is for Lu Jie," he said solemnly.

"Where'd this money come from?"

"He's still short a television set for the bridal suite. As the person who introduced them, I thought this was the least I could do."

Old Lu lost his temper.

"I'll have nothing to do with this!" he roared.

Kang Tong-yan took the money back in chagrin.

"All right, then I'll give it directly to Lu Jie."

*

When Lu Yong-cun read the test results that Kang Tongyan brought back, he stood shaking helplessly in anger. The entire foundation for the 500-ton rapid press was below standard. The design had called for a strength rating of 200, and the actual rating was only 90. Production had been halted for seven months, and this was what they had waited for! Over a hundred tons of cement and over thirty tons of steel reinforcing rods had been wasted. Even worse was the great waste of time. Once again they would have to hack the huge foundation to pieces with picks and put in another foundation. There was no telling how many more months *that* would take!

In all this misfortune one thing was very fortunate. Imagine the consequences if Lu Yong-cun had not checked for problems with the foundation and had not asked Kang Tong-yan to have secret tests done. If they had gone their merry way and mounted the press anyway, the result could have been genuinely catastrophic. The factory manager, as enraged as Lu Yong-cun, called an urgent meeting. All supervisors and directors were to be present.

The supervisor of the Construction Section had started out as an allotment clerk. Though gaunt and monkey-like, he had a stentorian voice. Known as one of the factory's "four iron mouths," he led the Construction Section with great flair and was reputed to be one of the cleverest and most capable middle-level cadres at the plant.

But today the manager's interrogation left him dumbfounded. He had not had the slightest warning of it. He asked to see the report Lu Yong-cun was holding. One look told him the tests had been done by someone in his own section. This made him seethe inside.

"The bastards sell out their own people to help outsiders. They do sneak tests for others and don't even let me know when they find trouble!"

But by the time he had finished reading the report, he had already formulated a reply. He lifted his head and, with a sincere and comely smile on his face, spoke in a confident and unapologetic tone.

"This is not our fault. There was nothing wrong with the way we did the job. The failure in quality is due to lack of bonding strength in the cement. And I have to point out here that the residence hall now under construction is being built with the same batch of cement. If something goes wrong there in the future, my department can accept no responsibility."

See how cleanly and lightly he shifted the blame? These days personal power, and success as a cadre, require nothing more than the gift of gab. Lu Yong-cun was flabbergasted. Before he could think of a reply, someone else answered for him. This was the supervisor of the Supply Section, a tough-looking middle-aged fellow whose lips were stained from cigarettes. The factory's Supply Section was like a department store or grocery store elsewhere. People often needed its help, but it seldom needed anything from others. Because of this, people involved in supply work were puffed up with a sense of their own importance. This supervisor, who was well known throughout the factory as Lin the Big Taker, now abruptly lifted his head from the sofa and addressed the supervisor of the Construction Section coldly.

"Look, Yu," he said. "If you can't take the heat, don't try to shift it to others. You can't just bite whomever you like with that iron mouth of yours, you know! All of our cement is certified for quality. What do you mean "low bonding strength?" Why didn't you run your tests before you started the job? It was obviously good cement, but your people ruined it, and now you turn around and lash out at me!"

Immediately the meeting was in an uproar as the two antagonists went at each other. Listening to this verbal battle, a person who did not know the true story would have felt quite torn. Both sides had mastered the key to effective prevarication—if one can speak with self-righteous assurance, the validity of one's position is halfway established. The truth counts for nothing.

The factory manager's towering stature and ruddy complexion gave the impression of an expansive heart housed in a generously proportioned body. He wanted to fix the blame and wrap the case up. But when he pointed at the Construction Section, Iron Mouth Yu glibly weasled out of it. When he pressed the Supply Section to admit error, Big Taker Lin was even firmer in his denial. The manager's anxiety to settle the matter was useless; angry stares alone would not resolve it. The situation was most peculiar—a factory manager is supposed to have control over his supervisors, but certain things were now clearly beyond his control. And a supervisor's authority is supposed to be less than a factory manager's, but when these supervisors discovered areas beyond their manager's control, they ran wild. Each exploited the other's vulnerabilities. It seemed that sometimes everyone had authority and sometimes no one had it: when doing their jobs, it seemed that everyone lacked authority, or did not choose to use it; but when they were out for their private advantage, they had plenty of authority and were only too ready to use it. The complex of "connections" among the cadres was based on an interlocking, hopelessly tangled maze of utter balderdash.

Lu Yong-cun sat off to one side, helpless with anxiety. Seeing that there was really nothing he could do, the manager had no choice but to wave his hands and put a stop to the battle of tongues.

"All right, enough of this baloney. We'll look into the problem of responsibility later. First let's decide what to do about the foundation."

Lu Yong-cun winced inwardly, knowing that the manager had given in. He would not get to the bottom of a mistake even this big.

Big Taker Lin lay back on the sofa.

"Deciding what to do about the foundation doesn't involve my department," he remarked casually.

"What do you say we should do?" the manager enquired of Iron Mouth Yu.

"Beats me," said Yu nonchalantly.

Lu Yong-cun could no longer restrain himself.

"Somebody's going to have to go back to work, hack the bad foundation apart, and put in a new one!"

"Who?" asked Iron Mouth.

"Your people, of course. It was your job in the first place, and you were the ones who botched it."

The supervisor of construction glowered.

"Who cares what you think? The problem hasn't been analyzed yet. Responsibility hasn't been determined. The manager hasn't even ruled on the case. So what right does somebody like you have to jump in?"

"Well—"

The question alone was enough to fluster Lu Yong-cun. His philosophy of life was that honesty would always win out over dishonesty. But others held exactly the opposite philosophy—that dishonesty overcomes honesty. When these two philosophies crossed blades, old Lu always lost. All he could say was:

"If you don't do it, who will? Maybe you can afford the delay, but the rest of us can't. And in the long run the country will suffer."

The supervisor of the Construction Section answered him sarcastically.

"You think you're the only one worried about our country's modernization? I'm even more wrought up than you. It's just dandy to say we should do it, but right now I don't have any men free. If I'm going to hack apart the foundation, I'll have to stop work on the residence hall."

"Impossible!" interrupted the manager, worried by this threat.

"I have an idea," Iron Mouth Yu said with a laugh. "Old Lu, aren't the people in your shop standing around all day with nothing to do? Maybe you should hack it apart yourselves."

So the burden, having been shunted everywhere, was finally shunted onto the forging shop.

"That isn't our job," spluttered an outraged Lu Yong-cun. "We are iron-workers. We can't do this work!"

"What's all this 'you' and 'us' stuff? It's all for the sake of our country's Four Modernizations!" Iron Mouth Yu lay back on the sofa, pulled a filter cigarette from the factory manager's pack, and held it between his lips. "Hey, don't think only of yourself!" he said, holding out his hand.

Big Taker Lin pulled out another cigarette and tossed it to Iron Mouth.

"Look at you," he chuckled. "So stingy you ought to be called Iron Rooster instead of Iron Mouth.\fn{A note reads: *The feathers of an iron rooster cannot, of course, be plucked; thus it can pluck things from others with impunity*.} Whenever there's a meeting, you smoke nothing but *Extended Hand* brand cigarettes."

Iron Mouth Yu, never one to let someone get the better of him, returned the compliment.

"I hear from your men that you can teach an honest man to cheat his father in only three months!"

The two men lit their cigarettes and burst out laughing. The fierceness of their argument a moment ago had been bogus. The mock antagonism would be forgotten immediately after the meeting and would have no effect on their personal relationship.

Old Lu simply was not in the same league as these two supervisors. Feeling greatly pained, he suddenly recalled the question Kang Tong-yan had raised not long before. Who *did* this mining machine plant belong to? Among the manager and supervisors sitting before him, there was not one man who regarded the factory as his own. A serious problem had arisen, and they were not even worried!

"Don't tell me this plant has become mine by default!" old Lu mused.

No, the plant belonged to the Party. But where was the Party? Was the Party a real thing or an illusion? The Party had been deceived. These people were taking advantage of the Party! Not one of them viewed the Party as more important than himself. It was the Party that had entrusted them with their positions, but they had played games with the Party and had ruined the foundation. They had turned into out-and-out liars. Oh, Xiao-qing, weren't these the very answers you were looking for?

Lu Yong-cun had always lacked the ability to make quick, penetrating judgments, but today he suddenly understood many things he had not dared to confront in the past. He realized that when the social environment calls for certain characteristics in people, those characteristics will naturally develop. If there were no need for buck-passing and wrangling, society would not produce slick characters. But when the need is there, people naturally learn the ropes. Just look at his own son, Lu Jie, who was right in there learning to be like Big Taker Lin.

The factory manager thought things over for a moment, then settled the matter.

"It's probably best if your shop goes ahead and tears up the bad foundation," he said to Lu Yong-cun. "You can send your men over to the Construction Section to learn how it's done."

*

Lu Yong-cun returned to his shop, called the workers together in front of the 500-ton rapid press, and assigned duties for demolishing the foundation. The workers were indignant, not only because tearing apart the foundation was dirty, tiring, and extremely difficult work, but also because it was so absurd that they were the ones to do it.

The Construction Section had committed an error so grave that their supervisor should have been dismissed and their bonuses withheld to compensate the forging shop for its losses. But look how things had turned out! Not only had the Construction Section evaded all responsibility; they had even ended up being bailed out by the forging shop. First the forging shop's bonuses had been withheld, and then this highly undesirable job had been assigned to them. Were the shopworkers supposed to accept this gleefully?

Lu Yong-cun understood the workers' dissatisfaction but had no power to change anything. The basic problem had been developing over the past ten or even twenty years, and now it all seemed to become old Lu's personal burden. The workers were complaining angrily when someone suddenly noticed that Director Lu was sitting white-faced and crumpled over inside the foundation pit.

"Director Lu!"

The workers rushed to his side. Lu Yong-cun himself did not know what had happened. At first there had been only a feeling of distress, then difficulty in breathing, then a series of wringing chest pains that gradually overcame him. Xi Xiao-qing and a number of young workers hastened to prop him up. His blood pressure and heart had never shown any signs of abnormality, but today he was suddenly being stricken by a heart attack. A frightening shadow passed across his face. Spasm after spasm contorted his facial muscles as he forced himself to bear the intense pain.

Old Lu urged everyone back to work, saying that he would be all right. But Xi Xiao-qing, who wanted to stay and take care of him, refused to go. Suddenly thinking of his son's marriage, old Lu felt he had to draw the girl aside.

"My boy Lu Jie is an ass," he whispered. "He's not good enough for you—"

Old Lu wanted to go on, but when he saw the color rush to Xiao-qing's face and the tears well in her eyes, he could not.

A moment later old Lu, obviously fighting pain, spoke to Xiao-qing as firmly as he could manage.

"I want you to organize a Youth League rush squad who will set themselves a goal of hacking this ruined foundation apart within one month."

As he spoke he pulled a roll of bills from his pocket and pressed it into Xiaoqing's hand.

"Use this money for bonuses. If it's not enough, I'll give you more on my next payday—"

Xiao-qing felt a lump in her throat and could not hold back her tears. She handed the roll of bills back to old Lu.

"Don't worry, Director Lu," she sobbed. "I promise we'll finish the job on time without a cent of bonus money."

"No, take it. This is tough work. And it's all my fault. I didn't do my job well, and everybody else has to suffer for it!" Old Lu insistently stuffed the money into Xiao-qing's hand.

When the ironworkers heard about this, they flocked around old Lu in consternation. They spoke in quavering voices.

"You still don't really know what makes us tick, Director Lu. What we say is just a lot of talk, but when there's work to do, we do it. We were shooting our mouths off just now but not because of you. What we can't stand is this crazy business where right and wrong is for the birds and all that matters is somebody's goddamn mouth. Please don't take it personally! If it'll help get production going, we'll do the job even though the Construction Section won't. And when we finish we'll drag them to the authorities and get justice! All of us'll join the rush squad, and we'll hack in shifts around the clock! We'll do just fine without bonuses. We don't work just for money, you know!"

Lu Yong-cun laughed in delight and kept laughing until teardrops rolled down his face. Then another terrible burst of pain nearly made him pass out. For the workers, the sight of great beads of sweat on their director's drawn face was as painful as a whiplashing. The workers were starting to lift him up to take him to the hospital when Director Lu struggled to raise his head and fixed them with a wide-eyed angry stare.

"Put me down, you numbskulls!" he roared. "I'm not sick. It's our shop and our factory that are really sick—sick at their very foundation!"

A flurry of voices rushed to comfort him.

"Take it easy. We'll tear apart the bad foundation, Mr. Director!"

Someone brought a canvas-backed chair, and they helped him to sit down in it.

"Watch us start in right now; we'll take care of this foundation!"

A ray of hope swept across Lu Yong-cun's face.

"The factory is our country's foundation; we can't go on mismanaging it this way."

He was pronouncing each word slowly and solemnly.

"We must not plant the seeds of future disaster for our country. The foundation—the foundation—"

When the workers said they would work, they meant it. The forging shop leaped instantly into feverish activity. Strange though it seems, on that day the ironworkers were doing construction work more efficiently than experienced construction workers. Xi Xiao-qing rounded up young workers from the Youth League, who looked like little tigers as they busily carried heavy loads on shoulder poles. When Kang Tong-yan came along carrying his briefcase, he could not believe the bustle before his eyes. He glanced sheepishly at the director. Old Lu pointed to a crowbar on the floor.

"What are you waiting for?" he shouted rousingly. "See that crowbar?"

With a quizzical squint of his small eyes, Kang Tong-yan separated his thin lips just enough to pronounce the words:

"OK, OK."

Then he threw down his briefcase, picked up the crowbar, and without a backward glance strode toward the people who were attacking the bad foundation.

81.130 1,230 Spots\fn{by Show Foong aka Chang Show-foong (1941-)} Tongshan, Kiangsu Province, China (F) 3

It was agreed that he should wait for Wang Cheng-fu by this pond.

The pond, with some geese on it, is located at the entrance to the hospital. In the last ten years, Tang Ta-sheng has come in and out of this hospital at least fifty times—if not a hundred. Strange to say, he has never thought of sitting by this pond. Now that he is doing so, he truly feels it is a nice pond. New Year's is approaching, yet the weather is surprisingly warm. By the pond stands a boy feeding golden carps, while his father is taking pictures nearby. A pregnant woman is strolling. A thin and frail patient on a wheel-chair pushed by someone gawks at the noisy sparrows in a banyan tree. The patient is rather amicable for he smiles at everyone he sees and, with his cheeks so emaciated, he seems to grin from ear to ear. Somehow, however, he looks the picture of pity.

Tang takes another look at the woman, the pregnant woman, and wonders if she will give birth before or after New Year's Day. If before, the baby will have been born in the year of the pig; if after, in the year of the rat. Man's fate is preordained. It's unfortunate that his own mother died early, for not only is he unsure of the exact hour of his birth, but there are two versions of the date: Father said it was the day before Mid-autumn, but Third Aunt said it was after. He used to hate it when some serious matter came up: had he known the hour and date of his birth, he could have at least consulted a fortune-teller. In recent years, however, as his life has become uneventful, his feelings have been unmoved. Rather like a familiar opera whose ending one already knows, the scenario of his fate can be ignored.

It is said that an exceptionally able fortune-teller can trace back an event and, on the basis of your life to date, determine the exact time of your birth. But now there is really no need for this. Half a year ago, in fact, one thing was awaiting his decision; today, however, the moment he stepped out of the doctor's office, his mind was almost made up. And once this matter is settled, nothing serious can happen the rest of his life.

Wang Cheng-fu has not come yet. He is quite annoying. He is actually a little hard of hearing; nothing serious in a sixty-eight-year-old man. But he is so dumb that one has to mind him all the time, or he will even forget to eat. There are more Chinese characters on Wang's body; so, on this first day of treatment, he will have to receive at least five hundred laser spots. Tang himself got five hundred and forty-eight the first time. The nurse had a sweet way of cajoling, calling him "Uncle" all the time.

"Uncle," she said, "you're in luck! All these five hundred and forty-eight spots were paid for by the VACRS [Vocational Assistance Commission for Retired Servicemen]. If you had to pay for them, each spot being worth one hundred and twelve NT dollars, it would cost you sixty grand and more for today's treatment alone!"

He forced a smile. The nurse was so young there was no use explaining to her: who needs this kind of luck? It all happened in 1953. Maybe even her mother was not born yet, let alone herself. What did she know?

Five hundred and forty-eight laser spots, and every one of them hurt. The doctor compared it to the sting from a snapping rubber band. All right, so it's like being snapped by a rubber band; to be snapped five hundred and forty-eight times at a stretch is sure to hurt. The doctor was also a youngster, all smiles:

"It hurt when you got your tattoos. To have them removed should be no great deal."

Strangely—maybe because he was young then—the tattooing didn't seem to hurt much. Three pins, bunched together, were dipped into dye and pricked the skin.

"Kill Zhu and Weed out Mao" on the left arm. "Anti-Communist; Anti-Russia" on the right arm. On the chest

was a map and a large flag; on the back, “Succeed or Die.”

The afternoon sun is warm. The white geese glide leisurely. He counts nine of them, but there are several others under the azalea trees by the pond, so he isn’t sure about their number. Somehow, a lonely mallard dashes and roams among them—a bizarre picture.

A breeze blows, and some leaves fall from the banyan tree. He remembers his advice to Wang Cheng-fu yesterday:

“It doesn’t hurt, and it’s not ugly. Laser, Ruby Laser. Scientific invention of the Americans! Remarkable! One machine costs over four million NT dollars! What a great opportunity! It’s free, and it doesn’t hurt. After the treatment, you rub on some medication, and in three days you can take a shower. Wang Cheng-fu, don’t be stubborn. If this weren’t something good, would I urge it on you? I myself have been through eleven treatments. Tomorrow I’ll go for the twelfth, then it’ll be all over. Even the appointment I’ve made for you. Be good and go for the treatment, and when you return to your native land next year, nobody’ll give you any trouble. Doesn’t hurt—I’ll be damned if I lie. After the treatment, it looks like a few plum-shaped white dots have fallen on you. It really doesn’t hurt.”

In fact, it hurts, of course, and much more on the breast and the back than on the arms. But Wang Cheng-fu is the stubborn type. While everyone else has revisited the mainland, he dares not go. Sometimes, when homesick enough, he would cry over the letter:

“But no, I can’t. Communists are ever so treacherous. I have on me seven national flags, plus ‘Persist in Anti-Communist Conviction; Determined to Revenge and Recover Lost Country,’ plus ‘Ba-ge-tu-tai-wan.’ How can they forgive me?”

Wang appears to be confused now, but little did Tang think that he would have some English tattooed at the time: Wang cannot even read the alphabet, and he was tattooed with some English words! Ai! this Wang Cheng-fu-he is the butt of many jokes. One time, from each of his trouser legs was pulled some white stuff, which, upon examination, turned out to be long-legged tight cotton underwear. He said he was quite sure that in the morning he had put on the underwear before he put on his trousers, but obviously that was not the case. And it was already noon when he discovered the slip. Early that morning, Tang went to send two hundred US dollars to his grandson, who was getting married. Upon his return, he found Wang in a very embarrassing strait. He was irritated, but he did not know what to do with this man.

That such a man should, years ago, have been fashionable enough to be tattooed with English words! “Ba-ge-tu-tai-wan,” they say, means “Return to Taiwan.” Tang cannot help laughing when he thinks of this. Wang Cheng-fu has the gift to turn every language—including English and irreverent Taiwanese—into Szechwanese. How does one say “Ba-ge-tu-tai-wan” in English, Tang wonders?

Wang is still not here. Tang is curious to know how many laser spots he’s got today. As Wang dreads pain, Tang took it upon himself to tell the doctor to take care of his two arms only today, leaving the chest and the back for next time. It’s close to New Year; let him have a nice holiday.

Tang’s own first treatment was on the arms too. Five hundred and forty-eight spots. A month later, during the second treatment on the chest and back, he received six hundred and eighty-two spots. After that, he has come once a month, treating in turn the chest or the back. He kept it firmly in mind: he had altogether one thousand two hundred and thirty little holes. Translated into money, it comes to one hundred and thirty-seven thousand seven hundred and sixty NT dollars. With each hole treated six times, the cost amounts to eight hundred and twenty-six thousand five hundred and sixty dollars.

“I am thus a man of wealth. The ‘nothingness’ of my body is worth close to a million dollars—at the rate of the Veterans General Hospital. In a beauty parlor, they charge five hundred per spot, which means four million in total!”

Occasionally there is news about kidnapping in the paper. The kidnappers often demand three to five million dollars or even tens of millions. He has never understood how a person can be worth that much.

At the age of sixty-nine—wow! He has never in all his life been so valuable! The tattooing itself did not enhance his worth, but its removal costs a million dollars. Ha! Everything in life is preordained. He’s heard of a chap who had the “Song of Righteousness” tattooed all over his body and who also went for its removal. He wonders how many prickings that man had to endure. The fair skin he got in return must be worth at least three million dollars. What he cannot understand is why should the “Song of Righteousness” be removed. How could its author Wen Tien-hsiang [1236- 1282 A.D.] have offended the communists?

Forty-odd years ago, when they courageously endured the pain of piercing pins, who would have expected this ill luck in old age? *Ai*, there is no reasoning out this life. There’s providence in everything.

The Korean War broke out on the 25th of June, 1950. Tang went in October with a rifle made by Han-yang Arsenal—junk from the Nationalist Army days. He had not yet had the chance to fire a shot when the American shells boomed and he was captured.

The two sides exchanged POWs. What puzzled him was that five Chinese POWs would be exchanged for one U.S. POW. For the first time it occurred to him that Americans were worth more: they were five to one against the Chinese.

Lives of the Chinese were worthless! In the battlefields of the Korean War, soldiers in their twenties and thirties died one on top of the other. The youngest were only fifteen or sixteen. After three months' training and barely able to manage the bayonet, they were driven to the battlegrounds. God only knew that hand-to-hand combat drills were of no avail, since the Americans only fought from a distance. They never sent people over for hand-to-hand combat. Thrust!-Hey!-Thrust!-Hey!-Hey-Hey-Hey!-Thrust!-Hey, who's going to use the bayonet?

Shrapnel flew his way and pierced his back. It was taken out, leaving a scar the size of a rice bowl. For him, that was all the Korean War-memories the size of a rice bowl. How much is a person worth, after all?

How can some people be worth a hundred million dollars? But that's the price some kidnappers ask.

They say some people's dress is worth ten million. He also has something on him that's worth eight hundred thousand. Unfortunately, that eight hundred thousand was spent so that people *cannot* see the thing on him, not so that they can *see* it. Eight hundred thousand dollars for something not to be seen—he cannot begin to explain it.

They say that it is after the Korean War that Lin Biao fell afoul of Mao Tse-tung. Many people died in the War—perhaps two million. Very few survived. In his company, all of the 180 but him died. After the war, Mao incredibly got mad at Lin:

"Why bring people back? I fought the Korean War in order to annihilate the Chinese population. Why not fight until everyone has died?"

To have his left arm tattooed "Kill Zhu and Weed out Mao" was his wish.

"Why, no longer Anti-Communist?" The young doctor joked with him lightly, perhaps to make his patient relax a bit, Tang thought.

"There's no need for me to fight against them," he said with confidence. "They're fighting against each other now!"

"And no more Kill Zhu and Weed out Mao, either? Well, Mao means Mao Tse-tung, but who's this Zhu?"

"Zhu means Zhu De, then their Commander-in-Chief," he said. "There's no need for me to kill them now. They've both reported to Yama.\fn{The Chinese god of Hell.} Saved me the trouble."

The doctor wore a pair of gold-rimmed glasses. He had a baby face, looked just over twenty. What does this little brat know?

Tang would never say anything to disgrace his tattoos. Unlike Cheng Chia-hsiao.

One day, Cheng was watching people fly kites on the grounds of Sun Yat-sen Memorial Hall when he came across a member of the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP). The latter stopped him and asked:

"Hey you, you the 'Anti-Communist and Anti-Russia,' what are you doing in Taiwan? Go, go and recover your Mainland! Why do you stand here and eat Taiwan's rice?"

Pulling away, Cheng shouted back: "I didn't do it of my own free will, they forced it on me! They forced me to be tattooed."

Tang is somewhat angry at Cheng. That good-for-nothing. What could the damned DPP member have done to you anyway? Besides, he had no tattoo on his face; how could you know he was a DPP member? And even if he was, so what? What was it to the DPP if you wanted to pierce your own skin? Moreover, if we had not fought the Communists in those years, we would have all ended up as subjects of Chairman Mao. Would you sons of bitches then be able to talk such nonsense with your stomachs full?

In the days gone by, fourteen thousand of us had a title "Anti-Communist Freedom Seekers." A movie was made of our story, entitled *Fourteen Thousand Witnesses.* On the day of our arrival in Taiwan, we were decorated with colorful silk stripes and paraded. There was a large turnout everywhere we went. Now, as soon as Ku Cheng-kang died, the 1-23 Freedom Day goes unobserved.\fn{A note reads: *Ku Cheng-kang was in his lifetime a staunch anti-Communist who presided over many a ceremony in celebration of Freedom Day, which falls on January 23rd (1-23 for short)*.} Speeches are no longer given. Moreover, in front of the memorial hall of our nation's founding father\fn{Chiang Kai-shek (1887-1975) is meant, the man who re-established the government of the Republic of China on Taiwan after the Communists expelled it from the Chinese mainland in 1949.} should turn up in
broad daylight that mother-fucking whoreson! Damned disgusting! Even more disgusting is the incredible fact that the good-for-nothing Cheng Chia-hsiao should say that he was forced. This is the greatest of scandals! Cheng

Chia-hsiao, fuck your shameless ancestors!

"Were you willing then, or were you coerced?"

Tang was surprised that the doctor should ask such a question. That was the second time he went for the laser treatment. His chest was being torn and heated by the national flag. He could smell a slight burning, and all of a sudden he found the smell familiar. Recovering himself, he realized that it was the smell of the battlefield in the past; flesh scorched by fire—that was the smell.

So the Korean War had continued to this day for its finale; the epilogue was taking place forty-four years later.

"I wouldn't say I was forced," he replied, his chest hurting more and more. "Fourteen thousand have been tattooed, wouldn't it have been a shame not to go along?"

"Ah," said the doctor, adjusting the blue eye-shield he wore to protect himself from the laser beams while operating—rather like Batman or something on TV. "So it's peer pressure."

"What beer?" he didn't understand. "We had no beer then."

"Peer. People of the same group. They form a binding force among themselves."

The doctor seemed to have some learning. What he said Tang could only half-comprehend and he had no intention to delve into the subject. It hurt a lot on the chest, but you're not supposed to scream—that would be too womanish. But from the corner of his eyes seeped some tears, after all.

The previous occasion he shed tears was five years ago, the first time he returned to his native home. When his wife learned that he had not remarried in Taiwan, she walked twenty kilometers to meet him. No sooner had she entered the door than she dropped upon her knees:

"I have not remained your wife, I have let you down."

Unable to make her stand up, he had to kneel down also:

"Leave off such talk. I'm more than grateful to you—our son and daughter are both grown up—and there's even a grandson. I'm indebted to you for shouldering the responsibility alone."

He gave his wife a heart-shaped necklace. She neither accepted nor declined it, but simply said:

"It's inconvenient for me. If I wear it the other side might be suspicious. Rather give it to Xiao-hong. To see Xiao-hong wear it is like wearing it myself. I was also eighteen when I married you."

Xiao-hong is their granddaughter, the exact picture of his wife when she was young.

After that he had not shed tears.

It was late spring. It was not too hot to wear long-sleeved shirt, and in this way he was able to cover up the characters on his arms. In the evening, he went to the kitchen to take a bath. His third younger brother poured water for him. The dim light in the kitchen was only about five watts.

"Oh my!" his brother exclaimed. "Second Elder Brother, whatever happened to your back—such a messy color?"

Tang didn't expect his brother to be so sharp-eyed, and he had to tell the truth. Third Brother is a low-ranking cadre. When he heard it he looked troubled:

"This thing is not serious—but then it can be somewhat serious. It's all right for family members to see it, but if it is seen by others, there will be trouble. I think we ought to be careful. 'Communists are like the moon'—you've heard the expression?—'they are different on the first day and on the fifteenth of the month.'"

Since then, he has not returned to his Mainland home.

What the hell is with Wang Cheng-fu? Is he not finished with the treatment?

Tang's son wrote him a letter, asking him to go home for good. Having given it serious consideration for a year, he decided to have the tattoo removed by laser first.

Wang Cheng-fu is a little on the dumb side. Luckily, he is also somewhat timid and has caused no big trouble, unlike Li Chih-hsin who almost got himself killed. That was eight or nine years ago. On someone's advice he went to the proprietor of a beauty parlor and got hold of material used for perms. With it he corroded his own skin. As a result, the characters still remained, but his skin was all burns and welts. It was a terrible sight. Li was severely reprimanded by the medical officer.

And then there is Lao Chiu-chung, another person of fantastical notions. It happened also about ten years ago. He missed his native home so much he almost went crazy, but back then there was no such thing as laser treatment. So he went to a tattoo shop to turn the Chinese characters into green dragons. Having to fit in with the original characters, however, the dragons did not look good. Mischievous tongues played on his name, nicknaming him "Lao Chiu-chung," which means "Lao the Dragons," punning on "Lousy Dragons." Tang has seen Lao's dragons, but because they are all contorted and mixed up, he does not know how many there are. But at least Lao has returned home; his son has even come and visited him in Taiwan! After a while Lao received laser treatment,

but it required a bit of persuasion. The VACRS has been subsidizing the removal of such tattoos as "Loyalty to Party and Country" and "Liberate the Mainland," but it has never seen tattooed dragons. It was only with much explanation and even the personal testimony of Lao's former commanding officer that the origin of the his dragons was clarified. Since the number of his punctures had increased, he now had to endure more laser spots which hurt him so much that he clenched his teeth tightly. After the treatment, the dark chest looked as if covered with a protective plate.

"Mr. Lao," the doctor said jokingly, "with these dragons all over your body, you look like a gangster. Are you a member of the Ching Pang or the Hung Pang?"

"Doctor, the gang we joined in those days had very strict rules," replied Lao. You know, Lao had had middle school education, and possessed a quick mind. "We had to be tattooed in order to join. And our gang is neither the Ching Pang nor the Hung Pang, but is called the KMT."

When Lao returned from the treatment, he told the story to everyone.

Wang Cheng-fu is still not here. Tang Ta-sheng, tired of sitting, stands up and moves around. He dares not go far, however, and soon finds himself singing a song on a Szechwan tune:

The old don't have to care,
The young don't have to care,
It's the in-between alone
Who are given the scare.

At the end of his song, he laughs—to have remembered the conscription song of more than forty years ago! "The old" refers to those aged from forty to fifty, and "the young" refers to those aged thirteen and fourteen. He was twenty-three then, exactly one of the "in-betweens" and scared to death. He was of course conscripted.

The old don't have to care,
The young don't have to care,
It's the in-between alone
Who are given the scare.

Maybe because he feels good, he sings the song again. At this moment, a slender middle-aged man comes along and gives him a set of leaflets:

"Sir, Lin and Hau for President and VP; New Party for the National Assembly, please. Thank you."

Tang is taken by surprise. What? This is the Veterans General Hospital, the stronghold of the KMT. How come this New Party member turns up here?

He is still wondering when he sees Wang Cheng-fu looking around timidly.

"I'm here!" he shouted.

Wang Cheng-fu is a short guy. When he hears Tang's voice he turns all smiles, and waddles on his two short legs toward Tang.

"It didn't hurt much, but it hurt some!" How rare for Wang to utter a clear sentence.

"The doctor says you're OK now, you've graduated, you don't have to come any more. Next month you'll have new delicate skin on you! But I'm undone, my, suffering is only just beginning!"

The two of them make for the gate, to take the bus to San-hsia, where they will transfer to Pai-chi.

Tang has a feeling of hollowness. Something like an empty stomach or dizzy head. But it's neither. Everything's gone, he suddenly realizes. Gone is "Kill Zhu and Weed out Mao," gone is "Anti-Communist and Anti-Russia," gone is the map, gone is the national flag, gone is "Succeed or Die." From now on everything is wiped out, as if a ring worn for forty years were suddenly removed, leaving nothing but a circle of whiteness.

Whiteness of complete emptiness.

Whiteness of complete nothingness.

Where are those blood-dripping oaths? The doctor says they are calcified, absorbed. But where do they go after absorption? Into the blood, or the marrow?

Subconsciously, he touches the bowl-size scar. It's still there, knotted like the bark of a tree. He feels a little more secure.

"The doctor tells me to come in two months," says Wang Cheng-fu. Somehow he has become a chatterbox today and would not cease talking. Maybe one is less dumb when hurting. "By then you'll probably be gone to the mainland for good. But I've got everything memorized—how to make the transfer next time, I've got everything

memorized."

He speaks like a good boy. They get on the bus at the stop. Before the bus starts, Tang gets closer to Wang and shouts in his ear:

"Next time—I'll come with you again!"

"What?" Wang shouts back. "Didn't you say you would go home and stay with your grandson for good?"

"We'll talk about 'staying for good' later. I know what to do now. Next month I'll go visit them, and give them my family support allowance. I'll return in ten days. I've thought it all out. The rest of my life I'll just stay in San-hsia—over there it's called San-xia, and here it's also San-hsia. Oh, yes, you must remember clearly that San-hsia is the last stop, from there you transfer to Pai-chi. Get off at Pai-chi and walk—to Home of the Honored Citizens. Don't forget!"

"Don't worry, I won't forget—San-hsia is the last stop."

The bus moves. Both men are tired, and both feel a strange pain. The "Ba-ge-tu-tai-wan" on Wang Cheng-fu's right arm leans against the completely erased "Kill Zhu and Weed out Mao" on Tang Ta-sheng's left arm. To the rhythmical rocking of the bus, the two arms rub against each other all the way. Finally, their heads resting on each other, the two men fall asleep.

183.179 Excerpt from **Building Bridges: The Life & Times Of Richard Charles Lee**\fn{by Vivienne Poy (1941-)} Hong Kong, China (F) 10

Hong Kong, at the turn of the century, was a city of palaces and more magnificent than the hillside Italian city of Genoa. Above the city of Victoria was a suburb hanging in the clouds of the Peak where the wealthy British lived.

This was how American Eliza Ruhamah Scidmore described Hong Kong in her book *China: Long-lived Empire*, published in 1900. A new hospital for Europeans had just opened on the Peak, and a newspaper, the *South China Morning Post*, had been launched. Only Europeans were permitted to live on the Peak, with the exception of Sir Robert Hotung's family.

At the foot of the hill, the first trams were put into service in 1904, all single-deckers, open to the elements. The carriages that used to fill the streets had vanished, and the coach houses of great mansions stood empty. Everyone went about by rickshaw or sedan chair, and carts were pulled by oxen or water buffalo. One could hear the sighs of coolies as they made their way along the streets, shoulders straining under their heavy loads on bamboo poles. The motor car had yet to reach Hong Kong.

The population of the Colony had reached over 325,000, the majority being Chinese. Water shortages were a perennial problem and new and bigger reservoirs were being planned. In 1901, the drought was so severe that water had to be shipped from the New Territories to Victoria.

The port of Hong Kong was expanding, and huge warehouses, known as *godowns*, lined the Kowloon waterfront. The number of ships entering the harbour increased 60 per cent from the previous ten years. Industries such as sugar refineries, flour mills, cotton mills and cement works had sprung up. Hong Kong Land was progressing with its land reclamation in Central (commercial section of Victoria), and the area was dotted with new four or five-storey buildings. Businesses were controlled by the *hongs*, such as Jardine Matheson and Butterfield & Swire in shipping, the Hong Kong and Shanghai Bank in banking, and John Swire's *Taikoo* in sugar refin[ing].

While the *hongs* were investing their opium fortunes in legitimate businesses, the government derived an annual revenue of about $2 million from the sale of the opium monopoly to the highest bidders, despite the strong opposition to the drug in Britain. Opium smoking was so popular among the Chinese that it was estimated that one in ten men was an opium smoker. Even though there was a gradual reduction of *divans* (establishments where Chinese men gathered to smoke opium) and no new licences were sold by the Hong Kong government after 1910, the sale of opium remained legal until 1945, and licences continued to be sold to the highest bidder by the Portuguese government in Macao.\fn{A Portuguese colony just across an intervening bay from Hong Kong:H}

The population of Hong Kong lived in two separate communities, the Chinese and the non-Chinese, each having very little to do with the other except at work. The Chinese men wore their hair in *queues* (pigtails) in Manchu style, and few dressed in Western clothes. Most of them wore mandarin jackets and pants or long gowns, with soft black shoes. They did not take part in foreign sport and none went swimming. The vast majority of them had no contact with Europeans at all. The old men spent time taking their caged birds for an airing outdoors, and the youngsters liked to kick a shuttlecock or fly a kite. In the evening, one could hear the clatter of *mah jong*, the

favourite game of the Chinese.

As for the Chinese women, with the exception of petty hawkers, sampan women, scavengers and seamstresses, none went out onto the streets. The upper-class women had bound feet and never left their family compounds. The poorer classes wore cotton clothes like pyjamas, while the upper-class ladies wore beautifully embroidered pants, skirts and mandarin jackets.

Despite the description of Hong Kong as a city of palaces, it was, for the Chinese population, a very unhygenic place in which to live. Plague was endemic and malaria was widespread. Officers of the sanitary teams charged with rat-proofing houses and spraying mosquito breeding grounds were discovered, by an enquiry in 1907, to have made small fortunes by evading the law, in collusion with property owners and building contractors. Sanitary problems magnified racial prejudice, and demands were made for separate residential areas to be set aside for Westerners and Chinese. Following the creation of the Peak reservation, an ordinance in 1902 set aside an area in Kowloon for the Europeans, since the government believed the Chinese could not be trusted to keep the mosquito population down. However, exceptions were made by Foreign Secretary Joseph Chamberlain, who, on approval of a separate area for "people of clean habits," added that Chinese of good standing should be permitted residence there.

The Chinese population had come a long way since Hong Kong became a British colony in 1841. Many of its enterprising members had become wealthy. This new merchant class was recognized by the colonial government as leaders in their community due to their commercial success and their leadership in organizations such as the Tung Wah Hospital, a charitable organization which became the centre of Chinese power in the Colony. Despite the segregation in most schools, Queen's College encouraged the enrollment of boys of different nationalities. Chinese students from this school had the advantage of learning Western culture and the Western way of doing business.

This was the Hong Kong into which Father was born.

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On March 7, 1905, concubine Cheung Mun Hee (Second Lady) of Grandfather Lee Hysan, gave birth to a son, Ming Chak, my father. He was not only the eldest son, but also the first surviving child in the family, as an older sister born to Grandfather's wife (Grandmother) died soon after birth. When Second Lady became pregnant, there was great excitement because Grandfather had been married for seven years and still did not have a child. A European midwife was arranged for the delivery, since Grandfather didn't feel that he could take any more chances after the death of his first child. It was believed that European midwives were cleaner and more knowledgeable than their Chinese counterparts.

When Father was born, Grandfather was delighted that he finally had an heir. Father's birth was also regarded as a lucky omen for the family, for from then on, Grandfather's import-export business flourished. His company, Nam Hung Shipping Co., carried goods from China to Hong Kong, Singapore, Malaya and Rangoon. He became a well-known and respected merchant of the Nam Pak Hong Business Association in Hong Kong, an association of merchants who traded between China and Southeast Asia.

According to Chinese custom, when a concubine has a son and the wife does not, the son is taken from his birth mother to live with the wife, in order to bring her luck and fertility. This was the case with Father, who grew up in Grandmother's household. He did indeed bring her luck, for after the birth of a second son by Second Lady, Grandmother gave birth to two sons and two daughters.

Father had a very special relationship with Grandmother because he grew up in her household, and she came to treat him as her own. She respected his judgment and that became important for the entire family after Grandfather died.

Father was a healthy child, alert and sturdy, with a narrow face and a small stature like his mother, Second Lady. He had strong, square hands, and his skin was as dark and shiny as Grandfather's. He probably wore his hair in a queue when he was very young, as Grandfather did, since it wasn't until the Revolution of 1911 that Chinese men abandoned this custom.\fn{They were required by the Manchu Dynasty as a sign of their subserviancy to the Ruling House:H}

As a small child, Father lived in Hong Kong and sometimes visited his grandparents, my great-grandparents, in China. At the time, Great-grandparents lived in our ancestral village, Garlieu, in the south of Guangdong province. Father once told me that Great-grandparents used to have only two meals a day, one early in the morning and the other between four or five in the afternoon. It seemed very strange to me, but that was the habit of the Chinese people who lived in the countryside. I'm sure it was also because food was scarce. As Grandfather became more prosperous, it was rumoured that bandits intended to kidnap his parents, so he built a house for them

in Sunwui city, not far from Garlieu.

Being the eldest son, Father was not only important to Grandfather, he was doted on by Great-grandparents. As a show of affection, Great- grandfather used to feed Father all the time when they were together, and even stuffed chicken legs in his mouth when he was asleep! He also told Father about the dreadful trip in a sailing ship across the Pacific to the Golden Mountain (San Francisco) during the gold rush, and the life of Chinese people in America. Even though Grandfather was the second son of Great-grandparents, Father's position in the family was considered so important that, when Great-grandfather died, and his body travelled in a boat along the river that ran past Garlieu village, Father sat in the front of the boat and Grandfather sat at the back, with the coffin in the middle. This was how the body was transported to the burial place according to our village custom.

Because of repeated outbreaks of plague in Hong Kong, Grandfather moved his family to Macao\fn{At that time, a Portuguese colony near Hong Kong} when Father was five years old. Most of the family remained there until 1918, although Grandfather continued to work in Hong Kong. As a well-educated man, he was concerned about the education of his children, both sons and daughters, so he hired a well-known Chinese teacher, Chen Zibao, to teach them.

As time went on, Grandfather invested in many successful businesses, and became one of the wealthiest men in the Colony. He took a second and later on a third concubine (Third Lady and Fourth Lady). According to Chinese custom in those days, it was considered a sign of wealth to have many concubines and children. The number of children in the family increased, and Grandfather was good to them all. Realizing the importance of an English education for his children in the British Colony, Grandfather brought Father back to Hong Kong from Macao, and enrolled him in Queen's College, one of the best-known colonial schools at that time, regarded as the Harrow or Eton of the Far East.

Grandfather had learned English in San Francisco as a child, during the years he lived there with his father. After they returned to China, Great-grandfather had the foresight to enroll Grandfather in Queen's College in Hong Kong in order to continue his English education, where he was able to make friends who became important to him in later life. He wanted the same advantages for his children.

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Since he was well acquainted with the English educational system, Grandfather thought it best for his children to send them to school in England so that they could be totally immersed in the English tradition. At the same time, they would have the opportunity to make friends who could help them later on in life. In 1917, at the age of twelve, Father and his third brother were sent to study in England with a governess. They lived at the home of a Mr. Churchill, and were tutored there in preparation for university entrance. It was then that they acquired their English names: Father became Richard Charles and Third Uncle became Harold. Several years later, two younger sisters were also sent to England for schooling.

Once the children went to England, they were expected to stay until they finished their education. The boys were told before they left that if they married non-Chinese while they were away, they would be automatically disinherited.

Father was fond of Mr. Churchill, whom he referred to as "Old Man Churchill" to us, and with whom he continued to correspond until Mr. Churchill died. Even when Mr. Churchill began to lose his sight, he continued to write to Father, with some help, I am sure. I remember seeing his scribbles.

By the 1920s, it was fashionable for the more adventurous and wealthy Chinese parents to send their children abroad to school—to France, Germany, England and japan. These students were usually of university age. Most of the Chinese students from Hong Kong went to England. The only mode of travel was by ship via the Suez Canal, and the long trip took weeks.

In a letter to his old friend and neighbour in Macao, Father wrote about the Chinese he met:

> Since my arrival in England, I have been well. Generally, the climate and life here are quite suitable to the Chinese … In the town of Oxford, there were less than ten Chinese students including myself … There are two Chinese in town, by the names of Zhou and Chen, from the village of Hoiping,\fn{A village in South China} who are to be admired. They arrived here, by mistake, eleven years ago. They wanted to go to London, Ontario, Canada, to make a living. However, the tickets that were bought for them were incorrect, and neither knew that there were two Londons in the world.
>
> When they arrived in London, England, no relatives came to meet their boat, and they knew something was wrong. Not knowing whether to laugh or to cry, they realized they had arrived in a different part of the world, with no friends and with very little money.
>
> A few days later, they made their way to Oxford, and opened a laundry establishment. They worked hard and had become very well known for the best laundry service. Almost all the students in Oxford send their laundry to them.
>
> It shows that, for those who are abroad, with hard work, they will succeed. Being very busy, I am sorry I don't see

them as often as I would like, and have forgotten their first names. These two can put many present-day overseas Chinese students to shame.

He went on to say that despite the importance the parents put on education, many of the Chinese students in England were not really interested in studying:

> The majority of the present-day overseas Chinese students have no idea how difficult it is to make a living. They are generally lazy, and are constantly complaining how difficult the subjects are, so they often skip the examinations. But, fearing rebukes from their parents, they enroll into colleges that do not have examinations and anyone can be accepted. There are many such colleges in both towns of Oxford and Cambridge. These students will write home to say that they have entered Oxford or Cambridge Universities, and their parents would not know any better. Their parents will send them money which they will spend lavishly. In three years' time, they will buy a degree to return to China. There is usually a lot of fanfare when these students return home, but if they are ever asked, by someone who knows, which university they graduated from, Oxford or Cambridge, they would be in trouble …
>
> China is so weak among so many strong nations, if the younger generation has no ability, how can we save China? These students are not capable of thinking. There are so many in China who want to study, but their families cannot afford to send them abroad. Those who have the chance to go abroad and not study hard are to be pitied.

And he concluded on a personal note:

> Oxfordshire has the climate that makes people tired. Many go to the seaside during the summer to avoid illness. I will be going away and will return to Oxford at the end of the summer.

We can tell from this letter that Father's lifelong wish to help China and the Chinese people was already emerging.

In 1923, Father entered Pembroke College, Oxford, to study Civil Engineering, where he was known to the other undergraduates as Dickie Lee. Percy O'Brien, who entered Pembroke in 1924 to read Chemistry,\fn{I.e., to study for a degree in Chemistry} remembers Father as a sprightly individual who was always happy and smiling. He walked quickly, was always in a hurry, and very punctual. He was well dressed and carried a watch chain across his waistcoat.

Father studied excessively hard and spent hours reading in the Radcliffe Science Library. At times he showed O'Brien some of his studies on the mathematics of engineering which O'Brien found very obtuse and difficult to understand.

By the time he entered Pembroke, Father was already used to life in England, but life in the colleges was a different experience. Undergraduate behaviour was still controlled by the statute *de Moribus Conformandis* of 1636, even though rules had been modified. Colleges exacted small gate fines from those who were not back in college by a certain hour in the evening. Although tobacco could be purchased (its sale having been banned in 1636), no undergraduate was allowed to smoke in academic dress. A rule prohibiting students from keeping motor cars had been rescinded, and so Father was able to own one. Students were not allowed to play billiards before one o'clock in the afternoon or after ten o'clock at night, and they were forbidden to loiter at stage doors, attend public race meetings or take part in shooting and other sports. Their opportunities for dancing, drinking and dining were carefully regulated. A male undergraduate was not allowed to enter the room of a female undergraduate, but a female student was allowed to enter the room of a male with a chaperone, with special leave from the head of her college.

Pembroke had some well-established customs that no longer exist. Undergraduates were obliged to attend college chapel daily at eight o'clock in the morning under the threat of a fine of two shillings and sixpence. Less onerous was the penalty for talking "shop" in the hall. The perpetrator could be challenged to drink one or more pints of beer without pause from a tankard marked by pegs within, to bring the ego down a peg or two.

Father was privileged to have lodgings in the Old Quadrangle, regarded as superior by the students. His rooms were on the ground floor, with a bedroom, a small pantry and a fairly large sitting/dining/study room with a fireplace. The communal rooms were in the back of the Quadrangle, and the undergraduates sometimes had to trudge through snow and ice in the winter to reach them. There was no college nurse or doctor in those days; the undergraduates were supposed to be tough. In the evening, the gates were closed at nine o'clock when the Old Town clock chimed. Latecomers were fined, so the students found ways of climbing into the residences without being caught.

The residences were taken care of by "scouts," who were essential to college life. Each scout was in charge of a "staircase," meaning a set of rooms that branched off from a staircase. In some respects, a scout was like a

servant, but in many ways, he was more like a “wife and parent” to his men. He cared for their general welfare, looked after them when they were ill, advised them, got them out of trouble and put them to bed when they were drunk.

Father was very fortunate to have a fine scout named Fred. Fred would light Father’s fire, clean his room, make his bed and do his laundry. It was also Fred’s duty to make Father’s breakfast and lunch and look after his parties.

The Master of Pembroke during Father’s time was Dr. Holmes Dudden, a man of great distinction and ability, a very good administrator and an author of some note. To be invited to dine at Pembroke was much sought after in the 1920s, because of its fine table and excellent wines.

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During his university days, Father made some very good friends with whom he kept in touch all his life. Many became prominent in their own countries. One was Percy O’Brien, who later became a tutor and Fellow of Pembroke. Until he retired in 1974, he was Director of the Nuffield Department of Clinical Biochemistry in the Oxford Medical School.

Another was Qian Changzhao, who became an important official in China under the Nationalist leader Chiang Kaishek. Both Qian and Father subsequently devoted themselves to the betterment of the lives of the Chinese. While Father spent most of his life in Hong Kong, Qian remained in China. After the Nationalist government was ousted, Qian served the government of the People’s Republic of China. Qian was persecuted during the Cultural Revolution. In the early 1960s, the two men were able to resume a friendship that had been interrupted during the Chinese civil war (1945-1949) and the subsequent restrictions on its population imposed by the Chinese government.

Other schoolmates were Liu Jia, later Chiang Kaishek’s representative at the United Nations in the 1950s, and Konosuke Koike, a graduate of Tokyo University, who later became chairman of Yamaichi Securities. Although Father lost contact with Koike because of the Pacific War, the two men were able to pick up where they left off in the late 1960s.

The one friend Father made who was not a student at Oxford was Ley On, whom we came to call Uncle. Ley On was adopted by a family without a son, in our ancestral village. He was badly treated, so he sold himself as an indentured labourer to North America when he was in his teens. When his contract was over, he stowed away on an ocean liner, not knowing where it was going. He arrived in France and found himself unable to communicate with anyone, so he boarded a boat to an English-speaking country, again as a stowaway, and arrived in London. This was around the same time Father and Third Uncle were in England. Ley On was an enterprising young man who started a small Chinese restaurant in London, catering mainly to overseas Chinese students.

Father and his young friends would go to Ley On’s restaurant whenever they were in London. Father used to tell me that Ley On made his tofu with an ingredient that gave his patrons diarrhea! Despite that, the two young men became good friends. I am sure Father admired Ley On for his diligence and entrepreneurial spirit. Ley On went on to become a successful restaurateur in London and the owner of many racehorses. His restaurant was frequented by famous movie stars who befriended him. Probably because he had a classic Chinese face—with high cheekbones and slanted eyes—and was tall and dark-skinned, he was asked to act in small parts in Hollywood movies. I first met him when he stayed with us in Hong Kong in the early 1950s, by which time he had become an alcoholic. I remember Father telling him,

“It’s a custom in Hong Kong not to drink before sundown!”

All Oxford undergraduates boarded in the colleges, and they were required to have dinner with the Master and the fellows in the hall. In fact, although undergraduates were free to choose whether they wanted to attend the lectures, they were *strictly advised* to attend the dinners. If an undergraduate’s annual attendance at the dinners was not sufficient, he would lose the right to sit for examinations.

At each table, ten to twelve undergraduates who had joined the college in the same year would sit together. In spite of the fact that the subjects they took were different, they usually became good friends, bonded by the habit of eating meals at the same table.

Konosuke Koike entered Pembroke College in 1923. Since he and Father both entered in the same year, they sat at the same table for dinners. They played sports together and became close friends. In winter, when the British students played rugby, Father and Koike would go to the gymnasium to box. Boxing was a favourite sport of many Pembroke men. Father loved the sport even though he broke his nose doing it.

Father had high ideals and was a leader among men. He became President of the Chinese Students’ Union of Europe in 1925. He already knew then that he would spend his life helping his countrymen. He kept all the menus

of the Union dinners on which he and his fellow students sketched their plans for a brave new China.

While Father was in England, Grandfather's businesses continued to prosper. He became one of the wealthiest men in Hong Kong and a well-respected citizen in the community. Real-estate development became his main business, and he purchased land and built row-houses, mainly for the Chinese middle class in Hong Kong. He also invested in many companies in Hong Kong, such as the China Sugar Refinery, Hong Kong Electric, the Hong Kong and Shanghai Bank, and the Dairy Farm Ice and Cold Storage Co., and he became a major shareholder and a member of the consulting team of China Light & Power Company, which supplied electricity to south China and Hong Kong.

Unfortunately, he also invested in the Yue Sing firm, which held the opium monopoly from 1924 from the Portuguese government of Macao, and this caused his misfortune later.

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Around the time of the First World War, while Father was in England, Grandfather purchased a large piece of land on the side of a hill on Kennedy Road with the intention of building a home for his family. Because of the war and labour problems, the house was not built until 1920. It was designed and constructed by Palmer and Turner, the same firm that designed the head office of the Hong Kong and Shanghai Bank on the Bund in Shanghai. The designs of the two buildings were rather similar. The family home, called *Dai Uk*, meaning the Big House, was one of the grandest homes in Hong Kong. Father did not see the Big House until he returned to Hong Kong in 1927.

The Big House commanded a magnificent view of Hong Kong Harbour. The beautiful gardens with their fountains, pagodas, artificial hills and caves, bamboo groves, chicken coops and vegetable plots were surrounded by high walls. At the main gate stood a guard house where a tall Sikh kept watch with a shotgun. Sikhs were traditionally hired as guards in Hong Kong because the Chinese regarded them as fierce-looking. Our guard's family lived in their own compound beside the garden of the fountain of the Goddess of Mercy.

The Big House consisted of three floors. The second and the third floors were living quarters for the family, with large balconies and a kitchen on each floor. For family meals, the men were served on the second floor, and the women and children on the third floor.

The ground floor was reserved for entertaining. It consisted of an enormous front hall, the library, the bamboo room and other entertaining rooms and the main kitchen in the back. From the front hall, one walked out onto the terrace to a panoramic view of the Hong Kong harbour. The house was filled with *objets d'art* from all over the world.

Besides being grand, the Big House was also a home away from home for all the Lee relatives or visitors from our ancestral village. There were many guest rooms behind the entertainment rooms on the ground floor, and anyone who needed a place to stay or a good meal was welcomed. Grandfather was known for his generosity which extended to distant relatives. Throughout his life, he made sure that his siblings were financially secure, and that all his nieces and nephews were in good schools or were given good jobs. His sons carried on this tradition after his death.

The land where the Big House stood was so large that Grandfather decided to erect another building at the other end of the property higher up on the hill. It was a three-storey apartment built in the same style as the Big House, with a wide central staircase, and large balconies for each apartment. This was called *Lee Hong*, meaning Lee Building, and was rented to tenants during Grandfather's lifetime. I wonder whether at the time Grandfather could foresee that, as his family expanded, the Lee Building would be used by them as well. My family lived in both the Big House and the Lee Building until the beginning of the 1950s.

In 1920, experts from England went to Hong Kong to investigate land development around the harbour. In their opinion, the development in the west had reached its limits, and the Colony's future lay in the east around Kowloon Bay. Grandfather then looked into buying land in that area for housing development. Hong Kong island was difficult to build on because of the hilly terrain. In order to build row-housing, hills had to be levelled and the soil used for landfill to create more flat land.

In January 1924, Grandfather made the most high-profile purchase of his life. He bought East Point Hill from John William Buchanan Jardine for the sum of $3,850,960.35. East Point Hill was the original homestead, offices and *godowns*\fn{Warehouses} of the Jardine *taipans*.\fn{Great merchants} The property also included the homes of the number one and number two *taipans*, with a riding stable in between.

The original agreement with the government was to use the soil on East Point Hill for land reclamation in North Point, but the government reneged on the agreement, so development was stalled. In the meantime, in order to earn income from the property, Grandfather turned it into a garden and amusement park for the Chinese, called

The Lee Gardens. The Chinese population needed recreation areas, since parks built by the government were restrictive. The Lee Gardens became the year-round pleasure ground for the Chinese and was financially very successful. The *taipans'* houses became restaurants.

Grandfather planned ahead for his family. In 1925, he established the Lee Hysan Estate Company, which owned East Point Hill and a number of other properties. He then continued to develop the areas in the vicinity of The Lee Gardens, clearing slums and building wide streets and well-constructed houses.

As an entrepreneur, Grandfather was always looking into new businesses. He loved Chinese opera, and felt that there was a need for a new type of staging that would make changing scenery in a Chinese opera easier. In 1926, he built the Lee Theatre on Percival Street and equipped it with a revolving stage which allowed the realistic touch of scenery changes as the actors walked along. Chinese opera in the Cantonese vernacular was the most popular type of entertainment, and the theatre became hugely successful. The theatre had a beautiful high dome, decorated with dragon designs and lights, and a movie screen was subsequently added. Many Chinese opera stars started their careers at the Lee Theatre.

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Upon graduation from Oxford University in 1927, Father returned to Hong Kong at the age of twenty-two, after having been away for ten years.

His plan was to go back to England to do his practical training. Grandfather was delighted to have his eldest son back, and this time, he wanted to see his son get married before leaving again. The word was out, and many girls were brought to Grandmother for her approval.

The Hong Kong Father returned to was a society that he did not remember. He had been treated as an equal in England, and now he was back in a colony where the British still believed that they were the master race of Asia. There was segregation in every facet of life in the Colony. In hospitals and the Hong Kong civil service, segregation persisted until the Second World War. An example was the Matilda Hospital on the Peak, which in 1940 refused to admit an American woman because she was married to a Chinese. It was not until 1942 that the civil service dropped the demand that all candidates for positions should be of pure European descent. As late as 1992, all senior posts in the civil service were held by British officers. It was the policy of the Hong Kong and Shanghai Bank not to have Chinese on the board, and many British firms forbade employees to marry non-British women.

Father was a diligent student who benefited from the British liberal education that taught the equality of men. Therefore, when he returned to Hong Kong, he could not accept the stigma of being a second-class citizen. Having been used to riding in England, Father wanted to join the Hong Kong Jockey Club, but was refused entry because he was Chinese. Grandfather immediately said,

"We don't need them. We will start a Chinese Jockey Club."

On hearing that, Father was immediately allowed to ride there, because the Hong Kong Jockey Club depended on the income from bets placed by the Chinese population.

Hong Kong's colonial snobbery was described by Ely Kadoorie, a successful merchant in Shanghai as well as in Hong Kong, as small "shopkeeper's mentality." He was comparing international Shanghai to a very British Hong Kong. However, at least the racial chasm in business was narrowing, for the Chinese were not excluded from any commercial activities. Father realized that Hong Kong was a place to do business, but, as someone who believed in the brotherhood of men, it was not a society he would choose to live in.

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As a sociable young man, Father was always seen with a group of friends. One day that summer, not long after he returned from England, he was with his friends on a beach when two girls dropped by on their way home from a tennis game. As one of them caught his eye, he asked a girl he knew, Julia Wong, to introduce him. Julia said,

"Don't bother with her, she's just my younger sister!"

Father persisted, and thereby met Esther, my mother. They ended up spending the rest of the afternoon together.

Mother was only seventeen, a student at the Diocesan Girls' School, when she met Father. It was a whirlwind courtship and they fell in love. But Mother was not ready to get married; she wanted to finish school first.

Father's parents were delighted that their son had found someone so suitable. When Father proposed, they went to see Mother's parents to ask for consent, but Mother stated she was just not ready. Grandfather then came up with a brilliant idea: he would send Mother to study at Oxford, where Father was to finish his practical training. Mother could study Portuguese to help in the Lee family business. Grandfather also promised to take her parents on a trip around the world to visit the young couple the following year. That did it, and Mother agreed to

get married.

All this happened so quickly that my parents didn't really have time to get to know each other well. Theirs was a relationship that grew with the years together, establishing mutual trust, understanding and respect that lasted throughout their lives.

The Wongs, Mother's family, were modern and progressive. Grandfather Wong, one of the elite in the Chinese society in Hong Kong, was good friends with Hong Kong notables Sir Robert Hotung and Sir Shou Son Chau. The Wongs lived a luxurious life on Prince Edward Road. When Mother and her siblings were growing up, they not only had a large household staff and gardeners, but also four cars so that the growing children could drive themselves around.

Mother always prided herself that her father was the first person in Hong Kong to own a motor car when cars were first imported into the Colony in 1912, despite the fact that the Chinese community described cars as "coughing, spluttering, honking demons." Mother's parents, Joseph and Jeannie, had eleven children of whom eight were girls. Mother was the number-five daughter. Mother and her siblings lived a free and easy life, driving everywhere, swimming, playing tennis and dancing. Mother used to get caught by the police for speeding, probably on her way to buy sweets, of which chocolates were her favourite. Mother also took flying lessons but never got her licence.

Mother was fond and proud of her family. Her grandfather, Great-grandfather Wong, had gone to the West Indies as a young man to work as a labourer. He returned to China with a sizable fortune when he was in his early thirties and moved to Hong Kong to work as a court interpreter because of his knowledge of English. He chose a wife from a convent school run by German nuns, a girl whose father and brother were both ministers of the church. She spoke not only English and Chinese, but also German, and she wore only European clothes. That was unusual for a Chinese girl at that time.

The two did not know each other well when they got married. Great-grandmother Wong later told her grandchildren she wondered on her wedding day why her wealthy husband had such rough hands.

As a court interpreter, Great-grandfather Wong was well paid. The Wongs lived on a large estate near Boundary Street in Kowloon. (The land was subsequently repossessed by the Hong Kong government, and they were relocated to present-day Prince Edward Road.)

Mother and her siblings were full of stories of the fun they had as children when they visited their grandparents. The person who was held in highest esteem by the grandchildren was the matriarch of the Wong clan, Great-grandmother Wong. She loved having them around and used to teach them to sing German songs. She was religious and encouraged the grandchildren to sing hymns to her by rewarding them each time. She spent her time doing charitable work, which continued after she was confined to a wheelchair.

Her grandchildren were impressed by the fact that she chose a concubine for her husband when she was tired of bearing children. But the real reason for finding a concubine was to have someone willing to stay in the village in China to look after her in-laws, since Great-grandfather was the only son, and Great-grandmother certainly didn't want the job. There were a total of sixteen children, of which eleven were her own.

In his home village Great-grandfather Wong was regarded as the son who made good. When he returned to Dong Guan (Guangdong Province) from abroad, he built a house with gun towers for the family in his ancestral village, Ho Pak Kiu. The Wongs were *Hakka*, (guests), who were later settlers on the land, and therefore got poorer land than the *Punti* (locals). They had to fight with their neighbours to protect the water supply needed for their fields.

The Wongs owned rice fields, *leichee* orchards and a peanut oil factory. Whenever Great-grandfather Wong or any of his sons returned from Hong Kong to check on the business, they were met at the train station by an armed brigade for protection! Due to the deterioration of law and order in China, rural militarization became the norm, and armed guards were standard for the landlords, especially absentee landlords.

Traditionally, the *Punti* and the *Hakka* did not intermarry. Father, being a *Punti*, used to tease Mother that *Hakka* women had big feet, considered ugly to the traditional Chinese. The fact was that *Hakka* women never bound their feet because they did a large share of the work in the fields, and besides, they were needed to help in the fighting and had to be able to run fast.

It was Great-grandfather Wong's wish that his descendants would one day return to the ancestral village, so at the entrance of the house he placed a large picture entitled "Hundred Birds Returning to the Nest." However, only the eighth son, who was the first-born of the concubine, actually lived and remained in the village, looking after the rice fields and the business. The rest of the children chose to live in Hong Kong, and with the political unrest that existed over the years in China, it was at times impossible for them to return even for a visit. The only time a

number of them went back was during the Second World War, after the surrender of Hong Kong. Food was scarce in Hong Kong, and there was always enough to eat in the village because of the rice fields that the family owned.

Great-grandfather Wong was well known and respected in Hong Kong. When he died, many people came to pay their respects by kowtowing all the way in from the entrance to the altar of their red house on Prince Edward Road. He had a grand funeral, with four white horses drawing the carriage that carried his coffin. The family was sent so many flowers that the colony's shops were said to have run out of flowers!

Mother's father, Joseph, was the second son. He was a prosperous and well-respected member of Hong Kong society, a chartered accountant and the first president of the Chinese Association of Chartered Accountants. During the First World War, he was in the police reserve in Hong Kong, when many of the British went to fight in Europe, and the gap had to be filled. His daughters Josephine and Jennie remember him looking very handsome in his white uniform.

Whenever there was a shortage of personnel, Grandfather Wong would fill in as interpreter in the law courts. He became a Justice of the Peace in 1923, and subsequently was decorated by both King George VI and Dr. Sun Yatsen.\fn{First President of the Republic of China} After his first wife died childless, he married Jeannie Maxwell, my grandmother. Jeannie's nickname was "Beauty", because she was a beautiful Eurasian girl. Great-grandmother Wong encouraged her sons to marry Eurasians because she wanted beautiful grandchildren, and she had many.

Grandmother Jeannie Maxwell Wong was one of four children and the only daughter of John Maxwell and a Chinese lady whose name we don't know, because she was always referred to as Grandmother by Mother and her siblings. John Maxwell went to Hong Kong from Scotland in the nineteenth century, stayed on to work and to get married. He chose a Chinese girl from an orphanage which was the precursor of the Po Leung Kuk, an institution established in 1878 by a group of wealthy and influential Chinese gentlemen to protect destitute women and children. That was really his only option, since there were very few European women of marriageable age of his own class, and no Chinese girl from a good family would consider him eligible. Great-grandfather Maxwell worked as a policeman in Hong Kong, and by all accounts, he was a fine father to his children.

In those days, Eurasians did not belong to either the Chinese or the European communities, so they had to try very hard to be one or the other. Grandmother Jeannie Maxwell Wong became more Chinese than the Chinese. She could understand and speak English, but she could read only Chinese. She was the authority on Chinese customs, and everyone in the Wong family always consulted her. I remember her in her later years looking very serene in a Chinese *cheongsam*, wearing her hair in a bun.

*

My parents' wedding took place on February 28, 1928, at St. John's Cathedral. Mother always said that she wished the fashion for wedding dresses that year had been long gowns instead of short, but, having to be fashionable, she had a short wedding dress of silver lace trimmed with pearls, and she carried white roses. Mother was a beautiful girl, tall for a Chinese and rather big-boned. She had to wear low-heeled shoes so that she would not look taller than Father. In fact, she kept growing after they were married and became quite a bit taller than Father. She was as fair-skinned as Father was dark, with brown hair covered by her wedding head-piece that came down to her eyebrows, according to the fashion of the day.

She had a large wedding party, with her sisters and cousins in dresses of different pastel colours and decorated with rosettes. They were beautiful young women and girls, and all Great-grandmother Wong's grandchildren.

The Cathedral was filled to the brim with Chinese and European guests, and many people had to stand outside because they couldn't get in. The wedding was performed by the Very Rev. A. Swann, Dean of Hong Kong, who broke tradition by officiating at a Chinese wedding for the first time. Hong Kong society was so divided between the Chinese and the Europeans that it was only on occasions like these that the two groups were brought together.

The reception was held at The Lee Gardens where a huge *matshed* (a structure of bamboo and straw) was erected, because the *taipans'* houses were not large enough to accommodate the two thousand guests. Hong Kong Hotel, which was one of Father's favourite hotels, catered the affair. A dais was erected to support a six-tier wedding cake. Sir Robert Hotung toasted my parents and speeches were made by Sir Robert, Dr. Robert H. Kotewall and Father.

After the wedding, my parents went on their honeymoon by boat to Europe. They sailed through the Suez Canal and did what most tourists do in Egypt, riding camels and visiting the Sphinx. Their first stop in Europe was Switzerland, where Mother met Third Uncle for the first time. He was attending school there. Subsequently, they went to England, where Mother met Father's sisters Doris and Ansie (Second and Third Aunts), who were in a boarding school for girls.

*

During Father's visit to Hong Kong, Grandfather got embroiled in what became a court case over the Yue Sing firm's opium licence with the government of Macao.

The Yue Sing firm had had the opium monopoly since 1924. A third of the company was owned by the Lee family, and Grandfather was the general manager. In March 1927, the Portuguese government announced in the *Boletim Oficial* that the monopoly system under which opium had been imported, prepared, sold and distributed would come to an end; therefore its contract with the Yue Sing firm would be terminated, to be replaced by a government monopoly under the superintendence of the Inspector of Consumption Taxes. It established an Opium Administration and Pedro Jose Lobo was appointed as Administrator.

By 1927, a quarter of the original investment of $3 million had been returned to the subscribers of Yue Sing, but the winding-up proceedings in the courts in Macao would mean that the rest of the investment would be lost. This was something the subscribers to the firm had to accept.

Then Grandfather discovered that the Macao government had not taken back the licence, but had given it to another company, the Yau Sing Company, for a payment of $120,000.

The company opened an account at a branch of the Mercantile Bank of India in Hong Kong, and the *comprador* of the bank confirmed that the opium monopoly had been obtained by the Yau Sing Company by tender from the government of Macao. The Company was opened for subscription. A friend of Grandfather's was approached to buy shares, and he came to Grandfather for advice.

Grandfather believed that since the contract with Yue Sing had been terminated by the Macao government, no other firm should legally be given a new contract by the same government. He sent a petition to the governor of Macao, requesting fair treatment for his firm and for an enquiry into the matter, as well as the return, in due course, of the original deposit by Yue Sing to the Portuguese government. The petition was also sent to the Legislative Councillors, sixteen lawyers and the Consul-General of Macao.

In his petition, the name of Pedro Jose Lobo was implicated.

In the spring of 1928, during the preparation of my parents' wedding, Pedro Jose Lobo sued Grandfather for libel and asked the Hong Kong court for an injunction to prevent him from sending further petitions to the governor of Macao. During the period leading up to the trial, Grandfather received letters threatening his life, saying also that bombs would be thrown at my parents' wedding. These letters were ignored by Grandfather even though friends and relatives advised him to be careful and change his routine.

The wedding went smoothly, my parents left for Europe, and the threats were forgotten. On April 17, Chief Justice Gollan of the Supreme Court in Hong Kong gave judgment in Grandfather's favour. And Grandfather believed that it was all over.

On April 30, at one o'clock in the afternoon, as Grandfather was entering the Chinese Yue Kee Club on Wellington Street for *tiffin*,\fn{Lunch} which was his routine, he was shot in the corridor. He called out a couple of times, "*Gau meng*!" meaning save my life, and members at the Club heard the shots and his cries. When a *foki* (waiter), Law Lau, reached the corridor, he saw Grandfather injured, holding on to the wall, and looking very pale. Instead of stopping to help, he followed a man in white trousers and a short jacket who darted through the passage from the Club.

By the time the members of the club reached Grandfather, he was already dead. He was forty-seven years old.

The family offered a reward of $10,000 for information leading to the arrest of the assassin, but despite the police having many leads and some arrests, the murderer was never caught.

The entire family was in shock. Grandfather left behind a wife, three concubines, seven sons and six surviving daughters, with daughter number-eight on the way.

My parents and three of Father's siblings were in England when the news reached them. They immediately began their return journey, but travel by boat through the Suez Canal was so slow, they missed the Buddhist funeral service. On May 25, Grandfather was buried in a beautiful site overlooking the ocean in the Permanent Cemetery in Aberdeen.

Later, at Lady Clara Hotung's suggestion, a *matshed* was specially built in The Lee Gardens. Buddhist services were held for seven days to pacify Grandfather's ghost and to raise his soul from suffering in the next world.

*

At the age of twenty-three, Father became the head of the family. Mother, at eighteen, was no longer a student, but his partner. …

1942

21.32 & 151.17 1. Black Walls 2. Excerpt from **Overpass**\fn{by Liu Xinwu [Xin-wu] (1942-)} Chengdu, Sichuan Province, China (M) 8

1

Summertime. Sunday. A courtyard in an alley. Three fruit trees, five or six households. Early morning. 7:30 a.m.

The room at the eastern end of the courtyard is the Zhou's. Actually there is just one certain Mr Zhou, about thirty years old, who lives there on his own. One might assume that he has never been married, though he uses a basin with a large, red double happiness design. One might also assume that he had been married and divorced but then why does he lower his head, study the ground and walk off in the other direction when he sees an unmarried woman in the courtyard? He only recently moved in and his work unit has a long and complicated name so his neighbors have not been able to work out exactly what he does for a living. By reckoning on their fingers they can work out that at his age, having been sent to the countryside for eight years, he can only have been working for about seven years at the most. Consequently, the amount of money in his monthly wage packet is not interesting enough to keep them guessing for long. Since he moved in he has never caused any trouble. He never drops in on anyone, nor does he receive any guests. When he meets neighbors in the courtyard they may first ask him: "How are you?" He will reply neither shyly nor arrogantly: "I'm very well, thank you;" or he may first ask the neighbour: "Finished for the day?", and the neighbour will reply: "Lord no! I'm just sitting in the cool breeze awhile."

But he will not stop and chat. Sometimes when he goes to the communal tap in the courtyard to fetch water, wash his clothes, or wash some rice and he bumps into a neighbor, of course they have to say something to each other. He only speaks when forced to reply to a question. If he answers, he will not follow it with another question. The other families who have lived in the courtyard a long time cannot say that they like him, nor that they dislike him.

He was busy very early one morning. First he moved everything out of his room, then he mixed some sort of liquid in a large wash basin. He must have borrowed a foot operated spray gun yesterday. Clearly, he was going to paint his room.

This began as nothing out of the ordinary. When the neighbors bumped into him at the communal tap, they asked him: "Are you painting your room today?"

"Yes, yes I am."

Then they asked him politely, "Do you need some help?"

He thanked them: "I've got a spray gun so it should be an easy job! Thank you anyway."

After collecting the water he calmly walked away. A calling cicada was hiding in the umbrella-like crown of a scholar tree whose trunk was only as wide as the mouth of a bowl. The noise was getting louder, but they had all grown accustomed to it and so did not find it annoying anymore.

7:46 a.m.

Chi—chi—chi … It was a new sound but it was clear what it was. Zhou had started spraying his room.

7:55 a.m.

Several of the young people from the courtyard had the day off and went out one by one. Naturally they were all dressed up in the latest fashions, each one different from the next. One girl, a meat cutter during the week, was wearing imitation jewel earrings and cream coloured high-heels. As she left the courtyard, she opened a blue-flowered, nylon, automatic umbrella. There was also a young man who worked in the foundry's workshop. On his upper half, he was wearing an Indiana State University T-shirt, printed in English. On his legs, he wore grey corduroy hunting trousers originally made for export. He put on a pair of large-framed, purple sunglasses as he walked out, pushing a small-wheeled bicycle. A second girl hurried out of the courtyard. She studied business management at the local branch of the university. She was wearing a pale green dress, loose at the waist, which she had made herself, and was carrying a round, rattan hand-bag. The events which followed may have occurred because they all went out, but it is hard to say if things would have been different if they had not done so, as there was still one young person who remained behind the entire time. This young man sold glassware in the local market and was enjoying a day off. After breakfast, he lay on his bed, reading *The Lamp Without Light*. When his mother called him to join in the following events, he smiled, lay back down and continued to read his book.

8:15 a.m.

The atmosphere in the courtyard was heating up. It is not quite correct to say "in the courtyard;" it would be

better to say "in the room." It was not in every room, but it was in the north room in the middle of the courtyard. That was where the Zhao family lived. Mr. Zhao was fifty-six years old. He had retired early so his second daughter could take over his job. Soon after his retirement, he went to another work unit to "fill in" for a time. Recently, that unit began making cutbacks, leaving Mr. Zhao out of work. Currently, he was trying to arrange another job in a different work unit.

Several of the neighbours gathered at his house. They told Mr. Zhao the news: Mr. Zhou was not spraying his walls white but black! He was actually spraying his walls black! They did not know what kind of paint he was using but it was black as ink! Pitch black!

Mr. Zhao was both astounded and strangely pleased at the same time. Ten years before, he had been the deputy-in-charge of the Workers' Propaganda Team in a song and dance troupe. At that time when some "activists" came to inform him about some "new trends," his manner and tone were just as they were now.

Mrs Zhao felt much as her husband did. Eight years before she had been the head of a "socialist neighbourhood committee." Once when some people told her about the remains of a reactionary slogan written at the base of the wall behind the date tree, the atmosphere was much as it was now. Who could guess that something would happen to bring the dead issues of a decade or so ago back to life again?

"That's just not right," Mr. Zhao proclaimed.

"How dreadful," said Mrs Zhao indignantly.

8:25 a.m.

Ch—chi—chi … Mr. Zhou was still spraying his room. Newsflash: He had sprayed the ceiling black, too! Mr. Zhao asked them all to sit down, giving the room the feeling of a meeting hall. Meetings can take on all forms: at some, everyone is bored; at others, only you are interested; at still others, it is you who is bored. Mr. Zhao enjoyed the present meeting. He put forward the motion:

"In this sort of situation we should inform the police as soon as possible."

If this were eight or ten years ago, this would not have been a mere proposal but a conclusive decision; not just a man giving his own opinion, but a leader's directive.

But, this was the present, not the past. Tall, thin Mr. Qian went so far as to immediately oppose him, saying, "As I see it, we shouldn't go to the authorities—that is, we have no basis. What can we tell the police?"

Mr. and Mrs. Zhao both stared hard at him. They were both thinking: Damn tailor! Years ago when he was an entrepreneur he never dared to open his mouth, much less oppose our suggestions, but now he does some private business at home, buys a color television and his whole tone of voice changes.

Mr. Qian sat up straight and began fervently expressing his opinion:

"Brother Zhou may be suffering from a recurring illness. There are such diseases; I've read about them in the paper. Sufferers have been known to behave strangely under stressful conditions.Young Zhou was airing his quilt outside his front door last Sunday. Perhaps no one noticed but the quilt cover was made of bright red silk while the underside was duller red. Really, very odd! So I say we should not go to the police but fetch a doctor instead. Although I have heard that traditional medicines don't work on these kinds of illnesses, it would not hurt to consult him."

Not many people responded to Mr Qian's words because as he talked they could not help gazing out of the window, through the shade of the scholar tree, to where they could see "Brother Zhou." Perfectly calm and collected, he continued to spray his walls. Faintly, they could hear him humming a song. Was this the manner of a sick person?

Mr Sun, who was sitting by the door, passed his little finger through his thinning hair and suggested: "Shouldn't we just go and ask him why he is spraying his walls black? If he can't give a good reason, we can just forbid him—no, advise him not to—yes, advise him not to do it any more."

Another neighbor, Mrs. Li, who was sitting in the middle of the crowd, took the opportunity to say, "Why don't you go and ask him for us?"

Everyone agreed to this suggestion.

8:36 a.m.

When Mr. Sun made his suggestion he thought it would naturally be Mr. and Mrs. Zhao who would confront Mr. Zhou. He never imagined it would be he who would be sent to ask. He regretted sitting by the door. For the past thirty years, he had worked in a primary school in charge of general affairs. He had not taught a class in his life. Consequently, he had picked up many of the mannerisms of a teacher but, now faced with a situation where he had to straighten his back and go to investigate a "strange phenomenon," he felt as though he had been forced to the front of a podium to deliver a speech. His hands and knees shook uncontrollably and he was completely

tongue tied.

8:37 a.m.

Chi—chi—chi … The spraying continued. "Bzzzzzzz …" Inside the room, they continued talking in hushed voices.

Mr. Sun flicked the long nail of the little fmger on his left hand and stared at the tips of his shoes. He was not willing to go to question "Brother Zhou." How could he ever face them again if he received a brash refusal? How could he explain such a failure? What if the idiot said something incriminating? Should he report it directly and be responsible for the unknown consequences, or should he keep the information to himself and risk being accused of protecting Mr. Zhou? And what if some evidence came to light in the future …

He gave it tremendous thought. Beads of sweat broke out on his forehead as he said,

"Maybe … maybe Mr. Zhao could go and ask instead?"

As no one else wanted the job, everyone agreed and said in chorus,

"Yes! Let Mr. Zhao go!"

Mr. Zhao did not make any immediate move, but waited for them to stop urging and start pleading with him. Only then did he abruptly stand up and declare, "I'll go and ask!"

He turned and left the room.

Everyone gazed out the window and watched the receding figure of Mr. Zhao walking straight towards Mr. Zhou's front door. They all listened attentively, hoping to catch a part of the conversation. All they could hear was the incessant call of the cicadas, high in the scholar tree.

8:41 a.m.

Ashen-faced, Mr. Zhao returned to the room and reported, "That rascal says he will come and explain to me when he has finished. I knew he would pull some trick. He doesn't respect us, his neighbors."

Mrs. Zhao pointed out of the window and said, "That's the man come to read the water meter, isn't it? He'll go and look in Mr Zhou's room! He'll probably spread all kinds of rumors about black paint and our courtyard, and give us all a bad name!"

Mrs. Li, whose job was fluffmg cotton into quilts, had a very placid nature and so put forward an explanation to make them all feel better. "Perhaps the black paint is just the undercoat. When it's dry he'll spray a top coat of white paint."

8:43 a.m.

Chi—chi—chi … The noise from the spray gun continued. Looking towards the room all they could see was blackness. No one really believed Mrs. Li's explanation. The more Mrs. Li looked, the more she could not help despairing.

What could one say? Black walls! In this very courtyard! Mr. Zhou is not afraid of doing evil things himself, but he should not get others involved.

8:45 a.m.

Everyone in the room agreed about one thing: he should not spray his walls black! How could anyone spray his walls and ceiling black? Most people would not dare even think of such a thing. He did not just think about it, he actually did it! Extraordinary! Weird! Half-mad! Reactionary!

Mr. Zhao still thought the police should be informed. Just as he was about to go and do so, he had second thoughts: The police station is not the same as it was eight or ten years ago. (At that time there was not a police station but a "group to smash the leaders of the judicial and public security institutions." It was in the same courtyard as the present-day police station). Today the police are not as extreme nor do they think themselves as important as in the past. They always talk about "going by the book" but once you start doing things "by the book" then problems like the black wall dilemma will drag on and possibly never be resolved.

Mr. Zhao hesitated. He felt strongly about it and really did want to report it. It was a responsibility he could not shirk, a duty he had to take quick action to deal with. Could he be doing it for his own good? But what possible benefit could come of reporting it?

Mrs. Zhao realized what her husband must be feeling and felt very bitter. How different it was eight or ten years ago! Her husband was actually suffering now because he lacked any real skills, and could only work as an assistant or warehouse watchman. Was it because he had not tried to learn a trade? Certainly not. For the past thirty odd years he had been transferred to work in various campaigns. The campaigns had come and gone, so now he had no way of earning a living. Formerly all his pride had come from his political sensitivity. Now he had a chance to display this talent, but his eyes, wrinkled face and the corners of his mouth showed hesitancy. Why was it? What was all this exertion for today? Could it be just for the good of his own family?

More and more, Mr. Zhao believed that “Brother Zhou” was suffering from a recurring illness. He admitted that what he had just been thinking was wrong. Traditional doctors were unable to treat this sort of illness. Could he not just let the doctor take his pulse? Not really. He would still have to get a Western doctor. But doctors didn’t make house calls nowadays. It would be extremely difficult. Who could persuade him to go to the out-patient’s department?

Mrs. Li wanted to go home and get her lump of a son to stop reading his novels and think of what to do. Perhaps he could bring Mr. Zhou to his senses, and even help spray the walls white again. White is so nice! Why should anyone want anything different?

Mr. Sun wanted to go home but was too embarrassed to make the move. In this sort of situation a person ought to make clear his position on the matter, so in the future he could not be accused of “sitting on the fence.” Of course a person should not leave it so that in any future situation he could not be accused of having played a part in a “misjudged case.” Ideally one would avoid any sort of criticism in the past, present or future. He had already shown enough “intention” to go to Mr. Zhou’s, so he should now make an early retreat. But it would be hard to slip out without being noticed …

8:48 a.m.

Mr. Zhao had a grandson affectionately known as “Little Button,” who was not much more than ten years old. At the start of all this he had been painting in the back room. At length, he came and leaned on the doorway between the two rooms, curiously listening to the adults’ discussion. He thought the room crowded, muggy, hot and disordered. Why did adults have to torment themselves like this?

Once again they began to discuss the matter and once again the atmosphere heated up. Little Button stood before his grandfather, turned his head and asked: “Grandpa, what are you all doing?”

Mr. Zhao said to him fmnly, “Off with you! Go and play! There’s nothing for you here!”

Little Button was not convinced and thought to himself: Are you angry with Uncle Zhou for spraying his walls? Uncle Zhou is a very nice man. He’s such fun. Once he called me to his room. He took some pieces of card from a drawer. The pieces were of every colour under the sun and were as big as the *Evening News*. He kept changing them and pressed them up to my eyes so that all I could see was that color. Then he asked: “Do you like it or not? Does it feel hot or cold? Dry or wet? Pleasant or nasty to smell? Does it make you want to go to sleep or go out and play? What does it make you think of? Or does it make you think nothing at all? Does it make you feel frightened or calm? Does it make you thirsty or not? Do you want to go on looking at it or not? He jotted down every reply that I made. See how much fun he is! If you don’t believe me, go over to his place and see for yourselves!

Little Button thought this far, then raised his head and said loudly, “Grandpa, you still haven't finished your discussion. You must be awfully tired. Can I say something now?”

There was nothing for it but for everyone to stop talking. They all looked at him.

Mr. Zhao waved his hands as if he had been wronged and said, “Right, right! Go ahead!”

Little Button asked: “When Uncle Zhou has finished his room, will we go from door to door spraying everyone else’s rooms as well?”

8:49 a.m.

Everyone went blank.

8:50 a.m.

Mr Zhao blurted out: “I’m sure he’d dare.” Mrs. Zhao echoed, “He’ll try!” Mrs. Li and Mr. Sun said at once, “He wouldn’t, he’d never …” Mr. Qian thought carefully before saying, “He doesn’t look like a trouble-maker. His illness only seems to recur in his own home …”

8:51.30 a.m.

Little Button turned round, blinked his round, black eyes, blacker even than the walls, shining black. He smiled innocently and said in a shrill voice: “So that’s settled! Uncle Zhou is spraying the walls of his own room, and it has nothing to do with us, so what are you all going on about?”

8:52 a.m.

Everyone went silent.

The *chi—chi—chi* of the wall spraying drifted over, mingling with the sound of the cicadas, becoming even more pronounced.

Summer 1982

Is there anything new? Every time he returned from the outskirts of the city and got off the bus to walk up to the crossroads at Dongdan, Hou Rui\fn{Like the English author Charles Dickens (1812-1870), Chinese writers often choose names to reinforce character. Rui means "acute."} looked eagerly for some sign that work was about to begin on the overpass.

However, he was always disappointed. As ever, the old barn-like structure of Dongdan Restaurant, standing at the northwest corner of the crossroads, hit the eye. As usual, there were people lined up to one side of this ever-crowded restaurant, waiting to buy *youtiao*.\fn{Fried dough rolls popular mainly for breakfast in Peking.} It had been thirty years! This ugly old restaurant had been whitewashed again and again but never torn down. How long would it linger on?

Hou Rui walked up to the iron railings at the junction, lit a cigarette, and turned to look across at the southwest corner of the crossroads. There, behind the pedestrian crossing, in the shape of an L, stood a never-ending line of billboards. He quickly noticed the latest change in the advertisements. One at the corner was now replaced by an advertisement for the Japanese electronics firm National Panasonic: a gigantic Monkey King was leaping out of the screen of a color television. The background was made up of millions of little metal discs that fluttered in the air currents. When they caught the sun at dusk, they produced an optical effect of golden ripples. Looking at these colorful advertisements that had such an air of the artisan, Hou Rui exhaled a puff of smoke. He thought: Life does, after all, bring changes. Things long longed for—even if not to be had immediately—had, after all, come within the realm of possibility.

Hou Rui had graduated from Beijing Normal College in 1964. After graduation, he was assigned to a commune middle school in the distant outskirts of Beijing to teach Chinese language. This autumn of 1980, he was exactly thirty-nine years old. At college he had been widely acclaimed as dashingly handsome … but Hou Rui, now standing at the intersection by the pedestrian crossing, puffing on his cigarette, seemed old before his time. He was gray at the temples, and though the crows' feet at the corners of his eyes were not very noticeable, his tear glands had already become greyish and were clearly discernable. The skin that had been tight and ruddy was now brown and rough. But seen from a distance, he still looked to be an attractive, middle-aged man.

It was with a confused mass of emotions that Hou Rui leaned against the railing and gazed at the bustle of Dongdan Intersection. Changan Boulevard, running in the east-west direction was good and wide, but all the streets running across it—especially those north of Dongdan—were narrow out of all proportion, compared with Changan Boulevard. Obviously, an overpass should be built as soon as possible, and yet …

Hou Rui threw away his cigarette butt and propped himself up with his hands on the railings. Gazing at the heavy traffic rolling by, he let threads of despair and hope weave within his heart a net of all feelings.

Just then he was startled by a slap on the shoulder.

*

Hou Rui turned, and recognized the fat man standing before him as his classmate from college days: Ge Youhan.

Ge Youhan had taken the college entrance exams as a salaried cadre\fn{A Party, or government official.} and was five years older than Hou Rui. He had hoped to get into a famous college from which he would go to some research institution to "play the role of a dignitary." He never imagined he would end up in a mere normal college,\fn{I.e., a teacher's college. The term is American, and goes back to the desire of the desire of the Father of Modern Chaina (Sun Yat-sen) to reform Chinese educational methods by instituting a system of Normal Schools throughout the country on the American plan, the purpose of which was to graducate teachers.} to be assigned, upon graduation, to teach in a most unremarkable middle school in the back streets. This was Ge Youhan's lifelong regret. To this very day, he was filled with nostalgia for his old organization, and the time when he was a clerk in an office. He would often say, "If only I hadn't been so intoxicated with the notion of going to college. I'd have wangled myself a position of department head long ago!"

He despised everyone at the middle school, and they in turn practically all despised him, for he was useless at teaching. Later he became librarian and would frequently take sick leave on account of half-genuine, half-imagined kidney trouble. How had he got by all these years? Political movements, the Ten Years of Calamities —\fn{This refers to the decade (1966-1976) of the Cultural Revolution.} while they had not left him unaffected-could hardly be used as clues to summing up his life. For many years now he had not read papers or listened to the radio, had not taken an interest in any gossip of a political nature, and, aside from furniture design manuals and cookbooks, had hardly read any books.

And he a librarian! For five years he went from one Housing Exchange Office to another, making the acquaintance of countless housing department officials. Seizing on other peoples' crises—such as family disputes,

or the fear following a death in the family, or hardship attendant upon the political fall of a family member—through all kinds of similar situations, by legal means, he exchanged his apartment for ever bigger ones. His family now occupied a most ideal three-bedroom apartment on the third floor of a new housing estate, and there were only three in his family—he and his wife and a son still in primary school. His apartment was impeccably furnished—the result of long years of going to and fro between all the second-hand furniture shops in the city, whereby, through meticulous study, comparison, selection, exchange, selling off, and then buying back, he had completed his collection, item by item.

He now stood placidly before his old classmate, his stomach bulging out. His round face, his eyelids, his nose, his mouth, were all heavy laden with flesh—evidence of richness of diet and peace of mind. On one arm he carried an ample basket stuffed full of fresh goods just bought at Dongdan market. Hou Rui peeped at the basket and caught a glimpse of two moist fat fish tails sticking out.

"Hey! I recognized you from behind at a glance!" Ge Youhan said in a loud voice, his face beaming. "Well, what's up? Getting a charge out of watching cars go by?"

"I'm just back from school—only got off the bus a moment ago. Haven't even been home yet," Hou Rui said lazily. He had no wish to linger with his erstwhile classmate.

"So! You still haven't moved?" Ge Youhan countinued at the top of his voice.

Where could he move to? Hou Rui felt a stab. He was especially reluctant to discuss this matter with Ge Youhan. He was well aware what his classmate's present apartment was like, and he sensed the satisfaction and feeling of superiority oozing from Ge Youhan's very bones. From the expression in his eyes, Hou Rui could tell that, at this very moment, Ge Youhan probably had a vision of the one-room abode of their family of three generations.

"Don't worry. Just wait for the relocation—it won't be long now!"

Ge Youhan indicated the intersection with his free hand.

"They say work will begin in the next year or two—an overpass, a contract with the Japanese. Their money, their design. We do the work. Just you wait and see. Your folks will come into their own …"

Not allowing Hou Rui to get a word in, Ge Youhan suddenly took a step forward. Gently prodding Hou Rui's chest with one stubby finger, in a low and extremely chummy voice, he cautioned,

"When the time comes, don't let yourself be swindled by the Relocation Office. They're sure to offer to move you to Chuiyangliu,\fn{The Weeping Willows—a place in Peking.} but you mustn't go there! It's too close to the paper mill. If you drink the water there, it'll give you cancer. And don't go to the south side of Tuanjie Lake. The land there is low-lying. When it rains, it's just one great big "toad pond" all around … No, you must hold firm: it's got to be Tuanjie Lake, north side, and it's got to be third floor with a wide entrance hall, and two built-in closets! I tell you, 'Where there's a will, there's a way … Fight to the last and be victorious.' These two dicta are well attested!"\fn{The first old and literary, the second from Mao and the Cultural Revolution.}

"How reliable is your information? There's not the beginning of a sign of an overpass!" Hou Rui continued lazily, "And anyway, I'm not smart like you—so good at trading apartments!"

Hou Rui had thought that, hearing these last few words, some sign of displeasure would appear on Ge Youhan's face. But not at all. He just looked even more sincere. Nodding several times in succession, he said,

"True, true, you're not like me—reckless and shameless, running around, begging, and pleading. Besides, you're out of town most days, don't get back till Saturday, and first thing Monday morning you have to be off again."

Hou Rui had already turned, and was gazing at the dimming evening sun and the dust falling on Chang an Boulevard, continuing his thoughts. But Ge Youhan good naturedly babbled on a little more before taking his leave.

*

Hou Rui's home was on a *hutong*,\fn{A sidestreet in a neighborhood of compounds.} not far from the intersection. If an overpass were indeed to be built at Dongdan, the compound where they lived would certainly be demolished.

Hou Rui ambled along toward the *hutong*. The *hutong* was a mass of grey: grey walls, grey tile roofs, grey road surface. As always, the moment Hou Rui turned into the *hutong*, he felt grey.

For some years now, Hou Rui had gone home every week without exception. Sometimes he would even go twice in a week. Actually, to go home from school, Hou Rui had to walk a couple of *li*, catch the suburban bus, then change to a city bus—the whole trip involving a great expenditure of time and energy. But he still preferred to go home whenever he had the time.

There had been a time when Hou Rui's head had been filled with rosy pictures, and he had vowed to "sink roots" in the countryside and dedicate himself to the cause of secondary education among the peasants' children. When this spirit had been at its peak, he had once stayed away from home for six months. However, a mass of worldly events had, like so many pairs of scissors, cut to pieces the threads of ideals that had bound his heart. These past two years, more than ten teachers from the three commune middle schools had already been transferred back to the city—transferred, it was said, on account of family hardship, or poor health, *et cetera*. Actually, it was a well-known fact—and they themselves made no attempt to hide it—that, in actuality, they had almost all accomplished the transfer by plaguing officials, pulling strings, and going through the back door. Once back in the city, they enjoyed to the full all the material and intellectual comforts of city life. Few, if any, truly "took better care of aging parents," or seriously tried to "rest and recuperate."

In the streets of the commune town, Hou Rui often came across his ex-students. They had become, for the most part, commune people who were well-informed, who "saw through it all." They would invariably come right out with

"Sir! Have you still not got yourself transferred back to the city?"

From their faces and eyes, Hou Rui could clearly discern a feeling of contempt or pity. Things had come to such a pass that a willingness to work for the people in a place of hardship was looked upon with suspicion or pity. Have you got yourself transferred to a cushier place? You are useless, you're a real jerk! Hou Rui could not bear this sort of treatment. Once he retorted,

"No, I haven't been transferred back; I haven't got the pull. So don't just stand there and laugh at me. Help me! Do something on my behalf!"

The ex-student had grinned and said loudly, without compunction—in fact with a gleam of satisfaction mixed with teasing and contempt—

"Fine! But what can you do for *me*?"

Hou Rui had turned and walked away. He hated himself, he despised himself. He had nothing—no money, no power, no connections. All he could do was beg help from others, and he had nothing to offer in return. In this modern age, he felt himself to be simply useless.

"Useless jerk!" he cursed himself, to vent his spleen.

He was coming up to the compound gate when, owing to some complex feeling, he paused. He stood beneath a power-line pole and lit a cigarette. He stood there watching the ancient gateway. It was said that a few decades ago the compound had been an inn, which is why it was crowded with several rows of rooms. Light now shone through the tiny window set in the back wall of Hou Rui's room. It shone through the pretty pink curtain with the blue flowers on it. This curtain stirred in him a feeling of profound gentleness: this was, after alL the only place that merited the name "home!"

But at the same time, there arose in him a pain, a sense of injustice, for, on entering the gate, one saw on the left his home, but on the right was the men's toilet. The visitors from other parts of the country and foreigners who walked to and fro along Chang an Boulevard would probably never have suspected that less than a couple of hundred yards away, there existed toilets so primitive, so filthy. It has been said somewhere that the most reliable sign of the level of civilization in a place is the state of the toilets.

Actually, the toilet in their compound was by no means impossible to clean. But strange to say, though in recent years the families residing in the compound had become more and more particular about furnishings in the home, they had become more and more careless of the public utilities there, such as the street light in the compound, the faucet and this toilet.

The toilet was now forever strewn with pieces of used toilet paper, so that one had nowhere to set one's foot. Hou Rui had once made a supreme effort and cleaned the place himself, but this had immediately aroused the displeasure of some people in the compound, because the very act itself seemed to suggest a contempt for the long-term residents there; this they found insufferable. The next time Hou Rui returned home, the toilet was still in the same state, and he relinquished his great ambition to transform it.

Standing outside the compound gate, he actually pondered over this toilet for quite a while. How droll! Or perhaps this was just another sign of what a useless jerk he was. Hou Rui laughed bitterly.

Most unwillingly, Hou Rui recalled the chance meeting in the street a few moments before. Unwillingly—yet the fat face of Ge Youhan persisted in appearing in his mind's eye, proof that man is indeed unable to control his thoughts.

Hou Rui had once been to Ge Youhan's place: every detail in the three-bedroom apartment had excited his greatest envy. It was not that Hou Rui was a boor—he had visited the army compounds outside Fuxing Gate, and

they were far superior to that of Ge Youhan. But then they were the high and mighty. And Ge Youhan—what had he to rely upon?

Hou Rui often compared Ge Youhan's situation with that of Cai Bodu. The more he compared the two, the more indignant he felt.

Cai Bodu had been a classmate of his and Ge Youhan's. He was now the resident playwright at a theatrical company. For two years past, two of his plays had been highly successful: they were shown in theaters, made into films, published in book form, reviewed in export journals.\fn{Journals meant for foreign readers in China and abroad.} The newspapers printed more than one commentary; he was even invited to be on television. In Ge Youhan's words, Cai Bodu had become an "Immortal."\fn{Which in Chinese folk religion referred to one so illustrious as to be no longer an ordinary mortal.} But what of Cai's accommodation? It was only two months ago that, in accordance with the policy of giving preferential treatment to artists who had made significant contributions, he had been assigned a small two-room apartment. This apartment was on the south side of Tuanjie Lake—precisely the location Ge Youhan had scoffed at. Furthermore, it was on the top floor. Of course, this was very much better than the four of them, from all three generations, crowding together in a single room on the ground floor. But once Cai Bodu had moved in, it did not seem in the least spacious.

The state of Ge Youhan's and Cai Bodu's housing often aroused a great indignation in Hou Rui. It just seemed too difficult to remold society in such a way as to reflect distribution truly according to work. Cai Bodu could already count himself lucky to be assigned such an apartment, because all he had to rely upon was "the organization"; he was even less adept than Hou Rui at seeking out and utilizing "extra-organizational" personalities, which in fact had more actual distribution power.

For this top-floor apartment to materialize, it had taken the repeated deliberation of many a leading comrade: many a circle had been drawn before Cai got the apartment.\fn{A reference to the practice of the named recipients of documents sent to various departments—"RE: Comrade John Smith."—drawing a circle around their names to indicate they had read them.} And what of the larger apartments on the second and third floors? Were they occupied by people even more brilliant and outstanding? No, strangely enough many of them were Ge Youhan types.

Don't keep going on about cadres enjoying special privileges—it's time the Ge Youhan type of wheeler-dealer was exposed. Corrupt cadres and cunning wheeler-dealers exist in symbiotic union, like rotten wood and poisonous fungus.

Hou Rui threw away the extinguished half of a cigarette, yet he still just stood there beneath the power-line pole. The street lights lit up, burning the greys to a kind of dark silver. Somehow this added a touch of poetry to the *hutong* that had been so drab. …

21.36 The Tall Woman And Her Short Husband\fn{by Feng Ji-cai (1942-)} Tianjin, Hebei Province, China (M) 4

Say you have a small tree in your yard and are used to its smooth trunk. If one day it turns twisted and gnarled it strikes you as awkward. As time goes by, however, you grow to like it, as if that was how this tree should always have been. Were it suddenly to straighten out again you would feel indescribably put out. A trunk as dull and boring as a stick! In fact it would simply have reverted to its original form, so why should you worry?

Is this force of habit? Well, don't underestimate "habit." It runs through everything done under the sun. It is not a law to be strictly observed, yet flouting it is simply asking for trouble. Don't complain though if it proves so binding that sometimes, unconsciously, you conform to it. For instance, do you presume to throw your weight about before your superiors? Do you air your views recklessly in front of your seniors? When a group photograph is taken, can you shove celebrities aside to stand swaggering and chortling in the middle? You can't, of course you can't. Or again, would you choose a wife ten years older than you, heftier than you or a head taller than you? Don't be in a rush to answer. Here's an instance of such a couple.

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She was seventeen centimetres taller than he. One point seven five metres in height, she towered above most of her sex like a crane over chickens. Her husband, a bare 1.58 metres, had been nicknamed Shorty at college. He came up to her earlobes but actually looked two heads shorter.

And take their appearances. She seemed dried up and scrawny with a face like an unvarnished ping-pong bat. Her features would pass, but they were small and insignificant as if carved in shallow relief. She was flat-chested, had a ramrod back and buttocks as scraggy as a scrubbing board. Her husband on the other hand seemed a rubber rolypoly: well-fleshed, solid and radiant. Everything about him—his calves, insteps, lips, nose and fingers—were like pudgy little meatballs. He had soft skin and a fine complexion shining with excess fat and ruddy because of

all the red blood in his veins. His eyes were like two high-voltage little light bulbs, while his wife's were like glazed marbles. The two of them just did not match, and formed a marked contrast. But they were inseparable.

One day some of their neighbors were having a family reunion. After drinking his fill the grandfather put a tall, thin empty wine bottle on the table next to a squat tin of pork

"Who do these remind you of?" he asked. Before anyone could guess he gave the answer. "That tall woman downstairs and that short husband of hers."

Everyone burst out laughing and went on laughing through the meal.

What had brought such a pair together? This was a mystery to the dozens of households living in Unity Mansions. Ever since this couple moved in, the old residents had eyed them curiously. Some registered a question mark in their minds, while others put their curiosity into words. Tongues started wagging, especially in wet weather when the two of them went out and it was always Mrs. Tall who held the umbrella. If anything dropped to the ground, though, it was simpler for Mr. Short to pick it up. Some old ladies at a loose end would gesticulate, finding this comic, and splutter with laughter. This set a bad example for the children who would burst out laughing at sight of the pair and hoot, "Long carrying-pole; big, low stool!" The husband and wife pretended not to hear and kept their tempers, paying no attention. Maybe for this reason their relations with their neighbors remained rather cool. The few less officious ones simply nodded a greeting when they met. This made it hard for those really intrigued by them to find out more about them. For instance, how did they hit it off Why had they married? Which gave way to the other? They could only speculate.

This was an old-fashioned block of flats with large sunny rooms and wide, dark corridors. It stood in a big courtyard with a small gatehouse. The man who lived there was a tailor, a decent fellow. His wife, who brimmed over with energy, liked to call on her neighbours and gossip. Most of all she liked to ferret out their secrets. She knew exactly how husbands and wives got on, why sisters-in-law quarrelled, who was lazy, who hard-working, and how much everyone earned. If she was unclear about anything she would leave no stone unturned to get at the truth.

The thirst for knowledge makes even the ignorant wise. In this respect she was outstanding. She analyzed conversations, watched expressions, and could even tell what people were secretly thinking. Simply by using her nose, she knew which household was eating meat or fish, and from that could deduce their income. For some reason or other, ever since the sixties each housing estate had chosen someone like this as a "neighborhood activist," giving legal status to these nosey-parkers so that their officiousness could have full play. It seems the Creator will never waste any talent.

Though the tailor's wife was indefatigable she failed to discover how this incongruous couple who passed daily before her eyes had come to marry. She found this most frustrating; it posed a formidable challenge. On the basis of her experience, however, and by racking her brains she fmally came up with a plausible explanation: either husband or wife must have some physiological deficiency. Otherwise no one would marry someone a whole head taller or shorter. Her grounds for this reasoning were that after three years of marriage they still had no children. The residents of Unity Mansions were all convinced by this brilliant hypothesis.

But facts are merciless. The tailor's wife was debunked and lost face when Mrs. Tall appeared in the family way. Her womb could be seen swelling from day to day, for being relatively far from the ground it was all too evident. Regardless of their amazement, misgivings or embarrassment, she gave birth to a fine baby. When the sun was hot or it rained and the couple went out, Mrs. Tall would carry the baby while Mr. Short held the umbrella. He plodded along comically on his plump legs, the umbrella held high, keeping just behind his wife. And the neighbors remained as intrigued as at the start of this ill-assorted, inseparable couple. They went on making plausible conjectures, but could find no confirmation for any of them.

The tailor's wife said, "They must have something to hide, those two. Why else should they keep to themselves? Well, it's bound to come to light some day, just wait and see."

One evening, sure enough, she heard the sound of breaking glass in their flat. On the pretext of collecting money for sweeping the yard she rushed to knock on their door, sure that their long hidden feud had come to a head and avid to watch the confrontation between them.

The door opened. Mrs. Tall asked her in with a smile. Mr. Short was smiling too at a smashed plate on the floor —that was all the tailor's wife saw. She hastily collected the money and left to puzzle over what had happened. A plate had been smashed, yet instead of quarrelling they had treated it as a joke. How very strange!

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Later the tailor's wife beame the residents' representative for Unity Mansions. When she helped the police check up on living permits, she at last found the answer to this puzzle. A reliable and irrefutable answer. The tall

woman and her short husband both worked in the Research Institute of the Ministry of Chemical Industry. He was chief engineer, with a salary of over 180 *yuan*! She was an ordinary laboratory technician earning less than sixty *yuan*, and her father was a hard-working low-paid postman. So that explained why she had married a man so much shorter. For status, money and an easy life. Right!

The tailor's wife lost no time in passing on this priceless information to all the bored old ladies in Unity Mansions. Judging others by themselves, they believed her. At last this riddle was solved. They saw the light. Rich Mr. Short was congenitally deficient while poor Mrs. Tall was a money-grabber on the make. When they discussed the good luck of this tall woman who looked like a horse, they often voiced resentment—especially the tailor's wife.

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Sometimes good luck turns into bad. In 1966, disaster struck China. Great changes came into the lives of all the residents in Unity Mansions, which was like a microcosm of the whole country. Mr. Short as chief engineer was the first to suffer. His flat was raided, his furniture moved out, he was struggled against and confined in his Institute. And worse was to come. He was accused of smuggling out the results of his research to write up at home in the evenings, with a view to fleeing the country to join a wealthy relative abroad. This preposterous charge of passing on scientific secrets to foreign capitalists was widely believed. In that period of lunacy people took leave of their senses and cruelly made up groundless accusations in order to find some Hitler in their midst. The Institute kept a stranglehold on its chief engineer. He was threatened, beaten up, put under all kinds of pressure; his wife was ordered to hand over that manuscript which no one had ever seen. But all was to no effect. Someone proposed holding a struggle meeting against them both in the courtyard of Unity Mansions. As everyone dreads losing face in front of relatives and friends, this would put more pressure on them. Since all else had failed, it was at least worth trying. Never before had Unity Mansions been the scene of such excitement.

In the afternoon the institute sent people to fix up ropes between two trees in the yard, on which to hang a poster with the name of Mr. Short on it—crossed out. Inside and outside the yard they pasted up threatening slogans, and on the wall put eighteen more posters listing the engineer's "crimes." As the meeting was to be held after supper, an electrician was sent to fix up four big SOD-watt bulbs. By now the tailor's wife, promoted to be the chairman of the neighborhood's Public Security Committee, was a powerful person, full of self-importance, and much fatter than before. She had been busy all day bossing the other women about, helping to put up slogans and make tea for the revolutionaries from the Institute. The wiring for the lights had been fixed up from her gatehouse as if she were celebrating a wedding!

After supper the tailor's wife assembled all the residents in the yard, lit up as brilliantly as a sportsground at night. Their shadows, magnified ten-fold, were thrown on the wall of the building. These shadows stayed stock-still, not even the children daring to play about. The tailor's wife led a group also wearing red armbands, in those days most awe-inspiring, to guard the gate and keep outsiders out. Presently a crowd from the Institute, wearing armbands and shouting slogans, marched in the tall woman and her short husband. He had a placard hung round his neck, she had none. The two of them were marched in front of the platform, and stood there side by side with lowered heads.

The tailor's wife darted forward. "This wretch is too short for the revolutionary masses at the back to see," she cried. "I'll soon fix that." She dashed into the gatehouse, her fat shoulders heaving, to fetch a soapbox which she turned upside down. Mr. Short standing on this was the same height as his wife. But at this point little attention was paid to the relative heights of this couple facing disaster.

The meeting followed the customary procedure. After slogans had been shouted, passionate accusations were made, punctuated by more slogans. The pressure built up. First Mrs. Tall was ordered to come clean, to produce that "manuscript." Questions and denunciations were fired at her, hysterical screams, angry shouts and threatening growls. But she simply shook her head gravely and sincerely. What use was sincerity? To believe in her would have made the whole business a farce.

No matter what bullies sprang forward to shake their fists at her, or what tricky questions were asked to try to trap her, she simply shook her head. The members of the Institute were at a loss, afraid that if this went on the struggle meeting would fizzle out and end up a fiasco.

The tailor's wife had listened with mounting exasperation. Being illiterate she took no interest in the "manuscript" they wanted, and felt these research workers were too soft-spoken. All of a sudden she ran to the platform. Raising her right arm with its red armband she pointed accusingly at Mrs. Tall.

"Say!" she screeched. "Why did you marry him?"

The members of the Institute were staggered by this unexpected question. What connection had it with their

investigation?

Mrs. Tall was staggered too. This wasn't the sort of question asked these days. She looked up with surprise on her thin face which showed the ravages of the last few months.

"So you don't dare answer, eh?" The tailor's wife raised her voice. "I'll answer for you! You married this scoundrel, didn't you, for his money? If he hadn't had money who'd want such a short fellow!"

She sounded rather smug, as if she alone had seen through Mrs. Tall.

Mrs Tall neither nodded nor shook her head. She had seen through the tailor's wife too. Her eyes glinted with derision and contempt.

"All right, you won't admit it. This wretch is done for now, he's a broken reed. Oh, I know what you're thinking!" The tailor's wife slapped her chest and brandished one hand gloatingly. Some other women chimed in.

The members of the Institute were flummoxed. A question like this was best ignored. But though these women had strayed far from the subject, they had also livened up the meeting. So the Institute members let them take the field. The women yelled:

"How much has he paid you? What has he bought you? What has he bought you? Own up!"

"Two hundred a month isn't enough for you, is it? You have to go abroad!"

"Is Deng Tuo behind you?\fn{A note reads: *Deng Tuo (1912-1966), historian, poet and essayist, was the Party secretary of Beijing in charge of cultural and educational work, who was considered a counter-revolutionary after the start of the "cultural revolution" in 1966*.} That day you made a long-distance call to Beijing, were you ringing up the Three Family Village?\fn{A note reads: *In 1961 Deng Tuo, Wu Han (a historian) and Liao Mosha (a writer) started a magazine colunm 'Notes From the Three Family Village' and published many essays which were well received. During the 'cultural revolution' the three writers were falsely charged as "The Three Family Village."*}

The success of a meeting depends on the enthusiasm worked up. The Institute members who had convened this meeting saw that the time was ripe now to shout a few more slogans and conclude it. They then searched Mrs. Tall's flat, prizing up floorboards and stripping off wallpaper. When they discovered nothing, they marched her husband away, leaving her behind.

Mrs. Tall stayed in all the next day but went out alone after dark, unaware that though the light in the gatehouse was out the tailor's wife was watching her from the window. She trailed her out of the gate and past two crossroads till Mrs Tall stopped to knock softly on a gate. The tailor's wife ducked behind a telegraph pole and waited, holding her breath, as if to pounce on a rabbit when it popped out of its burrow.

The gate creaked open. An old woman led out a child.

"All over, is it?" she asked.

Mrs. Tall's answer was inaudible.

"He's had his supper and a sleep," the old woman said. "Take him home quickly now."

The tailor's wife realized that this was the woman who minded their little boy. Her excitement died down as Mrs. Tall turned back to lead her son home. All was silence apart from the sound of their footsteps. The tailor's wife stood motionless behind the telegraph pole till they had gone, then scurried home herself.

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The next morning when Mrs. Tall led her son out, her eyes were red. No one would speak to her, but they all saw her red, swollen eyes. Those who had denounced her the previous day had a strange-feeling of guilt. They turned away so as not to meet her eyes.

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After the struggle meeting Mr. Short was not allowed home again. The tailor's wife, who was in the know, said he had been imprisoned as an active counter-revolutionary. That made Mrs. Tall the lowest of the low, naturally unfit to live in a roomy flat. She was forced to change places with the tailor's wife and moved into the little gatehouse. This didn't worry her, as it meant she could avoid the other residents who snubbed her. But they could look through her window and see her all alone there. Where she had sent her son, they didn't know, for he only came home for a few days at a time. Ostracized by all, she looked older than a woman in her thirties.

"Mark my words," the tailor's wife said, "she can only keep this up for at most a year. Then if Shorty doesn't get out she'll have to remarry. If I were her I'd get a divorce and remarry. Even if he's let out his name will be mud, and he won't have any money."

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A year went by. Mr. Short still didn't come back and Mrs. Tall kept to herself. In silence she went to work, came back, lit her stove and went out with a big shabby shopping basket. Day after day she did this, the whole year round.

But one day in autumn Mr. Short reappeared—thinly clad, his head shaved, and his whole appearance changed. He seemed to have shrunk and his skin no longer gleamed with health. He went straight to his old flat. Its new master, the honest tailor, directed him to the gatehouse. Mrs. Tall was squatting in the doorway chopping firewood. At the sound of his voice she sprang up to stare at him. After two years' separation both were appalled by the change in the other. One was wrinkled, the other haggard; one looked taller than before, the other shorter. After gazing at each other they hastily turned away, and Mrs. Tall ran inside. When finally she came out again he had picked up the axe and squatted down to chop firewood, until two big boxes of wood had been chopped into kindling, as if he feared some new disaster might befall them at any moment. After that they were inseparable again, going to work together and coming back together just as before. The neighbors, finding them unchanged, gradually lost interest in them and ignored them.

One morning Mrs. Tall had an accident. Her husband rushed frantically out and came back with an ambulance to fetch her. For days the gatehouse was empty and dark at night. After three weeks Mr. Short returned with a stranger. They were carrying her on a stretcher. She was confined to her room. He went to work as usual, hurrying back at dusk to light the stove and go out with the shopping basket. This was the same basket she had used every day. In his hand it looked even bigger and nearly reached the ground.

When the weather turned warmer Mrs. Tall came out. After so long in bed her face was deathly white, and she swayed from side to side. She held a cane in her right hand and kept her elbow bent in front of her. Her half-paralyzed left leg made walking difficult. She had obviously had a stroke. Every morning and every evening Mr. Short helped her twice round the yard, painfully and slowly. By hunching up his shoulders he was able to grip her crooked arm in both hands. It was hard for him, but he smiled to encourage her. As she couldn't raise her left foot, he tied a rope round it and pulled this up when she wanted to take a step forward. This was a pathetic yet impressive sight, and the neighbors were touched by it. Now when they met the couple they nodded cordially to them.

Mrs. Tall's luck had run out: she was not to linger long by the side of the short husband who had loved her so dearly. Death and life were equally cruel to her. Life had struck her down and now death carried her off. Mr. Short was left all alone.

But after her death fortune smiled on him again. He was rehabilitated, his confiscated possessions were returned, and he received all his back pay. Only his flat, occupied by the tailor's wife, was not given back to him. The neighbors watched to see what he would do. It was said that some of his colleagues had proposed finding him another wife, but he had declined their offers.

"I know the kind of woman he wants," said the tailor's wife. "Just leave it to me!"

Having passed her zenith she had become more subdued. Stripped of her power she had to wear a smile. With a photograph of a pretty girl in her pocket she went to the gatehouse to find Mr. Short. The girl in the picture was her niece.

She sat in the gatehouse sizing up its furnishing as she proposed this match to rich Mr. Short. Smiling all over her face she held forth with gusto until suddenly she realized that he had not said a word, his face was black, and behind him hung a picture of him and Mrs. Tall on their wedding day. Then she beat a retreat without venturing to produce the photograph of her niece.

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Since then several years have passed. Mr. Short is still a widower, but on Sundays he fetches his son home to keep him company. At the sight of his squat, lonely figure, his neighbours recall all that he has been through and have come to understand why he goes on living alone. When it rains and he takes an umbrella to go to work, out of force of habit perhaps he still holds it high. Then they have the strange sensation that there is a big empty space under that umbrella, a vacuum that nothing on earth can fill.

78.29 & 82.135 1. Vestiges **2.** Thoughts In Privacy: **Two Short Stories**\fn{by Liang-Hsüan aka Ma Kuo-kuang (1942-)}
Szechuan Province, China (M) 4

1

Turning on the desk lamp, I saw the clutter before me. I had reluctantly left my warm quilt to come to my cold, desolate desk in the middle of the frigid winter night, faced with the task of turning out the work I had promised. Yet, that elusive spirit, inspiration sulked inside me, unwilling to come out. I looked about in panic, hoping to seize upon something and make my early rising worthwhile. I got up and paced about the room, warming myself

in the process.

The chairs in the living room were scattered about the small round glass table covered with shells from watermelon seeds, ash trays, and tea cups with residual tea. A pair of sunglasses left by someone was half-buried in paper wrappings from sour plum preserves. It hadn't been so long ago, not more than five or six hours, when laughter and uproar filled the room. An old classmate, out of the country for over ten years, had returned home. On the spur of the moment, I had invited several other classmates over to talk over old times. As we got high on the liquor, we began to forget we had already entered middle-age. Slapping palms and patting shoulders, we threw off all restraints. Our eyes squinted in laughter, faces creased by crow's feet, we traced back the splendor of our youth. We fanned the fire of every fleeting fragment called to mind, making each scintilla blaze redder than blood, hotter than liquor. We were younger than youth.

But now the scene was chilly and bleak. The people in the chairs were already translucent, their forms, faces, voices, sorrows and anguish, kindnesses and grudges once entangled, so hard to part with, like crystal drops steaming in the air, circling through the littered plates and glasses, causing one disquietude at the truth of. their message.

Everything was on the desk that should be there: the "four treasures"\fn{A note reads: *Writing brush, ink, ink stone, and paper*.} of the study, plus books and the telephone. I sat dumbly staring at these things in front of me, my head heavier and heavier, when an empty yogurt container and an unfinished drawing of *King Kong Battles Three Supermen* caught my attention. I lost count of how many times my two mischievous sons had come into my study during the day to pester me. I had sternly warned them two or three times to no avail. If it weren't for them, why else would I be up in the middle of the night, wandering around and sighing? But now, at this moment, that empty yogurt container and half-finished pencil drawing unexpectedly became the most effective stimulant. Their clamoring, quarreling and endless questions had forced me to play deaf in order to give my ears a rest. But now all this became sublimated into a gentle rainbow, soaring around the flickering constellations in the three foot space above my head.

I couldn't help going over to their bunk beds, one stacked on top of the other. The younger one in the lower bunk had a gray smudge across his cheek, his right hand still grasping his "Little Brownie," a velvet cloth Pekinese dog. They had rough-housed until late last night. When his older brother finished his bath and told him to hurry up, it was his turn, he hadn't answered. He had already fallen asleep in front of the TV, so we just let him carry that smudge with him until morning. His older brother's plump round face was pressed upon part of his book, *Ting-tong*, unfinished from last night as he sank back onto his pillow. Was he finishing the story now in his dreams? In the other room, she was sound asleep, lying there alone in the double bed. She would always announce, "I'm going to bed now," and within a minute be fast asleep. The smile of an angel was nowhere to be found on her face now, though there might have been one before. Now she was unquestionably just an exhausted wife and mother.

The clock ticking away on the wall began to chime, clanging *tong-tong-tong* as it waved its hands in passing, churning up one's heart as it treaded across, time speeding by and time yet to come. I forced myself to sit down at the desk facing the wall, and spread out the clean surface of the draft paper. I tightly gripped the ballpoint pen and waited, hoping to be able to nail down that varmint time with one flick of the wrist, but that obstinate *tick-tock* continued on as before, like steady laughter, *ha-ha*, *ha-ha*, mocking me as it marched on by. I stared straight ahead at the portrait of Chung K'uei\fn{A note reads: *A deity who is supposed to protect people from evil spirits*.} on the wall. He turned and strode over, his sword raised and ready to strike, eyes wide open, hair on end, one glance enough to cut one to the quick. He seemed to come alive on that light brown silk scroll, the sleeves of his jacket fluttering, his magic showing through the ink sketch. For how many centuries had he been crushed by the superficial world into an insignificant tiny figure, colored by the artist's brush to bring out his brilliance, only to be buried in scrolls threatened by fire and flood for two hundred years. But finally, he was able to burst out of the scratches and cracks and appear on that wall before me. But once the wall appears, Chung K'uei disappears. He needn't turn around, nor wave good-by, but just indifferently take his leave.

The hand that had held the pen now clutched a glass of cold tea, still sweet and fragrant, but having passed from hand to mouth, a bitter aftertaste lingered. The image of the desk lamp was reflected on the glass desk top, piercing coldly into my pupils. I first covered the spot with my paper, but the eery white wearied my eyes. I could only turn my eyes away, letting them roam around the room. Books lined the walls of the study, books I had read and ones yet to be read. The ones read were fewer than those unread. But strangely, many of the ones I had read at this instant stared back at me as if they had once only seemed to have made my acquaintance. But those yet to be read didn't seem like strangers at all, as they were forever lined up there in front of me, letting me savor their

simple resumes on the binding. The souls of these books soared throughout the room, jeering this would-be writer for being so nosy. On a winter night such as this, such a blow could almost turn one's thoughts to dust.

I threw down my pen and strolled over to my books, wishing to clear up this quarrel right here and now, and see that meddlesome justice be done. I leafed through a book I had read before, thick and yellowed, each leaf loose and brittle. Ten years—no, twenty years more likely—of scrawlings in the margins filled every page. I put on my glasses to decifer what I had written. The strokes were crisp and clear, the markings familiar, but the thought, or perhaps what one could only call the ideas, were unexpectedly vague and distant, more strange to me than the work of any other person. Indecision and grief flooded my mind. I didn't know whether to continue walking on ahead or return, retracing my steps, though they too had gone without a trace.

The night wind moaned outside, whirling something away with it, depositing something else in its place. The wind was always fair whether one liked it or not. I put on my overcoat and quietly opened the front door. Out on the balcony, I discovered several early rising confreres, their dim lights scattered throughout the uneven buildings near and far. But they were too far away for me to converse with. Why exactly were they up? A child sick so they hadn't slept? Or awakened in fright from dreams of their old homeland and past reveries?

The outline of the mountains loomed in the distance under the foggy moonlight.. That red light in the sky on the radio transmission tower winked at me indifferently. I seemed to see a shooting star out of the corner of my eye. I jerked around but confronted only a desolate emptiness.

The wind blew stronger. I felt I would be carried off with the wind at that moment, so scurried back to pounce on the pen hidden under the draft paper blown askew by the wind. I lifted one page after another and with a sudden rattle, my pen rolled across the surface of the desk.

2

In the middle of the night, around one o'clock, I was preparing an evening meal for myself which consisted of a dish of spinach, a pork-rib, and a fish. As I fried the fish, I suddenly heard a voice, quite a loud one, "I just like it this way." I sobered up immediately when I realized that the voice was my own.

I guess I must have been alone for a long time. It's natural for a person alone—or even one not alone—to talk to himself nor is it unusual for a person to fix himself a meal. Besides that bottle of milk I had in the morning, all I had eaten that day was some fruit; and it was only around midnight that I got around to preparing a real meal for myself. For that reason I had spoken aloud unconsciously, "I just like it this way." I think that being steeped in solitude had apparently affected some change in my nature.

I'm not even sure what day it is today, nor can I recall what day they had left. We had set a day to meet again one month later; certainly it could not have passed yet. "Well, it's only one short month," she had said softly in my ear as we embraced and kissed good-bye. We had said good-bye at home. She was taking the children abroad for a vacation, but she had to see me off, because I had class in the morning. When I got home the topsy-turvy commotion of their baggage was gone. The house seemed much larger. I wasn't sad, on the contrary, I experienced a feeling of satisfaction. Ten years ago I had told her I hoped I could enjoy a solitary life even if for only a month.

A poor scholar like myself started to squander his own spatial, temporal and physical solitude without restraint. The manner of squandering is too complicated to describe. The gigantic house, including the tables, beds, books, records as well as the plants, the air conditioner, the electric fans and every square of parquet floor belonged to me. I walked around and laughed happily. Sneaking around, I touched this and that; and even though there wasn't the slightest chance of being discovered, I still sneaked over to open one of her drawers. At first I didn't touch anything, I just looked at the things I ought to have been so familiar with. Then I buried my hands in her things and a wicked heat rose in my heart.

Every table piled high with things related to books, which wasn't like what they were originally intended to be: one table to be used for writing articles, one for writing with a Chinese brush, one for studying and writing notes, and one table specially for treatise materials. But when one table became a mess, I dumped everything on another table. Some people are able to manage a huge piece of land, but I am so incapable that I can't even manage a few tables. I'm always in need of one more table.

In a rage, I cleared off all the tables in the house, including the dining table so that not even a speck of dust remained. I let all the tables face the ceiling with nothing more on them than the light. In the air floated a sharp, bitter atmosphere, what could be called an atmosphere of "reality." I walked around feeling quite comfortable. Unfortunately, I discovered an ant by the kitchen sink, then two ants, then three, four, five. After I killed them all,

my heart was stained with many spots. The feeling of smashing their small bodies between my thumb and forefinger stayed with me through the night.

I could stay awake or sleep, or stay between wakefulness and sleep. The lights could be kept on all night, the curtains closed all day; thus playing as one wish with time. If only the telephone could be disconnected, then the solitary person could easily drift away from this mundane world—that is if time did not adhere to experience, Life would then be as free as the soul. When I fed Einstein—my dog—I carefully observed the small, absolutely average, yellow and white mutt. He is now the only creature that shares the same world of experience with me. I mean this world in which time and space can be grasped. If I were to seize a portion of time that absolutely belonged to me, what would I do then? Einstein's dark, innocent eyes looked at me. The answer was frightfully close.

I said I wanted to spend it prodigally, but how does one spend time? Later I understood that in solitude it makes no difference whether one does something or does nothing.

Reading for eighteen hours or sitting blankly all day long can not be measured in terms of gain or loss. There is no standard of measure there. If we are not enslaved by time, we are spent by it until the day we die. I'll never laugh at you again, Time.

Sometimes I quietly went out and joined the crowd. Of course I went out alone and came back alone. Before going out you couldn't yell at someone for your socks, nor was there anybody there to hasten you along. A couple of times, I had the desire to turn back and look at the house one more time, but I deliberately walked away without doing so. Did I turn my head back before? The answer was vague.

"To Chung-hsiao East Road," I told the cab driver.

"A plate of Kwangchou fried rice," I said to the waiter.

"Excuse me, I have a proposal I would like to put before everyone," I spoke, raising my hand at the meeting. Secretly I was really horrified by my voice; I felt the impurity of existence. However, I forgot about it immediately, for I melted away in the impurity without leaving a trace and was transformed into a myriad of dancing particles which suddenly solidified into a single sphere, transparent and without any substance.

That night, after the meeting, I got half-drunk. On the way home I cut through a small park and for no apparent reason, the full moon made me think of a description of Wang Chao-chun, a famous beauty in Han Dynasty: "the girdle ornaments tinkling on the moonlit grave." The tinkling sounds were actually made by the keys at my waist. Therefore, when I opened the door, I was especially attentive. I knew quite well that it was pure fiction, but on account of my slight drunkenness, and in spite of the fact that I knew there was not a living soul inside, I still deliberately entered as if I were a thief.

I'm not sure if it is solitude that transforms life or if non-solitude has already transformed life at some earlier point. In one of my dreams, I felt my hand—apparently quite naturally—touching my wife's soft, warm body. Then I work up to find my hand beneath the pillow; in my hand was an ancient Tuan-hsi ink-stone. It's almost as if any object can produce a sensation which is completely out of the ordinary—even when one is not dreaming. One time I refused to eat peanuts because I didn't want the noise of chewing peanuts to disturb the tranquillity of drinking Quemoy Kaoliang. If I hadn't been alone, I never would have discovered that the noise of chewing peanuts could be so very vulgar. In human society we regularly pass information through odors and sounds.

I slowly came to believe the story which a friend told about the time he was in jail. One of his fellow prisoners, sitting peacefully in the jail, could predict without error whether the next meal would be noodles, rice or buns. He was told his nose was very sensitive; he answered that his hearing was the key. This prisoner knew that his death was near and that he was on the final stretch of his life. He regularly recited French verbs from memory, studied complicated French grammar and entertained himself by telling his cell mates the contents of the next meal. The most you can do for such a solitary sort of individual is to let him die.

When one is alone and face to face with oneself, the unexpected is the norm, because there is no one to bother you, you can look into the mirror free from anxiety; I suppose it would be better to say relatively free from anxiety when talking about looking into the mirror. I discovered that the person in the mirror was different each time I looked and what's more, always different from what I imagined. I don't know how he can be recognized.

The first time I was curious about probing myself it was around midnight. I don't know why I got up, perhaps the light was still on. Anyway, I was frightened by the person in the mirror; it couldn't have been for more than a couple of seconds, but I hadn't recognized him. Since then, I have paid closer attention when looking in the mirror, I even decided to play a joke on him. First I turned my back on him, then I suddenly whirled around trying to catch him, unprepared. I know that playing the role of a human being is a complicated cooperative process and the person in the mirror has rid himself of complete solitude, showing complexities beyond past understanding.

Perhaps all this is absurd. The mirror is a medium which allows a person to really come in contact with true

absurdity. Anyway, the absurd is very abstract. Are all mirrors absurd? Or just mirrors in solitude? There is one person who can give you an answer: his name is Van Gogh.\fn{Vincent Willem van Gogh (1853-1890), Dutch painter.} He painted his own self-portrait more than ten times and later went mad and shot himself. Did solitude kill him or did he kill solitude? I wanted to open the album of paintings and pull out Van Gogh, eliciting an answer. That artist who cut off his own ear\fn{1888.) basically already had a persecution complex. As I was considering this, the person in the mirror narrowed his eyes and twisted his lips into an insidious grin. That was another face I had never seen before.

They should be home soon, those who are called my wife and children. Once in a while we talked on the phone on an overseas line. We discussed airplane tickets, hotels, schedules, checks, departure forms, ID's and so on, all sorts of important things which indicate that we are mature and serious and that once again we believe in the dignity of living together.

The telephone is a thing completely devoid of sex appeal, unlike photographs which have the light and shadows of flesh and blood. But it was then that I realized that all important events in life are decisively connected with the telephone. I don't like telephones, even if they're thousands of miles away. I prefer to calmly ponder in solitude, intuitively realizing that there is not the least bit of difference between reality and illusion. Then one day when I come home, open the door, and see them safe and sound in the house, it will be as if nothing had ever happened.

79.56 The Ivied Cabin\fn{by Gu Hua aka Luo Hongyu (1942-)} Jiahe County, Hunan Province, China (M) 13

For many years now, the story of *naogelao Yulang* has been circulating in the Misty Border Mountain District. *Naogelao Yulang*, in Yao dialect,\fn{A note reads: *Yao: a minority people mainly distributed in Guangxi and other southern provinces*.} means "the young woman of Yao." The story goes that in Green Feather Hollow, in the heart of these ancient and secluded hills, lived a young Yao woman named Pan Qingqing, whose job it was to guard the forests. She was born, raised, and married in the hills. She seldom left her abode and had been to the Forest Department only once—granted. That was not quite far away. No wonder the young men of the department had never had a glimpse of her, however much they had heard that she was some sort of a mountain fairy.

Her ancestors lived in Green Feather Hollow in the ivied cabins which were built with trunks of fir so strong that no axe could ever break them and they could stand up to any attack by the wild boar. Layer upon layer of white fan-shaped fungus had grown on the trunks, which now looked black just above the ground. Behind the cabin, was a clear mountain stream which flowed quietly all year long.

The cabin's only contact with the outside world, apart from a narrow foot-path, was a telephone line put up before the "cultural revolution" for reporting fires. One winter, however, the snowfall was particularly heavy and the line snapped. During the turbulent times of the "cultural revolution" the leaders of the forest district were replaced whenever those contending for power moved up and down on the political seesaw; naturally no one had been sent to fix the fallen telephone line. And so this steel thread, the symbol of modern civilization, never did make its way back to the secluded forest hollow. In the midst of these thousands of acres of forest, the day alternated with the night and nothing much happened. But for the occasional crowing of a cock, the barking of a dog, the cry of a child coming from the cabin, or the pale blue thread of smoke rising from the chimney, the valley of Green Feather Hollow would have appeared, still and quiet, as if it had been sleeping. Neither the chirping of birds nor the blossoming of flowers and the falling of their petals could ever have waked it up.

Pan Qingqing's parents had passed away early. Her husband, Wang Mutong, was a tall and strong Han.\fn{A note reads: *Han: the majority nationality of China* [about 92% of the population].} He was so powerfully built that he looked as though he could kill a tiger with his bare hands. Both husband and wife were employed as forest guards. Before every meal it was Wang Mutong's habit, to drink a glass or two of the corn liquor which Pan Qingqing brewed. Except for an occasional drunken fury, when he would beat Qingqing till she was bruised in places with marks of purple and blue, he was not a bad husband after all. Generally, he took good care of his wife. He never made her climb the hills herself to gather firewood, which was always stacked neatly in piles beside the cabin door. He never sent Qingqing out to clear the fire lanes as there had not been a fire at Green Feather Hollow for over ten years. He never made Qingqing tend the garden or grow vegetables, yet all the year round the large plot beside the bank of the stream was always loaded with onions, fresh melons and vegetables, more than they could eat. All Pen Qingqing had to do was to feed the pigs, nurse the baby, wash and mend the clothes, and attend to the other household chores, so that at the age of 26 or 27 she still maintained the look of freshness and tenderness of a young girl not yet married. Though completely illiterate, Wang Mutong believed that he knew all he needed to

know. He felt that he was really the lord of Green Feather Hollow: the woman was, his; the children, the cabin and the mounains were all his.

Of course, the leaders in the Forest Center had sent him here to guard the forest and he was, in truth, merely their subordinate.

Before Pan Qingqing had given birth to the children, she asked him several times for permission to travel the 90 kilometers out to the Forest Department to have a good look around. That permission was each time denied. Instead, she was severely beaten and forced to kneel as punishment for asking. Wang was afraid once his pretty and charming wife had got to that worldly and exciting place she would be attracted by a new kind of life. More than that, he feared she might be lured away by the flashy, smooth-talking youth there.

Not until Pan Qingqing had given birth to a son and then later a daughter did he. begin to rest assured about her. It was as if Qingqing had now become tied fast to his belt, and had truly become his woman. He maintained his rule in the family with beatings and forced kneelings and rigidly arranged the daily schedule. Father, wife, children: everyone in Green Feather Hollow knew his or her place. Theirs was a small society with its hierarchy all right.

Wang Mutong and Pan Qingqing were cut off from the world as they spent their days. Although husband and wife were not always in agreement on everything, they were accustomed to their life in the forest and things generally went fairly smoothly.

Wang Mutong went to the Forest Department once a month to pick up his and his wife's salary and came back with the family's ration of rice, oil, and salt. Each time he returned, he would tell Pan Qingqing everything that had happened and all the gossip he had heard in the department. Pan Qingqing would sit in wonder with her big black eyes wide open listening as if her husband had brought home tales of distant lands. These past few years he had been telling her mainly of students outside rebelling and making trouble, of old, bespectacled intellectuals being paraded like monkeys through the countryside with labels hanging from their necks, or of forestry technicians who, after half a lifetime studying, now attempted suicide by drowning in buffalo wallows which were so shallow that he was dragged out with his back still dry. Later on, came the criticism of a certain kind of "deer," which of course was not the ordinary sort of wild swift-running animal that could be hunted with a gun. That term was used to denigrate the learned scholars.

"*Ah*, we are much better off here in Green Feather Hollow you know. The soil is so rich almost anything you put in it will grow. We've had no schooling, true; but no one will ever come here to bother us."

Pan Qingqing understood only some of her husband's accounts; some of it of course made no sense to her at all. With childlike innocence she shared the fears of those learned men out there. Surely, she felt, it was a calamity to be able to read and write! She could not help secretly rejoicing for herself and her husband. "It is better to live in Green Feather Hollow." She had heard this said often enough and truly believed it. She did not want even to think of the Forest Department, that place filled with open strife and invisible intrigue. She did not expect too much of her husband; she wished only that he would not strike her too hard when he was angry. Every night as soon as it grew dark they would go to bed. A mere half liter of kerosene was enough to last them through half a year to keep the lamp lit, themselves warm. Only the moon and the stars peeping through their window saw what was going on during the night.

"Qingqing, we should have some more babies!"

"We've already got Little Tong and Little Qing. Haven't you said the leaders nowadays forbid everyone to have too many kids and that all the women should go and get themselves fixed?"

"No matter, we could have another five and it wouldn't be too many!"

"You enjoy making me suffer, don't you?"

Wang confused two words which sound similar: scholar and deer.

"Suffer? What suffering is there when a woman raises children?"

"There's nothing to be afraid of! At most they won't issue grain rations for the kids. We've soil and water here at Green Feather Hollow. Look at my hands. They're as thick as oak planks. Do you really think we couldn't raise a few more children? After winter I'll have the soil ready for cotton-plants. Next year you bring the spinning wheel and loom your mother left you, and scrub them clean."

"Oh, look at you! You treat me like a hen that you can just keep well fed and penned up in the hills."

"You are mine!"

Pan Qingqing said nothing as he hugged her tightly and his armpits were giving out a strong smell. She was meek and docile. She was her man's woman and fully accepted that it was her lot to be reprimanded and beaten. She felt that in the full blossom of her youth, to give birth to more children was as natural as a tree bearing fruit.

When she nursed her baby the white milk from her breasts flowed as endlessly as the sap of the trees. Her man was virile; he was not afraid of tigers or wild boar. He embraced her with arms as strong as iron, and then they did what other couples outside the forest most likely also do. But he did it with the strength of someone who felt as if his energy could not have been directed into another channel.

*

In the summer of 1975 Ace Hand came to Green Feather Hollow.

Don't get me. wrong. This Ace Hand doesn't mean some "high-level" cadre. He was a city youth who had come to settle down in the Forest District in 1964. His real name was Li Xingfu, meaning happiness and referring to the fact that he was born in the year of Liberation. He was a tall and lanky youth, almost elegant in appearance, and revealed an engaging wit when speaking with the local workers and cadres. During the "cultural revolution," when the Red Guards put out the call to "establish ties" with the masses, he was swept along by the current of revolutionary fervor. He tried to hop on a train, but fell instead on the track and lost his arm as a result. From that time on, one shirt sleeve hung empty by his side. He stayed in the city for a few years, and then returned to the Forest District where the local workers gave him the nickname Ace Hand.

The leaders there didn't know what to do with him. They telephoned every logging camp, and every tree-farming brigade in the district but no one was willing to take him. They all said that not only was Ace Hand unable to perform physical labor but worse, he was a "Little Revolutionary General." His efforts to "establish ties" with the workers ended up somewhat like dropping ashes on bean curd: you could not blow them off or brush it clean and there was no way to get rid of that kind of contamination.

One day while collecting his family's ration of rice, Wang Mutong happened to run into the chairman of the District's Political Affairs Section. Chairman Wang put his hand on his forehead and said to himself:

"Right! Why not send Li Xingfu to Green Feather Hollow to help Wang Mutong and his wife in guarding the forest? This isn't just a convenient arrangement; it is perfect! It will add another guard to a post where besides the hard-working Wang and his wife there isn't another soul for 100 kilometers around. In a place like this Li Xingfu, if he is to establish ties at all, he will have to do it with the monkeys and pheasants."

When Wang Mutong heard another hand was to be added to Green Feather Hollow, he was very happy, but when he heard Li Xingfu had only one hand he expressed reluctance.

"Lao Wang, haven't you been asking to join the Party for years? This is nothing more than a test which has been arranged for you," said Chairman Wang as he slapped him on the arm. "Just because Li Xingfu has only one arm, he's easy to deal with. It doesn't mean he won't be able to do what you want him to do. I'll talk to him personally about his duties working under you. I'll make it clear that while he's at Green Feather Hollow he's to follow your orders in all matters, report to you on everything, and ask for permission whenever he wants to leave the hollow. But what about you? You should widen your horizon, as it were. Take this young intellectual who has been somewhat misguided. Educate him and reform him, if you can."

Nodding his head, Wang Mutong decided to accept this trial, this weighty responsibility of educating and reforming a young man.

So Ace Hand came to Green Feather Hollow and the community headed by Wang Mutong now had an important new member. Wang Mutong and Pan Qingqing built a hut for Li Xingfu only twenty or thirty steps from their own cabin right beside the clear green mountain stream. They used tree trunks to erect the walls and fir planks for the roof. Thus the two cabins, one big one small, one old one new, formed a pristine neighborhood.

In the beginning Wang Mutong had no hard feelings for Ace Hand. On the contrary he rather enjoyed hearing Li Xingfu calling him "Brother Wang." Li Xingfu was soon enraptured by the beautiful scenery and peaceful atmosphere of Green Feather Hollow. Wang sent him, out on fire patrol every day. Each morning he climbed the narrow path that looped and twisted its way like a snake up the mountain and into the forest fog. It was like walking into a dream world. The thick milk-white fog which filled the valley gave him the feeling that it might take him away from this world. At about 9 or 10 o'clock in the morning, when the sun first broke through the dispersing mist, he would sit in the doorway of his lookout post as the trees above burst forth in emerald green while the boundless sea of fog remained below. Then all he could see was one towering cluster of hemlock and pine floating above the billowing mist. At a time like this, he almost believed that this was fairyland, like the jade forest of Peng Lai,\fn{A note reads: *The fabled abode of immortals*.} beyond the reach of human beings.

Of course, Li Xingfu did not believe he was living in this forest fairyland. Even though Wang Mutong and Pan Qingqing were also young, he knew that he must behave properly and maintain an appropriate distance from lovely "Sister Qingqing," whose big black eyes seemed to be full of songs. But young people could not do without company. Would he really be able to make friends only with the golden-haired monkeys, thrushes and grouse

of this green valley?

Wang had two children, a seven-year-old boy named Tong and.a girl named Qing, who was five. At first the two children were a little afraid of Ace Hand; but Ace Hand caught a couple of red sparrows for Little Tong, and picked a bunch of wild flowers for Little Qing to wear in her hair and then let her see her reflection in a small round mirror. That changed everything! The brother and sister began to call him “Uncle Li” or “Elder Brother Li.” After a few days Tong began to stay the night at his hut. Pan Qingqing had to come to call him home but he refused to leave.

These children of the hills were lovable in their wild way. One day a snake slithered into the hut scaring Ace Hand, who was shaking all over. Tong calmly informed him, “Snakes won’t bite unless you step on them first.” Then he went on speaking with an air of authority:

“There are mainly three kinds of snakes in Green Hollow. The green bamboo snake is the laziest. Usually he just lies coiled up on a bamboo stalk and doesn’t move at all.” Little Tong looked up, closed his eyes, puckered up his cheeks and said, “Like this, *fu*, *fu*, *fu*, he spurts out his venom to catch the birds. When a bird is near, he strikes at it with lightning speed and then holds it in his mouth. After this he lazily coils back up around the bamboo stalk again and eats it slowly. Now the howler snake is not like that at all. His scales are mud colored but he’s fierce looking that when he crawls along the ground even the grass parts to make way for him. He can grow to half the length of a man. He looks like this.”Little Tong opened his mouth and stared without blinking, stretching his neck out so that his head stuck out as far as it could.

“*Hoo, hoo, hoo*—oh it’s frightening! Then there’s the snake that’s as thick as an axe handle and as long as a shoulder pole. Father calls him ‘Forty-eight Lengths.’ When he moves he sways his head so far back and forth you’d think he’s crazy!”

Ace Hand immediately took hold of Little Tong’s head so he wouldn’t get carried away imitating this too. He asked:

“How do you know all this?”

“I’ve seen the green bamboo snake myself. Father told me about the howler snake and forty-eight pieces although I’ve never seen them. He catches snakes and sells them in the Forest Department.”

Ace Hand looked at the boy, who, he thought, ought to be in school rather than studying the ways of snakes. Then he thought of that frightful snake which had already slithered away from his hut and he could not help shivering again.

As he observed the children, the children observed him too. Every morning Ace Hand brushed his teeth and rinsed his mouth by the stream bank. Little Qing would always stick her head half way through the cabin door to stare at him, out of curiosity. One morning Little Qing timidly approached him and asked, “Uncle, is your mouth dirty?”

Ace Hand looked at her not quite understanding what she meant. His mouth was filled with tooth-paste.

“If your mouth isn’t dirty then why do you rinse it every day?”

Ace Hand burst out laughing. He rinsed his mouth, wiped his face, and then said to Little Qing, “Later I’ll ask your mother to buy you and Little Tong each a brush. Then every morning when you wake up you can brush your teeth, too, and your teeth will be as white as snow and very pretty.”

Little Qing remained unconvinced. “Mum never uses a brush and her teeth are snow white.”

To convince her, Ace Hand asked, “But does your mother’s mouth smell?”

“When she kisses me her mouth always smells sweet. If you don’t believe me, kiss her yourself.”

“Little Qing, you devil, what are you doing out there? You come right back here!” her mother yelled from the cabin.

“Ace Hand” blushed. His heart pounded as though he’d been caught doing something he should not have done. He went back to his cabin at once.

It was only a trivial matter, but Wang Mutong heard about it. He made Little Qing kneel as punishment just outside the cabin door. Obviously, this was for Ace Hand’s eyes! Though no other warning signs were given, Ace Hand knew he had to be more cautious. Though there was no cause for suspicion he felt that he had to keep his eyes on things.

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Life for the inhabitants of Green Feather Hollow flowed on as smoothly as the clear green stream which ran behind the cabins. At its deepest, the water reached one’s calf; in the shallow areas it came only to the top of one’s feet. Yet the shallow stream, reflected the dancing trees, the clear blue sky, the freely drifting white clouds. And now it reflected one more thing, too.

Ace Hand had erected a tall slender pole beside his cabin to support a radio antenna.

This was bound to stir up trouble. The small black box in Ace Hand's cabin talked and sang, breaking the hitherto silence of the night in the forest. At first only Little Tong and Little Qing dared come into his cabin, once evening fell, to listen to it. Gradually, armed with the excuse that she had to call the kids home, Pan Qingqing would go in herself to listen for a while. Naturally, this resulted in Wang Mutong's going over to bring his wife and children back to their cabin when it was time for bed. Sometimes, when Wang's voice was too gruff, Pan Qingqing would answer somewhat in the tone of a spoiled child:

"It's early! When it's all dark we'll go to bed. It's such an awfully long time till it's light again!" Then she would go on, "When it's all dark we'll go to bed." The woman now thought the night was "awfully long."

Wang Mutong was perturbed. This big forest guard who could eat an entire *jin* of rice at a single meal never went to listen to the magical songs and voices which came out of that bewitched black box. He maintained the dignity of a man who would not tolerate offence, while he solemnly observed how the situation develop.

Not long after, Ace Hand helped Pan Qingqing and the two children clear away the refuse from the vacant plot between the two cabins. They neatly stacked the firewood by the doorway, leveled the ground and removed the pig and dog manure. Soon the whole place was looking neat and tidy. Ace Hand said they should grow some flowers on the lot. He also promised to teach Pan Qingqing and the children how to read and how to do exercises following the radio programmes. This made Qingqing so happy that she was all smiles. After that the children tagged along behind Ace Hand from morning to night. They talked incessantly of what "Uncle Li says" and what "Uncle Li forbids." They had grown closer to him than to their own father.

This made Wang Mutong all the more uncomfortable and irritable. Although Li Xingfu had only one hand, he had unwittingly altered the life at Green Feather Hollow as completely as earthworms had silently turned over the whole fields.

"Woman, he's come to this hollow just to show that he's a cultured type and to show up your old man!" said Wang Mutong to his wife.

Sure enough, Ace Hand eventually put forward four proposals. One was that they should ask the District Headquarters to send someone immediately to repair the telephone line which had lain broken for many years, and that a wired-broadcasting system should be installed on the plot between the two cabins. Secondly, he proposed they post painted wooden signs at every mountain pass around Green Feather Hollow displaying all ordinances concerning forest preservation. The third proposal was that they set up a fire-watch patrol schedule. He and Wang would carry on two shifts between them: a morning shift and an afternoon shift, each one eight hours long. While on duty it would be impermissible to gather firewood, dig for valuable roots or attend to any private matters. The fourth proposal was that they set up a small study group to discuss politics and culture in which Little Tong and Little Qing could also take part. When Pan Qingqing heard the proposals her face lit up. She gave Wang a sidelong glance which expressed what she wanted to say without using words:

"You see, this young man has culture; he doesn't think as we do and he speaks so beautifully!"

Wang had expected something like this for quite a while. His face stretched taut, his mouth clamped tight as an iron vice, and his eyes were full of fire as he stared at his woman ferociously.

"A newly-built outhouse smells great the first few days. Watch yourself!" Then he said brusquely, to Ace Hand:

"We've got a saying around here something like this; 'when city boys come to the country they ought to act as the locals do.' In other words, the guest ought to follow the host's lead. Of course, you're not a guest here, but you don't rate as the host either. There hasn't been a forest fire at Green Feather Hollow for twenty years. Is there a leader in this whole district who wouldn't find that commendable? Has there ever been a time when I didn't act as a model guard? I've never had to rely on a telephone line, or wooden signs, or two shifts of patrol or any study group. You'd be better off keeping your axe sharp and your body strong. The district put me in charge of what goes on in this hollow a long time ago. Don't forget those three conditions given you by Chairman Wang from the political section."

With a severe look, Wang Mutong crossed his arms behind his back, his eyes flashing.

Ace Hand stared blankly, his mouth agape, his face pale. Pan Qingqing looked apologetic, but she dared not utter a word of reproach to her husband for his rude and unreasonable behavior. She said to Ace Hand, "Brother Li, he's not a cultured person and these are only the words of a …" But when she saw herhusband was on the verge of flaring up again, she said no more. Wang Mutong laughed coldly and then said:

"Yes, I'm just a hick and he is cultured, but these are times when the cultured are led by the hicks. We hicks are in charge now! Don't you forget, Li Xingfu, that the leaders sent you here to Green Feather Hollow to be

educated! To be reformed!”

Having said that, he swung his massive body around and left. His footsteps were ringing with a booming sound that made one think he was leaving craters in the ground at each step.

Ace Hand’s proposals were up against the stone wall of Wang Mutong’s stubbornness, and there was not going to be any break-through. His heart sank. What Wang said was true, though. He had been sent out to this hollow to be educated and reformed. Indeed, nowadays it was a matter of hick educating the educated. This was the fashion. So be it. He could not help fearing Wang Mutong, somehow. He knew as well that he could not change the present unfortunate situation himself. Still, he was energetic and full of vigor. He did not let himself fall into idleness, for when he was idle he would feel lonely. Then he would ponder the meaning of life and even wonder if throwing himself off a cliff might not make more sense. He had brought with him two books printed before the “cultural revolution.” One was *A Survey Of Tree Species* and the other, *Common Facts About Forest Fires.* Every day as he patrolled the mountains he would bring along *A Survey Of Tree Species.* By studying the illustrations he learned to distinguish the several hundred different kinds of broadleaf evergreens in that area. He planned to carry out his own study of the natural resources in Green Feather Hollow, both to prepare the first data of that sort for later logging operations and to ensure that his stay here was not completely fruitless. He thought Pan Qingqing might understand so he told her of his plans. Sure enough, she advised him as kindly and gently as she would, be advising her own brother:

“Silly! Go ahead and do what you want. You don’t need anyone’s permission.”

“You don’t think Brother Wang will mind?”

“Is there anything wrong with what you want to do? Oh you …” As Qingqing said this her voice lingered on the last word. Her shining black eyes pierced him as she spoke directly to his heart.. Without knowing why, Ace Hand was afraid to look into those eyes. Qingqing’s admonition sounded like music, and like a mountain stream it turned and twisted its way and found into his heart.

Autumn had arrived. Ace Hand collected the seeds of cliff fir, golden forest lotus and ginger trees. He kept the seeds in an old envelope. He thought he would set up a small nursery in which to plant the seedlings so that later he could take the saplings down to the Forest Department, where he could hand them over to the technicians for proper care. In order to prepare the nursery he had to burn out a clearing in the wild shrub first. He knew Wang Mutong had not the slightest interest in this kind of endeavor, so he asked Qingqing to lend him a hand.

That day Wang was gathering firewood up on the mountain slope. As it turned out, the patch beside the garden which Ace Hand and Qingqing chose to clear, happened to be just the spot on which Wang had decided to plant his cotton. They set the plot ablaze. As a brisk wind was blowing, in no time thick smoke was billowing from a roaring fire. The two of them, were just like brother and sister talking and laughing, happy and cheerful.

Suddenly, Wang came racing down from the mountainside. With cold glare he snatched his axe from behind his back and leveled a pine sapling. Then wielding the young tree with both hands he beat out the fire. Ace Hand explained the situation at once. Enraged, Wang shouted back:

“Don’t ever do anything like this without my permission. I’ve got other plans for this spot! Li Xingfu, you should have asked me first, instead of torching down this patch on your own. Tonight I want you to write an account of self-criticism!”

“Whom should I give it to?”

“Whom should you give it to? Do you think I’m not in charge around here just because I can’t read? Let’s get one thing straight as long as you’re working under me. We’ll stick to the rules.”

Qingqing looked at her husband and wanted to cry. Wang ferociously instructed her:

“You go back and feed the pigs! Then get some water over here for the ashes.”

Ace Hand stole a cowering glance at Qingqing. Not daring to answer back to her husband, she turned around and walked away. She wiped the tears from her eyes with the back of her hand.

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Everybody had a certain degree of self-confidence, and self-respect. But if a small rip in it was left unattended it could become a hole, too wide to be papered over. Even the earth was rent in places. Wang felt the challenge from Ace Hand. At the same time he thought his own woman had turned wild; she was no longer as obedient or as docile.

When Wang went on his next trip to District Headquarters to pick up his family’s ration of grain, he felt an unexplainable anxiousness as he left the cabin early in the morning. There was something bothering him which he could not put aside. He was a rugged man with plenty of stamina. Though it was a 180-kilometre round trip on mountain paths, as night approached he started his journey back, carrying 125 *jin* of grain! By the time he got

back to his home he was reeking with sweat. The door to his cabin was unlocked and the light was shining bright within.

"Strange," he thought, "the woman had not yet gone to bed."

He walked into the room. No one was there: Then he heard laughter and music coming from Ace Hand's cabin. He felt the oven and the stove; they were both cold. He rushed out and ran to Ace Hand's cabin. There he could see everything clearly. His wife was sitting, her chin cupped in her hands. Little Tong was leaning against her knee, listening to the sound of a woman singing enticingly. Ace Hand was holding Little Qing on his lap, his cheek pressed tight against hers! Wang Mutong recognized the song coming from the black box. It was a love song of the Yao people, *Boyfriend and Girlfriend with Lovers' Hearts*.

"Oh how pretty, when my Mum was alive she loved to sing these songs," she said. Wang watched as his wife looked at Ace Hand with disturbing intimacy.

"The Yao people have always loved to sing and dance." Ace Hand too was returning his look with improper familiarity.

Wang Mutong could bear no more. He repressed the rage in his heart enough not to let out a torrent of filthy language and merely said:

"Little Tong! Little Qing! Are you two little devils planning to listen to love songs, all night? Do you see any light up in that sky?"

When Qingqing realized her husband had returned, she hastily grabbed Little Qing in one hand and Little Tong in the other and hurried, them outside. She said:

"*Ai ya*! You devil, why didn't you stay the night in the headquarters? Look how tired and sweaty you are!"

Wang Mutong didn't answer. He was grinning his teeth and then muttered uneasily, "I was afraid if I spent the night away, you'd spend it at his place."

When they got back to their cabin, Qingqing lit a fire at once to boil some water and warm up some food. She did not prepare any liquor though, afraid her husband might use it as an excuse to beat her. That night Wang showed an unusual coolness, a reticence that made Qingqing shudder. The atmosphere within the shack was tense. He used the hot water to wipe his body and wash his feet. Then paying no attention to the supper his wife had laid out upon the table, he solemnly and silently got into bed. Qingqing massaged his feet and back several times in a conciliatory way knowing the anger that was bottled up inside of him. But he lay as frighteningly still as, a heavy powder keg.

Wang Mutong was not just a powerful man, he was also calculating and self-centered. He felt his status in Green Feather Hollow was at stake. It seemed to him now that not just Qingqing but Little Tong and Little Qing might also forsake him. He was a simple, honest, exemplary forest guard suffering from the acts of others. Was he supposed to sit back and watch Ace Hand step by step steal his wife and children away from him? Could he let himself be defeated by an amputee, a care-free intellectual youth sent out to the countryside? Hell, no! To begin with he would have to re-establish his standing within his own household. Early the next day with a lively expression and eyes opened round he announced with a voice that boomed like muffled thunder:

"Little Tong, Little Qing, kneel for me! Kneel! Now listen! Starting from today both of you and your mother are forbidden to enter Ace Hand's hut. If any of you go in there, your old man will gouge out your eyes and break your feet!"

Qingqing turned pale as she listened to all this. Little Tong and Little Qing kneeled behind her, their teeth rattling in fear, trembling like two slender saplings in a winter storm.

Then, since Ace Hand had not yet left for work, Wang went over to his cabin to ask for the self-criticism he had assigned a few days before.

Ace Hand confessed that he had not written it yet.

"You haven't written it? So you think I was talking only for my own good? Listen, Li Xingfu, the district leaders have put you under me. From now on you're not allowed to do or say whatever you please. You must behave yourself properly. I'll give you one more day. Hand in your self-criticism tomorrow morning."

Glaring at him and with fists swinging like iron hammers, Wang Mutong laid down three more rules:

"From now on, every night you are to give me a report on your whole day's activities. We'll do it right here in this cabin. If you ever want to take time off you have to ask me first. You are not to come to my cabin unless you have a damned good reason! And one last thing, if you ever use that radio of yours to lure my family over again, you'd better watch out for these hands! One of my fingers could pull down that fir pole with all its wires and throw it right back beyond the mountains where it came from!"

In order to increase the effectiveness of his prohibition, Wang Mutong took one concrete measure too. Normal-

ly, when he left his cabin to go east by the narrow foot-path to the Forest Department, or west by crossing the stream to head for the hills on fire patrol, he had to walk past Ace Hand's cabin. Brandishing a shovel and rake Wang cleared out another foot-path for himself and his family, a roundabout route of an extra hundred steps or so. Clearly this was the way things were going to be; Ace Hand had no choice but to accept it. Wang's status in Green Feather Hollow had now become unassailable, somewhat like that of an intrepid forest warlord of ancient times and he was equally intolerant of disobedience. Formerly Wang had seldom gone to Ace Hand's cabin, but now that his wife and two children dared not go there, he went every night to listen to Ace Hand's report on his day's activities. Obviously, he enjoyed the taste of power in making Ace Hand as submissive as one of the "Five Bad Elements."\fn{A note reads: *Landlords, rich peasants, reactionaries, bad elements, and rightists*.}

The inhabitant of the small cabin now resembled a snail drawn into its shell. Even the music which the black box played was now just barely heard. Ace Hand bowed the neck to this new grim reality and admitted defeat. Life at Green Feather Hollow returned to its previous sleepy, lonely existence.

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The weather that winter was unusual. While there was heavy frost, it never snowed. The old people of the region said that this kind of dry winter would mean a dry spring. Every morning the innumerable acres of forest surrounding Green Feather Hollow were coated in frost. The broad-leafed evergreens looked as though they had silver strands draped over them. It was a white, snowy world before it dissolved each day with the noon-day sun. In the valley of the hollow the two cabins, one tall, one short, wore a crown of white jade every morning. The stream behind the cabins was lying frozen and gone was its past babbling sound.

On these dry, cold, frost-laden days, Qingqing would feed the pigs twice a day and cook two meals for the family. But as there were no chores for her to do outside, she got the old clothes out and did the mending work. Nowadays, it was her husband instead who took the children to the hills to play. Qingqing often sat at home beside the fireplace with a strip of cloth in her hand, sometimes as though in a trance for half the morning. Everyday Wang brought back a wild rabbit or badger. He would skin it first and nail it on the cabin wall. The meat dripping with fat would then be stewed in a large pot and its lovely smell would go for miles. Strangely, like a pregnant woman, Qingqing took only a tiny portion of the stewing meat and turned her head, nauseated. She felt as though a boulder had been weighing her down and below that rock were all the things of her life. Her husband beat her more often now. Her body was bruised black and purple. At night she would study her husband's expressions, watch his eyes, afraid even to breathe too loudly. During the beatings she would look on as his hands delivered their blows on her legs and her back, wherever the bruises would not show. Her eyes would change from moist to dry, dry to moist, and she wept at the bitterness of her life. She hated her husband's viciousness. She believed Ace Hand was the only one in the world who respected her, the only one who treated her like a human being. Her heavy-handed man treated her as if she were a criminal. Ace Hand and she were equally pitiful, she felt. But sometimes, too, she hated all that had happened. Why had he not gone anywhere else except Green Feather Hollow, only to disrupt her family life?

Oingqing was terrified every night when she crawled into bed and smelled the odor of her husband's sweat. Often she wept to herself silently in the pitch-dark, but little by little her despair turned to a desire to resist. Night after night when she came to bed she would stubbornly press her face against the wall as though it had been glued there. Even if her husband pulled and tugged she would not budge. Wang ground his teeth with hate and curse, as he said,

"I'd like to see you dead."

"Then let me die."

"Don't count on your luck. All you're thinking of is that young man."

"If you beat me, I'll shout. I'll shout."

"You slut!"

Unlike before, Oingqing now dared to fight back. She did not know why, but she realized somehow that he was very afraid Ace Hand would find out about her nightly abuse.

Life is lopsided; emotions defy logic. Oingqing knew she was changing though she was not sure whether it was for better or worse. One thing that was different this dry cold winter was that she now enjoyed dressing up. She loved to wear the silver Venetian head scarf and the rose colored felt jacket which in the past was lying on the bottom of the wooden chest. She kept her clothes fresh and clean, as though ready at any time to leave the hills for some visit. She also enjoyed filling the brass washbasin, which her mother had left her with clear stream water so that she could admire the reflection of her face. Several years ago she had asked her husband to buy her a mirror while he was on one of his trips to the Forest Department. Yet every time he came back empty handed, and merely

said that he had forgotten. It occurred to her now that he had done this on purpose, afraid that she would see how her face shone like moonlight, how her eyes sparkled, how her lips glistened like red lotus petals freshly laden with dew, how lovely her dimples were when she laughed, and how lovely they disappeared when she did not. Who would not be attracted to such beauty? Was Ace Hand attracted to her?

Oh! How scandalous! Her heart was beating fast and her mind reeling. She pressed her hands to her burning cheeks and bowed her head. It was as though she had done something so horrible and shameful that she felt she could no longer face another soul. Actually, of late she had often found herself gazing out towards Ace Hand's radio, soap, and cream for the skin still seemed as miraculous as anything in the world. It seemed in fact as if a completely new world were enticing her … Li Xingfu! Ah what a lovely name, "Xingfu" (means happiness). But was that pale lanky young man really happy? Each day he used his only hand to chop firewood, wash his clothes, cook his food, afraid even to look at me. When he meets Wang Mutong he acts as if he were confronted with a tiger. How pitiful! Though she acted with the charming shyness of young Yao women, she did feel a gentle and soft compassion for Ace Hand.

At one time, Ace Hand came back from a trip to the Forest Department and brought with him two sweets wrapped in gold and silver foil for Little Tong and Little Qing. Little Qing thoughtfully broke off a piece and stuck it in her mother's mouth. Qingqing hugged the little girl tightly and kissed her on the lips again and again. She asked crazily, "Little Qing, does Mum's mouth smell funny?"

"No! No!"

"Does it smell sweet?"

"Sweet. Mum, your breath is always sweet!"

How silly! Just listen to what you were asking your daughter. She thought back to half a year ago when Ace Hand had just come to Green Feather Hollow, and his talk with Little Qing as he brushed his teeth early that one morning. Her face flushed. The sweet slowly melting in her mouth seemed to drip down straight into her heart, She looked again at her daughter's pink delicate face and saw her own sweet lips reflected there, This was something his powerful husband could not control or even notice, for if he could, surely he would beat her for it too.

One day while Wang was in the hills collecting firewood Qingqing took a bucket to the stream to fetch some water, Ace Hand was there washing his clothes in the bone-chilling water. His hands were frozen stiff and red. She put down her bucket, rolled up her sleeves, walked up to him, took the clothes from him and began to wash them herself. Flustered, he straightened up and then stepped back.

"Qingqing, you shouldn't have done this! If Wang Mutong saw—"

Qingqing replied without raising her head, "What's the matter? We're not doing anything wrong."

"I know that, but Wang might beat you."

Her hands stopped. She said nothing.

"Look, your arms are all bruised."

"Be quiet! Stupid, my hands are bruised from the pigs. running up against them in the pen." Her eyes were now filled with tears, but she stoically held them back. There was nowhere she could go to cry out loud, to feel better afterwards. She dunked the clothes two or three times, scrubbed them, and then got them out of the water, wrung them and dropped them into his galvanized steel pail. Without turning back her head she scooped up her own bucket and walked away, forgetting to fetch her water.

Back in the cabin, she fell against the back of the door. Her hands and feet were like jelly and her whole body seemed to be sapped of energy. Her heart, however, was thumping wildly as though it wanted to leap from her breast. She did not cry; in fact she almost felt like laughing. This was the first time in her life she had ever done anything with a young man behind her husband's back. Qingqing felt pleased long after her racing heart had subsided. When her husband came back from the mountains he was not suspicious. She had won her first battle.

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The frost-laden drought continued into the new year. Many of the broad-leafed evergreens around Green Feather Hollow stood bare-limbed like starving old men with thin bony arms stretched towards heaven. A thick blanket of dry leaves lay on the mountain slope. Each time the frosty winds blew, fallen leaves of every shape and hue, like scraps of gold foil and jade pieces, filled the air with a rasping sound. Then they scattered pell-mell in their beautiful colors.

The long drought prevented Ace Hand from staying in his shell. Every morning he got out of bed before daybreak. Then with a hatchet hanging from his hip and the book *Common Facts About Forest Fires* tucked under his arm, he would go off to the hills on patrol. Several times he worked up enough courage to suggest to Wang Mutong that they ought to rake the dry leaves from the fire lanes. Wang paid no attention, of course, because he

disliked him and so ignored all his proposals. He said that only he, Wang Mutong, was in charge of Green Feather Hollow, and so everyone else could just keep his suggestions to himself. But this time Ace Hand showed a certain stubbornness. As though he had had a premonition, he adopted a rigorous schedule of fire-watch patrols. He persuaded Qingqing to take Little Tong and Little Qing out to clear the dry scrub from around the cabins. He also read *Common Facts About Forest Fires* over and over again to Little Tong and Little Qing, actually, he read it to Qingqing and Wang Mutong.

One morning Wang Mutong heard Little Tong ask:

"Uncle Li, what does it mean to run into the headwind?"

"That means if a forest fire is coming, you must head for where it has already burned and run to that place for safety."

"Uncle Li, what if our cabins burn up too?"

"Then we'll run to the stream and stay in the water near the bank where there're no tall trees around."

"Bullshit! Such talk of nonsense!"

Wang Mutong refused to listen to any more of this. He cursed viciously, scaring away Little Tong, and then asked Ace Hand:

"Li Xingfu, what are you up to anyway? Are you planning to set a forest fire here at Green Feather Hollow? Why else are you plotting how to escape from one?"

Ace Hand was left speechless by the question.

"Lao Wang, floods and fires show mercy to no one," he replied.

"Are you telling me then we are going to have a forest fire here this winter?" Wang disdainfully snatched *Common Facts About Forest Fires* from out of his hand. Although he could not read a single word, he flipped through it as if he were doing something beneath his dignity. Then he flung it back to Ace Hand and said:

"This is probably one of the books by those fortune tellers who try to predict the future."

"Lao Wang, this drought has lasted an awfully long time. The whole mountain is covered with dry leaves now, and every night the radio broadcasts …"

He didn't know why but Ace Hand always felt ashamed when he stood in front of Wang Mutong, looking like a pale weakling.

On hearing him mention the radio broadcast, Wang began to chuckle coldly. He interrupted to ask:

"Has that black box of yours been singing any more of those moaning love songs lately?"

Ace Hand did not know how to take his remark. But he kept a straight face and said:

"Lao Wang, I have a suggestion. I'd like you to report to the District Headquarters for me. Ask hem to send someone out to repair the telephone line immediately. If by any chance something did happen, some sort of emergency, we need a way of contacting the outside world."

"If you want to make a report, just go to headquarters yourself and do it there. I'll give you two days leave! While you're there why don't you find out if they can send a whole brigade to stay up here too!"

Wang Mutong gave Ace Hand a deriding sidelong glance and casually yawned.

"I'm bragging, but I've been living at Green Feather Hollow over twenty years. I guess I know something about forest fires!"

That night, as usual, Wang Mutong went to Ace Hand's cabin after dinner. What was surprising was that while in the past Wang always assumed a chiding manner as though he were lecturing one of the "Five Bad Elements," tonight he acted differently. He was unusually amiable.

"Comrade Li, when you're at the headquarters, will you do me a favor?" He took out a piece of white paper which he had brought along and asked Ace Hands to write for him a request to join the Party. Ace Hand was astonished. Wang Mutong put one of his fingers between his teeth and bit it till it began to bleed. Then he held his finger as though it were the pole of a banner. It was dripping with blood.

"Quick write this out for me: 'Esteemed and beloved Forest District Leader, I am writing you in my own blood this request to join the Party. I'm not educated. I am a country hick, but my heart is red. I will always do whatever the Party says.'"

Ace Hand was terribly frightened. He quickly found a writing brush and dipped it in the blood on Wang's finger as he wrote. He finished the request as fast as he could. Oh dear! He dared not look at that blood, and his whole body trembled, his clothes soaked through with sweat. Once the blood letter was written, Wang carefully folded it and stuck it into a pocket in the inner layer of his clothes. He did not trust Ace Hand after all. He would not let this politically unreliable person submit his sacred request to the District Headquarters.

The next morning, without even having bandaged his finger, Wang set fire to a new patch of land beside his

garden because he wanted to clear another section of his private plot. He was a hard worker, and had already cleared about two thirds of an acre of land for vegetables. The district required only that he raise three pigs, cure the meat at the end of the year and turn it in. Whatever else he raised beyond that belonged to him. He paid no attention to any philosophy or "ism;" his belief in the Party was a belief in himself. He thought the Party should be composed of people just like him. He raked the dead branches and fallen leaves into big piles and then set them ablaze. Every year after winter he burned the area in this way to fertilize the fields; even though there was a drought this winter he would not think of breaking with tradition.

Ace Hand was petrified of Wang Mutong's burning of the brush during such a dry spell, yet he dared not say anything against his doing it. He could not sleep well at night, and he often had nightmares of a monstrous and bright conflagration, as magnificent as the clouds at sunset, racing along as swiftly as a river. For two nights he secretly climbed the mountain to cut a branch of a fir sapling. Then he stood on watch beside the heaps of ashes left by Wang Mutong's daytime burnings. He would stand there for most of the night. The winter wind assaulted his hands, feet and face and they were stinging with pain. Why did he guard these ashes? He had not written a blood letter requesting to join the Party. Even if he had, no one would believe what he was going to say about what he had seen. In the ashes he could see flames and sparks. All that was needed to start a forest fire was a few such small sparks falling on the leaf-covered mountain slope. Once started it would spread, consuming everything in its path. He should go back to the headquarters to make a report. First, ask them to send someone to repair the telephone line; second, request they send someone here to check up on the work being done at Green Feather Hollow and convince Wang Mutong that he had to change his ways. He told his plans secretly to Pan Qingqing. These past few days her eyes were swollen and filled with tears, and she faced him with a bent head. She felt tender love, resentment and hate towards this pitiful young man. She always felt as if she had a world of things to say to him.

That afternoon as Ace Hand stood hunched over his oven preparing some food for his journey, Qingqing suddenly dashed into his small cabin! This was an open violation of her husband's severe month-old prohibition. Ace Hand bewildered, stood up. Qingqing appeared to have just come back from work outside. She was wearing only a flimsy blouse, which was too tight. The button beneath her collar had come open, half revealing a portion of her enticingly full, well-rounded breasts.

"Qingqing, what are you …" Ace Hand lowered his head. He was so alarmed he could not even finish his question.

"Idiot. Sometimes you're smart but sometimes you're so stupid. I'm not a mountain demon!" she said, because Ace Hand indeed looked utterly scared, as though he had just seen a ghost. Pan Qingqing felt more than ever a mother's tenderness towards him.

"Qingqing … you … you …"

"I've come to ask you to do me a favor when you go down to the headquarters."

Ace Hand pulled himself together, raised his head, and looked at Pan Qingqing.

"Here's 100 *yuan*. Please buy a radio just like yours for my family. Buy a mirror too, some soap and some of that skin cream. Also buy Little Tong and Little Qing those brushes that you brush your teeth with every morning. We'll set up a pole, at our place too, to put up an antenna."

Ace Hand gazed at Qingqing in amazement. This forest woman was really like a goddess of beauty. Her breasts were full, her limbs were well proportioned, and her body were healthy and strong. She was gentle and sweet, her body radiating an irrepressible youthful energy.

"Hey, what are you looking at me like that for? I'm as miserable as you are." Pan Qingqing piquedly turned sideways, her face blushing and her eyes lowered.

"Oh, yes, yes, Qingqing, I was ah … I ah …" Ace Hand temporarily lost his train of thought, as though he had discovered something glowing from Qingqing's body. In no time he awoke from his trance and said with a blushing face:

"If you spend all this money at once, aren't you afraid that Wang Mutong—"

Qingqing had been looking at him with an expression filled with joy. But when she heard him ask if she was "afraid of Wang Mutong," she felt as though he had sprinkled salt on the honeyed sugar in her heart.

"Afraid? I've been afraid for over ten years now. Every winter he catches animals, every spring he sells the skins, and all that money is added to a salary which neither one of us ever spends. Our cashbox is filled with ten *yuan* notes. He can't bring himself to spend it. He doesn't even know what to spend it on. No! I'm not afraid! The worst thing that could happen to me is that I might die."

As Pan Qingqing said this, her eyes were filled with tears.

"Qingqing, give me the money. I'll buy these things for you," said Ace Hand, his eyes now brimming with tears too. Don't cry. You've been wronged. I am worthless. I hate myself! Qingqing, please don't cry. If Wang Mutong came down from the mountain, and saw us now he'd beat you and curse me."

"Oh you, you are not a human being. The ivy which clings to my cabin has more strength than you!"

Qingqing glared at Ace Hand with resentment and hate. She turned and left.

"Qingqing, Qingqing!" Ace Hand ran to the doorway; he meant, unconsciously, to lift his arms to embrace what he desired, but his left empty shirt sleeve remained dangling at his side.

*

When Ace Hand reached the Forest Department, he found that people everywhere were writing slogans in large characters:

Oppose the Rightist Deviationists!

Criticize the Capitalist Elements Within the Party!

The cadres and workers in the tall office building of the headquarters were all shouting in confusion, running in and out of their offices. Ace Hand thought it would be most appropriate to make his report to Chairman Wang of the Political Section. After all, it was Wang who had sent him to Green Feather Hollow in the first place. He waited almost all morning beside the office door. When it was almost time for lunch he leaned in through the doorway.

"Eh? Li Xingfu? What are you doing back here?"

Chairman Wang, who had been preparing to leave, was standing before his desk. He patted his forehead and then placed his hands on his hips, but his attitude seemed pleasant enough. As best he could, Ace Hand hurriedly reported his suggestion that someone be sent to repair the telephone line.

"Fix the line that's been down these last 10 years!" Wang exclaimed, astonished at the very suggestion. "Is this Wang Mutong's proposal? Ah, so it is yours, after all! Li Xingfu, we rely on Wang Mutong to take care of things at Green Feather Hollow. Although he's not educated he is very reliable politically. He's been an exemplary forest guard for over ten years. It's not like we can just snap our fingers and have that telephone line fixed. That sort of thing requires money and materials, you know. Very soon now another political campaign will be underway. We've got to call on everyone in the country to oppose the Rightist deviationists. This is our most important task at the moment. Do you understand?"

Ace Hand then proposed that the headquarters send someone to Green Feather Hollow to investigate the fire prevention work there. He reported, too, how Wang Mutong had been burning fields during the dry season. He began to fear that Wang was impatient because he wanted to go to lunch.

"Hmmm, Li Xingfu, it seems you've made some improvement since I saw you last."

Again, Wang appeared to be surprised, but as he went on his expression turned severe.

"However, let me make this clear: we here at the headquarters have complete trust in Wang Mutong! While you are stationed at Green Feather Hollow, you are to follow his orders, learn from him and be reformed by him. Don't try any more of these tricks. I understand that Wang's wife is young and pretty; don't do anything you shouldn't or you might lose your other arm, too. You're still young, and you've got a future ahead of you. Behave accordingly!"

So that was that. Not only was Ace Hand unable to make a full report, but he was also given a stern reprimand. Obviously, the leaders did not trust him. He felt as though all that talk had gone for naught. He was like a sore-ridden mongrel, driven from place to place, kicked and beaten by everyone along the way. He spent the next two days walking by himself along the main street between the supplies cooperative and the plant nursery. He hated his parents for having urged him to be schooled; he hated the fact that he could not be transformed back into an illiterate, foolish hick so he might join the ranks of Wang Mutong and that sort. These days no one felt that education was worth it; on the contrary, nowadays wherever you went people believed that knowledge was the cause of reactionary tendencies, and that only people like Wang Mutong could carry on the revolution.

Eventually, he thought of Green Feather Hollow, of Qingqing, Little Tong and Little Qing. At least there, in

that little secluded place, cut off from all the world, were three people who did not look down on him, who believed in him. At the thought of this, Ace Hand seemed to come back to his senses. He bought two months supply of oil, salt and rice at the grain store. Then he went to the cooperative and bought Qingqing a transistor radio, soap, skin cream, toothbrushes and a big round mirror with a loop on the back. Finally, he went to the grocery store and bought two *jin* of steamed buns. Early the next morning, carrying the load with a bamboo pole slung across his shoulder, he started off for Green Feather Hollow.

When he got to Black Mountain Valley, the sun was already setting in the west. Just one more ridge and he would be at the hollow. He would be safe and sound in his cabin before it was completely dark. Then he saw some black smoke wafted over from the hollow by the breeze. Was Wang Mutong still burning clear some fields? Why was there so much smoke? He was already exhausted but he did not stop to rest. He wanted to get to the mountain pass quickly to have a clear view. As he became more anxious his legs became heavier. A horrifying thought was creeping into his mind. Just before he reached the pass, he could smell the smoke carried over from the other side of the mountain and hear the cracking and roaring sounds of fire!

Good heavens, Green Feather Hollow was not burning, was it? But where else could this smoke and roaring sound have been from? The sky, slowly darkening now, glowed red above the mountains; was it the setting sun? The evening clouds? Or was it the raging flames of a forest fire?

He raced up the mountain, his entire body dripping with hot sweat. Beads of perspiration the size of finger tips clung to his forehead. It was as if some spirit had been pulling him towards the mountain pass. Soon a raging fire which filled the valley with its incarnating light dazzled his eyes. He nearly fainted. Green Feather Hollow! Heavens! Green Feather Hollow was a sea of flames! The mountain winds stoked the fire, whose tongues of flames resembled thousands of giant centipedes stretching out and up along the mountain ridge, cruelly, wantonly leaping upward. The valley was filled with wave after wave of billowing smoke; the roaring fire surged ahead. Trees centuries old were burned entirely, their trunks looking like giant torches. The scorched cliff crumbled with booms like land mines. From out of the clouds of smoke shot flaming red arrowheads, which flew like dancing crimson snakes in the scorching blasts of air.

"Qingqing! Little Tong, Little Qing!"

Ace Hand dropped his bamboo pole at the pass. Shouting, he ran down into the flame-engulfed valley. Though faced with imminent danger he could not leave behind Qingqing, nor the children. They were the only three friends he had. He ran ahead recklessly. Amazingly he did not stumble. Soon he ran into the clouds of chokingly thick smoke, where he saw a raggedly dressed woman with disheveled hair and dirty face climbing towards him.

"Qingqing! What's happened! Are you all right?"

Ace Hand called to her ecstatically when he realized it was Pan Qingqing. When she saw him her two hands reached out in a plea for help before she collapsed to the ground. He dashed to her side. Half kneeling, half squatting he embraced her.

"Qingqing, Qingqing. It's me, Li Xingfu."

Ace Hand's throat was dry, his voice hoarse; he cried as he spoke to her. It took almost ten minutes before she regained consciousness. When she opened her eyes she murmured:

"You, you. I always thought I'd see you …"

Then she laid her head on his chest and sobbed.

"Oingqing, don't cry, don't cry. Tell me how the fire started."

"Let's go. Help me up," Pan Oingqing said as she struggled to her feet, and then tried to stagger up the mountain slope. Ace Hand jumped to help her, only to hear her say:

"That damned heartless bastard! That same day you left for the headquarters he discovered our cashbox was 100 *yuan* short. He accused me of stealing the money to give it to you. No matter what I said he wouldn't believe me. He beat me about the head and chest. He beat me till there wasn't a part of me that wasn't black and blue. Damn him. Then he locked me up in your little cabin. For three days and nights he gave me not so much as a sip of water. I spent all last night using my fingers to scratch and twist free one of the boards. Then I ran to the stream to drink and saw the forest was burning … those fires he started … burning … burning all the wild things of the mountain."

"And Little Qing, Little Tong?"

"That bastard! After the fire started, he took the cashbox and led Little Qing and Little Tong along the stream and out of the valley. That is the way you told him."

Pan Oingqing's body sank weakly against his shoulder, but she did not cry any more. Instead, she began to comb her hair, and even reached out to brush back a sweat-drenched lock of hair from his forehead.

Ace Hand was terribly frightened by this immense disaster. They climbed up to the pass to find the bamboo pole he had dropped earlier. Once there; he remembered that he still had two *jin* of buns in his pocket and a flask of cold water. He quickly brought them out and gave them to Oingqing to eat.

Qingqing was starving. She devoured each bun in only three or four bites. After consuming four of them, Ace Hand gave her some water. Qingqing leaned against his chest again and rested. Ace Hand hugged her tight as he stared blankly into the raging fire below. He suddenly remembered that behind the mountain opposite was Lovers' Hollow. There in that hollow was a beautiful stand of cliff fir and golden forest lotus. He had heard the nursery specialists talk of it. The age of these two kinds of trees dated back to the time of the ice ages. They were living fossils that existed on the brink of extinction. His heart brightened, he said to her:

"Qingqing, the fire has only burned part way up the mountain slope. Let's circle around to the opposite side, to the fire lane that protects that mountain ridge. If we can save the trees at Lovers' Hollow, someday, if we're ever able to make our way back to the headquarters, we'll have something to say for ourselves." Yet having said this, Ace Hand looked back upon the narrow foot-path that led to the headquarters with eyes that clearly said this was his final farewell.

"I'll go with you. No matter where you go, I'll follow." The food and short nap had revived this strong young Yao woman.

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The forest fire at Green Feather Hollow was spotted by a P.L.A. radar post 100 kilometers away. The post immediately telephoned the Misty Border Mountain District Headquarters. The Forest Department leaders ordered a brigade of men with horses to go into the mountains to fight the fire. Unfortunately most of the valley's evergreens had already burned, leaving behind naked black charred trees which looked like gangs of demon prisoners who had managed to escape from Hell.

Seven days later Wang Mutong returned to the headquarters with his two children and carrying a wooden box. No one knew where or how they had survived the catastrophe. He did not know what had happened to Pan Qingqing or Li Xingfu. With tears streaming down his face, he confirmed that "the fire" had been set by Pan Qingqing and her adulterous lover, Ace Hand. It had nothing to do with the fires he had set to clear the fields. For over ten years he had been a model forest guard. To vindicate himself further he presented to the Headquarters Party Committee his blood written request to join the Party.

Naturally the district leaders believed his sobbing report. They sent some civilian militia to Green Feather Hollow to track down and arrest the two lovers. During their few days in the ash-covered mountain spot the militia found only the charred remains of some wild animals. No one knew if Pan Qingqing and Li Xingfu were still alive.

Meanwhile the district, as everywhere else, was caught up in a class struggle that was to decide the fate of the nation. In order not to impede the progress of the "Oppose the Rightist Deviationists" movement the civilian militia filed a report according to the custom of that time which announced:

"The fire started by class enemies was extinguished in time by the revolutionary cadres and masses …"

And that was that.

Wang Mutong refused to go back to Green Feather Hollow under any circumstances. Fortunately, the headquarters had just received an urgent message from Heaven's Gate Cave, a forest area on the border of Guangdong and Guangxi provinces, that an old forest guard had died of illness. The district leaders sent Wang Mutong and his two children there to take up the post and continue his difficult, wild, self-reliant way of life. It is said that that year Wang Mutong married a Guangxi widow. He resumed his old habits of going to bed at sundown, and working arduously. As luck would have it, she also had two children, one boy and one girl. Both of them hoped that they would make perfect future partners for Little Qing and Little Tong. So a new generation was reared at the old cabin of Heaven's Gate Cave.

After the fall of the treacherous Gang of Four, many people in the District Headquarters maintained that Pan Qingqing and Li Xingfu might still be alive somewhere deep in the forest, leading a very different sort of life. Other people surmised that once the nation had redressed all the wrongs suffered by those who had been unfairly treated, perhaps Pan Qingqing and Li Xingfu might suddenly walk hand in hand into the headquarters to ask for their just pardons.

Impossible? Even the naked black-charred trees which were not completely burned that year in the fire of Green Feather Hollow, have now put forth buds these past two years and their branches have been covered with new leaves.

82.57 The Twilight Years\fn{by Ching Chi aka Chu Li-li (1942-)} Hupei Province, China (F) 6

That winter afternoon when Mr. Ch'en moved into the Garden of Peace, the place was a bedlam. First, we were trying to find the reading glasses of forgetful Mrs. Niu; then we had to pacify Mrs. Li who was clamoring to go home with her family. We also found a large pile of underpants in the drawers of Mrs. Wu who was addicted to stealing. At a time like this, Mr. Ch'en walked in with his son. He held his head up high, his lips pouting, and refused to say a word. Later, even when his son said goodbye to him, he ignored him. It was then that Mama Wu, who had been working here for years, made a prediction:

Just wait and see—this is a trouble-maker!\fn{The text has: *trouble-marker*.}

Located in Southern California, Garden of Peace was a retirement home specifically designed for Chinese people. The old folks living there must be mobile, able to go to the bathroom by themselves, and not be bedridden so as to require care twenty-four hours a day. The place provided Chinese food; all those on the staff were also Chinese. There were several middle-aged women from mainland China without work permits. The director was a registered nurse. She was the nominal director, though, and rarely came. The actual administration was handled by me. I had been working there for over a year; but the staff did not take me too seriously because they were all my senior in age.

Mr. Ch'en's son said to us apologetically: "If there were any other way, who would send his father to a retirement home? My father has always had a hot temper and since my mother passed away, we simply don't know what to do with him. Both my wife and I work during the day, our kids are teenagers and don't speak Chinese, and there aren't many Chinese where we live. He's by himself all day long and must feel very lonely. His hearing is poor, but he does not want to wear a hearing aid, which has caused many misunderstandings between him and my wife. She says he is playing dumb just to slight her. His eyes aren't very good either, and he is also forgetful. Sometimes he leaves something on the stove and then forgets about it. Last time, he almost got the house burned down. It was the neighbor who saw the smoke and pulled him out of the house. It's just not safe for him to be home alone …"

Mr. Ch'en was eighty-five years old, with deep wrinkles like tire tracks all over his square face. I told him about the establishment as I helped him put his belongings away in his room. He sighed and, with a heavy Shantung accent, declared loudly:

"It's meaningless when you're old. Even your own son doesn't want you any more. You've spent your whole life rearing him, and this is what you get!"

Although hoary, his voice was sonorous. Coming from the dried, bent torso, it gave me a strange feeling, as if he had been a big tall man to begin with, but somehow had been shrunk and only his voice was left intact.

Early next morning, there was some hub-bub in the dining hall. I went inside and found Mr. Ch'en arguing loudly with Mama Wu. When I finally managed to calm everyone down, I inquired about the cause of the argument. It turned out that Mr. Ch'en thought the scrambled eggs were too salty, so Mama Wu said she would get him something else. But Mr. Ch'en did not hear her, so the brawl broke out and grew louder and louder. At this moment, Mrs. Wang walked over, limping as she dragged her severely arthritic feet, and handed Mr. Ch'en a dish of eggs, saying:

"Try my scrambled eggs. See if you like them!"

Keeping his hands off the dish, Mr. Ch'en goggled at Mrs. Wang: "Why would anybody hire a cook as old as you?"

Unoffended, Mrs. Wang smiled: "I'm not a cook. I'm a resident too. Sometimes I help out in the kitchen. It's fun!"

Then Mr. Ch'en thanked her and dug into the eggs.

Seeing that the situation was under control, I decided to chat a bit with Mr. Ch'en: "If your hearing is poor, why don't you wear a hearing aid?"

"Those of you who have good ears don't understand. People are funny; when I wear the hearing aid, they all shout at me at the top of their lungs, for fear that I can't hear them. It almost explodes my head. But if I don't wear the hearing aid, everybody whispers like a mosquito."

"That's easy. You can wear it but don't turn it on." I thought I had come up with a brilliant idea.

"But 'm advanced in years. Often I can't remember whether I have it on or not, even when I do have it on. This foreign gadget, I just can't figure it out!"

We all burst out laughing. Mr. Ch'en then added: "Actually, being deaf has one advantage. Whenever I don't want to hear something, I just pretend I can't hear it. Nobody can do anything about that."

As he spoke, there was a gleam of playfulness in his eyes. He was no longer an eighty-five year old man. I thought this gentleman from North China was outspoken and likable; his presence added a touch of life to the Garden of Peace.

During the time I worked here, sometimes I felt really depressed. Most of the old people were glum and gloomy; besides eating and sleeping, all they did everyday was stare blankly at the television screen. They had no interest in anything else, as if they had one foot in the coffin already. But this kind of resident was ideal for the staff; those who were lively were considered troublesome. There did not seem to me to be a hard and fast line between life and death. Death is constantly near us, a conspiracy that we inherited the minute we were born. Every minute it erodes us without our knowing it. Long before we lie down in the casket, we die bit by bit, our life evaporating, little by little, like water. Working among those old folks, I was acutely aware of the silent procession of death. I could not understand why their families were so stingy with their visits. Why didn't they come more often to share those few moments while the old people were still conscious? Why did they only make a grand show of mourning after their deaths? If we spent more happy times together while they were still alive, there was really no need to mourn when death came.

At their ripe age, the old folks' personalities were fossilized and each stood out distinctly.

For instance, the eighty-year-old Mrs. Chao was fastidious about everything. She felt that if she did not watch out, people would take advantage of her. From the steamed buns for breakfast to toilet paper in her bathroom, her first words were always: "How come I have less?"

And then there was Miss Ch'en. This old maid's favorite word was "no." In private, we joked about it, saying when men courted her in her youth, she must have said "no" too many times: "no" to those who asked her out on a date, "no" to those who wanted to kiss her, and "no" to those who proposed to her. That's why she remained single all her life.

Seventy-two-year-old Mrs. Niu was relatively young, but her memory was virtually gone. She spent all day looking for her glasses or handkerchief. One day she couldn't find her dentures. The entire staff searched the place inside and out then finally they found them in her toilet. As to how the dentures got into the toilet, whether Mrs. Niu mistook it for the wash sink, we would never know, and we only regarded it as one of the many puzzles in the Garden of Peace. Sometimes, Mrs. Niu did not even remember her own name or where she was. Her language skills were regressing too. She probably had Alzheimer's Disease. If it got any worse, we would not be able to take care of her since she would have to go to a retirement home that provided twenty-four-hour's care.

And then there was Mrs. Ch'ien who complained about this ache or that all day long. If you asked her how she was doing, she would pour out to you all her aches and pains. Although she sighed as she talked about those symptoms that changed with each conversation, there was a touch of show-off, as if she alone had an especially pampered body to be inflicted with illnesses that ordinary people were immune to.

Mrs. Wu, on the other hand, was a cold, quiet, mouse-like woman. She liked to steal little things like steamed buns, soy sauce, peanuts, even other people's clothes, and stack them in her room. Every time Mrs. Niu lost something, we would sneak into Mrs. Wu's room when she was not there to search around. Usually, we discovered a large number of stolen goods. It was a good thing that Mrs. Wu only stole but did not keep track in putting them together. She never noticed that things were taken away from her.

Here, the women made up the majority of the population. Obviously, women live longer than men. There were only two couples. So it seems that when newly weds pledge "till death do we part," the probability ratio is quite low. As to the two couples, one of them never spoke. to each other; though they slept in the same room, they were like total strangers. The other couple were just the opposite. They argued all day long; not only did they bicker endlessly, they also dragged in a third-party to be the judge. It seems "till death do we part" is not necessarily desirable either.

The eighty-year-old Mrs. Wang was my favorite. Her hair was so sparse that it looked like cotton lint that would blow away in the wind any time. She was soft-spoken, with a feminine Soochow accent. She had severe arthritis; her fingers were swollen, her back bent over, her movement slow. She had to take several pain-killers each day; sometimes the pain got so bad that she could not get out of her bed. But she seldom complained and always treated people kindly. When we were busy, she would come and help, such as setting the table or washing up in the kitchen. Although some staff members thought she got in the way and complained to me in private, I always felt that work was therapeutic too. When a person ceased working, he or she became useless and grew old fast. So I hesitated to stop her.

Mr. Ch'en was the only bachelor in those days. His health was robust, his spirit pretty good too. Soon he got used to the life here. I think his speedy adjustment to the Garden of Peace had much to do with Mrs. Wang. Since

that "Scrambled Eggs Incident," they became good friends. Each morning, Mr. Ch'en would wait for Mrs. Wang in the dining hall to have breakfast together. They went everywhere together, watched TV together, took a walk together. Each evening, Mr. Ch'en would see Mrs. Wang back to her room like a gentleman. Nobody understood how they could have so much to talk about. They chatted softly all day long, his Shan-tung accent intermixed with her Soochow accent, attracting much attention.

The staff made fun of them, saying:

"Mr. Ch'en, you got a girlfriend!"

"How loving a couple you are!"

Mrs. Wang only smiled shyly, while Mr. Ch'en would laugh heartily. He could hear everything now as he wore the hearing aid every day, never once forgetting it.

Behind their backs, Mama Chang and Mama Wu said: "Look at Mr. Ch'en. An old man with a young man's heart. Who knows what he's up to!"

When spring came, evergreen Southern California was adorned with flowers everywhere. The garden in our establishment was blooming gloriously. Each morning Mr. Ch'en got up early and practiced T'ai-chi before breakfast. He said he had not done it for years and couldn't remember it very well. Some of the early-risers who saw him making the shaky moves would join him. With a bent back, Mrs. Wang followed stiffly but diligently at his side. From the beginning, she was his most loyal student. On a whim, Mr. Ch'en called his son for his writing brush and ink stand and started practicing calligraphy in the dining hall. His handwriting was shaky too, just like his T'ai-chi.

"It's meaningless when you are old," had become his catch-phrase. "When I was younger, I was known for the slender Gold style. Now my hands no longer take orders from me."

Then he guffawed:

"All my life, I don't know how to write English. Look at my calligraphy; these curves and twists, don't they look like English?"

Like a child, he got his face and clothes all dirty. Once he even knocked over the ink stand and spilled all the ink on the floor. Sister Liu who was in charge of house cleaning was displeased and almost threatened to quit. So I had to forbid him from practicing calligraphy.

Without calligraphy, Mr. Ch'en spent the whole day with Mrs. Wang, taking a walk hand in hand and chatting, or sitting close together on the sofa and watching TV. For quite a while, Mrs. Wang had not had a fit of arthritis, her bent back also seemed straightened. Mr. Ch'en was all smiles; no longer did he complain about being abandoned by his son and waiting to die. I was happy, too, for that rare feeling of spring in the Garden of Peace.

Little did I expect the reactions of Mr. Ch'en and Mrs. Wang's families.

It was a Saturday morning when Mrs. Wang's daughter came. Mr. Ch'en and Mrs. Wang were taking a walk hand in hand in the backyard. Mrs. Wang's daughter was shocked by the sight and her face changed color. Without greeting Mr. Ch'en, she took her mother out. When they came back in the afternoon, both were wordless, with ice-cold faces. Mrs. Wang's daughter sought me out to talk to me alone.

"Who's that old man?" She was a middle-aged career woman working in real estate, with a very sharp face.

"What old man?" Sensing her anger, I played dumb.

"That—that man who held my mother's hand," she spit those words out with difficulty, as if saying them made her lose face.

"Ah! You mean Mr. Ch'en! He's been here for three months. He used to be a military man, has taught in Taiwan, he's a nice old man."

"I think he's up to something, who knows what." So saying, she grew angrier: "You make it clear to him he can't take advantage of my mother. My mother is old, she can't think and can be easily fooled. As her daughter, I can't let her be taken advantage of—"

"What advantage are you thinking of? Two old people make friends, keep each other company—"

I was interrupted before I could finish: "Which room does he stay in? How far is it from my mother's room? Your rooms have no locks. I think this old guy is no good. Let me tell you, I put my mother in your care. If something happens, you'll be held responsible."

She stormed out in anger. She obviously meant it, for the next day I got a phone call from the director, saying that we must not allow men to enter women's rooms, that Mrs. Wang's daughter threatened to get her lawyer on our case, and that we must be very careful.

Two weeks later, Mr. Ch'en's son came to visit him; it so happened that Mr. Ch'en and Mrs. Wang were nestled on the sofa watching TV. Later, Mr. Ch'en spoke alone with his son, but both raised their voices so high

that everybody could hear them. His son accused him of losing his head and shamelessly falling for another woman. Mr. Ch'en said,

"I am your father, not your son. You abandon me here. With no kin, no friends, why can't I make new friends?" The son rebutted:

"I'm doing it for your own good. I want you to live a quiet, relaxed life here. But you've only been here a little while and already you've picked up a woman. How shameful of you! How could you face Mother in the underworld?"

"In what way am I wronging your mother? If she knew I had someone to keep me company, she would be relieved in her grave."

"You have totally lost your head!"

They broke up in bitterness.

For days Mr. Ch'en stayed solitary, practicing T'ai-chi with a straight face and not minding anybody. Finally, he probably could not stand it himself, so he came to me to talk.

"It's meaningless when you are old! You're not yet dead, but you are not treated like someone alive any more. My children wanted me to emigrate to the United States, so I sold my real estate in Taiwan, cut off all contact with my friends and relatives there, and moved here. I can't speak English, so I'm mute. I can't drive, so I can't go anywhere. Furthermore, my sight has gotten blurry and my hearing poor. Living in a retirement home, I'm not even treated like a human being. Why don't I just sit here and wait for death to come? This way, I won't make my children lose face."

Mr. Ch'en was crestfallen for a long time and was not seen with Mrs. Wang. All by himself, he stopped wearing the hearing aid. Those staff members who were keen on following the story predicted that Mr. Ch'eng was finally settling down.

He came to talk to me again:

"It's meaningless when you are old! I just don't get it. I don't have many days left; why can't I do the things I want to do? Why can't I spend my last days happily? Abandoned here by my children, why do I still have to listen to them?"

Not knowing how to comfort him, I kept quiet and listened.

"Miss Lin, you young people don't understand how we feel. Each night when I lie in bed, I watch the night and count the minutes. I know I am getting closer and closer to the end, but I can't stop myself from sliding into the bottomless darkness. How I'd like to lean on a warm body, a live human being, listening to a voice speaking. I want to know I'm still alive. Miss Lin, don't take me for a dirty old man. I'm eighty-five years old, I'm not interested in those things …"

Suddenly I was reminded of the director's instructions and became alert:

"Mr. Ch'en, you must never enter someone else's room at night. Do you understand that? Can you hear me? Otherwise, I'll lose my job. There is a regulation here that says only a married couple can sleep in the same bed."

"I was just saying that. I won't go into Mrs. Wang's room," he acknowledged having heard my words.

Lost in thought for quite some time, Mr. Ch'en suddenly raised his voice:

"Actually, what's wrong with my marrying Mrs. Wang? Once we are married, nobody would say anything about our holding hands or living together. Isn't that right?"

I was taken aback. An eighty-five-year-old man marrying an eighty-year-old woman. What a sensational headline! But then I thought, as long as they were willing and able, what was wrong with that?

"Yes! If you two want to get married, it will be wonderful to spend the last of life]'s journey together!"

Mr. Ch'en was all excited; he put on the hearing aid and went looking for Mrs. Wang. He talked loquaciously trying to persuade Mrs. Wang, but she was hesitant and kept declining gently. It was not until that summer when wisteria blossomed vivaciously that she said yes.

It became the biggest news in our establishment. In private, the staff treated it as a joke; even in front of the couple, they could not help making some cheeky remarks. Things like Mr. Ch'en's "old sword" was still sharp, or Mrs. Wang's "second spring" was here! Miss Liu from mainland China commented:

"I've never heard of anything like this! They are getting married at their age!"

I asked her if old people were cared for and respected by their children on the mainland.

"It depends. There are no retirement homes on the mainland, so children have to care for their parents. If the old folks can baby-sit or do house work, their children are willing to support them. Usually if the old people have a house or some savings, they live with their children. But some don't have anything and are too old to work. I have heard of many stories about old people being thrown out of the house by their children."

"Don't other people say anything?"

"Sure they do, but what does that do? If the children have the heart to abandon their parents, they won't care about what other people say."

"So it seems the mainland is no paradise for old people either."

"There is no paradise for old people anywhere. That's why I'm trying to save as much money as I can. If I have money, my children will be nice to me. There will be more problems for the future generations. With only one child per family, the child will have to support two parents; for a married couple, there are four to take care of."

When they heard about Mr. Ch'en's and Mrs. Wang's plan to get married, Mrs. Wang's daughter and son-in-law hurried over first. They took her out for a talk and brought her back. Mrs. Wang told me later that her daughter and son-in-law accused Mr. Ch'en of going after the family wealth and thought Mrs. Wang was muddle-headed and had fallen into his trap. They had already consulted their lawyer; if Mrs. Wang insisted on marrying Mr. Ch'en, there was nothing they could do. But they would take legal actions to cut off all financial ties with Mrs. Wang and would no longer be responsible for supporting her.

In less than two weeks, Mr. Ch'en's son and daughter-in- law, as well as his daughter and son-in-law living in the east, came too. His son-in-law was Caucasian. I wonder why Mr. Ch'en had never mentioned that. They sat in the living room and talked. Their voices were. so loud that everybody could hear them. Mr. Ch'en's son said that his father was too old and had lost his mind, and that he made them lose face; people laughed when they heard he was going to get married. He also said that his father was unfaithful to their deceased mother. To consider just one thing, did Mr. Ch'en still plan to be buried next to her in the future?

Mr. Ch'en got angry and said: "With your new education, how could you be so old fashioned? I did not think of it in the early days. Otherwise, I would have written a joint will with your mother, saying if I went first, your mother should look for happiness and remarry. If she went first, your mother would surely insist that I do the same."

Then the Caucasian son-in-law mumbled something in English before Mr. Ch'en's daughter turned around and said:

"Walter says both of you are old and your health is not very good. If one of you has any problem, you will have to move to a retirement home that provides all-day care. So even if you are married, you won't necessarily be together. Besides, now you receive social welfare for yourself and Mother. Once you get married, you will lose Mother's share. The cost here is exorbitant; with your own social welfare, it won't be enough. Mrs. Wang's situation is probably the same."

Afterwards, Mr. Ch'en confided in me:

"I thought since they left me here, they paid for the expenses. I didn't know it is the American government that's paying for me. I want to get married; not only are my children against it, even the American government is against it. What can I do? Really, it's meaningless when you are old."

So the marriage was called off. Peace returned to the establishment as in the past. Although Mr. Ch'en and Mrs. Wang still spent much time together, they had much less to say to each other and were not as close as before.

When fall arrived, the temperature rose and dropped capriciously. Many residents came down with a cold. For the average person, a cold is an ordinary thing; but for the old it is a big deal. The staff were busy like mad. In addition to routine duties, we had to attend to the patients so that their cold would not turn into pneumonia. Both Mr. Ch'en and Mrs. Wang fell ill.

By the time everybody got over the cold, Mrs. Wang was still sick. Everyday we took food into her room and fed her and helped her with going to the bathroom. I couldn't bear the sight of Mr. Ch'en waiting outside the door, so I called him in, had him wear a muffler, and let him keep her company. Since she came down with the cold, Mrs. Wang had begun to lose weight; she was petite to begin with, now she was all bones. Mr. Ch'en was saddened by the sight. Also out of thoughtfulness to the staff, he volunteered to feed Mrs. Wang, help her go to the bathroom, and do other chores. When I saw a gray-haired man feeding a gray-haired woman with a wobbly hand, I was deeply moved.

"I'm so sorry to let a man like you take care of me like this," her Soochow accent was also feeble.

"Why do you say that? I enjoy waiting on you. I've only come to realize it at my age. Men and women are equal; it's not that women should wait on men or men should wait on women. Serving someone comes from love within your heart. My wife waited on me all her life and I took it for granted; I even picked on her now and then. After a life of hard work, she left me and then I realized she did not owe me anything; it's me who owed her too much. I enjoy waiting on you; it's like waiting on my wife. Heaven is giving me this chance to repay her before I

go."

Mrs. Wang never recovered. Though I hated to break up the couple and kept stalling, I had to notify Mrs. Wang's daughter in the end and have Mrs. Wang transferred out. Since he found out about the arrangement, Mr. Ch'en sat in her room all day long; they had nothing to say but only gazed at each other.

The day Mrs. Wang was to move out, Mama Wu came running to me early in the morning and said something was wrong. I rushed to Mrs. Wang's room and found Mr. Ch'en, in his daytime outfit, lying on the side of the bed, holding Mrs. Wang in his arms. I called the doctor right away. Dr. Michaelson arrived shortly and examined them. Then he said:

"They died of natural causes; there's no suspicion of homicide or suicide. The result of my initial examination is that the woman died of heart fatigue and the man died of a heart attack. She probably died earlier than he by a couple of hours. When he found her dead, it brought on the heart attack."

He asked me the names of the deceased and started filling out the death certificates: "Were they husband and wife?"

"No. They met each other here and fell in love. They were going to get married, but their children opposed it strongly, so they called it off."

Dr. Michaelson who had seen many deaths was apparently touched. As he looked at the bodies on the bed, he said slowly: "They are the modern day Romeo and Juliet! We have no control over our birth; to put death in our own hands is a rare blessing too."

As soon as the doctor left, the director came running in. When she heard that they had died of natural causes, she felt a little relieved. Then she turned to me and said:

"I remember I had told you not to let any man go into a woman's room. I need to talk to you later."

I knew this day would come; I would probably lose my job. But the funny thing was I really didn't care and felt no regret.

The director hurried us to move Mr. Ch'en's body into his own room so as to avoid trouble. We did not expect an old man to be so heavy; even three of us could not lift him. Finally we had to put him in a wheelchair which two of us pushed. Mama Wu was making sarcastic remarks like "To die under a flower is well worth it." Before she could finish it, though, I stopped her with a stern look in my eyes. Once in Mr. Ch'en's room, we had a hard time moving him onto the bed. Then we pulled up the blanket over him and smoothed it out. There was not a wrinkle on the blanket, so that when the filial children came, everything looked the way it was supposed to look and they could start mourning.

83.47 The Legend Of Koxinga\fn{by Wang Hsüan aka Wang Hsiao-lien (1942-)} Shantung Province, China (M) 3

The ship sailed farther and farther out to sea, and although the light fog blurred his vision somewhat, he could still see the red hankie that his wife was waving to him from the shore. It had all seemed like a dream, he suddenly felt, and today he was finally emerging from that dream, step by step.\fn{Koxinga [Cheng Ch'eng-kung is his Chinese name (1624-1662); the name "Koxinga" is a Dutch linguistic bastardization derived from his popular Chinese title (*Kuo-hsing-yeh*, "Lord of the Imperial Surname," recalling the Act conferring the Ming imperial surname on him in honor of his allegiance to their cause)] was a general of the Ming dynasty (though born in Hirado, Japan), who fought the Manchu from a base in Fukien Province throughout the 1650's, drove the Dutch from Taiwan in 1661 and occupied the island's southwestern portion. He established a formal Chinese government with his capital at T'ainan, and ruled his territory as a Ming enclave, but died on June 23, 1662, apparently a suicide. (T'ainan remained the capital of Taiwan until 1885, when the Japanese removed it to Taipei.) This story, however, is concerned with his *father*, Cheng Chih-lung, who gained a vast fortune through commerce and piracy.}

The ocean surrounding Hirado Isle was as calm as ever, and even the waves produced by the winds rose in undulating swells. This calm expanse of ocean reminded him of his wife, who was still standing on the shore waving a red hankie at him. She too was forever calm: calmly she kept her seaside vigil here at Senri Beach on Hirado Isle, and calmly she waited for his ship to return. Never in their eight years together had she pressed him to talk about what he did, and whenever he placed the loot from his pillages at her feet, never once had a look of happiness crossed her face. Every evening at dusk she walked down to the shore, bamboo basket and small shovel in hand, to dig for shellfish. Even on that recent occasion when he had led his comrades in a raid on Nagasaki and had been wounded in the left shoulder by a *samurai* guarding the city, he could detect no sign of alarm or concern in his wife's eyes, when he had returned all bloodied to Hirado. She didn't even ask him how he had been hurt, but had merely cleansed the wound calmly with a piece of white silk. After daubing on a healing ointment, she had simply picked up her bamboo basket and gone down to dig for shellfish, returning after a while with her catch, which she soaked in clear water, preparing the *miso* soup for the following day's breakfast.

It seemed to him that his understanding of everything had come to him in a flash, that the red hanky his wife was waving at him was none other than the piece of white silk that had been stained by his own blood. For a fleeting moment a flicker of true understanding came to him, but it was quickly lost amidst his confused thoughts.

He was surprised to realize that the images of two pregnant women filled his heart at that moment; the wombs of his wife, who was standing there on the shore, and Yukiko, who lived in Nagasaki; both carried his offspring, and although he did not know when he would be able to set eyes upon his own children, he believed that it would be soon. He knew that he would be leading his warship back to Hirado Isle to fetch his son. He hoped that both of his children would be sons, imagining that they would someday grow up to be fine *samurai*, and that one would become the ruler of China, while the other would rule Japan. His reason for leading his followers in a raid on Nagasaki was to acquire a gift to celebrate the impending birth of his son—he wanted to present the city of Nagasaki as a gift to his son, so that he could become its ruler, and even though he failed on his first attempt, he was not disheartened-he knew that he would return to Nagasaki when next the winds rose.

"I do not want Nagasaki, nor do I want our son to be its ruler. I would prefer that he be a lowly fisherman, and not a *samurai* who battles his way across the land. A fisherman goes out to sea to fish at daybreak and returns at dusk; he can live a peaceful life with his woman, while a *samurai* must accept as his fate the need to kill and be killed. There has never been a *samurai* sword left unstained by the blood of men. All a *samurai* knows are his ambitions and his hatreds, and he is incapable of understanding the miseries and anxieties that are his legacy to the woman who loves him."

He thought back to that snowy morning when Yukiko had knelt in the *genkan,* holding his two swords in her uplifted hands as she saw him off; Yukiko—her name was Snow—with that red, bean-sized mole on her chest, standing in the snow dressed in a garment as white as snow.

He stood at the prow of the ship, unmoving, as he quietly listened to the gentle sound of his sleeves flapping in the wind; Senri Beach on Hirado Isle was now so far off in the distance that all he could see were the indistinct shapes of trees. From the sleeve of his *kimono* he took out a broken comb made from the bone of an ox. The scar from the break was as new. He did not know why his wife had chosen to give him this half of a comb that been broken in two. She had handed it to him under the lamplight on the previous night, without saying a word, and he had casually taken it from her and tucked it into the sleeve of his *kimono*.

The moonlight on the previous night had blanketed the ground like a layer of frost, and in that moonlight, his wife's pale face, framed by cascades of long black hair, had appeared more pale than usual. She had been sitting by the window quietly combing her long hair with this very comb. As he sat nearby drinking wine and gazing at the high cypress trees outside the window, he had said to her:

"Let us call our son Cheng Sen after the grove of trees, with the hope that he will grow into a pillar of a man as straight and powerful as the tall bamboo and the cypress, that he will become a pillar among pillars, a *samurai* among *samurai*."

His wife had quietly nodded her head, without missing a stroke as she combed her long hair. He had taken a dagger from his waistband and placed it beside his wife.

"Take this dagger and go pay a call on the feudal lord, the Hanshu of Hirado. He agreed to train our son to become a worthy *samurai*. You are to tell our son that he must never forget that he is the sole descendant of the 'Double Sword' Cheng clan from Ch'tianchou."

He had felt a sudden chill, as he watched his wife remove the dagger from its scabbard, then wipe the blade with a square piece of material she had taken from the bodice of her *kimono*. When she had finished, she had returned the dagger to its scabbard, then carefully knotted the cord attached to the handle. Once this was taken care of, she had picked up the comb and recommenced combing her long hair.

"And another thing: when the child is a month old, I want you to take some money to Nagasaki, where you are to give it to a *geisha* named Yukiko at the Cloud Skirt Geisha House. She too is carrying my child. If that child is a boy, he is to be called Tagawa Shichizaemon, so that he can carry on the line of Tagawa *samurai*."

The stillness had been broken by a crisp snap. He had seen that his wife was tightly grasping the broken half of a comb in her slightly trembling hand. Her face, pale in the moonlight, had seemed paler than it had ever been before. After his wife had wordlessly handed him the broken comb, she had picked the other half up off the *tatami* and slowly tucked it into her bodice.

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Dusk, the sky turned to fire by the setting sun, the fire in the water, the water in the fire, the fog merging with the water and fire growing thicker and thicker, the fog-bound Hirado now more than a hundred *li* in the distance. A solitary wild goose flew past the ship's sail, its mournful cry lingering in the air behind it. He raised the broken

comb in his hand and casually combed his hair, which had been blown loose by the wind, then tucked it back into the sleeve of his *kimono*. He recalled the day in that year long past when he had first set foot on the shore of Hirado Isle, a renegade who had stolen his way across the vast waters; it also had been at dusk on a foggy day. Now eight years had passed with the rising and falling tides. The memories of many past events suddenly filled his mind like the white fog that slowly covered the vast ocean.

After sailing across the stormy seas of the eastern coast of China, he had drifted to this tiny isle, where he had been plucked from the ocean by patrolling *samurai* and taken to the Hanshu. He had then realized that he was now no longer in China, that he had left Ch'üanchou behind him, and had arrived in a strange land. If he had not uttered the word "Deus"\fn{A note reads: *Portuguese for "God."*} just as they were about to execute him, he would long ago have become a ghost victimized by the Hanshu of Hirado. He had been spared by the Hanshu because he knew a foreign language and because he had been a Catholic; he was then ordered to be an interpreter during contacts with Westerners. A true friendship between him and the Hanshu had not developed until the second year after his arrival on Hirado Isle, when *samurai* from Setsuma had come to Hirado to do battle, and the defending *samurai* had been cut down one after the other. In order to repay the Hanshu for sparing his life, he had stood up to the enemy and, employing the "Double Sword" artistry of a member of the Ch'üanchou Cheng clan, single-handedly dispatched the Setsuma *samurai*. His martial skills had enhanced his position and reputation to the extent that he had become the sword-master of the 700 *samurai* under the control of the Hanshu, who had also become his matchmaker by securing his marriage to Tagawa Matsu, the daughter of the Tagawa elder Yokuo, in hopes that he would become a loyal follower.

Over the eight years that followed, his reputation as "the man from Tang whose 'Double Swords' know no peers" had been established via the spilt blood and sacrificed lives of countless wandering *samurai* from all quarters, but he and his wife knew what no one else knew, that for him those had been eight years of contradictions and inner struggle. Each time he had returned with his band of renegades from a raid on the southeast coast of China, bringing with him the spoils of his pillage, he had gone immediately to Nagasaki, where he had gone on a binge of several days. Meanwhile, his wife had never so much as glanced at the riches he had brought back; causing him a painful loss of self-respect. Although he considered himself to be a *samurai* of great renown, at the same time he felt that he was little more than an obedient puppy that had pledged its loyalty to its master, and in the service of this master preyed on its own kind. Never in all these years had he forgotten the words spoken to him by Yen Szu-ch'i during their first encounter on the open sea:

"Cheng Chih-lung, how can you call yourself a real man when you rob your own home with the help of Japanese pirates? If you have any guts, you'll come back to your own waters and make your way in the world."

Blackness had settled all around him, waves were crashing on the surface of the water, occasionally splashing their foam on him as he stood like a statue at the prow of the ship. He knew that he had sailed beyond the ever-placid waters of the bay surrounding Hirado Isle and had reached the coastal waters of China near his hometown of Ch'üanchou. He knew too that Yen Szu-ch'i was in nearby waters waiting for him, that his own countrymen were on Yen Szu-chi's ship waiting for him. He even knew that unlimited storms and an unlimited future were waiting for him not so very far away.

"I know that there is one thing that has caused you regret all these years, and that is that you have led my *samurai* to the shores of your homeland to rob and pillage your Chinese brethren. But did you know, Chili-lung, that something has caused me regret all these years too?"

The white-haired Hanshu of Hirado had looked straight at him with a threatening glare in his radiant eyes. Years of service had forced the other man into the habit of not looking directly into the Hanshu's radiant eyes. He had backed up slightly as he knelt before his lord and, with head bowed and eyes downcast, had quietly listened to what the Hanshu had to say.

"I regret not putting you to death. Truth to tell, I should have had you killed eight years ago when my *samurai* fished you out of the ocean."

"You can still order me to commit *harakiri*."\fn{Ritual disembowlment.}

"Ah, it is too late now. You are already full-fledged, and are no longer one of the creatures in my pond. I have grown old, and in my pond I can raise fish and shrimp, but not a dragon. A dragon belongs in the sea. But I hope you will remember that when you rule the waves you will not lead your *samurai* to my fiefdom to exact revenge. After you are gone, I will order my *samurai* to never again disrupt the peace of your homeland, so that an eternal bond of friendship can exist between us. I will keep your wife and child here with me for the time being. Since you lived in my fiefdom for eight years, I promise to match over them for eight more years. I will train your son to become a splendid *samurai*, and in eight years you may return to fetch your family and take them back to

China with you. It is the destiny of all Chinese to someday return to the land of their birth."

He had raised his head to look at the white-haired Hanshu, suddenly feeling that the man kneeling ramrod-straight in front of him was no longer a ferocious lord, but an accomodating old man. The old man had reached out and taken down his own sword from the rack behind him, which he had then held out in front of him with both hands as he said:

"I have used this sword for sixty years. Once you leave, my *samurai* days will come to an end. All 1 will need is a dagger with which I can commit *harakiri*. Take this and open up your own world!"

As his thoughts reached this point, he stretched out his hand and held firmly onto the handle of the sword.

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His eyes were completely bloodshot, his hair blew crazily in the wind as he stood like a fossil. He stood at the prow of the ship, unmoving, throughout the night.

A light fog covered the ocean as dawn broke. A flock of seagulls flew by looking for food. The sun began its skyward climb off on the horizon. He spotted a warship sailing toward him through the first rays of the morning sun; at the top of the mast flew a large banner with the single word *Yen*.

As soon as they made their rendezvous, Yen Szu-ch'i told him that the Manchu armies had already poured through the Great Wall at Shanhai Pass, and the situation was critical in the Eastern Ocean. He didn't know where he should sail his great warship. He responded by unsheathing his sword and pointing it southward:

"To Taiwan!"

At the very moment that he shouted the word Taiwan it seemed to him that he could hear the cries of a newborn child floating across the surface of the ocean from a great distance away. He instinctively thought of the shores of his Senri Beach on Hirado Isle. His son had been born, he thought to himself.

"What relationship does destiny hold for this child of mine and Taiwan?"

*

In the year 1624, Cheng Chili-lung led his warships to Taiwan; in that same year, his son Koxinga was born in Japan beneath an overhanging rock on the beach at Hirado Isle off the tip of the Matsuura Peninsula north of Nagasaki Prefecture.

The child born to Yukiko was also reared by Tagawa Matsu, and he was none other than Koxinga's brother, Tagawa Shichizaemon, whose descendants have remained in Nagasaki to the present day.

151.28 Trust\fn{by Chen Zhongshi (1942-)} "in a village near Sian," Shanxi Province, China (M) 5

A serious incident—a fight—had stirred every nook and cranny of Luocun\fn{Luo Village.} Brigade. The victim was Dashun, a member of the Youth League branch organization committee and son of Luo Mengtian, chairman of the Poor Peasant Association. The offender was Luo Hu, third son of Luo Kun, who had been branded a landlord in the Four Cleanups Campaign.\fn{The Four Cleanups Campaigns (1963-1966), also known as the Socialist Education Movement, was a national movement to clean things up in politics, the economy, organizations, and ideology.} Early this year he had been rehabilitated and reappointed brigade party secretary.

According to eyewitnesses at the scene—the well-drilling site—the whole thing was the result of sheer provocation on the part of Luo Hu. For some days past, Luo Hu and a few of the offspring of cadres who had been the targets of criticism during the Four Cleanups Campaign had gone about railing against those who had been active in the movement. Dashun, who had participated in the campaign, was quite aware of what they were driving at with their gibes. However, he just let them rail on, didn't say a word, and carried on with his work. Later in the day, during a break at the well-drilling site, Lou Hu and his gang got more worked up. They came out with the vilest, most unbearable language. Dashun, his face red with chagrin, couldn't stand it any longer and blurted out:

"Who are you cursing?" Luo Hu stood up:

"We're cursing whatever harmed people in the Four Cleanups Campaign."

Dashun, breathing heavily with anger, could not say a thing. Luo Hu strode up to him. He pointed at Dashun's red face and said even more brazenly,

"I'm cursing the one with the feverish face!"

"It's too uncivilized!" Dashun said, "Barbaric—"

Before he could finish his sentence, Lou Hu's fist had struck him heavily on the forehead. Dashun fell back a few steps, then steadied himself and came back at him. The two went at it. The other youths who had been behind Luo Hu all went up to them, pretending they were trying to break up the fight, but actually helping one side. Si

Long, the son of the brigade leader, took a firm grip of Dashun's right arm and someone else held back his left, allowing Luo Hu to punch and kick freely until a stream of blood shot from Dashun's face, and he fell to the ground, unconscious. That it had been a premeditated incident was only too obvious to eyewitnesses.

All at once, this affair became the chief topic of discussion all over the village. Relations between those that had participated in the Four Cleanups Campaign and those who had suffered in it became more tense than ever. A feeling of unease pervaded the streets of Luocun …

*

In the evening, after the spring rains, the mountains looked green, the water was pure, and the air was fresh. Patches of cloud floated at leisure; the ears of wheat were filling out, and the ripe pods were forming; the snow-white blossoms of the honey locusts on South Hillside exuded wafts of fragrance. At the bottom of the hill, by the mouth of the ravine, the party secretary Luo Kun and five or six commune members, whips in hand, were plowing the soft earth of the sweet potato field. Suddenly, Luo Kun's wife stumbled up the slope to the field in disarray, shouting in an unsteady voice:

"Quickly, it's terrible! …"

Luo Kun whoa'd the oxen, stuck the plow in the field, and rushed over.

"Something dreadful has happened!"

Luo Kun, greatly alarmed, asked, "What is it? Speak up!"

"Our third child and Dashun had a fight. Dashun … finished …"

"How is he now?"

"Carted off to hospital … no saying."

"Oh! …"

It was as though Luo Kun had been struck a blow on the head; his ears hummed. He stuck his whip in the earth and went down the slope, heading for the well-drilling site by the riverbed. As he walked, the tails of his shirt brushed the waist-high wheat and made a rustling noise.

At the work site, wooden staves, leather cord, picks, and shovels were strewn all about. A patch of young wheat nearby had been trampled. These were signs of the fight. Not a soul was to be seen; only the drilling frame loomed in the air.

From the temporary shelter made of rice straw where the tools were guarded at night, reckless words could be heard. Luo Kun turned to see: his third son Luo Hu was sitting there on a bed board with a few of his friends, playing cards. Luo Kun fixed his gaze on him and said:

"You had a fight with Dashun?"

His son answered, "Yeah."

"Had he insulted you?"

His son was unconcerned: "No."

"Then why did you fight?"

His son gave a full account of what had happened, without hiding his acts of provocation. He was quite willing to own up to what he had done. Luo Kun heard his son out with a stony face. Then he said with a sardonic smile,

"It was sheer provocation on your part. You sought to vent your rage on Dashun!"

His son rolled his head and blinked in silent acknowledgement. His air proclaimed to all—he wasn't scared. Luo Kun asked,

"Have you forgotten what I said to you at home?"

"Not at all!" his son replied. "During the Four Cleanups Campaign his father did us in good and proper. Now I'm no longer afraid of him! He—"

Luo Kun could bear it no longer. Hearing this, he raised one calloused hand and slapped it across his son's slightly flushed white face. His son ducked from the waist and turned his head to one side. Luo Kun turned and strode from the well-drilling site along the machine-plowed main road to the village in the dusk.

What a terrible business! It couldn't have come at a worse time. Luo Kun, with hands clasped behind his back, walked along the road laced with green grass. He just couldn't calm his feeling of frustration. During the Four Cleanups Campaign the old fellow, Poor Peasant Association Chairman Luo Mengtian, was someone the work team relied on. In the matter of branding Luo Kun a landlord, they had had the old man's seal of approval. During the ten years when he was an object of dictatorship, Luo Kun had hated Old Man Mengtian, thinking: You and I played together as kids; together we ran away from the press gang; we worked together in the land-reform and set up cooperatives. Don't you know me, Luo Kun, well enough? How could you put your seal to all that fabricated "evidence?" Feeling this way, he just didn't want to even speak to the old man.

But then, sometimes, he would think: When the high and mighty Four Cleanups Campaign work team showed up, how many could resist them?

Whereupon he would forgive him. But whether he hated him or forgave him had not mattered, for while he was an object of dictatorship, he had had no dealings with the old man. Then, this spring, his case had been cleared: he was taken back into the party. In elections in the party branch, he had been unanimously elected by party members to the highest position of leadership in Luocun Brigade. He had wept.

He had wanted to seek out Old Man Mengtian and have a talk with him, but he never succeeded. The exceptionally stubborn old man just would not talk with him. Not long before, Luo Kun had gone over to the old man's place, but his wife had claimed he was out, and had turned Luo Kun away. Not only was the old Poor Peasant Association on guard against him, but all those who during the Four Cleanups Campaign, under the "guidance" of the work teams, had criticized the cadres were now feeling guarded toward those who had resumed power.

And this is what troubled this party branch secretary, Luo Kun, most. After all, he thought, people are not of the same mind—and if everyone is on guard against everyone else, how can we promote production? How can we achieve mechanization? And precisely at the time when he was disturbed by the complexity of human relations in Luocun, his son had to go and get him into this terrible mess.

*

Luo Kun headed straight for Old Man Mengtian's place. As he stepped over the threshold, he braced himself for the worst; he was prepared to look upon the very worst face the old man could make and listen to the worst things he could say.

In the courtyard there was a bicycle, its carrier laden with a sack of rice, bread, tlothing, and the like, probably destined for the sick man. From the central room, a hubbub could be heard.

"Obviously trying to get his own back …"

"And his father had promised he'd 'forgive and forget!' What a lot of hot air!"

"Sue him! Take him to court. We can't go on like this …"

The voices were familiar: some of them belonged to a few who had been active in the Four Cleanups Campaign; the others were those of relatives of Mengtian.

Luo Kun paused. To go straight in would embarrass everyone. He stood in the yard and shouted,

"Brother Mengtian!"

The talking in the room stopped. Old Man Mengtian came out and stood on the steps, but did not come down. Luo Kun walked up to him and asked,

"How is Shunwa\fn{A dimunitive for Dashun.} doing?"

"Let him die and have done!" the old man countered angrily.

"But Brother, the child must be seen to at once!" Luo Kun continued, "Just so long as Shunwa is okay, the matter can be settled by the authorities right away—"

"Come off it!" Old Man Mengtian waved one arm. "First you strike with a hammer, then you stroke with your hand! Why bother pretending!"

So saying, he went down the steps, took his bike, and went out the gate.

Luo Kun stood there in the yard, feeling numb. The blood rushed to his face. He felt acutely uncomfortable, for he was a man of over sixty, an age that *should* be treated with a little dignity and respect! As he walked out the gate, he actually bumped into it.

He walked in his own door. The room was filled with people, men and women. Luo Kun swept his eye over the crowd and saw at a glance that those standing there were for the most part cadres like himself who had suffered "rectification" during the Four Cleanups Campaign—or their families. They were trying to allay his timid wife's fears:

"Don't be afraid! What if he did beat him up!"

"His father shouldn't have gone about doing people in in the Four Cleanups Campaign."

"To be honest, Old Man Mengtian has become a stinker!"

Call this patching things up? More like adding fuel to the flames! Luo Kun got quite fed up with their talk. Then he looked around and saw the brigade leader Luo Qingfa sitting there listening to all this kind of talk and feeling good about it! He tried talking to the brigade leader, but Luo Qingfa just poked fun at him, saying,

"So you went to make up with Old Man Mengtian, eh? I bet he just threw it straight back at you! My dear older brother, you are too timid! What a softie!"

Luo Kun sat on a wooden stump before the stove and would not so much as look at him. Recently, he had found quite a lot to resent in the brigade leader. As soon as he was appointed, he acquired for himself a nice plot of land in his own Third Team.\fn{A team is a collective unit of land and people.} This team had planned to build an electrically powered flour mill there, and so had turned down applications from several commune members. But when the brigade leader applied, the team leader was at a loss, and finally gave in. The kindhearted commune members felt that since the bridage leader had suffered wrongfully for several years, he ought to be given special consideration. And so it was passed. Soon afterward, the commune factory asked for a worker from the team, and it was the brigade leader's daughter who went. The commune members for the most part didn't object. This was also out of special consideration for him. Surely this was enough? But no, his son had to team up with Shunwa to beat people up and create a scene! After which, instead of sorting things out, he had rushed over to support and bolster Luo Kun's wife! Took him for a gold leaf, but find he's a copper shard, he thought to himself.

Luo Kun put a scowl on his face to show his coolness to the well-intentioned morale-boosters. Paying them no attention, he said to his wife:

"I want to take out fifty *yuan*."

"What for?" the wife asked.

"I'm going to the hospital."

The brigade leader was taken aback, stared, and then understood. Snorting in contempt, he jumped off the *kang* and left. The others in the room, sensing something was amiss, went off sheepishly. Luo Kun said to his young daughter cowering by the table,

"Go and get the party security representative and the Youth League secretary. Tell them to come right away!" His wife got money and grain coupons out of the chest and handed them to her husband.

"Look after yourself on the road." Luo Kun comforted his wife saying:

"Don't worry! You've nothing to fear either. No use worrying, anyway. You must carry on as usual: sleep when it's time to sleep; eat when it's time to eat."

The security representative and Youth League secretary hurried in. Luo Kun said,

"You two look into this business of today's fight and make a report of it to the local police station." The security representative said:

"Let's keep this matter in the brigrade. We can deal with it!"

"No! This must be left to the police! This is no ordinary brawl!" The Youth League secretary was about to say something, but Luo Kun turned to her and continued:

"You know your uncle\fn{The security representative.} is no good at writing! You'll give him a hand, won't you?"

So saying, he stood up, picked up the sack of bread his wife had got ready for him, pushed off on his bike, and left without even a look back. In the faint moonlight he rode off along the main road.

*

For a full five days the old party secretary sat by the sick bed, feeding Dashun and emptying his bed pan. The young man was so moved he shed tears. Old Man Mengtian sneered at all this:

"You're just putting on a show! Your son goes and practically beats someone to death, then you put on an act—all kindly and concerned, how two-faced!"

If Luo Kun ever sat down to chat with him, he would stiffly walk out of the sick ward. Later, when he saw his son act chummy with Luo Kun, showing no sign of the anger of the beaten, in his heart he cursed his son as a "spineless wretch." Spurred by anger, he got on his bike and simply went home.

With sadness, Dashun told Luo Kun how his father had been used by the Four Cleanups Campaign work team, which was out to get people. After the campaign, people in the village cursed him, and his father felt terrible. But he had an obstinate streak in him—he had made his bed and he would lie in it. On the matter of the Four Cleanups Campaign, if you discussed it with him calmly and nicely, he would admit he'd wronged some people. But if you cursed him, he would bristle,

"Why blame me? I didn't make anything up! I didn't organize the Four Cleanups Campaign! You say my seal was on it? Well, my head was not mine to shake! If anyone's been wronged, go to the work team!"

Luo Kun explained to the youth how Old Man Mengtian had suffered greatly during the old regime, was filled with love for socialism and for the party; if he had not withstood the pressure, it was not entirely his fault. Besides, the old man had always been a good worker, a pillar of the collective. . . .

On the seventh day, Dashun had his stitches out and was discharged from the hospital with a bandage around his head. Luo Kun insisted that the young man ride on the carrier of his bike, and the latter kept refusing. But Luo Kun said:

"Your wound won't stand any strain. The doctor said to rest!" So he carried him off.

"Uncle!" Dashun murmured from the back of the bike, a quiver in his voice: "When you get home, don't be hard on Huer.\fn{A pet name for Luo Hu.}

Luo Kun did not answer.

"All those years when you were being wronged, Huer also suffered. If any child got angry at him, they called him 'landlord' and made him feel inferior. I can see why he's angry …"

Luo Kun felt a sudden pang, and a lump constricted his throat. During the ten or more years when he had been branded a landlord element, all the hardship and humiliation that he and his family suffered—it didn't bear thinking about. The youth continued from behind his back,

"I've heard that my Dad and you, as well as Brigade Leader Uncle Qingfa, were all poor kids in the old society. After liberation, you carried out land reform together, organized cooperatives together, and were so close you were like one man. It is only with the turmoil of the past few years that things have come to such a wretched state. Even the children have become enemies!"

Luo Kun couldn't contain himself any longer. He felt two warm streams flow down either side of his nose and a salty taste in his mouth. How well put! Wasn't this precisely what he felt deep down? He just wanted to hug this darling youth and kiss him! He jumped off the bike and grabbed Dashun by the hand.

"My child, you're right!"

"I want to see Huer as soon as I get back. He may avoid me, but I'll seek him out!" the young man said. "We must put an end to this hatred!"

The two mounted the bicycle once more and, along the highway thickly lined with poplars, as though he'd been injected with some spiritual hormone, this man who was over sixty flew along on his bicycle, carrying a young man at his back.

The houses and trees of Luocun came into view.

*

When, pushing his bicycle, Luo Kun walked into the village side by side with Dashun, clusters of people deep in discussion were scattered here and there on the streets, and there was an unusual air about the place. A large crowd had gathered outside the brigade office. As they were passing the office, someone called him in.

In the office were seated the chief cadres of the brigade committee, as well as Old Jiang, the local police chief, and two policemen. The air was tense. Brigade Leader Qingfa, his hair bristling, was expressing his views:

"As for my view, I'm firmly against it! It would be too harsh a blow for the comrade recently reinstated! His father suffered wrongly for ten years!"

Luo Kun understood. He glanced at Qingfa and said,

"Comrade, the law is the law! It knows no one, takes no account of people's feelings!"

Luo Qingfa angrily broke off and turned his head to one side. Luo Kun said to Police Chief Jiang,

"Do it according to the book! That's not attacking me, it's supporting me in my work!"

Police Chief Jiang told Luo Kun that, with the approval of the security authorities, Luo Hu would be dealt with according to law: dentention for fifteen days. He had come to inform the brigade cadres and Brigade Leader Qingfa had staunchly opposed the sentence.

"Go on, put it into effect! There's nothing to say. The law knows no one!" Luo Kun said.

Some militia brought Luo Hu into the office. The young man stood with haughty visage, planted in front of the masses, quite fearless. Even when the police chief showed him the warrant for his arrest, he was still bolstered by a certain feeling, and was not at all afraid.

Qingfa let fall a great smack on his thigh and turned his head to the other side. The veins showed blue in his neck; they throbbed.

Luo Kun glanced at his son, turned away, and got out his pipe with slightly trembling hands.

At the precise moment when the militia pushed Huer out the door, the Poor Peasant Association Chairman, Old Man Mengtian, who had been sitting in the comer, eyes staring and mouth pouting, suddenly stood up, threw himself down on his knees in front of Luo Kun, and said weepingly:

"Brother, I have wronged you!"

Luo Kun quickly helped the old man up and settled him down on a bench. Then Old Man Mengtian threw himself in front of Police Chief Jiang and said tearfully,

"Please, Chief! Let Huer go. I … oh!"

At this, Dashun, standing by the door, began to weep, his arm around Huer's neck. Huer, looking at the white bandage on Dashun's head, let his eyelids droop; his nostrils pulsed quickly.

Huer broke away from Dashun's arm, turned back in the door, and stood in front of his father. Two shining tears rolled out,

"Dad, now I know why the people of Luocun support you."

So saying, he went out. The cadres of Luocun sat down once again in the office, smoking. No one said a word, yet no one would leave. The commune members gathered from the streets in front of the doors and windows of the office. They strained to gape at party Secretary Luo Kun—his dark, square face; the hair and stubble streaked with white; his sunken eye sockets. They gazed as though they had just come to know him.

Luo Kun sat there, looking at the brigade leader who had subsided and seemed slightly ashamed, and at the other cadres. He said,

"Comrades! The party rehabilitated me. Why? The commune members brought us back to power. Why? Think about it! What were relations like between cadres and commune members in Luocun during the cooperative movement? Or even during the three hard years?\fn{The Three Hard Years (1959-1961), right after the Great Leap orward, so-called because there was widespread famine.} When life was hard, how were relations then between cadres and masses in Luocun? You all know!

"These last ten years or more, Luocun has been torn asunder. Among cadres, among commune members, between cadres and commune members, it was here a clique, there a clique, here a faction, there a faction. How many trenches have been dug? If this matter is not cleared up, no one can sort out the mess in Luocun. You want to promote production? Achieve mechanization? Impossible when people's minds are not set on the task at hand and their energy is not focused on promoting production but on intrigue, on being suspicious, and on guarding against one another.

"Comrades! Our Luocun has suffered a serious internal injury. I believe that those who have made mistakes will gradually learn from them. We who have suffered 'rectification' should be big-hearted, and not pass this enmity on to the next generation.

"It hasn't been easy for Luocun to come this far. It hasn't been easy for us to come this far. I am over sixty. When it's time to hand things over to the next generation, we should not only hand over to them a prosperous Luocun, but also a united Luocun …"

Inside and outside the office, all was silent. Many, many people—cadres and commune members, men and women—had tears in their eyes. Through the glistening tears shone hope, trust.

188.38 Excerpt from **The Chopsticks-Fork Principle: A Memoir And Manual**\fn{by Cathy Bao Bean (1942-)}
Ningpo, Zhejiang Province, China (F) 10

I know the sun was shining that day in June, 1951, though I can only suppose how the four of us got to Teaneck, NJ—probably in the old '47 dark blue Chevy. The other clear memory I have was hearing the doorbell ring and, then, my mother calling me. Stepping aside, she pointed outside. There might have been a moving van parked by the curb, but I can't picture it now. Maybe it was still at the apartment in Elmwood Park, loading up the furniture that I also can't recollect. What I can bring back, standing against the background of our very own front lawn, were two big girls. Now more shy than when they mistakenly asked my mother if she could come out and play, they were waiting to see what size I would be. When seeing didn't help, one asked what grade I was in. I said the magic word,

"Fourth."

It couldn't have been better. Claire lived across the street from our first house, a compact split-level, with brick front and shutters, each flap decorated with a cutout in the shape of a shamrock. And Jan lived behind Claire, so their yards touctled cater-corner. I'm sure Jan had a front door, but it was the back one I got to know. During the warmer days, we'd careen in and out of the screened entryway. If it got too cool, we'd take a little longer to turn the handle of the solid inner door. By the end of that first summer, if someone had locked either, I would have landed in the hospital with a dislocated shoulder.

In Jan's house, we sprawled all over. We did what wasn't an option at mine—move chairs to build forts, cover the dining room table with paper dolls, dress up in curtains. Her parents, now Aunt Dorie and Uncle Herb to me, seemed to accept this sort of behavior as an inevitable consequence of having children. Except for my sister's and my rooms, our house was always neat, ready for guests. On the other hand, there was at Jan's house something that didn't exist at mine: places that were off-limits.

"See that?"

"What?"

“The box.” Looking on the floor of her father’s closet, I saw too many.
“Which one?”
“*That* one.”
“I see. What about it?”
“IT’s in there.” she whispered. Cued, I lowered my voice and body to match hers,
“Really?”
“Yeah.”
“Wow.”

This was important. Used to playing hide-and-seek throughout her house, we generally stayed out of Uncle Herb and Aunt Dorie’s room. So being there at all demanded a respectful pause. But I could tell from my friend’s manner that she expected more. So, in silent reverence, we knelt before the shoe box.

As great as my awe was, I soon needed more of a reason to spend my time in an otherwise ordinary closet.
“Jan?”
“Yeah?”
“*What’s* in the box?”

The tips of her fingers reached out and carefully lifted the lid. Looking inside, I saw a gun. In this house-of-no-locks, in a town of no violence, in a country where *If I Knew You Were Comin’ Id’ve Baked A Cake* was a popular song, we watched the gun as we would observe creatures in the snake house at the zoo. The thing itself kept us from reaching out. The shoe box was more inviolate than the thick glass, the weapon even less susceptible to tampering than the giant python.

“Jan, *why* does your father have a gun?”
“He works for the F.B.I.”

That capped it. Not only did I have the best friend in the world but her father had fought Al Capone single-handed. Or close to.

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Once again we crouched in silence, enveloping the revelation in an aura of quiet. That done, we tiptoed out of the room. Then hid our trail by thundering down the stairs and crashing out the door.

In the backyard, we flopped down on a patch of grass—evidence that it must have been a windy day when her neighbor sowed his seeds. If I was to take my turn, it had to be soon. A lot of being Best Friends is in the timing.

“Guess what?” I began.
“What, Cath?”
“I’ve got a sister.”
“Yeah, I know.” Too polite to say, “Big deal, so do I,” I knew Jan was thinking just that.
“I don’t mean Bette. I have another one.” More interested, Jan looked up.
“You mean a baby?”

How else could she have missed seeing another Bao? Had it been the walking variety, we would have used it by now—to divert her younger brother, Chuckie, from tagging along after us all the time.

“No, not a baby. At least not any more, I don’t think.”

“Whaddaya mean, ‘You don’t think’? Don’t you know?” Her look told me she might be having second thoughts about being best friends with an idiot.

“I mean she’s not a baby. But the last time I saw her, she was.”

Jan sat up. I’d gotten her. I rose too, and we sat, facing each other, in the cross-legged position of a serious conversation.

“Where is she? Why haven’t you seen her? What’s her name?”
“Jean. But we call her *SanSan.* That means ‘three-three,’ because she’s the third daughter. She’s in China.”
“What’s she doing there? You didn’t *forget* her, did you?”

Jan knew I had been born in China. And she knew from her own experience that, in the excitement of going on a trip, it’s possible to leave something important behind and not realize until you’ve been in the car an hour. But it’s not so easy to leave a baby

And so I told her my secret. As we idly pulled up the remaining patch of lawn, I told her that, when we came to America in 1946, we were only supposed to stay a year, so *SanSan* was left in the care of my Aunt.

“Uh?”

My “explanation” was making less sense to her with every word. Normal people get baby-sitters. But for a year?! I could see her wondering if her best friend’s whole family didn’t have a problem with reality. I started to panic. I had to make her understand.

“*SanSan* was only fifteen months. My mother would’ve had trouble taking care of three kids all by herself in a strange country. I wasn’t supposed to come either. But I packed my doll suitcase, stood by the front door with it, and threw a tantrum. She gave in. I guess she figured, at four, I might be old enough to learn a little something from the trip.”

“Trip?! Cath, it’s 1951.” Stopping to calculate on her fingers. “You’ve been here five years!”

Letting up a little, Jan must have realized that her interrogation was too insistent. Her new neighbors might be forgetful, maybe crazy, possibly criminal, but that was no excuse for being impolite. On the other hand, five years was an awful long time to leave a kid just ’cause you didn’t want to change a few diapers. And what about the poor aunt? Family is family, yet Jan’s most favorite relative had a limit of about two weeks for the three of them. It could go to a month if there was only one.

My “secret” was unraveling. I hadn’t meant for her to pull out this much. Actually, it wasn’t a secret. But it was “family business.” And there were rules about family business. I wasn’t always clear exactly what those rules were. I knew age didn;’t matter that much. Bette and I heard Grownup Talk all the time. And I knew it wasn’t limited to blood relatives. Or maybe it was just that we had to make do with family friends, since most of the Baos and Fangs were still in China. I knew that if there was a “lesson” to the story, just about anybody could hear it. On the other hand, if the gossip revealed an abiding character flaw or gross failing that could reflect badly on the whole family, it was hardly ever discussed. In some cases, like this one, the silence had to do with the Communists and the Nationalists.

“Jan, she lives in *Red* China.”

“Ooooh.” Now we were getting somewhere. All Americans, even fourth-graders, knew that it was better to be dead than Red.

“After we arrived here, there was a Civil War back home.”

“Yeaaah.” This, too, made sense. Jan never went to the Deep South on vacation.

“And the Communists fought the Nationalists, the *Kuomintang*.”

“The Who?” Oops. I was losing her again.

“The good guys.”

“Got it.”

“So when the Communists took over The Mainland—”

“What’s that?”

“It’s China. Sort of. It’s where the Chinese live. But it’s not ‘China.’ That’s on Taiwan.”

“Where’s that?”

“Near the Mainland. It’s an island. Some call it Formosa.”

“For—who?”

“Never mind. The point is: the Communists won’t let my sister out. That’s why she’s not here with us.”

“Oh, Cath. How sad. What a bunch of meanies.”

Finally. She said what I wanted to hear.

*

But it wasn’t the truth. Not really. How could I explain that it’s hard to be sad about someone I didn’t know? Or even admit that I’d never seen my parents cry over their loss? Yet for the sake of everyone’s future, we lived as part, apart. Bonded by something more immediate than feeling, more urgent than tears, we lived like so many Chinese before us: with separation but not distance. We were each with many selves—mothers, fathers, sons, and daughters—who daily, yearly, lived without spouses, siblings, and parents.

Long before “broken home” became a household word, trying to describe to the average American how good and real people could, for reasons other than military or religious duty, be “married” without seeing each other, or “loving” without helping their child take a first step, was too difficult to attempt. Without a lot of explaining and so little comparable experience, it’s no wonder people on this side of the ocean thought of Chinese as “heartless,” “emotionless,” “inscrutable.”

And without a lot of realities to compare and appreciate, it’s no wonder people from across the ocean can think of Americans as “soft,” “undisciplined,” “without subtlety.” Sitting in Jan’s backyard, between Cranford and Werner Place, the idea that a Mainland bureaucrat might read my parents’ letters before they arrived in my aunt’s

hands, or plot to kidnap my father in order to boast his “happy repatriation,” was a *fact* of my life but had little to do with it. Although everything about it.

Aunt Dorie called. I was saved from having to give more details. It was five o’clock and time to help get dinner ready. With a handshake, we signaled our confidence in each other and our agreement to return to the world of ordinary mortals. Jan never asked more about *SanSan.* Nor did I ask if Uncle Herb ever took the gun out of the box.

*

Back at my house, I knew that if I hurried, I could finish up my chores in time to be on Teaneck Road when my father stepped off the bus. I loved to watch when he did, looking so dapper in his suit and hat. Giving me a smile, he would keep hold of the newspaper, but let me carry his briefcase. That was the same as holding hands—which is what Jan did with her father.

I always askled if he had a good day at the office. He always did. I hardly ever told him how I had spent the day, unless it had to do with Mommy, in which case I would get another smile and maybe a light thwack with the newspaper to show how much he appreciated having such a dutiful daughter.

We spoke English. He was very good at it—better than most Americans. He enjoyed making conversations and being the Master of Ceremonies.

The walk from the bus stop was a short one, up the tree-lined street of one-family houses. Every few steps, we would pass a grassy lawn, sometimes greeting a neighbor working on a flower bed or removing a tricycle from the driveway. Whatever the condition of the back yard, the front view was a presentation of the house, not at all like the pictures I’d seen in books of Chinese homes where high walls made it impossible for insiders and outsiders to exchange casual glances.

As much as I loved walking with my father, I was glad we lived in the middle of the block and not further up Cranford Place. I never seemed to have enough things to say—important stuff that would capture his interest. I could always get his attention. But that wasn’t the same.

When we stepped into the house, my mother would be waiting. She too would ask if he had a good day at the office. Now speaking mostly Chinese—which I sort of understood—his response sometimes took all of dinnertime, even the rest of the evening. They never pecked cheeks like Jan’s parents, or even hugged. In our house, the public gesture would have been redundant; in our universe, a red flag to gods who tended to look at close proximity as only chemical, never magical. The difference was what I expected—the same as if Jan and I each brought home extra homework to be done over a weekend. Aunt Dorie would, likely as not, express some sympathy, even help ease the burden by reading a story with her, whereas my mother would look at an armload of books as a natural extension of my student’s body. As to chancing a discussion with me about some girl osculating a slimy Frog-Prince, let alone a young man kissing an unchaperoned Beauty sleeping with a bunch of wild animals in the woods? No way.

As my father, Bette and I took our places at the kitchen table, my mother would be at the stove nearby, a bowl in hand, asking how much rice we each wanted. I never asked for more than half. Too many times, American mothers would look at my short, skinny body and serve me a fully loaded plate to “fatten me up” or “put meat on my bones.” These Fork Dinners meant I had “to clean my plate” or be considered rude or forgetful of “the starving Armenians.” With not enough time to grow between the salad and dessert, I learned to swallow very hard, so my esophagus could act as a compressor, jamming out all extraneous air from the food. The result was a mass of incredible density and weight. And a very strong stomach.

At home, however, I could choose how much to take. But once received, I had to eat every grain or dishonor the farmer whose labor produced it. We thought it odd that Americans seemed to plan a meal so that every diner got equal portions, no matter what size or how hungry they were. Afterward, helping to clear the table, it killed us to see the uneaten portions thrown out.

On the other hand, our American guests would look at what my mother cooked for them and wonder if an army was going to join us for dinner. They didn’t understand that we were honoring them (and making sure the gods only associated our house with plenitude). Oddly, they also were uncomfortable about wrapping the leftovers for another day (or for live burials if we didn’t get to them before something else did). In those days, because “doggy bags” were only available in Chinese restaurants, we tried to clear the table as quickly as possible and forestall their wondering where our nonexistent pet was.

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Absorbing the two styles of dining eventually evolved into my Chopsticks-Fork Principle: a way to get a handle on our cultural differences and similarities. The Chopsticks table is round with a lazy Susan in the middle to

deliver the various dishes within reach of every diner. At an extra large table, standing is permitted as when the hostess searches for a special morsel to give an honored guest. There is no other centerpiece so everyone present, including children of all ages, can make eye contact—which is all one requires to start, interrupt, continue, override, or repeat and repeat and repeat the thought, report, description, gossip, judgment, event, etc. that will become part of the oral-aural history of the speaker, listener, group. A "quiet Chinese dinner" is an oxymoron. Being part of the group partaking of the meal is primary; all forms follow this binary function.

Hot tea is served before, during and after the meal to aid digestion. Cold water is a Western invention. While special sauces are served alongside certain dishes, having salt, pepper, soy and mustard sauce on the table to cater to individual preferences is another Western invention. To make these available as a matter of course is to announce that the chef doesn't know how to complete the recipe or the diner doesn't know when to leave well enough alone.

Weapons are inappropriate when dining with family and friends, so knives aren't part of the usual place setting. It is therefore the chef's job to prepare most ingredients in bite-size pieces. Exceptions—like a whole fish or shrimp, beef stew, noodles—must be so "done" that chopsticks, sometimes with the help of lips, teeth and tongue, are sufficient to rip, stab, probe, bone, or shell. That is, to achieve whatever remains to be done to the item before swallowing can take place.

While more proactive, there are rules. I hadn't thought of them until I first saw Bennett, my future (Caucasian) husband, eat with chopsticks. Pleased that his skill with utensils was already as multicultural as mine, I couldn't believe what he did with them. First, he picked up his rice bowl to his lips. Okay. Then he proceeded to shovel nonstop until the bowl was practically empty. Not okay. Horrified, I suggested to the barbarian that two delicate sweeps was the limit. Somewhat sheepishly, he allowed as how he acquired his technique by watching Toshiro Mifune and Blind Samurai movies.

At a Chopsticks table, I automatically put both arms on the table and lean in toward the center to signal my joining in. Then, like a spider, our conversations weave a web by crisscrossing in tangents, diameters and radii. Periodically, one person or topic attracts everyone's attention and the unity is strengthened. At family gatherings, rarely was I the one—neither my Chinese nor my opinions were to be trusted. Though the last time I did manage both to the delight of all, including my parents, was when I initiated a discussion on the designs of bathrooms around the world.

In contrast, the Fork table is usually rectangular with one or more centerpieces bifurcating it longitudinally. The effect of having flowers, candles, and/or sculptural objects is to emphasize the aesthetics, not just the function of the dining experience. When tall, the display can also discourage talking across the table. While this means extra care must be taken to create a good seating plan (by alternating gender, volubility, common interests, etc.), it does tend to keep the noise level down. (So does the practice of feeding young children earlier or elsewhere.) *Apropos* to a democracy, the more that is individualized, the more splendidly formal the occasion. In the extreme, this means each diner is allocated salt cellars and pepper shakers, different forks and (sets of) plates for each course, knives for each texture, glasses shaped for each type of liquid.

At a Fork table, I right away place the hand that's not in use in my lap. It doesn't matter that I like *wontons* better than filet mignon, or think it's inefficient to put the fork first in the left hand for cutting and then in the right for delivering. Preference is irrelevant, being proficient in both ways means I can chew with confidence, without making anybody feel ill at ease—including me—about which of the four forks, three knives, and one spoon to use for which course (not counting the utensils which come with and after dessert). Maintaining a little distance, physically and conversationally, the Americans know I'm both respectable and respectful because I can sit, unpropped, juggle silverware without violating my neighbors' air space, and pace myself so I don't begin before everybody else is served or end after others are sated. With the exception of folks who have dementia or imbibed too many cocktails, one isn't supposed to repeat the same story over and over, but is expected to be a good enough talker and listener that reruns are kept to a minimum.

While both Chopsticks and Fork people hope it's all delicious, the former say so by not making too many recommendations on how it could have been better (based on their experience tasting some renowned cook's version) while the latter pay their compliments to the chef by saying it was the best they ever tasted.

When eating with forks, we wait for everyone to be seated. At a Chopsticks Dinner, the hostess might spend more than half the evening cooking so each dish is piping hot when first tasted. This was one reason we used to linger after every meal, picking at this or that morsel, to keep my mother company as she ate. Even when she started to work outside the house and there were many dinners we couldn't share, our self-image was of a family that did.

*

Similarly, I continued to feel like a daughter who meets her father at the bus stop even when I didn't because school had started and there were so many friends to distract my filial heart. But when I did meet him, I had more to say. Mostly about arithmetic. Never about the twins next door. Jan used to kid me that if I married one of them, my name would be Cathy Cathie. That would have been fun, but I didn't think it was worth the uncertainty of not knowing who was my husband, Ricky or Walter. Besides, chitchatting to one's father about boyfriends was not appropriate for college kids, let alone a fourth-grader.

I told my father about the play I was producing, but not about the fights I had. They never resulted in any visible wounds except the time I retaliated by putting chewing gum in Stephen Miceli's hair after he pelted us with popcorn at the movies. That was scary. His mother had to cut it out. That meant he had to come to school with an almost bald spot. For days, I expected her to show up at my doorstep, towing her evidence by the hand, pleading her case before my mother. At the time I didn't know most American parents indulgently wrote off this sort of thing as an example of how "boys will be boys."

As for my mother, one look at his head, and she'd have ruled against me, however much popcorn he'd thrown. Having incited the disorderly conduct of Stephen's hair, I had forced his family into a terrible choice: either they endanger his educational viability by keeping him home from school or they lose face by sending out a son who couldn't appear "normal" in public.

Sometimes I was tempted to tell my father about the fights. I wanted him to know that Daughter #2 might be a bit undergrown, but she was no pushover. If a boy went after my pencil or scarf, I didn't run away. By the end of November, I had Scheduled Bouts before and after school, two or three times a week. (Maybe they did know. For years, I thought their Chinese nickname for me referred to the "Little Fatty" I was when a baby. It turns out that *Shao Tüfëi* means "Little Bandit.")

The flirting—for that's what my friends called it—had to stop. I was running out of pencils and my mother was starting to wonder how I could lose so much of my wardrobe just walking to school.

After the chewing gum incident, I made a deal with Stephen (he was still growing back his hair and ready to negotiate). For a couple of pieces of candy, he would get his best friend, Fred, to be my official body guard. It worked out great. Fred was monstrously big and almost as tough as I was. .

None of the other girls fought the way I did. Part of it was because I was the new kid in school; part of it was the fun in proving that looks can be deceiving—like at that first recess. Biding my time, I stood around while the captains picked everybody else before me. For half the game, I sat against the fence until the rules demanded that they give me a turn regardless of the two outs and a man on base. Making my way to the bats, I saw the outfield closing in, and the infield taking the opportunity to tie a shoelace or start a conversation. Selecting the heavier bat, I heard the snickering. Then, top-heavy, I assumed my Jackie Robinson stance. Since most girls—and some guys—would wait for the pitch with the bat resting on their shoulders, this cued a couple of the kids to back up to their former positions. Willing the ball into my range, I smashed the sucker over all their heads.

Daddy would have enjoyed it had he been there. Too bad I couldn't just tell him. That would have been bragging, and that was more than "impolite." When I credited my homer to good fortune or took full blame for striking out, it was because the gods might be listening in. Capable of anger, even jealousy, they might be provoked into teaching me a lesson. Or worse, taking my lack of humility out on my father. If all they heard from a household were disclaimers like, "My wife? Pretty? Her toenails are ingrown and her ankles are too fat," then they wouldn't think the family was getting too proud. On the other hand, to tell my father (and the gods) after something good happened might suggest that success wasn't routine. People and gods are supposed to bring about the best possible under the circumstances. That's a given.

If the effort yields better results than they or we anticipated, the astonishment is a bonus (but no excuse to rest on one's laurels). This is how we *behaved*, not how we "believed." We acted as if the gods existed but we didn't worship them. What we knew about their attitudes came through stories, not "commandments."

Still, I would have liked my father to have been a witness to my victory, to have him invisibly at my side. Just once. Expecting or needing more would have been too much for both of us. To secure my future and his senior years, no one could afford immoderate or immodest demands on the other's time. This was assumed, never discussed. If he preferred playing tennis to commuting, or wondered how a bat and ball would get me from the sandlot to Istanbul, I never heard it.

Nor did I hear talk about "following in his footsteps" or "leaving the nest," or "having a better life." My parents never said, "Why can't you be like so-and-so?" or "Remember, we're counting on you," as if I needed the reminder or could fail to grow up, go to college, have a career, and be available to them in their old age as they were

to me in my childhood. What they did do was tell me stories about far-fetched people—like the one about the filial daughter who chopped off a piece of her arm to feed her starving parent. Talk about intense! Intents?

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How and what they taught us contrasted with another game we used to play at recess, *Mother May I?*.

I remember the first time I was the Leader. Confronting my classmates, I said,

"Take two giant steps forward." Almost as one, they asked,

"Mother, May I?" Magnanimous, I responded,

"Yes, you may."

They did. Except one, who took three. I spotted him. In this game, as in others, the strategy is to end up ahead of the pack, but not to stand out too much—being too different raises fear and attracts suspicion. Pointing, I named him and his offense, then ordered him back to the starting line. My look could do that. He obeyed. What power!

Meanwhile, the rest weren't so neatly lined up. Those with long legs or the ability to make a great leap forward from a standing start were now in front. I decided to face the other way and lure the daring ones with false security. Many would stay put, taking a step only with permission, but others would take the dare and chance a quick run before I could whip around and catch them in the act. Calculating that none were close enough to make a dash and tag me while my back was turned, I waited an extra second, turned quickly, and caught several on the move.

Satisfied, I repeated the ploy. But the rest were closing in. I got anxious:

"Take one baby step forward."

"Mother, May I?"

"No, you may not."

With that unexpected call, a few were tricked. I was sure there were others, but they got away with it because they hid behind the ones in front—who were now too close for me to look at all at once. I could sense their growing impatience, their impending rush. No matter how clever I was, my gambits could only change the end game, not the outcome. I got panicky. And decided this wasn't fun anymore.

I also decided it was a lousy way to raise kids.

Not that I stood on the playground, as prescient about my future as I was wise to Little Steve using Big Fred as a blind. Rather, I was beginning to detect the patterns: about the hierarchy in *May I?*, the competition in "*Scrimmage*," the strategy in "*Stealing Second Base*," the grit in "*Facing Off*," the safety in numbers, the risk in being ahead. In the process, I was becoming more bicultural, more like everybody else. A lot of people don't think of themselves that way, but they are—it comes with the territory of spending half the time at home or with memories, the other half elsewhere, like tourists.

But immigrants do it more. It can be exhausting—which is why there are those who prefer to stay in Little Italy or Soho, Little Tokyo or Germantown, to eat at the same table or live in the same dorm, where they can relax, and just twirl or slurp the noodles with no thought about whether to ladle or stab them instead. My great fortune was having parents who balanced the fascination of touring with the desire to return home, the excitement of emigrating with the comfort of nesting. They encouraged me to "get along" in Teaneck. And I did.

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I absorbed the differences between our not holding hands and my friends not holding hands, between my not telling my parents, and their not telling theirs, between saying it and meaning it, between their asking for permission and my hardly ever doing so. I thought I knew how my parents felt from what they told me people, real and imagined, *should* feel.

For a long time, it didn't occur to me that there was much discrepancy. Or maybe it was the asking about feelings that was of no use—like standing in the sunshine during a picnic and saying,

"Aren't you glad it didn't rain after all?"

Or maybe it was just the times. In those days, *Movietone* and televised news might show people hugging or weeping but reporters didn't bother interviewing the lone survivor of a family crash with a "How do you feel?" Anyway, we didn't ask the question in public or private. If I felt some inexpressible confusion, then I probably hadn't paid good attention; if I needed my parents' permission, then I probably shouldn't be doing it; if we needed "to talk it over," it was probably out of the question. What my parents acknowledged of my conduct was what was supposed to be. The rest went into limbo. Some emerged when shared with friends who also didn't tell their parents everything, but most remained *incognito*. Maybe that's why it took as long as it did to find the words to express the different patterns.

As a suburban American, I could have a First and Second Childhood, a Subconscious, Love, Individuality, Justice and Rights.

As a Confucian Chinese, I could expand into an ever larger web of Human Relationships made proper by degrees of obedience, authority, trust, labor, modesty and, sometimes, affection.

As a Bao and Fang living in New Jersey, I was to accomplish the "all" of the All-American, but weave only with the larger Chinese web in mind.

It seemed to be that simple—until the day I wrote the letter to the *Readers Digest* and showed it to my father.

"Cathy, I know you've spent a lot of time on it. But I don't think you need to mail it."

"But Daddy, it's so unfair. Kids aren't like that. We're not a bunch of hoodlums."

"They know that."

"Then why don't they say so?"

"It's a magazine."

"That everybody reads."

"Yes."

"People should know the truth."

"Yes, but what truth will they get from reading your letter?"

"That we're not all bad."

"Maybe what they'll think is only that you are praising yourself."

"Oh."

At the time, writing it was extraordinary. The letter was an indictment, a public airing of a private grievance, an outright criticism of people who had nothing to do with me, who weren't related to me, but who had somehow injured me. It was my first collision with an institution and my experience with riding a "high horse."

And it was boastful. In the Confucian and Buddhist scheme of things, each individual is responsible for strengthening the moral fiber of the universe while simultaneously obliterating the ego. Thus everything depends on everyone. Since the "they's of the world had not yet crystallized in my mind as "the media," "the government," "the police," "the church," "the system," for me to redress one journalist's error by publicizing my (self) righteousness wouldn't tilt the balance for the better. And so the letter remained unstamped.

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What was ordinary then, and since then, was my father asking me how I spent the day, and my thinking ahead so as to prioritize the list and call attention to the exemplary deeds: "playing ball with Jan," "reading," "collecting dead bumblebees," "polishing shoes." I liked to put in a little something from each category to assure him, Chopsticks-Forks style, that I was developing the range of skills needed to harmonize my life with the family's as well as an assortment of people. I included nothing that might disturb our domestic tranquility or the human world as Confucius would have it.

If I had been playing with dolls, I avoided saying so, or stressed the "who with" rather than the "what." Pretending a "thing" could talk like a human was difficult. I did it. Not to would have been unsociable, even snotty. But I found the make-believe part hard to do and report. Chit-chatting about what hasn't really happened when there is no moral lesson involved or no spinning needed to explain what a god might have overheard and misinterpreted was not much more acceptable than talking about boyfriends and kissing.

So I learned to knit and sew for my doll, concentrating on the creation of tiny outfits rather than fantasies. They had the added advantage of being something I could actually display to my parents. I didn't know how much they impressed my father until, one weekend, he took out some wire cutters and pliers, and made a set of miniature hangers.

That was the closest he ever came to entering my child's world. We did a lot of stuff together, but it was "real" stuff like cleaning out the garage or washing the car. He never joined in a board game or asked about characters that didn't exist, the way Aunt Dorie or Uncle Herb might. Once, he had to take my doll to the hospital, but that wasn't "playing." It happened because one of his associates from the office had to do some weekend work at our house. The man brought his daughter along. Closer to my age than Bette's, she became my responsibility. If she had a reason for hurting me, I can't remember it. All I can recall is how she maliciously tore out the doll's hair—aa Victorian coiffure of honey-colored elegance. I didn't stop her because that would have embarrassed the father who couldn't stop her without mentioning the unmentionable: his daughter's (and, therefore, his) failure to be a Good Guest. Had we both not ignored her vandalism, it would have caused a whole chain of events and admissions that shouldn't happen if my father and he had to work in the same office together, if we had to live in the world we created.

After they left, my father took out the telephone book, made a call, handed me the hairless doll, and drove me for many miles. The trip was his paternal recognition that I'd done my filial duty by not altering that girl's face on the spot. And by not crying my heart out until after their car turned the corner. In doing this, he taught me that hearts can break, but that there are remedies.

I'd never heard of such a place as a Doll Hospital. It smelled of musty wood and had no furniture except a long counter. There were no walls, just shelves, filled with cubbyholes and boxes. A man, wearing an apron, came out of the back room. He looked exactly the way I imagined Master Cherry did when he tried to make Pinocchio into a table leg. My father told me to explain what I wanted—which wasn't easy since I wasn't sure what we were doing in this strange shop. Running out of words, I carefully laid my doll before him, letting him see for himself. Except for its hard rosy surface reflecting the light from the bare bulb overhead, it looked quite dead, its eyes wide open.

"Mmm, I see."

Not saying more, he went to a shelf and took down a box. It was covered with dust and not very awe-inspiring. But inside! Wigs. All colors and styles. One by one, Master Cherry took them out and held each type on my doll for me to see. None were Victorian; my doll would never be the same. Swallowing my disappointment, I looked at the array on the counter and got caught up in the old man's patter. He lured me with his discussion of each wig's virtues, real qualities—color, length, hairstyle. I had never heard a grown person talk about a doll as if it mattered. On the other hand, he wasn't pretending. He wasn't trying to make my doll into a "person," just a better doll.

"Now these. These you can comb. If you do it carefully."

That did it. I examined this last batch, combing each with my mind—Victorian, Chinese, whatever my fingers could manage. Finally, I pointed at a lump of gleaming auburn redness, nodding my decision.

My father didn;'t ask "Are you sure?" or "Don't you think it's awfully bright?" He simply added his nod to mine, and stood by me as Master Cherry disappeared into the back with my doll and wig.

The minutes passed and I got worried. What was he doing back there? I had picked out what I wanted. Why weren't we in the car by now? Taking my cue from my father, who didn't seem impatient, I kept my questions to myself, and waited.

When the old man finally emerged, holding forth my doll, I remained speechless. The ringlets didn't slide off! My doll had "hair," not just a wig.

I didn't thank my father. We often said "please," but rarely a "thank you." Some words are more for guests than family. Family members are supposed to be a certain way. Thanking each other for it could insinuate that either might have done otherwise, and that meant we didn't understand our respective roles or could really be "free" not to fulfill them. However, the longer we stayed in this country, the harder it got for me to figure out which "thank you" ritual was operative: the one that is right for the universe governed by Confucius' Five Relationships or the one that is suitable under The Bill of Rights.

In the car, I nevertheless felt the need to say something.

"Daddy, I picked this color because it's like Maureen O'Hara's."

My father nodded his acceptance of my gratitude and, thereby, gave his approval. I had chosen well.

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I don't know who started it or when but, for as long as I can remember, Daddy was Humphrey Bogart and Mommy was Maureen O'Hara. I guess it was my father's mouth, the assured way he carried himself, his newspaper, that led people to see the similarity in the jaunty hat, the manner that all good gangsters or adventurers should have. And my mother was the sparkling O'Hara. We would stand on Fifth Avenue, watching the Easter Day Parade—she never wore a fancy hat, she didn't need one—and photographers would stop to take a picture of her open, perfectly shaped smile on an utterly beautiful face. But they always asked permission before raising their cameras. Instinctively, they knew not to take any liberties with my mother.

At home, my father must have told my mother because, after the initial cursory glance, she returned to my room for a better second look. I then reinforced their interest in my doll by making clothes as glamorous as her hair—a bright yellow taffeta skirt bordered in black velvet, a sweeping cape with red accents, and a fitted, slitted, Chinese dress just like the ones my mother wore. It had been Daddy's "business" to buy the wig. Making the hangers was for me alone, for my pleasure alone; a reward for and worth my waiting.

When they were done, each exactly contoured, he came up to my room and amazed me more by drilling holes in my perfectly smooth closet door just to attach a tiny pole. He stayed to watch me arrange the doll clothing on the hangers, and then hook them over the newly installed rod. As we stood back to admire the effect of the miniature wardrobe within the regulation-sized one, we were commending each other on the fine job we had both done,

on the patience. It was hard to keep a matter-of-fact tone in my voice when there was so much pride and love trying to escape the pressure of being in so insignificant a body.

I showed the hangers to all my friends. They were impressed, but not overwhelmed. Used to parents who helped with a drawing or sipped "tea" out of "play" cups, they couldn't seem to appreciate the magnitude of the hangers and the esteem my father bestowed on me in making them.

I didn't know I needed Chinese friends, ones who lived up the block or went to the same school. Most of my parents' friends lived in New York. Of those who had children, most kids weren't my age, or were back in China. Visits with the few who could have filled the void were so infrequent that we hardly recognized each other for having grown so much in-between them. Unable to see them in action on a daily basis, I got the impression that they probably didn't dress up and go trick-or-treating on Halloween. Or if they did, their parents wouldn't have tolerated them playing touch football in the street with the Cathie twins.

Sometimes what I gathered about their lives was pretty unimaginable—like when one girl who was already in high school asked her mother, in as formal Chinese as I'd ever heard, if she could buy a blue umbrella. I mean, *really*! I could understand needing permission to buy something that expensive but getting an okay on the color?! I started to giggle, like "This is a good joke, eh?" when her mother said she'd go to the shop herself and check out if the shade was really dark enough because she didn't want people to get the wrong idea about her daughter.

Realizing she was serious, my jaw dropped too far from my upper teeth to finish the laugh. Detecting a tiny shake of the head from my mother, I eased my mouth back in time to have it nailed in place with a look from her mother that was designed to keep it shut until I was old enough to have kids of my own. That done, she proceeded to tell my mother some story about some other girl. I didn't catch the details, but the gist of it was that kids get hurt or go wild if they speak too much English and walk around in bright colors.

My mother stiffened. Making a quick decision, I interrupted, and asked, in Chinese, if either wanted another cup of tea.

They both said "No." She as if the word was a piece of dry ice, my mother as if to the youngest bride of the youngest son whose zero status makes her one hundred percent subject to the whim of just about everybody except the dog. Accepting the instant transition to Old China, I followed up by asking, again in Chinese, for permission to go outside and play. Dismissing me, my mother quickly returned my conspiratorial grin before facing her critic with a "Now, what were you saying, my Dear?" kind of look.

This was definitely not a Chopsticks-Fork family. I'm sure they thought that setting the table with sharp instruments was barbaric.

Later, my parents said there were too many Overseas Chinese who tried to raise their children as if they were still in the China of their grandparents. Although we didn't yet know any who went to the other extreme—total Americanization—I knew my parents would have disapproved of that too. Part of Bao lore was the tradition, but it also included stories of my parents' rebellion, of whatever it took to venture so far from home. Our motto was

"Have the courage and know how to take the best from East and West."

The Umbrella Woman must have had the same gumption once. So how could she be unafraid to cross an ocean and yet be so afraid of a medium blue? How could she want something new for herself but perpetuate the old in and on her daughter?

"Hrumph, no more *shuai*."

"What's that?"

My mother demonstrated. With her feet firmly planted, she rotated her upper torso several times. Her arms, hanging loose, followed her shoulders and did wrap-arounds about her body.

"Swing."

Thereafter, about once every year or two, she would swing for me. She wanted me to know about versatility and flexibility, about how being well placed meant being able to move in any direction at a moment's notice. Each time she did it, she enjoyed her ingenuity more and the delight made her a little girl, arms swirling, as pleased with the feel of it as the lesson being performed. I thought it was a tradition. I grew up believing every Chinese child learned how to swing.

Now I think she made it up. Maybe just for me. When I asked her, so I could explain the concept to my son, she couldn't understand my sloppy pronunciation. When I demonstrated, she shook her head and told me *shuai* is a to-and-fro or forward-and-back motion. When I insisted on the version she taught me and repeated the word, she mimicked my intonation and said,

"*Shuai*? Like fall down? Lose one's balance?"

"No, Mommy. *Shuai*. Like this." And once again twisted gaily.

"Never heard of it."

Oh well. This, like so much that was important in our household, had a *MaMa-HuHu* quality about it. Literally, "HorseHorse-TigerTiger," it connotes "neither one way nor the other," or "either way." But there's also an element of *comme çi comme ça*, or "so-so" in the phrase. The *MaMa-HuHu* meant my parents were casual, but never careless. Their ideas were weather balloons to my mind's eye, fascinating me with their staying power amidst the crosswinds, then astonishing me with their deft mobility in a breeze.

They ruled by proclamation of simple rules but governed with complex examples. Sixteen years after we arrived in the U.S., they did the same with *SanSan*? Reminiscent of what happened with Bette and me, on the next available school day after my little sister arrived, my parents sent her to Teaneck High to watch kids learn about Huckleberry Finn. Nearly two decades after that, when my uncle arrived in America, he was enrolled at City University of New York. At a time when "multiculturalism" had no meaning, good or bad, my parents invented the concept for us. When my mother saw my uncle doing his early morning *taijiquan* exercises by the front door, she pulled him inside, remonstrating,

"Not in the front. This isn't China. Do you see anybody else on the block doing that? In America, the front is where you put out the garbage and pick up the newspaper. Do it in the backyard, like barbecues."

When her "don't stick out like a sore thumb" and "look/see" lessons weren't enough, my father patiently compared cultures to explain how the differences were reflected in the everyday jargon that never appeared in grammar books. And throughout, we watched them make forays into the world and return with a variety of imports: the virtues of laughing at oneself, permanents, American breakfasts, Halloween and Christmas. Sometimes the timing got mixed up as when we wore costumes to decorate the tree, but our enthusiasm more than made up for any confusion this may have caused our friends.

Once my mother came back from the store with four pairs of mukluks, each exactly the same as the other. Unaware of their Eskimo origins, she appreciated their comfort and warmth. I asked her,

"Why four?"

She shrugged. Without pointy toes and slim high heels, not one of the Bao females ever wore them. And since they were our size, my father couldn't (for which he was very thankful). These occasional flops didn't matter. We still got the idea.

Though they sometimes forgot what they said, or lamented where my ideas took me, they were, nonetheless, the instigators. If their grandchild grew up in a world where the extraordinary and ordinary were made into each other, it was because I could say to the clerk,

"Please, I would like to buy an umbrella. No, not that one. The red one." …

268.152 1. The Story Of The Lotus-Picking Boat **2.** Father, A Stranger **3.** Grandpa And His Canary\fn{by Shen Aiping (1942-)} Wei County, Hebei Province, China (F) 4

1

Morning breeze with its breath of sweet lotus drifts
Over the pond encircled by traces of heavy footmarks
As the lotus blossoms display their poetic charm,
Their stately leaves, a swath of fresh green.

*

What a splendid cradle of jade!
Sound of a new-born baby crying comes
Wafting through the years. When was it?
A baby had no right to cry then …

*

I wept
My tears like a gushing stream
Clouded with dense smoke of gunpowder
Now trace the story of a small lotus-picking boat.

*

It was a late autumn evening, hazy with rain,
As Father went out to meet the guerilla forces,

Mother rowed a small boat for gathering lotus root
To wait for a woman guerilla under the old willow tree.
*
Suddenly from the opposite bank came a round of gunshots,
The small boat ducked under the lotus leaves;
At this life-and-death moment
Mother went into labor and I came howling into the world.
*
The small boat with its mat of lotus leaves
Was as my delivery room,
And a woman warrior acting the midwife
While the boat rocked in fear.
*
Mother stuffed my tiny mouth with Lotus petals
For cries would bring the attackers
Deliberately she uncovered my tiny black beanlike eyes,
And whispered in my ear:
*
“Quickly look upon your father, my child,
The guerillas are about to launch an attack
Your father has finished tightening his leggings
And has put on his grAy uniform …”
*
With a soldier’s decisiveness,
My father said to me, gravely and lovingly:
“My dear son,
I bequeath this lotus pond to you!”
*
Suddenly a bullet tore through his shoulder,
With a quick leap into the pond, he plunged into battle,
Leaving behind a small life in the small boat,
Leaving behind a streak of bright red along the boat.
*
Father is gone,
But the small boat still floats in my memories,
Lotus flowers still gleam with hopes, still
Lifting high the torch Father had set ablaze.

2

i

A silhouette fades away into the distance—
Carefully surveying the lotus lake
He looks so familiar and strange
Bewildered, I chase after him
As if asking in silence:
Are you my father
Why don’t you call me daughter
*
I don’t know how you will reply
But I’m sure
You will burst into bitter tears
Because of my convulsions

My hoarse voice
For you can understand
A child may also become hysterical
With longing for its father
*
Together we are tramping over this land
That has been irrigated with blood
The coursing blue water
Is carrying away my dank associations …

ii

Mother often used to talk about your going—
Early on that snowy dawn
Chains pulling your flesh and blood,
The snow enveloping the gasping earth
The villagers in their silence
Prolonging the tragedy
Your eyes wide
You searched for my mother
You saw her—
Standing on a high slope
Holding a thin small child in her arms
You smiled
Blood trickling from the corners of your mouth
But with the chains wound around your arms like poisonous snakes
*
You could not reach me
I stared innocently
Not knowing what had happened
The villagers' tears
Were like icicles suspended from eaves
Snowflakes fell like scarlet maple leaves
The clanking chains
Struck the still fields
In the east, a glimpse of a tall, straight silhouette
The road, a river of blood

iii

Let me see your hands
Your hands have rejected yesterday's shadows
Let me feel your legs
They have left that blood-stained history far behind
Only your bronzed neck
Is engraved, with scars left by the chains
Is engraved with the wounded truth
I cannot be wrong
You are my father

iv

Yesterday
Mother told me again what you looked like:

A swarthy, robust man
With hair like dense bushes
The stature of an unbending tree
Let me lean on your shoulders
Against your warm chest
You turn your face to smile at me
I raise my head to speak while we are walking
Even though you may grow old
You will never be lonely
Our home is just ahead
Look—
The woman with loose wisps of gray hair
Gazing out at us
Is my mother

v

Papa, why are you crying?
Let mc wipe away your tears
Why, your forehead is burning
Is it because seeing mother
Has rekindled the flames of memories of youth
Mother is walking towards you—
Holding aloft a bunch of white lotus flowers
She is smiling, smiling at you
And you, standing still
Are like a solid memorial—
A statue that will never topple

3

My silver-bearded Grandpa
Chuckles like an old locust tree shaking loose its blooms.
Early every morning
He hangs his finely woven birdcage on a branch
And closely scrutinizes the little canary,
Still a baby, all golden and downy.
How Grandpa grins with glee.
*
Up, up
He lifts my stocky body up
For me to feed the bird a few grains
And coax it into sweet song.
*
Crack goes the branch,
The cage is broken,
The bird is flown,
Shattering Grandpa's perpetual delight.
He raises his cane as if wanting to hit me
But I can't tell him where the bird has gone.
*
Grandpa, clutching the mended cage,
Sets out with me to scour the woods.
A peep of clear crisp trilling notes

Leads us to our joyous find—
Upon a leafy branch
Perches our golden canary
It twitters:
I'm not going back with you,
I've built myself a fine sturdy nest.
*
Looking upward at the nest,
Frosty beard quivering and
Dropping little sweatbeads.
Is Grandpa crying or laughing?
Tapping my shoulder he wildly gestures:
Fly, oh fly away …

21.27 The Loudspeaker\fn{by Bao Chu-an (1942/48-)} Nanxi County, Sichuan Province, China (F) 5

We live in one of those square courtyards that are quite common in our town. There are five families altogether and we have been neighbors for over fifteen years. We moved there in 1954. At that time, we were a friendly community. If someone was away on business, the neighbors would keep an eye on the children. If one of us became ill, there was always a neighbor to lend a hand with getting the herbal medicine and stewing it. If one household made some special treat, like sticky rice dumplings, not only would the smell pervade the courtyard but every family would get a taste. Even we guys who were in our teens at the time rarely quarreled, much less got into fistfights.

But today, fifteen or so years later, everything is changed. I don't know what happened. Is it something in the metabolism? Or a genetic deviation? Or has human nature entered into a new stage of evolution? Whatever it is, neighborly relationships have sadly deteriorated. Actually, we see more of each other, now that all normal work is stopped with this ongoing Cultural Revolution. In the space of the little courtyard, we stumble into each other whichever way we move. But we don't so much as bat an eyelid when we meet face-to-face; we might as well be staring into thin air. The fact is, to spit, or cough, or even sigh in the presence of another might be construed as provocation. It might easily be the spark that sets off a blazing fire. We keep our voices down even when speaking behind doors.

One morning, I sat on a stool on the step outside our front door (all the rooms open directly into the common courtyard) and stared listlessly at the loudspeaker jutting out from the top of the Economic Committee building. I was bored and wished for some kind of distraction, anything to break the silence. Even the loudspeaker with its deafening roar and abusive screeches. Anything.

Bang! Something hit hard against the wall in the room next to ours. Was a battle about to begin? Every nerve in my body tensed in expectation.

Boom! Boom! Boom! Whatever it was that hit the wall now bumped over the floor. Following the sound, Little Ming, our neighbor's teenage son, shot out into the yard. He stood in the middle of the yard, his neck stiff, his head lifted at an angle. He glared at the door to his family's rooms and cursed under his breath. His eyes were slits and his chin pointed, like a mouse's. I'm not prejudiced, even though his elder brother and his gang of Red Guards did beat me up three years ago at the beginning of the Cultural Revolution—just because I was a member of the Workers' Vigilance, a different faction. No, I'm not prejudiced. The fact is he does look like a mouse. He's even nicknamed Mouse.

His father, the blacksmith Guo Shun, appeared at the door, naked from the waist up.

"So your wings are strong, are they?" His broad bronze face was twitching and the muscles on his shoulders rippled as he waved his arms angrily. "Get out of here. Go and rot in jail. Go get stuck by a knife. Get hit by a bullet! I don't give a damn!"

Little Ming rolled his eyes and shouted back.

"I'm telling you, it's my turn at sentinel duty, headquarters' orders. It's to defend Chairman Mao's revolutionary line. How dare you interfere!"

Blacksmith Guo Shun snorted, but for the moment he was silenced. Then he stuck his head out of the door and broke out again.

"Right! Then you needn't come back to eat!"

"Want to get rid of me?" Little Ming now spoke slowly and deliberately, shaking his head from left to right. "Not so easy."

"Why not? I support your revolutionary acts!" Guo Shun also changed tactics. "Just pretend you never had a father—"

"You want to have it all your way, do you?" Little Ming squinted. "I'm not eighteen yet. Not for another year and nine months. Have you forgotten?"

"So what?" The blacksmith was, after all, just a lump of iron and couldn't follow his son's arguments. "Do you mean you can go crooked just because you're not eighteen?"

"Ha!" Little Ming laughed dryly. "And do you mean you can just go and breed children and not do your duty?"

"Oh, you've got me, have you?"

The blacksmith was furious. His nostrils quivered and he shouted at the top of his voice.

"Okay, I've made a mistake. I shouldn't have spawned you in the first place! Then I give up being your father! Let's settle accounts at once and sever relations. I'll publish a statement in the papers." There were steps behind him. He wavered for a moment and diminished his tirade. "Two hundred *yuan* yearly for your keep. Sixteen years altogether. How much does that add up to? Make it out yourself."

"Are you saying that *you* kept me all these years?" Unlike his father, Little Ming raised his voice as he saw his mother approaching. His mother doted on him, the youngest. Besides, mother and son were attached to the same faction—the Battalion. He drew out his chest and curled his lips in a smile.

"*You* kept me! By what right do you say that?"

"Didn't I feed you? Didn't I clothe you? Didn't I pay your school fees?"

Little Ming threw back his head and laughed, drowning out his father's words. Then he pursed his mouth and started to deliver a lecture.

"Well, let me tell you I don't mind settling accounts, but don't think you are getting any credits! I am indebted to Chairman Mao! If it weren't for the chairman, where would you be yourself? Probably a starving corpse on some street corner. Think again. Who should get the credit? Don't forget what you owe to Chairman Mao!"

Little Ming had really outdone himself. I didn't know what to think—whether to cheer or to spit. I ended up saving my saliva.

The middle-school teacher Zhong Kaiwen was squatting outside his own door cleaning his bike. He, too, was shocked. He raised his head and stared at Little Ming, open-mouthed.

"You!"

The blacksmith was no match for his son at argument. He wasn't a debater, but he knew how to use his fists. He made a lunge at his son.

Mother Guo was alarmed. She held back her husband with both hands while her stare penetrated the schoolteacher until he lowered his gaze. Then she pointed to the loudspeaker towering above us all. "Day in and day out," she said, dragging out each word significantly, "it reminds us to be on the alert, to beware of class enemies making rifts among ourselves. Have you forgotten?" She put on her best manner, trying to sound amiable, but her words were enough to draw a little crowd, some from our own courtyard, some from our neighbors next door who stood in the entrance. They smacked their lips in happy anticipation.

Mother Guo was well-known for her piercing voice. She was a saleswoman at a vegetable stand. She hawked stale vegetables all the year round. In spring it was "Tender shoots, ten *fen* for a pile;" in summer it was "Red tomatoes, ten *jin* for one *yuan*;" in the fall it was "Cabbages, twenty *fen* for a bunch, your money back if they are rotten;" in winter it was "Celery cabbages, eight *fen* for one *jin*, buy one get one free!" When Mother Guo sold her vegetables at the main crossroad, her voice could be heard down the streets in all four directions. It was certainly not a musical voice, but the bargains it offered somewhat neutralized its unpleasantness. The true demonstration of Mother Guo's talents occurred during the contest of the two factions seeking supremacy at the inauguration of the so-called Committee of United Workers of the Fresh Produce Department. On that occasion, Mother Guo, loudspeaker in hand, represented the Battalion and entered into a shouting contest with the representative of the Red City faction. She drowned out the bleatings of the other woman in less than half an hour. Later, when the Battalion got the upper hand, Mother Guo was honored with the title of Loudspeaker. At the inauguration of the Provincial Revolutionary Committee, Mother Guo was invited to stand in the stadium with a plastic red badge over her breast.

Mother Guo now made sure that the insinuation of her words was not lost on the schoolteacher. Zhong Kaiwen kept his eyes studiously lowered. Mother Guo rubbed her chin complacently, making the pockmarks stand out one by one under the pressure of her fingers. She drew herself to her full height and strode over to her son, who was

still in the yard.

"Go back home. Quarrels between people mustn't allow cousins to get hurt. Conflict only makes classes and conserves happy."

I knew, of course, that she was trying to quote from Chairman Mao about peaceably resolving contradictions between the people. She was also trying to use a set phrase about refraining from internecine fights that hurt loved ones and gratify the enemy.

I was not the only one who got the message. A woman who had been scrubbing clothes in a tub outside her door caught the thrust of Mother Guo's words and took personal offense. She was Wang Lei, cashier at the Sechuan Cotton Mill. The word *conserve* stung her, as she had joined the Industrial Army faction, which was labeled conservative. She had ample experience of Mother Guo's verbal darts and was always on the alert. Now she flung the soppy clothes into the tub with a splash and shouted in the direction of her own room, though raising her voice for our benefit.

"Hey, you, cursed with a short life, get me another tub. Stuffing yourself and doing nothing all day long! Want me to leave a *mark* on your face?"

She gave Mother Guo a hard look.

Mother Guo bridled and smiled contemptuously. She clapped her son on the shoulder.

"Well, the mother's not much to look at, but the son's not bad," she exclaimed. "Get a pretty wife for yourself, my son, anytime you like."

The people standing at the entrance to our courtyard burst out laughing. Little Ming was embarrassed. He growled something at his mother and pushed her away, nearly tipping her off balance.

"Your mother followed the correct line," Mother Guo announced to no one in particular. "I've stood in the stadium, shaken hands with officials big and small."

She glowered and gave Little Ming another clap on the back.

"A warning, though, my son. Don't get involved with shameless hussies. Remember, your uncle spent a pot of money and got smeared and slandered into the bargain."

"Slander yourself!"

Wang Lei's face was crimson, and for a moment she was at a loss for words. More than ten years ago, Mother Guo had introduced Wang Lei to her own brother. They met several times, but nothing lasting came of it. Both parties married elsewhere and the matter was forgotten. But later, during the anti-rightist movement, Mother Guo's brother was implicated, and officers on his case interrogated Wang Lei. Wang Lei never said anything untrue, but even so, whatever she revealed was used to build up the case against Mother Guo's brother. Since then the two women had been deadly enemies.

Wang Lei protested her innocence throughout. Now she again pointed upward with her finger.

"By the heavens above and the earth below, whoever made a false statement will die an instant death, and that goes for those who make unjust accusations, too!"

"Has anybody been naming names? Well, if the cap fits … *Instant death* indeed! Go kill yourself, you shameless slut!"

"Slut yourself," Wang Lei retorted. "Put yourself on sale like your rotten tomatoes!"

The people watching by the entrance now joined in the fun. A young fellow sporting a military uniform with a broad belt across his waist snapped his fingers.

"Go at her," he cried. "Go at herl"

The crowd roared with laughter.

"So what if I sell rotten tomatoes! You sell your rotten—a pity my brother wouldn't buy!"

"You're disgusting. You're beneath me!"

Wang Lei, unnerved by the laughter of the crowd, lost control. And anyway, how could her voice hold out against Mother Guo's loudspeaker? As always, she turned lamely to the defensive.

"Oh, well, what can one say to the likes of you? Demons and monsters …"

Schoolteacher Zhong's wife had been in the backyard all this time. The minute she heard Loudspeaker, she picked up a stool and swiftly took up position at her own front door, as if answering a battle cry. Her husband signaled to her with his eyes to keep away, but she ignored him, stoutly maintaining her position on the stool, a glass of water in her hands. She worked behind the registration desk at the local clinic. It meant daily confrontations with angry patients. On top of that, she was tempered by faction wars, which she joined with zest and fervor. Taken altogether, Mrs. Zhong was a seasoned verbal combatant; a tiff in this little backyard was just child's play to her. She and her husband subscribed to the rebel August 26 faction. During the February

suppression of the year before, they had seen some hard times while Wang Lei and her conservative faction had had the upper hand. Thank goodness, they had managed to reverse the situation, but not before verbal bricks had been flung about and hard knocks exchanged.

Now she pricked up her ears at the words *demons and monsters,* terms usually applied to class enemies singled out during the Cultural Revolution. Having missed the prelude, she thought Wang Lei's words were directed at her. So she remarked: "Why give up like a whining dog? If you are in the right, why don't you go and eat the sesame-seed cakes that Li Jingquan has thrown to you?"

Now Li was the toppled provincial party chief and it was the accepted thing to taunt the so-called conservative faction with their connections to him, as if they were in his pay.

The minute Mrs. Zhong opened her mouth, I knew that a sparring melee involving many combatants had begun. I sneaked back into my room, leaving a gap in the door to keep track of developments.

Just as I had foreseen, the term *sesame-seed cake (ma-bing)* had struck a chord. The term shared one ideogram with the term *pockmark (ma-zi*) and the pockmarked Mother Guo took up the challenge. She assumed that Mrs. Zhong was retaliating on her for alluding to her husband as the class enemy. She put Wang Lei aside for the moment and trained her guns on Mrs. Zhong, directing her words ostensibly at her own husband:

"What are you standing there for like a lamppost? Take care you don't fart, or someone will make a case of it and report you!" This was a thrust at the Zhong couple: at the beginning of the Cultural Revolution, schoolteacher Zhong had created a poster accusing the blacksmith of holding a private job for extra gain.

"Hmmm," Mother Guo continued, "we eat by the sweat of our labor. What is it to you? Did it snuff out the joss sticks at your ancestors' graves?"

Mrs. Zhong had originally directed her attack at Wang Lei of the hated conservative faction, but since Mother Guo picked up the gauntlet, she was just as ready.

"So what! Tit for tat! Worthless trash! As if I had eaten chicken over her ancestors' graves!" This was an allusion to an earlier grudge dating back to 1964, when Mother Guo herself had accused Mrs. Zhong of pocketing the registration fees to treat herself to chicken. There had been an investigation, but nothing came of it except damaged relationships.

"Serves you right! Come full circle! You evil thug! Spy! Can't change your nature!"

Mother Guo reverted to her favorite tactic: shout down your enemy; never mind whether the words are relevant or not, so long as they hurt.

Schoolteacher Zhong reacted as if he had been hit, and the container of bicycle grease that he was holding spilled over. He raised his tired eyes and signaled his wife to stop. He was afraid to rake up that painful episode in his past. But with the word *spy* that raw nerve was touched and the memories came flooding back. Those memories harkened back to 1947, when he was graduated from high school and spent a whole year looking for a job. Finally he became a traffic policeman. He was on the job a mere three months, when in an accident involving a private rickshaw owner who had hit a beggar, he gave an honest account—and got a slap in the face and the sack. Little did he dream that this humiliation would be a blemish on his file and a blight on his whole career. It was raked up during every campaign of the last thirty years—the campaign to suppress counter-revolutionaries, the anti-rightist campaign, the socialist education campaign—all the way down to this so-called unprecedented great Cultural Revolution. There were endless interrogations and unending confessions. Even to this day, he had to be prepared against anything and everything—to have his home ransacked, to have a black carbon board hung over his neck advertising his crime, to be paraded down the streets with a piece of straw between his lips. Now he tried to explain for the nth time.

"Traffic p-police directing traffic," he stammered, "is n-not the s-same as spies."

In spite of all his explanations, however, isn't it true that his sons were barred from senior high school, excluded from jobs in state-owned enterprises? For a moment he was overcome. His legs shook. His head throbbed. He began to sway where he stood.

Mrs. Zhong was alarmed. She smashed the glass in her hand onto the ground and rushed to her husband. She helped him to a stool.

"Come, come, old man," she said. "Don't bother about the bike. Here! I've got ten *yuan* in my purse. Go to the teahouse and enjoy yourself. The little singsong harlot will sing on order, and you can even hold her hand for an extra *yuan*!"

"Oh, you!"

Zhong stamped his feet in exasperation. He gave a deep sigh and sat down speechless.

Mother Guo had lost her mother when still a child. Her father was blind, and father and daughter had once

been reduced to singing in a teahouse for a living. It was a dark moment in Mother Guo's life. Life is not an easy thing after all, we all have a page or two that we would rather not turn back to. Nobody with a sense of decency would probe these wounds. But Mrs. Zhong had forgotten herself in her anger.

Mother Guo was deeply wounded, wounded to her innermost being. Her eyes bloodshot, her face pale, she became demented.

"Okay," she screamed, placing her hands on her hips. "I'm selling, right here. Come and get me if you have the guts! Why one *yuan?* Ten *fen* will do! Like turnips and cabbages!" She twisted her body frantically and headed in the Zhongs' direction.

"Gutless creatures! Here, I'm delivering myself!"

The crowd at the entrance to the courtyard laughed mirthlessly. Some made sounds of disapproval or cried "Shame." The chap in the military outfit said to his companion,

"Come on, let's go. We don't want to be splattered with blood."

Meanwhile schoolteacher Zhong had shrunk into his own room, his knees still shaking. Fortunately, blacksmith Guo picked up his wife by the waist and shoved her back into their quarters, thus concluding—for the moment—this phase of the battle. Each side had used the most degrading language possible, and each had paid the price in the utmost measure of personal pain.

As a final stab, Mother Guo screamed at the top of her voice:

"Spy! Secret agent! Low-life creep!" The strain of her effort produced a fit of coughing.

The schoolteacher, provoked beyond endurance, took advantage of her coughing and poked his head from behind his door. Quivering with anger, he raised his index finger.

"You, you, you *square* low-life creep!"

Square? What is this newfangled term that the bookworm has cooked up? The contending parties and the onookers were silenced for a moment, savoring the flavor of the term. Even the returning section head, Mr. Zhu, stopped in his tracks, with one foot across the threshold.

"You! Square yourself!" Mother Guo was the first to regain lier wits and gave him as good as she got. A smile stole across the tired face of Mr. Zhu, which he converted into a dry cough as soon as he saw Mother Guo catch him in the act.

"Smile, do you?" Mother Guo thought she had somehow lost out in the exchange of *squares* and moved to surer ground.

"Smile on your mother's fucking feet, you capitalist roader. You deserve a thousand cuts!"

At that time *capitalist roader* was the extreme form of opprobrium. The section head being denominated in this manner was too stunned to reply. Wasn't he made to clean the latrines every day at his workplace? He gave Mother Guo a look of contempt and dived into his room. Immediately the blaring of *Dragon River Eulogy* (one of the eight model operas) from his radio effectively drowned out all the sounds of battle in the little courtyard. When the section head had first rigged up an amplifier, I had been mystified by his sudden interest in the radio programs. Only now did I begin to understand.

The sounds were drowned out, but the faces were still there before my eyes—livid faces, tearful, furious, vicious, pained, desperate, heartrending.

I shut the door and leaned against it in anguish. My deaf old mother came in from the backdoor. How lucky she is, I thought. She is above and beyond all this sordidness. She can dismiss everything. But now she cocked her ears and tried to catch what was going on. She crept up to me on tiptoe and shouted into my ears.

"Now, who is it who started the row?"

I gave her a look of disapproval. Then I was struck by the question. Who indeed!

Suddenly the loudspeaker at the top of the Economic Committee building was turned on full blast, drowning out the radio, literally enveloping us with its sound. The air around me seemed to quiver with the vibration. My nerves could not stand it anymore. My head began to swim. A humming assaulted my ears.

I knew that in a minute the racking pain would return. I lay down quickly and put my fingers to my ears.

Heavens, when will all this end?

1943

16.38 A Dream Of Good Fortune\fn{by Hwang Sogyong (1943-)} Manchuria, China (M) 18

A roof-tile factory with an evil-looking smokestack stood alone on a sprawling, denuded hillside, looming

above the housing sites spread about the reddish-brown earth. The sun was setting, and the sparks soaring from the smokestack gradually began to glitter in the murky sky. Simple frame houses and squat huts were clustered here and there amid the undeveloped land at the foot of the hill.

Nearby, Kang pulled his can past a depression beside the back wall of a chemical factory. Great heaps of rubbish were reflected in the grayish waste water that always collected there. Kang wore only a sleeveless T-shirt, tattered corduroy jodhpurs, and a perforated straw hat pulled down over his forehead. These clothes must have been picked from rags, and even the looks of their owner were worn and faded, like streamside pebbles parched by a drought. Kang looked like someone who had popped out of an ancient, yellowing photograph. He had the grizzled hair of a fifty-year-old, but his gait was dignified and his shoulders were solid from years of shouldering weight on a pole.

Kang hauled his can through a tangle of rusty galvanized-iron lean-tos built by the Reconstruction Corps—that was what they called the ragpickers these days. Half a dozen men were busy soning through the rubbish heaps, separating the jumble of paper, bottles, broken glass, wooden boxes, and tin cans into piles. Those who had just returned from their scavenging had unfastened bamboo baskets from their shoulders and were pouring the contents onto the heaps.

Boss, an older rag-picker who headed this branch of the Reconstruction Corp, was directing the work. He wore a field jacket whose pockets hung to the sides like ears; a reservist's cap was thrust down almost to his nose.

"Hey—get anything?" Kang greeted the man.

"*Just* get back?" Boss replied offhandedly.

"Get anything? Shit—I might as well try to find a middle leg on a woman," wisecracked a younger rag-picker next to him.

Boss looked askance at the other.

"Tell that to your old man, asshole, and see what he thinks."

He wiped his nose with one of the cotton gloves he was wearing.

Kang merely coughed instead of joining the banter.

"Unless I swipe something, the best I can come up with is stuff like this," Boss replied to Kang.

Kang somehow looked quite content, Boss felt. Judging from his greeting, he must not have made out too badly that day.

"How about buying me a drink? You look like you made some money."

"Not enough for all the legwork I do." But then Kang opened up.

"I got some wire."

"How much?"

"Fifteen pounds or so."

Kang made three or four hundred *won* a day at most. Sometimes the neighborhood kids sneaked him useful items from home, and there were days when petty thieves who had hit the jackpot but lost the services of their fence would sell to him. In such cases Kang would inspect the surroundings, quickly exchange taffy or cash, and make his getaway. Nothing was more certain than a trip to the slammer if he were unlucky enough to be caught. Today he had worked a good deal on some electric wire from a suspicious character, then resold it.

And that wasn't all.

"Take a look inside, pal." Kang pushed aside a wooden taffy tray and a plastic bag of popcorn.

Wondering what treasure was there, Boss craned his head into the cart, then jerked it back.

"That's an animal, isn't it?"

The gray legs of a dog protruded from a sack.

"You bet! Big as a calf."

"A shepherd! Yeah, he's no runt, is he? What did you do, cozy up and knock it over the head?"

"Come on—I got it from the owner. Everything's aboveboard."

The dog had a fine coat. Boss gave the tail a tug, but couldn't budge the heavy animal. He was about to touch its ears when Kang subtly deflected his hand with the taffy board. Boss clicked his tongue, reluctant to withdraw.

"Just what the doctor ordered. The Dog Day before this, we ended up with squat."

"But you'll have to chip in," said Kang.

"What a great guy! All right, I'm good for some booze. But only if it's safe to eat—I don't want to croak, you know."

Kang surveyed Boss from head to foot as if he had said all he was going to say, then gave his cart a push.

"Okay, I get the message," Boss said fretfully. "It won't kill us. I can roast the hair off it, so be sure to give me

a holler."

"You'll bring a bucket of *makkolli*?"

"I just said I would. Quit your worrying."

Kang nodded deliberately. "Good enough." Every time Kang thought about what was under the taffy tray, his heart throbbed like that of a young woman at her first marriage interview. Plump and heavy as a man in the prime of life, the dog was almost too handsome to eat.

Boss still couldn't believe it.

"What a find! It's not easy to see a dog during Dog Days."

"Still wondering how I got it? Well, I'm coming down in front of Kangnam School and this woman gives me a shout. I figure she has some scrap iron or something, so I follow her."

They had gone to a veterinarian's. The dog had been run over by a car. Its injuries weren't fatal, but both its hind legs were broken and there was no doubt it would be lame. The woman asked the vet to give the dog a shot to put it out of its misery, and within a short time it had spread its legs wide and was gone. The problem was how to get rid of the bulky beast. The vet wanted it disposed of immediately, but the woman had decided to bury it in some sunny place. It wasn't quite right to put it in her garden, she said, but then she couldn't just throw it in the garbage can either. What's more, she'd have to travel some distance to find a hill or an empty lot suitable for burial. Meanwhile, the woman's daughter was whining over the animal.

It was then that they heard the clanging shears heralding the approach of a junk dealer. The woman had all she could do to soothe her daughter while asking Kang to take the dog and bury it.

"Man, I'm telling you, with its tongue hanging out and its legs spreadeagled it looked just like a tiger. I was drooling the whole time, but they probably never dreamed I might have other plans for the dog."

Suppressing a feeling of triumph, Kang had loaded the dog into his cart. And as if that weren't enough, the woman had given him a full three hundred *won* for his trouble. It wasn't just a stroke of luck but a veritable windfall. While the daughter cried and the woman breathed a sigh of relief, Kang had to grit his molars to contain his excitement, which was causing his nose to twitch. Once out of their sight, he had looked inside the cart to see just how big the dog was.

"I don't get any meat these days, so my psoriasis is acting up," Kang continued. "Every day, skin flakes off like bits of rice. You know, I'd been thinking a stray mutt would be just the thing to eat to build up the old constitution."

Boss listened with a look of wonder and admiration.

"Sounds like the gentleman who ran it over deserves all the credit, and not the lady."

"That's a fact. It wasn't rat poison and it wasn't a fit; it was a gentleman in a car hitting a big fat dog. He did right by us."

The two men were of one mind, and their laughter came easily. Kang had received not only a healthy day's earnings but the three hundred *won* as well. He had then thrown down a couple of shots of rotgut at a bar, indulging himself in his achievement. It was on his way home from the bar that he had met Boss.

"Okay, see you in a bit."

Kang exultantly pushed his cart into a neighborhood whose rows of dwellings could hardly be distinguished from the garbage heaps along the cement embankment about a foot and a half high that bordered a broad open sewer. Almost anyone who saw him could have guessed how his day had turned out. His dignified gait, his head held erect, his cart rolling lightly along, the jaunty angle of his hat, and the first question he asked anyone he met —"How'd you make out today?"—left no doubt that his day had been the best.

An old man who lent money at daily interest emerged from the public toilet The head of the neighborhood association had raised black goats there until the previous year, but he'd never made any money at it. His goat-pen was now a hut used as the neighborhood toilet.

"You're going to be a grandfather."

The moneylender stood with both hands stuck inside the dirty pajama bottoms he was wearing.

"What are you talking about?" Kang asked.

"Misun's back."

"That little tramp!"

"Hard to recognize her. She's with child, you know."

Kang could only click his tongue in irritation. A few days earlier, his wife had been sobbing over a letter from Misun. He knew what this moneylender was like, and was not unaware of his habit of toying with people. Even so, this news galled him to no end. He was about to say, "She's not my girl anymore." But this was too

hardhearted, and his face prickled with shame.

"What a pain in the ass! As far as your money's concerned, you'll get it whether the bitch is dead or alive. Talk to my old lady about it."

The old man was somewhat agreeable today. He had given up trying to find out if Kang intended to pay him back, but now there seemed to be hope.

"Misun's the one who started it all. Now that she's back, no problem."

"I agree," said Kang. "I'll leave the whole thing up to you."

"Listen to what she says. You'll see I've been telling you the truth. And the parents have to take some of the responsibility."

"But I had nothing to do with it."

Not satisfied with this, the old man shot a piercing look at Kang and his cart.

"Her stomach's just like a watermelon," he chuckled. "I'll bet it's twin boys."

"Damned slut!"

Kang gave the cart a shove and entered an alley lined with low piles of bricks. The houses sat low enough to reveal their tarpaper roofs held down by rocks, and the slanting sheets of light green plastic that served as vents and windows. Beyond the other end of the alley was the neighborhood's single water pump and—an old custom reflecting the residents" rural origins—plots of vegetables being cultivated in the undeveloped land: scallions, cabbage, com, and such. Most of the other workingmen had returned home, washed up and changed, and found a spot among the empty lots to squat and take in the breeze. Kang exchanged cursory greetings with a few of them.

Kang's boy saw him, left his playmates, and dashed over.

"Dad—Uncle's back. And he brought Misun."

Kang removed the taffy and popcorn from the can, then hoisted the dog. The children gathered, and there was a stir among the scattering of grownups. Kang, noticing his boy clinging to the taffy tray, punched him in the back.

"Little bastard!"

Kang turned toward his house, which was already dark. There was usually a response to his arrival, but today all was quiet.

Stamping in vexation, the boy heaped abuse at his father's back:

"Dad's a sonofabitch! Dad's a fucker, a fucker!"

Ignoring this, Kang toted the dog into his kitchen and set it on a shelf. The wooden plank bent under the weight.

One fellow, perhaps designated by the neighbors, stuck his head in.

"How about if we get a fire going?"

"Okay," Kang readily replied.

Kang entered the family room and just missed stepping on his wife's stomach. She was lying on the floor with a thin sheet pulled over the top of her head. Kang turned on the light and stared at his wife's body in its white shroud.

"What's eating you so early in the evening? How do you think I feel after pounding the pavement all day long?"

"Spare me—I'm not in the mood."

"Great! Just lying there like you've gone nuts."

Not wanting to aggravate his wife, Kang swallowed an urge to bark at her some more. But just then his boy, sitting astride the doorsill, started whining.

"Little son of a whore! You want to die?" Kang shouted.

The boy burst into tears.

"Well done," Kang's wife murmured from beneath the sheet. "What a way for a father and son to behave. The simpleton—is he whining because he can't shove anything more down his gullet?"

"That's right, bitch. And your two kids are real charmers too."

Kang's wife peeled off the sheet and lurched upright.

"If you had a thousand mouths you still wouldn't have anything worth saying. When have you ever tried to be a father to them? When? Have you ever? I'm so ashamed in front of others I could die. A man of your age still going after sex … I know, why bring it up now, but who knocked me up so I had to get married again? How old was I when I had that kid? How many others did I get rid of? Tell me."

"Woman, you really are something! Like mother, like daughter. So, Misun's back?"

"Why did I ever get myself into this? What a silly broad I was."

The sliding door to the back room rattled.

"Damn family," Kang growled, "I ought to burn this mother down."

At last the door slid open. Sure enough, there was Kang's brother-in-law in a dandy suit and a neat tie. He rose and emerged, hunched over.

"Hello, Brother-in-Law. Please calm down. The others will hear."

"Oh, the whole neighborhood knows."

Losing his temper, Kang punched his knee over and over. "It's natural for kids to make their parents worry," he said to his wife, "but there has to be a limit. Why did that slut make up a story, borrow money at daily interest, and then take off! That's what gets me, We've gotten used to the moneylender bugging us, but if I say one word about Misun coming back home with her belly sticking out, you get bent out of shape. I'm a father, with a reputation like anyone else—a father!"

"Good grief. Well, how admirable. Father who can't bring any money home, if you were the outside of a cabbage, at least I could boil you and make soup."

"Sister, you stop too," said her brother. "As the Bible says …"

Here we go again, Kang thought indignantly. His boy turned pale and was about to run off when Kang grabbed his wrist and said in an overly plaintive tone:

"Let's go outside. Father'll give you some taffy."

Kang's wife gave a deep sigh that became a trembling sob, then threw herself down again. Her brother, seating himself squarely, began praying in a deep, encouraging voice.

"Almighty Jehovah, we in this family beseech you to cleanse us of the worry and suffering that dwell among us. May we sin no more in your presence, Father. Although she who went away has just returned and our family has come together again, we know not how to thank you. Instead, we feud and forget your kindness, Heavenly Father, though we struggle in poverty and anguish on this earth and know not heaven, show us the way; include us in your ranks on judgment day. We who are about to stand in the presence of heaven, we sinners …"

"Cut it out! 'Sinner, sinner'—it makes me sick. These days the King of Kings is getting on my nerves."

Kang's brother-in-law flinched at this outcry but didn't stop.

" … we sinners, every one of us, will repent and become faithful; we will praise the glory of the Lord. We know that our unhappiness comes from our sins. We ask of you, bestow perpetual grace on Kunho, who is working the night shift at the factory, and on the head of this household, and bless the life Misun is bearing …"

A choking sound came from the other side of the sliding door.

Kang's wife became still. The prayer continued.

" … Oh God, make us all your children. We beseech you once more, save us from the burning brimstone of hell, and allow us to live, with the Lord's favor, in truth and hope. We unworthy sinners, lacking any merit, pray in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen."

This talk of sinners, heaven, and hell seemed to have suddenly filled the room with a sweet, languid sorrow and expectation. Behind the sliding door Misun felt the tension drain from her chest. But her mother couldn't avoid feeling she herself had somehow been treated unfairly. Her uncle, still sitting piously, leafed through his Bible, its pages marked through and through with a colored pencil, and read to himself.

The old clock on the wall struck eight. Next to it, mounted in a frame, were several photographs fading with age. And beside them was a calendar, brought home by Kunho, advertising a cosmetics company. The current month showed a woman in sheer underwear with her legs coyly spread. On a low desk stood such books as a Japanese primer, a dog-eared economics text, a Chinese historical romance, Andrew Carnegie's autobiography, and a volume titled *The Secret of Success*.\fn{Andrew Carnegie (1835-1919) was an American industrialist and philahthropist, responsible, among other charities, for endowing over 1,700 libraries—called, after him, "Carnegie Libraries"—all across the United States. His autobiography was edited By J. C. Van Dyke in 1920.} On top of the worn-out, old-fashioned bureau was a portable hi-fi that Kang's wife turned all the way up whenever she was in the mood. The songs from the old days, performed on an electric organ, sounded to her like rice gruel boiling in a pot. It was something Kang had given her as a present rather than turning over to a second-hand shop.

But now Kang's wife was in no mood for music. She hated Misun to death, yet pitied her, realizing in retrospect that as her mother she was entirely to blame. The evening breeze felt chilly, so she pulled the cord from the vented window in the ceiling and it banged shut. She heaved another sigh. Her expression was much more composed now; by nature she was hot-tempered but cooled off easily. Though she was almost fifty, the skin on her face was taut and she had kept her figure.

"It's all my fault. I lost my head and got married again—to an old halfwit," she said to herself with a sigh of

grief.

It was in the city of Ch'onan that she met Kang. Her first husband had been lost in heavy seas off Taebu Island—her previous home—and she had settled in Ch'onan shortly thereafter. Finding it difficult to raise Misun and Kunho as a single mother, she had taken to selling rice cakes filled with bean jam on the trains, using a nook at the station to avoid the security men. Kang, still brawny, handled freight at the station. Before they knew it, this rice-cake vendor and freight hand had caught each other's eye. Having been two-timed once, Kang had lost heart with women. But even though he was not your usual bachelor, he couldn't help falling for this widow who had kept her charms. It was long before their child was born that they had moved to Seoul. Though arriving empty-handed, Kang knew how to provide, and the family had quickly adapted to their new life.

Absorbed in these thoughts, Kang's wife called her daughter as mildly as she could.

"Misun, come over here."

Misun, barely replying in a voice that seemed to retreat rather than project from her throat, squatted hesitantly at the threshold of the back room, her head sunk squarely on her chest.

"What's the plan? Have the baby just like that?"

Misun fingered the hem of her skirt without answering.

Her mother repeated the question, lifting Misun's chin, but the girl's head drooped again as soon as she let go.

"It's not going to work. Let's talk with your brother, and then tomorrow we'll go to the hospital."

Looking at her daughter's slender face and swollen abdomen, she wiped away tears with her fingers.

"It's not six months yet—there has to be a way out."

Misun's head snapped up.

"I don't want to."

"Then what are we supposed to do with a kid and no dad?"

"It's got one."

"So where is he? He ought to be right here explaining the situation and asking permission to get married, or if the timing isn't good, then asking us to wait awhile. Fat chance we have when you come crawling in with a big belly like a mangy dog. When Kunho sees that, he'll blow his stack—he'll kill you."

Her brother, still looking through his Bible, broke in.

"Sister, how could you kill a healthy, living baby?"

"Don't you butt in. The things that come out of that mouth of yours … you know what it's like for us to make ends meet."

Her brother tried to change the subject.

"Was I ever surprised when Misun showed up. I couldn't get her to tell me anything—all she did was cry. But I did get the impression that they lived together before they split up."

"Did you split up with the guy? What happened?"

"He went in the army. He said he was going to learn how to drive, and we could get married when he got out."

"What if it was somebody besides him?" her mother asked.

"Oh, I don't know," Misun said, brazenly ignoring her mother's feelings. "He's got a good personality, but he's lazy."

Her mother gave her a rap on the head and heaved a deep sigh.

"There's no other way. We've got to settle this. If you don't want an abortion, then write this creep and make him own up."

"Mom, he's not some knight in shining armor."

Her mother spoke half to herself:

"Before we do anything else, we're going to get you out of this mess."

"All right, if you can find someone who'll accept the baby, then I'll marry him."

Kang's brother-in-law slapped his knee. "Terrific! Thank you, Lord."

"Oh, be quiet!" said Kang's wife. "My guts are so torn up I could die." Misun was now completely philosophical: whatever happened was fine. A few tears dribbled out, and that was all. In truth she looked less dejected than her mother.

"I'll do it your way."

"Oh, how wonderful. Crazy bitch!"

Her mother tried to make a rough estimate. It looked as if the wedding would come to thirty or forty thousand *won*, no matter how she worked it. And there was the twenty thousand Misun had borrowed at daily interest when she ran away. To make good on the debt and then pay for a wedding would easily require fifty thousand won. In

addition, someone had to provide for Misun until she was able to go back to work at the wig factory. But the immediate question was, who would want this young thing for a wife? As soon as one cause for concern disappeared, a new one cropped up.

"This is going to be quite a project. What happened to that money you borrowed, anyway?" she asked Misun.

"I took out a room. And the ten thousand that was left—I blew it the month after he went in the army."

"You should've gone to hell instead. Then I'd feel better."

They needed money—that was the bottom line.

Kang's wife tried again to calculate how much Kunho would bring home that month. Since he'd put in a lot of time on the night shift, he'd probably make at least fourteen thousand. What if they could get by on barley and wheat flour on the money Kang brought home? And they'd have to rent out the back room. But there was no guarantee that events would tally with this scenario. As for blood relatives, there was just her brother. If he could help out with ten thousand for the ceremony, how proud of him she would be! She picked up her brother's Bible and shook it in front of his nose.

"Eating comes first, then Jesus and all the rest. You think you can save the world by locking yourself up in that mountain chapel for the rest of your days? I wish you'd make a clean break with them, so you could get your hands on some money."

"Sister … now what's wrong with my being there? It's the least I could do after God helped me get over my mental problems. And starting next month I'll be in charge of the chapel and get thirty thousand a month to live on."

"That's what I like to hear! I'll lend it out at high interest And how about ten thousand for the wedding?"

"I'll bring that up with the evangelist."

"Good luck! And I suppose the next thing you'll tell me is that it's your turn to get some of the money those people donate who go there to bow and pray—those sinners with heavy hearts and the ones who have such a tough life."

"You'd be surprised. The financial situation at the chapel really is better these days."

As soon as Kang's wife had made up her mind about her daughter, her worries seemed to ease. Although the family was pinched from day to day and occasionally in danger of breaking up because of its poverty, the five of them managed to survive. There's always a way … things will work out somehow. She had made a vague decision to go through with a wedding, but that child inside Misun was more worrisome than anything else. A baby without a dad? No way.

"I've never had money to live on—only deception," she mumbled to herself as she stepped down into the kitchen.

*

A bonfire blazed in the field across the sewer ditch, fed by apple boxes split by Kang's neighbors. In the pitch darkness where one day a factory would stand, the flames shot up to reveal weeds head-high among piles of rubbish. Humming and chuckling could be heard amid the stir of the men gathered about the fire. As soon as the flames had come to life and the fire had stopped smoking, they had strung up the dog and begun singeing off its hair. When you have fire, liquor, and meat, it's only natural that you'll give fresh life to a gathering. And these men chuckled and swapped jokes like a bunch of mischievous country boys who had just stolen some chickens. The womenfolk watched this cheerful group with satisfaction, for their men were usually irritable and dispirited in the evening. The women remained on the far side of the ditch, but the impetuous little ones had crossed over and were hanging around in clusters among the grownups. Their faces and naked chests flickered crimson, and the smell of scorched fur filled the fireside air.

In groups of half a dozen or more, the men made a point of thanking Kang. Since they had all contributed toward the bucket of *makkolli*, no one felt like a deadbeat waiting for the meat. Water was boiling in the iron kettle brought by Boss. The dry wood crackled, and fat ran from the skin of the dog, now stripped of its fur and black as coal. The men talked about the neighbohood that had sat until this day below the roof-tile factory, occasionally looking apprehensively at the flat expanse where not a dot of light could be seen.

"We're pretty lucky, aren't we?" said the gray-haired, bespectacled head of the neighborhood association. "The people at the district office say that since our neighborhood's been here more than ten years, they'll compensate us. Anyway, there shouldn't be any problem before next year."

"I sure hope not," said one of the other men. "After all, most of us came here to put in the foundation of that factory. That's how this neighbomood got started."

"So when they do tear down our neighborhood," the headman continued, "they'll pay fifty thousand *won* per

household.”

“Damn—that’s not too bad,” the other replied.

“Come on, pal, don’t let the booze go to your head. You think fifty thousand is enough for that imperial palace of yours?”

“Well, I guess not … yeah, it’s an imperial palace to us, all right!”

The loud jangle of a bicycle bell sounded behind them. A tall, well-built man with several wooden tubs piled on the carrying rack of his bicycle came alongside.

“Looks like you boys planned on counting me out of this one.”

“Tokpae—you’re just in time. How about the liquor peddler treating us to some drinks, huh?”

“Yeah, take the night off from that booze stand of yours and get some nourishment into you.”

Tokpae propped the bicycle against the inside of his thigh.

“How’d it turn out?” he asked the headman. “Did someone say each household gets fifty thousand?”

“I’m not sure when they’ll tear the houses down, but I think we’re safe for this year. Just remember—I’ve been busting my ass on this.”

The headman patted himself on the chest.

Tokpae thought for a moment as he whisked away the sweat streaming down his forehead with the back of his hand.

“What about a case like this: I’m thinking of renting out one of our rooms. When it’s time for us to get out, would the tenants get fifty thousand too?”

“You’ll have to work that out in advance and get it down in writing.”

“Could you help me out? They’re coming tomorrow, and you’re the only one I can count on.”

“You need a witness? Okay—but you’ll have to treat me.”

“No problem.”

“Hey, Tokpae, we’ve got an empty room too, you know,” said Kang, who had been thinking of every possible way to pay off Misun’s loan. Despite wrangling with his wife, he felt remorse over Misun’s predicament. It was a fact that he had never shown any affection to Misun and Kunho.

“You meet a lot of people on the street. Why don’t you fmd someone for us, too?”

“Let’s wait and see,” Tokpae replied. “The people who’re coming tomorrow might know someone.”

“What kind of work do you suppose these guys are going to do?”

“What do you think? Anyone who’s looking for a place around here is up from the countryside putting in for factory work—remember?”

“Yeah, I suppose so.”

“Considering the room, I ought to be able to get twenty thousand from those hicks,” said Tokpae.

“Listen to this guy! I suppose you're not a hick?”

“Cut it out. I’ve been drinking city water for six years now.”

“And you still don’t know your way around town. You think this here isn’t the sticks? Let me tell you something, buddy—this is the boondocks.”

Tokpae turned away from the boisterous joking, pushed off on his bicycle, and passed by the field. The traces of furrows made the road bumpy. Every time the wheels caught on something Tokpae cursed to himself:

“Scummy, idiot bitch!”

He couldn’t help being in a foul mood, for his wife had told him to go home and cook more noodles for the liquor stall. This meant business was good these days, but wasn’t it a fact that the goddamned broad didn’t have an ounce of foresight? They’d taken a beating on that tub of sea cucumbers she’d bought: the things had turned bad and she’d had to toss them. Ditto with half the sausage. She knew that the people on the night shift always ordered noodles, but just the same she’d come up short.

Tokpae crossed the sewer ditch on a plank bridge connecting the cement embankments and walked his bicycle onto a broad asphalt street that stretched right and left. In both directions were bright streetlights and a row of factories. The solitary sound of machines filled the empty street. The liquor stall was at the edge of the ditch where the factory buildings and an abbreviated commercial area came to an end. Inside the stall were seats fashioned from logs and boards.

“Where the hell have you been?”

While Tokpae was parking his bicycle behind the stall his wife began ticking off a litany of grievances.

“We just lost a couple of parties, you know … did the big one go home?”

“I didn’t see him.”

"What did I tell you! I'll bet he's got his eyes glued to the TV in the comic book shop again. Just wait till that little bastard shows up."

Innocently clicking his tongue, Tokpae set down the tubs of noodles with a thud and went inside the stall. A man who had been swilling *makkolli* held up his glass in greeting. He was a peddler of transistor radios who stopped by every evening for a drink.

Tokpae responded with a nod.

"Well, look who's here," he said uneasily.

"That old lady of mine is getting carried away."

"Life has a way of doing that to people."

"I couldn't have put it better myself. Making a living is one big headache."

"I'll bet I walked thirty miles today, and that's no lie," the peddler said with a sigh. He stroked his sparse beard. His face was always melancholy. Though his expression was less somber now than several months before, it was still a bit gloomy. That spring he had been released from prison. It was no big deal, he had said, but according to the gossip of the people across the ditch, he had been jailed for sticking a knife in his deranged wife.

Tokpae hoped the peddler wouldn't drink too much that evening. He was quite familiar with the lethargy and insecurity that dwelled in the faces of the men who had lost their jobs, and he knew that when the peddler grew excited he would sometimes crow about his days as a clerk. Realizing the peddler lived in the neighborhood that had been leveled that day, Tokpae became completely ill at ease. And today of all days the snack plate was empty except for a couple of deep-fried morsels. He chopped up some baby octopus and set it on the plate.

"You must be tired," Tokpae said to the peddler. "Maybe you ought to hustle on home."

"Well, I guess I could … but it's so godawful hot I think I'll take it easy here."

"Was there some trouble in our neighborhood today, honey?" Tokpae's wife asked.

Tokpae elbowed her, at the same time nonchalantly offering the peddler a cigarette.

"Trouble?" the peddler asked laconically.

"Umm … let's see … oh yeah, everybody had to line up for water-boy, it's been dry," said Tokpae.

As if she had just remembered something, Tokpae's wife untied her apron, grumbling all the while.

"Damn brats … you mind the place, okay?"

"Just forget about them, huh?"

"They don't study like I tell them to. Every day it's the TV or the comics—I'm sick and tired of it. And they're always getting into the money box."

Tokpae sighed.

"Educating the kids takes a lot of effort," he told the peddler, who was calculating some of his customers' monthly payments. "I'm trying every way I can to get the big one through school so he can get a desk job … I only went to middle school, and look at me."

The peddler smiled.

Tokpae's wife rushed out shouting, "When the factory kids come, check the account book and get what they owe for last month's rice cakes. I'll be right back."

"Hey, woman!"

Just as Tokpae was going out after her, an old man entered the stall and ordered a bowl of noodles and broth. Tokpae had no choice but to return. The man toted a folding chair and a whetstone worked by a crank. Probably sharpens knives and scissors, Tokpae thought. While Tokpae was preparing the noodles, the old man looked over the various rice cakes. After a while he took out some coins and counted them several times.

"How much for one of those sticky ones?"

"Ten *won*. A couple will fill you up more than plain rice. Sticky rice is the best thing if you can't get a square meal."

"Okay, I'll take one."

"Excuse me, mister," said a young man of about twenty in a thick, husky voice. He had bushy hair and wore a gaudy shirt.

"Hey, it's Kunho. What's up?" Tokpae said casually.

"Oh, not much—just out for a snort. Can you get me a drink?"

"Looks like you've done some snorting already," Tokpae said disapprovingly. Only then did he discover that Kunho's left hand was completely bandaged.

"What's wrong with your hand? Aha, been in a scrap."

"Huh? Oh, this. Yeah, I went a couple of rounds with somebody."

"Nice boys who think about their mothers avoid that sort of thing. Looks like your sister came back, young fella."

Kunho hesitated as he was reaching for the kettle of *makkolli*.

"Who?"

"You know who: Misun."

Kunho scowled, then shook his head roughly. For a moment he looked down vacantly toward his feet. Then, regaining his composure, he drank a glass of *makkolli*.

Tokpae served the old man his noodles and turned to the peddler.

"How much do you make in a day?"

"Oh, maybe a thousand *won*."

"Hey, that's not bad."

"That's on a good day. It's a different story during the rainy season and when it gets hot."

"I know, I used to be a salesman myself. This time of year, why don't you try parasols or something? You know, if you sell them on credit, the housewives get jealous of each other and snap them up one after the next."

"Parasols! They went out with straw shoes. Different things are in fashion now."

"Yeah, I guess times have changed. Would you believe I made two million *won* selling them?"

"You must have felt pretty flush."

Tokpae couldn't help tossing down a glass of *makkolli*. "Fuck it. Who the hell would've thought I'd end up like this?" Tokpae spoke over Kunho's head, which was still bowed as if the young man were mulling something over. "Two million, honest to God … I'm telling you, once I started making money I couldn't think arout anything else."

In a tone of exaggerated wonder, the peddler chimed in:

"It's shit luck—that's all it is. Grab it, and you make so much money it's scary." He spoke like someone who had also made millions in the past.

"You made two million—in cash?" the old man asked Tokpae.

"One fell swoop, hot off the press."

"How long did it take?" asked the peddler.

"Just one summer." Tokpae grew animated. "At first I was hustling by myself. Then I gave my cousin and my brother-in-law in Taegu a piece of the action. If only I'd quit while I was ahead and set up a nice safe business."

Tokpae struck himself on the forehead.

"I just wish I'd known about the tastes of Seoul people. I come up here to Seoul, and you know what? I really did try to think things out. In business you've got to use your head. I had the capital, I had energy to burn, and when I stopped to think about it I realized that practically every house in Seoul has some old folks in it. Now if a gentleman wants to go out for a walk he needs a walking stick, right? So I sank all my money into walking sticks. I figured I could sell them in front of the temples and playgrounds. I had more than a hundred of them carved every day—even hired some kids and sent them out. Ah, what an idiot I was. I can't figure this friggin' city out. The old folks didn't show up, and so the damn walking sticks were no better than kindling—that's the story."

"It sounds to me like you *didn't* use your head," said the old knife sharpener, who had been drinking his noodle broth. "If you want to know what an overnight fortune feels like, you'd better think like a thief. But for hicks it's the land that comes first. Walking sticks—that's what somebody from the countryside would dream up. I've got two kids, and if I don't work like a dog I can't get by in a big city like this."

All this talk had made Tokpae expansive. He was cranked up and felt like drinking his fill. Already he had fmished half a kettle of *makkolli*.

The long hair of a young woman swept inside the canvas curtains of the liquor stall and then withdrew. Voices chattered outside.

"There's a lot of guys in there."

"So what? Is eating something to be ashamed of""

Tokpae quickly followed the voices outside. Some factory girls on their way to work had stopped by for a snack. They all looked about the same age.

Well, well, thought Tokpae. Look at the little clams. He ushered in a cute, demure-looking one in pigtails.

"Come on in, girls. I'll whip up enough noodles to feed the whole bunch of you."

"You got rice cakes too, right?"

"You bet—all kinds. And I know how to make 'em tasty."

"Gee, those hands of yours are filthy."

"Knock it off. I'm always dipping them in water."
"Mister, when's the last time you took a leak?"
"Come on, I do my business with my hands behind my back."
While the banter continued, Tokpae went in through the canvas curtain behind the girls, a smile of satisfaction filling his reddish face. As the girls stepped inside, the cramped liquor stall swelled like a distended ball.
First the girls threw down a bowl of noodles apiece. Then they had some rice cakes and began to jabber.
"Hey, I've got a problem. I'm short on money again this month."
"Are we ever going to fmish being apprentices and get to be regulars? I think I'm going to quit."
"We can't go back home now. You girls think you can?"
"If we stick it out for a couple of years, we'll at least pick up some job skills."
"Are you kidding? If that kind of work is a skill, then so is cooking rice and making love."
"Well, they are … if you can sink your teeth into a rich one."
"I could go work in a bar, or else latch onto some guy who doesn't know better."
"A factory boy?"
"No way. Even after ten years the best they can do is foreman."
The knife sharpener put his tools in place over his shoulder and went out grumbling: "God. What in the world is it with these crude bitches? Don't they know how to keep their place with men? Ought to be ashamed going around at night cussing like that. If it was my girl I'd break her …"
The girls cried out in alarm.
Tokpae, putting a finger to his lips and gesturing with the other hand for the girls to relax, kept an eye on the old man as he left,
"Elderly men are all like that. They just think about the old days, or else they think they're back in the countryside going out for a good time."
"The old man might have been right," said Kunho, who had stopped drinking and become lost in thought.
"What?" said one of the girls.
"Don't get me wrong. I'm not saying you ladies did just like he said, but … frankly speaking … in this screwed-up area anyway, all someone has to do is sweet-talk the ladies and they put out. Isn't that right? I mean-"
"Look here, who do you think you're—"
"I'm serious!"
"Put out? Put out what?"
"Fix me up with a boyfriend, will you, mister?" one of the other factory girls said to Tokpae.
"How about me?" Tokpae replied. He looked around bleary-eyed at the girls, who were becoming more and more flippant.
A girl who was spitting out particularly trashy remarks answered coquettishly, as if she had been waiting for just that moment:
"You're too old—I don't think you'll do."
"Anyone here who can pay our rent for us?"
"I'd rather have someone pick up our tab here," Kunho interrupted in a voice just high enough with liquor: "Fuck! Now listen to me—I've got some money. So how about a date? I heard the Na Huna show's in this part of town."
The factory girls looked put off, as if their pride had somehow been injured.
"What time is it getting to be?" asked the demure one with the braided hair, who looked the oldest.
"Low-life bitches, you're ruining the mood," growled Kunho.
Tokpae made a flamboyant gesture and looked at his watch.
"Ten to nine."
"Those of us who're off work tomorrow let's go see Na Huna," said KUnho.
The girls grew sullen at this.
"Why don't you move on?" the cheeky one spat.
Someone outside called for Tokpae, and there was a glimpse of a policeman's cap and uniform. Tokpae's face suddenly tensed and he went out.
The girls started jabbering again.
"Hey, last night that short little guard who gives us a body search every day tried to get me to go play badminton with him. I wonder what he thinks he can see at night."
"You know Myongja, the one who started working in Manufacturing the month before last? These days she's

short on money, so she takes business trips to an inn. Then she comes to work and makes like she's so prim and proper. Well, one of the girls tells her she saw her coming out of an inn, and then she gives her a poke, like she knows what's going on, so Myongja takes her into the bathroom and starts bawling and begging her not to say anything."

"Kim, the engineer, says he's going to Japan pretty soon for technical training."

"That's the first thing he says to every good-looking girl in the office—it's the way he gets women."

"I wish I could learn some Japanese too and go to the main office."

"The likes of us can't even get near people from the main office. That Miss Pak who works for Inspection—the skinny one, you know? I hear she's shacking up with the big wheel himself—Watanabe, or Waribashi, or whatever you call him."

"*Toyota-no, Honda-no, skoshi, Tokyo-no, sayonara*," said Kunho, who was feeling cocky among all the cackling girls. And then without warning he broke into a boisterous song:

Ŏlsshigusshigu, here we go!
Chŏlsshigusshigu, here we go!
Where are we going to bury the wretch
Who never, ever saw Seoul?
In front of Seoul Station we'll bury the wretch
Who never, ever saw Seoul.
Factory boy, beggar boy, here we go!

The girls covered their ears, but Kŭnho, brandishing his bandaged hand, raised his voice to a howl as if he were the neighborhood tough guy:

In front of a college we'll bury the wretch
Who never, ever studied.
In front of Myong-dong we'll bury the wretch
Who never, ever spent money.
In front of a hotel we'll bury the wretch
Who never, ever went dancing.
In front of a comic shop we'll bury the wretch
Who never, ever read books.
In front of some yodelers we'll bury the wretch
Who never, ever went hiking.
In the red-light district of Chongno we"ll bury the wretch
Who never, ever got married.
In Mugyo-dong we'll bury the wretch
Who never, ever went drinking.
In front of a chapel we'll bury the wretch
Who never, ever had a day off.
In front of a Western-style house we'll bury the wretch
Who never, ever rode in a car.
In Vietnam we'll bury the wretch
Who never, ever had chocolate.
In a rice pot we'll bury the wretch
Who never, ever had rice.
Factory boy, beggar boy, here we go!

Then, playing the part of a listener, he exclaimed, "God, it's noisy! Hey, beggar boy, I'll give you acoin. Now get lost!"

As Kunho began to repeat the song, Tokpae's head poked into the stall.

"Hey! Will you be quiet? Don't you have any sense, boy!"

The girls stampeded outside to see what was happening. Tokpae, his hand on the back of his neck, was nodding continuously while the policeman admonished him in a low voice. Tokpae's wife approached as she was herding home their kids, faces puffy with sulky expressions. Having become the focus of so many eyes, the policeman lost interest in what he was doing. He gave Tokpae a couple of pats on the back and then crossed the street at a snail's pace.

"How much did he shake you down for?" Tokpae's wife asked, scowling at the policeman's back.

"Two thousand," Tokpae said dispiritedly, his shoulders sagging.

“God, there goes three days’ business.”

As if all of this were the children’s fault, Tokpae’s wife roughly jabbed them in the chops. They began to scream as if they were dying. Tokpae hurled his apron to the ground.

“Maybe I should feed ’em rat poison … or sell the whole goddamn bunch to the Chinaman,” he muttered. “See, bitch? The cop knew I was looking after the place, so he came around and stuck out his hand.”

While Tokpae and his wife were thus preoccupied, the girls slipped away one or two at a time. After arguing some more, Tokpae fmally realized they were gone. He looked inside the stall and out, then set off down the street toward the factory, but he lost the girls at an intersection. He paused and caught his breath.

“What a shitty day! That woman always has to be bitching about something.”

There was a flash of red beneath a utility pole on the other side of the street at the entrance to a dim alley lit up by a streetlight. Gotcha, thought Tokpae, his temper flaring. He ran straight over, and as he entered the alley he heard soft footsteps ahead of him. He drew nearer and nearer to the sound.

“Hey! You think you can run away from me?” he roared.

The girl stopped running but continued slowly down the alley. Then she came to a halt and looked back apprehensively. As Tokpae came up beside her she cringed.

It was the demure one. Tokpae grabbed her hand before she could say anything.

“Damn girls! If you don’t pay you’ve got to leave something behind … come on, we’re going to the police station right now!”

The girl squirmed backward, trying to huddle in a ball.

“You’ve got it all wrong, mister,” she pleaded. “One of the other girls said she’d pay, but she ran away on us.”

“No excuses. Pay up!”

“I’m telling you the truth. I’ll give you the money for sure on payday. Have a heart, just this once. I have to get to work.”

As he yanked her toward him Tokpae had a fleeting urge to let her go—it’s only a lousy hundred *won*, he told himself. But then this kind of thing had happened all the time in the early days of his neighborhood: the one who was fleeced was always the one who had shown others a good heart.

“If you don’t have any money, you’ll have to leave me something. You’ve got a watch, don’t you?”

“No. I pawned it a few months ago, and I haven’t gone back for it yet.”

“Where do you live?”

“Over in those prefabs—building three.”

“Let’s get over there.”

The girl’s tone and gestures of supplication stopped. Shaking off Tokpae’s hand, she set out ahead of him. The road to the factory ended and they passed through a market. Tokpae relaxed, knowing he could see the girl’s red T-shirt ten yards away, and the girl, apparently deciding that one attempt to escape was humiliating enough, didn’t look back once. They zigzagged down a narrow, muddy alley among the prefabs, which looked much more attractive than Tokpae's neighborhood, and entered the girl’s building. Twenty families appeared to be living under that one roof. Both sides of the long hallway were lined with sliding doors, and from the rooms came the sounds of drunken rowdiness and the racket of men and women singing. The girl unlocked a door, stepped inside, and turned on the light. Tokpae couldn’t quite bring himself to follow her in; his chest began throbbing.

“Come on in. This is all I have,” the girl said, kicking aside a synthetic quilt lying in a heap on the floor. Two pots, two bowls, and some toiletries were lying on an overturned box that had once contained packets of instant noodles. Hanging on the wall were some shabby clothes, a photo of the singer Nam Chin with his shirt open at the chest, and a mirror; there was an ashtray on the floor. Feeling somewhat awkward, Tokpae sat down across the doorsill and lit a cigarette.

“You know, I didn’t plan things this way, but that was pretty cheeky what you did.”

The girl pouted and then with a knowing smile looked hard at Tokpae, but without making eye contact.

“Now that you’ve stopped me from getting to work on time, why don’t you take the quilt and go.”

“Well … maybe that’s not necessary.” Tokpae's eyes traveled to a small piece of paper tacked to the wall.

Existence
Though life deceives you, my beloved,
Don’t be sad or angry.
If days of sorrow are patiently endured,
Then days of joy are soon to come.
The present may be sad,

But if the mind dwells in the future,
Then all is momentary.
And what has passed is what is yearned for.

Sea gulls and clouds appeared below the poem.

Not bad, thought Tokpae; these kids must know something. Somehow he was reminded of the times he had wandered around by himself, and without really thinking about it he moved well inside the room.

"I'll … just … talk some and then go."

The girl sat uneasily with her back against the wall, singing a song about bygone days and an uncertain future.

"There's a saying that the hardships of youth are more precious than gold," said Tokpae. "But if you learn some job skills and eventually get married, then what's there to worry about?"

"Marriage? Oh, come on …"

Tokpae liked the way she scowled.

The girl stretched her legs comfortably and punched down her short skirt, which she had gathered retween them.

Tokpae anxiously tried to keep his eyes from straying to her white thighs.

"So you're going to get old and die all by yourself! You're in the prime of life—"

"Mister, as long as you're going to give me a break, could you do something else?"

"What's that?"

"Take care of our rent? I'll pay you back next month—promise. I've been sick this month and had to miss a whole week of work, so you can see I'm in the hole."

"You think I'm not playing with a full deck, or something?"

Tokpae was sitting so that the two of them faced each other. The girl undid her braids, and with fingers spread, pushed her hair back again and again. She looked much more feminine and mature now.

Tokpae wiped his sweaty palms on his knees and gulped.

"Good lord, how can a man's smell be so strong in a girl's room?"

The girl glanced up at the men's clothes hanging on the wall.

"Three of my friends live here too."

"This room's a coffm. I'll bet it's like cordwood when the four of you lie down."

"We'll always be friends and nothing else—we made a pledge."

The girl raised her wrist to display two ink dots made with a needle to seal the promise.

Tokpae nodded. "Looks like you could switch off with each other when you lie down—you know, man, woman, man, woman."

"Okay, mister, now I get it. You didn't come here to get the price of those noodles. At any rate, you got something up your sleeve." The girl lifted her arms and stretched.

Tokpae began inching his way toward her.

"You know, as far as family life is concerned … I haven't had any luck either."

The girl groaned.

"Your heart won't stand it. Will you take the quilt and go right now?"

She subtly drew up one of her legs and piled her hair against the side of her head.

Until now Tokpae had been sobering up, but all at once he felt flushed with liquor.

"All I know is I lost money today—dammit!"

With the tip of his foot he jerked the door shut.

*

Awk-awk-awk, byoo-tee-pool Sun-day,
Awk-awk-awk, byoo-tee-pool Sun-day.

Staggering along much like the peddler, Kunho kept repeating these few bars of a Western pop song that had caught his ear. He cared not that he knew only the one stanza. Every forceful, staccato "Awk!" lifted his spirits.

"It's the moment," he told the peddler. "We have to live for the moment."

"You bet! My place for another drink."

The peddler hoisted his load of radios higher on his shoulder, made a fist, and shook it resolutely in front of Kunho.

Kunho waved him off.

"Un-uh," he said, rapping his chest with the palm of his good hand. "I got some money today. Money … as much as a guy could want. There's a place called the Ch'ongju House down an alley near the neighborhood market. What do you say we drop by and give the girls a squeeze? Awk-awk-awk, byoo-tee-pool Sun-day …"

The two of them stumbled past a tangle of barbed wire outside a row of warehouses that belonged to an appliance factory. Some muscular men clad only in shorts were loading boxes onto trucks. The women reporting for the night shift stood in line having their work cards validated. A siren sounded from the factory, and a pair of girls who looked like sisters ran by, gripping each other's hand. There were no streetlights beyond the path to the warehouses, and Kunho and the peddler could scarcely make out their feet in the darkness.

"How much do you make, anyway?" the peddler asked.

"Me? Shit … three hundred twenty a day."

"You talk pretty big for that kind of pay. I thought—"

Bristling, Kunho stopped, produced a thick envelope from his shirt pocket, and shook it in front of the peddler's nose.

"We're not talking about pay. Take a look at this."

Like a boxer, Kunho proudly raised the hand with the huge bandage.

"It's a mess, isn't it? But it's a godsend, I tell you."

"What's this? … You been in a fight?"

"Fuck! You think I go around beating up on people? I had an accident. So I got pissed off and had a few drinks, and now I can't tell if I'm in a good mood or a bad mood."

"So they gave you money to get it treated."

"But I don't know whether it's too much or too little. Anyway, I lost three fingers, right in a row."

"Three?"

"Yeah. Thumb, index, middle. Three in a row, bye-bye. So, don't I have a reason to treat?"

"I can't drink on that kind of money. Let's go to my place," said the peddler in a soft voice. He placed his arm under Kunho's.

Kunho briefly held his ground.

"Let's go to my place instead. I've got my own room."

"But didn't Tokpae say that runaway sister of yours came back?"

"Ah, that bitch! I could kick the shit out of her and it wouldn't satisfy me. I might just throw her out—no problem. You watch me—the minute I see her I'm going to grab her by the scruff and give her a thrashing."

A gurgling sound interrupted this furious outburst, and Kunho hunched over and vomited at his feet. The peddler patted him on the back. Kunho, squatting in a heap, stuck the fingers of his good hand in his mouth and continued to throw up.

"Listen, fella—a woman's life can be hell if she hooks up with the wrong man."

Kunho hawked and spat, shook his head, and stood up with a sigh. "Come again?"

"I said we ought to have a little sympathy for women."

"Yeah, I know. I heard you served time on account of a woman."

"No, I got mixed up in a labor dispute. Actually, I was one of the guys who stuck with management."

"Doesn't matter what side you're on. If you get caught up in that stuff you get hurt."

"I acted like a peacemaker, but what I really wanted was to finagle some money from both sides so I could start my own business." The peddler clicked his tongue. Bit by bit his voice softened, as if it were retreating inside him. "It was a shitty thing to do."

"What's wrong with trying to make some money?"

"You live a little longer … and you'll find out. Are you happy you got yourself a pile of money for your hand?"

Kunho stared at his bandaged hand as if for the first time. It's only a bit of bad luck, he thought. And it's better than no money at all.

"Supposing I wasn't, what could I do about it? It was my fault."

"How much did you get, anyway?"

"Ten thousand apiece, so thirty thousand *won*."

Kunho was told he would also be treated at no cost at the factory infirmary and receive an extra month's pay. It wasn't as if the higher-ups had been completely cold and calculating, Kunho was thinking. At any rate, he wanted to show the peddler that his spirits weren't that low.

"The doctor said drinking would do me in, but he was just trying to scare me. It's hard without booze when

you're feeling as weird as I am."

The two of them arrived at the embankment along the sewer ditch. The peddler walked silently in front, head bent forward. Kunho did something extravagant: he bought two packs of Milky Way cigarettes and gave one to the peddler. They stepped onto the embankment.

"You ought to call it quits and get some sleep," said the peddler. "Uh-oh, what's this? Backing out on me?"

"It's not that."

The peddler quickened his pace.

"I'm just saying go home and get some rest. Hell, we'll have another chance."

"What a bummer."

Kunho shot forth a long belch.

Transferring his load to the other shoulder, the peddler gazed across the sewer to the dark expanse where his neighborhood should have been.

"Strange," he murmured to himself. "Is the power out?"

"I want to tell you I'm glad I got to know you. I mean it. Let's get together once in a while for a snort. Awk-awk-awk, byoo-tee- pool Sun-day …"

"I'll see you at Tokpae's place. Where you headed?"

"Our house—over there at the foot of the embankment."

"Looks like they've got power."

"What a bummer. No shit."

"Okay. See you later."

The peddler crossed the sewer ditch.

Kunho continued along the embankment. The insects grew still at every "Byoo-tee-pool Sun-day."

Kunho worked for a Japanese company in the woodworking shop of a factory that produced radio and television cabinets. All day long he cut plywood, veneer, or synthetic resins to a standard size, using an electric saw. That day he had started work at six in the evening. After he had cut about two hundred pieces of six-by-twelve plywood, word had come from Quality Control that the standard was off by a fraction of an inch. With a tape measure Kunho had laid out the new dimensions on a piece of stock. Next he had set this piece on the saw blade, preparing to make a new model. As usual, he had then stepped on the starter switch. "Ow!" Blood sprayed over his work clothes. A co-worker pulled him back. It wasn't the pain but rather the tingling chill in his left forearm, as if it had been struck by a sledgehammer, that he couldn't stand.

"Is that you, Kiinho?"

It was his mother. She was sitting next to her brother on a straw mat spread out on the embankment. The two of them were enjoying the evening breeze.

Kunho remained standing.

"Hi, Uncle," he said bluntly. Then, addressing his mother defiantly: "I heard Misun came back."

His mother nodded.

"Don't say anything," his uncle told him.

"That bitch—I'm going to …"

Kunho brushed past them and was about to step down from the embankment when his mother grabbed his forearm.

"Pretend you don't know. Things are working out okay now. So, you've been drinking again."

"What's working out okay?"

"This fellow who might marry Misun was just here talking with us. He said he'd go over and see her."

"Ow-God, that hurts! Hands off, huh?"

Only then did Kunho's mother discover his bandaged hand.

"Well, isn't this nice. First you go out drinking, and then you get into a brawl, and now look at you …"

"What kind of guy is this would-be bridegroom?"

Kunho's uncle rose and dusted off the seat of his pants. Well aware that his nephew always regarded him with displeasure, he spoke in a slightly self-conscious tone.

"Uh, what's his name … the one who heads up the Reconstruction Corps."

"You mean that old fart Yi, the one who's always acting like a big shot?"

"You'd never know it from looking at him," said Kunho's mother, "but I understand he makes an awful lot of money from second-hand stuff."

"Are you kidding? He's nothing but a fucking rag-picker. Mother, we were brought up in a decent farming

family. Did you raise Misun to give her to some son of a bitch who's no better than the dirt under my feet? She's not like you, Mother. She's pure—pure!" Kiinho said, indirectly criticizing his mother for remarrying. The liquor had loosened his tongue.

"Now you be quiet, boy. Pure? I wish. But she's not—she's …"

Clutching his forearm, Kunho squatted on the embankment and sighed through pursed lips.

"This throbbing is driving me crazy."

"Are you hurt bad?"

Kunho lit a cigarette and sank into thought: at this point, beating up his sister would only make him feel worse rather than less disappointed. He felt more and more resentful toward his mother.

"What does Misun have to say about all this?"

"Who knows? They're probably talking to each other right now."

Kunho shook his head and spat. He was quivering with emotion.

"Shit, what a low-life family."

"Something's gotten into you."

"Starting tomorrow, I'm not working."

"Now don't tell me you got fired. Wasn't it a fight?"

"I had an accident. I'll get my pay, same as always, so don't worry. And …"

Kunho produced the thick envelope and thrust it toward his mother.

"Take this and hold onto it. Don't let the old man know. And don't spend it unless you know what you're doing."

His mother took the money out of the envelope and glanced about uneasily.

"What's all this money for?"

"It's thirty thousand *won*."

"Thirty … thirty thousand … where'd you get it?"

"From the company—I had an accident at work."

"My oh my—bless us. Thirty thousand *won* at a time like this! You know, I didn't worry all that much—I knew there'd be a way out. This is wonderful!"

"And this throbbing is killing me. Maybe I need another drink."

While Kunho was rubbing his wrist, which had started to swell, his mother counted the money, holding the bills in front of her nose and folding them over one at a time. Murmuring could be heard from across the sewer ditch, and the bonfire was visible.

"What's going on over there? An ancestral ceremony?"

His mother remained absorbed in counting.

"Drinking," his uncle said, clicking his tongue.

"Say, there's only twenty-eight thousand."

"Oh yeah—subtract two thousand for the drinks."

"Two thousand! What have you been swilling? If you'd come right home you could've drunk for free and had your fill of dogmeat."

"Dogmeat? Where'd they get their hands on a dog?"

"Your father got one as big as an ox. There's enough for a dozen big men to gnaw on all evening, and then some."

"Instead of bringing home money—he ought to be ashamed."

"It's no skin off my back if you don't want to eat."

Kunho was about to express further dissatisfaction with Kang, but gave up. As people say, even a worthless husband is better than a filial son.

"So Misun and that guy are the only ones at home now?"

His mother pleaded with him to understand.

"Yeah. Go on over and say hello. See how things are going, and try to keep the ball rolling."

Kunho became noticeably less testy. He clicked his tongue.

"As far as I'm concerned," he muttered, "if Misun turns out okay, I'll be happy. But I'm not going to butt in. This is the bitch who was screwing around and ran away, and she's not going to listen to anyone this time either. Nothing left to save for her husband. She's just a pain in the ass. Are you really serious about this marriage?"

"Why not?" said his mother as she stuck the money in her waist-band. "Since he mentioned it first and he's already following up, I'd just as soon be done with it. If they want to get married in the next few days, fine."

“There’s going to be gossip. Selling off a pregnant girl—that’s what they’ll say.”

“Now look you—are we supposed to take you seriously when you run off at the yap like that?”

“I can guess what you’ll use that thirty thousand for.”

“So, you’re going to feel sorry for yourself if we put that money toward the wedding? Isn’t she your only sister?”

“Sister, I don’t think that’s what Kunho meant. He said it because he’s proud to be helping out.”Uncomfortable with this flareup, Kunho’s Uncle gently prodded his sister.

“Dammit!” Kunho shouted as he picked his way down the embankment. “That money cost me three fingers, that’s what!”

“Well, well, a brat who couldn’t care less about his sister. So you got hurt—you can get it treated. When the family’s threatened like this, we all have to make some adjustments and get through it the best we can. Now look—if you’re going to act like the servant who became chauffeur, then who needs your help?”

Kunho scuttled across the sewer ditch toward the field where the dogmeat was supposed to be.

His mother poured out more invectives, but then tears of remorse began to trickle from her eyes. Before long she was unburdening herself to her brother, telling of her years selling rice cakes to support the two children.

“Well, like I said, you’ll find peace if you believe in the Lord,” said her brother as he patted her rhythmically on the back.

“I guess I’d better visit one of those Jesus temples before I get any older.”

“Now that’s more like it.”

They rolled up the straw mat and headed home. The men and children had long since departed for the field, and the neighborhood was perfectly still. The women were sleeping here and there on mats along the paths.

The two of them stopped in front of the kitchen and peeked inside the house. They heard the gravelly voice of Boss as he made his case before Misun.

“Even wild geese fly off together, so why can’t two lonely people like us try to make a go of it? In my thirty-five years I’ve been through every hardship you could imagine, and I haven’t blinked once. But I haven’t met a woman who suits my fancy. Heh-heh. Now I don’t look at life in terms of black and white. When I heard you came back, that opened up some old wounds and I got angry. But I made up my mind. It’s forbidden fruit all right, but who cares whose baby it is? I’ll be the dad and we’ll bring it up together.”

Boss seemed intoxicated by his own glibness.

“I may not look like much, but I’ve got an Eagle hi-fi and thirty LPs\fn{Long-playing records.} worth of tunes from the old days. I’ve got a cinder-block house that I built with my own hands, and we’ll lay in a little old TV and a mother-of-pearl wardrobe.”

Kang’s wife prodded her brother firmly and nodded.

“Look at that. Now if Misun will just answer him, the wedding’ll be in the bag. Goodness, I’ve never seen a man propose that fast—like lightning!”

Misun said something in a low voice, and then Boss could be heard chuckling.

“Fine and dandy. I’ve got a big announcement to make to the neighbors, and then I’ll be back.”

The door rattled open as if it were about to fall from its hinges, and Boss’s broad, smiling face, flushed with satisfaction, popped out.

Kang’s wife, standing nearby, grabbed his wrist.

“What’d she say?” She now addressed him less formally and politely.

“Mother-in-law, I may not be much to look at, but I want you to know, back in the old days I was quite the man. Now you can just rest easy. I made her melt like taffy in the summer sun. It’s not easy for a godforsaken old bachelor to find a wife.”

But from inside came a distressful sniffling. It was impossible to tell whether Misun was crying with joy, or with relief that there was a way out.

“Now hush up!” shouted her mother. “Just sit tight and count your blessings.”

“Well—I’m in the mood for a drink. I’ll be back.”

Breaking into another meaningless chuckle, Boss hurried off toward the field.

The drinking party was winding down, and most of the men were pleasantly drunk. Some were dancing in nimble leaps, others reeled off songs. Sparks shot from beneath the nearly empty stewpot. Kang was about to finish a second heaping bowl of dog soup. Kunho lay snoring on the bare ground where he had sprawled out after shouting one last chorus of “Byoo-tee-pool Sun-day.” Buckets and aluminum bowls were tumbled about the stewpot—it was a lavish scene, resembling a family ancestral cereony.

Boss made a deep bow and prostrated himself before Kang.

"Please accept this greeting from your son-in-law," he said gallantly.

The revelers simultaneously came to a halt and gaped at the two of them.

"What's this all about, pal?"

Boss uttered his meaningless chuckle, rose, and offered Kang half a bowl of slightly stagnant *makkolli* from the bottom of the bucket.

"Sorry to surprise you like this. Misun and I decided to get married. Father-in-Law, I offer you this drink."

"Well, looks like we'll be drinking every day for a while."

"In any event, we've got something to celebrate tonight," said another, slapping his knee.

The head of the neighborhood association came forward:

"Let's not forget who saved our neighborhood. Remember, I've got what it takes to make a case to the authorities."

"We've had dogmeat, booze, a good time all around."

"So—Misun's going to have a husband, and you there—you don't have to sleep by yourself anymore."

You could feel an extraordinary vitality everywhere in the field. The men sang, danced, and squabbled dnmkenly until the fire went out and the iron stewpot grew cold. At last, weary and exhausted, they found their way back in ones and twos to their cramped rooms, which had cooled in the night air. Those passed out were dragged away or led off with a supporting arm by family members. Kunho remained face up on the ground. The embers lingering in the fire glowed near his feet.

Misun, dressed in her slip, crossed the sewer ditch. Her stomach protruded, but she looked like a little girl as she skipped smartly from one stepping stone to the next. She reached her suffering brother, who was moaning listlessly, and gently shook him. A fellow drunk to the gills passed by on the embankment singing a song.

40.15 The Legend Of The Sun Brigade\fn{by Zhang Lang-lang (1943-)} Yan'an, China (M) 4

Duo Duo and other famous poets of today suddenly remembered a group of not so famous poets of yesterday. In a number of sincere essays they said, yes, there was, there was a "Sun Brigade." And, according to them, I was a member of it.

I was taken aback. Was there? Still, Zhang Ming-ming once called me "young poet" with much admiration. She was remembering the old days, over twenty years ago.

Guo Lu-sheng (also known as "Index Finger") had come looking for me to ask me to take part in the "Survivors Poetry Festival," and pointing at me with that index finger of his, he said:

"No need to be polite about it, the title of my poem *Believe in the Future* came from you."

I had heard about that famous poem while I was in prison. In the seventies, it had created quite a stir underground. All the lads in Baiyang Lake knew about it, and had read it. It was said, it's like a transmission of fire.

A few words of the title were first spoken by me, but what does that say about anything? The real force of the words lay in his poem, in his sinceriry, his sensitivity, his passion. At the time I heard him reading a poem about fish, about fish floating in ice. And today, he is still like he was back then. He is a fish of that particular period.

We were the ovenure to the emergence of a certain kind of fish.

*

Bei Dao said very matter-of-factly:

"Think back, think back, and write it down."

And what can I remember? A "Sun Brigade" that had never been an organized body, only a group of poets that had left no poetry behind, merely some hazy images in the background.

The faded sepia photograph that was yesterday was already hazy. That was today in ancient times, that was Western culture winding its way across the Great Wall of Steel, inciting a group of restless young people to commotion.

I just gently open up the source of memory, and cool clear pictures come floating out …

*

1958 and, as Mao pronounced:

"Everyone in China is a sage."

Everyone was also a poet, and I was no exception. Everyone had a time limit to hand in his one hundred poems and fifty paintings. I handed over my share as well, never thinking I was dishing out mistakes. At the time, most

of the poems were of the kind: “Dare to let the earth produce more” or “Only when you have spread muck can you know the fragrance of dung” etc., etc. Mine was:

Like snow breaking away,
flooding down the mountain,
vigorously, forcefully, rapidly,
the great wheel of history rolling.
Who is it?
Us!
Symbols of youth,
pioneers of revolution.

The headmaster’s face dropped: the poem showed erroneous thinking—it was “youthism.” It did not mention the party or the Chairman, nor did it mention the “three red banners” policy.

I cried floods of tears as I threw back my answers: hadn’t Lenin approved of Mayakovsky?\fn{Vladimir Vladimirovich Mayakovsky (1893-1930), Russian poet.} Loads of his poems hadn’t mentioned those things. Mine was hardly an editorial piece.

At the time what we liked to read most of all were old Maya’s *My Love* and *Clouds in Trousers*. Zhang Jiu-xing, Gan Lu-lin and I used to go walking in the little pine wood every morning, obsessively learning Mayakovsky’s poems by heart. We had our heads shaved bald as melons—just like Maya, and wore padded army trousers, tied at the waist with a length of old flex.

I kept it a secret that I wrote poetry, and wrote long and short stanzas that those above wouldn’t like. Because it was a secret it was stimulating. We also had secret plans to publish satirical papers to paste up on the walls.

The headmaster, thundered with rage. He said:

“If you were in the final years of secondary school you’d have done enough to be labelled Rightists.”

He huffed and snorted as he tore down one of our cartoons:

“Why are you satirizing Communist Youth League members? Why have you drawn dogs fighting? Too noxious and poisonous. You’ve even written ‘Wolf, wolf!’ Who are you trying to get at?”

We all shriveled up. And only fourteen.

For the first time it was clear: it was a forbidden game.

*

In 1959 I went to the 101 Secondary School. Just like in the army schools we had brass buttons on our uniforms, and wore caps. I put some effort into keeping to the regulations, and didn’t dare mention my own poems. In assembly before the whole school I read Mayakovsky’s poetry.

When I shouted out another’s poetry I was taking the opportunity to vent my own frustrations, and this also took courage. My bravery had its source in the secret love I harbored for a supremely elegant girl—Zhang Mei-jun. The two of us directed the play, *New Year’s Sacrifice,* in commemoration of Lu Xun,\fn{Or Lu Hsun (1881-1936), Chinese author.} and had enjoyed working together. Backstage we would chat with Guo Shi-ying, who played the lead role, “the traveler.” I had never been able to stand his father—old revolutionary poet, Guo Mo-ruo. But his son was all right: quite open, easy going, intelligent. Nothing like his rabbit of a father. I had a lot of respect for him, and he also wrote poetry.

Two or three years later, I heard Guo Shi-ying had been arrested. They had a little literary group, underground of course. In the Cultural Revolution, I heard he took his own life. I couldn’t believe it, but he was dead. Just because he wanted to use his brain to think about things. Only later did I hear what really happened: he had been beaten to death.

Humans are truly fragile animals.

*

In 1960 Zhang Wen-xing was at the secondary school attached to the Foreign Languages Institute, reading French, playing the guitar, singing, reading poetry, writing poetry, painting.

He was stubborn yet warm-hearted, had a thick brow and large eyes, lips drawn into a line. He was short, but he exercised his body until he had muscles of steel. He had never lost at anything, and he was known as “Little Napoleon.” His poetry was just like him, it lashed out.

We transferred to the secondary school attached to the Foreign Languages Institute, very near to Liulichang, the secondhand book market. After school we used to linger in the old bookshops. Mayakovsky’s poetry could no longer satisfy our hunger. We found Pushkin,\fn{Aleksandr Sergeyevich Pushkin (1799-1837), Russian poet.}

Lermontov,\fn{Mikhail Yuryevich Lermontov (1814-1841), Russian poet and novelist.} and later Longfellow,\fn{Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (1807-1882), American poet.} Whitman.\fn{Walt Whitman (1819-1892), American poet.} What excited us most of all was discovering that a girl in our class, Dai Yong-xu, was the daughter of a famous poet, Dai Wang-shu. We ran over to borrow collections of his poems. But she brought out her father's translations of *Selected Poems of Lorca*.\fn{Federico García Lorca (1898-1936), Spanish poet and playwright.} I flicked it open at the foreword, and one line shook us:

The black night made black by the night

Perhaps it is because I liked to paint, that lines like "Little black horse, great big moon" made me so happy. I used to read these translated poems, my teeth stuck into a bun made with sweet potato. In times of hardship people look for things to eat. And out of our hunger for art we formed a group. Apart from Zhang Wen-xing, there was:

Zhang Xinhua. Crazy about art. Didn't have enough to feed himself but painted in oils. Ready to risk his life for his friends.

Yu Zhi-xin. Sentimental. Spoke beautiful French. His constant frown was famous. Feet a little off the ground.

Zhang Zhen-zhou. A plumpish, tall beauty with a very kind heart. Wrote prose poetry.

Yang Xiao-min. A scholarly type of girl. Wrote prose. Sensitive, seemed slightly nervous.

Dong Sha-bei. Very dark and very thin, lean and tough. Attached to the College of Fine Art while at secondary school. Painted modernist oil paintings. Interested in religion and mysticism.

Zhang Run-feng. The youngest of us. Quick thinking, very good mimic, outstanding memory.

We often organized poetry evenings, usually at my home, though sometimes at other people's. Gan Lu-lin and Chen Nai-yun who I'd known at secondary school would often join in too.

*

In 1962, there was a group of poetry lovers at the Central College of Applied Arts. Zhang Ji-man, the chairman of our Student's Association, and I discussed the two groups coming together to hold a large scale recital.

We were very excited about it, and everyone was busy preparing his weapon. I polished up a long poem *Burning Heart*. Yang Xiao-min invited another girl along, Jiang Ding-yue—the daughter of Jiang Guang-ding, famous general from the War against Japan. Her eyebrows were straight as swords, truly "a tiger of a daughter from a general's home." People said she looked Spanish.

About a hundred and ten people turned up that day, there weren't enough seats, and the back of the room was filled with people standing. We secondary school students were full of valiant spirit, and "shook" that group of university students. When everyone had left, the university students Huang Wei, Zhang Hong-bin and Zhang Ming-ming (daughter of the celebrated romantic writer, Zhang Hen-shui) showered us with praise. My poem's concluding line was:

We—the Sun Brigade!

"Let's start right now!" shouted Sha-bei, excited. Everyone was talking all at once, volunteering to get on with the printing, and so on, a whole run of plans. Half of us spent the whole night walking up and down the streets, and the other half talked the night away at my house.

At the time, it was no more than our love for poetry, and our love for art. Excitement and feedback. Hadn't given a thought to the threatening shadow of politics. What had that to do with poetry?

*

Oai Qing, who was studying then at the Harbin College of Military Engineering, took us out to the Summer Palace. They had heard that I liked to recite poetry. In the evening, in the long open corridors I started reciting Mayakovsky, then Eluard's\fn{Paul Éluard (1895-1952), French poet.} *Freedom* … and they were all amazed. Oai Qing told me she too loved literature. But it seemed perhaps we were a little too "modern." I reckoned she had never even heard of this French poet before.

We were moved by the interest and generosiry of these university students. Yet I had not let them hear my strange "inappropriate-for-the-time" poems. I guessed there'd be trouble if I did.

We had to serve two masters, one was society and the other was our own pleasure.

*

In 1963 I entered the Central College of Fine Art. The College had a poetry society, "Reed Swords," named for

Qu Yu-an's life story. The name of this society had been written in the calligraphy of Mr. Wen Huaisha. The first leader was Fan Zeng, followed by me and Bai Rubo. At the poetry readings of the society Fan Zeng chanted Zheng Banqiao's lament:

The old fisherman, a single rod. . .

The secretary of the Communist Youth League, believed Fan Zeng was reviving the ancient, and frowned at it. He wanted me to read something modern. All I could offer was old Maya. The secretary frowned even more.

When we came out, I saw Fan Zeng in the corridor; we shook hands and laughed. We were neither of us good children in the eyes of authority.

*

"The Sun Brigade" had really held its first big meeting. That was in the Xiao-zhuang Building of the old Peking Normal University. Taking part were: Zhang Wen-xing, Zhang Xin-hua, Dong Sha-bei, Yu Zhi-xin, Zhang Zhen-zhou, Zhang Run-feng and myself. I draft a constitution for the organisation. Its aim was none other than to encourage the national cultures of China to flourish. We planned to hold a salon once a month. We would hang paintings on the walls and read poetry. Only as a formed strong group would we be able to break into society.

At about this time I wrote the one act play *Dialogue*, the film script, *Turquoise*, and a collection of short poems.

However, after only a few days the "Brigade" disbanded. Guo Shi-ying (at the time in the Philosophy Department at Peking University) and their salon wanted to sneak out to France. They were caught and all of them were arrested—grasses scattered in the piercing winter wind. We immediately ceased all the organisation's activities, and scattered to bide our time.

*

During 1964-65 the pressure on the underground salons grew ever greater. The artist Yuan Yun-sheng's graduation piece *Memory of the Water Country* was seen as a product of the Western capitalist artistic view. *Fine Art* magazine printed the painting. In the schools knives were out and bowstrings taut. This enormous oil painting was removed from the gallery, and placed in the table tennis room, ready for criticism.

The three artists, Yuan Yun-sheng, Ding Shao-guang and Zhang Shi-yan, were firm friends of ours. By then Yuan Yun-sheng had already gone to Jilin, and still didn't realize he was heading for disaster.

Wu Er-lu, Yu Zhi-xin, Jiang Ding-yue and I split up to think over how we could save our friend. I had a brainwave: steal the painting! If the target had disappeared there would be nothing to criticize. At the time I really liked that painting.

I decided to do it on my own. During a Youth League meeting, when there was no one in the grounds, I slipped into the gym, and cut the painting out of its frame, rolled it up and sneaked out of the school.

When the painting was laid out on the floor in my sitting room, Wu Er-lu came over to enjoy it. I was sweating all over, on the one hand happy for Old Yuan and on the other pleased with myself for this heroic success.

The Public Security came bursting into the College, to sort out the political case. The atmosphere was tense.

My mates all came to look at the painting and do homage to my courage. With true feminine pragmatism Jiang Ding-yue warned me that when the authorities found out about this, I'd go to jail.

I couldn't give a toss, not a damn. I believed we were all brothers.

*

The meetings become more and more secret, and the members were changing.

At the time Wu Hong was closest to me. We had both been to 101 Secondary, and were now in the same class. We shared the same interests and ambitions and were both in love with Jiang's daughters; I was wooing Jiang Ding-yue, he was courting Jiang Ding-hui. Their brother Jiang Zhi-qiao wrote classical poetry. Their home hosted the salon during this period.

Another salon was at Zhou Qiyue's. We had been friends since we were little. They had the latest Western records at his house. We began to be fans of modern music.

One day we were having lunch at his house, playing modern German opera. His father came in, looking dreadful. I didn't even notice. I should really have switched to a classical opera when the first side had finished, but I put on the other side. Oh, hell. I was really letting my friends in for it.

The old couple wanted a word with me, then showed me the yellow card. At the time I thought they were over-cautious. Now when I think back, they had a long, deeply cutting memory of political cruelty.

*

Mou Dun-bai was the youngest person involved in Guo Shi-ying's "French Connection," and was let out first. He came running to find me.

There was a salon at his house too, including: Wang Dong-bai, Gan Hui-li, Guo Da-dong, and later I also saw Guo Lu-sheng. We used to meet quite often, and play secret poetry writing games, and drink wine. We had no money, and could only drink the crudest liquor. Very often we had some pickled or salted vegetables to go with it. There was one time when Dong Sha-bei brought along a dark beet, and we used a pencil sharpener to peel it, and everyone found it really delicious. Zhang Shi-yan was an old friend, and already had a job. Every time he came to see us he would bring a bottle of "Chinese Red." Everyone was happy.

*

I also tried sending in manuscripts to *Peoples Literature,* and didn't have any success because the editor in chief lost his position for political reasons.

We decided to publish our own hand-written magazine, which we did on a small scale at my house. My parents also joined in. There was Geng Jun, Wu Feng, Jiang Ding-yue, Zhang Da-wei, Zhang Liao-liao, and so on. The cover of the issue I edited had an iron bars, behind which you could see two red characters for: Freedom.
Perhaps it was because I didn't feel confident in freedom.

1966. Yuan Yun-sheng's painting, "The Sun Brigade," the secret meetings, the French students here, my political jokes—all kinds of. reasons, I was arrested, I fled … In the hurried parting from my friends I wrote on the inside cover of Wang Chenbai's notebook:

"Believe in the future."

When I escaped to the South, Gan Hui-li wrote a sad farewell poem *I don't believe: you have already left* (I'm not sure of the title anymore).

I was arrested again. First in the school, then in the cells of the Public Security Bureau, I was questioned countless times. Again and again I was asked about that "counter-revolutionary organization, the "Sun Brigade." All of my work was investigated. Maybe to this day it is still in the archives of the Peking Public Security Bureau, maybe it was cremated long ago.

I am a "poet with no works."

*

I've heard that people are already beginning to research the histoty of the underground literature from this period; that they are actively collecting and editing compilations of the scraps of work that survive from this time.

At the end of the day was there ever an underground literary organization called the "Sun Brigade"? That is just hearsay.

75.141 An Offering Gathered From That Cherished Homeland\fn{by Jia Baoquan (1943-   )} Handan, Hebei Province, China (M) 4

Retuming from a visit to his hometown, a traveling bag in his left hand, and in his right hand a half-filled glass water bottle with a bunch of green, tender willow twigs stuck in it, he suppressed a strong yearning for a reunion with his family. He halted at the iron railing gate of a photo studio in this bustling North China city.

Upon his knocking, an elderly man, rubbing his halfopen, drowsy eyes, came out to open the gate. He hurried toward to old man, took out a photo from his pocket, and courteously handed it to him.

"Excuse me. Could you make a negative out of this picture and then make an enlarged print?"

The man took it, examined it carefully, and finally shook his head hopelessly.

"The picture is so worn that you cannot even tell whether the person is a man or woman. Why not take another picture?"

"Well … but …"

He had to take back the photo. Why can't he see it? It's clear obviously—the slightly long, graceful neck, the rather colorless, thin face that flushes scarlet when she smiles, the moderately high forehead, the dark-brown, short braids stopping under her ears, the gleaming eyes occasionally covered by her long lashes, and a scar the size of a soy bean above the corner of the right eye.

He walked slowly along the street in a cool drizzling rain, his face stroked by a gentle breeze. Through the pale white light of the street lamps in the summer night, the rain looked like dense fine silk threads, gleaming, so tough and pliable, yet they could not be separated or cut by the wind, as an ancient poet wrote when he lost his country and parted from his people.

Such a scene brought him sorrow, grief, and memories of the past. He remembered the year when Father and

Mother went deep-ploughing in the fields. They were told that when the earth was ploughed five feet deep, the grain yield per *mu* would reach ten thousand *jin.* Simply digging one foot down would amount to two thousand *jin* of grain! Busy with such a highly profitable, significant job, they could come back home only once in more than ten days. The task of taking care of him thus tell upon the small shoulders of his fourteen-year-old sister. What else could they do? It was the times that imposed this duty. Sometimes Mother returned at midnight to see them and urged the sister repeatedly to feed her brother well.

A long silence. Sister drooped her head, and she loosened her braids and then rebraided them repeatedly Holding both of them in her arms, Mother touched the sister on her shoulder and said:

"We're being hard on you, my little girl." She patted the brother's head "And you'll do what your sister says, won't you?" Then she dried her tears and soon disappeared quietly into the darkness again.

His stomach was aching as if catching fire; he rolled back and forth on the *kang* crying out loud, "I'm so hungry I can't sleep!"

His sister who lay beside him sat up at once. Resting him on her legs, she sang to him softly:

Little Brother, good baby,
Little Brother, sleep well.
Now eat your dream cake
And eat one for me, too.

Her crystal voice, with the tone of Henan opera, sounded sad but sweet. So beautiful! However, indifferent to the singing, he continued crying and kicking his legs. Gradually, his voice became so weak that it could barely be heard, though he still tried to cry with his mouth open. Soothed by the soft persuasion and motherly care of his sister as well as by her melancholy singing, he fell asleep on her gently rocking legs. .

At broad daylight the birds, knowing no sadness, woke him up. Alone on the matless *kang,* he screamed with fear:

"Mum! Sister—"

"Little Brother, I am here. Come over here quickly!" Following the voice of his sister, he ran out of the room, with his feet and bottom all bare. Under the big willow tree in the middle of the courtyard, he found his sister standing on her toes on the top end of a door-propping stick leaning against the tree. Her left hand seized hold of a branch while her right hand was stretching for a cluster of twigs rich with buds. But she was too small to reach them. Then she suddenly jumped up in an attempt to get them. Before he realized what had happened, she fell on the ground, but with a firm grip of those twigs in her hand.

"Sister!"

He threw himself upon her. Slowly she opened her eyes and smiled at him, and he spotted a bleeding cut above the right corner of her eye, with embedded broken glass the size of a soy bean. He held her head still and picked out the glass. Following the way of his mother, he swiftly collected a pinch of very fine dust from the foot of the wall and sprinkled it on the cut. It stopped bleeding. Sister propped herself up with both hands. She carefully stripped all the buds of the willow twigs and put the buds in an earthen pot filled with clean water. Then she kept squashing and rubbing them between her fingers; soon the water was dyed a thick emerald green. She replaced it With another pot of clean water and repeated her action until the water no longer chged its color. Scooping up the buds and kneading them into a balll no bigger than a fist, she handed it to him.

"Ha, ha, my good brother. Now eat it and your stomach will not make any noise again."

Her laughing, coming from the bottom of her heart with sincerity and pride, was as crisp as the clashing of broken ice in the stream in early spring, as sweet as the sound of growing sorghum after a heavy ram. He grabbed the ball and stuffed half of it into his mouth. It even tasted somewhat sweet mingled with a light bitterness.

"Is it tasty?" Her eyes fixed on him, she did not eat.

"Yes, it is almost as tasty as your tears."

"Nonsense." The sister pretended that she wanted to hit him.

"What do you mean by 'Nonsense'?" Afraid that she would take away his food, he gobbled it up quickly. "When I lay on your legs during the night, your tears dropped into my mouth."

Hearing this, Sister cried, the tears streaming without shame down her face.

"Drip."

"Drip."

He feels a rumbling sound gradually close in on him, shaking his eardrums and his heart. But all around him is

complete quietness. The night is so still that everything seems to be frozen: the cloudy sky, the light, the Chinese parasol trees, the falling lines of the rain, the breeze passing like the hem of a woman's light green skirt. Only the tender willow buds in the vase he carries, shining with gleaming tears and an emerald glow, gaze at him with affection.

Oh, Sister, are you shedding happy tears, rejoicing over the blessing of spring rain? Or is the illness of those years still forcing tears from your pure, innocent eyes? Thus the willow buds before him become the colorless, thin face of a young maiden.

The pig-iron furnace of their production brigade was still smoking and the deep-ploughing battle was still on when Sister fell ill. Initially, she felt a pain in her, neck; then reddish thick veins popped out along her neck, with ulcers oozing thick yellow mucus. Soon she couldn't even carry her small basket, and when she smiled the swirling dimples on her cheeks could no longer be seen. A yellowish-gray color replaced her formerly somewhat redish hue.

Though he was persuaded by sister not to tell Mother, Mother finally found it out and told Father about it. .

"We must send her to a big hospital!" Father blurted out after a long silence, his head raised resolutely.

"Won't that take a lot of money?" Mother, who had been watching Father all that time, dropped her head. Probably she had been expecting nothing but these words, but once he spoke them, she was struck by the fear. Uncles and aunts in the neighborhood all came to see her and urged them to go to a hospital.

"Even if she cannot be treated in the hospital, it'll be good to know what her illness is," they said. "We'll help if you need money." In no time, a pile of coins, still retaining the warmth of the bodies of these dear folks, appeared on the end of Sister's bed. Sister watched silently, looking at one face and then another as if she wanted to imprint these faces in her memory.

The next moming saw an ancient one-wheeled pushcart, with both his sister and him sitting on it, rolling along the yolk-yellow winding path stretching away ftom the end of the village. When Father gave him the small cloth bag of coins, he suddenly grew tall. On the way, he felt the wheel clicked a melody as beautiful as the swishing of Mother's weaving machine, as rhythmical as the chirruping of Sister's shoulder pole when she carried buckets of water. From time to time he jumped down ftom the cart and picked some flowers ftom the ridges around the fields. Then he jumped back onto the cart without waiting for Father to stop, and, sitting between her legs, he put the flowers on Sister's dark-brown braids.

At noon time, they arrived at the biggest hospital in the county. Who would have thought that all the doctors were away to participate in the central tasks\fn{A note reads: *Tasks characteristic of the political climate of the time but unrelated to medicine*.} of the time. The young nurse on duty had never seen such a case before. The cart rolled, back following the same route it came in the moming. Father, his lean buttocks moving with each step, pushed the cart, leaving a long, deep rut and a string of footprints on the road. The bending road was like a weak man taken by rickets newly-marked with a long whip scar and countless bruises. The wheel no longer sang melodies; instead ftom time to time it sobbed oppressively with long tremors. Sitting no longer between Sister's legs, Brother now held Sister on his legs.

Then some local medical men were called in. They performed an operation on Sister's neck with a dazzling knife without using an anesthetic. She refused to cry, only uttering a groan at the most unbearable moment, her hand clutching his arm, her forehead and her body glistening with perspiration which soaked her white blouse woven and sewn by herself. Her teeth bit into her lip; her nails dug into his flesh. The medical men left after a big feast, but they did not take away Sister's disease.

Again the brother and sister were left alone at home. He stayed close by to look after her, bringing in drinking water and carrying away the bedpan. Nevertheless, she was getting weaker and weaker, so feeble that she even had to stop several times to gasp for breath when drinking a small bowl of water. She wanted to sleep, but the pain in her neck was too gnawing to let her close her eyes.

That day, when he used an earthen pot to boil some hot water, the smoke from the damp straw choked him and he coughed continuously. Feeling sorry for her brother, Sister tried to come down to help; but hardly had she moved an inch when she made a loud cry and her arm hung down limply from the bedside, her eyes closed.

"Sister," he cried, shaking her head.

The sharp pain awakened her; she opened her eyes trying to smile, but she could not.

"Little Brother," she whispered. She tried to raise her hand several times to stroke his head, but she had not the strength. "When hungry, climb the tree. Put on your pants. Don't get scratched. May plant trees, the willow grows fast." She panted after each few words, and he was terrified.

A moment later, she motioned him to come over. Quivering with fear, he moved to her bed, and she finally

held his hand.

"When … people die, do … they … eat?" she asked half consciously—it was hard to tell whether she was asking him or herself.

He did not nod, nor did he shake his head, his eyes wide open staring around vacantly.

Suddenly, her spirit seemed to come back to her: her eyes shone, her cheeks .flushed, and she no longer panted when she spoke. She's getting better now, he thought.

" … what to eat …"

He was still motionless, but upon hearing the word "eat," he answered:

"Eat willow buds. I'll pick up a lot of willow buds for you."

Her brows smoothed and, with a smile that could hardly be detected, she slowly loosened her hand. Her eyes still watched him, but lacked their usual luster.

She was gone; she left forever satisfied with a word of comfort uttered unintentionally by her little brother.

*

People say it is the children who stay beside their parents when they die. But when Sister died, it was the innocent Little Brother who stayed with her.

A 47-year-old man in the East Village had died a bachelor several years ago. To arrange a marriage for him in the nether world, his brother sent a matchniaker to her family with 30 *yuan* as a betrothal gift.

"This man is too old for her," Mother said, somewhat worried. Hearing this, the matchmaker offered another 10 *yuan.* "I didn't mean that," Mother retorted. Soon some senior villagers came in his stead. "A young girl dead without being married will be troubled by the drifting spirits and foxes in the wild," they said.

Hence the fumily accepted the offer. Of the 30 *yuan*, most was spent on the bridal outfit of clothing, and the left-over money—over two *yuan*—was given to Little Brother.

A burying ceremony became a wedding ceremony, and Mother and Father put on smiles with tears welling up in their eyes.

A little coffin was made out of Sister's bed and some wood scrap, including the door-propping stick she had used to climb the tree. Sister appeared as if she were sleeping as usual in her bed, except that the bed had a wooden enclosure around it. She was in stylish winter clothes which she wouldn't have dared to imagine wearing when she was alive, and they were matched by a light red woollen scarf on her neck and a pair of black leather shoes on her feet. Her two soft dark brown plaits along her shoulders, she lay there pale-faced, with an expression that seemed to convey to her little brother unspeakable deep love and tenderness for him.

Though he was young at the time, he did not forget his promise. He put a few withered willow leaves on Sister's lips—it was already winter, but in the Central Plains the trees had not shed all their leaves yet. Of course, he did not forget his sister's words. When he climbed the tree, he put on his split pants.

One day, Mother wept when she looked at him. She hugged him tightly, perhaps afraid that she would lose him, too. Stroking his bare head, she said:

"Good boy, listen to me. When your hair grows, braid it."

Doubtlessly, she was missing her little girl.

As time advanced, he was oid enough to be able to carry a bucket and to use a shovel. He planted a small willow tree on his sister's grave and came almost every day to see it and to take care of it. A Chinese saying goes, "A willow twig accidentally planted can grow into shade," let alone what happens to a carefully planted tree. The tree not only survived but flourished.

Before long, with the two yuan left ftom Sister's marriage settlement, his father bought a textbook, a slate, and a foot of colored cloth out of which Mother made a school bag for him. He went to school. Whenever he played truant or had a fight with other boys, he dared not come to Sister's grave. Didn't the little willow look like the slender figure of Sister when, waving in the cool air, it became a. dark green haze? Didn't those slim willow leaves resemble Sister's beautiful eyes and brows?

Gazing upon the willow twigs in the bottle, he pours out his heart silently to his sister:

"My dear sister, your dearly beloved little brother, into whose rearing you put all your heart, is now a P.L.A.\fn{People's Liberation Army.} regimental officer. I went to your grave again when I returned to our village recently to see our parents. The young willow tree at your grave is now tall. and branches out with the blessing of the spring breeze and rain. This is a bunch of branches I picked from it. I am taking it as your picture, as your statue, and placing it as an offering to you on my desk.

"Dear Sister, our parents are now over seventy, in fairly good health for their age. Father is taking care of the irrigation of land and Mother is at home raising chickens. They are most afraid of other people mentioning you, as

they did over twenty years ago, but they themselves always like to talk about you. Mother once said to me, ‘If your sister were alive, your nephew might have graduated from middle school by now and have become an accountant at the mill of our production brigade. It’s a pity that she didn’t drag through those hard years.’ See what we eat today? We even feed the chickens with golden corn flour, not to mention willow buds. These years we’ve had good weather and people have been contented. And we’ve had a bumper crop of wheat every year. Although it rained continuously this year during harvesting time, not a grain of wheat grew moldy.

“Mother said, ‘My daughter has become a wind and blown the sky clear.’ Father said that was superstition. But Mother replied, ‘I’m not superstitious, but when I see that willow tree, I hear the willow twigs calling me Mother. If you don’t believe me, go listen.’ Then she would be in tears. Sometimes Father also mourned with her.”

… Ahead of him is his house. After he walks down the winding road, he turns into a lane, dark and impenetrable as a cavern. As his feet carefully probe the uneven surface of the road, his mind keeps pondering on that recent part of history, a tortuous path they have traveled. He cannot help feeling grief, even with an awareness that history never follows a straightforward course …

1944

77.42 The Sun In The Pit\fn{by Chiang Ling (c.1944?-)} Fukien Province, China (F) 8

The moment we left the crowd of people behind, I told him that I'd like to have some mango ice cream: a ball of solid tender yellow in a high stemmed glass of fine crystal, with the freshest and tenderest aroma. He knew where to take me. There was only one place in the whole world that would have such delicious ice cream.

“Want to take a cab?” he asked.\fn{I have restored the quotation marks to this story, in the interests of machine analysis.}

I shook my head.

Then he took hold of my hand and walked me across the street. Grasped by his wonderfully cool hand, my hand did not seem as boisterously hot as it usually was. A very comfortable feeling crept up from my palm. If only the street were a little bit longer! What if the crossing were never to end! I purposely walked very slowly hoping all the time that the traffic light would suddenly turn red on us. A stream of cars flew through the square where the shiny tracks lay. Four traffic lights stood at the busy intersection diligently blinking their iron-clad Erh-lang eyes,\fn{A note reads: *A legendary figure with three eyes able to transform himself at will*.} while the policeman paced back and forth in the middle of the square with a whistle implanted between his lips. Herds of people rushing out from all corners and coming to a halt at the curbs, impatiently raised their heads waiting for the lights to turn green. I earnestly wished the iron-clad eyes facing my direction would suddenly permit themselves to turn crimson red so that I’d heartily enjoy another 30 seconds of an evening that was so unlike any of its kind. I’d like to enjoy more of the cool comforting feeling that was creeping up from my palm. The green light was still gleaming. A deep breath rushed out from the bottom of my heart. He suddenly turned to look at me with a very gentle smile:

“What’s the matter? Are you tired?”

“Oh no!” I said.

When the red light finally came on, we were already on the other side of the street, and he of course had let go of my hand. I looked back, the light was then translucently red and showed very little sign of ever darkening. I’d like so very much to tell him: “Let’s go back from where we came!” Perhaps he would hold my hand again and carefully wait for the red light to die away, and then once more escort me through the zebra lines. Perhaps he would simply measure me with a very curious look: “What a weird girl you are!”

Why weird? Wasn't life just as much a foolishly monotonous routine as coming and going, waiting for the red light and walking on the green light—that sort of thing? It was only considered mad when one conscientiously hoped to do the same simple thing over and over. “What fun is there walking back and forth across the same street?” they would say. It never occurred to them that human beings lived their lives in the same way. Strictly speaking, the only difference lay in one fact: that people did not necessarily wander back and forth across the same street. But still, they crossed, all the same.

No use thinking about that. No one would listen to me anyway. They are all so pathetically stubborn and conceited. At best, they’d say (with a very tolerant smile), “Is that so?” More often, one encountered the kind of people who would wrinkle up their noses and sniff out their contempt. Sis used to confront me, too: “Why don’t you think of something bright and sunny?” Wearing a smile bright as the spring, she would then try to make herself clearer: “Think about the bright side of life, will you? Stop being such a bore.”

Sis never had anything to worry about. Whatever thought she did have was very matter of fact: attending

school, studying for quizzes, making it through with high grades, dressing up nicely and gracefully, wearing cosmetics, dating dozens of boys. Sis never had any trouble, never had any worry. Even the boys that she associated with were pretty much like her. Their feelings and wisdom could both be fathomed at first sight.

There never was a need for them to probe into anything very deeply, so they themselves never needed to be probed. In fact, there wasn't much depth to them to begin with. They understood everything so very well—everything was what it appeared to be. Sunshine was just sunshine, a necessity of life according to the authorities. Flowers were of course flowers; their mere purpose was to decorate one's parlor. When they withered, well, they should be disposed of right away. No regrets. After all, the world was full of flowers. Everything was so conveniently and neatly arranged to one's satisfaction; why should one ever have to worry about anything?

Sis had chosen the road that every girl was supposed to tread and most would take without questioning. She accepted everything at face value with a nonchalant attitude as if she herself were a dyed-in-the-wool fatalist.

Not me. No. I would fight against all that. I would never accept the nonsense of life. Why should one obligingly accept what others have chosen for her? I did not see what good it would do me to be a good girl like Sis. I would never be satisfied with sharing the glory bestowed upon me through my father, my husband, my son—let alone having to achieve that by denying my own existence. Of course, girls like Sis would never have to suffer the way I did, nor would they experience the kind of pain and pleasure that I experienced. They took the conventional and least risky road while I still wandered in a maze where pain coexisted with pleasure. It was really very difficult to explain the fact that I thrived on pleasure which came to exist only because of the pain that my peculiar ideas, which were termed my weirdness, caused me. The truth was, if I once ceased to realize the possibility that everything was not what it seemed to be, if I stopped questioning, if I began to accept things as they were, I would not feel the pain that I now felt, nor would I feel the piercing pleasure that arose from my own awareness. When I ceased to be puzzled, I would cease to exist, that was certain. So I had to find something to do constantly. Life was the stuff that drifted away piece by piece, though summer vacation seemed never to end. I murmured.

A streetful of tuxedo shops drifted by. Outside, cars were like flowing water. Still, there were endless lines of people waiting at the bus stops.

I am glad that I don't have to wait at the tail end of a line trying to crowd into the bus which never seems to have any space for us but constantly demands a price hike.

"You really don't need to torture yourself so," he said.

I looked up at him, not knowing what he meant. I never torment myself. Didn't I just celebrate the fact that I did not have to join the crowd? Of course, school days were exceptions. I just couldn't be late every day to be scolded by our military instructor. Besides, that would have upset her terribly. She was a pious Christian—very anxious to make good little girls out of us. By the way, have you ever heard of a person in the military being a pious Christian? I mean, how can one be a Christian and at the same time kill other human beings? It is almost as unthinkable as holding the Qur'an in one hand and a sword in the other, trying to make disciples out of non-believers by having them choose between the Qur'an or having their heads chopped off! Of course our military instructor wasn't that awful. She was really a jolly old fat lady who couldn't help laughing even when she was bawling us out! She was the one who told us about the head-hunting Moslems to show how barbaric some religions could be. I didn't really agree with her. Barbarism is only a matter of degree. Under certain circumstances, I'd rather be the powerful disciple than the tortured one. I must confess, though, I do not believe in anything. Christians and Moslems are all ardent believers in a senseless Nil. As far as belief is concerned, she was only wasting time on me. When she thought I was listening attentively, I was really wondering what happened to the heads that were chopped off! I was told that they would roll on until they found somebody to bite into and hold fast.

"Really?" He smiled and puffed out a mouthful of good smelling smoke rings.

"I think what they told me may be true. That kind of death is certainly not peaceful. I suppose biting somebody would be a conceivable act of revenge. Still, it's not worth it. I wouldn't want to die so foolishly."

"What would you have done under such circumstances?" he asked absentmindedly.

"I'd accept the Qur'an, then turn around and throw it away afterwards."

He laughed softly, somewhat condescendingly. "Is that all? Nothing great, right?"

"But it's being flexible. One shouldn't have to die for something as vague as a questionable God. One should only sacrifice oneself for a higher cause. And for the sake of seeing that cause come true, any means can be used. What's wrong with being flexible if one gets things done and never has to sell out his ideal or give up his final goal?"

"You know what?" A smile spread across his face as he looked at me again, making me feel deeply trapped. "For a true believer, God is all. He is all goodness, representing all the highest ideals."

"But," I stared at him in great amazement, "for a nation like ours that is in want of everything, God is too great and distant a luxury. Perhaps it is true that we desire protection and crave for comfort the most during difficult times. But I feel that it is exactly then that we are not qualified to seek divine shelter. We can afford to sleep in a holy peaceful shade and have sorrow purged away only when we enjoy internal peace. When a nation suffers, when it is constantly under the invasion of other countries, politically, economically and religiously, its people have no right to dream of a peaceful afterlife, but must be self-sufficient and fight for its existence on this earth."

Little twinkling sparks flashed up in a stream of light from his smoothly curved pipe. I could denote a kind of discomfort under his pretentious sense of superiority. People looked at me from the corner of their eyes as they walked by. I stared back at them with arrogance. Inside the drugstore, a Japanese figurehead toasted to us with his rejuvenating drug. Rows of foreign letters filled up the open space. I was suffocated by the sight.

"We Chinese are so hopelessly forgetful. We never remember things of the past. Do not do unto your enemies what you would not have your enemies do unto you."

"My foot! We advocate pacifism and generosity so much that we do not see what the 'narrow-minded' nationalism of others has done to us. Our streets are always full of neon lights brassily advocating the products of 'other people.' The higher class Chinese have to use American products; the middle class, Japanese products, while only the poorest use our own products. While countries great and small limit foreign imports to protect their own economic growth and profit, we still dream of a world in which all men are brothers. More and more, I feel that the ideal world in which all men are brothers as Confucius dreamed of, is only the beautiful flowers in the mirror or the shiny moon under the sea. Since our country is not as strong as others, we are not qualified to advocate brotherhood, let alone convince others of practicing it. Who will listen to the whining cry of a powerless country even though its concern is the dire need of all humanity? Who will believe us? While others remain ignorant of the welfare of our country, and continue to be narrow-minded racists, there will never be such a world that will belong to all. How can we first ignore the profit of our own country, and the welfare of our own people and hope to create a world that will take into account the benefit of all countries alike, the welfare of all people alike?"

All the foreign drugs on the drug counter made faces at me. The Japanese figurehead raised its arm wanting to knock me down. At the corner, the TV commercial bellowed with Japanese, "*Yuvela*! *Yuvela*!"\fn{A note reads: *A Japanese drug which supposedly has rejuvenating quality*.} And the Japanese tourists looked around with amazement:

"Why, Taiwan is full of everything made in Japan!"

He drew on the shiny black pipe and puffed out rings of smoke. From his otherwise gentle profile, his straight nose stood out. His eyes were very bright and frighteningly black. But what was he thinking? From his silence I had obtained the security to pour out whatever I felt inside, but after I really opened my heart. his silence made me uneasy. Why didn't he say something? Why didn't he tell me whether I was right or wrong? Could one become so sophisticated that one also became too timid to make a move? He shouldn't be such a person, nor should I be only sixteen. I wished that I could grow up a lot every time the wind blew: it would be great to become old and powerful. One could certainly be stronger and do what one felt to be right and good. One would have no need to feel young and helpless, nor to be led around by the nose by the older folks. Why was it, though, that one always became so prudent when one was old enough to act on his own accord? Why does he suddenly withdraw from the eternal battles of life once he has the power to act and make changes?

It was then that we saw two young couples walk into the Pastorale. When the glass door was pushed open, I heard the distant cry of G minor falling softly in the rain of black and white keys. And then the door swung back licking up the shadows. Imagine, ten young people crouched in a dark corner making love in hide-and-seek style while the stereo wept with Chopin-like clarity. Perhaps there were even candles dripping tears for romances in the dark.

"Is love so unsightly?" I asked. "I thought it was something splendid that didn't need to be hidden away from others."

He said he did not know. Perhaps love was self-sufficient, needing absolutely nothing.

"Not even sunshine or fresh air?" I walked through the iron gate that led to the city park. "Didn't you say that you'd like some mango ice cream? Let's walk a bit in the park, o.k.?"

He did not object and trod along leisurely, puffing away on his ebony pipe. The tobacco was first rolled into half of a ball and then gingerly stuffed into the pipe. Once it was lit, sparks of flame coiled around the silk threads of the tobacco, fuming into a thin film of smoke that rose above the pipe, high into the air, gathering there for a

moment, long and parallel to the smoke coming from the distant smokestack.

When smoke shoots straight into the air, you know the weather will be fine the next day, I thought all of a sudden. "It will probably be a fine day tomorrow!" I declared. On the horizon, evening clouds heaped up on top of one another. A gorgeous sight. Love had to be finer than a fine day! No sunshine, no fresh air, nothing but the dark corner, what kind of love could that be? Can't one love with blazing courage?

He knitted his brows tightly.

"What are you thinking?"

"The Pastorale."

He hesitated. I could almost tell that he was lying. "Have you been there too?"

"What?" He was evidently disturbed.

"The Pastorale."

"Oh no, only a long time ago, I went to another Pastorale." I waited quietly. Was he finally going to tell me something But nothing came afterwards, he only shuffled his fee through the fallen leaves.

"It's strange. It's still summer and the trees have already started to shed their leaves."

"What about America?"

"The leaves are shed only in the fall," he said, "just like home. Is that why you now consider America your home?"

I glanced at the fallen leaves.

"I don't have any home," he said hurriedly. It doesn't matter where I stay."

"Why don't you get married? Once you're married, you'll settle down again." I quoted what mother had said about him

He took down his pipe and cleaned it with great tenderness. Without the pipe, his lips curved into sarcasm:

"Is man's marital status the chief concern of all women?"

"I don't know," I shrugged that off. "I used to think that going into service and being married were the necessary initiation rites into manhood."

"That does not apply to every man. For some, love alone is enough to make them grow up, make them grow old."

I lifted my head to look at him straight in the face.

"You won't understand." His forehead was furrowed with deep horizontal lines.

"Why, is it a very complicated matter?"

"Oh no. Nothing is simpler than my story."

"Is it a matter of loving or being loved?"

"What difference does it make?" He raised his eyebrows.

"I believe being loved makes one young, while loving, ages."

"Will you please stop talking?" He stared at me from below tightly knit eyebrows. I stood under the tree not knowing what I had said wrong.

"If you don't want to talk about it, then don't!"

At the end, I had to console him with that. Then he really cut off every possible means of communication, leaving me alone in a cocoon of wonder and regret.

"You wouldn't understand," he said. "You wouldn't understand."

The thing inside me called dignity ached treacherously. My age humiliated me so. If only I were not sixteen, would that make him feel like I might understand him more? Would I then understand the world more? Would I then have the power to persuade others to give up their tightly grasped stubbornness? Would I then be able to act instead of simply worrying myself sick over the repulsiveness of the world?

"Would I?" I pulled at his sleeve.

He gave me a very blank look. His black irises reflected the smoke from the distant smokestack. The sun, a huge orange ball sat behind the stack. Underneath waited a pitch-black pit.

Our sky was always full of neon lights promoting sales for imported goods. Peace-loving Chinese still loved to decorate themselves with imports. The generation that preceded us loved being generous to those who came to destroy us completely, and advocated generosity and pacifism to hide their own incompetency: our generation was happily lost along with Hemingway; and the coming generation wondered what they would be. And the overseas students, the essence of our culture, our race, caring for nothing but promoting their own welfare even to the degree of prostituting their own ancestry. The peace-loving Chinese; the generous Chinese. Home was nowhere and home was everywhere. The middle aged Chinese who readily settled their future for mediocrity. The

sophisticated Chinese that were never young, and the youth that confined all freedom and beauty in the darkest corner of the night.

The smoke that shot straight into the air flared into a thin film. The sun that wavered at the point of setting was distant and blurred. Beneath the horizon, the deep pitch-black pit was forever waiting.

I've got to grow up soon. I made up my mind, as if that I would settle anything.

I've got to. I was not only wanting to convince him but to convince myself. Then I felt tears crawling down my cheeks. Who would've cared what I had to say? Who would've cared how I was suffocated by the simple fact that we would never be able to conquer either our own cowardice or our ignorance; that we might never break through the despair we were in? Why didn't I possess the power to make changes when I wanted so badly to raise the whole world upon my shoulders? Why did those who had the might always tell me that I did not understand, when it was they who would not try to act?

"I am really confused," I said, "but I am not going to accuse anybody."

All of a sudden, he drew me close to him and looked at me with deep anxiety.

"You deserve something better."

He embraced me.

"I only wish," he said after a while, "that I were as proudly young as you are, my brave little girl."

I burst out in laughter. I had to be crazy or he had gone mad. I had been so envious of his age, his experience and the power that came with them all, and he just now admitted he was only a defeatist. What made him an escapist? Did that simple ageing love affair do it or did this disheartening world that we were raised in? Perhaps even I myself had been running in circles thinking that I was searching for truth while I was really running away from reality? I did not know for sure if I regretted coming to understand him—and myself—to such a degree. We did not try to hide anything from each other, but we were also very accustomed to wearing masks to face the crowd. And when we bared our hearts, we had nothing to say to each other.

"Good-bye," he finally forced out these two words, his face filled with painful resolution. When he said I deserved something better, he probably had already made up his mind.

"Good-bye." I replied nonchalantly, knowing at the same time something inside me was dying, piece by piece. I had wanted to ask him to wait until I grew up.

The sun then fell into the pit beneath the horizon.

What had we been searching for? Or maybe we were only trying to run away from something? I thought he was the sun—at least I had always been in search of that sun—while he thought I was.

39.124 Clock\fn{by Zheng Wan-long (1944-)} "rural Heilongjiang Province," China (M) 5

He escaped. The fog churned around him, wave upon wave surging against his face. Eyes opened to their widest though nothing could be seen, he had groped his way out of the paddock on memory alone. When Mother let go of him she had stuffed something into his pocket, the red medicine of healing or perhaps bear's grease, but by the time he slid down the river bank it was nowhere to be found. The rushes down there grew so deep they seemed bottomless.

The wind was bitter, the fog dank. His wounds began to ache as if they were soaking in brine. Yesterday afternoon Father had hung him from a hitching post and thrashed him till even the whip fell apart, savagely enough to have killed him in one breath. But he had inherited Father's spine; he took it all, made not a sound. The shaman said he was possessed, that devils lurked in his body and witches flitted across his face; the shaman claimed to have seen all this even before setting foot in their bark tent. Mother could only weep. She could not bear the sight of Father—his deerskin coat stripped off, his chest all bare—whipping their son. Hiding in the tent she stabbed her palms with a knife and watched as blood flowed from the wounds.

Every family in the village was burning incense and praying amidst the shaman's drums and bells. Old women knelt before the fire chanting:

"Ha-la-la, give us your blessing, Bahuriya!"

All winter long the villagers had caught next to nothing on their hunts, but he had not understood how this calamity could have been all his doing. Then Father made him understand. It was only yesterday that Father had found out about him and Baidanjia of Ogda. With the whip Father told him:

"If you're my son then go die in the widow's bark tent!"

Father said Baidanjia's mother was a jinx, an unclean woman who had jinxed her husband's parents, then jinxed her husband too. That Baidanjia was born after the man died—she with the milk-white skin and twinkling

blue eyes, she was not of Ogda stock. Wherever mother and daughter went the fires would die; wherever they lived creatures would flee. May they burn to death in heaven's fire so we may prosper again!

"You bastard, if your eyes weren't growing out of your crotch, how could Baidanjia have seduced you? And you still have the gall to be our *ulilun's* marksman?! If it wasn't because of you, you lowlife, how come I have not been able to kill any bears all winter or catch a single marten? Look at your mother and the other women in the *ulilun*—not one of them pregnant. Even our sacrificial *kawawa* plant doesn't smell sweet anymore!"

In the end, tired at last from flogging him, tired too of berating him, Father dropped onto the ground and tossed a knife at his feet, saying:

"If you don't die in that little widow's tent, then never let me see you again."

Actually Father was not such a devout believer in the shaman, he just could not stand the shame of not capturing a bear or a marten the whole winter. Mother came and cut the rope from which he hung, buried her face in his chest and said:

"Run away, Molitu, quickly! Your father really means to kill you. He has already sharpened his knife. At daybreak, in front of everyone in the *ulilun*, he wants to offer your blood as a sacrifice to Bainacha."

Could it be that god of the mountains Bainacha would gag him just as Father did? Would He not even listen to his explanation? Molitu wanted to tell Bainacha, wanted to tell everyone in the *ulilun*: Baidanjia was the most beautiful girl he had ever seen, the loveliest doe in the Tardaji mountains. Father talked that way but he had never seen her, nor had anyone else in the *ulilun*. Her mother had been sick all along, and Baidanjia spent the whole day at her mother's side, coming out only at night. It was at night that they had met. Night drew everything close to each other, moon and stars were right in their laps. But where are you, Bainacha?

He ran and ran, blood oozing from every wound. He pounded along dappled trails, splashed through soggy marshes, running, running all the while. Still darkness enveloped him, just as it had swallowed the valley. On he ran, through the stretch of wind-felled timber, past the grove of camphor trees, over the ridge and down the hill—till he tumbled headlong into the inky black bushes near the fork in the river.

Above the treetops on the crest of the hill, a layer of rich dark red appeared. Molitu was startled awake by the insistent screeching of a snow owl. It was right there in the grove of camphors, calling to something. Baidanjia had once told him that she liked this bird, because whenever she heard its cries her thoughts would wander far and wide—but she had never seen one. Molitu had. It looked sinister to him, though he had heard from the old folks that the cries of the snow owl always meant the woods were empty. As empty as his heart at this moment, with nothing left to await and nothing to hope for, a heart light and empty as a leaf fluttering to the ground. Just now, however, while he was still running, he had felt as though his heart were weighed down by a rock, plunging him deeper into the darkness with every step.

Then he came to hear the wind in the woods and the river flowing between its banks, smelled the delicate fragrance of grasses beginning to yellow. Thus it was that he followed the river and walked toward Ogda, heading for that familiar white shack hidden behind the dense wooden pickets.

He was no longer thinking about anything. Keep going, Mother had told him, go try your luck. But where? He shook his head. Now twenty-four, he had never gone beyond the valley at the edge of the Tardaji mountains, had never thought of doing so. He remembered seeing a group of people a few years ago who had come from beyond the mountains. They were carrying bags and red-and-white poles and some objects that looked like living things. Instruments, that's what they called those things. But they had no horses, no guns, no dogs. This forest doesn't belong to them! So saying, Father stuffed a bullet into his Bilatanka rifle and flattened himself on the grass, silently taking aim at the outsiders, his teeth clenched tight. Son of a bitch, if they chop one tree within my sights I'll mow them down right there! A life for a life! Do you hear me, you bastard?! I don't care how much they pay, you'd better not be their guide! They are they! No matter what Father was saying he always seemed ready to take a bite out of you. By the time the outsiders disappeared from his gunsight, though, Father had fallen asleep and was snoring loudly. But not Molitu. A feeling of bleakness came over him, as if the mountains had shrunk, as if a piece was missing from the hills, from the sun, from himself.

The snow owl began to cry again. These birds guarded the moon for mountain folk. He wondered what the mountains were like at night when there was no moon. What if there were no snow owls? His thoughts drifted off, his heart—from which a piece was missing—awash with uncertainty.

As he drew near the wooden picket fence and the gate that was tightly shut, he wondered if he should call out to Baidanjia. But no sooner did his hand touch the door than it opened, and Baidanjia appeared before him as if sprung from the earth.

"You escaped?"

"Will you run away with me?"
Baidanjia nestled against his chest and began to weep, her sobs like a fawn butting softly against his heart.
"Molitu, take Baidanjia with you, she's carrying your little lamb."
Inside the bark tent Baidanjia's mother was speaking. In a voice like ripping bark, this lonely and ill-fated woman cried out:
"Let him come to life, Molitu, he is Ogda's heir! Now Ogda will have an heir! O heavens, may the Lord protect you both!"
Molitu began to tremble all over. Putting his hands on Baidanjia's quivering shoulders, he asked:
"Is this true, my lamb?"
"No, no, he's not yours! Run away, go!"
Abruptly Baidanjia pushed him away and started to run toward the house.
But with a bang the cabin door slammed shut and was barricaded from within. Baidanjia was locked out.
"Go, child! Never mind me, go, and let Ogda's seed sprout wherever you may go!"
Something in that voice told Molitu she would never open the door again, no matter how Baidanjia cried and pleaded. Ogda women never turned back.
A sudden energy surged through Molitu. He swept Baidanjia up in his arms and, after a few faltering steps, strode away from the wooden pickets.
Like ebbing waters the fog in the valley subsided. In its wake the sodden birches on the slopes seemed to be waiting quietly for something. Molitu's fur boots kept sliding on the wet grass. Suddenly, from within his arms Baidanjia's hand shot out and grabbed his ear:
"Listen, the snow owl is calling again."
"Where? Where?" Molitu turned a full circle where he stood, but still he heard nothing.
"Silly, it's right here in my belly!.Listen to those tiny legs thumping, thumping—he's calling for you!"
Molitu blushed. Grinning foolishly, he held Baidanjia all the more tightly as he ran straight into the woods. Like so many hands the branches tugged at his clothes and slapped at his cheeks, but it was his heart that tickled. He liked running through the woods like this, grass, rocks, trees and wind all young like him, all full of energy and life.
He found a flat open space and laid Baidanjia down. Kneeling by her side, he pressed his ears close to her belly.
"Can you hear it?"
"Hush."
It was very quiet, so quiet that their hearts began to throb and tighten. Then gradually and from far away Molitu heard something, and all of a sudden he burst out laughing.
"Ahhhh—thunder, I hear muffled thunder!"
"It's the drumbeat of the Thunder God, you silly fool!"
"Ohhhh!" Molitu straightened up, raised his arms up to the sky and began to shout:
"I hear it, I hear it! It's going dong, dong, dong!"
His shouts shook the leaves and made them rustle, while overhead the clouds scuttled across the sky. Watching him, Baidanjia laughed through clenched teeth as tears streamed down her cheeks.
Then suddenly a gunshot roared through the woods. Molitu turned around to look, and was shocked. They were surrounded! Father stood at the head of the crowd. In the valley far below, the bark hut that had been Baidanjia's home stood burning, flames drifting like clouds in midair.
A bluish spark shimmered among the black depths of the gun barrel, but not a glimmer brightened the old man's face. All at once Baidanjia jumped up and stood in front of the muzzle, shielding Molitu behind her.
Then a shot rang out. Slumping to the ground was someone who had just rushed up to them from the crowd.
"Mother!"
But Molitu was held back by Baidanjia.
"Run, child …" whispered the voice from the ground.
Another shot rang out.
Baidanjia fell, Molitu also. He did not know where he was wounded, only that blood covered his body.
Suddenly Baidanjia pushed Molitu aside and stood up once more, shrieking at the top of her voice as she staggered towards the muzzle:
"Run, Molitu, run quickly! My horse is in the meadow beyond the ridge!"
The icy brilliance of a steel blade flashed unmistakably before Molitu's eyes. Then a heavy blow landed on his

leg. He fell, got up, fell again. No longer could he see Baidanjia, nothing but a blur of flashing steel. Finally, at the muffled blast of a gun, he somehow jumped onto his feet, then wove through the woods and ran down the hill.
He found the little brown pony. As he clambered onto its back, he realized that he had a bullet in his shoulder and a wound in one leg—a grave wound, his leg feeling heavy as a wet log, his foot completely numb in the stirrup.

The crowd milled around shouting and firing their guns, but no one gave chase. Amid the clattering of his horse's hooves the pitch-black hills and birch forests faded like a nightmare. Yet the rumbling of the Thunder God followed him like moonlight and wind, up one valley and down the next. There was absolutely nothing wrong with his mind, for beyond a doubt he could hear—ever so clearly—that transparent yet mystical drumbeat resonating in the night-blue sky.

But eventually even the drumming faded away. Everything became a dizzying blur in his sight, hills and trees rushing at him like wild beasts. He fell off the horse.

Some days later he awoke to find himself in the home of a Han,\fn{A note reads: *The largest ethnic group in China, comprising over 93 percent of the population*.}covered with a colorful quilt and lying on top of a well-heated *kang*.\fn{A note reads: *A heated brick bed*.} On the *kang* across from his sat a man smoking a tobacco so aromatic it made every pore in Molitu's body puff up.

"Awake, eh? Been sleeping seven days."

It was the voice of an old man, so smoky it could have been coming from the flue of the *kang*. His words were followed by a string of rasping coughs.

Molitu tried to speak but could not. As if through a mist, he felt the old man's hand stroking his forehead and saw the long whiskers drifting back and forth like a white cloud before his eyes. The old man seemed wiry and alert.

"Fever in the blood, also in the liver and the lungs. And a chill too. But two more doses of my medicine and you'll be good as new."

Sitting on the edge of the kang, the old man relit his long-stemmed pipe and puffed away evenly. "Your horse I've also taken care of, it's in the barn out back. It was wounded too …"

What else the old man said he did not hear clearly. He felt as if his spirit were dangling idly from the rafters, swaying, fluttering, ready to take flight at any moment. In his ears there was nothing but a constant droning—the cries of the snow owl and the sounds of the distant thunder had melded together until he could no longer tell them apart.

Several days later—he didn't know how many—Molitu was still lying on the kang. But this time his eyes were wide open, and he was staring through the double glass windows at skies that seemed somewhat sloping and somewhat level, skies that looked rather lowering yet rather bright. His senses told him it was snowing, the first snow of the season. His senses also told him he was not far from Tardaji.

All of a sudden an unusual sound pierced him—a ponderous, tidy and clear-cut sound that penetrated all the way into his heart.

"Tick-tock, tick-tock."

His whole body began to shiver involuntarily to its beat. What sound was this—a as mysterious as the bells and drums of the shaman's demon dance, as enchanting as the cries of the snow owl and the muffled thunder in Baidanjia's belly? Where did it come from? How long would it go on?

He sat up with a start and stared blankly, as though in a trance.

Hanging on the wall was a big wooden box (how close it seemed!), behind its shiny glass cover was a round plate (like a moon made of bronze!), on the moon's face some strange markings (just like those made by the shaman on birch bark!), around the moon two needlelike things whirling and twirling (like two goblins chasing each other!), and underneath it a bright golden thing swinging from side to side. A Living Thing! The sound was coming from right in there.

"Tick-tock, tick-tock, tick-tock …"

"That's a clock. A wall clock."

It was the old man again, pointing at the clock in the ebony case and saying: "I've had it for many, many years. Bought it from a Russian."

"It's alive." Molitu stared fixedly at the clock.

"It follows the sun, moon, stars."

"The sun, the moon, the stars—they're all in there?"

"That's time."

"Time? What is time?"

“Time is day and night, sunup and sundown.”

“Who needs a clock to tell all that?”

Molitu fell back onto the *kang*, in his eyes a glare cold as ice. Silently he cursed:

“To hell with you, lying as usual!”

“How to explain this to you? Well, we watch it to tell the passing days.” The old man seemed not to mind Molitu’s look at all, and with a little shake of his head, walked away chuckling.

Han folk watch it to tell the passing days? Molitu turned his gaze upon the clock again. But even as he listened in a daze to its sonorous and steady tones, he could feel his spirit gradually leaving his body and being snatched away by the clock.

To hell with them! Lies, all lies! The Hans must have a more important reason for keeping this Living Thing. Molitu never believed a word they said. When he used to trade his pelts, deer embryos and bear glands with the Hans for salt, rice, cloth and gunpowder, he had learned for himself how those mongers would blink their snakelike eyes while robbing him blind.

Through the window he looked out on the bustling little town, at the narrow and filthy street cramped by row upon row of tile-roofed houses and filled with a constant hubbub, at the tavern streamers and shop banners fluttering above the crowds. At the other end of the street stood several large chimneys, their thick dark smoke staining the sky the same shade of metallic gray.

Night came, but sleep did not come to Moliru at all as he lay on the kang, his heart brimming with desolation and with fear.

The clock on the wall continued to go “tick-tock, tick-tock,” filling the whole house with its mysterious sound, while around him the four walls shut out one and all, leaving Moliru alone with this Living Thing. At times, this “tick-tock, tick-tock” seemed to be dashing against him, powerfully, persistently, just like the clip-clop of hoofbeats, or the gurgling of leaves—or perhaps it was like the cries of the snow owl and the thunderclaps in Baidanjia’s belly. Other times, it was like a savage beast that had been crouching in the dark, then creeping up murderously, now pouncing on him in one fell swoop!

Then suddenly in the darkness he saw the clock’s shimmering light, a light that shone right into his heart. This Living Thing, so mysterious, so menacing—it must be a treasure of some sort, he thought, probably even more precious than the sun, moon and stars. Why else would the Hans keep it alive?

The snow fell more and more thickly, the night turned white. The clock on the wall grew louder as well, like the rumbling of a caravan as one by one the wagons lumber out of the valley, or like the crashing of timber as tree after tree is felled. He could not understand how this Being came to have such power that heaven and earth trembled at its strokes, such force that it had even shattered his heart.

“Tick-tock, tick-tock.”

The clangor filled his ears. Every wound on his body began to throb with pain again, as if they were still oozing blood. His head too felt like it had been split open.

No more, no more of this awful sound! Like a frightened roe deer Moliru scampered off the *kang*, took off one of his gold-inlaid armlets and left it on the supper table to pay for his meals, then slipped out of the house, went to the backyard, got his horse, and ran off without looking back. As he went through the door he saw the old man standing in the dark, eyes ablaze like torches and shining right on Molitu. Neither said a word. There did not seem to be anything that could be said.

This time, though, Molitu’s flight was not so carefree as the time he ran away from home, because not a day passed but the sound of the clock pursued him, now behind him, now before him; now on his body, now in his dreams; now falling from the sky, now rising from the earth; now like his shadow, or like his specter, constantly haunting him.

Clip-clop, clip-clop. Tick-tock, tick-tock.

Eight months passed. Whatever the place, whatever the hour, Molitu could not shake off that hellish din. Alone he wandered through the woods and across the marshes, eyes sunken, his once iron-hard body now a withered stump, and on his face a clouded look—as if his eyes saw nothing and his mind were blank. His life seemed to be throbbing away right there in the fluttering of his harness straps; then again, it seemed to be dissipating under the horse's hooves and blowing away on the wind.

Finally came a day when he found himself with no road left to travel, so he returned to the Tardaji mountains. By this time their Thunder God would have already come on earth if Baidanjia were still living in Ogda. But when Molitu returned he found the wooden pickets and the shack all gone, the weeds growing tall and thick, no trace of a fire anywhere. The valley was so quiet it was as terrifying as the exodus from mother’s womb into this

world.

Standing there in a daze, he once again heard the cries of the snow owl and the thunder in Baidanjia's belly—but this time he heard them in the midst of the noise that had been pursuing him relentlessly. For the first time he felt a tenderness in the sound of the clock.

Then suddenly he noticed some smoke—like that from a cooking fire—appearing above the woods on the hill. It rose all the way into the sky before finally breaking up into little brown puffs.

When he went up the hill, then through the birch grove, and came at last upon that once-familiar cluster of bark tents, he was stunned. The first things he laid eyes on were the two corpses hanging from the willows on the river bank. Swaying and twisting in the wind, they were wrapped only in reeds, not even the ritual birch bark—so pitiless were their executioners—and hung not from a scaffold but only a few skimpy poles. From their head ornaments Molitu knew they were Baidanjia and her mother. On their bodies were strung the entrails of various animals, curses for one thing or another. Green and goldenly glistening flies swarmed around the willows like a fog. Even at a distance he could smell the odor coming from the flies.

The next things he saw were the men on the sandbank beneath the willows, humming "Zhe-wei Zhe-hui leng" as they skinned bears with their knives. They had certainly done well with bears after he left. Father, his face and body all splattered with blood, was working on one at least a head taller than a man. The women were tending kettles over the fire. Huge tongues of green and golden flames leapt up into midair, turning every one of those flat, blank faces a bright red.

All those red blank faces filled Molitu with disappointment—the disappointment of someone who finally found what he had been looking for, only to discover it was not at all what he had expected. Those people seemed so near to him, so familiar; yet so far away, so very alien.

The air above the river bank gradually became a universe of flies. Perhaps those green and golden flecks were not flies after all, but a horde of spirits on the sacrificial altar. Why else did their droning sound so much like wailing? In the cool clear world beneath that green and golden fog the people began to feed. Their sweat-drenched faces remained expressionless.

"Ding-ding dong-dong" they clanged their wine bowls, "ba-ji ba-ji" they chomped their meat, "shi-lu shi-lu" they slurped up the broth. All energy seemed concentrated in their mouths; they seemed to neither see nor think at all. Over hill and dale the only sound was the chorus of gulping throats.

The guttural sounds, and the droning, and the "tick-tock, tick-tock" of the clock jangled together. In the midst of this cacophony the people on the riverbank all turned into stone—except for their mouths, which continued to move. These rocks, too, gave off a green and golden glow.

Molitu sank to the ground. But even there he found no trace of himself, or anything else. Nothing but the splintering sounds of the Chaos.

79.106 A Saleswoman\fn{by Hang Ying (1944-)} Tianjin, Hebei Province, China (F) 8

The result of the week-long opinion poll, so unexpected, it put me in a very awkward position. She came in first with 1,899 votes, far ahead of the next two on the list. I was flabbergasted. To ask the customers to vote for the best shop assistant had been the idea of our new manager and Party secretary, Guo.

"The customers know who's best," he said. "Their participation in running our store will help us improve our work."

He had us put at the store entrance a big ballot box to which he assigned a special man to collect the votes every day. So that customers could identify the shop assistants for the contest he had each of them wear a badge with a number on it. I was put in a spot by this novel idea of Guo's because as the secretary of the Youth League I had always been sure of the outcome of any vote before people raised their hands.

Taking my cues from the Party secretary I did a lot of spade-work by finding a likely candidate and recommending him or her at Party or League meetings. People then would take my lead and know who to choose. But now it was different. Guo had dropped me no hints. All he said was:

"Let the customers decide."

And now they had singled out a girl who was neither a Communist nor a Youth Leaguer, not even a prospective one!

I thought for sure people would vote for Wang Xianshu, No. 59, who had been played up by the store management during the previous six months. On the suggestion of Gao, the former Party secretary, she was being groomed to be a second Wang Shuxian, which was me. Our names were almost the same. I was in my thirties. I

had no boyfriend, but I had lots of titles: Secretary of the Store Youth League Committee, Member of the Store Party Committee, Veteran Advanced Worker, Member of the City Youth League Committee, Member of the District Women's Association, Woman Pacesetter, Model of Late Marriage … I wanted Wang Xianshu to shine like me. She stood at my old counter and succeeded me as group leader. Arriving before dawn, staying on late, mopping the floor, cleaning the toilets, filing regular ideological reports to the League branch, she followed my example in every way. Like me, she wore her hair back without bangs, her short pigtails tied with dark rubber bands. She also wore a plain blouse under a work jacket the color of which had faded with washing. Indeed, she was the very image of a model worker.

But she got only half the votes. The winner was Tin Lu, or Golden Deer, the girl at the candy counter. Her number was 163, but the young men who often breezed in from the steel rolling mill nearby called her "No.1." I didn't know what they meant until I found out that they were grading our girls on the looks. This alone made her unqualified to be honored with the title of model worker.

But now this pretty face was challenging me!

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The awards were to be presented the following week at a meeting attended by our leaders, press and radio journalists, colleagues from other stores and customers' representatives. I sought Guo out and suggested that we postpone announcing the results until we had discussed the problem first so that things would not turn out badly for us. Guo agreed and called an enlarged Party committee meeting for that evening.

At the meeting, staff members of the Political Work Section and I raised three points against Jin. First, she was frivolous and too preoccupied with clothes. She had been chosen as the beauty queen of our store by some customers. Her votes might have been fixed by people with other motives. Second, she didn't like her job, but was more enthusiastic about appearing before the footlights at the Cultural Center. Third, she was a flirt. Several times she had invited boys to her room to eat sweets.

The trade union official and men of the Propaganda Section disagreed. They said her votes showed that she sold the most and that she was popular, quick and capable, and devoted to her work. Socialist competition means to compete well in work, they said. Since the customers had chosen her, they argued, we should announce the result of the poll honestly. Guo, all smiles, wound up by saying:

"We should see that the poll is conducted in a democratic way and with Party guidance. Before we call the meeting to give out the awards, we'll ask Wang Shuxian to find out more about Jin Lu, and the trade union and Propaganda Section the views of our customers."

That evening, I tossed and turned in bed. I was at once happy and worried—happy because I would be able to prove my point, worried because, though new to our store, Guo knew quite a lot about it and may have drawn his own conclusions. Jin may have wormed her way into his favor. I would need unrefutable arguments to convince him.

At the first glimmer of dawn cycled to the store to check the account books of the candy counter, hoping to hit Jin where I thought she was weakest. As I got off my bike, I saw a bright red one already in the parking shed. Only she dared ride such a flashy bike, with various gadgets attached—a reflectors, a transistor horn, a down tube wrapped in red velvet, a "Deer" brand electroplated Jock, an unusual taillight, topped off with a galloping metal deer at the head of the front fender. The bike was just like her.

What annoyed me more was that she had come so early. Why? To tamper with her account books? I hurried to the candy counter. I saw no one, and the account books were under lock and key. I stopped by to look into the changing room, the table-tennis room and the library. No sign of her. The store was not open yet. The corridors were empty. Where could she have gone?

Then I heard a faint sound of singing floating down from the fifth floor. I ran up to the auditorium. No one was there. The singing was coming from higher up. Out of curiosity, I went up two flights of iron stairs to the roof, where I saw her singing. As she sang, she twisted her body as if dancing. I'd never been to a dance, and I'd seen few foreign films. She was probably doing the strange disco dance that people were so crazy about these days. I hid myself behind the chimney. She was absorbed in her performance, unaware of being watched.

The sky was now rosy with the rising sun, throwing into relief the sexy curves of her body. Blushing to the tips of my ears, I closed my eyes.

Yes, she was beautiful, young and vivacious, but being prejudiced, I found her disgusting. Her rosy cheeks and lips looked as if she wore make-up. Her eyes were large and bright and her long eyelashes were seductive. Even more repugnant was the wild expression in her eyes, eyes that always looked people square in the face. And her fashionable clothes and that flashy bike of hers! She really had no sense of what was proper. So she had come

here early in the morning when no one was around to indulge in such an indecent act. How could a person like her be a model worker?

I was fuming when she suddenly stopped singing and staggered towards the railing as if intending to throw herself over. My heart jumped to my throat. I was wondering whether I should rush over to stop her, when she suddenly turned round. Leaning against the railing she sighed, brushed back her long hair, and said:

“I feel empty and oppressed. Time hangs heavy on my hands. Very soon, my face will be covered with wrinkles and my hair will turn gray …” She broke down and began sobbing.

Without realizing what I was doing, I passed my fingers over my face and felt a nostalgia for my lost youth. I tried hard to control my feelings—I couldn’t miss this fine opportunity to probe into her innermost thoughts.

Suddenly she stopped crying and stretched her arms towards the sky, sighing, “Let me pass my time in music and dancing …”Again she twisted her body crazily, waltzmg round and round, her disheveled hair covering her face.

I became worried. What had happened to her? Why was she so distressed? Perhaps she had gone mad? But then I contradicted myself: no, this was her true rotten self.

My investigation was more successful than I had expected. I stole down the stairs with a contented smile.

*

The head of the candy counter and I looked through the account books the whole morning but found nothing wrong with them. When I asked him if Jin had ever been found stealing sweets, his answer was negative. So I let him return to his counter.

My head swam after tackling figures for hours and, finding nothing suspicious. The matter didn't seem so simple as I had thought. I decided to go back to the candy counter to see why she was so popular.

The store was crowded, the candy counter even more so. People visiting the city on business or pleasure, those about to get married or calling on friends and relatives, parents shopping with their children—all wanted to buy sweets. Being short I could not see clearly who was at the counter behind the throng of customers. Then I caught a glimpse of a head of rich curly hair fastened by a golden clip characteristic of the Dai girls of Xishuangbanna in Yunnan, complete with a little chain which swung as her head moved. This deliberate showiness got my back up.

As I stood there trying to find fault with her, I had to admit that she worked efficiently. Smiling, she asked the first customer in line what he wanted. As she measured it for him, she asked the second what he needed and told the third to

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make up his mind. At the same time she figured out how much the first customer should pay, checked it skilfully on the abacus, and gave each customer an account of what his change was. Her skill earned her much praise.With my professional eye I noticed that she did not keep her head bent over the scale but looked up now and again to smile at customers when she talked to them. All shop assistants were required to be friendly. It had taken me a long time to learn this before I was commended as a model worker. She must have taken great pains, too.

But my favorable impression was soon gone when I recalled her indecent performance on the roof. She was an entirely different person then. If I had not seen it with my own eyes, I would never have believed it. One should be judged not only by her work but, more important, by her ideology. However well she acted, there was still something which threw a revealing light on her true character—the dazzling hairpin. And that golden chain behind her ear that drew men’s attention to her snow-white neck! What a shameless coquette!

Perhaps out of admiration or curiosity, onlookers who had not intended to buy anything queued up too. This increased business, of course, but wasn’t her way of attracting customers disgusting?

I snapped out of my musings when, impatient for his sweets, a child in his mother’s arms at the end of the line began crying. When her efforts to soothe him failed, the mother slapped him, which made him howl like mad. Jin asked the other customers:

“Comrades, how about letting this lady be the first in line? It’s not good for this little boy to cry so much.”

When they agreed, she thanked them and asked the grateful mother to come to the front. But the boy still wailed. Jin gave him two sweets to stop him.

My heart sank. It was necessary to maintain order in the store, but she should not give away sweets like that. I wondered—did she do it often? The woman protested. Meanwhile, as Jin finished measuring the sweets, she took two back and asked the woman:

“Isn’t that only fair?”

After wrapping a few pieces of candy in a small piece of paper, she put the rest into a bag which she neatly tied before helping the woman put it into her satchel. She slipped the smaller bag into the mother’s pocket, saying,

"This is for your little boy to eat on the way home, so you won't have to open the big bag."
"That's very thoughtful of you," the woman said, thanking her.
I had to yield my plan to her.
A soldier carrying a suitcase entered the store. He took his place at the end of the queue, looking at his watch again and again. After serving two more customers, Jin noticed he was about to leave.
"Are you in a hurry?" she called out to him.
"Yes. I've got to rush to catch a train back to camp. I want to take some sweets to my friends."
With the consent of the other customers, she let the soldier jump to the front of the line. He saluted her and left smiling with his sweets.
To think that such a decadent person was so efficient and I enthusiastic about her work! Who was the real Jin, the one on the roof or the one behind the counter? Could there be beautiful jade inside a crude stone? The doubts born out of my prejudice were being dispelled as the satisfied customers streamed past her.

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Just after the soldier left, a gang of youths from the steel rolling mill crowded forward demanding, "We're in a hurry too! We want to be taken care of first." The enraged customers shouted, "Come on—get to the back of the queue!"
A tall, dark young man in steel worker's overalls dragged their brown-haired leader out and said in an authoritative voice:
"Shape up and stand in line."
Brown Hair and his gang quieted down but continued to hang around. Jin seemed to know the young man.
"On your day off, Mr. Dai?" she asked to ease the tension.
Brown Hair laughed at this.
"He isn't Mr. Dai. He's called Daiyu," he said, pointing at the young man.\fn{A note says: *Daiyu is the heroine of the classical Chinese novel* A Dream of The Red Mansions, [more popularly known in the West as *The Dream of The Red Chamber*] *a girl who is noted for her beauty and delicate health*.}
The customers laughed. The young man's dark face turned red with anger. He stared at Tin, then darted towards Brown Hair who retreated crying, "Daiyu in classical Chinese means 'black shining jade.'"
Jin giggled while the young man cast her another angry glance and ran after Brown Hair. Brown Hair dodged behind a pillar.
"Since you've come to the rescue of No. I, if you propose now, she'll accept you for sure," he said, taunting the young man.
"Shut up or I'll lift your hide off!"
Brown Hair whispered something to him.
"Dare you do it?" he asked the young man.
The two young men went back to stand at the end of the queue, each holding a ten-*yuan* note in his hand and a crafty grin on his mouth.
Somehow, I felt worried for Tin. I had been a salesgirl myself. I would have got cold feet in such circumstances. But she threw them a casual glance as if she had not sensed anything unusual.
"Can I help you?" she asked politely when the young man's turn came.
He blushed. Brown Hair poked him in the back.
"Which are the best sweets? Please tell me the speciality of each variety so that I can make a choice," he asked.
She nodded. Speaking to him as well as to all her customers she began,
"It all depends on your taste. Generally speaking, sweets from the north are sweeter than those from the south. The ones from the northeast are the sweetest. If you have a sweet tooth, buy those from Peking or the northeast. In the south where sugar cane grows, people care more about better ingredients and flavor than sweetness. Peking is famous for its crisps, butter balls, and fruit drops. Tianjin is, known for its coffee-flavored sweets and wine-flavored chocolates from the Qishiling Confectionery. Shanghai is famous for its toffees. Chongqing has good sweets too, while fruit drops from Guangdong are the best in the country. We have more than twenty varieties of toffees alone. So which do you want?"
It was as if she was reciting a poem with her perfect Peking pronunciation in her musical voice. The customers were impressed by her detailed presentation. The young man stood transfixed until his companion gave him challenging looks.
"One ounce of each please," he said.

"All in one bag?"
"No. In separate bags."
A murmur ran through the crowd.
"Is that the way you buy things? You're just out to make trouble," one old man said.
"Don't serve him," others shouted,

The young man looked embarrassed, but Brown Hair put his hand on the scale and replied, "It's none of your business. Why can't we buy things that way?"

A man went up to reason with him, and the gang crowded forward. It looked like a fight. I elbowed my way to the counter to intervene. At the sight of me, Jin smiled and calmly addressed her customers:

"Don't worry. This will only take a minute." When the commotion subsided, she asked the rest of the gang, "What about you?"

"The same. We want to taste every kind." they said.
"One ounce each?"
"Two ounces each. Four ounces in a bag," Brown Hair cried.
"Three ounces each. Nine ounces in a bag."
"Four ounces each. One pound two ounces in a bag."

Goodness! That would mean her mesuring the sweets many times and tying many bags. And how could she work out the prices and give out the change quickly? Quietly she asked the fifth member of the gang:

"And you? Half a pound each? There are more than twenty varieties. Please have thirty *yuan* ready."
The man felt in his pocket and made a face.
"I don't have a sweet tooth. Please give me 1.3 ounces each."

What impudence! These scoundrels jostled the young man in admiration, while making faces and urging Tin, "Please hurry!"

"OK," she answered, adjusting the scale. The customers watched her movements, some curious, some anxious, some fuming. In a jiffy, [a] miracle seemed to happen. She put a bunch of small bags on the counter with her left hand, while with her right hand she took a handful of sweets and put it on the scale. It was always just right. Then with her left hand she picked up a bag, filled it with sweets and tied it up neatly in a second. The customers held their breath, while I wondered when she had learned this skill. Her movements were so deft and elegant she was more like a dancer than a salesgirl.

But something even more amazing was yet to come. She called out the unit price of each variety of candy and its weight as she tied the bags up, announcing the total cost while checking the figure on her abacus with her fingers flying over the rattling beads. Her calculations were always accurate. Taking the money, she told each how much change he would get. She was still cool as a cucumber as she finished serving all those rascals.

The customers, gaping all the while, broke into applause as if they had just seen a superb performance in a theater. She fixed her eyes on the dark young man till he blushed.

His companions were stunned.

"Do you need something else?" she asked with a smile, seeing the gang rooted to the spot. "We have chocolate bars, boxed sweets, assorted toffees, jelly drops, sesame sweets, mint drops …"

Then she solemnly produced five lollipops for children.

The customers split their sides while Brown Hair and his gang ran away. In a polite way, she had called them silly boys, smart girl! I was sure they would never dare bother her again.
Before I knew what I was doing, I was giving her a friendly smile.

*

Back in my office, I sent for Jin's roommate, Ren Xiaomei, and asked her whether Jin had often invited boys to eat sweets in her room. I didn't know why I was so keen on clearing up the question, but the answer pleased me. Ren said that Jin had invited young friends to sing and play music. She had treated them to more than two hundred kinds of sweets she had bought, asking them to sample them and write down their comments in a notebook. Ren also told me that many nights she had practiced wrapping up stones and weighing them …

The scales fell from my eyes. I was ready to blame the head of the candy counter for not having told me about her exemplary behavior. But then I remembered he had recommended her for a demonstration of her skill. I had struck out her name because …

I was conscience-striken.

At a store cadres meeting that evening, I came out with a report on the results of my investigation to the approval of Party secretary Guo. It was decided that the outcome of the poll would be announced the following

morning, and the meeting to give out awards held as planned. I volunteered to help Jin draft her speech so that I could have a chance to talk to her frankly.

The following morning, photographs of those chosen by the customers were put up on the "board of honor" at the store entrance. Jin, as the winner, attracted much attention, but she worked as usual, unaffected by her fame. She also was dressed as smartly as ever. Didn't she realize that a model worker should play down her dress? I felt I must talk to her as soon as possible and incidentally tell her to get her speech ready. The moment the store closed I went straight to her room. She had put on an even more beautiful dress and was polishing her shoes.

"You're going out?" I asked.

She laughed and made me sit down on her bed. She was nonchalant when I offered my congratulations. I told her that she was to speak at the meeting and asked her what she was going to say.

"No, no! I am a poor speaker," she said, blushing and shaking her head.

"You spoke very well at the counter the other day," I, said. "You came out first in the poll. You must speak. It's our leaders' decision."

She looked at me helplessly. "I must speak?"

I nodded.

"All right then." When I offered to help her with her speech, she asked, "You mean I have to prepare something ahead of time?"

"Write it out or at least make an outline, so that you won't go astray," I said.

"I'll just say what's on my mind."

"That won't do." I decided to write it for her, but I had to know her thoughts. I couldn't tell her I'd seen her dance on the roof, so I asked her tentatively:

"Has anything been weighing on your mind lately?"

"Why, no," she said, puzzled.

"Yesterday morning …" I hedged.

"Yes?" Her eyes opened wide.

I was pondering how to put it mildly when someone knocked at the door.

"Come in," she said.

The door remained closed. She got up and called, "Who is it? Why don't you come in?" When she opened the door, she was amazed. There stood the dark young man, his face crimson. He bowed his big body and muttered:

"Sorry, No. 163, Comrade Jin Lu. I learned your name from the board of honor."

Her shocked expression turned into a sardonic one as she asked him in politely.

His face a deep red, he backed away protesting.

"No, no! I don't want to disturb you. I've only come to express …"

My spinster's heart pounded. What did he want to express? Jin smiled and looked at him steadily. Embarrassed, he showed his white teeth in a grin and shoved a package into her hand. Only then did I notice he had shaved and had his hair cut, looking very handsome in a woollen jacket. She didn't open the package but held it in her hand, as if measuring its weight.

"Is it a bomb?" she asked with a gleam in her eyes.

"Yes. Dare you open it," he asked.

She opened it right away. It was the sweets he had bought.

"A small gift. My name's on it," he pointed at the wrapping paper and went away.

"Hey, come back …" she ran after him, but he was already down the stairs.

Jin spread out her hands in a helpless gesture. I opened the wrapper: it was a certificate given by the steel rolling mill to outstanding workers. His name was Shi Yongli.

"It never occurred to me he did his work so well," she said as she smoothed it out.

I agreed, then added, "But he shouldn't hold the paper so cheap."

My solemn expression made her laugh.

"Yes. The great Youth League Secretary can't bear to see that," she said, "but I like people who make light of fame and honor."

My mouth dropped when she used the word "like" so casually. As if reading my thoughts, she added with a smile, "I meant it in the broadest sense of the word."

I was about to offer more advice when she said:

"Well, humans are complicated. Some very outstanding people have glaring faults." She stopped abruptly, blushing, and ran out the door.

I was still in the dark about what she was going to say at the meeting.

*

Although the meeting was going to be held the following day, Jin still hadn't written out her speech. According to the usual practice. I decided to get the speakers together to go over their speeches with them that evening. I had to see that their speeches were politically sound.

Jin sought me out and told me apologetically that she had an appointment and could not come.

"What? Are you asking leave of absence from such an important meeting?" I asked.

"I'm taking part in a dress rehearsal for a play at the Cultural Center, so I can't come to your dress rehearsal," she said.

Dress rehearsal? How could she put it like that?

"No. You must come," I said firmly.

She became impatient. "I can tell you right now what I'm going to say, but since I'm in the leading role in the play, I must go," she said.

"What kind of a role?" I persisted.

"A girl who has lost sight of her aim in life and kills her time sprucing herself up and dancing."

The situation dawned on me as recalled her bizarre dancing on the roof. "'Very soon, my face will be covered with wrinkles and my hair will turn gray,'" I recited.

She grabbed my hand, her eyes bright.

"You've seen us rehearsing?"

"I … heard about it," I said, hesitating. So she was only reciting her lines that morning!" I stroked her hand and told her:

"OK. Go to your rehearsal."

She hugged me and wheeled me round in a quick waltz, making my head reel. I stopped her.

"Stay away from these activities in future," I said. She gave a start:

"Why?"

I couldn't understand her disturbance.

"You are a model worker now and must be strict with yourself in everything. You must not only work well, but also behave well." I gave a meaningful look at her dress. She paid no attention and replied:

"Can't a model worker have a hobby?"

"Certainly you can. But your prestige is more important. You must work hard to keep it, otherwise you will be a flash in the pan."

"I hate people who put up a front to seek prestige," she said. "It never occurred to me that I would become a model worker. And I don't think it should be a lifelong title. Of course I'll work hard to keep it, but if I have to choose between being a model worker or an actress, I'll choose the latter."

"What?" I couldn't believe my ears. Yet I couldn't lose my temper, so I tried to appease her. "That's not what I mean."

She brightened up. Sitting down beside me, she asked in a respectful tone, "What else do our leaders expect of me?"

Her submissiveness pleased me. Removing her golden hair clip, I told her like a big sister, "Many leaders and guests will come to our meeting, better not wear this …"

"Why?"

"Why must you wear it?" I countered with a smile.

"Because it makes me pretty. It also reminds me not to lower my head when I serve my customers. I tend to forget when I am busy. When I lower my head, the chain touches my ear to remind me."

So that's how it was! She had many good ideas to tell her audience.

"All right, just tell your listeners how this golden chain reminds you to look at your customers when you serve them. But don't mention that it's pretty."

"But that's my main reason for wearing it," she insisted.

I gave her a tap on the forehead. "Silly girl! Keep it secret from others. How can you say it in a meeting?"

"Why not?" she said, chuckling. "I want to tell everybody. I like to be pretty. Only those who love life care about their looks."

Perhaps all amateur actresses are like that, I thought.

"Tell me what you're going to talk about." Seeing her pondering over the question, I added, "Just say how you came to love your work."

"Well, it is a long story."”After a sigh she went on. "I wanted to be an actress, but I lost the chance. Now I'm too old to be one."

"But you have worked well," I said.

"I realized not everyone can do what he wants even in developed countries, not to mention in a country like ours."

"So how did you come to love your work?" Her answer again surprised me.

"You grow to like anything you're familiar with. No matter what kind of work you do, when you get the hang of it you come to love it."

"Not all young people are like that," I said, shaking my head. "You must say why you are so kind to the customers."

She thought for a moment.

"Well, I'd better tell you first how they helped me," she said.

"The customers helped you?"

"Take my regular customers," she said, "one middle-aged woman teacher, her face always pale as a sheet, came to buy a few sweets on pay day every month. But once she failed to turn up. Instead, her little daughter came together with her mother-in-law. The old lady told me through her tears, 'She is always busy, preparing her lessons late every night in her eight-square-meter room. Her pay is low. She buys sweets only for me and the children. Because she is now hospitalized for hypoglycemia, I've come to buy her some candy. She needs them for her ailment.' One old worker often comes with her grandson who only wants chocolates. His grandfather told him, 'You are born under a lucky star. I never tasted sweets until my twenties, not to mention chocolates!' There were several young men who came to buy sweets to celebrate their being admitted to universities. Those who failed said, 'It'll be our treat next year.' Two more were admitted this year, still the last one said, 'Come and eat my sweets next year.'"

Her eyes were moist.

"They taught me many things about life.I am only too happy to serve ordinary people like them," she said. She spoke as if to herself. She turned her gaze outside the window, the tears in her eyes glistening in the glow of the setting sun.

I knew what she would talk about at the meeting—her love for people, life and beauty. I had misunderstood her. I blushed when I realized my rigid thinking.

"You have spoken yery well, Thank you." I felt a lump in my throat. Embarrassed, she scribbled on a piece of paper on the desk. I urged her to go to her dress rehearsal.

She flashed me a grateful smile.

"Can I come to see your play?" I asked.

Surprised and overjoyed she gave me two tickets. "The premiere is tomorrow. I hope you'll tell me what you think of it."

"Thank you." I saw her to the door. There seemed to be something more I wanted to say to her, but instead I asked, "Why are you always so happy?"

She was silent for a moment, then laughed.

"I don't know. I just find life sweet," she said.

She left. I heard her laughed again when she met someone in the corrider. I picked up the piece of paper and saw a deer, its horns crowned with a rose. I repeated to myself:

"Life is sweet."

Golden Deer, her heart brimming with roses, will plunge into the world with firm steps.

41.163 Trial By PROLEDIC\fn{by Xu Wenli (1944-)} Peking?, China (M) 3

1: Challenging the Judge

Before the hearing started, two clerks came to explain the relevant regulations to me once again, though I told them I already knew them.

They had learned a lesson from Wei Jing-sheng's case, during which there had been too many people in the court. My case had been limited to a selected audience, yet the big room was still crowded with people. The case was heard in the foyer of the court, which had been decorated especially for the event. It was all very solemn and awe-inspiring: two cameras were set up with magnesium lights and spotlights; there were three big tape recorders

lined up and a dozen or so electric fans. There were about fifty people in the audience, mostly petty officials of the court and some others who looked like journalists; admission was by ticket only. I recognized two “routine” interrogators who entered with a young man.

First, Ding, the presiding judge, asked me:

“Is there any member of the court whom you wish to challenge?” (He clearly assumed that my answer would be no.)

“Yes!” I replied.

Ding was taken aback. Before he could recover his composure I hit him with a question myself.

“Your Honor, I would like to ask whether or not you came to talk to me several times before this hearing?”

“Yes, I did,” he answered. (I dare say he was wondering what I was up to.)

I didn’t give him a second to think and pressed on.

“Your Honor, did you or did you not tell me each time we met that it would be in my own best interests to confess my crimes, and that I would be treated leniently if I did so?”

Now I was interrogating him.

“I did,” he answered, lowering his guard spmewhat—perhaps he thought I was trying to play up to him by praising his professional skill in front of all these important people. I didn't explain the legal basis of this line of questioning straightaway. I knew I had to press on while his defences were down, so I continued clearly and precisely:

“So, the person I would like to challenge is you, Your Honor!”

I stared at him.

He went pale, his dull gaze moved over to the “puppeteer” sitting in the first row behind me on the right. From now on the “puppet judge’s” eyes were fixed nervously in that direction.

Obviously he received some sort of a signal, and declared in a flurry:

“Clear the court!”

The audience had been sitting bolt upright in their seats. Suddenly they relaxed and the camera lights went out with a “poof!”—like the air going out of a balloon.

Furious voices rose from the court.

“He’s making a mockery of the court. Challenging the judge! Who ever heard of such a thing? Who can carry out the interrogation if the judge is forced to withdraw? What utter nonsense! They should throw the book at him and give him a really heavy sentence.”

But the more sensible members of the audience must surely have realized that a toady like this judge was incapable of presiding over a proper trial. The Standing Committee of the People’s Congress announced long ago that in China a person is considered innocent until tried. If you tell someone that he is guilty, then why bother to try him at all? In my case the judge had convicted me and passed sentence before the trial had even started. The trial was just a sham. And as for my sentence, I stood no chance at all of being justly treated.

Some people may say that I’m stating the obvious. They may think it pointless to go on like this. I disagree. I believe that what I am saying is of some significance. It may be obvious to everyone, but the point is, by speaking out, I can draw people’s attention to the fact that a law enforcement officer has no right to break the law. If he does, then he should be exposed. The law can cut both ways. The educated people of the present generation understand the law, and they won’t allow themselves to be manipulated any more! Although law enforcement officers may be able to get away with illegal conduct in the short run, this situation will not last long. No one may speak up now, but it will be recorded in the chronicles of Chinese judicial practice for future generations. They will study and consider it, when they come to rationalize our legal system. My actions today are based on this conviction about their value in the future.

2: Faking the Evidence

The hearing resumed after a ten-minute recess. My request to have the judge replaced had, of course, been refused. I tried briefly to explain in legal terms why I had made my challenge, but Ding interrupted me and I had to give up. The audience could ponder the question themselves. I would be content if just a few people gave the matter some thought. You can’t change everyone's way of thinking at once.

The moment the examination commenced. Ding dealt his knock-out blow. They knew perfectly well that according to the letter of the law they would have to prove counter-revolutionary motivation before they could convict me as a counter-revolutionary. Although they sifted through all of the *prima facie* evidence they had,

including the material recorded by their "electronic earwigs," they still lacked a single piece of evidence to prove my counter-revolutionary intent. This should; have been enough to call a halt to the proceedings, but they continued, for reasons best known only to themselves.

The procurator seized on a passage in Xu Shui-liang's article which they had cleverly edited, claiming that I was its author. The argument was flimsy and easily disposed of, so Ding came up with another trick. He used a "secret weapon" that hadn't been mentioned till now.

Ding: "Is there any reactionary content in the publications you edited?"

Xu: "No, definitely not."

Ding: "Did you edit this?" A court assistant showed me a copy of the second issue of the *Journal of Studies.*

Xu: "Yes, I was editor of the magazine, but this particular issue was edited by Wang Xizhe, because it was carrying an article by him."

Ding: "Did you read it?"

Xu: "I did. If there is any problem in the contents, I accept my share of the responsibility."

Ding: "In this article it says that the dictatorship of the proletariat is a bloody dictatorship. Is that so?"

Xu: "Definitely not. I certainly don't recall that. Could Your Honor please read the original?"

Ding read the relevant passage out loud.

Xu: "Very well. Could you now read the paragraphs immediately before and after this passage?"

Again Ding read.

Xu: "That should make it clear. What Wang Xizhe is saying is that some comrades have an erroneous idea that since land-owners and capitalists once treated the proletariat in a bloody fashion, the proletariat, after seizing political power, has the right to treat them in an equally bloody fashion. He states that this does not conform with the principles of Marxism and is inhumane. It should be criticized and brought to an end. The article says, moreover, that years of practice have proved that the existence of many so-called 'enemies' is quite illusory. In writing this Wang was upholding Marxism and criticizing the fanatics of the extreme left. Surely this is not the same as saying that PROLEDIC is a bloody dictatorship? I could just as well accuse you of being a counter-revolutionary, and charge you with calling PROLEDIC fascistic, just because at some time or other you have used the words PROLEDIC and fascistic. It is almost six years since the fall of the Gang of Four; how can you still use their methods and trump up charges by quoting out of context?"

Ding was at his wit's end. He quickly changed the subject at a sign from his "puppeteer."

3: The Sweating Prosecutor

Various clues alerted me .to the possibility that the statement I had originally prepared in my defence might be photocopied, so I abandoned it and wrote an entirely new one, making a new draft on rough toilet paper. I put it in my pocket and kept it with me day and night, taking care not to let even my cell-mate notice it (though I told him everything later). This hurried redrafting naturally weakened the structure and strength of my defence considerably, so in court I had to rely to a large extent on the inspiration of the moment and on my own self-confidence. I was still able to conduct my self-defence successfully and to deal with the ensuing cross-examination.

On the other hand, my change of defence threw the prosecutor into complete confusion. They were aware that I knew about my statement being surreptitiously copied, but they had not reckoned on my being able to write a new one in the short amount of time left to me. There were about thirty papers piled on the prosecutor's desk in readiness for the cross-examination, which began immediately after my statement. It was the prosecutor's task to refute my statement on the basis of the notes he had taken while I had been speaking. But he was in a hopeless muddle. As I had completely reorganized my original defence, he couldn't locate his refutations of the points I had raised, since he had arranged them in the order of my original statement. He became increasingly flustered and frantic, as he sifted through the pile of papers on his desk. He broke out in a muck sweat. Such is the fate of petty thieves.

When it was my turn to speak again I pointed out to the audience, not without a touch of sarcasm, that it seemed odd to me that the prosecutor should have been privy to the contents of my defence and should have made preparations accordingly. I asked pointedly why he had been thrown into such a state of confusion at the last minute?

The prosecutor blushed in embarrassment. He attempted neither to deny my implied accusation, nor to defend himself in any way.

94.191 & 150.291 1. The Amateur Cameraman 2. Earth\fn{by Chang Hsi-Kuo aka, S. K. Chang, Shi-kuo Chang (1944-)} Chungking, Szechwan Province, China (M) 41

1

Wu Ziqiao had secretly been thinking about killing his wife for at least four or five years. The first time he had gotten the idea, she had just been promoted to a managerial position within the company and was entertaining guests at their home. There was no placer for Wu Ziqiao to hide—he had had no alternative but to get dressed up and mingle with all the Americans who would be coming. He thought he'd been the perfect host; who would have thought that as soon as the guests had left, his wife would start berating him from the bathroom?

"Wu Ziqiao, what's wrong with you tonight? You were a lousy host. What did you think you were doing, anyway?"

"What do you mean, I was a lousy host?"

Wu Ziqiao looked on as his tall, heavyset wife took off her clothing item by item, and, like a big white walrus, delicately slid into the bathtub. He just stared at her stupidly, and only after a while did he open his mouth to say, "The whole time I was in the living room chatting with our boss, I didn't try to sneak off, even for a second."

"Sure, but you completely forgot who you were talking to. Why were you talking to Bill about photography? I thought you were going to bore hi to death. Plus, you backed him into a corner, where he couldn't escape. The reason they're called cocktail parties is because everybody needs to be moving around nonstop like a cock's tail; it's the only way they can get the full social benefit of mingling with everybody at the party. After you trapped him in the corner, I wouldn't be surprised if he thinks you're a homo\fn{Homosexual.} trying to hit on him."

She didn't pull any punches, Wu Ziqiao thought to himself. He looked at his wife through the clouds of steam, as if from afar. The pure white pile of flesh in the bathtub looked like a show-covered mountain. What kind of a person would lie in her bathtub and call her own husband a homo? Only his wife. Looking at that great Mount Fuji, Wu Ziqiao suddenly had an idea. This idea was so bizarre that it shocked him. He promptly turned and left the bathroom, a plume of steam and his wife's voice following him as he left. "Wu Ziqiao, where do you thing you're going?

"I'm going to take out the garbage."

"Don't forget to put a big rock on the garbage-can lid, or a raccoon is going to come along in the middle of the night, pry it open, and make a rotten mess."

In the middle of the night, the raccoon came as predicted and was banging around outside the kitchen. Wu Ziqiao's wife forcefully shook him awake.

"Wu Ziqiao, go out and scare away the raccoon."

"Scare what away? The lid's on tight and the raccoon won't be able to get in. Even if I go out to scare it off, it'll just come back."

"What, and let it start <a> riot out there? Out! Go scare it away."

There was nothing he could do. Wu Ziqiao went barefoot into the kitchen and turned on the outside light. There were two glossy black-furred creatures, one large and one small, standing motionless for the moment in the light, fixing Wu Ziqiao with their bright eyes. After a while, the two raccoons started to jostle the trash cans again. Wu Ziqiao knew that the raccoons really weren't afraid of him and thought, "It'd be easy with a gun. Fire it once, and even if they weren't dead they'd be scared off."

Thinking of the gun, his idea from earlier in the evening mysteriously came back to him, as if it were put back in his head by some supernatural being. Wu Ziqiao scared himself with his own thoughts and just stood by the kitchen window, at an impasse with the raccoons outside. The two raccoons were unable to pry open the garbage can and, fortunately for him, decided to leave. Just as it was about to go, the bigger raccoon looked back at the house; Wu Ziqiao could have sworn that the damned beast gave him a contemptuous wink before it left.

*

Wu Ziqiao wasn't really planning to kill his wife, but he definitely liked thinking about it. He wasn't the kind of person who liked to argue with his wife; if he were really pressed, he would simply state, "A gentleman doesn't fight with a lady." But this wasn't a point he could afford to bring up often; if he did, Helen would argue all the more.

"What do you mean, a gentleman doesn't fight with women? You're living in American society now. You can't not fight. If you don't fight, how will you be able to persuade anyone of anything? If you don't fight, how will people know what your strong points are? If your opponent's a man, you have to fight with a man. If your

opponent's a woman, you have to fight with a woman. 'Gentlemen don't fight with women' is only an excuse, that's all; besides, have you ever even fought with another man? If you don't fight you'll be an accountant for your whole life—is that really all you want?"

What Wu Ziqiao said was that he didn't care. Of course, in his heart he did, but he couldn't change one of his lifelong philosophies. He'd been fairly unmotivated for as longas he could remember; probably the only time that he had ever been really stirred up had been when he courted Helen. But it had been so long ago. At that time, Helen Hu was a college basketball star. Wu Ziqiao's hobby was photography, and he followed the team around everywhere they went, taking pictures of the girls and doing odd jobs for them. Originally, he didn't much care which one of them he ended up going out with, but since Helen was the captain, he did a little more for her than for the others. Gradually, everyone began to think of them as a couple. Even now, when she got angry, Helen would bring up those days.

"That was when you trapped me, when you spoiled all my other chances. All I could do was marry you. I guess it's just my luck. What happened to all the vitality and persistence you had in those days? Why don't you wake up and try to act like you did back then?"

Helen hardly needed to bring it up even Wu Ziqiao found it kind of strange. The only explanation he could think of was that Helen had completely exhausted all that energy. The same Helen who with her powerful build shook the basketball court and slam-dunked her way to fame now applied that same spirit and stamina to her work. No wonder all the Americans were amazed by her. Helen had advanced to assistant manager; Wu Ziqiao was still a mere accountant. Except for a slight increase in salary, his position was exactly the same as when he had entered the company ten years ago. His wife's salary was already twice as much as his. The thing that really annoyed him was that it was through his introduction that she had gotten the job in the first place. He'd juste meant to get her a small job to while away the time; who would have thought that in just six years she would become an assistant manager? She didn't even have a master's degree!

Wu Ziqiao definitely wasn't planning to kill his wife, but starting from that night when the damned raccoon had given him that look, it was as if her were possessed. Thinking back on it, he realized that the moonlight had definitely been a bit odd that evening. Americans said that there was always something eerie about the full moon. The raccoon's intentions in coming to his house hadn't been good; for all he knew, it might have been a devil in disguise. Wu Ziqiao's downfall started on that night of the full moon.

*

On another night with a full moon Wu Ziqiao resolved to start writing a diary.

When he was young, Wu Ziqiao hadn't snored. Or maybe he had but hadn't been aware of it. Snoring is really quite a strange physiological phenomenon; usually, the thinner one is, the louder one snores, as if the volume of the snores were in reverse ratio to one's body size. Wu Ziqiao was getting thinner and thinner as his snoring was getting louder and louder. Chinese people who live in America for an extended period of time, eating an American died, usually find that they put on weight, and begin to look more like their American counterparts. Not Wu Ziqiao. Helen, though, had gained at least forty pounds. She had been large to start with, so she gained weight especially quickly. She was fortunate in that she had put it on in the right places, so she was voluptuous rather than fat. She resembled a beauty of the early Tang dynasty—large, fair, and plump, with the grace and carriage of nobility. In comparison, Wu Ziqiao seemed like a shrunken Stan Laurel or like one of the commoners from the ink paints of Feng Zikai.\fn{A note reads: *An accomplished artist in the modern period. Born in 1898, he was a proponent of the new cultural movement and of things modern. Besides being a painter, he was also a music teacher, the author of more than 150 books, and a translator of both Japanese and Russian works into Chinese*.} Even an accomplished flatterer would be hard-pressed to come up with an appropriate way to say that they looked good together.

Of course, after they had been married, there had been a certain honeymoon period. Even now, Helen really wasn't all that bad to Wu Ziqiao. The fact that she, a former basketball center, yelled at Wu Ziqiao about this or that wasn't really anything unusual. And even though she asked a lot of him, Helen did most of the household chores herself. Strictly speaking, Helen couldn't really be considered a shrew. There was, however, one thing that she truly couldn't stand, and that was Wu Ziqiao's snoring. At first, when he snored too loudly, Helen would shake him awake. Later, she found that when Wu Ziqiao slept in a sitting position, he didn't snore. Although here undergraduate degree had been in international trade, her thinking was still more scientific than Wu Ziqiao's. She demanded that he sleep sitting up to avoid disturbing here sleep, and with science behind her Wu Ziqiao had no way to say no.

Sleeping sitting up became natural for Wu Ziqiao; he often sat on the bed propped up with a pillow and passed the drawn-out night in a dreamy half-asleep, half-awake state. He didn't have a very high-pressure job, so he

could usually pass the day in a half-asleep, half-awake state as well. Day and night gradually became indistinguishable to him, but he discovered an advantage to sleeping while sitting up—you could rest up and think about things at the same time. At first, his thoughts and dreams got muddled together, but later he had it perfected to the point where he could sleep for a few minutes wake up, think, sleep again, wake up, think again, and still maintain consistency in his thoughts. Helen didn't believe that he could really do this at first, but slowly came to admire him for it.

Of course, if Helen had known what Wu Ziqiao was thinking about, she probably wouldn't have admired him for it at all. Sometimes he thought about work; sometimes he thought about photography tricks; but most of the time he thought about ways to kill her. At first, thinking about killing Helen had made him feel like he was transgressing some moral code, but he gradually overcame his guilt and handled it purely as a matter of photographic technique. His musings on how to kill her were like reflections on the layout of a photograph. He pictured Helen lying in the bathtub, that pure white pile of flesh like a snow-covered mountain. Anthony Perkins rushes in and with a virgin dagger stabs the snowy mountain;\fn{An allusion to one of the most shocking scenes ever filmed (1960) for a general audience—the killing of a beautiful naked girl in a shower by stabbing her with a large kitchen knife through a shower curtain by a figure dressed in a skirt—in the motion picture *Psycho*.} the snowy mountain collapses and slides to the bottom of the tub. Ah, but when to release the shutter button and take the picture? As the wicked knife pierces her white, white flesh? Click-click. As the snow-covered mountain collapses into the tub? Click-click. Or when the blood comes oozing out? Click-click, click-click, click-click.

In his half-asleep, half-awake state, Wu Ziaqiao came up with one after another ingenious plan for killing his wife. He sat on his bed, three pillows behind his back propping him up, with Helen beside him in deep sleep, the sound of her breath rising and falling evenly. Sometimes, the sound of her breathing would suddenly stop, and Wu Ziqiao would get nervous and uncomfortable. Only when she murmured something in her sleep and moved around a little, and the sound of her even breathing reappeared, would Wu Ziqiao be able to relax again and continue pondering yet another way to kill her.

One night, when the moon was full, Wu Ziqiao's creativity soared, and he thought up five different ways in a row to kill his wife. He couldn't sit still on the bed and decided he might as well take his pillow and go sleep in the living room—he knew Helen had an important meeting early in the morning, and he didn't want to disturb her pleasant dreams. The living room was a bit cold. He lay down on the sofa and looked through the window at the moon. The full, bright moon reminded him of an old children's song, and he began to hum it softly.

Spring's flowers,
How fragrant they are!
Autumn's moon,
How bright it is!
I in my youth,
How happy I am!
Beautiful she,
What's happened to her?

He remembered Helen at the Armed Services Arena during the finals of the women's basketball championship. With twelve seconds left to go in the game, she made a jump shot from outside the key. He had released the shutter and had captured the instant of the ball just leaving her hand. It was a fantastic shot, click-click.

"If only I had been holding a shotgun, it would have been like hunting pheasant; an even better shot!"

The cool, majestic moon looked down upon him and suddenly appeared to make a bobbing motion, as if nodding approval of his marksmanship. Even though he was in a half-asleep, half-awake state, Wu Ziqiao still caught sight of its movement. From that time on, he resolved to start writing a diary and to carefully record all the methods he thought of for killing his wife, one by one.

*

"Wu Ziqiao! Wu Ziqiao!"

Wu Ziqiao heard the muffled sound of someone calling him and quickly took off his earphones. His wife, all dressed up, was standing in front of him.

"You idiot. You listen to music all day long. Aren't you bored with it by now?"

Wu Ziqiao chuckled and was about to put his earphones back on, but Helen knocked them out of his hands.

"Hell, Zhou Xuan would kill herself if she knew how much you were listening t her tape. Let's go."

"I'm not going."

"You're not going? It's the general manager's party and you're not going?"

"No."

His wife stood with her arms akimbo. She looked particularly elegant this evening, wearing a low-cut black evening dress with a double chain of pearls around her neck; it served all the more to bring out her fair skin and the fullness of her breasts. Wu Ziqiao mumbled and quietly applauded her beauty.

"What?"

"Nothing."

"You really aren't going to go?"

"No." Wu Ziqiao pointed to a stack of tales of knight-errantry\fn{A note reads: *Tales of knight-errantry,* Wu Xia Xiao Shue *are a form of popular literature originating in the Han dyansty* (206BC-221AD) *and continuing to this day. They involved a central figure who acts outside of the law to help those unable to help themselves, similar to the Lone Ranger, or Robin Hood without the band of Merry Men*. The Lone Ranger was an American invention, running as a radio show from 1933-1955 and as a TV show from 1949-1957; Robin Hood is the hero of a group of English ballads of the late 14th or early 15th century.} on the table beside him. "Practicing martial arts at home is a lot more interesting than yakking with all those whiteys."

"You loser. You never go to any social functions; how will you ever make it in American society?"

"I've never said I wanted to make it in American society. You did."

"You'll never get anywhere, you recluse." His wife walked downstairs and, as she went out the door, yelled back, "Don't forget to take the trash out, and cover the lid with a rock. You really have no future. Marrying you would be anybody's downfall."

Wu Ziaiao put his earphones back on and picked up the small green notebook hidden under the kung fu novels. Nature in her mercy nurtures man, and man is powerless to recompense, kill, kill, kill, kill, kill, kill, kill!\fn{A note reads: *Nature in Her Mercy Nurtures Man, and Man is Powerless to Recompense, Kill, Kill, Kill, Kill, Kill, Kill, Kill!* is a famous poem written by Zhang Xian-chong, c.1605-1647, a powerful and cruel robber baron who made himself king of Szechuan Province for two years during the close of the Quing dynasty. This poem was carved on a stone monument (near Chengdu?) called the Seven Kills Monument to commemorate his many massacres.} The green notebook was densely packed with characters the size of a fly's head; when Helen was reprimanding him, he had thought of yet another ingenious plan for killing her. Helen's car must be on the highway by now; at the first big loop before the bridge, she steps on the brakes and suddenly discovers that they aren't reacting at all. She screams, and the car, speeding like an arrow, smashed through the guardrail of the bridge. Click-click, the BMW is suspended in midair; the photo is laid out so that the bridge is in the left corner, and the lower right corner is a stand of small trees; the composition is perfect. Click-click, the front end of the car, falling vertically, enters the water, which sprays out in every direction. Click-click, click-click, click-click, click-click.

Wu Ziqiao had written yet another plan in his green notebook. In a seductive voice, Zhou Xuan sang a song about flowers to him alone.

"KILL!" Wu Ziqiao yelled. "Beautiful flowers are short-lived, kill, kill, kill, kill, kill!"

The Little Dragon Girl, the heroine of the novel he was reading,\fn{A note reads: *The Little Dragon Girl,* Xiao Longnü, is the heroine of a tale of knight-errantry, *Shen Diao Xia Lü* by Jin Yong.} turned to him and smiled. Wu Ziqiao laughed aloud, "Love is never having to say you're sorry, kill, kill, kill, kill, kill, kill, kill!"

He took the garbage outside by the kitchen, found a rock in the bushes, and put it on top of the lid. It looked as if there were a pair of green eyes secretly peering at him from inside the grass pile. Damned raccoons, just waiting for a chance to raise hell. If only he had a gun. He'd shoot them on the spot. They wouldn't give him much trouble then. He took a hoe out of the toolshed and in the last rays of the setting sun dug out the weeds growing next to the sidewalk.

As the round red sun sank weakly beyond the horizon, Wu Ziqiao's shadow stretched across the lawn. Helen should have made it to the party by now; he could picture her thrusting forward her ample bosom and charging right into the midst of everything. Someone asks her why T.C. didn't come, and she just laughs and shrugs her shoulders. No, that's not right, nobody would ask why T.C. didn't come. Who would care whether T.C. came or not? Wu Ziqiao looked out over his long long shadow extending across the lawn, and at his side, Zhou Xuan sang, "After tonight's parting, when will you come back tome?"

"After tonight's parting, kill, kill, kill, kill, kill!"

He swung his hoe toward the skinny shadow, and the blade hit something hard—dong!

"Kill!"

Helen is at the party. She lifts her glass and finishes the drink in one gulp; suddenly, her blossomlike face pales, and the wineglass falls to the floor, click-click. She falls into the embrace of her American boss, Bill. Click-

click, click-click. Close-up: her hand clasping at her throat, her lips going into a spasm, her face turning from white to purple, click-click, click-click, click-click.

"When will you come back tome? Kiill, kill, kill, kill, kill!" Helen's head drops to one side, and life leaves her. The fragrance disperses, the jade falls. Her soul returns to the Heaven of Painful Separation. Click-click.

*

"You've gone mad."

"No, I haven't."

"After writing something like this, you still say you haven't gone mad?"

"Give me back my notebook. You have no right to look through my private stuff."

"I would never have thought you were this kind of person. You hated me like this all along. I'm really hurt.

"Give me back my notebook."

"Closet sadist. You need to see a psychiatrist."

"Who needs to see a shrink? This is my creation, don't you get it? It's a novel. They're all fictitious stories."

"One hundred seven ways to kill your wife—that's a novel? Don't give yourself so much credit.\fn{A note reads: *The expression used in the orignal, literally rendered, is, "Don't attach gold foil to your own face," a reference to a practice among Buddhists to show devotion by rubbing a sheet of gold foil onto the face of a statue of Buddha*.} You don't have a single artistic cell in your body. All you can do is play with cameras, the simplest kind of toy, the most fitting for you."

Wu Ziqiao's gaze focused on his wife, and he thought to himself that it wasn't 107 ways anymore—now it was 108.\fn{A note reads: *The number 108 has mystical significance; it is also the number of bandits who live on a hill in a tale of knight-errantry*, The Water Margin.}

"Still, for you, it's pretty amazing," his wife laughed bitterly. "In the thirteen years we've been married, this is the first time I've seen you really work hard at something. It's obvious there's still hope for you. It's also obvious how much you hate me. Who would have imagined."

"Give me back my notebook."

"Fine, I'll give it back to you." Helen threw the diary back into his arms. "What have I done to make you hate me so much? Everything I've done has been for us, and still you hate me like this. Forget it, I've just been blind. Just leave. Get out."

Wu Ziqiao was silent. Years before, his mother had said the same kind of thing to him. Silence is golden; when facing a cruel wife, you should stay composed.

"Go. Leave. Make it a clean break. I can't tell you how disappointed I am in you."

Wu Ziqiao stayed silent.

"Really. I thought marrying a man would be the biggest event in my life. Who would have thought I'd end up married to a heartless beast? I'm truly disappointed."

Silence. Helen is walking on the sidewalk. Suddenly, from out of the sky comes an unexpected disaster—a block of concrete falls off the scaffolding of a tall building, click-click.

"What have I done wrong? Tell me! Other husbands do whatever their wives tell them to do. This one not only doesn't love his wife, but secretly plots to kill her and lies by saying he's only writing a novel."

His wife falls into a pool of blood, a big gash in her head, click-click, click-click.

"He can't fit into American society—all he does is listen to music and read knight-errantry tales, and he decides to kill his wife to vent his frustration. And you still have the nerve to just stand here? A divorce! I want a divorce! Get out of here! Go! The farther the better! Get out!"

His wife went into the bedroom and threw out Wu Ziqiao's pillow and blanket.

"Get out of here by tomorrow morning!"

She slammed the door shut but shortly opened it again and said, "Before you leave, take out the trash, and put a rock on the lid."

She slammed the door shut again. Wu Ziqiao waited for quite a while, until all was silent inside the room, then picked up his blanket and pillow.

Early the next morning, when the lawn was still covered with dew, and before the garbage truck came, he really did leave.

*

At the entrance to the toy store there was an oblong glass fish tank on display, with plastic, camouflage-colored frogmen swimming in it. Every time Wu Ziqiao passed the toy store, he saw the frogmen bumping their heads into the glass and paddling around without stopping. One time he couldn't help but fish one of them out of the water; the alert sales clerk quickly walked over.

"Why don't you buy one to take home for your kid?"
"What happened to this frogman—why isn't it moving anymore?"
the sales clerk, a fat, red-haired girl whose face was covered with pimples, snatched the dripping frogman out of his hand and put it back into the fish tank.
"The batteries died. All it needs are new ones."
The sales girl's intention wasn't to change the batteries, however, but instead to watch Wu Ziqiao, like a buzzard waiting for prey. How could she think she would make a sale with an attitude like that? He pretended he didn't care about it anymore, put his hands in his pockets, and walked away. After half an hour, he made it a point to walk by the entrance to the store again. The pimply-faced sales girl had already gone in, and the grass-green frogman was floating motionless in a rigid, bent position. An electric frog had been added to the tank, and it was swimming back and forth in a lively manner.
That evening, Wu Ziqiao called his sister. Bao Zhu wasn't home; her daughter Betty answered the phone.
"Mom took bobby out. Uncle, why don't you come over for dinner this weekend? We all miss you a lot."
"I can't. The company is sending me to Los Angeles to audit an account. Tell your mom that I'll be over the Sunday after next. I've bought a pair of Calvin Klein jeans for you, and some toys for bobby. I'm sure you'll like them."
"Thank you, uncle. Don't forget to bring the receipt, so I can return them if they don't fit." She then blurted, "Uncle, Debbie's mom is here to pick me up. I have to go now, bye-bye."
Wu Ziqiao hung up the phone, and dutifully started searching through everything for the receipt for the jeans. Last year Betty wasn't nearly as tall as Bao Zhu, but she had sprung up overnight and was now only half a head shorter than her mom. She'd become a young woman; she had Bao Zhu's people sills and even resembled her, too. Where had he put that receipt? Wu Ziqaizao searched wildly through his room and finally started taking all of bobby's toys out of the paper bag one by one. Wu Ziqiao took out the frogman hiding at the very bottom, and, As if in fear of punishment, its hands and feet suddenly started to shake. As might have been expected, the receipt was wedged under the final present.
He put the frogman in the sink. It made a few forced strokes until its head collided with the white porcelain, and then it stopped, floating motionless like a corpse.
"Damned clerk. It obviously wasn't a problem with the batteries," Wu Ziqiao swore as he looked at the grass-green plastic frogman floating bent over in the water. Tomorrow he'd go find that imply-faced sales clerk and return it; as Betty said, as long as you keep your sales receipts there are never any problems.
He put the toy and the jeans back into the paper bag and then put the bag away out of sight in his closet. Besides two chairs, a small round table, a TV set, and a single bed, his room was completely empty. The landlady said he could ask for more furniture anytime he wanted, but Wu Ziqiao didn't see the need. He hadn't brought in anything the entire two months he'd been here. He had spent most of his energy getting used to his new job. As soon as he got home, he just collapsed on his bed—he didn't even have the energy to watch TV. Fortunately, his sister lived on the east side as well and invited him over for a home-cooked meal on the weekends. Bao Zhu had been classmates with Helen; she'd known from the beginning that they wouldn't make a good couple. This time when Helen kicked him out, his sister didn't say anything and didn't try to patch things up for them. He was extremely thankful to he for this, and he spent most of his weekends at her home. Bao Zhu's husband, Zhou Zimin, was an engineer. He was kind and broad-minded, and he enjoyed recreational photography as well. Wu Ziqiao felt completely free to be himself their home. Occasionally Bao Zhu would mention Helen, but Wu Ziqiao would either pretend that he hadn't heard or change the subject.
Actually, on infrequent occasions Wu Ziqiao would talk to Helen over the phone, usually about the house. Sometimes if Helen couldn't find something, she called him. On the phone, they treated each other with great mutual respect. Helen had never asked about his new job, and he had never asked how things were for her either. In all their years of marriage they had never been so tacitly considerate. Sometimes Wu Ziqiao had doubts about whether his moving out had really been a wise decision, but never for mer than an instant. His departure had been a release for Helen. He could tell from her tone of voice that she didn't miss him or want him to come back. he knew she didn't think much of him, and he had moved out determined to make it on his own, earning back a little of her respect in the process. Go back with his tail between his legs and plead forgiveness? Why bother?
When Wu Ziqiao felt bored, he took out his diary and admired it. Since he'd moved out, though, he hadn't written another wife-killing entry. Unless he was in a particularly nasty mood, he didn't hate Helen anymore. Now that he had his freedom, what could he do? What did he want to do? This was something that couldn't be written in his diary.

*

Wu Ziqiao called Jin Lihe as soon as he got into Los Angeles. Jin Lihe wasn't home; it was Xiao Jiling who answered the phone. "Jin Lihe went to San Jose and won't be back until late," Xiao Jiling said. "Leave your number and I'll have him call you when he gets in tonight."

Wu Ziqiao left the hotel number. As expected, at half past ten Jin Lihe called and, without so much as a hello, bluntly asked him, "What are you doing in Los Angeles?"

"Auditing an account," Wu Ziqiao said. "Tomorrow's Saturday. Why don't we get our old classmates together and have a little reunion?"

"Of course. We'll see them all at the funeral."

Startled, Wu Ziquiao asked, "Funeral? What funeral?"

"Xiao Jiling didn't tell you? It's "Camel" Luo-tuo's funeral. All our classmates are going. Do you have a car? I'll give you the church's address. It's at nine o'clock, don't be late."

Jin Lihe had always been on the taciturn side; even after not seeing Wu Ziqiao for five years, he hung up after only a few sentences. Wu Ziqiao had no alternative but to take out his address book and look up Lao Chen's telephone number.

"It was lung cancer. You know that he smoked like a chimney. Even when his illness had reached the critical stage, he still wouldn't quit. It went on for more than a year. He just passed away last Monday. We told all our classmates who are living in California now. You say you just got in from New York? Want me to pick you up? In the morning, 'Monkey' Houzi and I are going to the flower shop; it wouldn't be any trouble to pick you up on the way."

Wu Ziqiao said that it wouldn't be necessary, that he had rented a car and it would be equally convenient for him to drive himself He hung up, and after a bit Jin Lihe called again.

"I've thought about it. It'd be best if I pick you up.,"

"Really, there's no need. I have a car."

"I'm not just being polite. On the road we'd have a chance to talk. Xiao Jilin probably already told you—we're moving to San Jose soon. I'm getting ready to go into business for myself, and I wouldn't mind hearing what you have to say about it."

Xiao Jiling hadn't mentioned it. He hadn't expected that Xiao Jiling would adopt Jin Lihe's philosophy of silence being golden. Fifteen years before, when Wu Ziqiao had just come to America to study, Jin Lihe and Xiao Jiling had been the first of their classmates to get married. Wu Ziqiao had ridden Greyhound three days and three nights to get from South Carolina to Los Angeles in time for the wedding. On the eve of the wedding, Xiao Jiling had still been in Jin Lihe's apartment chattering away like a happy sparrow, loud enough to give everyone a headache. After a while, Camel had been unable to take it anymore and had told her that there were only a few hours left to Jin Lihe's bachelor days; the fact that she was still thee was a little out of keeping with tradition. Xiao Jiling had said she didn't care what the American tradition was. Laughing, Camel had asked how, according to the Chinese tradition—in which an unwedded bride didn't leave her parent's home before marriage—one would devaluate the conduct of one who was staying at the bridegroom's house before their marriage? Angry and embarrassed, Xiao Jiling had ranted at camel and stormed out. …

"So does that settle it?" Jin Lihe said. "I'll come get you tomorrow morning at eight o'clock."

Wu Ziqiao turned off the light and lay down on the bed with all his clothes on. Camel. He almost couldn't remember what Camel looked like. The spirit of memory was like the spirit of Aladdin's lamp; you needed to polish industriously before it would appear. He thought about it over and over; all he could come up with were the faces of the annoying people in the office. "Camel," Wu Ziqiao, rubbing the lamp of his memory, quietly intoned, "Where are you?"

Camel's appearance gradually became clear, a silly grin exposing his two buck teeth. The four brothers in Camel's family were all crowded into a narrow wooded shack in a village for military dependents. Within his memory, Wu Ziqiao once again saw that rickety wooded shack with Camel inside, mouth wide open in a silly grin, and his three younger brothers, who looked as alike as peas in a pod. In the darkness, he couldn't help laughing, and recited from memory a poem by Ku Ling.\fn{A note reads: *Ku Ling is a modern Chinese poet*.}

*

"Did you sleep well last night?"

Wu Ziqiao climbed into Jin Lihe's Mercedes Benz. Jin Lihe was wearing dark sunglasses, and Wu Ziqiao noticed that her hair was graying at the temples.

"Where's Xiao Jilinjg?"

“She doesn’t feel like coming. We’ll be moving soon, and there are a lot of things that need taking care of.”

“Why are you moving to northern California all of a sudden?”

“Why not? Everyone who’s interested in starting a business should move to Silicon valley. You should come, too. We could go into business together.”

Wu Ziqiao mumbled an incoherent response. Jin Lihe added, “Lao Chen just quit, too, and started his own trading company.”

“Really? He didn’t mention it yesterday.”

“You didn’t ask.”

Wu Ziqaiao thought Jin Lihe would continue to discuss the prospects of their going into business together, but, surprisingly, he didn’t say anything the rest of the way. Only when they had nearly reached the cemetery did Jin Lihe say, “Just about all of our classmates have come today. In all the years since we graduated, this is the first time we’ve gathered together enough people to hold a class reunion.”

Jin Lihe was right. The tiny church was packed with their classmates. Wu Ziqiao stood by Du Jian’s side. Du Jian, with his protruding belly and glistening red face, lowered his voice and whispered to Wu Ziqiao, “Aren’t you living in New York?”

“I just happened to be here to audit an account. Aren’t you living in Taipei?”

“I just happened to be on the west coast for a meeting,” Du Jian continued, “Camel wanted us to come, and we all came.”

Wu Ziqiao knew that Du Jian wasn’t joking. Of all their classmates, Du Jian had been closest with Camel. Without having made arrangements before hand, when Camel’s coffin came out, they all spontaneously proceeded to the altar to act as pallbearers. Outside the church, the southern California sun was dazzling. With such\fn{The text has: *soon*.} wonderful sunshine, it didn’t seem like a day for sorrow. Camel had been a straightforward, upright person; it was only fitting that he depart on such a bright day as today. “Camel,” Wu Ziqiao said softly, “Camel, my brother, go in peace.”

His eyes became moist. Du Jian walked in front of him while on the other side of the coffin were Jin Lihe and Monkey with their heads lowered, Monkey making unusual blubbering sounds. Wu Ziqiao had never heard Monkey cry before; it actually made his own emotions settle down a bit. Such brilliant sunlight! He softly hummed John Denver’s\fn{1943-1997, American country-and-western performer.} old song.

Du Jian’s shoulders were really broad. He had never realized Du Jian’s shoulders were that broad. Du Jian walked forward stolidly. Perhaps it was the stance of one who had spent many years as a flag bearer in basic training. Wu Ziqiao wondered what he was thinking about. For a while camel and Du Jian had been at odds. Their political opinions were on opposite ends of the spectrum, and they had argued whenever they had seen each other. What would Camel thing if he knew that Du Jian had come all the way from Taiwan to send him off?

*

“Uncle Ziqiao is here, Uncle Ziqiao is here!”

Bobby charged forward to meet him. Wu Ziqiao hoisted him up; his two chubby legs were kicking so hard that Wu Ziqiao almost couldn’t hold him.

“Bobby don’t kick your uncle!” Bao Zhu scolded. Wu Ziqiao put him back down, pulled out the toy inside his paper bag, and gave it to him. Bobby took the transformer robot that Wu Ziqiao had bought him and immediately started to disassemble it on the living-room floor.

“Bobby,” Bao Zhu smiled, shaking her head. “He’s quite a mischief maker.”

‘That’s all right. where’s Betty?”

“She went with her dad to watch a ball game. Last week we made dumplings and waited for you, but you never came.”

“I went to Los Angeles to settle an account—didn’t Betty tell you?”

“She must have forgotten. She’s a lot of trouble for such a small kid. Ever since she’s had a boyfriend, she hasn’t taken anything seriously. It’s only a year until she starts college, and I haven’t seen her study yet. I’m really worried she won’t get into a good school, but I can’t even complain. As soon as I start yelling at her she leaves the house. We were never like that as kids!”

Wu Ziqiao had sunk into the soft sofa and was watching bobby roll around on the carpet. He was standing o his chubby arms in a handstand when he slipped, hit his head on the floor, and burst out subbing, all the while keeping an eye on his uncle. Wu Ziqiao took a lollipop out of his pocket.

“Don’t cry, Bobby. Boys as big as you shouldn’t cry—shame on you.”

When Bobby saw that he wouldn’t get any candy, his fake sobbing turned real. Bao Zhu shook her head.

"It's all your fault, Ziqiao. You have to stop spoiling him. every time you come, I have to spend three days straightening him out."

Wu Ziqiao smiled and nodded his head. He and Bao Zhu were only three years apart. When they were young, they were both skinny. After marriage, Bao Zhu had put on more than a little weight. In these last two years especially, she had begun to resemble a balloon.

"Ziqiao, have you been in touch with Helen recently?"

"I called her before I went away on business, but I haven't talked with her these last two weeks."

Bao Zhu looked as if she had something she wanted to say but the held herself back. Wu Ziqiao knew what she wanted to say and thought he might as well come out directly and say it first.

"I got the letter her layer sent me yesterday. She wants a divorce."

Bao Zhu looked at him. Wu Ziqiao shook his head.

"Obviously I'm not giving my consent. Divorce? Hah."

"Have you told Helen yet?"

"Not yet. Tomorrow's Monday; I'll find a lawyer to call her lawyer."

"Why get a lawyer? Why don't you just call her directly and talk it over? After being husband and wife for so many years what is there that you can't talk about face-to-face?"

"I wasn't the first one to get a lawyer!" Wu Ziqiao's anger boiled up inside him, and he struggled up out of the sofa. "I had just gotten back from Los Angeles, I was in a terrible mood, and then I saw her lawyer's letter. What do you thin, was I annoyed? I didn't move out, you know. She forced me out. In these past few months, I've sent her money to pay the monthly mortgage bills, just like before. When the pies were clogged, I rushed back to fix them. I've done everything I could to accommodate her. After all this, she's the one to strike the first blow!"

Wu Ziqiao was angry enough to get sharp pains in his stomach, and he paced back and forth in the living room. Even Bobby could sense his uncle's anger and took his robot and quietly sneaked off to the TV room

"She's picked up American bad habits, getting a lawyer at the drop of a hat like that. She thinks that American laws can rule me, but I won't stand for it. a divorce, oh, how she wishes. She's out screwing around with that American boss, and she still thinks I don't know." Wu Ziqiao turned to Bao Zhu and continued, "Before we came abroad, she wasn't like this, as you're well aware. Before, her temperament was bad, but at least she was reasonable; she's not a bit reasonable now. I really regret bringing her. Once abroad, women change entirely."

"We've all changed," Bao Zhu said. "Ziqiao, everyone grows up. Helen has talked it over with me quite a few times—it's not that she didn't want to save your marriage, but the things that you did hurt her too deeply."

"You two have discussed it? What did she say?" Wu Ziqiao's voice became rushed. "Whatever you do, don't believe any of her one-sided arguments."

"Are they one-sided? Helen says you've wanted to kill her for a long time and wrote a whole diary of ways to kill one's wife. It was only after you scared her that she forced you out."

"Why would I want to kill her?" Wu Ziqiao forced a laugh. "Kill my own wife because I have nothing to do after dinner? In the thirteen years we've been married, have I touched a hair on her head? She always considers Americans to be superior to Chinese. Sure, Americans' English is better than Chinese people's, but when an American beats his wife, he doesn't just stop when her face is bruised, he keeps going until he's beaten the living daylights out of her. Have I ever hit her? She didn't fulfill her duties as a wife, and I moved to the living room to sleep without even murmur of complaint. She wanted me to get lost, and the next day I moved out of the house. I even quite my job. Would I kill her?"

Bao Zhu sighed, pulled on his Arm, and pleaded with him, "Why, Ziqiao? You're both almost forty, and you've been through this many years, even if it has been a constant fight. If tomorrow you go to Helen and have a talk with her, quietly and calmly ask for her forgiveness. That'll fix it. Like you said you've suffered so much for her, why blow it by trying to act tough?"

"It's not an act," Wu Ziqiao replied. "She's really picked up 'Americans' bad habits finding a lawyer to intimidate me. Divorce? Never!"

*

After three days, Wu Ziqiao finally mustered enough courage to call Helen. Over the phone, Helen's voice was cold and distant. It made Wu Ziqiao wonder whether or not caving in and being the first to apologize was a wise move. Nevertheless, Helen didn't refuse to see him. He arranged for them to meet at half past five at a Western restaurant, but before three he lost his patience and left work early. When he arrived at the restaurant, there were hardly any customers there. he chose a seat in a corner and ordered a martini.

The restaurant had just turned on the lights which gave it an air of majesty. This was one of the classier restaurants in midtown. Helen would certainly appreciate it, but Wu Ziqiao regretted that it was so expensive. He had never had much of a liking for Western food, but Helen, following the native traditions, had suddenly developed a remarkable appetite for steak, eating it blood rare. The previous phase she had gone through was an infatuation for French cuisine, especially *bouillabaise*. Wu Ziqiao wouldn't touch it with a ten-foot pole. Helen made fun of him for not understanding how to enjoy life. She would always say that since he didn't have any kids, he ought to learn how to live it up a little; did he think he could take his money with him to the gave?

Wu Ziqiao gulped down half the contents of his glass. The icy liquid stopped in his esophagus and stayed there for a while before entering his stomach. He noticed he was starting to warm up, but his stomach hurt a bit, too. He liked to drink, but recently his liver had been acting up, so he rarely did anymore. Today, though, he needed the soothing effect of alcohol.

He couldn't say he didn't regret not having a child. If they had had children, maybe things would have been different. Of course, they might have been even worse. If they were going to separate now, at least no innocents would suffer. He thought of the three half-grown children Camel had left behind. It was fortunate that his wife was strong; after all, she had grown up in a military dependents' village as well. At the funeral, Du Jian had started a collection on the spot for camel's kids' tuition. Du Jian really had initiative, and his activities in the Taipei political arena in the last two years had proven successful.

"Sorry to have kept you so long."

Wu Ziqiao was startled; he couldn't believe that Helen could be so refined and polite. As soon as she sat down, though, the old Helen resurfaced.

"Drinking again? Are you trying to kill yourself? What a loser."

"I've only had one glass," said Wu Ziqiao, smiling amicably. "Is there a lot of traffic outside?"

"It's all right. I didn't drive, I called a cab." Helen had lost some weight, but her face was still glowing with well-being. "Yourself?"

"I took the subway. There's something wrong with the car's transmission, and I just took it to be fixed. I have the feeling we're going to be extorted for another lump of money."

"Speaking of the car …" Helen fished around in her purse and pulled out an envelope. "The car's insurance expires at the end of the month. Since we're living separately, the cars should be insured separately as well. will you call, or shall I?"

"Here, I'll take care of it." Wu Ziqiao took the envelope And took advantage of the situation to say, {I have something to give you, too."

"What?"

Wu Ziqiao took the green notebook out of his briefcases and handed it to Helen.

"What do you mean by giving this to me?" Helen looked as if she'd touched a poisonous snake. "I don't want it."

"You can have it if you like. Burn it. Keep it for evidence. Do whatever you want."

"Who would want to keep this for evidence?" Helen raised here voice in anger. "Wu Ziqiao, if you think that this wipes the slate clean, if you think that this is repenting for your mistakes, then you can go stick it!"

"That's not what I meant."

"then what did you mean? That dog-shit diary of yours. I get the shivers just looking at it. I can't believe you had the gall to bring it!"

Wu Ziqiao knew he'd messed up again. How was it that he didn't think to buy a dozen roses or something? He had never sent Helen flowers before; he would never be able to do so now.

"You've lost your senses! You don't have even the most basic sense of decency. If you had any sense, would you still continue to think of ways to kill your wife every night? How pathetic."

"Certainly it's pathetic," Wu Ziqiao told her. "They're all fake, vulgar, fictitious stories. Who would actually want to kill his wife?"

"You would!" Helen opened the green-covered book and read:

> Uxoricide method number 47: In Haiti there is voodoo magic, by which one can stab a little doll with sharp needles, causing one's wife to ache everywhere. Every day she'll have a headache, stomachache, a sore liver, a sore heart, a sore waist, sore shoulders; there won't be anywhere that doesn't hurt, until finally she dies of pain.

"You're truly cruel to think up this kind of torture. Have you any decency left?"

"Actually, I was thinking about myself when I wrote that. At night my liver often hurts. I wrote that entry because it hurts so bad I can't sleep."

"Is that because I used voodoo to get you? Because of this you want revenge and want to use voodoo to get me, too? Even the Khmer Rouge\fn{The name of the Communist movement that ruled Cambodia from 1975-1979, in which four year period they murdered, worked to death or starved to death cdlose to 1,700,000 people, or over 20% of the country's entire population.} aren't as cruel as you. I always hoped I could get you to give up drinking. I was afraid you would get cirrhosis of the liver, and here you are, biting the hand that feeds you!" Helen stood up and threw the green-covered book at him. "Wu Ziqiao, this is the knife that cuts us in two. I'm telling you, don't bother trying to save the situation, because there's nothing left to save. Anyone who could think of these venomous plans to kill his wife, feel no remorse, and think they're 'interesting' is someone with an abnormal psyche. Divorce! Believe me, we will be divorced!"

"Helen," Wu Ziqiao stood up as well and pleaded, "all the stories are fictitious."

"Fictitious stories can be acted out. I won't be giving you the opportunity." As she left, Helen had a final comment to make. "Hurry up and find a lawyer I want this strictly by the rules."

But Wu Ziqiao didn't look for a lawyer. The next day, just after he had reinsured the two cars, he was sent to the hospital in a state of confusion. He couldn't even remember how he got there. All he could remember was that as he came out of the bank, his sight grew dimmer and dimmer and his legs became weak and wobbly. After that he couldn't remember anything. Looking back on it, he thought it was interesting, like a gradual fadeout in a movie. It was surprising that in life one could have such a perfect montage. If he had passed away then, it would have been like the last curtain call. When he woke up, his stomach had been cut out; the success rate of American hospitals in saving people had always been admirable. He stayed in the hospital recovering for eight days and didn't call Bao Zhu or anyone. His sister thought he had gone off on business, and, surprisingly enough, Helen's lawyer hadn't come to bother him, either. These eight days should have been a good opportunity for Wu Ziqiao to repent for his misdeeds, but in the end he didn't repent and instead had another strange encounter.

*

Her English name was Wendy, and at first Wu Ziqiao thought she was Vietnamese. There weren't many Asian nurses in the hospital—most of them were ungainly old women with indeterminate ancestry. At first Wu Ziqiao, I his weakness, let them handle him. Every time they changed the sheets, he didn't know which way was up or down. Once he regained some strength, he did all he could to get off the bed himself. Every time the stout, black, head nurse saw him sitting primly in the chair at the head of the bed, she would laugh like a braying donkey and say, "Mr. Wu, have you come to visit yourself again? Sorry, he's gone to have an operation, try again tomorrow."

Wu Ziqiao detested the head nurse's jukes. He didn't think they were a bit funny. One time Wendy happened to be bringing his medicine, saw the expression on his face, and whispered to him, "Don't mind her, Barbara's just like that. She's the same with patients who have a terminal illness, cracking stupid jokes. That's her way of cheering them up."

Wu Ziqiao forced a smile and replied, "I know, but if the patient wee a lonely old person and has been made fun of like this, would he be able to stand it?"

Wendy gave him a wink, picked up the medicine tray, and left.

The next day, Wendy's shift came, and, as usual she took Wu Ziqiao's pulse and blood pressure, then left. It was only after she left that Wu Ziqiao noticed that a bottle of yellow flowers had been added to the room. It was a long while until Wendy came back, and Wu Ziqiao, all choked up, thanked her. Wendy chuckled and, switching to Chinese, said, "You'll be all right. In another two days you'll be out of here."

Wu Ziqiao, who had been counting the days until he could leave, now felt rather differently about the whole affair. He started to daydream about the story of the Girl with the Red Whisk and Li Jing.\fn{A note reads: *These are characters from a Tang dynasty tale of knight-errantry,* The Curly Bearded Hero. *The girl with the red whisk packs her belongings and leaves her job to be with Li Jing, a historical future minister to the founder of the Tang* (618-907AD) *dynasty. See Cyril Birch, Anthology of Chinese Literature*.} He was sorry that Wendy didn't come by again before the day he was released. After he finished the hospital check-out procedures, he dressed himself nicely. When the male nurse wanted him to get in the wheelchair to escort him to the front door. Wu Ziqiao signaled to him that it wouldn't be necessary. Now that he could get around by himself, thee was someone he wanted to find. Where was she?

"Wendy? Isn't she on leave?" said one nurse to another. "Didn't she go on vacation?"

"She took a week off. From what she said, her mother was coming from Taiwan, and she wanted to take her sightseeing."

Wu Ziqiao got a taxi and returned to his temporary residence. Everything was still the same: the same old bed, broken table, and two rickety chairs. Wu Ziqiao swept and cleaned the room, found himself in a sweat, and sat down on a chair to rest. Although it didn't seem that anything had changed in the room, he definitely sensed some slight, almost imperceptible differences. What had change? He remembered that when he had just moved in, he had felt a bit uncomfortable, but he always felt a little bit at odds with his surroundings. Later, the room slowly accepted him, like a woman accepting a man. There was always a mutual acclimatization process between room and tenant. He wondered, was it possible the room had been hopefully waiting for him to come back?

Wu Ziqiao slowly settled down. At least something was still waiting for him. He thought of Wendy. He had asked her what her Chinese name was, but he hadn't heard her answer clearly. It seemed to have been Fan something-qiao. Fan Xiaoqiao? Fan Wenqiao? Fan Aiqiao? He had mentioned how his name ended in –qiao, too. When he told Wendy this, she grinned, showing her teeth. Her teeth weren't straight; they tended to stick out in different directions. She was quite tall, almost as tall as Helen, and slender, a southern Chinese natural beauty. People who were that thin were usually Southerners. It was no surprise her mother had come from Taiwan to visit her. From the fact that she was willing to take her mother around, you could tell that she was a good filial daughter, and you could also tell that she hadn't married yet.

Sitting in the chair, Wu Ziqiao slipped into a befuddled state of consciousness. In his half-asleep, half-awake state, Helen pointed at his face and cursed him for being such a loser. He suddenly woke up, startled. The light inside the room had dimmed. It was dinnertime, but Wu Ziqiao didn't feel especially hungry and fell back asleep. He was standing at the entrance to the hospital, waiting for the long-legged Wendy to get off work. Finally she came out, and she grinned when she saw him. When he escorted her home, it was already getting dark. The apartment, having only a single female occupant, gave off a faint aura of sorrow. Like his room, it only had one old bed, a broken table, and two rickety chairs. What was she doing living in a place like this? Wendy smniled and shook her head. The next-door neighbor was making a racket, movin tables and chairs around for no reason, making a "bam bam" sound. Ah, Wendy, Wendy, beautiful Wendy, why do you live in such a place? Bam bam, the next-door neighbor was still making a racket. Wendy smiled and sat on the side of th ebed. Wu Ziqiao tried hard to recall her proper name Fan Xiaoqiao? Fan Wenqiao? Fan Aiqiao?

Bam, bam, bam.

Wu Ziqiao gave a start; someone was knocking on the door. he turned on the light and opened the door. two policemen were standing outside, and the landlady stood behind them, sneaking glances at him. the husky policeman who was in the front took out his identification.

"Mr. Wu? You're Mr. Wu?"

Wu Ziqiao nodded. He began to understand why there were some slight and almost imperceptible differences to the room.

"Ziqiao Wu," the policeman said to hi, "You're under arrest."\fn{A note reads: *The policeman, not aware that Chinese surnames precede the given name, has reversed them*.}

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"Ziqiao, are you all right?"

Bao Zhu's face was slightly pudgier; Wu Ziqiao wasn't sure whether it was because she had put on weight again or because she had been crying. He was disinclined to pursue the question and instead said to her, "I didn't kill Helen—it's all a misunderstanding."

"I know you wouldn't do something like that," Bao Zhu comforted him. "We want to get a lawyer for your defense."

"I didn't kill her. Would I kill my wife just because I had nothing better to do after dinner? In any case, I had just left the hospital. Does someone who's just had half of his stomach removed have the strength to kill someone?"

"Why didn't you tell us you'd been hospitalized?" Ban Zhu was breathing in jerks and began to cry. "If only you'd told us sooner, it wouldn't have come to this."

"Come to what?" asked Wu Ziqiao in shock. "It's not like I killed anybody. I'd just come out of the hospital. Where would I get the time and energy to go kill someone? America has a good judicial system. They won't falsely convict me. Poor Helen, to have been butchered so cruelly by some burglar. Have they found … her head?"

Bao Zhu shook her head and started crying again, and then it was Ziqiao's turn to comfort here.

"Don't cry. I'm not in such bad shape."

"You really don't remember anything that happened?"

“Remember what?” Wu Ziqiao bellowed. “You still don’t believe me? Helen and I had our problems, but it wasn’t as bad as all that. As the Chinese say, for every night a husband and wife spend in wedlock, there come a hundred days of affection. How could I kill her?”

“But your diary …”

“They’re all fictional stories, the plots to novels! My god, how is it that none of you can tell fact from fiction?”

“Helen really died.” Bao Zhu swallowed slowly and said, “Ziqiao, listen carefully. Helen is really dead. She died in her own bedroom. She died a horrible death—the murderer cut off her head, and they still haven’t been able to find it.”

“Why talk tome like this? I’m no psycho. You think I’m nuts, don’t you?”

Bao Zhu didn’t answer. Wu Ziqiao sighed. He realized that the situation was serious; even his own sister didn’t believe him. How the hell had it come to this? He carefully recalled what had happened the day he left the hospital. In the morning, he completed the outpatient procedures at about ten, no, eleven o’clock. It must have been approaching eleven, because he saw the food cart in the corridor. He’d probably wasted another half hour looking for Wendy. Afterward, he took a cab home. By the time he got home, it was close to one. He cleaned the room and then sat on the chair and napped. By the time he got home, it was close to one. He cleaned the room and then sat on the chair and napped. By the time the police arrived, it was already dark. The police records said it ws eight o’clock. He had actually slept seven or eight hours sitting in the chair! But after an illness, with our body weakened, it’s easy to fall asleep. The judge should believe him.

Wu Ziqiao broke out in a cold sweat. He urgently needed evidence that he hadn’t been at the scene of the crime. Too bad nobody had seen him come home. Perhaps if he found the cab driver who had driven him home that day, he would testify for him? But, that probably wouldn’t be enough. He could have taken another cab to do the deed, rushed home after killing her, and still have made it on time.

“My thinking is still quite clear,” Wu Ziqiao announced, pondering and speaking aloud in a loud voice. “This will prove that I’m not crazy. If I’m not crazy, I couldn’t unknowingly run out and kill someone. I don’t sleepwalk, so I couldn’t have killed anyone in my sleep. Therefore, I didn’t kill anyone.”

Bao Zhu listened to his analysis and burst out laughing. Wu Ziqiao laughed, too. When they were little, they used to teasse each other. Wu Ziaqio liked to blurt out a big pile of nonsense to trick Bao Zhu, and every time, Bao Zhu was intimidated into believing him. She took out her handkerchief, wiped her tears, and said to him, “Ziqiao, all the evidence is against you. they’ve found your diary and are looking for someone to translate it right now. Helen had also told her boss that you wanted to kill her. He was furious; he said that it didn’t matter how much the company would have to pay in legal expenses, he wanted to see that you receive the punishment you deserve.

“It figures it would be her lover,” Wu Ziqiao explained. “Of course he’d love to get rid of me. “They’d be rid of a thorn in the eye; they would be free to do as they pleased.”

“But Helen was slaughtered. It’s only natural that her friends would want to avenge her.” Bao Zhu quickly added, “Sorry, I wasn’t accusing you.”

“I want to avenge Helen as well. Don’t think that I don’t hate her murderer. His method was too brutal, just too brutal.”

Hearing Wu Ziqiao say this caused Bao Zhu to get worked up and start crying again.

“How could this happen? I just don’t get it, such a good person butchered like that …. I really don’t get it.”

Wu Ziqiao couldn’t get it either. After Bao Zhu left, he was taken back to the detention center. This was the first time in his whole life that he’d been jailed, and, surprising enough, he stayed calm and cool. If he had moved directly from his old home into jail, he might have felt uncomfortable. But after having lived away from home for half a year, he found that the differences between his little room and the jail were not that great. The decoration was equally simple, and the meals were just as hard to swallow. Being in jail made Wu Ziqiao finally realize that, since he had been forced out by Helen (or, that is, decided to move out on his own), he had never been free. Why? Before, he hated how Helen yelled at him to do this and that and just wished that he could kill her. Now, he hadn’t even gotten to sample freedom’s pleasures. All the media hype about how single yuppies lived the high life seemed to have no bearing on him. Damned yuppies, Wu Ziqiao thought, they’re imprisoned, too—it’s just that some people know they’re in prison and some people don’t, that’s all.

Actually, he didn’t mind being in jail. No need to go to work, no need to deal with those boring nincompoops; it wasn’t bad at all. Wu Ziqiao just wanted to clarify that he didn’t kill his wife. Afterward, if they still wanted him to live here, he really wouldn’t object.

The whole thing was still a mystery to Wu Ziqiao. He didn't have a newspaper, but he could imagine the headlines

CORPSE OF VOLUPTUOUS ASIAN FOUND HEADLESS,
SUSPECT HUSBAND UNDER ARREST.

Even the Taiwan newspapers would make this into a big story:

STUDY-ABROAD STUDENT KILLS WIFE

No, his student days were long over. They would say,

OVERSEAS CHINESE BUMPS OFF WIFE!
CHINESE KILLS WIFE!
TAIWANESE KILLS WIFE!
CHINESE AMERICAN KNOCKS OFF WIFE!
SCHOLAR SLAYS SPOUSE!

He liked the last one the best. After having suffered through all these years, he should be considered a scholar. Two years ago he was almost invited to attend the National Reconstruction Council.\fn{A note reads: *The National Reconstruction Council*, Guo Jian Hui, *is a meeting of overseas Chinese intellectuals and professionals who return to Taiwan to counsel the government on domestic policy*.} That's it. "Scholar Slays Spouse"—that should be the headline.

Pity that the news broadcasts had it all wrong. He hadn't done it. The fact that the police had taken away his diary left him defenseless. He wished he had burned it a long time ago, but burning it would necessarily have helped any. Helen must have told Bill early on that her husband had come up with 108 ways to kill her. Didn't she realize that if someone could come up with 108 ways to kill his wife, he must have some talent, so why would he bother to kill her?

He hadn't killed his wife, but still his wife had died because of him. Whoever set hi up must have read his diary or at least have known that they weren't getting along. Who would want to frame him? Wu Ziqiao thought it through over and over. He didn't have any enemies. Perhaps Bill wanted to get rid of him, but he wouldn't take it this far. In the company, he was a low-level employee; there were people who picked on him, but he certainly didn't get the opportunity to pick on anybody himself. Maybe the companies whose accounts he'd audited were unhappy with him, but that was business; they wouldn't take it out on his family.

Wu Ziqiao thought for a long time and couldn't help but admit to himself that there wasn't anyone who would kill Helen just to set him up. In that case, could it be that it was Helen's enemies who had killed her? Helen was blunt and outspoken. She was the only person in the company with enough nerve to yank the tiger's whiskers and yell at the bigwigs. The Westerners were all somewhat intimidated by her. But he didn't find it plausible that someone would kill just for this, either.

The most logical explanation was simply that burglars had killed her. But the police had taken him with them to comb her house, and nothing was missing., Besides, the corner's report said that she hadn't been raped, so neither greed nor lust could be established as motives.

So who could it be? Bill couldn't be completely eliminated as a suspect. Maybe he really had had something going with Helen, and they'd had a fight. He couldn't satisfy her demands, so why not kill her and frame Wu Ziqiao? If that was truly it, then this American was a real brute.

Of course, there was still the last potential killer, the possibility Wu Ziqiao least liked to consider, the unfortunate possibility that the real killer might in fact be who the police had determined it to be.

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"Your case isn't hopeless. At the very least, there's still a possibility for defense. However, you have to trust me completely and cooperate with me."

Wu Ziqiao hadn't liked this lawyer all along. He was a typical Jew, big nose, wire-thin lips, the very picture of some louse who wanted both his life and his money. When Bao Zhu selected this lawyer, Wu Ziqiao argued with

her, but Bao Zhu only said, “Your judgment is too subjective—you have biases against every kind of person. Here in New York, if you don’t get a Jewish lawyer, what kind of lawyer are you going to get? Would you rather get a Chinese lawyer?”

That one phrase was enough to shut him up; there was no way he was going to get a Chinese lawyer. At least this Mr. Cohen didn’t know who he was. As far as Cohen was concerned, Wu Ziqiao was just another yellow-skinned, slanty-eyed, slightly wacko Oriental. Even if Wu Ziqiao was sentenced to life imprisonment, he wouldn’t necessarily be interested. This Oriental would rather entrust his life to a Jew who was not willing to see him electrocuted, although he still might be a Jew who would nail him to a cross.

“You’ve got to cooperate with me. It isn’t a pretty situation—that diary …” Cohen wagged his head back and forth and clucked continuously. “Too bad. Too bad. I hate my wife, too, but I would never be stupid enough to write a diary about how to kill her. You know how I unwind?” Cohen lowered his voice and said, “Fishing! When I catch a big saltwater fish, I take the knife in mown hand, slice open its belly, and rip its guts. As I cut I say, ‘Paula, this knife is for you, did you hear me? Paula, this knife is for you!’ Ha ha!”

Cohen laughed aloud, and it caused Wu Ziqiao to think of that head nurse at the hospital with the weird sense of humor. These Westerners had all gone crazy, but instead, they thought *he* had gone crazy. What kind of world was he living in?

“I did not kill my wife. My diary cannot be used as evidence for homicide.”

“But it’s enough to explain your motives for doing so and your mood at the time.”

“I didn’t kill her!”

“The primary objective of our defense is to prove that on the afternoon of September 14, 1986, you went crazy for a short period of time—that is to say, had a temporary insanity—and so are unable to take responsibility for your actions.”

“I didn’t kill her!”

“I didn’t say you killed her. Although this is the crux of the matter, it is not the crux of our defense. The most important thing is to prove that sometime you can’t take responsibility for your actions.”

“I didn’t kill her, and I didn’t lose my sanity.” Wu Ziqiao continued, “How many times do I have to say it before you’ll believe me? On the afternoon of September 14, 1986, I went home, put my room in order, and then sat in my chair and fell fast asleep. I slept until evening.”

“Did anyone see you sleeping?”

“No.”

“In that case, how do you know you were sleeping?”

“Because … because when I woke up, it was already dark out. Besides, I remember the dreams I had.”

“What were they?”

Wu Ziqiao suddenly realized he’d slipped, but he couldn’t avoid going through with what he was saying. “My wife was calling me a loser. But this wasn’t the only dream, this was just the last dream. I’ve forgotten all the dreams I’d had before. You must have had the same experience, only remembering the last dream before you woke up.”

“Aha” Cohen said. “You dreamed of arguing with your wife, and when you woke up, it was already dark out. this doesn’t conflict with my defense at all. In fact, it perfectly supports my primary argument.”

“But I didn’t go crazy.”

“You don’t think you went crazy. But strictly according to what you said, you don’t even remember what dreams you had, so how could you remember what happened in your dreams?”

“I am not insane, and I did not kill my wife. Maybe I can’t present any strong evidence that I wasn’t there, but the opposition can’t present any evidence that I was there, either. Why don’t you make that the focus of your defense?”

Cohen fixed his gaze upon Wu Ziqiao like a hawk and after a while responded, “I considered it, but then decided that it wouldn’t work.”

“Why not?”

“Because although the opposition still can’t prove that you were there when your wife was killed, they can prove that you were at the scene of the crime on the day it occurred.”

“Nonsense! Of course I’ve been to my house before, but on the day it happened, I did not go to see Helen.”

“In that case, how do you explain the fact that the police found your diary at the scene of the crime?

How could that be?! Wu Ziqiao was dumbfounded. The green-covered diary had always been by his side. Hadn’t the police found the diary when they searched his room? Mr. Cohen seemed to sense his confusion, and he

continued, “You thought the police found the diary when they searched your apartment, didn’t you? That’s just it—that’s what they hoped you would think. That way, during the cross-examination in court, they could take you by surprise and ruin my defense. But the advantage of having asked a brilliant lawyer like me to defend you is that no one can deceive me. Nor the prosecution and not even you, ha, ha.”

“That’s not possible. The diary was clear in my room.” Wu Ziqiao mumbled to himself. “I’ve never taken it out. How could it have gotten to my wife’s? It’s completely impossible.”

“In this world, nothing’s impossible.” Mr. Cohen closed his briefcase and stood up, saying, “The reason god is willing to forgive man is because man doesn’t know what he’s doing. Relax, I’m getting more and more confident about this case. I’ll come again to see you tomorrow. In the meantime, just get some rest.”

*

Of course, Wu Ziqiao wasn’t able to rest. He could not believe his diary had grown wings and flown home. He remembered things quite clearly. That day in the restaurant Helen threw the diary back at him. he took the diary home, hid it in his wardrobe, and the next day he passed out in the street and was sent to the hospital. Before ehe came out of he hospital, no one knew where the diary was hidden.

Who had sent the diary to Helen’s? He couldn’t have done it himself, could he? Cohen had repeatedly insinuated that he wanted Wu Ziqiao to confess that he had temporarily lost his sanity. It couldn’t be that he had really gone crazy? Wu Ziqiao began to worry. He distinctly recalled that he had dreamed of Helen. Perhaps he hadn’t been dreaming? Perhaps he really had taken the diary and rushed over to Helen’s house. He had apologized for his mistakes again, but Helen still wouldn’t accept his repentance, and he, in a fit of anger, had killed his wife.

Ever since he had been arrested, Wu Ziqiao had managed to keep his cool, but he suddenly felt extremely frightened. He wanted to scream but was unable to make a sound. It was as if he wee possessed by a demon and could only lie paralyzed on the bed. No matter how he struggled, he was unable to stand up. His face was covered with tears, and although he was unable to emit a sound, he still repeated to himself over and over, “I really killed her! I really killed her!”

Everything was clear! The 108 ways to kill one’s wife were just a rehearsal for the tragedy. The unseen supernatural force caused him first to record all the ways to kill one’s wife, and in the end one was destined to be carried out. He though that he had been daydreaming, that they were fictitious stories, but actually he had been fated to be his wife’s executioner.

Poor Helen. Since it had happened, he had been calling for justice to be served. Even though Helen’s head and body had been separated, he had felt no pain or contrition. Now, he suddenly was overcome with remorse towards her. Helen!

Suddenly he was able to move his hands and feet again, as if the demon had loosened his bonds. Wu Ziqiao struggled up, kneeled in front of the bed, and prayed for his soul. He didn’t know how to pray; he just intoned again and again, “Helen, please forgive me. Helen, please forgive me.”

“Helen! You died such a horrible death, please for give me.”

He kept up this attitude of prayer until he fell asleep from exhaustion.

*

By the time court opened session, Wu Ziqiao had already agonized to the point where he hardly looked human anymore. When Bao Zhu saw how Wu Ziqiao had to be slowly led into the courtroom by the bailiffs. She couldn’t restrain herself from bursting out sobbing. Wu Ziqiao’s hair was all dried out, and his eyes had sunk into his head. He had the look of one who saw death as a release.

The cross-examination went smoothly, with no great highs or lows. It was only when the prosecution interrogated the Chinese specialist who had translated Wu Ziqiao’s diary that the defense attorney stood up several times to protest. Wu Ziqiao listened to the entire testimony without any expression on his face, as if he had completely lost hope.

When it came time for Wu Ziqiao to testify. Bao Zhu’s sobbing became too excessive, and she was taken out of the courtroom by her husband. Wu Ziqiao looked all around. In the entire courtroom there was no one he knew. Was it these people who would judge his crimes?

But he didn’t care about these people anymore. He knew he was only the puppet executioner of an unseen power. As he could be used, so could these people be used; they were all fate’s straw dogs. Wu Ziqiao answered the prosecution’s questions according to Cohen’s instructions. He didn’t believe that Cohen’s ingenious plan could save hi, but this was no longer something he was concerned about. Even if the law didn’t punish hi, he still wouldn’t be able to absolve himself. Who had told him to go out and kill his wife?”

Wu Ziqiao thought of rugged Helen, who used to gallop around the basketball court. At that time she was something to see, able to sink baskets from midcourt with ease. She ran back and forth on the basketball court, and he took his camera and ran back and forth along the sidelines, the good husband following his wife wherever she performed.\fn{A note reads: *This is a reversal of the usual expression*, "The good wife following her husband wherever he performs."} Their golden years were when they had just been married and were living in Kaohsiung. She got up early to go running, and he followed behind on a bicycle, while she hollered, "Wu Ziqiao, hurry up! I'm running and you're riding, and still you can't catch up. What do you think you're doing?"

She had always liked to shout, but after leaving Taiwan, the quality of her yelling had gradually changed from an intimate tone to one of scorn. Was it she who had changed? Or was it he? If he had known it would turn out like this, he would never have come to America.

Wu Ziqiao looked around again. There were quite a few people in the court—who knew what rock they had all crawled out from under? Perhaps some were reporters, perhaps some had come purely to see the excitement. Helen's boss, Bill, sat primly and properly in the third row. In the last row there was a woman shrouded in a black veil; Wu Ziqiao couldn't see her face clearly. It was almost as if she were a close acquaintance of his, but it also seemed as is she were a stranger. He didn't think he had seen her earlier. Why had she suddenly appeared? Why was she wearing a veil? Why?

He mentally struggled with this question and almost didn't hear the prosecuting attorney's question.

"Mr. Wu, please pay attention. What is this notebook?"

In his hand, the lawyer held up the green-covered notebook that was the source of his misfortune. It really was strange. He had clearly hid it in his wardrobe—how had it gotten to Helen's room?

"My diary."

"Why do you keep a diary?"

"When I can't sleep at night or I'm feeling depressed, it's my custom to get up and write in my diary."

"You say that this is your custom. However, previously, you didn't have this custom, right?"

"right."

"When did you acquire this new habit?"

"About a year ago, on a night with a full moon."

"Mr. Wu, can you tell me what the contents of the diary are?"

Was it he who had brought over the "flying diary"?

"The contents of the diary are all fictitious stories."

"What kind of stories?"

"Stories about how to kill one's wife."

"Mr. Wu, when most people keep a diary they record actual events, but you say your diary is all fictitious stories. Is there such a thing as a fictitious diary?"

"Perhaps it shouldn't be called a diary. It's the scattered thoughts that I had every day and casually wrote down. You could call it a novel, a novel written for myself to read."

"Regardless of whether it was writing a diary or writing a novel, you certainly had an objective, didn't you? What was your objective?"

"I just answered that. If I couldn't sleep well at night or was in a bad mood, I wrote in my diary."

"Mr. Wu, please read this section of your diary." Wu Ziqiao read the selection the lawyer pointed out. He had never read Chinese in front of foreigners before, and it came out very awkwardly.

> March 15. Uxoricide method number 68. Put a leather bag on top of the wife's head to catch the blood, and in one swift move cut off the head.\fn{A note reads: *This is another reference to the Curly Bearded Hero, in which one character carries the head of an adversary in a leather bag. In the story, the man whose head it was, was "unrivalled throughout the empire for mean ingratitude," according to his killer, who was a hero and a model of the Confucian virtue of yielding*.} Afterward, splash on some hydrochloric acid, and in no time the head will have dissolved into a clear liquid. The leftover corpse won't bleed a drop.

"Mr. Wu, of course we don't understand with you reading in Chinese, but fortunately, just now Mr. Meier translated for us. Now, please explain for us, in your own words, what is the meaning of the passage you jest read?"

"It doesn't mean anything. As I've already said, the whole diary is only fictitious stories. This story comes from a Chines tale of knight-errantry …"

"Mr. Wu, I am not the least bit interested I Chinese tales of knight-errantry. I would just like you to explain in simple terms the sixty-eighth method you wrote for killing one's wife."

"It's just to cut off the head, and then to use a chemical to dissolve it. This is a tale of knight-errantry …"

"Your honor!" the prosecuting lawyer addressed the judge. "From this it can be seen that the accused had premeditation from early on, and this sixty-eighth method of killing one's wife is the evidence."

"Objection!" Wu Ziqiao's lawyer, Cohen, immediately stood up and shouted. "It remains to be proven that the defendant killed anyone. The prosecution is trying to distort the defendant's testimony."

"Objection sustained." The judge went on. "Continue the cross-examination."

"Mr. Wu, why did you want to cut off your wife's head?"

"Objection!" Wu Ziqiao's lawyer shouted again.

"All right, let me rephrase the question. In your diary, or novel, or god-damned-who-knows-whatever-the-hell-its-called, why did you want to cut off the wife's head?"

Why? Why would the killer use this cruel and heartless method? Why was it that the police had never found the head? Why?

"Mr. Wu, please pay attention and answer my question."

Why couldn't they find the head? Why?

"Ziqiao Wu," the judge said to him, "you have to answer this question honestly."

Who was that woman shrouded in the veil sitting in the back row? Unless …

"Ziqiao Wu!"

"I didn't kill my wife, I didn't kill anybody! The person who died wasn't my wife Helen Hu, and that's why you can't find her head. This is an old Chinese story—no, two stories. The old switcheroo—*Using a Plum to Replace the Peach*, and *Switching a Cat for the Crown Prince*.\fn{A note reads: *These expressions, known in Chinese as* Li Dai Tao Jiang *and* Li Mao Huan Tai Zi, *are both representatives of stories in which one thing is replaced with another*. Using a Plum to Replace the Peach *is from a poem in the record of* Music from the Sung Records, *describing how a worm who was going to eat the roots of a peace tree ate the roots of a plum tree instead; it is a reference to the closeness that should exist between brothers*. Switching a cat for the Crown Prince *is a Yuan dynasty* (1279-1368) *Judge Bao detective story in which two rival queens in the Sung dynasty* (960-1279) *compete to have the first male heir, and one switches the other's boy with a cat to humiliate her and gain status*.} If you don't understand, I'll explain it for you. The dead person isn't my wife at all. She's still alive and living well, and she may be enjoying this farce as we speak. She arranged the corpse. She arranged to have the diary placed right next to it as well. She's fooled you all."

Wu Ziqiao stood up excitedly. The prosecuting lawyer looked completely dumbfounded and helpless. Wu Ziqiao's lawyer, however, slowly sat down, and his mouth shifted into a satisfied smile.

"I didn't kill anyone! The deceased is not my wife!"

"Your honor," the prosecution attorney said to the judge, "what's going on today? Are we investigating a murder case or taking creative writing class?"

"Ziqiao Wu, I order you to sit down immediately!" the judge commanded. "If you lose control of yourself again, I'll have to instruct the bailiffs to restrain you."

"I've got it, I've got it all figured out! The person who died simply isn't her. This is called *The Golden Cicada*\fn{A note reads: *Personified later by a character in* The Journey to the West, the cicada is originally referred to in a poem by Guan Hanqing in the Yuan dynasty.} *Sheds its Exoskeleton* plan. If you don't understand, I can explain. …"

"Mr. Wu, we're not as dumb as you think," the prosecuting attorney said. "You say the dead person isn't your wife. In that case, who is she?"

"I don't know, but it's not Helen Hu."

"This is America, it's not China. Would it be that easy to find an Asian woman who was tall and built completely alike to take her place?"

"Perhaps some hospital just happened to have the corpse of an Oriental woman who died of an illness. You can buy corpses. …"

"Weaving stories again! We're sick of hearing your stories. Mr. Wu, the court deputies accompanied you to examine the corpse, and you didn't have any objections then. Wouldn't you notice any special marks on your wife's body? Mr. Wu, if you're telling the truth, can you tell us of any defining ark on your wife's body to prove that the corpse isn't her?"

Wu Ziqiao was speechless. .He thought carefully but couldn't come up with any type of mark on Helen's body. It had been too long since they had been together; all his recollections of her seemed hazy. He thought a good while, but without any result, and was left completely shamed. The prosecuting attorney looked at him scornfully.

The jury was listening, but there was nothing he could say. He noticed that the woman with the veiled face had already walked to the entrance. Although he couldn't see her face, he was still able to perceive the air of supreme desolation emanating from her eyes. The woman in the veil! Wu Ziqiao jumped up again.

"It's her! Don't let her get away—she's Helen Hu, my wife. Somebody stop her, don't let her get away!"

He wanted to leave the witness stand, but the bailiff immediately grabbed him from behind and held him fast. The judge pointed at him and started to bawl him out, the prosecuting attorney was yelling and his own lawyer stood up and shouted as well. By the time all the clamor had subsided, the woman was already gone.

*

"A brilliant performance, even better than I had expected," Cohen said smiling. "Who would have thought you'd comer up with a trick like that? Now no one can doubt that you're schizophrenic and have a tendency to lose your sanity temporarily on occasion."

Wu Ziqiao had no reply. His hands had been cuffed, and he was in despair. The woman with the veiled face … it must have been Helen, she looked too familiar.

"Don't be disappointed," said his lawyer, patting his shoulder. "We've won. They can't establish the murder charge against you. At most, you'll get fifteen years. Of course, you'll be sent to an asylum to be treated, but if everything goes well, in a few years you'll get parole and regain your freedom.

"I'm not crazy, and I don't want to go to an asylum."

"It's still a lot better than being put away for life," said Cohen. "Mr. Wu, it's been my honor to work with you."

She didn't die, Wu Ziqiao thought to himself. Not only didn't she die, she still had the gall to come back and attend her own murder trial. This was just like Helen. Whenever the women's basketball team made trouble, Helen was always in the lead. There had never been anyone who could control heer no-fear-of-heaven-no-fear-of-hell attitude. Even the coach gave her some free reign. Wu Ziqiao had spent a lot of his energy courting her; he'd labored despecially hard <to> scrape up enough money to buy a motorcycle. There were only a few in all of Kaohsiung at the time. Cruising around town, darting amid the safflower trees aflame with blooming red flowers, was like flying in heaven.

"Mr. Wu, you definitely have creative talent. Once you're out of the cuckoo's nest, you should give up your boring job as an accountant and take up a new profession."

She wasn't dead. Wu Ziqiao said to the lawyer, "I want to appeal to a higher court. I'm innocent."

"Save it," Eichmann answered him. "No one will believe you."

"You don't believe me?"

"I believe," he said, "I believe that you *think* you didn't kill your wife. As to what actually happened, only your wife knows."

Wu Ziqiao thought there was some truth to that and said, "We can summon her to appear in court to give testimony."

Eichmann looked at him with a surprised expression and waited a while before responding.

"I didn't want to admit it all along, but I can't avoid saying it anymore: you need to go to any asylum. You're not feigning insanity, you're really insane."

But Wu Ziqiao knew he wasn't insane. Sometimes he was still extremely worried that he might have actually killed his wife in a fit of insanity, and at these times he would kneel and pray with an inexpressible feeling of grief. Most of the time, though, he believed that Helen hadn't died, that this was al her plot, and that he was completely innocent. She was a woman who could never be killed by a man. Still, he didn't hold a grudge toward Helen. At the end of their life together as husband and wife, the one who wasn't crazy had been sent to an asylum, and the one who hadn't died had been forced to live incognito, and this was tragic enough in itself. He would often think of the air of despondency in the eyes of the veiled woman. He knew he would never see Helen again. It wasn't until that last glance in the courtroom that she really departed from the world of the living.

*

Upon entering the sanitarium, Wu Ziqiao's behavior was excellent, and he became the model patient for the entire clinic. Every two months, Bao Zhu would come to see him and bring canned food and beef jerky. She never brought the children, to spare them from knowing that they had a crazy uncle. On days when Bao Zhu came to visit hi, Wu Ziqiao was always waiting for her in one of the iron chairs out on the patio, playing with his camera and humming a tune. …

Spring's flowers,
How fragrant they are!

Autumn's moon,
How bright it is!
I in my youth,
How happy I am!
Beautiful she,
What's happened to her?

The moral of this story is,

The man who fears his wife is a real husband, the man who kills his wife is a barbarian.

Another moral of this story is,

If you're really set on killing your wife, *don't* keep a diary.

1945

83.71 Just Let Them Not Know\fn{by Hsiao Feng aka Chang Hsiao-feng (c.1945?-)} Kiangsu Province, China (F) 5

"Have patience, gentle friends; I must not read it:
It is not meet you know how Caesar loved you.
And, being men, hearing the will of Caesar,
It will inflame you, it will make you mad.
'Tis good you know not that you are his heirs;
For if you should, O what would come of it?"\fn{The author quotes, for the purposes of the short story, only the underscored words of the above complete speech by Marc Antony to a Roman crowd demanding to know the text of the last will and testament of Julius Caesar, of whose assassination in 44BC Antony was himself one of the leading conspirators. It occurs as part of the play *Julius Caesar* by William Shakespeare (Act III, scene ii).}

I went alone to the airport to meet my husband who was returning from visiting refugee camps in Thailand.

"I bought this for you." As soon as we had gotten into the car he took out a small package from his old canvas bag. "It's a silver piece made by the Miao people, somewhat tarnished, very inexpensive. The moment I saw it, I knew you would like it."

I have known him for twenty-two years, ever since my freshman year. He always talked a blue streak.

"The handicrafts of the Miao people are quite unique. There are a lot of them among the refugees. They are really pitiful. Not too long ago, they collectively rebelled against tyranny. When the communists could not subdue them they used poison gas. Tens of thousands died, all over the mountainside and in the fields …"

Suddenly this tarnished piece of old silver felt very cold in my hands. In my elementary school days I learned the names of the six peoples of our country, the Han, the Manchu, the Mongolian, the Muhammedan, the Tibetan, and the Miao, and I had always simply believed that the Miao were one of us. I had never met a Miao, but surely the books could not be wrong. I believed in them implicitly just as I believed in the songs which described our country with such words as "majestic mountains beautiful rivers, over-abundance of natural resources."\fn{A note reads: *Lines from the National Flag Song*. [It is important to realize that this story is written by a Chinese of Nationalist persuasion; according to Nationalist Chinese thinking, China includes only a single "Chung-hua nation" (*Chung-hua min-tsu*) subdivided into various "stocks" of common blood, such as Mongols and Tibetans. The Communists, on the other hand, have sought to apply a nationality policy based on soviet practice, based on the definition of a nation as "a historically evolved, stable community of language, territory, economic life, and psychological makeup manifested in a community of culture," and on this basis China is a state presently inhabited by 52 diverse nationalities, of which the Han constitute approximately 92% of the total. The Miao people (who numbered about 2.5 million in 1953) are concentrated in Kweichiow province, but were also to be found in Hunan, Kwangtung, Kwangsi, Yunnan and Szechwan provinces.]} The songs could not be wrong..

Why did it have to be just as we were speeding along the super highway in an air-conditioned car that my hands came into .contact for the first time with a piece of Miao silver handicraft which had brought with it such a heart-breaking story?

"There was a girl from Vietnam. She was an overseas Chinese, about twenty." He began to tell me the story. "She had been on the run for over ten years, probably ever since she learned to walk. Her only experience in life was that of a refugee on the run. I asked her a loaded question, 'Why do you people keep running? The worst that could happen would be death, and to be forever on the run is a miserable way to live. Why do you keep running?' She laughed and said, 'Death? Do you think that the communists would be so good as to let us die? Death in itself is not to be feared, but they lock you up, starve you, beat you, humiliate you, and they instill so much fear in you every minute of the day that you wish you were dead. At one time we were engaged in hard labor. If we failed to

collect our daily quota of manure which was to be used as fertilizer, we would not be allowed to eat, and the girls would be subject to rape. You must be from Taiwan. People from Taiwan know the least about the communists.'

"There was this other girl," he continued, "She actually chanced upon her lost family in the refugee camp—"

"Then they were able to have a happy reunion." I finally got a word in.

"No, they went their separate ways. Half of them went to Canada, half to France. They said that in these troubled times a family mustn't stay together. For if something should happen they would all perish, and the family line would end there. Better to separate a family; as long as one member is alive, the family lives on "

I hastily turned my head aside. In the summer afternoon the colorful yellow of the flowering vines clambering over the sloping embankment along the side of the road flew past us like thousands of speeding arrows.

When we got home our little boy and little girl were searching in the refrigerator for cocoa ice. As soon as they saw their daddy they asked him for toys.

"Don't be ridiculous, how can there be toys for sale in refugee camps?"

"There are children in refugee camps too." The little girl was very righteous about it.

"No wonder that girl said that in all the world, the people in Taiwan know the least about communists." My husband heaved a big sigh.

I turned around and saw that the children were engaged in a joint venture of digging into the cocoa ice with spoons, smearing their faces until they looked like the painted faces in Chinese operas. Do I want to let them know that in the forests in the southwestern mountain region tens of thousands of dead bodies of the Miao people were rotting away and covered with maggots? Did I want to let them know that in one group of refugees a hapless mother finally had to submit helplessly to public demand and strangle her child so that his ceaseless crying would not bring retribution upon all of them? Tonight at bedtime would I have the heart to repeat the story about green mountains covered with tens of thousands of dead bodies killed by poison gas?

"Just let them not know about it!" I said mournfully to myself.

*

One night, in a big hall in Chicago, in Chinatown, we were presenting a show, over the smell of haddock and crabs, and over the sounds of *Hwang Mei* melodies and the music of *Pi Pa* instruments. Afterwards, a dried-up little middle-aged man came over and shook my hand and said, "It has been thirty years. I attended many such evening events on mainland China. They all had the smell of gunpowder. Yours is different, just listening to you I know there is love."

Just then my son walked by. I stopped him and told him, "Say hello to 'Uncle Chu.'" He did. Our homeland lies ten thousand *li* away, and it has been thirty years since we left. Life is like a vast misty sea, and that night two boats stopped for a while to exchange greetings. It did not matter if we came from the same province, it only mattered that we were of the same *people.* Addressing him as "Uncle Chu" was only an expression of kinship and compassion. I told my son, "Uncle Chu just came from Peking. This is his first day in Chicago." My son opened his eyes wide as bells. I smiled and waved him away to get us a cup of tea. In a lifetime's journey of one hundred years every stop is a way station. Thirty years of worries, and half a lifetime of suffering were clearly etched on his face, stroke by stroke, telling a story as true as the records of any history books. Did I want to read it to my children? No. Just call him Uncle Chu and let it go at that; tomorrow will find us at far ends of the world. As to the disastrous thirty years, let's just not let the children know too much about them!

*

One day as we were leaving the outskirts of New York City my friend Hsu suddenly said to me, pointing to a road off the highway:

"A friend of mine lives around there. He brought his mother out of China two years ago. To his surprise, the old lady sang the praises of Mao Tse-tung day in and day out. My friend was curious. Why was she keeping it up even in America? They argued a number of times and all to no avail. He had no choice but to leave her be. What was even stranger was that half a year later all of a sudden she started to curse Mao Tse-tung using the most awful language. My friend was stunned. She then explained, 'When I first came I of course did not dare to curse him. How was I to know if you were on his side or not? I tested you for half a year. Now I know you are not, therefore I now dare to curse him.'"

Here was a story of a mother who dared not trust her own son, and it concerned two people from a country which prided itself on five thousand years of filial traditions. To whom could I tell such a story? The young ears of today have only been exposed to the soft music of guitars. To whom could I tell such a story? On Wall Street the stocks plunge. How many millions of Lennon's gold records have been sold? Was Mrs. Ford's face-lift a success? On the day Vietnam fell, there was a picture of President Ford at an airport holding a young refugee who

had been air-lifted over. The picture was very effective. Who would be interested in listening to a colossal tragedy that would continue on and on for one billion acts? They don't want to know, so just let them not know!

*

My friend Hsu later went back to China. On his way out of the country, as soon as he left Canton and reached Hong Kong, he became ill.

"How can anybody not become ill?" he said. "I have been traveling for a month. Wherever I went, whenever 1 met with old friends we talked about their sufferings and grievances of the last thirty years, and we cried. How can anyone not be ill from crying for a full month?"

Hsu later came across a friend whom he had helped in his moments of need. The friend was very poor, and he had no personal belongings of any kind, yet he wanted desperately to give my friend something as a token of his gratitude. Finally he found on old personal seal of his and handed it over to Hsu, with embarrassed hesitancy, saying,

"The stone is a good one. Rub my name off, and you can use it again. In any event I have no use for it."

Hsu could not bring himself to accept it, yet if he refused it would certainly hurt his friend's feelings.

"How can I ever rub my friend's name off?" in a seafood restaurant on Hsi-ning South Road, Hsu asked with great sadness in his voice.

Actually the name and the life of his friend had been rubbed off the record long ago. The lives and dignity of a billion people have all been erased, so what could this little piece of jade matter?

But, to whom could I tell a story like this? So just let the world not know about it!

*

The fact was that the people on that scorched land were not the only unlucky ones. Haven't we, who lived on this evergreen island, also had our share of grief? When I was in college I often visited an old professor. His so-called home was no more than half a room leaning against the side of a hill, and it served as his bedroom, living room, dining room and study. On the wall was a hand-painted photograph of his beautiful wife gazing sadly down at him in deep melancholy. It was as if she were frozen in time by the hand of magic, and year after year her gentle eyes always held a slightly startled look, and her thick black braid was always hanging down over her shoulder, lying against her breast.

"Well, she couldn't let go," said the professor with a sigh. "I told her to leave; I told her to. She said she would as soon as she sold the harvest of grain. The price of grain was falling, and she could not bring herself to sell. It was the harvest from our own land. She wrote that as soon as the price went back up, even a little, she would sell and leave. Then it was too late; she could not leave. Now …"

Close the *Book of Changes.* How can one figure out the success and failure of a life time? How can one predict the impending calamities of the world?

"It is said that women's hair can be classified into two types, the cottony type and the silky type. My wife's is the silky type …"

She, with her silky hair, looked down from the wall. How can one climb up to reach her? The low wall which was on the side of a hill was a sheer precipice. To whom can I tell this story? Who would want to hear the story of half of an old room leaning against the side of a hill, dark and damp and smelling of mildew? Let's not talk about it. Let the people who do not know about it remain unknowing.

*

"That year when we escaped to the city of Chengchiang and reached the Gold Mountain Temple," my friend Hwang Yi-kung told us, "both my brother and I became ill. My brother died. My mother held me against her bosom; waiting, not knowing whether or not I too would die."

I was very surprised to hear the story. Wasn't the Gold Mountain Temple the one in the opera *White Snake*? The Temple should be sitting majestically at a grand scenic spot, glittering in gold and resounding with the beat of drums and bells. And then, at the beat of a drum the monk Fa-hai in his red and gold Buddhist robe would walk out in all his priestly dignity. And when he waved his magic urn all the demons and goblins would be trapped, and there would be no escape for any of them …

But in that particular year at the Gold Mountain Temple there was a women refugee on the run, her hair tangled and disheveled, her face sad. At her feet lay the body of a dead child and in her arms that of one near death. At such a time and place, what would the Monk Fa-hai, known for his ability to subdue demons and goblins, say?

Did I want to tell this story? No. Let it be blown away quietly with the wind without leaving any trace. Let the people not know about it.

*

One winter, in the deep of the night, I was sitting under a lone light to write a lyric for my friend Chiang Cheng-tao in Paris. He was an impetuous and impatient man. He was likely to call from Paris in the middle of the night to press me.

I sat up straight in my chair. I had already thought of a topic: Lao Wang, the steamed-bread vendor, receives a letter.

It wasn't that I had nothing to say. On the contrary, wild waves of thoughts were surfacing, and I did not know how to control them. I did not know how to put them down on paper, line after line according to the prescribed rules of rhyme and rhythm. I did not know a bread vendor called Lao Wang, yet I felt as if I had known him for many decades. He often rode around on an old bicycle and announced his wares in a broken voice much like the sound made by his old bicycle.

"*Paotze* … *Mantao* … *Tousha Pao* …"\fn{A note reads: Paotze *is steamed bread with meat filling*. Mantou *is plain steamed bread*. Toushapao *is filled with a sweet red bean paste*.}

As a rule, they were northerners with dark complexions, strong and solidly built, but with unhappy eyes. They usually sold plain bread, but to cater to public taste they also sold bread with sweet fillings. In the twilight hours of the day, in the alleys, in the fading light of dusk, in every city big and small, their silhouettes from behind were like identical black papercuts.

Supposing, one day while he was kneading dough, a fellow provincial brought him a letter, dirty and faded from much handling. He opened the letter. The message was simple and devastating: Mother died in 1970 …

I did not know a Lao Wang, but I knew that the story was true. I shed copious tears for Lao Wang in the deep of the night. I felt his anger and his loss. How can this be the way of heaven? How can it be!

Then I saw him, Lao Wang, out there in the dusty mist in the evening hours, his face full of grief. I saw him clearly, lifting his hand, still covered with dough, to wipe the tears from his face … my thoughts started to fall in place; line after line I wrote:

Lao Wang the bread vendor received a letter
Eight thousand *li* away, ah! his old mother had passed away
He kneaded and kneaded. Ah! Kneaded and kneaded again
Placing the letter into his apron pocket
Been dead these ten years, ah!
No wonder she didn't answer his calls in his dreams
The freshly steamed bread, oh *niang*,\fn{A note reads: *An appellation for mother in certain parts of China*.} taste one while it's hot
How many have I sold these past years I've forgot
Why is it I cannot place one in your palm?

Early the next morning I called the children to me and read them my lyric.

"Do you know what was in the letter Lao Wang received?"

"We know," they answered in the same manner as they would a math question; their faces perfectly tranquil. "His mother died."

Then they hurried away in search of their skates. It was a rare crisp cold day. They wanted to go downstairs to the skating rink in the park.

Do I want to tell them that Lao Wang's mother had gone through thirty years of hell on earth? Do I want to describe to them how she felt as she stood by the village gate, waiting and hoping? Do I want to tell them that for a third of a century, tens of thousands of sons and daughters have been waiting for this shattering moment, waiting like criminals awaiting arrest? No, let their laughter ring like a bell; let them run down the stairs to join their friends in the park.

*

Wasn't I, too, as ignorant as they in my younger days? What was I doing when the whole country fell with a thud? I was reading *Alice in Wonderland.* I was ingratiating myself with my third uncle, fanning him, bringing him tea, begging him to tell me the story of the Monkey King. Chapter after chapter, over many mountains and across numerous rivers, endless numbers of goblins and demons and evil spirits were waiting to devour the priest. But he walked across those numerous mountains and endless numbers of rivers, step by step, with only one thought in mind, to get the *Sutra* …\fn{The holy scriptures; of Buddhism, in this case.}

It's been many years, and I have forgotten a lot, but one thing I remember, and that is on rainy days the rice fields would be full of brownish colored snails. I would take a container and go down to the fields to pick them up

with enthusiasm. After gathering a certain number of them I would bring them to A-po, an old farmer next door. His wife would crack them and feed them to the ducks.

Last year my third uncle died of a heart attack. I went post haste to Keelung to pay my last respects before the coffin was nailed shut. I was still grateful for the many stories he told us on those summer nights long ago, stories about the priest, the Monkey King and the Pig. As the stories unfolded, tiny little me was able to visualize Priest Tang crossing the great desert, his eyes steadily fixed towards the west, while fire-flies danced around me.

A few books were placed on my third uncle's chest. The one on top was *Tso Chuan,* with a red pencil in its fold. They said he was reading it the day he died. I almost wanted to go over and shake him, asking him to sit up and tell me another episode from the book *The Romance of the Eastern Chou.*

In those days I was not aware of the tragedy hanging over all of us and was therefore able to enjoy a peaceful childhood. Those were the days when I stared at the waves created by the rice stalks in the fields, and those were the days when I wore potato leaves as earrings and when I dreamed that I was the Monkey King. Now thirty years had gone by. The soft breeze, the bright moon, can't they too bring us an understanding of *tao,* the truth? Isn't there magic in the fragrance of flowers and in the singing of the birds too? The book *Journey to the West,* the aroma of the steaming rice fields under the summer sun, and every other blessing of my childhood, each in its own way, can show me the way of the Chinese people. If I were unaware of the ten long years of nightmare, and the wide cataclysmic sweep of events which took place in the ghastly land, well, it was just as well that I was unaware of it at the time.

Let us also look upon this generation of children with indulgence and love. Let their laughter make up for their grandfathers' blood and tears and their fathers' sweat and toil. As to the thirty-two tragic years from the annals of five thousand years, and the great tragedy which took place on a huge stage measuring eleven million square kilometers, let us wait until they grow up before telling them about it! How I wish there were a Diviner of Dreams in this world, his body as large as a mountain and his ears as deep as the valleys. Only thus would he be able to absorb the innumerable, untold bone-chilling tales of the past thirty-two years. Only he can tell us why it is that this nightmare has bound and fettered us so tightly that even when it causes us to sweat with fear at midnights we still cannot fully awaken.

To the young children I want to give my blessings and my trust, always. In the *Old Testament,* King David fought to the east and to the west with only one thought in mind: to build a place for God. But God rejected him. Instead, He picked his son, Solomon, a child who grew up in peace and happiness. In the Chinese operas and in novels about knights-errant, in the end the ones who have final control of a situation are always the fair-faced scholars who are at peace with the world, not the muscle-flexing warriors with dark angry beards. Those who are able to reach perfection in the skill of martial arts are not the weary dust-covered travelers, but the heroic youths who are pure in heart.

Let them not know. Let them hold their guitars in their arms and sing their campus songs! Let them go climb the Tapachien Mountain. Let them lie under the sun on the grass in their jeans and count the floating clouds. Youth has no responsibility, just let happiness be their responsibility! How many among the world's surging population of forty-two hundred million are really lucky? One more lucky person in the world means one less unhappy being. Isn't this the blessing of this generation? As to politics, doctrines and tenets, we have the right not to understand them. We only need to understand one thing, that there must be a tomorrow for us and our children!
If, because they are too young, they do not comprehend the fact that the communists brought a great disaster to this world, and if their eyes do not see the great big gaping wound left in human history, worse than any caused by the collapse of mountains, or by the roaring of the angry seas, or by earthquakes, or drought, or famine, then let them be temporarily unaware of it. Did the young Liu Hsiu, first Emperor of the Later Han Dynasty, know that he was to shoulder such an awful load of responsibility? And before David killed Goliath he was merely a red-cheeked village boy who always carried a sling shot in his little hand.

The girl in the refugee camp was right when she laughed coldly and said, "You people! What do you know about communism?"

True, none of us really know. But one thing we do know. There will be a day when our children will know nothing about communism. There will be a day when a child will show his father the word "communism" in his book and want to know what the word means. The answer he gets will be, "I am not sure. Look it up in the dictionary yourself. I do know that it was a strange and horrible and ridiculous thing."

*

I put on the silver necklace, inlaid with blue porcelain, made by the Miao people, letting it hang near my heart. Suddenly this thing on my chest felt very heavy. It represented thousands of people whom I had never met, but

whose voices seemed to be ringing in my ears. It represented what our geography books referred to as the beautiful mountain peaks in the southwest, and it also represented the thousands of bodies of the murdered Miao. All of a sudden I said to myself:

"Let me know! Tell me the sorrowful tales. Tell me more! I am an adult now, and I have a strong heart. I can listen to the saddest of tales. I have powerful shoulders; I can carry any burden of grief. I have salty tears to shed for all those who have run dry. Let me know! With the knowledge I gain today let me be allowed to earn a right of ignorance for future generations. Let's spare our children for millions of years to come the knowledge of this tragedy."

188.65 Not A Single Day Of Peace I\fn{by Yan Huili (c.1945-)} Shanghai?, China (F) 1

My husband, Zhang Xianliang, is a talented, upright, and honest man. Since 1978 he has suffered constant political and economic persecution. The first time he went to jail, in August 1983, he wasn't released undl1987.

My daughter, Zhang Bing, and I have suffered as well. When she grnduated from college in the early 1990s she couldn't get a decent job because of her father's political problems.

After my husband was released from prison in 1987, things were very difficult economically. He had no work unit and no regular work, so we had no economic security.

Life was also difficult for us socially. Of the eight families we share a doorway with, four of them were always there to watch us. For years now we have been fighting all the time. Recently one of them even cut my hand with a knife. Our phone is tapped 24 hours a day.

On June 3, 1993, my husband was taken into custody again and is currently at the Shanghai No.3 Re-education Through Labor Farm in Qingpu. He was denied water for the first three days of his detention while the guards maliciously ate watermelon in front of him. He went on a hunger strike in protest At that point, I didn't even know where he was.

Financially, things are worse than before. I only get 200 *yuan* a month from my work unit, but the long trip to see my husband, which I make once a month, costs a total of 100 *yuan.* I also must take medicine daily for my poor health.

On June 3, 1994, the police took me to Qingpu, claiming that they were taking me to see my husband at his prison there. Instead, they took me to the Qingpu Guesthouse. They were worried that I would cause trouble during the fifth anniversary of the June Fourth 1989 Massacre, so they kept me there until June 5. They treated me fine, but if I hadn't just happened to have enough medicine with me, it could have been very dangerous.

Personally, this has all been very difficult for me. I haven't had a peaceful day since 1978. I have spent all my energy on this. Many friends and relatives have cut off contact with us.

But I am not afraid I am very strong-willed and I don't care if I am arrested. I support my husband and I believe he is right. I've seen a lot of foreign reporters and have asked them to my home. I don't care. My husband, daughter and I have done nothing wrong.

191.99 Excerpt from **Confessions: An Innocent Life In Communist China**\fn{by Kang Zhengguo (c.1945-)}
Xi'an, Shanxi Province, China (M) 12

1

One day in the early summer of 1949 Nanny bundled up all her silver jewelry in a piece of blue homespun, grabbed me by the hand, and fled with me out of the Dongguo Gate of Xi'an.

Much later I learned that that had been the day of Xi'an's Liberation. "Liberation" was a brand-new word at the time, and I was only five years old, too young to grasp its full meaning. All I remember is that Nanny had been discussing the news with everybody for days: the Nationalist troops were retreating in defeat, and the Communist Eighth Route Army was coming. Nobody could explain exactly what this "army of bumpkins" was, but I could sense the worry in people's faces and tones of voice.

The idea of an army, any army, struck terror into Nanny's heart. Her nervousness led me to fear that they were going to sack the city as soon as they arrived. All she had in the world was this bundle of jewelry from her trousseau. Over and over again she took out her silver bracelets, hairpins, and necklaces and then wrapped them up again, as if this would protect them from the marauding hillbillies.

Outside the city gate there was a fork in the country road. One way led south, to Nanny's in-laws' house, and the other side led north, to her parents'. She had told me her story many times. Her firstborn daughter had died of umbilical tetanus in the year that I was born. Before her milk could dry up, she had hurried off into the city, where she had found a job as my wet nurse. She hated her simpleminded husband and never wanted to go back to her inlaws' house again.

She took me with her to visit her parents on holidays, so I could reel off the names of all the villages along the road as fluently as any bus conductor. I remembered where there was a cemetery or temple and where you could buy chilled tea. On past occasions there had been almost nobody on the road, and the rural scenery had been dull, but this time I saw something different: refugees streaming in both directions, in and out of the city, and bare-chested deserters from the retreating Nationalist Army with red welts on their shoulders from carrying stretchers. I heard the muffled booming of cannons in the distance, and the loud explosion of the great Chan River Bridge being destroyed by the retreating Nationalists. People were lugging all kinds of bundles in their hands, on their shoulders, on carrying poles, and in carts. They were afraid that their personal property would be seized by the passing troops. They feared the retreating army, but they feared the approaching one even more.

We didn't see any armies along the way. But we did see people looting a Nationalist Army base near the road. As soon as the troops evacuated the buildings, a mob surged in and tore them up, making off with wooden beams and sacks of flour, while a group of empty-handed onlookers egged one another on, shouting,

"Go for it! Let's get some loot while we can!"

That afternoon we arrived at Nanny's parents' house, a deep, dark earthen cave with a cracked, sooty ceiling, which I was afraid would collapse on us. As I stretched my tired legs on the *kang* I took a deep breath, enjoying the familiar smell of earth, mildewed straw, and chimney smoke. On the wall there was a shrine to the gods, lit by an oil lamp, with a table of offerings beneath it. Under the table there was a dark pit, which Nanny called a cellar. She climbed down into this cellar and hid her bundle, and then all the neighbors filed in and hid their bundles there too.

Finally, the terrifying day passed, and the troops were gone. By the next morning, when there still had not been any pillaging, the neighbors filed back in to retrieve their hidden bundles, and village life returned to normal.

*

When Nanny brought me back to our family home in the Dongguan section of Xi'an\fn{Near the East Gate of the city} about ten days later, the Communists had taken over.

The whole city was abuzz with the word "liberation," which was emblazoned on posters everywhere. Triumphant songs were popular, and I liked this one:

The sky is blue in the liberated areas,
The people are glad in the liberated areas,
The sun never sets in the liberated areas,
The singing never ends in the liberated areas.

People really did seem as jubilant as the song suggested, as if the mere incantation of this new word, "liberation" could instantly usher out the old and bring in the new. But some things did not change that quickly. Our inner courtyard was still quiet all day; the gray pigeons still cooed on the roof; the big old tree by our door was still half dead, with the same hollow halfway up its trunk; the road from the Dongguo Gate to our house was still pitted; and manure, garbage, and dead cats and dogs were still piled next to the earthen city wall with a sickening stench that reeked from far away.

Once the Communists were in power, there was endless fanfare. Whenever new policies were proclaimed in the streets, parades of teachers and students spilled out of the middle school next door to our house, beating drums and gongs, waving little red and green placards, and shouting slogans.

Nanny enjoyed all the festivities. She had always liked going to traditional New Year's parades with our cook, a tall man who would elbow his way through the crowds with me on his shoulders to see all the different costumed characters from various operas. Suspended high in the air from scaffolding cleverly hidden with stage props, they held still, like statues, as the parade marched slowly along. Nanny would point to them and identify them for me.

But this parade was different. Wearing octagonal caps and Lenin costumes or white-towel turbans, the marchers beat on waist drums and danced the *yangge*,\fn{A rural folk dance popularized by the Communists} twisting and turning, taking a few steps forward, then a few steps backward. From time to time they stopped and stood in a

circle to sing and dance for the audience. This new show had nothing to do with the traditional opera, so Nanny could not tell me the names of the characters. The only thing that was the same was the earsplitting banging of the gongs and drums, which reverberated throughout the city so often that most days seemed like New Year's, an audible sign that times had changed.

Of course nobody used the derogatory term "bumpkin Eighth Route Army" anymore. Now it was called the People's Liberation Army. This was its official name, and all others were banned. One evening when a contingent of this army rolled into the Dongguo Gate, we heard someone at our door calling,

"Ma'am!"

Nanny, who had the typical civilian's ingrained fear of the military, went to answer the door. Later she told Grandmother that her hands had been trembling so hard that it had taken her forever to get the bolt open. That night the troops were quartered in our alley, and they cooked their meals in our kitchen the next day. But people's fears turned out to be groundless. The troops were well disciplined and congenial, and there was no trouble.

Nevertheless, the townspeople still called them bumpkins and circulated jokes about them. There was one about a soldier who tried to light his cigarette by holding it up to a lightbulb, and another about some troops who, quartered in a judge's house, dropped to the floor with their guns cocked when they heard a telephone ring.

Once the troops were gone, we were harassed constantly by our new neighborhood police officer, a man in a shabby uniform with a heavy northern Shaanxi accent. We always served him tea in the parlor, but he seemed unaccustomed to smooth cedar chairs, and after sitting for a while, he would shift to a squatting position right on his chair, without even taking off his shoes. The main reason he came was to interrogate Father about his vacuum-tube radio, apparently a forbidden item now. The police seemed to suspect that it was for sending wireless telegrams rather than for receiving broadcasts. Father was summoned repeatedly to the police station for questioning. Although they never managed to pin anything on him, he eventually surrendered the radio in exasperation.

Father had gotten his undergraduate degree in water conservancy engineering from the National Northwestern Agricultural Institute and done his graduate work in municipal drainage systems in Chongqing. Then he returned to Xi'an and was hired as head of the Preparatory Department for the new city waterworks. Before the Communist takeover, he had dressed in a suit and tie, parted his hair and styled it with a hair dryer, ridden a motorcycle to work, and entertained in his living room an American engineer from Tennessee, with whom he spoke English. He had also been fond of oatmeal and condensed milk, from boxes labeled in English. When the Communists nationalized all the industries, they retained him as a deputy chief engineer in the new waterworks. Once they sent him to Shanghai to sue the foreign contractors who had built the waterworks before the Communist takeover. After a lengthy stay there he recovered a large sum of money on behalf of the waterworks.

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But while he was away, our family fell on hard times. The Land Reform campaign had begun, and Grandfather was classified as a landlord. According to the official policy, he was supposed to buy back some real estate that he had recently sold and donate it to the work team to be redistributed to the poor peasants and farmhands. To raise the cash for this, he had to sell our family home in Xi'an at a loss. My parents, who could never afford to buy a house again, rented a place downtown with me and my two younger sisters, Shuzhi and Shuci.

On weekends and holidays we went to visit my grandparents in their garden home next to the ruins of the earthen city wall, not far from the house we had sold. The local people called my grandparents' garden the Kang family cemetery because Grandfather's mother was buried under a stone *stupa*\fn{A Buddhist monument} there. She had been a devout Buddhist all her life, and Grandfather had taken her on a pilgrimage around the mountain temples of South China in the early 1920s, while he was living in Shanghai. Unfortunately, she passed away on the journey. He shipped her coffin back home to Xi'an and buried her by the city wall near our house.

His love for her ran especially deep because his father had died long before, and she had raised him and paid for his education single-handedly. At the time of her death he was a leader in local industry, but after her funeral he suddenly decided to set aside all his worldly affairs. After building a two-acre garden around her grave, he moved there to devote himself to the study of Buddhism. Inspired by the Buddhist term "perfect silence," used for the deaths of monks and nuns, he named it Silent Garden.

As far back as I can remember, Grandfather practiced Buddhism in this garden. He hired a craftsman to engrave plates for printing the scriptures,\fn{A meritorious act in Buddhism} built a guesthouse for visiting Buddhist priests, and organized Buddhist study groups. But he spent most of his time there alone, and family members rarely went to see him. Grandmother and his children and grandchildren lived in their own houses and went about their own business, visiting him only on holidays.

Inside the main gate of Silent Garden there was a round doorway framed by a couplet on a pair of hanging wooden tablets, which I liked to bang against the wall to scare the lizards into the cracks. Beyond the doorway there was a narrow mossy path through a bamboo grove, blocked by an old trellis of wisteria that had wrapped itself like a boa around a nearby tree. To the left of the trellis there was an artificial mountain and a goldfish pond, and to the right there were some tile-roofed buildings, in front of which a brick path led to the staircase into the main house. Once I passed the brick-floored entryway, I would lift the door curtain and enter Grandfather's inner sanctum, which always smelled of incense. I could usually find him meditating in lotus position, with his flowing white beard and blissful, kindly face, silently.counting his *mala* beads.\fn{A reference to the Buddhist rosary}

Father and my uncles always seemed a bit ill at ease in Grandfather's presence. They would hover at the edge of the room and wait for him to tell them to sit down, and then they would sit far away from him, speaking in hushed tones. They were not Buddhists, and I suspected that they were afraid to let Grandfather get a whiff of the meat, tobacco, and alcohol on their breaths since he strictly eschewed these substances. We grandchildren had no such fears of him, however. When I was little, I loved to march right up to him and stroke his beard. If Mother scolded me for it, he would always chuckle.

"It's all right; he and I are as close as brothers."

Then he would loudly intone the name of Amitabha Buddha,\fn{A deity associated with the Pure Land sect of Mahayana Buddhism, said to rule over the Western Paradise} which he had a habit of interjecting into his speech all the time, sometimes in praise, sometimes in regret or even in warning.

I have read Grandfather's autobiography, which he wrote when he was fifty-eight, and listened to parts of his life story. His turbulent era catapulted him to officialdom from humble rural origins. Before he turned to Buddhism, his politics were fairly radical. While still a young student at his home in Lintong\fn{In rural Shaanxi Province} during the Qing Dynasty,\fn{Also known as the Manchu Dynasty (1644-1911)} he launched a campaign against foot-binding: He founded an anti-foot-binding association, distributed a song titled *Unbind Your Feet*, and let his eldest daughter's feet grow to their natural full size.

After he had passed the county-level imperial examinations. for the selection of government officials, the Qing government abolished the examination system, and he enrolled at Capital University\fn{Later Peking University} as a student of politics and economics. There he joined Sun Yat-sen's revolutionary party, the Tongmenghui. During the Revolution of 1911, when the Qing dynasty was overthrown, he quit school and returned to Shaanxi, where he got an important post in the newly established provisional military government. That was when he bought our grand family house in Xi'an and the large tract of land that later became his garden.

But when Yuan Shikai, the first provisional president of the new republic, tried to declare himself emperor in 1915, his regime lost support, and many important officials, including Grandfather, were listed as wanted men. He hid out in the French Concession of Shanghai for years, writing articles and publishing a newspaper promoting industry as China's salvation. He was a leftist who worked with Chen Duxiu, one of the cofounders of the Chinese Communist Party, and even published a pamphlet in support of the Bolshevik Revolution. But after he moved into his Silent Garden in the early 1920s, he abandoned politics and public office, relying on his real estate as his sole source of income. He became a prominent local Buddhist, who led local charities, relief work, and education and collected donations to repair dilapidated Buddhist temples.

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During the Land Reform campaign for the redistribution of rural property soon after the Communist takeover, the local authorities planned to attack him and confiscate his garden. Fortunately, the Living Buddha of Qinghai, a high-ranking Tibetan lama who was prominent in the Northwestern Military Government, shielded him with a special order, sparing him the brunt of the attack. Although his rural property was seized, he was allowed to keep the garden where he lived.

But deprived of his rental income, he had to sell his garden bit by bit just to pay his living expenses. First he sold the piece from the front gate to the wisteria trellis. Next it was a tract near the back gate, surrounding the shed he used for printing the scriptures. On one visit I discovered that the two ends of the garden had I been cut off by newly built walls, leaving only the essential central portion.

Grandmother had moved in with him when they sold their house following Liberation, and now she had to follow Grandfather's strict vegetarian diet. In addition, she had to do all the housework herself since they could no longer afford servants. Kitchen chores roughened her pampered hands, which had been accustomed only to playing mah-jongg or holding a water pipe. In the winter her hands cracked from doing the dishes and the laundry, and she covered them with adhesive bandages.

But Grandfather's fortunes improved after a few years. On one of my visits when I was in second or third grade, I noticed that the house had been spruced up in preparation for an important guest. The walls had been whitewashed, and Grandfather had hired a cook to make a vegetarian feast. Later I learned that the guest was an old friend of his, who had become a high-ranking cadre in Peking and was visiting Xi'an for a meeting. Soon afterward Grandfather was appointed the Buddhist representative on the Municipal Political Consultative Committee, a "united front" organization that included non-Communist Party members.

Now that he had a job he replaced the long Chinese gowns and man- darin jackets he had worn around the house with gray or blue Sun Yat-sen suits.\fn{Later called Mao suits} He started to attend meetings and to discuss Communist Party documents with his religious group. He brought home packs of documents and Marxist-Leninist materials to study in addition to his Buddhist texts. The word "study" had taken on a new meaning for him; now it meant changing his old ways and adopting new ones. This was accomplished through meetings, discussions, and poring over documents. It was his job as a committee member to rubber-stamp party policies, to spread propaganda, and to teach people the official lingo. In the political context of the times, to say that an old man from the old society was "studying diligently" meant that he supported the Party and the government. Grandfather and the other committee members may have felt constrained by their assignments, but men like him who had worked for the Nationalists must have been glad to serve nonetheless. It afforded them some prestige and was far better than being blacklisted or attacked.

He even got paid for studying. At the end of each month the committee sent someone over with more than a hundred *yuan*. They called it a transportation and living subsidy rather than a salary and considered it government support for members of the united front like Grandfather. Since most people earned less than forty or fifty *yuan* a month in those days, this was very generous treatment indeed. And now that Grandfather had been deprived of his land, this money seemed like manna from heaven.

In the early 1950s landlords all over China were persecuted mercilessly by the poor and lower-middle peasants. When my maternal grandfather and grandmother returned to his hometown in Chang'an County to take care of his aging parents, they were labeled landlords and suffered unspeakable torment at the hands of the villagers. And I shall never forget the anti-landlord struggle session I witnessed on one of my visits to Nanny's parents' village.

As soon as we got there, we saw a wrathful mob in front of the school, surrounding a tall, ruddy-faced, mean-looking landlord, whom they called a local tyrant. The villagers had stood two bricks on their sides on the brick pavement, and militiamen wielding red-tasseled spears were forcing him to balance on one foot on the edge of one of the bricks. As soon as he got a trembling foothold, a militiaman would kick the brick out from under him, and he would fall with a heavy thud onto the mossy pavement. The insatiable villagers subjected him to this process repeatedly, while they recited their angry tales of his oppression. His face turned black and blue, and dark red blood streamed from his temples.

Nobody knows how many rural property owners died in the unbridled mob violence of this period. Many of them were much less prosperous than Grandfather. It was only because he had an urban registration card and was chosen to be the Buddhist representative on the committee that he was able to avoid attack, keep his garden, and enjoy a position of respect. If he had still been registered as a resident of Lintong rather than of Xi'an, or if he had not been such a prominent Buddhist, he would have been crushed by the peasants. Thanks to the Buddha and the Bodhisattva Guanyin,\fn{The Goddess of Mercy, an assistant of Amitabha Buddha} the fragrance of his Indian sandalwood incense fillred his chamber again, and his spare rooms were cleared of tenants and restocked with Buddhist scriptures. Once again he could afford to hire servants to help Grandmother, and gardeners to restore the overgrown garden. Father, using his connections at work, installed running water for him, and he often let me help him plant vegetables and water the flowers. For the time being, Grandfather's ruined garden was back in bloom.

2

In the Fall of 1958 my parents sent me to live with my grandparents and attend Number Two Middle School, which was near Silent Garden and adjacent to the site of our former family house. I still have childhood memories from the yard of that house. Whenever the middle school students sang the national anthem and raised their flag on the playground next door, I used to run to our magnolia tree to hoist the tiny flag that Nanny had made for me. Later, when Grandfather had to sell the house shortly after the Communist takeover, the school converted it into ex:tra classrooms, dormitories, and offices.

In 1958, the year of the Great Leap Forward, the nation became caught up in a frenzy of smelting “backyard steel. It was our “glorious mission” to donate scrap iron to this cause, so our school playground, like most other work units, was heaped with it, along with piles of burned charcoal. Some enthusiasts had tossed in their pots and pans or drawer handles for good measure, even if they were made of copper or tin. The student cafeteria had been temporarily converted into a foundry, equipped with a mighty blower that shook the classrooms with its roar and filled the air with a sooty purplish haze.

Nobody seemed to have time for mundane pursuits like eating and sleeping. The upperclassmen manned the furnaces around the clock with holiday spirit, belting out all their new songs and cheering for the molten “steel” as it poured out of the furnaces. Once it congealed into hard black slag, we deemed it a success and swathed it in bright red silk. Then, banging on drums and gongs and carrying big red paper placards that read **SURPASS ENGLAND AND CATCH UP TO AMERICA**, we marched it triumphantly over to the district Party committee. Classes were canceled more often than not, and even we younger students had to help out at the foundry. When this happened, I began to resent school activities.

My parents had sent me to live with my grandparents because they were too busy with their jobs to take care of me and because they wanted to isolate me from the neighborhood children, whom they regarded as riffraff. Most adults had to work all day and attend mandatory political study sessions and meetings at night, and lacked the time to supervise their children after school. Moreover, few parents could afford to buy their children any toys, musical instruments, or sports gear. So once we had gotten our homework over with, we ran wild in the streets, climbing trees and walls, wrestling and sparring, and even recklessly scaling the city walls.

The city walls of Xi’an were grand and well preserved. The side that faced outward was surfaced with huge bricks, culminating in neat crenellations that loomed impregnably over the city moat, as in ancient times. On the side that faced inward, however, the rammed earth was exposed and weather-beaten. In order to prevent further erosion of the walls, huge brick downspouts had been installed at twenty- or thirty-yard intervals. Slanting along the imposing walls from top to bottom, the spouts protruded like giant skinny ladders. By the late I950s the municipal government had declared the walls obsolete and closed all the stairways to the top. The only way to get there was to shimmy painstakingly up the narrow spouts, choosing your finger- and toe-holds with the utmost of care and never glancing down lest you plummet to the ground below. The climb was nerve-racking and exhausting, and by the time we reached the top all of us were completely worn out. I otten returned home from these wild exploits smeared with dirt from head to toe or with torn clothes and bleeding arms and legs.

When I was not indulging in these death-defying pursuits, I loved to read classic swashbuckling fiction. Once I had gotten my first taste of this *genre*, with Father’s copy of *The Water Margin*,\fn{About a band of Robin Hood-type rebels of the Song period} I was hooked and proceeded to devour *Journey to the West*, *Roster oj the Gods, Romance oj the Three Kingdoms,* and *Stories oj the Tang.* At first I had my parents borrow books for me from their libraries at work; then I borrowed some more from our neighbors. Eventually I started going to bookstalls to rent martial arts tales that I could not fmd elsewhere.

Everything about these stories was fascinating to me, from the terminology for the “eighteen ancient weapons” to the nicknames of all the heroes and swordsmen and the descriptions of the immortals’ steeds and magic arts. I recited the battle stories to my playmates, adding gestures and reveling in the formulaic storytellers’ language and the marvelous vocabulary I had absorbed from the books. Sometimes I inserted myself and my friends into the stories, imagining myself a martial arts master who was leading the others on a heroic mission. Somewhere far from the city, I dreamed, we would encounter the wonders of ancient times.

When I was thirteen, some of my roughneck friends and I started to save our money for a trip to climb Mount Zhongnan,\fn{Located in the Zhongnan Mountains, a section of the Qinling mountain range, approximately twenty miles south of Xi’an} one of the sacred peaks of China, over summer vacation. Sitting in an abandoned pillbox on the city wall, we planned our expedition and established an explorers’ club with me as president. Our first escapade took place when we sneaked out of the mass parades on the May I Labor Day and went outside town, where we climbed the walls of a sanitarium for the party elite and got caught by the guards. They called our school, and we were suspended for a day of “introspection.”

Then we had a wall-climbing accident. One boy in our group slipped to the ground from a downspout, broke his leg, and had to spend several months wearing a cast in bed at home. This got us into deep trouble. Several sets of parents complained to the school that their offspring were being led astray by rabble-rousers. They exposed our plan to climb Mount Zhongnan and named me the ringleader of our group. Claiming that our establishment of the explorers’ club without official sanction was a major violation of the rules, the school political director issued a stern warning to our parents.

Father overreacted a bit, especially to the explorers' club, and he admonished me against winding up as a delinquent. Today it was wrestling and climbing walls, he and Mother chided me, but tomorrow I could find myself playing hooky, prowling the streets, and becoming a hooligan. He heartily disapproved of the neighborhood children, who knew they had to scurry out of our house as soon as they heard him coming through the main gate with his bike. That was why he decided to "exile" me to Silent Garden.

*

My grandparents put me in a room on the west side of the house that they had used as a guest room for visiting monks. It had whitewashed walls, a hardwood floor, and clumsy, old-fashioned furnishings. Tangled wisteria grew on the eaves outside the room, which faced a dense grove of cypress trees. At night the tiny metal bells on the corners of my great-grandmother's tombstone *stupa* tinkled in the wind, while mice scampered noisily on the floor. I was afraid of the dark, so Grandmother lit a stick of incense by my bed as a night-light and told me to gaze at it while I prayed to the Bodhisattva Guanyin. Grandmother's Bodhisattva Guanyin seemed much more approachable and down-to-earth than Grandfather's Amitabha, who had to do with the future and lived in the faraway Western Paradise, so I began praying to her regularly.

Later I found a rusty old sword in a junk pile upstairs, and I spent a few days sharpening and polishing it, along with its sharkskin scabbard, to a gleam. I hung the sword at the head of my bed for reassurance until I had gotten used to being alone in the cavernous room. This find aroused my interest in ransacking the dusty piles of stuff upstairs and downstairs. I was looking for novels to read, but Grandfather did not have any. Instead, I found ancient, unfamiliar classics, such as the Confucian canon collected in *The Four Books* and *The Five Classics,* the works of the Daoist philosophers Laozi and Zhuangzi, and numerous other compilations of classical philosophy, poetry, and essays. All were antique, large-type woodblock-printed editions, bound in silk thread and written in Classical Chinese, without modern punctuation.

I became fascinated with these musty old books, especially on rainy days when the high humidity kept their dust under control. Sitting on the brick floor in the hall with a stack of them, I wiped them off and pored over them to my heart's content. I read at random, devouring everything I got my hands on. I remember a fantasy novel Grandfather had written, describing a vision of a Buddhist revival, titled *Half a Joss Stick of Reveries*, as well as poetry by the "Eight-Fingered Mendicant," a Buddhist monk who burned off two of his fingers in an avowal of faith. I also enjoyed more Confucian classics in an oversize edition of *The Annotated Thirteen Classics* and *A Shaanxi Miscellany,* a compendium of two thousand years' worth of local literature and history.

I discovered documents pressed between the pages of these volumes, such as a letter to Grandfather about Buddhism from the Kuomintang leader Dai Jitao and an old newspaper clipping describing a visit to Xi'an by Grandfather's *guru*, the renowned Buddhist evangelist known as the Master of the Void. Through all this browsing and sorting, my reading skills in Classical Chinese improved as if by osmosis, and by the time I dusted off the entire library, I had plowed through—with varying degrees of understanding—most of the ancient classics.

Those were the most idyllic days of my life. Every day, once my homework was done, I turned to my reading program. I was full of youthful intellectual curiosity and drive and still open-minded and impressionable. Although I often understood my reading only dimly, I found it stimulating and memorable. Later I was deprived of the chance to study for years on end. Even today, more than forty years later, I believe that the reading I did long ago at Silent Garden was the foundation of my intellectual identity and that I have benefited from it all my life. Youth is a golden opportunity to read widely, and people who are denied that opportunity may never get around to making up for it later.

After a while I started to design my own ambitious survey courses in literature and philosophy. When Grandfather's library could no longer satisfy me, I began to frequent bookstores, buying the books I needed with the pocket money my grandparents gave me. Grandmother often let me keep the change when she sent me on errands, and Grandfather liked to reward me with money for good behavior. He was always delighted when I memorized a sacred text, like the *Heart Sutra,* or performed a random act of kindness, such as the time I donated my New Year's money to help a poor classmate pay his tuition. Grandfather rewarded me for my donation with more money than I had given to my classmate. Thanks to their generosity, I usually had enough money for books.

I loved to go to the only secondhand bookstore downtown, where I spent all my savings buying the classics on my reading list. Some of them were for immediate consumption, but I was also avidly building a collection, just as I had accumulated such things as stamps and cigarette-cases in my young childhood. My appetite for books was insatiable, and regular bookstore forays became my favorite leisure activity.

Then I discovered that the bookstore also purchased used books, and it dawned on me that I could sell some of Grandfather's useless books on the sly and use the cash to buy the books I needed. I would just be trading one old

book for another, I rationalized, and actually renovating the book collection, so nobody could really accuse me of siphoning off family property to line my own pockets.

Eventually I managed to quiet my misgivings and try this scheme. Whenever I was short on money, I would choose some of Grandfather's books that I considered worthless, like popular Buddhist reading material and collected works by local authors, and exchange them at the bookstore for the books I wanted. The first time I did this I was conscience-stricken, fearig that Grandfather would suddenly decide to look up something in one of the books I had sold, discover that it was missing, and identify me as the culprit. But it never happened. Actually, except for some rare editions of the Buddhist scriptures and a few big sets of books that Grandfather kept at hand, he did not really know exactly what was on his shelves. I was the only person who was interested in the dusty old tomes, and it had not occurred to anyone that they could be exchanged for money.

Over the course of a few years I replaced all the expendable books in Grandfather's library with a basic Chinese humanities curriculum, including all the major texts of classical Confucianism, history, philosophy, and *belles-lettres*. The library at Silent Garden had been fully remade in secret.

My independent study plan consumed all my attention in my teen years. I did not even want to go to school in the mornings, not because I wanted to loaf around the house but because I vastly preferred my own curriculum. School-sponsored activities, both inside and outside the classroom, were becoming increasingly politicized. The highly regimented educational system allowed us very little in the way of course selection, and my teacher's strict enforcement of discipline seemed more appropriate to a correctional institution. I wished that school would provide an environment truly conducive to learning, with more interesting classes. Most of all, I wished that we students would be permitted to relate to one another freely, without being subjected to constant surveillance. In order to prevent my schoolwork from encroaching on my personal study program, I tried to finish all my homework while I was still at school and was satisfied with grades that were average or slightly above.

Grandfather had a friend named Mr. Wang, who often stopped by Silent Garden to borrow books. Knowing that he was an excellent calligrapher, I asked him to make me a copy of a poem that I loved titled "The Year-Round Joy of Reading," written in the heptasyllabic ancient style by the thirteenth-century poet Weng Yipiao. I hung Mr. Wang's artwork on my wall and recited the poem every morning and evening. Grandfather, whose political antennae were more sensitive than mine, was alarmed by my behavior and criticized the message of the poem.

The new government had deliberately gathered a group of Consultative Committee members from all walks of life, Grandfather included, and indoctrinated them until they learned to practice self-censorship and echo the Party line. Even though I was young enough to have grown up under the red flag, he was more in tune with the latest political trends than I was. He often told me that I would have been considered an excellent student in the old society. But his praise of my studiousness was tinged with worry that my reading program, which kept drifting farther and farther from the prescribed school curriculum, might accentuate my nonconformist leanings. This was soon after the Antirightist campaign, during which our family was spared direct persecution. Still, Grandfather's constant circumspection made me aware of the insidious political pressure all around me. Even one's choice of pnvate reading material had become a barometer of one's political stance.

Grandfather had begun to sprinkle his speech with newly learned Marxist jargon. For example, since Buddhist doctrine held that the world was created by a chain of cause and effect rather than by an external force, Grandfather seized upon this as proof that Buddhism was "not superstitious" and that it was "compatible with materialism." Unlike other religions, he maintained, Buddhism was basically atheistic.

In 1959, the tenth anniversary of the People's Republic of China, Grandfather toured the Yangzi River Bridge at Wuhan and the construction site of the Sanmen Xia Reservoir with the Consultative Committee. When he came back, he spoke glowingly at committee meetings of what he had seen and even wrote some laudatory poetry. For this he was deemed a truly "red" old person, a glorious appellation in those days. Socialism seemed off to a good start in China, and Grandfather, like many other people, had fallen for Communist propaganda. The promise of the new society, embodied by the major engineering projects he had witnessed on his tour, aroused his sincere patriotic fervor.\fn{Later on, the dam behind which the reservoir was formed was found to contribute to alternating droughts and floods, and it was eventually torn down}

Those were the heady days of revolutionary romanticism, and the walls along the alley in front of our school were blazoned with murals and poems exaggerating industrial and agricultural production. There were pictures of cornstalks tall enough to scrape the clouds, mountains of cot-ton, elephantine pigs, and hens that laid ostrich-size eggs, as well as bold exhortations from Chairman Mao to "conquer heaven and earth." The city authorities had

even deemed it a kind of “production mission” to compose doggerel extolling new achievements, and anyone who penned a few usable lines was hailed as a “poet” overnight.

The walls of Silent Garden created a sanctuary for me from the world outside. I ransacked the house for the accoutrements of an elegant scholarly study and used them to decorate my room. I had an inkstone, a brush washer made of shell, a jade paperweight, a bronze incense censer, calligraphy and paintings, and porcelain vases, with my wall hanging of the poem “The Year-Round Joy of Reading” as the finishing touch.

But Grandfather, determined to bring me back to earth, wrote a takeoff on this poem tided “The Year-Round Joy of Work and Study” and hung it on my wall. The latest Party call was for intellectuals to be both “red and expert.” If intellectuals devoted themselves single-mindedly to their professions and book learning, at the expense of political study and manual labor, they were denounced as “white experts.” Grandfather’s poem, which emphasized that work was as important as study, was a response to this Party directive.

But I ignored his admonitions, and his poem hung on my wall in vain. In my opinion, its political slogans were just eyesores.

My love of literature was habit-forming, and the more comfortable I was with it, the more I craved it, regardless of the consequences. I had tried my hand at more practical activities, such as playing musical instruments, assembling crystal-receiver sets, building model airplanes, and all kinds of athletic endeavors, trying to demonstrate that I could do these things too. But I was clumsy, so I had given up and retreated into my piles of books.

Tasks such as drawing circles or triangles seemed like a nuisance to me, because they demanded the accurate use of a pencil, compass, and ruler. The simple act of choosing my words in writing, however, satisfied me emotionally and intellectually, while requiring only reason and imagination. For me, curling up with a book was the ultimate in relaxation.

Father had achieved his goal; I had lost interest forever in the neighborhood children. I was so deeply immersed in my books that I was loath to tear myself away long enough to go visit my parents on weekends. I resisted anything that interfered with my daily study time.

*

This attitude set me at loggerheads with my school.

In those days a “bad student” was one who cut school, brawled, insulted the teachers, and got bad grades. I was not one of them, since I earned decent grades and followed the rules, but I was still never considered a “well-behaved” student. In the politicized language of post-I949 China, the word “behavior,” like many others, had added connotations beyond its dictionary definition.

“Behaving” meant putting on a deliberate show of allegiance to the authorities. When the teachers and school leadership evaluated your “behaviorm” they were referring to your politics, and you had to play the game right if you wanted a rating of “well behaved.” Behavior ratings were as important as tests and grades since they affected one’s class rank, admission to select groups, and future prospects in general. Elementary school students needed good behavior ratings to join the Young Pioneers; middle school students needed them for entrance into the Communist Youth League; and adults needed them too, for Party admission.

Good behavior seemed to come naturally to some students, but making a favorable impression on the teachers was not easy for those of us who were not inclined to show off. For example, cleaning up the classroom was a daily chore that we rotated among us. But in that era there was more to the matter than simply maintaining a clean study environment. We actually had cleaning competitions, in which each class competed with all the others in front of the inspection team. So all the students whose turn it was to clean were dragged into the battle, and all vied to demonstrate their good behavior. Compared with the others, I was aimless, clumsy, and anti-social, and the faculty found my recalcitrance irritating.

A corollary of the Red and Expert campaign of 1959 was the Work-Study campaign, which introduced manual labor into the nationwide school curriculum. We middle school students had to take part in several hours a week of productive labor classes, supervised by the head of our school’s maintenance and housekeeping department. At the height of the campaign we would be sent to a nearby commune to help with the turnip harvest or to do odd jobs at a small neighborhood factory. If our supervisors could not find any place that needed our help, they assigned us chores on campus that should have been taken care of by the professional maintenance and housekeeping staf£

At home I always helped Grandfather in the garden. In the spring I plowed the ground and planted vegetables, in the summer I carried buckets of water for the flowers, and in the fall I dug up the medicinal knotweed tubers

that grew near the wall. I also helped Grandmother gather half-opened honeysuckle blossoms and ripe fruit from the trees. I liked this type of manual labor because it had a clear purpose, and I did it of my own volition.

But the manual labor at school was just busywork, designed for the sole purpose of training us to follow orders with feigned enthusiasm. The more the other students showed oft the more I balked, and the time passed with agonizing slowness. I started to dawdle on the job and even to sneak away on my own. My teacher and the cadres filled my record with black marks for these unexcused early departures and absences. Although I was too young to understand politics fully, I was already beginning to develop a dubious political reputation. …

3

One day in the spring of 1960 Grandmother sent me to buy matches and soap, but all the shops in our neighborhood were sold out. This was a harbinger of a series of shortages, a new experience for me. Next, the street vendors disappeared, and all the restaurants, whether state-operated or partly privatized, ran out of food. During that unusually frigid winter Grandfather was the only one who had a coal-burning stove in his room, and my wing of the house was so cold that my toes froze through my cotton-padded shoes while I was studying at night.

My politics teacher told us that serious natural disasters had brought "hard times" on our country.\fn{ The Great Leap Forward was followed by a deadly three-year famine, which the Communist Party blamed on severe bad weather, although it was mostly created by the misguided agricultural policies of the Great Leap itself. While no exact figures are available, there is a general consensus that this famine led to at least twenty million deaths, most of them in rural areas} "Hard times" was the buzzword of the day. Food was rationed, and general belt-tightening began. City dwellers were confronted with the unprecedented prospect of hunger, although it was actually more psychological than physical. All urban households were still guaranteed adequate, if minimal, monthly rations, and no one's cupboard was ever completely bare. The people who were really threatened with starvation were the peasants, who, after all, produced the food for the cities. With no guarantees or periodic government distributions to fall back upon, their only option was to flee certain death in the countryside and roam the city streets as beggars.

In a charitable spirit, Grandfather hired one of these refugees, a man from Henan named Mr. Su, to cultivate our vegetable patch and do odd jobs around Silent Garden. Before Grandfather gave him work, he had been alternating between begging and hiring himself out occasionally in the marketplace, but with the money he earned at our house he could fill up on steamed cornbread every day and could even save enough to buy a few ration tickets to send home to his family.

Mr. Su was a taciturn, hardworking man, who told us only the bare minimum about the conditions back where he had come from. He said that there had been an excessively zealous campaign to make everyone eat in mess halls and plant high-yield crops and that the cadres had over-reported production, eradicating the savings of all the commune members.\fn{Because the State's tithe was based on the cadres' reports of production} His whole village had run out of grain, and people had begun to drop like flies, so he had fled while he could.

I was appalled by his story. Our teacher had told us that the Great Leap Forward had been a big success and had blamed the current grain shortages completely on the "natural disasters" and the Soviet Union's extraction of full repayment of China's old debts. Now I was faced with substantial evidence that he was not telling the whole truth, and I began to agree with the critics of the Three Red Banners\fn{I.e., the General Line for Socialist Construction; the Great Leap Forward; and the People's Communes} policy. No one ever discussed these matters with me, and even Grandfather had no ready answers for my questions. Confused, I recorded Mr. Su's troubles in my diary and wrote a poem depicting him as a trusty, exploited ox that shrank to a mere heap of skin and bones and eventually dropped dead of starvation while tilling a field.

As the food shortages worsened, even cornbread was rationed, and life became tougher for migrant workers like Mr. Su, who was not entitled to an allotment of ration tickets. In the winter malnutrition was rampant. The first symptom was edema, which you could check for by pressing on your forehead or inner calf with your finger each morning to see whether an indentation remained. This finger test became a widespread form of greeting. At first edema sufferers could get doctors' notes to tap into special reserves of soybeans and sugar, but eventually the demand outgrew the supply.

Then the Party had to call for "combining work and leisure," one of the strange new expressions coined to keep up with the bizarre new developments. This was a policy of reducing people's workloads and proclaiming it everyone's political obligation to minimize calorie expenditure. Since the schools slowed down too, I had much more time to study on my own and write in my diary.

*

My diary dates back to an evening, during my fifth-grade summer vacation, when I was studying in Father's office as he sipped liquor in a chair opposite mine. On a drunken whim, he staggered over to his desk drawer and pulled out a thick new blank book with a hard blue cover, glossy paper, and color illustrations. Laying it before me in the lamplight, he suggested that I begin keeping a regular diary. This practice, he assured me, would develop both my writing skills and my self-discipline. Eagerly, I flipped the book open to the first page and got started right away.

Father had not told me how to go about keeping a diary, but I was no stranger to the idea. Grandfather had been doing it for decades and had a hundred slender volumes, each labeled according to the year, stacked in the bookcase by his bed. Like old-fashioned account ledgers, they contained running records of mundane affairs, such as the places he went and the people he met or visitors who stopped by and what they said. He also kept track of correspondence with other Buddhists, Party lectures and meetings, daily expenses, and seasonal changes in the weather, flora, and fauna. Jotting a few lines in his diary each night, like going upstairs every morning to pray to the Buddha or taking a constitutional around Great-grandmother's grave after every meal, had been Grandfather's habit for many years. His current diary usually lay open on the table for all to see.

But young people like me had a different notion of diaries. My cousin Shuren, who also kept one, maintained that they should be completely private and that it was as unethical to peek at other people's diaries as it was to open their personal letters. Her words impressed me so deeply that I always kept my diary carefully squirreled away.

I admired Grandfather's diaries for their sheer number rather than their content. Remembering Father's injunction to hone my writing skills, I polished my entries every day as if they were personal essays and made sure that my descriptions of events were detailed and comprehensive. I also included a reading journal, consisting of notes on my readings, passages that had caught my attention, and my reactions to books I had read. I lavished more care on my diary every night than I did on my homework, but I was nevertheless embarrassed by my bombastic prose. No doubt many novice writers would have shared my sentiment that one's scribblings should be kept as private as certain parts of one's anatomy. My diary was a burdensome secret, and I worried constantly that someone might discover its immature contents.

The austerity measures created social chaos, which was exhilarating for me. With parents to shield me from the food shortages, I was enjoying the quasi-vacation from school. The cities had been released from the stranglehold of politics, and long-banned merchandise of every description was available again. Free markets, like the one at the renowned Daoist Temple of the Eight Immortals, -were bustling. State-run restaurants and grocery stores were deserted, but movie theaters were packed at all hours of the day and night. Billboards announcing new movies were constantly appearing, and we had one foreign film festival after another, featuring the latest from the Soviet Union, Eastern Europe, and even the capitalist West.

That winter I saw huge numbers of foreign films, sometimes sitting through double and triple features. When the lights came on, however, and I got up from my seat and elbowed my way through the crowds, I realized that I was woozy with hunger. Trudging feebly along on the bleak wintry city streets, I was loath to jerk myself back to reality from the dreamworld of the movie screen. I was smitten with the glamour of Europe—cathedrals, palaces, aristocratic manors, high-society balls, prosperous modern cities, and exotic scenery—and couldn't help making invidious comparisons with my own drab surroundings. As soon as I got home, I poured my heart into my diary while my favorite scenes were still fresh in my mind and, too excited to sleep, often kept scribbling until late at night. As my diaries started to pile up, I eyed Grandfather's, aspiring to the day when my stacks would be as tall as, or taller than, his.

Worried about the secrets revealed in my growing stack of diaries, I put a lock on my drawer to protect them from Father and Grandfather, who often visited my room. Since the key was in a nearby unlocked drawer, my lock was actually just for show, but it nonetheless displeased Grandfather and Father. One Sunday, when Father was sneaking a few drinks in my room, he went snooping around, found my diaries, and read them. Infuriated by my private revelations, he gave me a severe tongue-lashing. Maybe he was just grouchy that day from the cheap sweet potato liquor he had been swilling all afternoon, or maybe his frustration with me had been mounting for a long time, and this was the final straw.

*

Father was an alcoholic, whose daily habit kept him constantly in debt. He was flush on payday, but he frittered away his entire monthly salary within the first week on fancy packaged brands of *mao-tai* and whiskey.

Mother redeemed armloads of empty bottles for a pittance whenever she heard the call of the recycling men outside our gate. After his initial splurge, all Father could afford was rotgut until his next paycheck arrived.

"I'm never rich for more than three days or broke for more than a month;" was his own wry comment.

He kept sending me out to buy liquor for him even when his money was gone, and I had to stand there and watch him rummage through his pockets for change. Sometimes he even scrounged some from our neighbor Mrs. Li. After he had managed to scrape together a fistful of coins for me, I marched out to the shops with his empty bottle, looking for a refill. If the cheap stuff that he needed was out of stock nearby, I had to keep looking farther and farther afield, and I did so grudgingly, especially since there was rarely a penny left over for me. I have no memories of Father's ever giving us children any spending money, and I was always too embarrassed to ask him for any, even if it was for tuition or school supplies. For that, I always went to Mother.

Father craved the burn of fiery spirits and didn't care for much in the way of food to go with them. He usually sat by himself at a bare table with his glass and bottle, drowning his sorrows in silence. Once in a while he bought a few scarce delicacies, such as peanuts or canned anchovies, and offered me or my sisters a nibble, but he preferred not to seek our company. Far from cheering him up, the liquor plunged him into an ill humor, and he often lost his temper. When his breath reeked of alcohol, I knew enough to stay out of his way. I cannot remember when all this began, but it started to make an impression on me as soon as I was old enough to go out to buy his liquor for him. Instead of eating dinner, he tended to nurse his drink until it killed his appetite. Eventually he made a show of toying with a few bites of food, just so he could say that he had eaten.

Father's wasteful habit was a serious bone of contention between my parents. Our family was considered well off in those days, since he was a highly paid senior engineer and Mother was a middle school teacher. People imagined that we lived extremely well. It was difficult for Mother to tell outsiders how hard up we were because they would not have believed it. When Father got his pay, he gave her a meager allowance for household expenses, reserving the rest to pay back his debts from the previous month and to keep himself supplied with liquor in the coming one. He even asked for her allowance back bit by bit when he had exhausted all his other avenues at the end of the month. Naturally, it infuriated her to see him sitting around the house guzzling liquor.

Mother would serve Father stoically at the beginning of one of his drinking binges, but she lost her patience when he kept postponing dinner. She would snap at him to finish up and try to snatch away his bottle, but he would clutch it tightly, insisting that he needed just one more drink. Eventually she would reheat the evening meal, grumbling under her breath. Then she would erupt at him, dragging out all her old grudges, reciting her grievances against his drinking buddies, and berating him for bringing poverty on the family.

At first Father would just sit and drink, letting her accusations roll off his back, as if he had heard everything before and could not be bothered to argue with her. Sometimes, especially if he was drunk, something she said would push him over the edge, and his face would suddenly darken. He would hurl his bottle to the floor, and the sound of its shattering would set him on a rampage. After recklessly smashing everything on the table, he would stagger out the door with his Bluebell brand bicycle to spend the night at the company dormitory.

The cathartic sound of china shattering on the floor snapped Mother out of her bad mood. Some females make a manipulative show of self- pitying tears at the end of a marital tif£ but not Mother. The climax of the fight had provided her with release, and she was ready to turn her full attention to cleaning up the debris. She was the victor for now, having interrupted Father's drinking session and caused him to smash his own bottle and shot glass, and she had recovered her domestic turf. Pleased to have driven him out, she would carefully sweep up the broken shards with her whisk broom and wash the remaining dishes. When all traces of the scuffle had beeh erased, she would place a couple of teacups, now minus their handles, back onto their tray, as if lining up the last remaining chessmen on a chessboard.

During my years at Silent Garden, Father often visited us on Sunday afternoons. When he was low on cash, he would mooch from Grandmother, who loved to indulge her sons and grandsons. Like a good fairy, she would send her cook out for liquor and some stewed pork wrapped in a lotus leaf and invite Father to enjoy these treats in my room. Once he was safely inside, she would close the door and the door curtain over it and then keep watch in the foyer, puffing on cigarettes and sipping tea. If Grandfather asked her where Father was, she would point at my closed door and whisper,

"He's sleeping in there."

Grandfather, who never doubted anything Grandmother said, would tiptoe away, clearing his throat and thankfully intoning prayers to the Buddha as he went. Father spent many a peaceful Sunday afternoon this way in Silent Garden.

But he flew into a drunken rage on the Sunday he discovered my diary. He had torn out the two pages that he found particularly objectionable and gave me a severe dressing-down for their contents. The first was the one describing Mr. Su's plight, with its poem comparing him to a trusty old ox. Father warned that I would be criticized for attacking the Three Red Banners if anyone ever found out I had written such a thing. The second was my critique of *The Diary of Lei Feng*,\fn{Lei Feng was an altrustic young soldier who died in an accident in 1962, leaving behind a famous diary that all Chinese were made to study when Mao proclaimed the Learn From Lei Feng campaign in 1963}in which I contrasted my diary with his. Mine was a private record, I said, kept solely for the pleasure inherent in the writing process and in reliving my memories in the future. I did not want anyone else to read my diary, I insisted, since it revealed too many of my scandalous secrets. *The Diary of Lei Feng*, on the other hand, seemed to have been written entirely for show, as if Lei Feng had already arranged for its posthumous publication while he was writing it. I thought it a shame that this young soldier had not written a single word about his love life. Had he ever had a romantic relationship? How could he omit it? That's what diaries were for!

Father was beside himself. He scolded me and ripped the offending pages into shreds, then tossed them into my face. In the heat of the moment I protested insolently that he had no right to look at my diary and that it was an illegal "invasion of privacy" to read other people's diaries and letters. This incensed him further, and he slapped me. I raised my arm in self-defense, but this was tantamount to pouring oil on a fire, and he went berserk. Accusing me of trying to strike him, he pulled out his bicycle pump and chased me all around Silent Garden with it, like a policeman brandishing his nightstick.

I darted into Grandfather's room, interrupting his meditation and begging for his protection, and in response he rushed out barefoot and whacked Father with his cloth shoe. Father strode away in a huff, muttering about packing me off to a strict boarding school. Grandfather later managed to convince him that it would not look good on my transcript if I switched high schools when I was almost ready to graduate.

Father and I were not on speaking terms for a long time, alth.ough we eventually managed to paper over our differences to some extent. I don't know whether he was sorry he had acted on his whim to give me the blank diary in the first place or if he remembered encouraging me to read traditional fiction when he had had a bit too much to drink. I had seen Father get starry-eyed under the influence of liquor, and it was a revelation to me that he could also see through the fog well enough to be a clearheaded, strict censor. From then on he seemed to regret having sent me to Silent Garden to live with my grandparents. His decision that it would be best to isolate me from the delinquent children on our block had backfired unexpectedly. He blamed Grandfather's influence for my habit of indiscriminate reading and writing and thought that I might not have turned out this way if he had not sent me to Silent Garden.

I knew that Father was wrong. Grandfather was such a devout Buddhist that he spent much more time on meditation and prayer than he did on scholarship and seldom read anything other than Buddhist scriptures. He had never been enthusiastic about my grandiose reading plan and in fact had often tried to discourage me from it. Whenever I asked him a random question about some ancient text, he would respond with a gentle put-down, such as

"Mere factual knowledge cannot make you a sage." He also loved to repeat the old chestnut,

"Take action first, and use your leftover energy for book learning."

My love of reading and writing was my own natural inclination. Grandfather was not responsible for it, and Father's vehemence could not dissuade me from it. Something snapped in him on the day of that fight. He seemed to have decided that I was a hopelessly disobedient son and that he should get ready to wash his hands of me. He began this process with the dire prediction that I would have hell to ay in the future unless I eeded his and Mother's advice. …

21.40 Jingjing Is Born\fn{by Gu Ying (1945-)} Yunnan Province, China (F) 11

It was a snowy day in winter. Two men and a woman were sitting in a warm restaurant near the railway station. On the table before them were dishes of sliced ham sausage and smoked fish. There was also a small platter of dried fruits and tri-colored nuts, as well as a kettle of the strong *erguodou,* just heated in a pot. The men's collars were loosened and their faces flushed. The glass in front of the woman was empty. She did not drink, but merely nibbled at the apricot kernels in the platter.

The tall, thin man with a square forehead and a straight nose seemed to be the host. And the woman, clear-skinned and lively in her general demeanor, was evidently his wife.

The two of them kept plying the other man with food and wine. The guest looked travel-stained, with two bags

behind his seat. More likely an old friend who had suddenly turned up.

"Take your time," said the woman. "The steamed dumplings will take at least half an hour to arrive. We have two hours and ten minutes. It's a shame you are so rushed. We can't even leave the railway station."

"What can I do? This is a business trip. But I see you two, that's something. Though I'll have to miss your precious Jingjing. She must be grown?"

"Thirteen already," the man answered proudly.

"No, four more days to her thirteenth birthday," the woman corrected him. Her face took on that expression peculiar to mothers when they talk about their children. "She's nearly as tall as I am. A big girl altogether. She has Lao Xu's nose and forehead, but her skin is like mine. And her temperament as well. With that combination, she is better than either of us. A couple of years ago, a teacher from the ballet school pestered me to allow her to learn dancing, but I resisted." The woman stopped, and then added earnestly:

"If I had a choice, I would rather Jingjing grow up to be an obstetrician."

"Obstetrician?" the guest asked. "Why?"

The couple exchanged glances and told the following story.

As expected, the woman begins the tale.

Lao Xu and I were married nine years, and we still didn't have a child. Injections, pills, medicine made from secret prescriptions—I'd tried everything. But no matter how hard I tried, I did not conceive. We finally decided to adopt a child. And just as we were about to take steps, I became pregnant. We were up in the clouds, as you can imagine. But there was one drawback. The timing was bad. I became pregnant in the middle of March in 1967. That meant my delivery would be in late December—a winter birth. But worse, Jingjing decided to enter the world on December 16. Later, I often wondered how Jingjing could have made such a bad choice. If I had the choice of my birthday, I would never have chosen that wretched day. You see, December 16 was the beginning of the great faction war in our city.

On the morning of December 15, Lao Xu was in a hurry to get to his plant. Zhang, our upstairs neighbor, and Wang, our downstairs neighbor, both masters at their craft, were staying home with their flowers and their goldfish. Why, I asked him, should you give a damn for the plant? But he had an important conference and had to attend, even if the skies were raining knives and daggers. But supposing I must go to the hospital today, I asked him. He laughed and said, "It's still ten days to the projected date. My precious baby would not play nasty tricks with its daddy."

Unfortunately, the precious baby had a mind of its own. Lao Xu was barely out the door before I started feeling ill. I thought: it's far too early, it can't be the baby coming. So I ate a bowl of noodles and took a little nap. When it grew dark, I felt bad again. Our neighbor old Mrs. Wei came over for a chat. She was immediately alarmed. "With all this faction war and commotion around us, how can you wait for Lao Xu? If he is not back by now, it means he has decided to stay through the night. That is their style, the rebels, as they call themselves. They strike at night. I'd say that you needn't wait for your husband. Anyway the municipal hospital is just at the corner of the alley. I'll take you there and we can call your husband afterward."

Old Mother Wei wrapped some food for me and helped me down the stairs. Our alley is straight as an arrow. We can see the main road where the alley intersects, people and bicycles and cars going back and forth, and the little shoe shop guarding the mouth of the alley.

It was a long time since I had been outdoors. Lao Xu would not let me go to the neighborhood dressmaking co-operative where I work, and he never mentions what's going on outside. So when I first stepped outdoors, I had a real shock. I was not prepared for the change. All the little stores were tightly shut and locked up. What's more, they were all plastered with big-character posters and slogans, right up to the chimney. And then to see the men and women rushing about, as if there was a fire. Others advanced in columns, carrying guns and clubs across their shoulders. They all looked so grim, as if out for blood. I had always been timid. I clutched Mother Wei's arms.

"Good heavens, what are they doing?" I asked.

"Out for a fight," Mother Wei said casually. Evidently she had encountered scenes like these.

"Who's fighting whom?"

"It's United Headquarters against the Battalion. The two sides had a go at it yesterday. The Battalion surrounded one of the fortifications of the United. The United sent reinforcements. See there! Look eastward! That's where it happened."

Old Mother Wei pointed to a building about ten stories high. The top of the building was swarming with people, like so many ants.

"What are they fighting for?"

"Heaven knows. They all call themselves the revolutionary rebels. All claim to be upholding this and defending that. All to the death, too."

I tried to calm my anxieties. Let them do their worst, the hospital was right at the corner from the alley. Nobody could stop me going to the hospital to have my baby.

Who would have thought that the minute we were out of the alley, we couldn't move. The crowd was so dense. Someone at the back shouted, "Give way, give way!" A stretcher borne by two young men surged forward from behind and nearly knocked me down. Then another stretcher. Followed by pushcarts. People were piled pell-mell on the carts with bandages around their heads. I trembled all over and just wanted to go home. Mother Wei clutched me tightly and steered through the crowd, pushing, cursing, begging her way through. Finally we made it to the door of the hospital. We were just about to step in when two figures with red armbands leveled a wooden pole across the door.

"What's your business?"

"Please, please make way, we must get into the hospital." Mother Wei pointed to me with great assuredness.

The two revolutionary rebels stood their ground.

"The hospital has an emergency revolutionary task. No patients whatever will be admitted."

They were so cocksure of themselves.

"There is nothing so urgent as a woman giving birth!"

Mother Wei had worked for the neighborhood committee. She was ready with words.

"Please, please make way for us. Babies are the future of the Revolution, you know!"

"Nothing doing. All the patients at this hospital have been sent back."

"We are going to the obstetrics unit. Do you hear me? Obstetrics!"

"Obstetrics no exception. All patients sent back. Those that have had their babies, and those that didn't get around to having them yet, all sent back."

"Oh, no, you must be joking. She is assigned to this hospital. She's always had her examinations here. Look, here are her records." And Mother Wei handed over my prenatal examination files. "She's thirty-three, and this is her first baby. Where can she go?"

"That's your own concern. Now move on. It's dangerous here. If you get hurt, you've yourselves to blame."

Mother Wei and I were paralyzed. I felt my head spinning. I couldn't think at all. Luckily Mother Wei regained her presence of mind and led me to Aunty Zhao, who runs the shoe store.

"Don't worry," Mother Wei said. "I'll ask Lao Xu to take you on his bike to Pingan Hospital. It's a specialized maternity hospital in a quiet area. They can't drive out all their patients. I'm going to phone Lao Xu right away."

So I sat in the shoe store and listened to the howling of the crowd outside. The sky was murky, as if it was going to snow. My tears dropped as I cursed Lao Xu in my heart.

"You son of a bitch, why don't you show up?"

Why the hell didn't he show up?

The man continues the narrative.

While Gui Zhi was sitting in that shoe store in an agony of waiting, I was at my plant, listening to our chief relaying orders from headquarters. Headquarters announced that very same night that the decisive battle between the two lines was launched and that every soldier of the United Headquarters had to be ready to fight and to fall for the glorious cause.

Many comrades formed ranks immediately and made ready for battle. I was a member of the Red Pen Brigade and our task was to print two thousand campaign leaflets and draw a large-scale poster. Everything had to be finished before dawn.

My job was to do the poster. I had already drawn up a sketch. It was a huge caricature of all the leaders of the Battalion faction. I pictured them as a convoluted mass of crawling creatures with human heads and reptile bodies. The next step was to pick out the outlines in white against a pitch-black background. When Mother Wei's call came through, I was just halfway through with the background. I put down my brush immediately and requested to leave.

The chief was disgusted.

"Perfect timing, isn't it? Don't you know that this is the crucial hour? A matter of life or death? We may all have to reinforce the front lines any minute. Go and be damned. There's no relying on the likes of you."

I felt as if I had swallowed a fly. I, Xu Guoliang, have always stuck to the revolutionary left. I had borne the whiplashes of the conservatives without a flinch. I never whispered a word of it to my wife, in case she might hold me back from fighting for the cause. Can anyone say that I am a coward? But my wife was going to give

birth. What could I do? I put on my cotton-padded overcoat and made my way out. I hunched my back, keeping my head low as I got on my bike, looking furtively around, as if I were a deserter.

As I made my way back I felt more and more justified. Was it my fault? Here I was nine years married, and still childless. I was thirty-four, my wife thirty-three. Who would have thought that she was going to be pregnant at such an unprecedented moment in history? And who could have seen that she was going to give birth just at the moment of the decisive battle between the two lines? If we had had a child eight years earlier, my son would be in primary school right now, and a little revolutionary rebel, too, like his father!

The shoe store was easy to locate and I quickly put Gui Zhi on the backseat of my bike.

"Be careful," Mother Wei reminded me. "The streets are so unsafe. Don't worry about things back home. I'll put the chickens in the pot when she is ready to come back."

Pingan Hospital was about eight *li* away. Not far. All we had to do was to cross three streets and two alleys. But luck was against us that wretched night. We were barely out of the first alley before the snowflakes came floating down around us. The ground slipped under my feet and I could only move inch by inch. I was soaking in sweat.

Then, as soon as we emerged into the second street, we saw a huge black shape in the distance lumbering toward us. I was petrified. There were no street lamps, of course. In the darkness, the gigantic shape appeared to have tentacles shooting out of its forehead, like some mythological creature. How did such a thing ever get here, into our town center, in the middle of civilization? I watched it with dread as it approached. Finally, the rim of tires showing underneath gave away its secret and I saw through the mystery.

It was a homemade tank! A truck covered with plates of iron welded together, with a few holes drilled in front for firing, and there you have the basics of a tank. It crawled forward slowly and ponderously, like a giant snail, totally oblivious to my anxiety. At last, it moved out of sight.

I quickly steered my bike through the next alley and emerged into the last street. But bad luck stuck to me, it seemed. As we passed a building a few bricks fell out from the wall above and scraped the tip of my nose before they crashed to the ground in front of me. I looked up and saw gun barrels poking out of holes made in the wall. In the darkness, they cast a menacing, cold reflection on the snow beneath. I am as brave as the next man, but who likes to walk under the barrel of a gun? I took a look at Gui Zhi and hastened my step. By the light of a passing car, I could see that she was deadly pale and her eyes were full of fright.

"Don't mind it," I assured her. "We are getting there."

Gui Zhi began to groan. "It hurts," she cried. Her hands trembled as they grasped the seat of my bike.

Good heavens, suppose she delivers the baby now—in this cruel and deadly street!

I began to curse under my breath. I cursed the unlighted streets. The columns of people rushing about madly. The homemade tank. The holes in the wall. The gathering snow. They were all in my way. All working against me. Why won't they let us have our baby in peace? These reflections, of course, were not worthy of a leftist revolutionary rebel. They smacked of betrayal. But I couldn't help it. They keep cropping up in my head. After all, my wife was sitting at the back of my bike and going to deliver our baby!

I finally let out a sigh of relief. We were at Pingan Hospital.

The walls of the hospital were very high. All the buildings were hidden behind trees. Not a flicker of light anywhere. I began to panic. In the momentous hour of the decisive battle between the two factions, work units would be likely to close down and disperse its members. And even if the work units didn't close down, people were likely to stay home. Who would have the heart to work, anyway? If Pingan Hospital were really closed down, my poor wife would be left in the streets, in the snow! The blood rushed to my head, and I pounded the gates with my fists, shouting desperately.

"Open! Open!"

The sound of footsteps! Footsteps actually approaching! A woman's voice, shrill with impatience, came from the other side of the gate.

"What do you want?"

"My wife is going into labor! Please open! Quick! I beg you!"

The gates opened a crack. A hand stretched out.

"I must inspect the medical files."

I handed over my wife's booklet of medical records. It was shown on her records that she was assigned to the municipal hospital. I hoped that the person on the other side of the gate would not notice.

But that was exactly what she was checking on.

"This is not her assigned hospital. Go to the municipal hospital."

"That's where we come from! They have an emergency task, and the doors are closed to patients!"

"Then go and talk to whoever is responsible. What right do they have to saddle us with their patients?"

"Doctor, please …" Through the gap between the gates, I saw that she wore her front hair in a frill beneath her white cap. A typical trainee from the nursing school, I decided. I called her *doctor*, hoping that this promotion would put her in a good humor. "The streets are so unsafe, we had such a hard time getting here. Please stretch a point. Do us a favor, please."

"A favor! A favor! You all want a favor! But who's going to do us a favor? The two of us have been here over fifty hours! No heating! No hot water! No food! And no one to take over the shift! Nothing! Who cares if we die of fatigue! Let me tell you, it's *no.* You can shout yourself hoarse, but let me tell you, it's *no*!"

"Please, have some pity, doctor."

"And who's going to pity us?" She started to shut the gates.

"No, no. Don't, don't!" I edged my body between the gates.

"Doctor, can you stand by and watch her die?"

For a minute she stood irresolute. Perhaps my plea struck a chord. But when I tried to pry open the gates, her anger erupted.

"Hey! What, what are you doing?!"

"My wife must go in! She must!"

"*She must.* Is that it!"

"Yes, she must. That's it!"

I tried to force my way in. She was no match for me.

"Your grand-aunt has said no!" she screamed. "Go in if you dare!"

I threw caution to the winds and screamed back.

"We will! And right under your nose!"

Thus we started this shouting match, our voices getting higher, our tempers getting hotter. All this time, Gui Zhi stood by helplessly, drenched in her own tears. I don't know how this would have ended if a voice had not intervened.

"Let them in!"

It is strange, the effect of a soft voice in the middle of loud and angry shouting. I calmed down immediately. The voice was indeed unusual. Perhaps it was because the voice came from behind a gauze mask. It was not what you would call a sweet voice. But it was soothing. Like the rays of the sun in winter.

"You always let them in," the nurse complained. "There's six of them already who are not from our beat."

"They can't help it," the voice replied. "They have gone through a lot of suffering. Don't make it worse for them."

"And we, don't we suffer, too?" the nurse complained, though her anger had abated. "One after another, they all come here. As if we were the Temple of the Goddess of Birth."

"Come in," the voice behind the mask directed us. The door opened halfway.

"Thank you, doctor! Thank you, doctor!" I mumbled as I hustled Gui Zhi through the threshold, afraid that somehow the gates might close before we got through. Before they could change their minds, I dragged Gui Zhi toward the main building.

"Don't rush her like that," the voice behind me warned. "She's about to give birth. Support her properly. She is stiff with cold."

"Oh, thank you."

We stopped in front of the building, brushing off the snow from our clothes. Only then did we have a chance to see the person who had let us in.

She was a slightly plump woman of medium height, the kind of plumpness that bespeaks a heart condition. A white cap covered her head down to the forehead. The big gauze mask hid the lower half of her face. Only a pair of narrow eyes was visible between the edge of the cap and the top of the mask. Mind you, they were not what you would describe as beautifully chiseled shapes or of burning brightness. They were quite plain, but they were black and clear. Coupled with eyebrows that were lightly sketched in a straight line, they conveyed a sense of gentleness. One would imagine that the contours of her nose and mouth beneath the mask would also be soft. She was no longer young, judging from the little wrinkles creeping beneath her eyes and on her forehead. And her slightly puffed eyelids and bloodshot eyes certainly denoted fatigue.

She made me register in the lounge and then led Gui Zhi into a door on the right. I noticed that she dragged her left leg as she walked.

I finished registering and had time to look around. The little cubbyholes with REGISTRATION, PRESCRIPTIONS, and CASHIER printed on the glass panes were all shut. A door leading to the right carried many signs: DELIVERY ROOM, NURSERY, WAITING ROOM, NO ADMITTANCE. The door leading to the left carried the signs: WARDS, VISITING HOURS EVERY DAY 5:00-7:00 P.M. and SILENCE. The whole corridor was deserted. There was a hole in the door of the building, and the wind crept through, bringing flakes of snow.

After a little while Gui Zhi appeared. She had changed into the hospital's baggy striped pyjamas. She came over and stood close to me. I knew something was wrong, so I took her hand.

"Gui Zhi, do you need some food?"

She shook her head and sniffed.

"Is something the matter?"

"Doctor says that the water is out. And the position of the baby is not right …"

"But wasn't the position all right before?"

"The stupid municipal hospital! All the doctors are chased away and made to clean the latrines. That wretched girl who examined me got everything wrong. She took the baby's bottom for the head! I wanted to reassure her but didn't know what to say. Her eyes were swimming with tears.

"The doctor says that after the water is out, I mustn't walk about. I must go in." She looked at me piteously, like a hurt little lamb, with no one to protect her.

"Gui Zhi," I exclaimed after her, my voice quavering, "Courage! Don't panic! Take those cakes with you."

Suddenly a moan drifted through the freezing atmosphere. It was contagious. Immediately, more moans, some loud some soft, coming from behind the door on the right, seemed to fill the air.

We stood petrified. Gui Zhi's lips were white. She leaned against me as if she was going to fall.

"I'm scared, I'm scared," she cried.

The woman adds a word.

I was really scared to death. I daresay all women in labor for the first time must have the same feeling of dread, so hard to define. And on top of that, the pain. I could neither sleep nor eat for the pain. It was horrible. There were four of us in the waiting room and we were all moaning, sometimes singly, sometimes in chorus. We just couldn' bear up any longer. The room was so cold. Our towels were frozen into stiff icy sheets. The blankets and bed paddings felt cold and slimy to the touch. And the light bulbs in the room were all broken. Outside, through the windows, the snow on the ground was reflected in an unearthly bluish gleam. It seemed the whole place was haunted. How could we help moaning?

Our moanings finally managed to wake up the nurse, who was dozing at the table with her head on her arms. She got up to her feet and scolded us.

"Stop it! Have some control! Women bear children all the time, but I've never seen the likes of you! Just listen to this grunting! Do you all have pigs for your zodiac animal?"

She went out for a moment, then came back and said, "You three, your numbers are ten, eleven, and twelve. Your babies aren't due before midnight. Now you, number two"—she turned to a short young woman with freckles on her face—"follow me to the delivery room for observation!"

She banged the door behind her and left.

Number two followed meekly.

The man takes up the narrative.

I can hear the trio in the waiting room. Gui Zhi was the alto. The words she sang were "Oh, oh, oh …" What a tune it was! It made my hair stand on end. I am thirty-four years old, but I had never imagined that women giving birth had to go through such a hell.

"Go into the corridor, there are benches inside." The doctor was pushing a flatbed wheeler from the right door into the left. She added:

"It's warmer in there. There's no wind."

I suppose I must have been a sight, wretched with anxiety and shivering in the cold, because she smiled at me, a kindly smile.

"Don't be so tense, young fellow. Relax. I'll let you know when the time comes."

Behind the door on the right was a long corridor. The delivery room, the nursery, and the waiting room were all in there. Benches lined one wall along the corridor. I sat down on a bench.

Not far from me, on another bench, was a young fellow. He was wrapped in an army overcoat, very fashionable at the time, and was fast asleep and snoring.

I looked at my watch: 11:40.

I lay down, but I couldn’t sleep. Once I was just about to doze off when the sound of an infant’s yowl pulled me up. The wail came from the direction of the delivery room. The sleeping young fellow shot up as if he had been pricked by a needle. He glared at me.

“The baby has come?” he asked.

“Whose baby?”

“Mine! My wife is number two. Short and plump, with freckles on her face.”

“Someone like that was wheeled in a little while ago.”

“Oh, is that so?” He cocked his ears and listened.

Piercing cries of pain arose from the delivery room. Then the doctor’s voice: “Try to be quiet, you are taking too long. You mustn’t exhaust yourself. Give her the drip. Continue observation.”

“No, the baby has not come, after all.”

The young fellow held his head in his hands dejectedly. I looked at him. He looked like a bull. Low forehead, protruding eyes, short neck. All he needed was a pair of horns.

We sat next to each other on the bench, each lost in thought. From the sound of the cries, the newborn was being transferred to the nursery. Evidently its cries were catching, for very soon there was a chorus of infants’ cnes.

“Have a smoke.”

The young fellow tossed over a Battle brand cigarette. As he held his lighter I glanced at the red armband on his sleeve: Battalion of Mao TSE-TUng Thought! The Battalion! So this bull is from the detested Battalion! Suddenly I was consumed by faction loyalty and cursed under my breath:

“Wretched conservative.”

“Say that again!” He turned toward me menacingly. A livid scar under one eyebrow began twitching. His eyes shot out like a pair of bronze bell ringers. He was ready to pounce on me—just like a bull. Of course he had seen my armband, too.

It was absolutely ridiculous. The only explanation was that we were bewitched. There we were, two grown men, by pure accident passing the time in the same room, exchanging a word now and then. And suddenly we discovered we belong to different factions—warring factions, actually. And lo! We are gripped by the deadliest hate for each other, as if caught in a vendetta.

The bull and I eyed each other. The screech of loudspeakers far and near, with their mutual denunciations, seemed to egg us on. Just at that moment, however, his wife’s cries from the delivery room joined my wife’s cries from the waiting room.

“*Oh*! *Oh*! *Oh*!”

“*Ah*! *Ah*! *Ah*!”

Those cries brought us back to reality. Our militancy was completely deflated. The bull and I sighed in the same breath. We would not fight. But we did not have anything to say to each other, either. We just sat there—smoking, waiting, and miserable.

It was 4:55 in the morning. The door to the delivery room opened and a woman was wheeled out. The same flatbed wheeler. The woman’s hair was all disheveled; she looked utterly exhausted, but at peace. She had done her job.

Bull threw down his cigarette and stood in the middle of the corridor, blocking the way of the doctor who was pushing the flatbed wheeler.

“My wife has agonized for two days and two nights. Why can’t she deliver?" His voice was harsh and belligerent.

The doctor answered quietly under her mask. “Her contractions are very weak.”

“This won’t do! Two days and two nights running. This won’t do!”

The fellow stopped. Then, as if catching hold of an idea, he struck his arms akimbo.

“Mind you,” he spluttered, “me and my wife, we are workers, third-generation true-blue workers. You stuck-up city doctors, you better take care how you treat our proletarian offspring!”

The doctor’s eyes registered a bitter smile of helplessness. She tried to control her voice as she replied.

“The facilities here are very poor. But we do our best for all mothers and infants with no exception. Let us observe your wife for another two hours. If she still cannot deliver, we will use forceps.”

“Forceps?”

The young fellow lowered his head as he looked hard at the doctor. If he had horns growing over his forehead,

he would have gored her with pleasure.

"If anything goes wrong, you must answer! We are true-blue workers."

A soft sigh was emitted from under the mask. The doctor closed her eyes without saying anything.

I pulled bull out of the doctor's path.

"She is so tired. Can't you be polite?" I said to him softly.

"Polite! The old hag is probably from an evil background."\fn{I.e., her family belonged to an exploitative class, one which made its living by exploiting the pesants and workers of China.}

"Why do you say that? Did you investigate?"

"Why bother? She's a doctor, isn't she? She's been to a university. Now you tell me: before the Liberation, could you attend a university and *not* be from an evil background?"

"You can't make sweeping statements like that. Besides, she's staying at her post to help your wife. You should be grateful to her."

"Grateful! Two days and two nights!"

"If you don't like her, why don't you take your wife someplace else?"

"Go stuff yourself!"

I did not respond because the doctor now emerged from the waiting room with Gui Zhi on the flatbed wheeler.

"The baby's coming?" My heart pounded wildly.

"Soon." The doctor's eyes twinkled at me kindly. Her smile penetrated me like a ray of sunshine. And from the bottom of my heart, the words sang out. *Soon*! *Soon you'll be a father*!

The screams coming out of the delivery room rang loud and clear. It was Gui Zhi's voice. It was unbearable. "Oh, oh, I'm dying!" she screamed.

The screaming was like a whip lashing at me as I walked up and down the corridor. Finally I couldn't bear it anymore and turned into the courtyard, leaving the bull in the corridor, smoking away.

Outside, snow covered everything—the ground underfoot and the roofs of buildings overhead—bringing a measure of charm even to the dirty courtyard. The trees, which had hitherto gone, unnoticed, now stood out in snow-clad elegance, the flakes lingering on their branches looking like so many blossoming white flowers.

Sounds of commotion were still coming from the streets outside, but they seemed to come from another world, totally irrelevant, totally incompatible with this courtyard shimmering in silvery light.

The woman interrupts.

The delivery room was just as cold as the waiting room. The delivery packet was icy to the touch. The pains were getting worse by the minute. And the two loudspeakers outside gave us no peace. One screeched:

"You worms of the Battalion, surrender! Stand behind the revolutionary line! Surrender, or death!" The other loudspeaker droned on the two lines of a battle song:

"Upright stands the everlasting pine! Stalwart stands the invincible Battalion!"

Both factions kept it up through the night. If I had died that night, believe me, it would have been that loudspeaker that was responsible.

"Some people are just more fussy than others," the nurse complained, meaning me evidently, but perhaps also including number two in her condemnation. "*Eh*, what's your name?" she asked me.

"Gui Zhi."

"Family name Gui?"

"Yes."

"Where do you work?"

"The Chestnut Lane Neighborhood Dressmaking Co-operative—oh!"

"Stop whining! Don't tell me that dressmakers are more sensitive than others. Your husband's name."

"Xu Guoliang."

"Work unit?"

"Weaving and Dyeing Factory—oh, I'm freezing."

"What do you expect me to do about the weather?"

The doctor came over to check the baby's heartbeat: 124.

"A bit slow," she murmured. "Give her oxygen, and calamin injections." She patted my arm, then shook her head as she sighed. "It's hopeless. The normal temperature of a delivery room is twenty-four-point-six-degrees Celsius. You walk around in a shirt. But here"—she glanced at the barometer on the wall—"it's five degrees below zero!"

The doctor mused to herself for a moment, then resumed with spirit.

“You should all be honored with the title of Heroic Mother—to deliver your babies under such conditions. Yes, Heroic Mothers.” Evidently she was just trying to cheer us up, but the words were warming to my heart. “You must deliver your baby properly, to deserve that title!” she added.

I looked at her and nodded weakly. Her eyes were kind and warm, but also tired. My heart trembled. Suddenly I felt I had seen those eyes before. Yes, it was when I was small and had pneumonia. Under an oil lamp my mother sat by me through the night and she had looked at me just that way.

“The conditions are not too good, but that’s no reason to lose confidence. And now”—she inserted the oxygen tube into my nostrils—“you must cooperate.” She smoothed my hair as if I were a child. “Now you are all set to become a mother!”

The doctor washed and disinfected her hands and put on a sterile gown. The nurse put a platter of delivery instruments near where I lay.

There was a knocking at the door, a timid soft knocking. The nurse went out for a moment.

“It’s little Wei,” she told the doctor when she returned.

“What does he want?”

“Something happened at home, it seems.”

“Oh!” The light suddenly went out of the doctor’s eyes. She fixed her eyes on the rubber gloves over her hands and remained silent. But she did not go away. She walked over to me. Her arm was pressed against my leg. I felt a warmth where she touched me, as if she instilled some strength into me.

“Very good, very good.” The sound came from behind her mask, soft and steady.

I had no idea how the baby was born, but born it was. I heard it crying.

“A chubby daughter,” the doctor announced happily. “What a pretty girl, just born and already you can make out her features. Here, have a look.”

She lifted the baby and I saw a pink little bundle of flesh, and next to it the tired and loving eyes of the doctor.

“Thank you, doctor,” I managed to say as I felt an ice-cold drop of water trickle from my jaw into my hair.

The man takes up the story and ends it.

The minute I heard the baby’s cries, I rushed into the corridor, sat plump next to the bull, and gave him a nudge with my shoulder.

“Hey, can you hear the cries? Such a strong voice!”

The bull’s face was clouded with anger.

“What number is your wife?”

“Twelve.”

“Fuck!” he spat. "”f my baby doesn’t get here soon, I’ll bash that hag!”

The doctor poked her head out of the delivery room and called out: “Family member of Gui Zhi.” I hastened to respond.

“Your wife is all right. She just gave birth to a girl—seven *jin* and two *liang*.”

“Thank you, thank you!”

She was about to say something else when a boy rushed up to her. I had seen that boy before, when I was walking in the yard. Actually I had opened the door to him.

“Mommy!” He tried to grasp her hands.

“Don’t touch my hands. They are disinfected!”

The boy lifted himself on tiptoe and said something in his mother’s ear. The doctor had her back to me, but from the way she swayed in shock and held on to the door frame to support herself, I could tell that some calamity had occurred. So I dashed forward and prevented her from falling. She opened her eyes slowly. Her eyes were so red, so dry and dull.

“Let’s go, Mommy.” The boy tugged at her clothes.

She pushed me aside and passed by the waiting room as if sleepwalking. The groans coming from inside the room held her like a magnet. She leaned against the door of the waiting room weakly, her two hands crossed together. What could be seen of her face was as white as her gauze mask and the cap on her head. Her eyes were downcast.

“Doctor! Doctor!”

“Oh, coming.” The doctor answered in a quavering voice and walked mechanically into the waiting room.

The boy slid into a corner and wiped his tears.

Bull went over and punched the boy in the shoulder.

“Hey, little fellow, why the tears?”

"My daddy … beaten … wounded."
"Why?"
"He wouldn't let the Fight to the Death Brigade take away his books."
"What does your father do?"
"He teaches history at the Duofu Road Middle School."
"Where do you live?"
"Duofu Lane number seven."

There was a strange expression in bull's eyes. I asked him in a low voice, "Have you been to ransack their home?"

"Not I personally. But someone in our battalion had mentioned that house number, someone whose brother is a student in that school."

There was a nasty taste in my mouth. I myself had taken part in those ransack-and-search parties. Sometimes on the trail of an incriminating letter, a notebook. Sometimes just for the sense of power that they confer. We never thought of the pain that these searches caused to the victims, the parents, the spouses, the children.

I hung down my head. I did not know how to pursue the subject, but was overcome by a deep sense of guilt. How I wish I had never taken part in those lawless searches.

Who knows what bull was thinking. He also hung his head dejectedly. "Oh," he groaned as he shook back his matted hair. "Another forty minutes observation period—it is hard." He looked at his watch helplessly. Compared with that bully who threatened the doctor a while ago, he was a changed man.

The doctor appeared, helping another expectant mother from the waiting room to the delivery room. Both bull and I stood up and walked over to the doctor as if propelled by a hand from behind us.

"Doctor, about my wife—number two …" Bull said ingratiatingly.

"I'm afraid we have to use forceps."

"Mommy!" The child stood up from the corner and cried out.

"Wait a little while—there're only three more," the doctor said to the child softly, and then turned back to bull, anticipating his protests.

"It is as you say, doctor," bull said humbly. "Is there … is there any danger?"

"Of course there is danger. The child's heartbeat is too fast, while the mother's contractions are so weak. This is a case for a caesarean birth, but that is out of the question now. I'll do my best."

"Yes, yes. Whatever you say, doctor. Thank you so much for the trouble, doctor." Bull was very tense but tried to put a brave face to the situation.

"Don't mention it," the doctor said lightly, and turned to me.

"Your wife is leaving the delivery room soon, young fellow. Go and get her some breakfast. There is nothing here—no hot water, no milk. You have to get everything yourself."

"Mommy …" the child called to her again.

"Little Wei." She was on the point of saying something, looked at the child, and held back the words. Finally she just said: "You go back first." And she continued on her way to the delivery room with the expectant mother.

"Doctor!" I cried in spite of myself. "Please go back and have a look."

"Thank you." She nodded to me gratefully and added softly, "There are just three more."

As I came back carrying millet porridge in brown sugar and boiled eggs the doctor was just wheeling Gui Zhi from the delivery room into the ward.

Generally speaking, hospital wards conveyed a vision of whitewashed neatness, especially maternity wards, which also carried associations of mystery and joyful celebration. But the ward that Gui Zhi was wheeled into was more like a refugee center. The bloodstained bedclothes, the greasy pillows, and the people occupying all the space between the sickbeds, some lying, some sitting, some moving about—a perfect picture of a refugee center.

All these people were in the suite of the women who had just given birth. Among them were male and female, old and young. The floor was covered, here with dry hay, there with furry blankets. Old women squatted on the floor and gossiped. Bored old men, tucked away in a corner of the room, smoked and played cards. The children drew squares with pieces of chalk in the free space on the floor—whatever there was of it—and played hopscotch. Chicken bones and fish bones were piled behind the door, while crumpled sheets of wrapping paper were scattered allover. The whole place gave out a strange smell.

Gui Zhi was barely installed in bed by the window when the doctor who came with her was besieged by the relatives from the various suites.

"About the mother of our child, could her stitches be taken out tonight?"

"Doctor, my daughter seems to be running a fever."

"Doctor, my aunt has no appetite, why?"

The doctor looked at everybody by turn, giving one an injection, feeding some medicine to a second, and giving advice to a third. She often had to stop to clear her voice.

"Doctor, when is your next shift?"

What a stupid question! Of the one thousand and more work units in this city, could you find one that was operating normally?

So I butted in.

"Doctor, try to get a moment to yourself and get some sleep." I then realized that my advice was equally stupid. The doctor barely had time to sit. But I wanted to say something, so I asked: "And your child, doctor, where is he?"

"He is gone," she answered shortly, evidently reluctant to pursue the subject. "You should also get some sleep, young fellow." And with that she left the room.

Gui Zhi ate some breakfast and slept. She slept so soundly a cannon would not wake her. My poor little wife was completely exhausted.

For the next four days, my job was clear-cut and simple. Mother Wei cooked and all I had to do was bring food to the hospital on my bike.

Back at the hospital the next night, I spread two sheets of newspapers on the floor next to Gui Zhi's bed and spread a rug over that. And that was my bed. After tucking everything into place, I curled up and tried—unsuccessfully—to get some sleep.

I suddenly thought of bull. Why had he still not turned up? As I couldn't sleep anyway, I got up to look for him.

Two women were sitting on the bench in the corridor, probably family members of numbers ten and eleven. But there was no sign of bull.

It turned out that he was in the yard, by the wall. He was pacing restlessly backward and forward with his head in his hands. As he saw me he cried out in agony:

"My wife! She's still in there, and she hasn't delivered yet!"

There were tears in his eyes. Poor bull. The doctor's son was also in the yard. His head was bare and his ears raw with the cold. He rubbed his hands and stamped his feet. He was not crying anymore. He kept his eyes on one window of the building, the window of the delivery room. The blue curtains could be seen through the windowpanes glazed with ice.

"Why are you still here?"

"Waiting for my mommy. When the aunty in there has her baby, my mommy will go home to look after daddy."

I devoutly wished that number two would deliver her baby quickly. For the sake of bull. And for the sake of the doctor's child.

It was not until noon of the next day when I came back with Gui Zhi's lunch that I heard bull's shout of joy. "Born! Born! Eight *jin*, three *liang*! A big fat son!"

When he saw me he grabbed me and wheeled me around in a circle.

"Ah, a big fat son. Eight jin, three *liang*!"

I could hardly breathe in his delirious grip. I could understand how he was feeling, though. We faced each other with smiles, smiling from our hearts. If our comrades from the United Headquarters and the Battalion could have seen us, no doubt they would discipline us for betraying the cause. Surprisingly, at that moment, I didn't give a damn. I had changed overnight. I had become a stranger to the cause. The cries of my comrades leaping into the fray held no appeal for me. All I felt now was that they interfered with my child's birth, interfered with my wif's sleep and meals, as well as the peaceful daily lives of many families like mine. I'd had enough. And I suspect bull felt the same.

"Has the doctor gone back home?"

"Not yet, but soon," said bull confidently. "There is nobody else in the waiting room. She should go home."

"It would be indecent to keep her away from home anymore," I answered.

Half an hour later, number two was shifted to the ward. Bull fussed around her clumsily.

"How scary! The umbilical cord was wrapped in a double knot around our son's neck. Both of you nearly lost your lives. We owe everything to her."

I knew who he meant by *her* and I asked again: "Has she gone home now?"

“Probably.” But just as he spoke, there was a noisy disturbance from the direction of the yard. From the window, we could see two men both pushing their bikes, and on the two bikes were two women both wrapped up in huge blanket rolls. The two men were in loud argument with the nurse. Their voices were drowned out by the loudspeakers, which were still blaring. But from their gestures and facial expressions, I determined that—like me on the night before—these men had brought their expectant wives. And, as before, the nurse refused to admit them. And the women all wrapped in blanket rolls were suffering the same fright and pain as Gui Zhi had been suffering.

The two couples had my full sympathy. I had gone through it all. But now the nurse also had my sympathy.

The argument rose in a crescendo. Everybody in the ward gathered at the windows out of curiosity. Even the mothers who had just given birth tried to sit up in bed to have a look. Just as the argument was at its height, somebody said softly:

“Look! The doctor!”

Then we all saw the doctor emerge from the building. She had put on a dark blue padded overcoat with a gray scarf wrapped around her neck. She still had her mask on. The little boy was walking beside her. Evidently she was headed for home.

From the window we could see that when she was five or six feet from the group, she stopped in her tracks. She looked silently at the two women in blanket rolls and her eyes were full of sorrow. She went to the nurse and spoke to her. The nurse looked up in shocked surprise. I guessed what it meant, of course. The nurse could not believe that the doctor had again decided to accept the newcomers. The doctor did not explain. She just waved the two men in. The two men were all grateful smiles as they helped their wives into the building. The nurse followed slowly.

Only the doctor and her son were left in the yard. The boy’s clear-cut features were all twisted as he fought back his tears. The doctor drew him to her side, and with her delicate soft white hands, a doctor’s hands, she smoothed his hair. Her eyes looked far away. The child kept his head against his mother’s breast, waiting, hoping. They stood like that for half a minute. The doctor lifted the boy’s face slowly and forced a smile out of her puffy eyes. That smile carried apology, sorrow, and a deep love. I knew that it was precisely that kind of love that made her stretch out to others when in deep distress herself. She took out a carefully folded white handkerchief and wiped away the dirt on the child’s chin. She could not remove the stain on his forehead. *That* was not dirt, but the mark of a blow. She said something to the boy, who then bit his lips and nodded. She gave one last lingering look at the child, then turned and walked swiftly into the building.

As soon as the doors of the building were shut the boy leaned against a tree and burst into tears. His thin shoulders shook so that the snowflakes dropped from the branches of the tree he was leaning against and settled on his head and shoulders.

Suddenly the sound of shots rang out from the east end of town. With the shots, all the loudspeakers and shouts fell dead, so that the shots rang clearer than ever. Soon the shooting swallowed all other sounds and filled the air.

The bull and I exchanged glances. We both knew that the decisive battle between the two factions had started. Our feelings were mixed. If not for the birth of our babies, the two of us would be on opposite sides at the front lines. But now we were both standing shoulder to shoulder at the window of the ward looking at the weeping boy. In the far distance, a column of brown smoke rose. Bright flames broke out from the smoke.

*

The three of them ate and drank and talked. The guest seemed lost in thought. Suddenly he remembered himself and looked at his wristwatch. It was twenty minutes before his departure time. He turned to pick up his bags, then suddenly asked, “What was the name of that doctor?”

"We are ashamed to say that we found our conscience very late,” the husband replied. “When we finally realized we should seek her out and thank her, we couldn’t find her. The hospital was disbanded. The doctors were sent down to the country.”

“But she had an address in town, Duofu Lane number seven.”

“We went,” said the wife, “but somebody else was living there.”

“Wherever she goes, a doctor like that will always be respected.”

The married couple nodded in agreement.

“We are very sad that we neglected her,” said the husband. “She was a good woman.”

The guest was borne away by his thoughts, but he didn’t know how to form them into words. With another glance at his watch, he bade goodbye to his hosts and fled—toward the track where his train awaited.

21.61 Excerpt (untitled) from **Beijing Opera**\fn{by David Su Li-qun (1945-   )} Chungking, Szechwan Province, China (M) 4

… Jane was particularly excited today. She received a letter from her father saying that her brother Steven had just been posted to China to work for the British Embassy. The whole family was in London celebrating his twenty-fifth birthday, which doubled as a farewell party.

Before leaving London, Steven was first to attend a course in Chinese Culture and History, arriving in Beijing in just over a month, in October.

Jane hadn't seen him for more than two years. Like his sister, Steven had spent most of his childhood in China and only returned to England for the last two years of his secondary education. He was a pupil at the famous St Paul's School for Boys, going on to Oxford University to read Philosophy, Politics and Economics. On graduation he had spent a year and a half doing a Masters degree on Chinese History. As a student, Steven was a great squash player, representing both his school and his university at County level. After Oxford, he went through a political phase and even stood for Parliament. Around the same time he was working for a bank as their Chinese political consultant, earning a considerable salary. Steven was therefore generally regarded by his contemporaries as a high flyer. Later, he had grown increasingly fond of Oriental culture and decided to become a diplomat. His first assignment was an eighteen-month stint in Japan.

The transfer to China was a promotion—to become the second in command at the British Embassy in Beijing. He had never been an opera fan like his sister, but Steven had always loved, and was becoming quite an expert, on other aspects of Oriental art—in particular, he had spent time studying Chinese literature, antiques, painting and calligraphy.

He wrote a post-script in the letter to Jane:

> It was wonderful to get your letter, and to hear that you are thinking of studying Chinese opera, perhaps even becoming a professional! I was surprised, of course, but I do admire your determination. My ignorance of the subject is almost complete, but I did accompany Father to a few per-formances when I was little. You must forgive me for not understanding why it was considered so special! In comparison to what we have in the West, Beijing opera seemed childish and vulgar. As you know, we used to do Shakespeare at school and to me that will always remain the highest form of theatrical art. Still, I will always support you in whatever you choose to do—if this is your passion, then why not pursue it?
>
> Your brother who loves you,
>
> Steven

Jane had always known that Father would respect her opinion but she never expected Steven to give his support, so this was a wonderful surprise. Unfortunately, she also had to get the approval of her guardian before proceeding any further.

At first he shook his head, saying: "There is a lot of difference between Chinese and English culture. However skilled you might become in time, I don't think that a local audience would ever tolerate a 'foreign devil' in the midst of their traditional theatre." But Jane was not to be put off and he finally had to give in, at least to the extent of allowing her to write to her parents to solicit their opinion.

Before Jane had even begun the letter she knew that Father would not object. He was, after all, an opera fan himself. Mother, however, was extremely unlikely to say yes. Jane's mother was a member of the English aristocracy, and had always valued status above everything else. Entering the theater was not what she had planned for her daughter. Fortunately, there was a tradition of democratic decision-making in their household, where majority opinion always held sway. Steven's support was crucial and now that she had it, Jane knew that half the battle was won.

One other person was to be instrumental in shaping Jane's destiny—the owner of Lan Ling Guan, Zai Chao.
But before going to him Jane decided to confide in the poet Lin Wenqiao. She told him that she had already secured her parents' approval.

Lin's reply was straightforward: "This is the dream of a lunatic and the whole thing is utterly out of the question."

Jane asked: "Is it because I am not good?"

Lin shook his head: "If you are not good you can always work to improve. You can get a top class teacher. No, that is not the problem."

"Is it because you think I am too stupid to learn?"

Lin shook his head again: “How could that be true? You are more hardworking and intelligent than almost anybody I know.”

Now Jane smiled: “It’s because I don’t look right, isn’t it? Because I have pale skin and blue eyes, and my nose is a little higher than yours.”

Lin was exasperated.

“If you know then why do you ask?”

“This is only your prejudice speaking,” Jane replied, a little less polite than she should have been. “Who doesn’t know that opera is for the ears and not the eyes! Those who stare at the stage with their eyes wide open are not the real opera-lovers. Even if someone came to look rather than to listen, do you really think that they could tell the colour of my skin under all that wig and make-up?”

Lin was silent.

“Look at this photograph.” Jane produced a picture of herself in full costume in the role of Huang Bao Chuen.

Lin took it from her hand and examined the photograph with close attention. She was right. It was impossible to tell this was a foreigner. He turned towards Jane and took a good look at her profile. Her nose was in fact not much higher than that of an average Chinese girl. With the help of make-up this could easily be disguised.

Still, the matter was beyond contemplation. He could not agree to such folly.

Jane would not take no for an answer. She insisted on being taken to Zai Chao for a second opinion. Eventually Lin reluctantly agreed.

When they arrived at Lan Ling Guan, two guests in court attire were already seated. They had come to ask for a piece of Master Zai’s calligraphy. When they saw Lin enter with a blonde woman, the gentlemen were at a loss whether to stand up and greet her or to discreetly retreat from her presence.

Zai laughed.

“Honoured guests, please do not be alarmed. This lady is a close friend of Master Lin’s. She is also a regular amateur performer here at Lan Ling. You should see her in *The Exile of Su San.* Miss Jane is every bit as good as Master Lu Rain!”

The two officials marveled. Jane quickly added, “Please do not listen to our host, he is too gracious! I have less than one per cent of Master Lu’s talent.”

When the two men heard Jane speaking such excellent Chinese, they looked at each other and said in unison: “This lady is truly a magical creature!”

Lin asked: “What kind of scroll would the gentlemen like today?”

The fatter of the two replied: “To tell you the truth we have not come for our own pleasure today. We are here on behalf of the Ambassador to England. Apparently the British Museum has requested a sample of Master Zai’s calligraphy, to be hung above the entrance to the Oriental Wing.”

Zai added: “Ah, this was the suggestion of Master Hang Yau Wei and Master Chiang Dzi Yuen. The Ambassador wants to raise money for the new railway. As you know I am still half a monk, and earn my living selling opera tickets, so politics is hardly my milieu, but if my unworthy efforts could be of help to the country, then I am more than happy to oblige. What should I write? Master Lin, you are the scholar here, perhaps you would like to make a suggestion?”

Lin thought for a moment and said, “To present the word ‘Luck’ would seem somewhat commonplace. If we are looking for something to suit the occasion, emphasis ought to be on the relationship between the two countries. Why not make a gift of the character ‘Eternity’?”

The two officials and Zai all applauded the suggestion.

“Excellent! Master Lin, you never fail to live up to your distinguished reputation! This is exactly what I shall do! Housekeeper, please bring two pieces of paper in the largest size.”

The housekeeper disappeared.

Zai walked over to the corner of the room and took down his biggest brush which was hanging on the wall. He turned to Jane and said, “Miss Jane, it is for your country and mine. The task of grinding the ink must fall on your shoulders today!”

Jane had never seen such a large brush before. She found this all very amusing and happily agreed. With the help of Lin she began to grind the ink

The housekeeper now reappeared with two sheets of paper, each measuring about a metre square. Zai took one look and said, “This is not nearly big enough, bring another two!”

When the housekeeper returned with more sheets the two officials were given the task of pasting them together. Now the paper covered the entire floor of the living room.

Zai tucked away the tail of his long robe, rolled up his sleeves, shook off his shoes, and stood silent at the center of this vast expanse of white.

Jane did not understand what was gomg on, so Lin explained:

"Before one puts ink to paper the mind must merge into a single point. Without this focus the strokes will appear diffused. Once the brush makes contact with the paper there must not be any breaks until it lifts off the page at the end. The number of characters is irrelevant, the important thing is for the energy to flow from first to last in a single breath."

Jane now turned her gaze towards the two court officials. They were standing reverently with arms hanging by their sides, so still they appeared not to be breathing.

Lin whispered in her ear:

"Observe carefully later how the brush makes contact with the paper, how it travels, pauses and comes to a halt. The energy flows from deep within the artist. I haven't made a scroll this big in years, let alone attempted a single character! It is common knowledge that the fewer strokes there are the more difficult the task. In this way calligraphy is comparable to building a house - the less material at one's fmgertips, the harder it is to construct a frame. Without a solid structure, all the skill of execution is in the spirit!"

The ink was almost ready.

Suddenly, Zai awoke as if from a deep sleep and said: "Good, let us have another sip of tea." His whole demeanour once more relaxed. Approaching Jane's side, he dipped his forefinger into the ink to test its consistency: "A little bit longer, if you please, it is difficult to wring energy out of a dry brush."

Jane was once more perplexed. Again Lin came to the rescue:

"Master Zai would like the ink to be thicker." Then lowering his voice he said, "He was unable to locate his spirit. He will drink some tea then try again in a little while."

The tea was brought, everybody sat down again.

Zai said: "Master Lin, did you know that contained within the character for 'Eternity' is every facet of Chinese calligraphy? Let me entertain you with a little story—there are, of course, eight different strokes in the character."

He gestured to Jane to come to his side.

Zai dipped his finger into his tea and drew on the side table:

"The first stroke is a dot. The brushwork here resembles a boulder bouncing off the face of a cliff, plunging down without pause or hesitation; the second stroke from left to right is a thousand miles of flowing clouds, light in substance yet full in form; the third stroke through the center is as an ancient bark, alive with moisture without a hint of dryness; the hook aspiring skywards unleashes a hundred arrows, focused in aim, explosive in power; to the left the brush across is as waves smashing against a steady rock; the next stroke down must hold the strength to tame a wild beast in water; the seventh from right to left is shallow in appearance but searches deep towards its roots; the eighth and final stroke is as the ocean swelling up to chase the thunder."

Suddenly Zai felt his spirit rising and said:

"Quick, fetch the brush, I'll do it right now!"

The fat official presented the huge brush. Zai seized it out of his hands, ran towards the ink stone, and plunged the sable into the black, viscous liquid.Lifting his hand a little, Zai let the ink seep down so that it sank to the tip but without dripping. He collected himself for a brief moment then immediately began. Zai was holding the giant brush with both hands—first it looked as if he was rowing, turning his oar this way and that, negotiating the currents; now he was a warrior brandishing a long staff, riding the wind. Wrist, shoulders, waist, focus all moved together as a rhythmic whole, suffused with energy …

Zai finally came to a stop and everyone shouted "*Hao*!" in unison.

Jane was stunned into silence. The ink seemed to have expanded to fill up every corner of the room. Jane felt sure it was going to burst through the walls and reach out into infinite space …

Examining the brushwork, Jane could see how each stroke was perfectly balanced, in lightness and intensity, moisture and dryness. Where the ink was heavy it resembled the concentrated blackness of unmilled lead; where light, a cloud shimmering in the reflection of a new moon; where dry, the bottom of a disused well; where moist, like dew on the tip of a new spring branch. The frame of the character was lean as steel, the intricate corners delicate as carved jade. Within its power reposed a deep sense of calm, out of its strength a careless grace emerged. Here was a gaze direct yet mysterious, a beauty conscious of itself yet unimpressed by the attention it drew.

The two officials were overjoyed. The minute the ink was dry they picked up their treasure and left with overwhelming gratitude.

It was only now that Lin brought up the subject of Jane's intention to become an opera singer.
Zai thought for a moment and said:
"Female liberation is in the air. Even the Health Department has just issued an edict for women to unbind their feet. In Shanghai there is already an opera company featuring women only. These are changing times and perhaps Miss Jane's ambitions are not totally out of reach. What I worry about is whether or not she could put up with the hardship of an actor's life. This young lady has been raised like a beautiful flower in comfortable surroundings. How is she to endure such tough regimes?
"Miss Jane, first you must realize that most actors come from ordinary families, and usually end up on stage because their parents cannot feed them. Secondly, historically speaking, actors are not unlike prostitutes in one respect—once you have entered the profession it is almost impossible ever to extricate yourself. All day long you will be in the company of actors—not only are your parents likely to object, you yourself might find it limiting after a while and begin to regret your decision."
"Master Zai, I love the opera. I want nothing else from life and I am willing to take the consequences. If you would only give me some guidance I would be grateful to you forever. Please indulge my sincere request."
At these words Jane dropped to her knees and bowed low to the floor.
Zai helped her up at once and sighed.
"I can see that your mind is made up. In that case we must think carefully where best to send you."
Zai allowed himself a moment's thought: "How about the Shiao Yang Troupe? The director of the company, Yang Tien, is a good friend of mine. He is a reliable man and I would not be so worried if I knew that he was looking after Miss Jane."
"The actor from Shanghai?" Lin asked. "I hear he is as famous as can be in the south, but that this is the fIrst time he has come to Beijing. Perhaps he means to conquer the capital as well!"
"That is indeed the man I refer to. He is the prized and only pupil of the actor Hong Fang To. His martial arts skills are quite incomparable. Unusually he is also blessed with an excellent singing voice. Yang is one of those rare actors who can tackle both disciplines with equal accomplishment."
Zai continued, "When I was in Shanghai I saw some dozen operas in his repertoire and I said to him at the time, 'To be the best in Shanghai is not enough. You must have the courage to conquer Beijing. Beijing is like a dragon, Tientsin, a tiger. Until you can ride the dragon and subdue the tiger you have not reached the pinnacle of the opera profession.' In fact he was here last year to 'steal' from us. He must have seen more than eighty operas and stayed here with me for four months. He loved to talk late into the night. Yang thinks that midnight is the witching hour when all the spirits of heaven and earth congregate. Everything becomes clear to him at midnight. He wrote to me recently, asking me to draw up a plan for his visit."
"That's perfect," said Lin. "I wonder when he is thinking of making his debut?"
Zai replied, "It is not yet decided. Yang is not only hugely talented but also very ambitious. He is not like the average actor. All this time he has been quietly putting a company together. It would appear that he is not concerned with making a big splash overnight. He would rather start small, learn slowly and establish his reputation in time. This way he can build a solid foundation. Here is a man who has thought carefully about how to shape his career. If Miss Jane were to train under his auspices, her future will be assured."
Jane found it hard to contain her excitement. She knelt down again and bowing her head all the way to the floor she said:
"Thank you, Master Zai, Master Lin!" She did not know what more to say, so the young English girl kow-towed to the two Chinese masters three more times …

76.18 A Broken Promise\fn{by Zhang Zhilu (1945-)} Peking, China (M) 1

"Where did that antelope go?" Mom suddenly asked me. The antelope Mom was talking about was a piece carved from black hardwood. It was given to me by Dad when he came back from Africa. It was always on the corner of my desk. But now my heart started thumping faster because I had already given it to my best friend, Wan Fang, yesterday.
"Didn't Dad say he gave it to me as a present?" I said quietly.
"I know he gave it to you, but where is it now?" Mom's eyes were riveted on me. I discovered that things weren't as simple as I had thought.
"I put it away."
"Where'd you put it? Get it for me to look at." Mom apparently could tell I was lying, because I stood there

motionless with my head lowered, not daring to look at her.

"Now tell the truth. Did you take it out and sell it?" Mom got very stern.

"I didn't sell it, I gave it away." I could feel my voice wavering.

"Who did you give it to? Out with it." Mom rested her hand on my shoulder.

"I gave it to Wan Fang. She's my best friend."

"Go now and ask for it back!" Mom said firmly. "How can you just give someone something as valuable as that? Or else, I'll go with you."

"No!" I shouted in tears. Dad walked in, and after hearing Mom explain what had happened, he quietly lit a cigarette, and slowly said to me:

"It's not that children can't give things to each other, but it depends on what it is. This kind of valuable object is not like a little cake or a piece of candy. How can you take it upon yourself?" Dad's tone of voice was very even, but with a force that you couldn't defy.

"But you gave it to me."

"Yes, I gave it to you, but I didn't give you permission to give it to somebody else!"

I had no argument. When I realized that they were going to make me go right away and ask for the antelope back from Wan Fang, I felt very sad. They didn't know what a good friend Wan Fang was and how much she believed in principles.

We'd been together since nursery school. She's a good student, and not at all selfish. The two of us are so inseparable that our language arts teacher calls us a "dialectical synthesis of two into one."

Last week at a physical education class, we were all wearing newly-bought gym clothes. After playing "leap the goat," we chased each other around a small tree. I accidentally caught my pants on a branch, ripping a big hole in them. I sat under the tree furtively wiping away my tears and bemoaning my pants, scared to go back home where I would be scolded. Wan Fang also stopped playing, sat down next to me and sighed long sighs. Sud- denly, she jumped up and slapped her thigh and exclaimed:

"Let's first switch pants. My mom is a first-class seamstress, she can sew up the pants so that you won't even be able to tell from the outside."

Then I felt that I'd been saved, and switched pants with Wan Fang. Later I learned that because of this, her mother made her stand facing the wall for an hour.

"Why didn't you say that the pants were mine?"

She laughed. "My mom is a gossip. If she knew, sooner or later she'd let your mom know too."

Then I wanted to switch back our pants. But she said differently, "Forget it. In any case I've already stood for an hour. If we switch again, you'll just be punished by having to stand another two hours."

Even now I'm still wearing her gym pants. Whenever we have physical education class and I see that big scar on her pants, I feel sorry for what I did to her.

Yesterday, Wan Fang came to my house to play. When I saw her admiring the antelope on my desk, I picked it up and put it in her hands.

"I'll give it to you. We are good friends forever—forever." She was very excited to have the gift, and in return she took out of her pocket a curved retractable knife and gave it to me.

I don't know for how long, but Granny had been standing in my door. She certainly wanted to say something, but didn't. Mom took a tin of candied fruit from the drawer.

"It's not that I don't understand what's called for. I know you wanted to give something to your good friend. Give her this tin of candy. Your father and I just can't bear to give away that antelope." I could tell from Mom's eyes how much that antelope was worth to her. She and Dad were watching me, as if they were waiting for something. I knew the situation was hopeless. Tears streamed down my cheeks. It was very quiet in the room.

"That's enough!" Granny suddenly said. "This isn't any good."

Mom stood up and pushed the tin of candy toward me.

"You don't know how precious that wood carving is!"

I couldn't stand it anymore. Pushing away Mom's candy, I flew out of the room.

Clutching the little knife that Wan Fang had given me I thought as I walked. What would I say? Would she remain on good terms with me as before? I doubted it. I knocked lightly on her door. The door opened and Wan Fang stuck her head out and pulled me inside:

"Wan Fang …" I stood in the entrance hall, not wanting to go further.

"What's the matter with you? And no umbrella. Did you get a whipping?" Wan Fang looked at me quizzically.

"No." I slowly took the little knife from my pocket. "Can you give the antelope back to me …?" I could barely

hear my own voice.

Wan Fang was silent for a while, not taking back the little knife. She just bit her lips and looked at me. I lowered my eyes, not daring to look back at her.

"Didn't we agree on it yesterday? How come you're acting like this today?"

I was struggling not to cry. Just then her mother carne out of the room. Seeing the little knife in my hand and our appearance, she immediately understood.

"Wan Fang, do you have something of hers?"

Wan Fang glanced at me and ran into the room. After a while she emerged with the antelope. Her mother took it from her.

"Ai-ya! How could you take something so valuable from someone?" She handed me the antelope. "Take it and be careful with it, don't be sad. I'll be giving her a lick or two!"

I handed the knife over to her.

"Auntie! I gave her the antelope. It's all my fault." When I raised up my head, Wan Fang was already gone. She wasn't going to be my friend any more.

I slowly walked down the street alone. The moon came out. In the cold, I gave an involuntary shiver. There was no sound at all on the street. Suddenly I heard someone calling my name. I turned around to see Wan Fang running. up. She pressed the little knife into my hand.

"Take it. We're still good friends."

I stared at her blankly, unable to keep from crying. I felt I was the saddest person in the world! I had broken my promise to a friend. I had done such a shameful thing!

Yet, was I completely to blame?

78.74 Locks\fn{by Cao Guanlong (1945-)} "rural Zhejiang," China (M) 5

"According to our reports, Master Numbskull has been buying quite a few locks recently and seems to be spending a lot of time in his room fiddling around with them in a very suspicious fashion. No one knows what in the world he's up to!"

One of the investigation case workers was flipping through the folder of materials gathered from informers as he conscientiously presented his report. The Special Investigation Team attached to a certain university was right in the middle of the regular meeting it held each week to exchange intelligence. But his report seemed to disappear into the hum of murmuring voices, failing somehow to attract any attention from the others who were sitting around the office in small clusters, some cracking watermelon seeds between their teeth, others absorbed in paring their fingernails. Nor was this lack of response surprising, considering that this particular Special Investigation Team had already made quite a name for itself throughout the city. Having become accustomed to handling the really big stuff, who could expect them to show any interest in this kind of small potatoes?

"Are you trying to tell us that that old duffer is attempting to pull something off? You must be kidding," somebody finally responded after a long while.

"Oh, I guess you probably haven't ever heard the story about him, quite a funny story, too. It seems that a few years back, a burglar jimmied the door to his room and made off with his radio. Master Numbskull was, in fact, wide awake at the time, but he was so scared he couldn't even croak out a sound. Well, the burglar was long gone, vanished into the night by the time the old boy had climbed out of his bed and crept over to close the door, trembling every step of the way. *That's* when he began scampering around the room yelling 'Stop! Thief!'"

A burst of raucous laughter engulfed the room. The chief investigator of the Special Investigation Team sat back comfortably in his handsome swivel chair of glossy walnut, taking in his staff's reports with complete aplomb. The old saying, "you can't play with ink without staining your hands" certainly has something in it. This intrepid and battle-tested "pebble," having been immersed in the slimy mire of intellectuals for quite some time, was actually becoming a little refined in his gestures and choice of words. A dangerous sign. From among a big heap of "the spoils of war" stacked up beside him, the chief investigator casually plucked out a faded brown copy of the earliest extant edition of the *Zhoubisuanjing,* a Zhou Dynasty treatise on astronomy and trigonometry printed under the Southern Song Dynasty.\fn{1127-1179AD.} After absentmindedly flipping through its ancient pages, he took this work, written before the Qin Dynasty,\fn{221-210BC.} the first Chinese work on mathematics, and blithely, even jauntily, tossed it into the fireplace. Truly it may be said that heavenly justice is all-encompassing, and though its millstone may grind slowly, it grinds exceedingly fine. This classic work on mathematics somehow escaped the large-scale book-burning by the dictatorial First Emperor, Qinshi-huang—but

have no fear, for after two thousand years, it had in the end been brought to bay and exterminated by the iron hand of "total dictatorship." The chief investigator, having served as the executioner privileged to carry out final justice, watched appreciatively as the pages of that irreplaceable book writhed painfully in the flames. At the same time, he demonstrated his command of that bureaucratic jargon, an amalgam of Shanghainese and Mandarin favored by Party officials, unctuously summing up the discussion by delivering this drawled-out pronouncement:

"Master Numbskull, ahh, fancies himself the proponent of some theory of; umm, what was it, uhhh, oh, yes, I've got it, he concocted some theory of probability. Let's see now, didn't he propound some universal, ahh, some universal law?"

His female secretary immediately picked up this thread.

"Yes, he once propounded *A Series of Most Refined Mathematical Formulae Governing All Changes in the Universe from the Movement of Galaxies to the Propagation of Mosquitoes, from the Ebb and Flow of Oceanic Tides to the Rise and Fall of Continents*; or something along those lines."

"Um-hmm." The chief investigator nodded approvingly and continued,

"During the past several years, he has been in no position to do any teaching or to carry out any research, since he spends all day in custodial work. Naturally he can't help being a little bit out of it. I would imagine that, quite possibly, he's now taken a wild notion that there is some great mathematical law to be derived from studying the inner workings of locks!"

Another big outburst of sycophantic and scornful laughter.

"However, there's another aspect to this, and that is that recently the old boy has been toeing the line and behaving himself a lot more the way these people ought to." Adopting a magnanimous tone, as if graced with that certain generosity of spirit and tolerance politicians ought to have, the chief went on to amplify his remarks: "He now seems to be quite well disposed toward all of us here in the Special Investigation Team office. Why, this week alone he's come round six times already to report to me on his ideological progress. That's not to say that the old muddle-head doesn't run off at the mouth and spew out a lot of jumbled nonsense, but still and all, there's no denying that this kind of attitude is pretty good, isn't it?"

*

Master Numbskull was, in fact, surnamed Dai. But during the time when all intellectuals were subjected to relentless attack for being "unable to tote a rifle, plow a field, or swing a hammer," people started intentionally mispronouncing his name as Dai.\fn{Slow-witted.} It was thus that he became "Professor Numbskull." Then with the campaign in which Master Kong\fn{Confucius.} and Master Laozi]fn{Lao Tzu.} were selected for a flood of public invective, "Professor Numbskull" became "Master Numbskull."

Master Numbskull actually was a bit numbskulled when you come right down to it. Take that incident last year, for instance. The Special Investigation Team had just received glowing commendations from the city's revolutionary committee and from senior officials in the central government for having broken up an enemy intelligence network in which several hundred intellectuals working in more than a dozen institutions of higher learning and research had been implicated and arrested. The entire Special Investigation Team, along with various big shots and lower officials of the university, had organized a celebration banquet. Professor Dai, now known to everyone as Master Numbskull and still under detention for further interrogation at the school, was pressed into temporary service as a waiter. After three rounds of toasts, all of the brave "gestapo," well-renowned for their derring-do, were already muddled with drink. According to the customary order of things at such banquets, a course of fresh fruit was supposed to have been served at this point to help the revelers sober up.

"Hey, Master Numbskull, run out and buy us a few pounds of tangerines!"

An hour or more went by, but Master Numbskull was still nowhere to be seen. Eventually the sleuths, now sprawled and lolling here and there throughout the banquet room, suddenly recalled having sent him out for tangerines. They leapt to their feet in consternation. Almost sober, they grabbed their long lances and charged out through the door, each one screaming curses and dire threats against the old scoundrel for having proved himself unworthy of the trust they had placed in him. Just who did he think he was, trying to evade his well-deserved punishment?

In hot pursuit, the revelers got no farther than the main gate of the university when they were greeted by the sight of a large crowd of people gesticulating and laughing in front of the night-time shop across the street. Master Numbskull's pursuers dashed across to see for themselves what was going on. The crowd, catching sight of glinting spears rushing their way, supposed this to be yet another bout of armed struggle. They scattered shrieking in all directions, thereby revealing the singular object that had been the center of their attention. A man was sitting underneath the shop window, all scrunched over, tangerines strewn and rolling on the ground around him. As the

advancing spear carriers drew near, they could see it was none other than Master Numbskull!

The paper bag in which the tangerines had been sold to him was spread on his lap. He was bent over it, availing himself of illumination from the shop's electric light-bulb, totally absorbed in the tiny symbols and words that covered its every inch. His bald head bent down so close to that old paper bag that he was the very image of a round-shelled snail obliviously devouring a leaf, bite by bite, greedily munching away on it, savoring it, digesting it. His ears did not register any of those vicious curses, much less did his eyes observe the welter of shoes surrounding him. It was not until a hand suddenly cuffed him a good one on the back of his head that Master Numbskull blankly looked up. The cold metallic gleam of a spear tip flashing right in front of his nose abruptly reminded him of the errand on which he had come. In a panic, he frantically tried to gather up all the loose tangerines. One of the spear carriers rudely snatched the paper bag away, and holding it up to the light for a look, flew completely off the handle, screaming with rage:

"It's that same fiendish obsession of his!"

It just so happened that the paper out of which this particular bag had been fashioned was a page from some unknown mathematician's handwritten manuscript, its title running straight and true across the top: *Applying Optimization to the Refining of Pharmaceuticals*.

Back in his room, our friend Numbskull was now writing out this week's seventh report on his ideology. This man, who could frolic freely and dive to spectacular depths in the ocean of numbers, found it an altogether different matter when faced with stunts such as "carrying out revolution in the depths of one's soul." Trying to cope with this type of thing, he was just like a carp who has flipped out of the water into an ash heap; the more he thrashed around, the more flummoxed he became. Nonetheless he kept at it, slowly and laboriously filling up the paper with words.

He wrote, first of all, that his being confined in isolation and undergoing investigation completely proved the concern and care shown him by the Party organization; then he wrote some more, saying that the instruction he had received from the chief of the Special Investigation Team far outweighed the ten lean years he had spent as a poor student struggling to become educated; and he went further, writing that now there really and truly was a gratifying spring-like warmth and gentleness in the office of the Special Investigation Team, and so on and so forth. Resorting to characters almost as large as the standard script of Liu Gongquan,\fn{A note reads: *Famous calligrapher, 778-865AD*.} he finally managed to fill up five or six pages of this latest report on his thinking.

Quickly scanning it once, he folded it up and slipped it into his pocket. Then he pulled open the drawer of his desk and took out six separate bunches of steel wires of various lengths and shapes, each with a hook or twist on one end. His hand reached out to turn off his desk lamp. This left him sitting in the dark, just like a Buddhist monk meditating as he counts his beads. Reciting words and numerals under his breath, the professor concentrated on carefully feeling each wire with his fingertips. This done, he slipped each packet cautiously into an inside pocket and then patted them to be sure they were in place. He sat there in the silence of his room, his accelerated respiration rasping extraordinarily loud and distinct in his ears. All of a sudden the table clock struck nine. The professor jumped to his feet and was gone out the door.

His pallid face was illuminated by the street lamps, and the corners of his lips tightened into frequent spasmodic grimaces. A cold chill ran down his spine, while his forehead exuded drops of sweat as large as beans. Stealthily ducking into a line of stumpy trees and scrambling through a hole in the fence around the university campus, the professor then crept silently along a wall until he could slip inside a small French-style building. He brushed off his clothes and began to climb the stairs to the second floor. Although he stopped time and again to take in deep breaths in an effort to calm his nerves, his legs simply refused to stop their wild trembling as he climbed the staircase. There was no light upstairs and the whole corridor was pitch-black. Starting from the head of the stairs, the professor counted out five paces, then reached out and groped around in the dark. Sure enough his hand soon came into contact with the labyrinthine keyhole of the "Empress" brand lock with which the door to the Special Investigation Team's office had been specially fitted.

With the latest installment of his "thought report" in his left hand, he rapped lightly several times with the knuckle of his right index finger, pressing his ear against the door. No sound came from within. Then he beat several times on the door with the open palm of his hand and still there was no response. Without further delay, the professor wadded up his "thought report" and stuffed it into his pants pocket. Quickly fishing out those packets of wires, and softly repeating a six-digit number to himself, he pulled out a specific hooked wire from each of the packets according to a predetermined sequence. Next he combined these into a certain configuration and inserted them by feel into the keyhole. Holding their ends tightly between his thumb and forefinger, he twisted and jimmied these springy wires rhythmically back and forth, in and out, but the mechanism of the lock

simply would not budge. Thereupon he recited another sequence of numbers and tried a different set of six steel wires, again to no avail.

Time slid by in perfect silence, nothing to mark its passing, as the professor stuck to his sequence and methodically tried one configuration after another. As he worked, he gradually entered a different state of mind, akin to euphoria or dementia. Cowardice, anxiety, trembling, giddiness had all vanished into the night, leaving him fully concentrated on the job of picking the lock. It seemed his other senses and every part of his nervous system not employed in this task had ceased to function for the duration.

Had the professor's skull turned into a transparent glass dome right then, we could most assuredly have seen a miraculous sight: the bulging surface of the professor's brain would have appeared to us as the fluorescent screen of an oscilloscope with a single point of light glowing and sparkling on it there in the dark. That nodule of light would be the supreme center of stimulation among the many functional areas of his brain. The "fuel' supplied to the brain calls to stoke its cogitational activities—those high-energy phosphotidic acids—would have nearly all converged at this hot point and be intensely metabolizing, reacting, combusting, emitting a dazzling glow. But the tens of billions of nerve cells surrounding this one center of stimulation were all inactive, temporarily held in check; they would have shown up as nothing but an inert gray mass on the fluorescent screen.

That glowing point of light would be the quintessential nature of the professor and would represent the crucial characteristic of many, many other scientists who lose themselves so completely in their work. It is this temperament that has accomplished so many great discoveries and inventions. But in this particular environment, with danger lurking all around, what would this special temperament bring to the professor?

Everything was proceeding according to his pre-established plan of attack. The professor himself was calm and collected, his movements sure and deft. He was totally oblivious to the fact that he was in the middle of a very dangerous and tricky piece of business. He was like a superbly skilled surgeon performing a delicate operation to set the stirrup bone in the middle ear.

The eighth configuration of wires finally did the trick, turning the mechanism of the lock around twice with the faint sound of metal springing into place. The professor turned the door handle and the door slowly opened to him. He nipped in through the door, immediately closing it behind him, then leaned back against it to catch his breath before setting off through the darkness.

"Three steps forward," he muttered. "Now three to the left, now two to the right, here we are!" He reached out to touch the chief investigator's office desk. It was right where it was supposed to be. Detouring round the chief's chair, he brushed up against a pile of books stacked in the corner. He then squatted down and felt around with his hands until he found what he was groping for—a square bundle of papers tied up with four crisscrossing pieces of twine.

"Right, this is it!"

Everything had gone off without a hitch and the object he was after was now in his hands. After a few seconds, a sudden thought struck Professor Dai just as he was about to clear out of this frightening place. "Could I have gotten the wrong one?" So he put the bundle of papers down on the desk and, bending over it with the window at his back, struck a match, which clearly illuminated the title on its wrapper: *An Inquiry into the Criteria for Uniqueness in the Q Process*.

"That's it! That's it!"

A tremor of delirious joy swept through his body; his legs went weak at the knees and then gave way as he sank backward into the chief investigator's upholstered swivel chair. The flame from the match quavered, calling forth dim shapes of desks looming all around, ever so like wild beasts lurking in a mountain cave, peering malevolently at this uninvited guest who dared to trespass within their lair. The match burned down and began to singe his fingertips, but the professor was unmindful even of this.

"I wonder how he begins his argument," mused the professor. "The opening argument generally determines the whole exposition. Just a quick glance. I'll just take a peek at the first page and then get out of here."

With two final quavers, the match flame went out. Incredibly, the professor's hand now inched through the darkness toward the switch on the desk lamp.

Click!

The room was suddenly filled with eye-piercing light. Please don't blame the professor too harshly for his foolhardy self-indulgence. If we could comprehend the far-reaching and decisive significance that the content behind that abstract and peculiar title had for the future of ballistic accuracy, earthquake prediction, meteorological forecasts, plant and animal genetics, and so on, or if we had any conception of the history of probability studies during this past half century, in which so many experts have expended so much effort on this very topic, about

which to this day they are unfortunately still groping in the fog, perhaps we would then be able to appreciate the nearly magical allure of this manuscript for the professor.

Just as the pearl diver who has gone through great hardship finally to get his hands on a large and promising oyster shell, and who needs only to pry that shell gently open in order, perhaps, for a pearl of breathtaking luster to come into view, likewise the professor could not resist the hope that out of that bundle of papers would emerge a pearl of wisdom to rise up into the limitless starry firmament of knowledge, there to radiate its light and guide mankind's eternal voyage in search of truth. When one thinks of it this way, even if you were risking your neck in a wildly pitching sampan, do you think you could have withstood the intense desire to take one little peek?

The first page had long been turned over; the professor had not kept his promise to himself. The second page had followed, and the third …

It was just like the good old days when he used to sit beneath that pale yellowish light, so warm and cheerful, back at the faculty room correcting graduate students' papers in the dead of night. He ran his eyes rapidly through pages filled with line after line of abstruse and monotonous numbers, signs, equivalences, equations. He resembled the conductor of an orchestra silently poring over the score of a colossally complex symphony; merely from notes, dots, and lines on paper, the maestro can hear in his mind's ear the forceful, surging resonance of the piano, the dolorous tremolo of the violin, the soaring clarion call of the trumpet, the heart-stopping barrage of the kettledrum's roll …

The professor was intoxicated, his whole body and soul intoxicated. He couldn't help slapping the table in delight at the incisiveness and boldness of the thesis, he whistled to himself and exhaled repeatedly in admiration of the finely honed and tightly argued proofs. Again like a conductor, who detects a few faint discordant tones present somewhere in the orchestra's harmonious chords, the professor also had to shake his head and sigh at the occasional oversight or mistake in the thesis. He reached out to take an old-fashioned steel pen from the penholder on the desk, the very same pen that had split countless good and innocent couples asunder, that had separated children from parents, destroyed homes, sent good people to their deaths. Dipping the nib into the inkwell, he painstakingly set to work refining the manuscript with a mark here and stroke there …

Those amazing spies in thrillers and detective stories are often depicted as possessing a sixth sense. In tight spots, they are always able to maintain all six senses in a state of heightened alertness so that they absorb and process the slightest bit of data captured from their surroundings and thus prevail over their opponents and protect themselves. Although our good professor had mastered the art of picking locks to a degree that probably would have left Sherlock Holmes wide-eyed and gape-jawed, what happened to him next further demonstrates, unfortunately, that he really was not in the same league as the great detectives and spies.

The sky in the east was beginning to turn fish-belly pale, but he did not notice. The early morning sun began to shine in through the iron bars on the window, but he was completely unaware of it. Nor did he perceive the peal of voices as people did their collective morning exercises on the playground outside. He didn't even know what to make of the earsplitting cry of surprise from the woman secretary as she opened up the office that morning.

Several items of incriminating evidence were collected when they searched the professor's room:

First, there were all those disassembled, shiny metal parts of door locks found in his desk drawer.

Second, there was a small notebook chock-full of numbers, plus a great many sketches and diagrams of hooks that looked like steel wires. Third, there was a blurry letter written on coarse straw paper. It read:

> To my esteemed teacher, Professor Dai:
>
> I'm afraid I haven't much longer to live. They want me to confess to being an enemy intelligence agent and several shifts of them are interrogating me around the clock; they persist in smashing my head—very hard—against the concrete wall in the air raid tunnel. This happens every day!
>
> My capacity for logical thinking has been ruined. There was a time when you used to praise my memory, but now I can't even recite the multiplication tables! When you're a mathematician and you have your cerebrum destroyed, then what's the use of living, anyway?
>
> Since I'm an orphan and you were my teacher, I have to be counted as one of your children. Permit me to unburden myself and leave my last words to you as to a loving father.
>
> Some years ago I wrote "An Inquiry Into the Criteria for Uniqueness in the Q Process." But even though I completed the manuscript, I didn't publish it because there were still certain places that needed further consideration. Who would have imagined that the manuscript and I would come to grief simultaneously?
>
> The last time I was taken into the Special Investigation Team's office for interrogation, I noticed that my manuscript had been thrown into a corner near the chief investigator's desk where all kinds of books lay in a big pile.
>
> This body of mine is now nothing but a worthless piece of junk waiting to be discarded; whether it is buried or cremated doesn't matter. But what I've written could conceivably offer some useful leads that would contribute to the eventual solution of this major mathematical proposition. Just the thought that those pages might wind up being used as

kindling or burnt as waste paper makes my head whirl and throb in the most horrible way. . .

"Goddamn! The creep was about to die and he still tried to pull a fast one right under my nose!"

The chief investigator, feeling that he had been duped, finally dropped all pretense of refined civility and vented his ire in loud cursing.

"I know this handwriting! This letter was written by that bastard who killed himself last month by slitting open his carotid artery. That's it, no mistaking it!"

Those several sets of steel hooks, the miscellaneous contents of the professor's desk drawer and the indecipherable notebook were all sent to the responsible unit for analysis. After a long time, they came out with their formal appraisal:

> The pieces of metal found in the drawer are all parts of "Empress" brand door locks. Furthermore, each metal part bears clear traces of having been sawed, filed, chiseled, hammered or otherwise manipulated in the process of being taken apart and broken down for analysis.
>
> The numbers recorded in the notebooks represent the nearly ten thousand possible states of the cylinder of said lock as constituted by the permutations of the sequence and lengths of its six tumblers; and, the general formula for opening the lock as derived from the above. The hook diagrams are the simplest key components derivable from the formula.
>
> Following the sequences prescribed for each set of six-digit numbers in the notebook, we have grouped the six sets of steel wire hooks into all possible combinations and then experimented with them on all the "Empress" locks we have in storage. The results have yielded success in opening every lock without exception.
>
> The "Empress" door lock is a new type of lock reserved for official use in China after the incorporation during the last few years of comprehensive improvements over its model, the 1940 German product called the "Swastika Brand" security lock.

79.114 A Soldier In The Tianshan Mountains\fn{by Li Binkui (1945-)} Heyang County, Shanxi Province, China (M) 12

Plucking up courage, I hitch-hiked all by myself and arrived at Dry Gully. I headed straight for the troops' quarters, but to my great disappointment I found the barracks deserted, for the soldiers had all gone to the worksite in the depth of the Tianshan Mountains.

In the whole hostel, which was merely a few rows of prefabs, there was only one other guest. She was a rather attractive woman of about thirty, with an oval face and fine features. She had a little white flower pinned on her black woollen jacket. What puzzled me, however, was that her eyes were swollen with tears. She was mumbling to herself:

"Haizhou, I shouldn't have left you. I've let you down."

The fierce wind was roaring over the vast Gobi Desert in the sandstorm and dust was swirling everywhere. I pushed the table and the spare bed board against the window and the door to give them proper support. Then I put on a gauze mask, and lay on the bed fully clothed. I stared blankly at the ceiling.

I had asked my factory management for permission to come and attend the conference on the improvement of shears in Xinjiang, because Zhitong had written to me several times, saying:

"Please come, Qian. It's a good chance to see for yourself how we soldiers live and work in the Tianshan Mountains. I'm sure you'll be able to understand me better after this."

The evening I set off, his mother came to see me with a large bag of toffees and asked me to give it to him personally.

It was bad enough, this sandstorm raging outside the troops' headquarters. What the devil would it be like up in the mountains? It so happened that Han, the Fifth Company Commander had just come down to the hostel to see the young woman. So I began wondering whether I should ask him to give the sweets to Zhitong. Then I decided that I shouldn't as he had phoned Zhitong shortly after my arrival, shouting merrily into the receiver:

"Deputy Battalion Commander, your girl-friend is here to see you. All the way from Peking! She has brought with her a bag of wedding sweets!"

Oh, my gracious! For three months, I had not written him even a short note. I came here simply because I wanted to put an end to our whole affair. There was a good deal of truth in what my friend Xiao Tian had said. He pointed out that it would be another year before Zhitong, now thirty-one, came to see his relatives in Peking and that if I were to wait till then to let him know how I felt, it would mean another year's debt of emotion, so to speak. But what could I possibly say when I saw him again, here? Better write him a letter instead. That was a good idea! I threw off my quilt and got out of bed.

"Comrade Zheng Zhitong," I began. But what an awkward address! And my words sounded cold and heartless. No, I should have written "Dear Zhitong." Every time I began my letter with his name, he would appear in my mind: a stalwart young man with a pair of penetrating eyes. His exploding merry laughter would also ring in my ears. At this moment I seemed to see him standing beside me, fondling my black hair and saying to me, "Qian, it is awfully heartless of you! I've made up my mind to go back to Peking with you. I'll never leave you again."

"Impossible," I said to myself. Then I changed my mind as I pursued my thoughts. "Why be so pessimistic when you are coming to meet him in the mountains?" I argued within myself. Many a time had I argued thus and now I went over the arguments all over again.

Suddenly, I hurled down my pen, crumbled the paper and flung myself onto the bed. I began weeping. Inside, the lamp cast its dim, pale light on the young woman who looked like a bronze statue lying down; outside, the wind howled all night long vehemently shaking the low hut.

Early the next morning, a leading comrade from the worksite arrived in a jeep and went away with the woman guest I was feeling so miserable and began pacing the room, when Company Commander Han rushed in, his weather-beaten face lit up with a mysterious smile. He handed me a flattened matchbox, on which were these words:

Qian, sorry to have kept you waiting. Something has cropped up and needed immediate attention. See you tomorrow.
Zhitong

The scratchy handwriting obviously was a sign of the great hurry he must have been in. I felt uneasy.

"What could have happened?" I wondered.

"Apparently, there hasn't been any transport service for the past couple of days," said Han. His hasty explanation and the white flower on the young woman's jacket increased my anxiety. I could not wait a minute longer. I wished I could see him right away.

"Let's go at once!" I said and hurried out.

Without the slightest hesitation, I climbed into the cabin of a lorry, which was loaded with food supplies.

*

The lorry was racing into the mountains. The asphalt road, wider than I had expected, took a serpentine course along the mountainside. All around were dense woods of firs which blotted out the sun; at the bottom of the valley flowed a river carrying with it chunks of ice. Because the road was not yet open to traffic, there were only a few trucks passing by. The gloomy ravine was quiet and chilly.

So this was the road built by Zhitong! This was the road which many a time his letters had made me visualize in my excited imagination! A new feeling came over me, as if I had entered the world of poetry or some dreamland. Indeed, our romance was like a dream …

In 1971, there was a great stir in our school. At the meeting convened with a view to urging the school-graduates to go to the countryside, someone suddenly expressed his doubts.

"We school-graduates should certainly receive re-education from the poor and lower-middle peasants," he remarked. "But what about the problem of unemployment in China?"

The whole school was stunned and Zhitong's name spread around the campus. A meeting was then called to criticize him. Everyone was curious to see what that bold, unorthodox, reactionary element would do. By a stroke of luck, I was the first to denounce him. But my solemn speech, reinforced by gesticulating, was interrupted by giggles from the audience. I glowered at them in my indignation and found Zheng Zhitong sitting in the middle of the first row. He was shaking his close-shaved head superciliously, his face turned upward, as if he had nothing to do with the meeting. So, after this, the meeting was not taken too seriously. I took him to the Red Guards' headquarters.

"Trying to be different and provocative, eh?" I demanded, banging the table.

"What about you? A girl with a boy's haircut, aren't you trying to be different and provocative?" he sneered and looked at me with his piercing eyes.

I blushed, my lips blue with rage, but I couldn't find any words for a retort. A few days later, Zheng Zhitong put up a big character poster announcing that he would live and work in the countryside of Shaanxi, the sacred place of the Chinese revolution.

He and I happened to have been assigned to the same village. I felt triumphant. He had, after all, repented and volunteered to re-educate himself!

"Zheng Zhitong, you should have stayed behind for your employment prospects," I said to him, tongue in

cheek, on the way to the countryside of Shaanxi. “What on earth has made you choose the Loess Plateau?”

“Do you know how the Americans developed their Western areas?” he laughed and went on. “Look at our forefathers who went to the border areas and kept watch on the frontier!”

I ignored his remarks and chuckled to myself.

Then he burst into laughter. I had never heard a laugh so strange and so loud ever since I was born. I was annoyed; but some of the schoolmates cheered him, others whistled and even stamped the floor.

“Don’t be conceited!” I cursed under my breath. “I may be a junior middle school graduate, but I look down upon those college students or even their professors. You have got nothing to be proud of. You are dull-minded, like a sturdy bull.”

Two years went by. All the political movements had not turned anything for the better. School graduates, bottles in hand, tried to cultivate influential people in order to get themselves transferred back to Peking. Those with their precious connections jeered at me and left; those without vented their spleen on me for the simple reason that I had taken the lead in upholding principles.

My enthusiasm was gradually waning, and finally 1 became disillusioned too. Since I had refused to wheedle my way back to Peking, I had no other alternative but to stick it out. I wished I were dead! In retrospect, I could not help feeling sorry for what I had done to Zheng Zhitong. So I began observing how he reacted to things around. He was no longer what he used to be: no inspiring speeches, no high-sounding comments. He became taciturn; day in and day out he farmed in the fields and didn’t say a word even at meals. All his spare time was devoted to the perusal of philosophical books or magazines, which he kept under his pillow and worn-out mattress. There was a deep frown on his brow all day long, and he was lost in thought as if he had to solve all the world’s problems.

One summer afternoon, there was a sudden rainstorm and presently water was cascading from the eaves. A thunderbolt struck an elm tree in the courtyard. Zheng Zhitong, barefooted, in his vest and shorts, was making his way down the village. Sheer danger and stupidity! I cried and rushed out into the rain, chasing him. I spotted him standing on a precipice gesticulating, looking at the sky. When I had come close, I heard him reciting a poem of the Song period:

The great river flows eastward,
washing away traces of the great men,
generations past …

“Are you crazy?” I ran up and caught his arm, wondering how I had plucked up my courage.Perplexed, he looked at me and said:

“You yourself are crazy, too.”

“You must have gone mad rushing into the rainstorm like this. Aren’t you trying to kill yourself?”

“Killing myself? I’m just having a rain bath in the storm!” He looked calm but serious as he uttered every word clearly. I tried to size him up agan. When he realized what I had been worrying about, he burst into his usual ear-piercing laughter.

“You are making a fool of yourself, Cultivator,” he said. (Cultivator was the name I chose for myself when I began work in the village.) “The open country, now glorying in this lightning, rainstorm and howling wind, is a poem in itself! It has bred heroes for so many generations. Why should we be scared and stay away from these testing forces of nature, here in this very sacred place of the revolution which has given us a new China? Come along, let’s have a walk!”

His romantic and warm words drove away my cold and for the first time I had a glimpse of his strength of mind and purity of heart.

We walked chattering idly, for two hours or so. Later I got a high fever, which lasted a few days. To make things I even worse, he came up sneezing and said to me, “I find that I have been sloppy and undisciplined. I should live a soldier’s, life. I’ll join the army.”

I didn’t want him to leave me; I didn’t know why. So I said to him sarcastically that he was only trying to zigzag back to Peking.

“Nonsense! Some people may do it for personal gain, but I join the army in order to know more of our society.”

In my desperation I reminded, him, “You were criticized and disciplined at school, weren’t you?”

Immediately, he bit his middle finger and wrote on a piece of paper:

"Man should go out to face the world."
He decided to present if to the army officers who were recruiting in the area.
"All right," I said with tears in my eyes. "You can all leave me. I'll kill myself."
He replied sternly, giving me a good dressing down:
"Suicide! It's very nice of you to say that! Look at those country folk. They supported the revolutionary wars whole-heartedly. And now they're still hungry. They can barely find enough black soya beans or millet to fill up their stomachs. What can they do? Commit suicide? Crawl to the cities or towns and try to live and work there? My dear Cultivator, over the past few years I have seen clearly for myself the plight of those who have a low station in life. Probably I feel more miserable than you do. The 'cultural revolution' may ruin us, but it is likely that some real fine men will come out of it. We should think hard and look into things and work for the benefit of our country and the people."
I knew him well: a man who would pursue an unswerving course once he felt he had made the right decision. So with tears in my eyes, I walked with him for three kilometres and saw him off. He left. His unit was stationed at Qaidam in Qinghai. It was extremely cold there and people had to wear cotton-padded coats all the year round. He wrote me a few letters, but they were all impersonal. My heart turned cold. And yet who could ever forget the very first person to whom one had lost one's heart?

*

The lorry raced on, leaving the fir woods far behind. After we had gone up a frozen river, there came into view a huge glistening slope and a snow-covered mountain ridge. Suddenly, the sky looked wider, with a deeper blue set off against the white sheen of snow.
In 1977 I was transferred to Peking. One winter evening I attended a party at Xiao Tian's home and danced till midnight. When I got home, I pushed open the door, which was unlocked. I found my mother moaning in bed, surrounded by my father, younger brother and sister and a soldier. Upon seeing me, the soldier called:
"Cultivator Li."
His resonant. voice gave me a start. Zheng Zhitong, it was Zhitong! He still remembered the name I gave myself when we were working in the village.
"Your mother fell down when she was trying, to get on a crowded bus and hurt her side," my father explained. It was Zheng who carried her home on his back. My mother forced herself to sit up and said:
"He wanted to leave until he heard you were my daughter."
I wondered if I was in a dream-land. He looked tall and sturdy in his uniform. His square face suggested masculine strength. There seemed to be a hunter's toughness about him. He was looking me up and down. Then our eyes met.
It was an embarrassing moment, all right, but my mother had to go on.
"Qian's still single. She snubs anyone who would mention the word marriage. How about you? Have you got a family?"
As he rubbed his hands in great embarrassment, my heart was throbbing. After a long while he stammered:
"It is a rule in the army that unmarried soldiers have a leave every two years. Our commander insisted that I not return until I have found myself a wife."
I could hardly suppress a giggle; I was relieved. My younger sister sniggered so hard that Zhitong blushed.
The night deepened, and there was not a soul in the street when I walked him out of the alley.
"Come again on Sunday."
"Sorry, I'm afraid I can't. My leave is over."
"You mean you have found a wife?" No sooner had I said this than I regretted having made such a flippant remark. Smiling bitterly, he said:
"It is hard to win the heart of a girl here in Peking. Who wants to marry a foot-slogger like me from Xinjiang?"
"Oh, come off it, officer," I said jovially, pretending to be casual. "I'm afraid you are too choosy."
"Nonsense!" he hastened to explain. "I don't want girls to be introduced to me. I prefer a girl who once worked with me and therefore understands me." His eager eyes looked into my face.
Disconcerted, I looked away, pretending to tidy my hair. Both of us stood speechless, each waiting for the other to speak, our hearts beating faster. But Zhitong was a man of remarkable self-control and, having looked at his watch, he shook my hand and left.
The day Zhitong returned to the army, I went to the railway station to see him off. On the way back his mother kept grumbling:
"Now he is deputy battalion commander, and a model officer of the engineer corps, but what is the use of that?

He is twenty-nine and still single. Nowadays soldiers are nothing but trash in the eyes of the girls. Even country girls won't have them; they were looking for city boys! Who'll follow him to Xinjiang? Alas!"

Often, in the still of the night, the twinkling stars reminded me of the old days Zhitong and I shared in the countryside. At last I could not bear waiting any longer. I wrote him a letter trying to find out how he felt. One month passed, and then another, without any reply from Xinjiang. I got so cross that I wouldn't allow anyone to mention his name.

Barely two months later, came the spring of 1978. One day after work my younger sister came home and, making face at me, said:

"Great news! I just ran into Zheng Zhitong in the subway. He is studying at a military academy. He asked after you."

"Did he? I'm not interested."

Feeling snubbed, she turned away.

That evening Zhitong turned up suddenly and he was all smiles. Indifferently, I showed him to my room, deliberately avoiding his eyes.

"I know you feel annoyed," he said, trying to make amends.

I began to yield. But when I asked him why he didn't answer my letter, his smile vanished and on his face appeared the familiar frown. After a while, he said decidedly:

"We soldiers are straightforward. I hope you don't mind what I'm going to say even if in doing so I'm making a blunder. Before the "cultural revolution," soldiers from the border areas or the northwestern plateaus were held in high esteem. They would introduce themselves readily, sticking out their chests, when they took lodgings or looked for girl-friends. 'I'm from the border areas.' For that statement alone would make people admire them. But now we have to say humbly, 'I'm from the border areas; you may not like that.'" He breathed heavily, his face reddened with rage.

"To tell you the truth, I don't need any sympathy; nor do I need charity," he continued. "When I was in Peking last time, I was fed up with the cool detachment some people displayed for soldiers. I simply can't stand such insults!" He banged at the table, his body trembling all over.

"Well, you can't stand it, so you suppose I can?" I retorted.

"Cultivator, I know it's not easy for you to be transferred to Pekiing. Why should I be in the way of your future happiness? So—"

"So what? Why bother to explain, since you think you know all?" That was all I could say. My sarcastic words silenced him. Several times, he rose to go, but dawdled and sat down again, lowering his head in great embarrassment. After I calmed down, I regretted having hurt him so much. Obviously, he had all along loved me, but he didn't like to put me in a dilemma. Probably he had suffered a great deal after reading my letter and it was long before he regained his self-control. But in the end he could come up only with a lame explanation which was more like a confession. A man of his sense of self-respect must have passed through terrible ordeals putting up with a girl's sarcasm! I began to feel uneasy.

Spring, after all, was a season for love. So let me shut my eyes and be carried away by the current of emotion. Let me be driven to where he was. I prayed that it wouldn't lead to misfortune.

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The lorry was racing on and on. The red sun peeped out from the clouds. Its golden rays fell on the white snow, which sent back dazzling, bright lights. Newcomers naturally compared the beauty of the snow scene to that of a charming girl. Little could they imagine that at the shout of "Avalanche!" its ugly face would show itself glorying in its destructive power.

As Zhitong had foreseen, my mother, though delighted to see us in love, was worried that Xinjiang was too far away. My younger sister, however, had other ideas. She believed that Zhitong would surely be posted to work in the academy and, even if that did not work out, he could still leave the army and return to Peking. Mimi, my best girl friend, urged me to give him up. She advised me:

"Why, things have changed. It's no longer fashionable to court a foot-slogger. If I were as pretty as you, I would certainly choose a high official, an overseas Chinese, or at least a college graduate. Give him up!" Xiao Tian even went so far as to make fun of me by saying:

"Hey, why don't you let us meet your hero lover?"

Since Zhitong didn't mind my friendship with Xiao Tian, I decided to introduce him to my circle of friends. When we arrived, Mimi and some others were dancing. She said saucily, "How marvelous to have a guest from Xinjiang, a land of song and dance! Come on, give us a performance!"

The others were laughing heartily. I felt humiliated. Who would have thought that Zhitong would accept the request! Casually, he began waltzing with me. He danced with grace, following the rhythm of the sweet music, and moved lightly and nimbly almost like a dragonfly skimming the surface of the water. I was fascinated by his elegance. Gently, he gave me a sweet smile and whispered, "Shall we go to a concert next time?" Indeed, my cup of happiness was full.

Xiao Tian felt jealous. Snapping his fingers, he cried:

"That's no good. Let's have some real music."

"Let's have *Good Wine and Coffee*," one of them echoed. The tape recorder started playing and all at once a trembling voice, more like crying, wailed:

Who loves me?
Who will love me?

Mimi was now swaying her sensual hips, her gilt necklace rippling, and, making eyes at Zhitong, invited him to dance with her. Zhitong knitted his brows, looking very displeased. "Sorry, I must be off now." Then he swept out of the room, slamming the carved door.

I ran after him and soon caught up with him; but before I could say anything, he bawled:

"No need to explain! I won't listen anyway! That's no recreation. They are a rotten lot, bored and frustrated. What would our soldiers in Tianshan think if they saw such rot?"

Tianshan again! I was sick to death of it.

"Do you love me or your Tianshan? Your buddies may think whatever they like. It's none of my business!" I mounted my bicycle and pedaled away. He was standing there, still fuming. It served him right!

After this, for two whole weeks we didn't see each other. Often I skipped supper. I picked up an English text-book and tried to read but my mind was elsewhere. It was dreary weather. There was no wind, and the heat was stifling. Then he suddenly turned up with two pink tickets in his hand.

"There is a concert tonight. Let's go."

He seemed to be in high spirits, as if nothing had ever happened between us.

"Go away! I'm trying to get some sleep." I was lying in bed and pulled the quilt over my head. He kept silent for a long while. It was heart-rending to hear his chair creaking.

"All right," he said at last. "I'm sorry I was rude, but I do think that you have changed a great deal over the past few years. You have lost your spiritual mainstay," he said gently and every word of his touched the chord of my heart.

I had to admit that he was right. There was no need for him to remind me of the days I spent in the countryside. I had been feeling low since I returned to Peking. Work, meals and wages had somehow become the routine of my life. I felt empty after the parties at Xiao Tian's home. As a way out, I sometimes shut myself up in my room, practicing calligraphy or reading English. Late at night, lying in bed, I felt as if I were in a boat which had lost its direction, drifting away in the ocean. Sometimes I did want to exert myself and find some real purpose in life. But what could one do? True, the Gang of Four had been overthrown, but what did that mean to me? I had had a terrible time working like a slave in the countryside for six years, but some people still thought that had been a completely unnecessary sacrifice. Now look at Xiao Tian! He escaped being sent to the countryside by enlisting in the army through his influential connections. He remained in the city and even managed to join the Party. Then, once again through mysterious channels, he had found an easy job in the Tourist Bureau! My transfer to Peking couldn't have been made possible without my appeal to him—I had to put on a forced smile when I went to see him. The fact that I had taken the lead in going to the countryside was still a laughing-stock. So much for all that talk about noble ideals and revolution! What a joke!

"Well, reality is never as rosy as we would like to imagine," Zhitong sighed. Then he began to give an account of what he himself had gone through over the past few years.

"I simply thought the army a paradise when I first joined up in 1973. Shortly after I was enrolled in a company, I was transferred to the regiment's spare-time propaganda team. Every day, when the soldiers were eating their meals the chickens raised by the regiment commander would come into the mess looking for food. Very soon, their droppings were everywhere. I was hot-tempered, as you know. So I flared up and on the spot killed one of them with a big broom. Then I put up a big-character poster at the entrance criticizing the comman-der. As a result, I was made to write a self-criticism and sent back to the company 'to be disciplined.' This drove me mad. To hell with the commander! A civilian official like him would have been labeled as a capitalist-roader, pure and

simple; as my thought ran wild, I came to believe that our country was a hopeless case since a regiment commander could be so rotten.

"Later, our regiment was transferred to Xinjiang. The troops had hardly entered the mountains when they were caught in an awful snowstorm. Our trucks moved along at a snail's pace. For a day and a night we covered only five kilometres. Before long, we ran out of food. The orderly went under a truck and cooked some soya beans with a blowlamp for the commander. But he gave all the beans to the drivers. He also joined us in digging away the snow and pushing the trucks. I was so moved at the time that I could have shouted: 'Long live the commander!' For me there was no doubt that his was the very image of a veteran revolutionary. Afterwards, I often wondered what sort of man he really was; but the more I thought, the more perplexed I got.

"As time passed, I gradually found the answer: the worse after-effect of the 'cultural revolution' was that our ways of thinking had become mechanical. We tended to go to extremes. When you were praised, you were nothing but good; when criticized, you were anything but good. Girls wearing a boy's hair-cut and dancing the *Loyal Dance* were supposed to be the most radical; at present, however, wearing long hair and dancing rock-and-roll is thought to be a sign of the complete emancipation of mind.

"Things keep changing and you will soon learn the safest way is to follow the trend of the day. But I still don't see what is wrong with going down to the countryside and what is wrong with carrying out the revolutionary drive to build up the rural areas. Are we left now with nothing but broken dreams and a bitter past? If that were the conclusion reached by the young people of our generation, what could the country expect of them? How can the country build a new spiritual life on such an ideological ruin?"

One after another, his solemn words found their way into my heart and together with the patter of:the rain outside they brought me back to the days when I was a radical student, when Zhitong and I lived and worked on the northwestern plateaus. Oh, that unforgettable night, when he had a rain bath in the storm! And here in this room were the two of us again, of the same generation but now how different from each other! Why was I so bitter and frustrated, grumbling at the social injustice I had suffered, while all along he had been unswerving in his pursuit of the truth in life and found it! Failing to control myself, I began to cry.

Zhitong lifted the quilt gently and brushed my forehead and cheeks with his handkerchief. As if coaxing a child, he said soothingly:

"Ah I see you've embroidered the English words 'Good flight' on your quilt cover. It's careless of me not to have noticed that you have been learning English and studying hard."

"Boo, you are the greatest!" I retorted.

He gently held my hand in his own saying, "I'm not good enough for you, Qian. You're still the best!"

I must have appeared like a spoilt child and after a. while putting my hands around his neck, tried to sit up.
Since then I had been madly in love with him. One day we were rowing on the Kunming Lake at the Summer Palace, I was so overcome by emotion that I dropped a hint about marriage. He told me in all serjousness that he had to rejoin his men in a few days.

"Will you like to live with me in the mountains all your life?" he asked.

I had never thought of this before and my mind began to reel again.

*

"Hold on tight!" The driver's warning pulled me back to present from my reverie. I found the lorry moving along a not properly surfaced road. Glancing at my watch, I inquired anxiously:

"Are we getting near the worksite?"

"This is the Dotted-line District before us," the driver answered, his eyes fixed on the road ahead. His short mustache twitched faintly.

"Is your battalion stationed in the Dotted-line District?"

"Yes."

"Are you very busy?"

"Not really. Two shifts a day, twelve hours a shift, not including emergency work!" His sarcasm got on my nerves. A new recruit trying to impress people. That's all, I thought.

*

The lorry pulled up before piles of frozen rock and sandstones. We had arrived at last! But I began to feel uneasy and a little confused.

Han jumped down from the lorry, his lips betraying the effects of the cold. He told me that it was already 3,000 meters above sea-level and that the Dotted-line District was so named because it was impossible to make an on-the-spot survey of the precipices and the steep cliffs and therefore they had to map it out in dotted lines.

"Wait for me here. I'm going to find the deputy battalion commander." He started off running and moving nimbly among the rocks and finally joined the soldiers on the other side. I couldn't hear what they were talking about because of the howling wind. However, I could see one of them pointing somewhere in the mid-air. I looked up.

Good gracious! What did I see but a precipitous cliff such as I had never seen before? It tilted backward menacingly like an injured wild beast and it was puffing out clouds of smoke and vapor. Barely visible in the misty clouds was a snow-covered man clinging to the cliff unsteadily against the cold wind blowing in gusts. He was trying to hit an overhanging piece of a rock with a steel pole. Any minute he could be swept away like a fallen leaf.

"Well, could it be Zhitong?"

All of a sudden, I was overcome with fear. Hastily, I ran forward to get a closer look despite my benumbed legs.

"Stop, it's dangerous!" Han yelled, running towards me.

Before I realized what was going on, the whole valley was shaken by a thunderous crash. Instantly, thick clouds of dust and snow went up and Zhitong vanished from my sight. I screamed and, covering my eyes with my hands, fainted.

I didn't know how long it was before I came to and heard a familiar voice shouting, "What's happened? Is anyone hurt?" Then the voice was filled with surprise and delight, "Oh, how come you're here?" Han and others were chuckling.

I blushed and had a quick look at him. His appearance astonished me. He was wearing a worn-out osier hat, with a broad, thick safety-belt fastened around his waist over a threadbare cotton-padded coat. His galoshes were covered with slush, his face and body with scraps of ice and rock. But for his black shining eyes, I wouldn't have been able to recognize him. I was deeply grieved.

Oddly enough, on seeing me, he did not appear as excited as I had expected. I could still remember the night shortly before he finished his study at the academy. It was eleven at night when somebody was knocking on my door. Something dreadful must have happened, I thought. But it was only Zhitong, who said casually:

"Nothing the matter, only I desperately want to see you. Don't ask me why, but I've got the premonition that we'll never see each other again." I walked with him for the rest of the night. It was not until then that I realized that he had been madly in love with me, too …

And now, it might be a woman's instinct, but I was certain that he was preoccupied by some troubles; otherwise he wouldn't have been so indifferent.

"Let Han take you to the battalion headquarters," he said coldly. "I've to look after the work here first."

"Just as you please!" was my colder answer. He hesitated for a while, and I could see he wanted to talk to me. But then he changed his mind. Stepping up to Han, he said:

"The out-hanging rock has been removed. Tell the soldiers to set their minds at ease. You must get the roadbed cleared before four this afternoon. You'll be in charge now. I'm going to call up the political instructor."

The ice and snow scraps swirling in the wind were beating full in my face. Before long, my legs were benumbed with cold, but my heart felt colder. When he finished talking with Han, I picked up my bag, getting ready to go with him. He seemed to take no notice of me, as he headed for a dug-out to make his phone call. The sympathy I felt for him was now turned into resentment. He must have heard something about what I had been doing and guessed why I had come. So he was giving me the cold shoulder on purpose!

Shortly after we parted from each other last time, his regiment commander came to Peking to attend a conference. He paid me a personal visit and urged me to get married and live in the barracks. It so happened that Mimi had been pestering me with the request to accept a date with one of Xiao Tian's classmates, who was due to study abroad and whose father was a high-ranking official. In a dilemma, I turned down both. Soon after this Zhitong wrote to me, insisting that I should break with Xiao Tian and Mimi. Alas, what a predicament I was thrown in! My younger sister, who thought highly of Zhitong, commented that he was a fine man but would make a lousy husband …

Now, so much the better, I thought. Since he had deliberately left me out in the cold, I would tell him clearly what was on my mind and then leave him in the afternoon. This damned place was not fit for living.

No, I began to change my mind. No, I'd better think it over again before rushing to a final decision. Such a break would mean a severe blow to a person's most tender feelings. What would become of him then?

Bang! Another blast somewhere. I looked at the cliff whose overhanging rock had just been removed. Zhitong came running up and, passing me his sweaty helmet, lifted my bag and turned away. Not until we were safely out

of the Dotted-line District did he explain to me:

"I know you were anxious to meet me down in the hostel. I was in the worksite when Han phoned me. So I scribbled a note for the driver to take down to you. The Dotted-line District is perilously covered with scraps of frozen rock and there have been a few accidents. As there hasn't been any transport service for the past few days fuel and equipment cannot be brought here. Besides, we are running out of food supplies."

Though he tried to force a smile, his tone betrayed his great worry. I should have said something to lighten the awkward atmosphere, but suddenly I felt suffocated and was going to throw up. He looked at me and said most casually:

"You'll be all right. It's high altitude. Newcomers always feel it. As a rule, women suffer less than men."

I squatted at the roadside, fuming. I retched but didn't throw up anything, for I had not had a meal since the previous evening. He bent to pat, or rather beat, me on the back. Glowering at him, I protested:

"Not so hard!"

It was a summer's day after all. As we descended, I noticed the snow was melting. There were patches of green here and there on the slopes. Little flowers were peeping out between the icicles by the roadside; even the sun seemed warmer. Zhitong's sense of humor came back. He skipped and leapt and slid on the ice, asking me questions all the time. He was most interested in what was going on in Peking, and was filled with envy upon hearing about the recent performance of a foreign symphony orchestra.

"How very nice if one could get some live television coverage and watch the performance here in the mountains!"

Was he making roundabout references to the purpose of my coming here or dropping it hint about coming back to Peking?

As the snow melted, water kept trickling down the rugged slopes. The dripping sound could be heard everywhere. I could hardly find a dry place to put my feet on.

"You'll sprain your ankles, walking in your high-heels. Let me carry you across!"

I could not tell whether he was joking or mocking at me. Pretending not to have heard him, I lifted my foot, trying to step on a stone.

"That won't do!" he chuckled, winking at me. "You'd better put on my galoshes. I'll walk barefoot."

In a huff, I leapt forward valiantly, when a truck passed by at top speed, splashing the slush. Startled, I fell off the stone, spattered all over, my feet landing in a puddle. Zheng Zhitong laughed until tears came into his eyes.

"Serves you right! Now you know our Tianshan Mountains, eh?"

What a cruel and boisterous laugh! That was too much for me. So sneering, I retorted, "Yes, I know you only too well, don't I?"

Shocked, he ran up, all in a fluster.

"I was only teasing you. Why did you say that?"

I didn't reply, trudging mechanically along the muddy road, my mind having become a blank. He glanced at me from time to time without saying anything. He sighed audibly …

*

Their battalion headquarters consisted of only a few bleached tents pitched on a terrace leveled on a slope. At the entrance was a frame, over three meters high, made of three pieces of wood. In the middle of the horizontal piece, to my surprise, hung a big white paper flower; on each of the two vertical ones was posted a long, worn-out, sad-looking elegiac line, written in black characters on white paper. These lines read:

He shed his blood on Tianshan;
for what did he lay down his life?
For the name of his country and the army.
He lived ten years away from his wife;
where did he find happiness?
In the union of countless couples outside.

I recognized Zhitong's firm, strong handwriting immediately. He paused before it for a short while, looking melancholy again.

"Someone has died?" I was just wondering, when the political instructor came out to meet us. Promptly heads appeared at the door curtains and window flaps. It seemed as if everyone were looking at me. The messenger was staring at my sunglasses. I felt completely out of place among those smelly, boisterous soldiers. I sat at the table, without saying a word.

“Why, a girl from Peking shouldn’t be so shy, should she?”

“Stop talking nonsense! She is feeling car sick. Have some sweets, please.” Zhitong managed a smile and tried to get. me out of the embarrassment. But when they saw the sweets, they became even more cheerful.

“Good, you’re throwing a party before the wedding ceremony, eh? So much the better! We’ll visit your bridal chamber for fun, all the same! Following tradition, you know. You’d better warn your *fiancée* beforehand. We are a rough bunch and she shouldn’t lose her temper, when we celebrate your wedding.”

Zheng Zhitong kept nodding his head all the time. Finally, the political instructor came to our rescue. Beaming with joy, they went back to work. Then came the last straw when I overheard Zhitong and the political instructor arranging my lodgings.

“How ridiculous! The whole lot of you!” I stopped them as he was about to enter the tent.

“They teased you because they were pleased to meet you,” he explained. “You see, Han has spread the news that you are coming here to marry me!” he said, laughing to himself.

“Gosh!” I interrupted. “Who told him that I’d come to marry you?”

His face froze at my impertinent remarks; he wanted to say something but did not. He snorted, shook his head, and went out.

As the sun’s rays came into the padded tent through a small window, it was getting so hot that I took off my woolen sweater and still perspired profusely. When Zhitong came back again, he lifted the bucket of melted ice off the stove and smothered the fire by putting a layer of damp coal on it.

“That’s the weather here in the mountains. You go through the four seasons in a single day and have to change your clothes accordingly.” After washing his face, he took out a pair of slippers from under the bed, saying, “Put them on. I’ll take your leather shoes out in the sun.” So he had softened up.

“I don’t like to change my shoes,” I sneered.

“Take them off. They are soaked through. You’ll catch cold.” Then he coaxed: “You are the same stubborn girl, aren’t you? All right, I was wrong, OK?” He stooped to unfasten my shoe laces. My legs jerked and nearly hit him on his forehead. I was nervous, but he was still squatting in front of me, his intelligent and gentle eyes staring into my face. He seemed to me like a kind elder brother cajoling his mischievous little sister. I was moved.

Indeed, he looked lean and haggard! Long exposure to the sun and the storms on the plateau had tanned his skin. With sallow cheeks and a stubbly beard, he looked like a man of forty. His bright eyes were blood-shot from excessive fatigue and anxiety and his voice had become husky. Since we got to the battalion headquarters, he had been so busy looking after me that he had not thought of changing his own clothes. Now the melting ice began dripping down from his padded coat. I could not let him suffer any longer.

“Well, I’ll change my shoes, then,” I said in a reconciled tone. “You’d better change your clothes, too. How terrible you look in them!”

He grinned. “No hurry! I’ll have to see about supper first.”

“Aren’t you crazy? Take off your padded coat!” I demanded and tried to strip it off, but he quickly moved away. I felt annoyed. After a long while, he complied most reluctantly, grinning sheepishly, with his hands behind his back.

I pretended to ignore him at first and then, quite abruptly, dived behind his back and pulled apart his hands. I was stunned! Good gracious! His side had been seriously injured, his shirt was stuck to the unhealed wound, and around the blackened scabs were traces of blood and sweat. So that was why he had always been wearing a broad leather belt! He took it calmly, however.

“Nothing serious!” he said, trying to make me feel at ease. “Only a scratch, that’s all.” It was obvious that he had been working without letting anybody know about it. I dipped a towel into the hot water and loosened the smelly shirt from the skin by pressing the towel hard against it. When I applied balm to his wound, my tears kept dropping on his bare back. I didn’t quite see why he should risk his life in so wretched a place.

Zhitong was leaning on the table, listening to my complaints quietly. It was long before he spoke again.

“There was a terrible avalanche in the Dotted-line District last Sunday,” he said slowly. “Yu Haizhou, political instructor of the Fifth Company, was killed; the rock was all red with his blood. The accident happened when his wife had just come to visit him. She is staying in the tent down there.”

“So that’s the woman I met in the hostel!” My teeth chattered. Zhitong heaved violently as he nodded and then, straightening up, said:

“They married young. Their son is already two years old, but they had lived apart from each other for ten years. Yu had always been in poor health. This time all his wife wanted to bring him was a bag of Chinese medicinal herbs; who would have thought …” He broke down.

"I got injured when I was digging out the corpse. It's nothing serious. As a matter of fact, Qian, the very thought of Yu's death helps me to stick it out. You didn't write me a single word for months. This drove me mad." Excited, he turned round and grasped my hands and, biting his lips, made great efforts to curb his emotion, but his eyes were still swollen with tears.

"Qian, you must stay here longer this time. I've got so much to talk to you …"

I felt sort of choked. What should I say to him in face of his outburst of emotion? I was feeling guilty and ashamed as well as embarrassed. Unable to endure such mental torture any longer, I flung myself into his arms and cried. I wept and kept knocking my head against his broad chest as I urged him:

"Let's go back! I'll do anything so long as you leave the army. I can't bear to see you suffer so much."

He smiled. Holding my face in his rough hands, he wiped the tears off my face with his fingers and said, "That's real baby talk. Do you think I'll leave?"

"Why not?" I asked, without giving him a chance to explain, and went on. "Who knows, indeed who cares, that you soldiers are risking your lives? By hook or by crook, lots of ex-service cadres are trying to get back and work in Peking. There are people who don't want to live in their own country, too. Xiao Tian and some others are now applying for passports. Don't be a fool, Zhitong! You'd better get out of Tianshan and take a look at the outside world!" My voice had become a shout.

"Different people have different ways of looking at the world. For me, I believe some people have to build roads so that others could travel more easily. As for Xiao Tian and his like, better forget about them." Zhitong gave a grim smile and, turning to me, said warmly:

"Qian, let's talk about ourselves."

Just then the driver who had given me a lift up the mountains called for Zhitong. He went out of the tent. What a nuisance!

I leaned against the desk, my mind in a muddle. There was a faint fragrance oozing out of the snowdrops on his clean desk. My eyes fell on a photo of a smiling girl whose black eyes revealed a mixture of annoyance and conceit. It was me; Zhitong took the picture when we were rowing on the Kunming Lake at the Summer Palace. That day for the first time he hugged me tight in his strong arms. I couldn't believe at the time that a soldier like him would be capable of such passionate love. He kissed my hair, smiling:

"Why call us foot-sloggers? Are we all brawn and no brain? Actually, we understand love the most."

"Talking big, eh?" I teased him, making a face.

"It's true. One will never join the army unless one can love others." He had a heart of gold and he loved me truly and intensely. But was I that selfish and that mean? Why couldn't we play our part if we lived in the city? Didn't I deserve some happiness that I could call my own?

Zhitong came back, looking worried. He kept pacing the room, his heavy steps foreboding a storm. Gingerly, I asked him what had happened. Scowling, he bawled:

"That's really too much! A recruit who has been in the army for only one year bas applied for demob and he has been making so much fuss about it. Nowadays, men recruited from the countryside want to quit, complaining about the shortage of labor-hands in their families, now that the "system of responsibility" is widely practiced; those from cities or towns simply don't like to work in the army. Some even deserted this year. Officers don't feel at ease, serving in the border areas. Such people don't give a fig about the country's problems. They care only for themselves. Let him go and good riddance!"

After venting his spleen, he tapped at his own forehead regretfully and sat down in a chair, looking distracted.

By now the messenger had prepared a rich dinner, but neither of us felt like eating anything. The messenger was a little bewildered. To cheer me up, he brought me a marmot, which he had caught. Zhitong shook his head, smiling wrily and then beckoned me to go out with him for a walk.

*

Down the mountain, turning a bend, one could see a vast stretch of grassland. I could hardly believe my eyes. Grass rippled in the breeze and scarlet wild peonies showed off here and there against the wavy green. There in the distance many white tents were pitched on either bank of the Alstan River; from the bridge worksite came the hum of traffic and a medley of human voices.

Zhitong was in high spirits again. He inhaled deeply the fresh air and pulling me by the hand ran after a marmot. Soon I was out of breath and, clutching my chest, waved to stop him. Not until then did he stop running and throw himself on to the grass as if he were going to embrace the whole pasture.

"Qian, look at the lovely grass. After the road is built, the herdsmen won't have to worry about entering the mountains. The whole grassland will soon be turned into a mechanical stock-raising area." He was glorying in his

visions.

"What is so good about living in the city? Pollution, noise, three generations of a family living in a small room; more people than flowers in parks, where two pairs of. lovers have to share one bench! Now here in the mountains, just look at this green land and all your worries, boredom and what-not will be gone in an instant. Of course, some would call me a nut. But I don't care." He flung his arms up and sat up. He hugged his legs, pondering. After a long while, he said as if to himself:

"You know, China produced a great traveler called Xuan Zang in the Tang Dynasty and again a famous navigator named Zheng He, in the Ming Dynasty. For the past century, however, our country has been bullied and disgraced. It is true that history is made by the people, but history, in its turn, can influence a nation's spirit. Are we in a rut now? Have we completely freed ourselves from the inferiority complex and obsequiousness that plague the people of the semi-colonial countries? People are usually content with things as they are and don't like to see any changes. Where is the spirit of the pioneer who works with great perseverance, the adventurer who keeps exploring new worlds, or the hero who wants to prove that his country is second to none in the world. Perhaps I'm going too far, but I do think it imperative to imbue the young people with such a spirit if we genuinely want to make our country strong each making his contribution in his own way. Don't you think so?"

I said nothing. I appreciated his words but quietly I was thinking of finding my way out. On the one hand, I realized I loved Zhitong more than I had ever before; several times I was on the point of saying I would marry him. On the other hand, I knew it was impossible to change his mind. Love was more than embraces and kisses. Separation, bringing up children, always on the move with the army—I simply did not have the spirit of an explorer. I couldn't afford to be a heroine again. Life was ruthless; I was not in a position to sum up the history of mankind and make my impact. Discussions of a nation's spirit meant to me no more than an increase of a few *yuan* in our bonus system. I fully accepted the simple truth that I was not born for greatness. And that it would be better for me to return to my snug nest for an easy life. What was wrong with that? But my misery drove me to despair. I really should leave him. But then I couldn't make up my mind.

The sun gradually sank behind the icy peaks. Zhitong walked on in silence. It was worse than calling me names. He stopped at Yu Haizhou's grave, overwhelmed with utter grief. I dared not glance at him.

Just then Doctor Zhao, the regiment commander's wife, turned up. She caught hold of my hand and said:

"Hey, I was looking for you up on the mountain. Come and stay with us tonight. Our clinic is not far, just beside the worksite. We've tidied up a tent for you. My old man says he wants to meet you."

"I've got only a day's leave and I've to get back today. Thank you all the same," I said to her politely, for I realized that I shouldn't stay and make Zhitong suffer any longer.

Disappointed, Doctor Zhao went away.

"Let's go! Hurry up!" Zhitong said firmly, suddenly making up his mind. "I'll have to go to the worksite at four."

Just then, the young messenger ran up, panting.

"Deputy battalion commander, the regiment commander asked me to tell you that you should stay at home and accompany"—he glanced at me and chuckled. Zhitong stopped him and said, "Hurry back and report to the commander that I'll be at the worksite soon."

"That won't do! You haven't had a meal, not even a wink of sleep; besides—"

"Nonsense! You hurry along!" Zhitong flared up suddenly, but the messenger murmured and didn't move. Zhitong was about to give him a dressing-down, but he changed his mind and, forcing a smile, said cordially, "Hurry up, will you? Don't you know there will be a meeting at the worksite?"

Disappointed, the messenger turned and made his way towards the worksite.

A bugle sounded. From the loudspeakers came the military music. Lines of soldiers, with tools on their shoulders and white flowers pinned on their chests, were heading for the Dotted-line District. As soon as I entered the barracks, I felt the solemn and stirring atmosphere. When Zhitong put on his safety-belt and took a small white flower from the drawer, something ominous shadowed my mind.

"What meeting are you going to hold? Why do you insist on going?" After hesitating for a short while, he said:

"The whole regiment is holding an oath-taking rally on the spot where the political instructor died. We'll swear to conquer the Dotted-line District. From today on I'll be acting as the political instructor of the Fifth Company. After the rally I'll take the soldiers to work. I must go, mustn't I?"

"Zhitong, you … you mustn't!"

I snatched the white flower from his hand.

"Give it back to me, Qian." He caught my hand angrily.

“No, I won’t!” Despite his fierce looks I burst out into tears and cried, “Zhitong, let’s leave this place, I beg of you. We’ll have a good talk and sort things out. I can’t live without you. I can’t.” I hugged his broad shoulders, looking at him imploringly. His chest heaved as emotion surged up within him. Through the window he gazed at the mountains in the distance. Finally, he said, weighing every word, his voice low and quivering:

“To tell you the truth, over the past six months I’ve been torn by indecision myself. I’ve suffered more than you have. There had been moments when I almost decided to quit. My mother, like you, has wept many, many times. Nevertheless, I’ve made up my mind and I must say to you that you shouldn’t mention my quitting again. Not long ago, a few officers and technicians went to inspect the roads and the patrol routes at the border. It was raining and by accident our jeep got bogged down in the mire near the watch tower across the border. When we tried to push the jeep out of the mud, they laughed, whistled and even took photos. They made their soldiers watch us pushing the jeep forward in the rain. They laughed at us for having these bad roads and poor equipment. This was an insult, not for me as an individual, but for the army and country as a whole. Isn’t it true? Now the big power to the North holds us in derision while the pint-sized country to the South tries to browbeat us. Some of our fellow-countrymen still fail to see that we are living under threats. Without a strong army, without the soldiers toiling and risking their lives to build and guard the border areas, there will be no national security, let alone the “four modernizations,” no personal happiness and sweet love. I know views on these things vary from man to man, I won’t impose mine on you. As a soldier of New China, I’d rather give up my life for our country’s modernized defence than be crushed down by the invaders’ tanks or armoured cars—”

“Oh, please, Zhitong,” I begged: “Don’t press me any more. Let me calm down and think it over again.” I threw myself into his arms, all my grievances erupting like a volcano.

Outside, a jeep horn hooted. Snow-flakes started dancing frantically again and soon the road was covered and the sky blotted out. I collapsed in the cabin of a lorry, which took me far, far away.

Bang! There came another sound of a blast. The army flag was fluttering in the cold wind and rumbling machines of all kinds made a thrilling melody. I couldn’t help sticking my head out of the cabin window. My eyes swept over the thousands of soldiers, as I tried to find Zhitong. Oh, over there in the Dotted-line District, high above on an outhanging piece of a rock was my dearest Zhitong waving to me, all white with snow except for the red star cap insignia shining liking a burning flame …

83.4 The Quadrangle Compound\fn{by Ling Chung (1945-   )} Chungking, Sichuan Province, China (F) 3

Mr. and Mrs. Hsin-tang Wei sit side by side on a Taiwan Highway Bus, speeding southward to Ken-ting National Park. Mrs. Ching-ching Wei who sits on the aisle seat is already fifty-three, but due to her constant endeavor to keep a fit figure, she retains a youthful look of early forties. Apparently she is very confident of her own appearance. Most middle-aged women would put on a loose one-piece to cover up their barrel-like figure. Yet Ching-ching puts on a thin, tight Chinese *ch’i-p’ao* gown; her voluptuous, curvaceous body is wrapped in brilliant bamboo green. The distinct features on her oval face remind one that she must once have been a renowned beauty. However, Time has engraved not only fan-shaped wrinkles at the corners of her eyes, but also between her eyebrows and at the corners of her mouth two vertical lines as sharp as the strokes of the Thin Gold calligraphy style.

She has suffered from the tedium of just sitting there for one and a half hours, she thinks. If she had known that the trip would be so boring, she would not have made such a fuss to take it. Two nights ago, she lay stiffly in bed and told him coldly,

“Look, we’ve been married for more than thirty years, but you haven’t taken me on one single trip. You, yourself, go on business trips, every two or three months. To Taichung, Taipei, and other places. Now our children have gone abroad to study. Have you ever once realized just how bored I’ve been?”

Staring at the water-stains on the ceiling, she envisions a black sedan, speeding on the smooth coastal highway; her husband’s superior and “Madame” leaning back comfortably on the back seat. Hsin-tang Wei is fifty-seven now. A section chief in the Civil Affairs Bureau, the position he is holding might be the highest one he can ever attain. Her dream that her husband would be promoted to a top position, with the privilege of a sedan car at his disposal, will not come true for the rest of her life.

“Where do you want to go?” he asks in a condescending, low voice.

“Madame” told her on the phone that one can enjoy the sparkling waves of the sea from the balcony outside the suite in a grand hotel. She says resolutely,

“To Ken-ting.” She switches off the bedside lamp with a snap. Turning her back toward him, she curls herself

up as if this posture could keep them further apart.

"I will ask for leave tomorrow. We can set out the day after." His feeble voice crawls over the extensive darkness stretching between them.

The air-conditioner on the bus is so powerful that a chill comes over her bare arms. Looking outside the window, Hsin-tang Wei does not notice that she, shivering, is holding her arms. She says sarcastically,

"You can fetch my coat for me, can't you?"

Hsin-tang Wei stands up hastily. He is six feet tall, with lanky legs and arms. Due to his nervousness and the narrow seat, he stumbles and bounces back into his seat. Finally, he manages to stand steadily in the aisle to fetch the bag, but the bag gets stuck in the rack. She grumbles to herself,

"I've never seen such a clumsy man. His hands don't go with his legs. His body disagrees with his brain!"

He puts the coat over her shoulders, and at the touch of his bony fingers, like monkey]'s claws, the muscles of her arms tighten. She can't stand even such a slight touch.

*

When Mr. and Mrs. Wei arrive at the square of the Ken-ting Youth Activities Center, dusk has already set in. Only a few people can be found in the whole center, because it is not on a weekend. The red-tiled roofs, the white washed walls, and the streets paved with slabs are all enveloped in the gathering darkness. They look around in surprise. They used to hold opposite opinions on almost all matters, but at this moment, in their minds, as if cast under a spell, nearly identical notions emerge: without the cris-crossing alleys, the Chinese quadrangle compounds were built much too closely; all the trees here are so small that no long branches reach over the walls; the square should not be so bare and there should be a huge Yellow Fruit Tree under which a few old men sit chatting; the ground should not be meticulously clean, instead there should be dog-droppings and a chuckling hen passing by, followed by a herd of chicks. Everything about this center, which was modeled on an ancient town in China, is inaccurate, but their hearts are helplessly plunged into a profound longing for their hometown located in the central region of mainland China. Actually, they are unaware of the fact that their hometown, lurking in the subconsiousness, often sneaked into their dreams in the present form of the center: the quadrangle compounds loomed in throngs, without any human shape, nor any living creature, and only one's own footsteps trod the narrow alley …

After finishing their meal in the dining hall, they return to their compound Yin Chuan Hall and sit on the benches at a square wood table in the small living room of the west wing. Contrary to her normal behavior, Ching-ching is unexpectedly quiet. Hsin-tang Wei takes a sip of hot tea. Feeling warm, his lean face glows with a light flush. He says,

"When I was eleven, the Japanese devils bombed our town, Yao Shan. I hid under the wooden table in the hall, as our teacher had instructed us to do in case one couldn't find a better shelter. Fortunately, our compound was not blasted. My third uncle's compound was bombed. How miserable! My aunt was the only survivor."

"That very day my mother took me out of town to visit grandma. I was lucky," she says.

As recollections of childhood soften her expression, he becomes more and more at ease.

"You were only seven then, weren't you? You must have been an adorable darling!" he says.

She smiles at him with a bewitching glow which has long disappeared from her face. He stares at her and then says,

"Let's go to the yard to watch the moon."

He pushes the wooden door. It opens with a loud creak which resounds through the courtyard. As if in a trance, her soul drifts on the waves of sounds to a desolate quadrangle compound some thirty years ago. She says,

"That door in your home creaked exactly the same way. Very loud."

He studies her enchanted face very carefully and it dawns on him which door she meant. It was the uninhabited one among the many quadrangle compound in which his clan resided. Ever since his third uncle's family was wiped out, the compound has remained vacant.

"Were you frightened then?" he asks.

The details of the event arising in her mind, she giggles and says, "No, I wasn't frightened at all, but it was quite embarrassing."

In his mind, she emerges in a funny outfit: her body was wet all over, with nothing but a thin white vest sticking tightly to her skin.

They exchange hearty smiles and walk toward the center of the courtyard. The moon has not yet risen; only few stars are scattered in the vault of heaven. Since they are the only guests in the Yin Chuan Hall, the other three wings are all shrouded in darkness. They sit on their door-sill. Their adjoining shadows are cast on the pavement

of the empty yard. They bend their minds in unison toward an imagined object—there should have been a decor in the center of the yard—a brown earthenware fish tank. He asks,

"I've been wondering all these years. That day when you visited our house, why on earth did you go to that uninhabited compound?"

"Well, because those men all gaped at me. The relative my mother and I visited that day was my uncle, the chief-steward serving your clan. Those who reported to him in his quarter were man-servants, drivers, and farm tenants. They stared at me in such a way that I had to slip out."

Grinning, Hsin-tang Wei is envisioning the young Ching-ching at sixteen: her figure was already curvaceous, her skin milky white and her features resembled that of Ch'en Yun-shang, the most popular movie star in the 1940's. No wonder those men stared at her lecherously.

She continues, "When I stepped into that compound, I saw in the center of the yard a fish tank in which hundreds of tadpoles swam. So I leaned against the tank to watch them. Suddenly a stone flew past me and hit the tank with a crack. I turned and saw a boy in khaki student uniform running toward the gate—"

"It was my third younger brother."

"When I turned my head, I lost my balance and fell. The water and tadpoles gushing from the broken tank splashed all over me. It happened that I did not wear a shirt and skirt, but a silk gown in off-white. Drenched, it stuck to my skin so that I looked practically naked. How could I go back like that? So, I tried all the doors in the compound. Only one door wasn't locked. I went inside and took off my gown. As I was wringing it, the door opened suddenly with a creak. Very loud—"

He interrupts her, his words full of wit, "Well, I came to look for a book. When I opened the door, a peerless beauty appeared in the darkness. She wore nothing but a brassiere in ancient style, she was, in fact, a fox spirit who came to seduce me …"

She feigns an angry look, coquettishly. "If I had known that you were such a rogue, I would not have married you. But in fact, you were very gentleman-like then. You stared at me only for a second when you entered the room. After that, you turned your head away, even when you were speaking to me. Also, it was very kind of you to help me—you stole a dress from your sister's room. I had already figured out that you must be the son, the heir of the Wei family."

She remembers the dark blue Chinese silk jacket and trousers that he wore. He looked handsome and graceful. Now—she looks at him—his handsomeness has vanished without leaving a trace. He is wearing a light blue shirt which she selected for him. But on his lean face, framed by the old-fashioned red wooden door, reappears a gentle grace that had gone for many years.

All of a sudden, his tone turns serious.

"Three days later, my family sent a matchmaker to your mother, asking for your hand. Ching-ching, was it because of my illustrious family that you consented to my proposal?"

Since her face is concealed in the shadow, its sharp lines are blurred. She has an understanding smile on her face. He looks at her with a mixed expression of earnestness and pain. She says,

"That was what was in my mother's mind. Your family was the wealthiest of the whole town. And the Communist troops were approaching our area. For her, the sooner the wedding could be held, the better. As for me, I had been frightened by men's wolf-like stares ever since I was twelve. You were the only gentleman, the only calm, stable man I had ever met. Since the moment the matchmaker pro- posed for you, whenever I thought of you, I felt composed."

*

That evening, they accomplish something they have not done for seven or eight years. The large built-in board-bed in their bedroom can hold the beddings of eight people. The boards are built high like the wooden bed in their hometown in olden days. It is below the lattice window, gently vibrated by the ocean breeze, that they make love.

83.17 1. Whistle **2.** Retirement: **Two Very Short Stories**\fn{by Ai Ya aka Li Chi (1945-)} Szechwan Province, China (F) 1

1

She never imagined that whistling could be so difficult. After puckering her lips and blowing—*phui, phui*—for some strange reason she felt she had to urinate. But she could hardly be blamed for that, since she went *phui* whenever she tried to get little Hsiung-hsiung to pee. That was sure no whistle. She really and truly did not know

how to whistle.

But no, she had to learn how, she just had to! It had all started when she decided she wanted a dog.

"I want a dog, a tiny little dog." She pleaded her case very tentatively to Ta-fa, who responded emphatically and, it seemed, without even considering her request:

"No!"

She tried to explain that she was lonely, especially after Ta-fa and his wife had left for work in the morning, leaving her alone at home from half past seven in the morning until six in the evening. It was so lonely being in such a big house all by herself. Mei-fang, who hadn't said a word all the time she was talking, banged one of the teacups hard against the tray—*clang*—as she was picking up the tea service, and her meaning was clear:

Lonely? If you're so lonely, why don't you keep Hsiung-hsiung home with you and take care of him yourself?

Mei-fang had said—in a roundabout way—that sending Hsiung-hsiung to a baby sitter every day cost them well over a hundred dollars a month, which, when the cost of milk powder and baby food was added in, went up to nearly two hundred. But she wouldn't agree to it. She knew that at her advanced age the pudgy little boy, with all that energy, would be too much for her to handle. She didn't dare agree to it.

"Mama," Mei-fang reasoned with her, "you're not as spry as you used to be, and who's going to take care of feeding and cleaning up after the dog? Besides, the neighbors would complain about the dog's barking."

She was right, you can't keep a dog in an apartment building.

Then, one day she noticed the little grade-school boy from across the way standing on the stairs whistling. Each whistle was answered by a series of barks—*arf*, *arf*, *arf*. What was going on here? The boy told her it was something called an "echo key-finder," invented for people who were forever misplacing their keys. All they had to do was whistle, which produced a series of barks in the echo sounder attached to the key, thereby giving away its location.

She asked the boy to buy one for her. It was a small thing, no bigger than a cigarette lighter. She called it "doggie" and pretended it was her very own dog. All she had to do was whistle and it would answer her, just like a real dog.

But she never imagined that whistling could be so difficult.

2

After being called in to the Personnel Office for the third time, Chang Liang-fan finally agreed to retire. (Naturally, this business of retirement was something he had considered and reconsidered.)

The Director of Personnel informed Chang Liang-fan of the factory policy of encouraging all employees to put in for voluntary retirement when they reached the age of sixty. (Using a hand calculator, the Director of Personnel figured out that his retirement pay would come to NT$970,000.) If they did not put in for retirement and there was a reduction in staff or a layoff, the less fortunate employees would really be in for some hard times. (In Chang Liang-fan's case, he would get NT$300,000 in the event of a staff reduction or NT$500,000 in the event of a layoff—the Director of Personnel had also figured this out for him.) It meant nothing to the factory if an employee had been with them for ten or even twenty years. (It was a world-wide depression!) And (at that time, there were rumors making the rounds that the factory was planning a staff reduction!) not only could he get away with his dignity intact by retiring, but could pocket NT$970,000 in retirement pay in the bargain (an increase of NT$670,000 compared to the unfortunate circumstances caused by a staff reduction or NT$470,000 in the case of a layoff)!

After considering and reconsidering the options, Chang Liang-fan finally decided to retire. (And if he didn't retire, what then? He was informed by the Director of Personnel that the youthful Factory Manager was particularly disturbed by Chang Liang-fan's age.)

By taking his NT$970,000 and putting it in the bank, Chang Liang-fan found that he could get by nicely on the interest it earned. He owed a real debt of gratitude to the Director of Personnel. (He was mindful of the fact that the Director of Personnel had taken a special interest in him because he and the Director's elder cousin, Wu Wei-ming, had gone to college together.) He had expressed this gratitude by personally taking two bottles of imported whiskey over to the Director of Personnel's official residence.

The only problem was the boredom that came with retirement! (He wasn't so old at sixty that he could be content to hang around the house and do nothing.) With so much time on his hands, he could only knock. around here and there, trying to keep as active as possible.

One day his wanderings took him near the factory where he had worked, and he decided to go in and say hello

to some of his former co-workers. (Oh, how he missed them! Them and that old desk of his!)

Chang Liang-fan stood in the office, where he saw his former co-workers and that old desk of his. (As well as the new man behind that desk, about whom he had been so curious from the very beginning!) The man sitting in what had once been Chang Liang-fan's place stood up politely and shook hands. (It was a firm handshake—the man seemed so sincere.) Chang Liang-fan nearly choked.

"Wei-ming," he said, finally managing to find his voice. (He would have known him anywhere. It was the Director of Personnel's elder cousin, his very own college schoolmate, Wei-ming. He had never been more sure of anything in his life!)

Chang Liang-fan had retired only after considering and reconsidering the options, but how could he have imagined that his replacement would be Wu Wei-ming! (The same Wu Wei-ming who was his college schoolmate and was two years his senior!)

There was no one Chang Liang-fan could complain to!

111.40 Excerpt from **Chen Yi Crosses The Mountain**: **A Folktale**\fn{by Hui Zhaolong (1945-)} Yangzhou, Jiangsu Province, China (M) 2

… This was in May 1940, during the anti-Japanese War. It was in the evening and the sun was slanting steeply towards the west. On the main road running along the banks of the Yangtze river at the foot of Maoshan mountain, clouds of dust were whirled up, waves of sand were rising and falling. From afar two horses were coming in flying gallop, *clippety-clop*, *clippety-clop*. *Ne-e-e-igh*!

When they arrive at the riverside, the horses are reined up and their riders dismount like a wind. Look at the man in the lead! He is about forty, tall and sturdy, his face is impressive! On his head he wears a gray military cap, he is dressed in a gray military uniform, around his waist is a leather belt with a revolver stuck in it. This makes him look even more healthy and vigorous, with a majestic air and an imposing appearance.

Who is he? A man whose military genius and fame has ruined the enemy's morale, whose prestige rules north and south of the Yangtze river, the commander-in-chief of the head forces of the New Fourth Army\fn{Communist.} south of the Yangtze, Chen Yi—General Chen!\fn{1901-1972; Mayor of Shanghai (1949-1958); Foreign Minister (1958-1969).}

Behind him we find staff officer Yang from headquarters. Chen Yi is preparing to cross the Yangtze in order to build up anti-Japanese activities in the northern part of Suzhou. Now he is standing on the river dike and gazing into the distance full of pride and enthusiasm! The sun has already disappeared behind the ridge of Jiaoshan at Zhenjiang. The glow of sunset illuminates half the sky and is reflected in the lucid spring waters of the Yangtze. In front of him: the vast expanse of the Yangtze, stretching endlessly into the horizon. Just see how heaven unites with water, and water unites with heaven, the waters of the Yangtze are surging high, the white-crested waves are rolling forever. Indeed:

Yangtze river, Yangtze river,
Day and night you flow to the east.

The river, stretching more than ten *li* to the other side, is swept in mist: Wave follows wave, wave chases wave, wave swallows wave, the wave before joins the wave behind, the wave behind pushes the wave before, wave after wave break over in white crests: *Ha-a-a-a* !

When comrade Chen Yi sees this scenery, he is overwhelmed by emotion. A poem by Su Dongpo comes to his mind: Thoughts of the past at Red Cliff:

"What a lofty style! Truly:

The great river flows to the east,
its waves wash the horizon,
since ancient times fostering truly great men.\fn{Here the text of the poem has been truncated by the editors of this book.}
In stormy weather we reach the bank,
enveloped in thousands of snow drifts.
River and mountains are like a painting,
Oh, what an era of heroes!

Ha, ha, ha, ha!"

"Surely, General Chen, the great waves wash the sand\fn{I.e., sift the good from the bad.} Those people who are

making friends with our enemy, those small clowns who do not care about our national interests, will surely be washed into the Japanese sea by the great tide of history. Let me wish you, General Chen, a favorable wind and immediate success for your plans.

"Immediate success, ha, ha, ha, ha, I certainly do not dare to guarantee you that. But this is the third time I cross the Yangtze, and I am earnestly convinced that we shall be able to move the heart of God, God will protect us. Ha, ha, ha, ha! Well, when will we embark?"

"Everything is ready. Our liaison man has arrived. We can enter at once."

"Fine!"

At this time the sky has grown darker and darker. The river is enveloped in a gray fog, evaporating clouds of mist everywhere. While looking at the river a faint sound is discernible among the reeds: s-*s-s* … *s-s-s* … *s-s-s* … *s-s-s*, a small boat is nearing. On the boat a man is standing pulling on the oars, *sque-e-eak* … *gurgle*, *gurgle* … *sque-e-eak* … *gurgle, gurgle*. The small boat shoots forward like an arrow from a crossbow and lands on the riverbank. As soon as the boat has landed, the man aboard jumps ashore like a gust of wind and fastens his boat.

One can see that this man is already well beyond his forties, he is tall and sturdy. Standing on the ground he measures one meter and eighty two. He is not only tall, but also in excellent condition. He is strong. If he would stretch out his upper arm and compare it with my upper arm, you would find that his was more than twice the size of mine! His face is weather-beaten with a purple tan, so dark that it is shining, so shining that it seems sparkling! He has bushy eyebrows and large eyes, a straight nose and a square mouth. He wears fisherman's clothing: black Chinese-style coat, gown and trousers. His coat is fastened with button loops and buttons, altogether seven or eight. One button is not buttoned and the opening flaps in the wind.

Who is he? He is an old liaison man among the guerrillas of the Yangtze river. His surname is Zhang, and he is called Zhang Youfu.\fn{Lucky Zhang.} Today he has received the order to escort General Chen over the Yangtze. As soon as he is ashore, he watches General Chen with a big smile on his face and shouts with the sound of a bronze bell:

"How are you, General Chen! Ha, ha, ha, ha!" He grasps Chen Yi's hand firmly.

"Hello, Big Luck! How are you? How are you, old mate? Now we meet again! Well, everything is ready, now we are only waiting for an eastern wind to blow. When do you think we can take off?"

"Is everything ready?"

"Yes!"

"Take it easy! As soon as my boss, Hui, has given you into my hands, we shall go!"

"Fine, we should take orders and follow commands! Ha, ha, ha, ha!"

At that moment Big Luck turns round and blows a whistle in the direction of the reed grove, *pi-ift*! As soon as the whistle sounds, three masts are raised in the reed grove and three boats appear, three large wooden junks.

Why would Chen Yi as one person need three junks to cross the Yangtze? He brings along a Japanese horse—a Japanese battle horse—and thirty 38-calibre revolvers. For the sake of his safety, the Party has ordered thirty-six men to escort him. With horses, guns and escort, they fill up three junks.

Chen Yi grasps the hand of Staff Officer Yang and takes leave. Then he enters the small boat together with Big Luck, and from the small boat he boards the big junk, binding the small boat to the rear of the big junk. Chen Yi changes into informal clothes and goes to relax in the center cabin. Big Luck shouts his order:

"Cast off!"

"*Hua-a-a-a-a-a*," three large junks aim straight for the northern bank of the Yangtze. Big Luck personally holds the rudder. He is a captain on board, *squeak* … *squeak*.

Well, to escort the head commander on his expedition North is surely an honorable task, but also a difficult one. Even if you do not fear ten thousand catastrophes, you must look out for the danger that may occur once out of ten thousand times! Who would have imagined that just at this moment, when their junks are in the middle of the river, they faintly perceive the sound of a motorboat coming from afar, *chug*, *chug*, *chug*, *chug*.

My! A boat is nearing! How do they know? They see a lantern in the distance, and the lantern is moving. What kind of boat? Could it be a Japanese surveillance boat? No. Big Luck has experience. How do the surveillance boats sound? They are steamers and sound like *dug, dug, dug, dug*. But this one sounds, *chug, chug, chug, chug*. That's a different sound.

Well, if it's not a steamer, what kind of boat is it, then? They are looking intently, and suddenly they see a snow white beam of light shooting up: *s-s-s-s-s-s*. What light is that? A searchlight! The searchlight is very strong and presently it is directed towards their boat. Not only is the light directed towards them, but the light is put on and off at intervals.

As soon as Big Luck sees that, he knows. This is a signal, and it means: “Drop the sails! Inspection!” It is unnecessary to say any more, this is for sure an enemy boat. This is a critical moment. General Chen must be warned immediately.

Big Luck gives the rudder to the hand of another of his men, whereupon he jumps into the center cabin to report to Chen Yi …

186.198 The Story Of A Child, Working Every Day\fn{by “the mother of my friend EH” (1945-)} Hanzghou, Zhejiang Province, China (F) 1

“That day a group of ten of us set off by train, leaving the beautiful mountains and lakes of Hangzhou behind. We arrived in the great, bustling city of Shanghai, where we boarded another train to Xi’an.

“We were shocked rigoid by the bleakness of Xi’an and the poverty and ignorance of the locals. Many of the girls started crying, and some ran off back to the cities in the east.I didn’t have the nerve to run away with them, so I got dressed in my army uniform, and became a new recruit.

“I was only thirteen. I didn’t understand anything, it had never occurred to me that anything frightening would happen. From Xi’an I took one of those “sardine-can” trains they used to transport soldiers in, which took us to Urumqi, changing at every station. Altogether, the journey from Hangzhou to Urumqi took one month and seven days.

“When we saw the Gobi Desert stretching out in front of us, we were all shocked out of our wits. We couldn’t imagine how people could survive here. Most of what they ate were milk products, and the toilets were big pits beneath two slabs of wood. There were no streets or roads, and practically no lights, let alone shops.

“Later on I learned that the suffering and poverty were nothing. The worst part was the physical labour. Everyone who came to Xinjiang had to do a probationary year of labour, and mine was building reservoirs. For a city girl, working every day on the building sites, where I had to dig the ground or carry stones or earth on a shoulder pole, hard physical labour in the blistering heat of the sun … I’ll never forget it as long as I live. It’s also why I will never feel tired or overworked again in my whole life.

“We built the first Xinjiang Military Hospital in that place, and that was where I met the man who’s my husband now. In those days he was the director of the Xinjiang Song and Dance Troupe. He fell ill and ended up on my ward. He liked me a lot, and he took me to visit his two sisters, who had also been sent to work in Xinjiang. But I really couldn’t get used to his reserved style of courtship, and I didn’t much care for the way he kept combing his hair all the time—it was very unmanly. I didn’t dare to make up my mind on my own, so I asked my friends in the hospital, but most of them didn’t approve. They said that he couldn’t stop fussing with his hair and clothes whenever he came to see me, he was too capitalist, too *petit bourgeois*, and he was bound to end up a counterrevolutionary. I was very confused, but I still decided to marry him, because he was clean and very polite.

“We got married and had two daughters. Life in Xinjiang was very hard, so I made up my mind to go back home to Hangzhou. I was determined not to bring up two daughters in this cruel place, so I left the army and took my daughters back to Hangzhou on my own, where I got a job as a nurse in a local hospital. My younger daughter was only two then, and the other was nine. Every minute of every day was a struggle, with no help from either set of parents.

“My husband and I lived apart like this for twenty-three years, with me working and bringing up the children alone, suffering all kinds of hardship to raise my daughters. We could only get together once a year. Often my husband was busy and couldn’t come to Hangzhou, so I would have to take the two girls on the long, arduous journey of over three weeks from Hangzhou to Urumqi to see their father.

“After twenty-three years of separation, we were finally able to live together once more, but it didn’t take us long to realise we had become incompatible. My husband despised the extravagance and self-indulgence of the interior, and the constant quibbling over trifles. And I was hugely disappointed in the husband I had longed for through all those lonely nights: his crudeness, his constant grousing and shouting, his total intolerance of anybody different. It made me miserable.

“But we didn’t divorce. Both of us thought we should stay together, if only for the sake of our two daughters and our grandchildren.

“My elder daughter has a son called Haohao. He’s thirteen now, and he often quarrels with his grandfather. Haohao believes that his grandfather is dragging the dark shadow of history into his life today. He thinks that his grandfather should accept the gifts that modern society has to offer.

“But his grandfather feels wretched and angry that his grandson has such an affiuent lifestyle but understands

nothing of the trials and suffering of the older generation; he\fn{The grandson} doesn't know or respect what happened in the past.

"I don't think this is just a problem for our family; I don't know what it's like for other people."

188.157 Excerpt from **The Jade King: History Of A Chinese Muslim Family**\fn{by Huo Da (1945-)} Peking, China (F) 11

This is a traditional courtyard-house. At one comer of its wall of polished grey bricks stands the gate under an arch, whose ridge is decorated at each end with an owl-head of simple yet graceful design, and over the rafters is a neat row of triangular drip-tiles. The gate itself is of heavy wood, painted a dark red. On each of the two panels is a brass door-knocker, the size of a rice bowl, with a ring hanging from it. Running down the middle of the panels are two lines of a couplet etched in gold, which read:

Owner of the Priceless Pearl and the Precious Jade,
Lover of Brilliant Moonlight and Gentle Breezes.\fn{The Priceless Pearl refers to the pearl said to be presented to Prince Sui, a duke of the Han Dynasty (206 BC-AD 220), by a boa he had rescued. The term has since become a synonym for rare treasure, espcially in Chinese classic literature. The Precious Jade is a classical synonym for anything of rare beauty. The term takes its origin from a piece of precious jade, presented by a commoner to a king of Chu during the Spring and Autumn Period of Chinese history (770-476 BC)}

Inscribed on the two hexagonal protrusions on the door lintel are two characters *Bo* and *Ya*, one on each, meaning "broadness of knowledge and elegance in taste," which make up the name of the house—Bo Ya mansion. Unlike such trite phrases as "Longevity and Prosperity" and "Everlasting spring households fronting south overflowing felicity in families doing good deeds," commonly seen on gates, the words *Bo* and *Ya* are a subtle revelation of the taste and interest of the owner. Flanking the gate are a pair of stone drums, and leading up to the raised threshold a series of five stone steps.

As a rule, the gate is tightly shut. Should the master of the house or any visitor come, he would first have to rap the door-knocker before the gate would be opened by a house-maid coming out from the apartment on the southside of the courtyard.

A few steps beyond the gate and directly opposite it stands a tile-roofed, brick-based spirit-screen, its wall white and bare of writing and painting, pristine as moonlight. At the base of the screen a wisteria of great age curls its way like a dragon up a bamboo trellis, its vines thick and luxuriant, its lush foliage forming a green canopy draping itself all the way to the ground. In spring and summer when the plant is in full bloom, its lavender flowers dangle like strings of gems.

Between the gate and the screen is a long and narrow courtyard, contiguous to the southern wall of which is a five-roomed structure generally known as the "lower apartment." Serving as the reception-room and servants' quarters, the building is to the west of the gate. Thus the gate archway is not in the middle but at the southeastern corner of the courtyard, conforming with the architectural tradition of "house in *kan* (west), gate in *xun* (southeast)" which is supposed to ensure good fortune.

At an oblique angle with the gate archway and on the axis of the premises is a second gate. Although merely a passageway between the outer and inner courtyards, this portal, popularly known as "the gate of overhanging floriation," is of no small import. Unlike the simple and sedate door to the street, it is elaborately and exquisitely adorned. Instead of being dark red in color like its counterpart, it is painted vermilion and embellished with fine designs in white and gold, and has under its eaves an intricately carved and colorfully painted overhang similar to that of a sedan chair. The gate is a perfect specimen of the unsurpassed artistry of craftsmen of traditional architecture.

Beyond the second gate is another spirit-screen. But unlike the one in the front courtyard, it is not built of brick and tile, but carved of natural Chinese box-wood and consisting of four pasels linked together in the manner of a folding parlor screen. On the panels are four landscapes done in relief—Mount Emei in moonlight, Suzhou under the midnight moon, Lugou (Marco Polo Bridge) in the dim morning moonglow, and surging sea in the moonshine. All four scenes depict the queen of heaven, but each has its own artistic appeal and evokes a different emotion.

Behind the screen is the inner courtyard, along three sides of which are buildings—those on the east and west sides are three-roomed while that on the north, or the main apartment, five-roomed. These apartments are linked by a verandah that extends along the southern wall up to the inner gate, forming a square. Two brick-paved walks cross at right angle in the middle of the yard, leading to the gate and the doors of all three apartments. Flanking

the main apartment are Chinese crabapple and pomegranate trees, which are a delight to the eye with their leafy boughs swaying in the wind from spring through until autumn.

Among Peking's courtyard houses, Bo Ya Mansion is of medium size. There are larger ones that have three courtyards or side yards or gardens. But architeturally speaking, it is far above the average and, due to the part played by the owner in its designing, has a grace and tranquillity of its own. Moreover, being ideally located, neither amidst the din and bustle of the main thoroughfares nor too far from them, one can be secluded from the outside world by shutting the gate and yet still have easy access to various places in the city; thus its inmates may sally forth abroad or enjoy quietude at will, an arrangement most suitable for those who care for both social intercourse and peaceful solitude. Obviously the couplet on the gate, the carved landscapes on the wooden screen, and the plants in the courtyard were not randomly chosen.

The present owner of Bo Ya Mansion, however, was the head of the crime-squad of the local police station, who showed neither "broadness of knowledge" nor "elegance in taste," but wore a black police uniform, toted a handgun and dealt in chains and handcuffs. It is said that before the house fell into his hands, the owner was a Qing-Dynasty scholar who, having fallen out of favour with the court, chose to live as a recluse, devoting himself to reading and painting, and taking pleasure in antiques and cultural relics, especially jades of ancient vintage, priding himself on "gentlenlanly conduct chaste as jade." As a rule, he shut himself in and shunned company, but occasionally would go out to visit shops dealing in jades and other lapidaries, where, if he found any rare and precious artifacts, he would make a purchase at all costs, or, if the price was beyond his means, would linger until he had studied the piece and enjoyed its beauty to his heart's content. And if told a certain family had rare jades, he would make a visit there to have a look even though unacquainted with the owner; for his unconventional behaviour, the old gentleman was nicknamed "Jade Fiend," in which he took pride rather than offence.

After his demise at the age of eighty, his descendants squandered away the estate and the house fell into the hands of the crime-squad leader. Nevertheless, the old gentleman's antiquarian style lingered on.

*

In the 24th year of the Republic (1935), the police officer suddenly took it into his head to sell the house and move away. For what reason no one knew, but it was conjectured that either he needed a new and larger house for the power and riches he had amassed, or he was hard-pressed for money to meet the expenses incurred in his political dealings.

The news that Do Ya Mansion was up for sale soon became a talking point everywhere. In the streets and marketplaces, in restaurants and tea-houses, people conversed about the sale with great interest, some eager to know the price to see whether it was within their means, though most were just having fun and waiting to see who could afford it. So a number of real estate middlemen made so bold as to approach the crime-squad leader, an attempt to fleece the tiger, as it were. For such people the police officer had an instinctive aversion, as he himself was a profiteer and could not bear to have anyone else put a finger into his pie. So he made it known:

"Whoever wants to buy the house, let him come to me himself. Brokers and middlemen had best keep their noses out!"

Having thus shooed away the go-betweens, the officer waited for prospective buyers to come to him. He also refused to go to the real estate exchange and look for customers.. There was no doubt in his mind that the house could be sold, that those both in the know and with money would come to make their bids.

Then one day a man came knocking at the door. After showing him into the reception-room, the maidservant went to her master to announce the visitor.

As the officer entered the reception-room, he, cast a glance at the visitor.

The man was thirtyish in age, dressed in a long gown of gray cotton, a bowler hat and black cloth shoes, and though tall in stature, was thin and frail. His complexion was darkish, forehead high, hair parted in the middle, eyebrows slightly arched, and eyes black, slightly sunken but flashing with animation, giving the impression that he was highly intelligent and competent. With years of experience in dealing with people of all types, the police officer could identify anyone at a glance. Now he was almost certain that the man before him was a junior clerk or a teacher or, at best, an accountant, whom he surmised was not a buyer but someone sent to pave the way for the deal. Annoyed at the thought, he asked the man coldly without bothering to use any term of address,

"What do you want to see me for?"

"I was told," the visitor said, "that you're finding this house too small and wish to change it for a larger one." In deference to the owner, he used the word "change" for "sell."

"Ah, yes," the officer replied, somewhat surprised by the man's choice of words. Then turning to the maid, he ordered, "Tea for our visitor."

"No, thank you," the man said. "Let us get on to the subject of the house."
Another jolt for the officer. Why, the man was wasting no time or words in getting down to business! Why so eager? Actually he himself was anxious to get down to brass tacks too. Waving the maid away, he came to the point at once:
"All right, let's not waste time and get down to business. On whose behalf are you coming to see the house? Why isn't he here himseIf!" Smilingly the visitor remarked,
"Am I not here myself!"
"Oh?"
The officer was taken aback and wondered how he had failed to see this. Hell! The fellow doesn't look like someone who afford this house of mine, he thought to himself. But then, since he's said he wants to buy it, I can't but treat him as a prospective buyer. It was at this point that he remembered to ask the visitor his name and began to mind his manners.
"Your surname, sir?"
"Your humble servant is named Han," replied the man, rising slightly from his seat,
"Mr. Han," the officer switched to the polite term of address but being wealthy and powerful enough to give himself airs, he made little change in his haughty tone, "you want to take a look round the house first or find out the price first?"
"No need to look around," the man replied. "You see, I was here before you took possession of it. Now that you intend to move away and seeing as I'd like to buy it, you have only to quote the price."
The officer was again taken by surprise. Why, he reflected, the man's long had his eye on the house and is willing to buy it without taking a look. Not a bad guy to deal with! To make a deal so readily raised the standing of both parties. The officer was pleased and thought to himself that this was indeed a fine house and decided not to let slip such a good buyer. Secretly raising his intended price twenty per cent, he said,
"When I deal with someone straightforward, I'm always fair and square. Ten thousand silver dollars and the house is yours."
He eyed the man for signs of acceptance or rejection of the bid while being ready to do some bargaining. But to his surprise, the man replied without a moment's hesitation.
"Let's call it a deal."
Another jolt for the officer. Obviously it was now impossible to raise the price. But he was quick-witted enough to add,
"But there's one point I want to make clear, Mr Han. The price is for the house only; it doesn't include the wooden screen in the inner courtyard. I intend to take that with me."
"But that's part of the house," the man said with deliberation. "When I buy the house, I buy the screen too. As to the price, we might talk it over."
"Then throw in another two thousand!" Now that he had sounded out the buyer, the officer made no bones of the matter.
"Right!" With that, the man closed the deal, adding,
"You might start moving out." And so the deal was clinched, much sooner than the officer had expected.
"Please, sir, don't move in until I've vacated the house," the officer said for fear that the buyer would change his mind. "Besides, you'll need time to get the cash ready. Right?"
"A few days' waiting won't make any difference," said the man, "so you can take your time. As for the money, you can send someone to my store for it right now. I'll pay ten thousand first as deposit. The balance of two thousand I'll settle after you've moved out. How's that, sir?"
The officer was struck dumb. Had anyone ever had such a buyer? he wondered. Why, he hadn't tried to cut a damn cent off the price quoted and was ready to pay ten thousand cash right away. Was there ever a business deal like it? Ordinarily a thirty per cent down payment was good enough! This guy … how rich was he? Who was he?
"Your surname, sir?" In his flutter the officer repeated the question he had asked earlier on.
"Han is my humble surname."
"Your given name, please?"
"Han Ziqi in full."
"Oh!" The officer cried out in astonishment at hearing this highly celebrated name.
"So, you're Mr. Han, the proprietor of the Rare Gem Studio. I've long heard of you, long heard of you! No wonder."
No wonder what, he did not say, but both of them know what that was.

"If the house goes to you, it goes to someone who knows what's what," added the officer. A change in ownership between connoisseurs is an honour for both the seller and the buyer. The transaction pleased both parties. The officer gloated secretly. As for Han Ziqi, he congratulated himself on having made this devil of a crime-squad officer move out of the house that he had long been yearning to possess.

Not long after, the officer moved out. Bo Ya Mansion became the residence of the proprietor of the Rare Gem Studio.

*

Han Ziqi's Rare Gem Studio was well-known throughout Peking. It enjoyed the same prestige as Tongretang Pharmacy, Neiliansheng Hatter's, Ruifuxiang Silk Store. Those who knew nothing of it could only blame themselves for being ignorant. The fact was, the difference between Han's studio and these other celebrated stores was that it did not carry medicines, fabrics, headgear and footwear, nor gourmet delights, but dealt in goods unrelated to daily living yet which held great attraction for all, that is, curios and jades, precious stones and jewellery. The store was located in Langfang Lane Two, a by-street west of the Zhengyangmen Boulevard and north of Dashalan Street. This vicinity was old Peking's most elite, most prosperous and most bustling business centre. It bristled with shops and stores and drew merchants from all parts of the country and thronged with shoppers and sightseers day and night. As a popular saying concerning Peking had it:

"Its east and west sids are known for residents of wealth and distinction; its south for fish and fowl, birds and flowers; and its central section for jewels and jades, silks and brocades."

This "central section" referred to the business district just outside the Qianmen Gate while the best of gems were to be found mostly in the antique shops in Langfang Lanes One and Two. Of all the different kinds of store, these shops were by far the most spectacular. Precious commodities on the market such as gold and silver are sold at fixed prices, but rare jades alone are priceless. This was a fact known to all.

As for Han Ziqi's Rare Gem Studio, it was considered the epitome of the history of Chinese fine arts, a treasure trove of the world's rarest stones, a crystallization of human ingenuity, an enigma that aroused both envy and curiosity.

The history of this ancient capital, millenniums old, is also a history of jades, for the city had amassed countless gems, nourished artisans without number, and created no end of miracles. The vast Dushan jade-jar kept in in front of the Chengguangdian Hall in the Circular City at Beihai Park is a standing testimony of the emergent jade craftsmanship in the Yuan Capital Dadu. Reputed to be the wine jar used by Kublai Khan in entertaining his courtiers, weighing 3,500 *jin* and having a capacity of over 30 *dan*, the grand vessel was carved out of one huge jade boulder and is as impressive as it is gigantic. Rare for its size and artistic craftsmanship, this *tour de force* is said to have taken fifteen years to carve, spanning two dynasties, the Jin and the Yuan.

In the Ming Dynasty, when the country's best lapidarists were assembled in the palace workshops, the jade craft began to flourish, reaching its zenith during the reigns of the Qing emperors Yongzheng and Qianlong. By then there was distinct division of labour—grinding or polishing the stones. Day and night the craftsmen were engaged in making wares for the court—*bric-a-brac* both decorative and those for daily use, jewellery, accessories for dress, carriages and horses, dinnerware, wine sets and innumerable others. In addition, an engraving workshop was set at Ruyiguan Hall that specialized in carving royal seals and jade tablets (sacrificial objects used by royalty).

But in the late Qing period, when China was torn by internal strife and foreign invasion, the jade craft declined. The rising international demand for handicraft products consequent to the revival of the European and Japanese economies after the conclusion of the First World War gave impetus to Peking's jade craft industry and pushed China's jadeware export business, begun in the late 18th century, to its peak. By the early years of the Republic Peking boasted of more than forty stores dealing in jade and other precious stones, over thirty jade workshops and some one hundred antique shops. The sound of drilling and grinding could be heard all day long in Flower Street outside Chongwenmen Gate and in Langfang Lanes One and Two beyond the Qianmen Gate, the number of lapidaries having exceeded six thousand.

*

At that time the Rare Gem Studio was a small and insignificant workshop with very little business and absolutely no hope of ever entering the rank of large, establishments. Located in Langfang Lane Two, this small cottage-industry had only two front rooms for the workshop and a few rooms at the back as family quarters. Though it had a name, it had no signboard . on the door. Except for those who had dealings with it, people took it to be a mere residence.

Actually, the owner of the Rare Gem Studio, Liang Yiqing, was a first-rate jade craftsman, a master at making all kinds of wares—vases, censers, cups and wine vessels; flowers, birds, fish and insects; warriors and other figurines; miniature architectural structures of all kinds and landscapes complete with boats and carriages. At one glance he could detennine the inner qualities of an unhewn jadestone and make the best use of its shape and coloration, miraculously turning an unsightly stone into an object of superb beauty.

Highly skilled as he was at the craft, he was dull-witted otherwise. Never having had any schooling, little given to loquacity and inept at either socializing or contending in business circles, he therefore seldom went anywhere but kept to his workbench. His wares he supplied to stores dealing in antiques and jades, especially to Mr Pu's Huiyuanzhai (Universal Jeweller's), an establishment engaged in trading with foreign firms and exporting in quantity. All these businesses sold at a handsome profit, but Liang got paid precious little in return for their orders, allowing them to fatten themselves on his craftsmanship.

Yet he never complained; he was content with his poor lot and scanty returns from his small capital and managed to make a living by keeping his nose to the grindstone. Not surprisingly, his Rare Gem Studio remained its meagre self. Over forty in age, he was without son and heir, having only two daughters by his wife whose maiden name was Bai.

The girls took after their mother, both very pretty, though the younger more so than the elder, and with lovely complexions, white and delicate as "muttonfat" jade. Equally pleasing were their names that did justice to their looks. The elder was called Junbi, or Fine Jade; the younger Bingyu, or Icy Jade. These names were given at the request of their father by the learned and antique-loving old gentleman, the master of Bo Ya Mansion, and were dotingly shortened to Jade Girl and Little Jade by Mr. and Mrs. Liang when addressing their darling daughters.

The sisters were eight years apart in age. When the younger girl was still a toddler, the elder was already a great help to their mother in housekeeping—cleaning, making the beds, sewing and mending, laundering and cooking. Jade Girl was actually cleverer than her mother. She was bright and conscientious and had a clearer idea of the family's income and outlay than her mother had and, though illiterate, was able, through mental arithmetic to keep account of the family finances. By the age of twelve or thirtren, she had relieved her mother of more than half of the household chores and was a sort of junior "bookkeeper" to her father.

Sometimes when Liang had more orders than he could handle, Jade Girl would be his assistant, receiving customers, collecting payments, delivering the wares and even doing simple jobs such as cutting up rough stones and taking measurements of unhewn blocks. But Liang never let her work on the "water-bench." For one thing, grinding and drilling are jobs too heavy for girls. For another, it is a rule with artisans to pass on their skill only to sons, never to daughters, who would eventually be married off and take away whatever skill they might have learned to their husbands' families. Without any prospect of an heir to his studio, he often sighed to his wife, in the absence of Jade Girl,

"Too bad she's a girl. If only I had a boy." He would break off in mid-sentence.

Deeply remorseful, Mrs. Liang would lower her head and, still not reconciled with reality, would pray, "Have compassion, Allah," holding on to the belief that God would someday bestow her a son, though she was already past child-bearing age.

The Liangs were devout Muslims. Among the large population of Peking, Huis were a small minority, even smaller amongst those engaged in the jade craft. This was perhaps the reason why Liang Yiqing seldom bestirred himself beyond the threshold and had no quarrel with the world and, out of an innate sense of self defence, kept to himself.

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In the early summer of the 8th year of the Republic (1919), cries of fruit-and-snack hawkers could be heard up and down Langfang Lane Two:

"Mulberries for ritual offerings! Large juicy cherries! Big dumplings made of quality glutinous rice and dates, wrapped and tied up with the best mugwort leaves and reed grass and well-iced too!"

At the cries of the hawkers, Jade Girl and her sister Little Jade ran out of the house towards the hawker's wheelbarrow. The vehicle had large wicker baskets lined with blue cloth and filled with cherries, as well as a large jar of clear cool well-water. While calling out, "Large cherries!" the hawker kept sprinkling water on the jewel-like fruit, which were at the same time chilled by blocks of ice. The very sight of the cherries had a cooling effect on anyone who cast them a glance. How could anyone resist buying some? Jade Girl handed two coppers over to the man, who ladled out two small cupfuls of cherries on to a fresh green lotus leaf. Jade Girl took the cherries and, without eating any, led Little Jade, her mouth watering, back into the house. Liang Yiqing was bending over his work when Jade Girl called softly ftom behind,

"Pa, take a break now and have a taste of these!"

Putting aside his work, Liang turned round. At the sight of the cherries on the lotus leaf, resembling agates on a green jadeite platter, he remarked,

"Hmm, that's a beauty. I'll make one like it some day. Go ahead and eat them yourselves."

Only then did the girls pick up the cherries with their jade-white tapering fingers and put them into their mouths, sucking the icy bitter-sweet juice with relish. As Liang eyed their tender and delicate faces each adorned with a small red cherry between the lips, he conjured up another picture in his mind and forgot all his fatigue. He then resumed his long and hard toil of grinding.

The grinder Liang used is called a "water-bench." This is a very simple tool—a board supported by four legs, which has on one side a shaft with a rotary wheel and on the other side a groove that holds the emery for grinding. Below the open end of the groove is a basin on a tripod. When working, Liang would sit on a stool by the bench and keep the shaft rotating with a foot treadle, which set the wheel in motion. The stone to be ground would be held up against the edge of the rotating wheel with his left hand, while with his right hand he would keep feeding the emery on to the wheel and the jadestone. To lower the heat generated by the friction, he would keep watering the grinding wheel and the stone. Hence, the grinder was named "water-bench."

Primitive as the tools are, the technology is far from simple. To transform a crude jadestone into a finished product, wheels of different sizes have to be used one after another as the work proceeds from rough-hewing to fine-polishing, until the desired refinement is attained. Moeover, the variation in the forms and shapes of the artifact to be produced and the application of different carving methods (in relief and intaglio) rest entirely on the dexterity of the craftsman. When at work he is fully occupied, hand and foot. He must be all attention and most meticulous, his eyes riveted on the stone as if magnetized to it, his heart tugged as if by some invisible cord, even his breathing has to be slow, soft and in an even tempo. There must be absolutely no sound in the room except the humming of the grinder, which obliterates everything, swallows up everything. In short, the craftsman at work has to dismiss every thought from his mind.

Suddenly there was a knocking at the door. Without stopping work, Liang asked Jade Girl to see who it was. He knew she would recognize all the customers coming to fetch his wares or pay him.

When she opened the door Jade Girl found two strangers standing on the threshold. One was an old man, the other young. The older man was about sixty years old, tall and stalwart in build; his complexion was the color of bronze, his forehead broad, his nose high, his sunken eyes spirited, and a long white beard flowed down from his chin. He had on a white turban, a grayish-blue long gown and sandals for his bare feet. The young lad who seemed to be in his teens was of medium height, dark-skinned and handsome-looking, but his head was shaven and his cloth suit nondescript in color and patched at the cuffs and knees—the very image of a young mendicant monk. Stunned by the trampish appearance of the two strangers, Jade Girl was momentarily at a loss what to do.

"Oh!" she finally uttered and then called over her shoulder, "Pa, please come here!"

Liang put aside his work and came into the outer room. He too was surprised by what he saw. Why, he did not know them either. At this moment the elderly bowed slightly and laying his right hand on the chest, said,

"*An salam al-lakun*!" The surprised Liang hurriedly responded to the greeting, also putting his hand on the chest, making a slight bow and uttering,

"*Iu al-lakuman salam*!"

What were they saying? For Muslims, no translation is needed. The first of the remarks means "May Allah bless you with peace!" and the second, "May Allah bless you with peace also!" There are expressions of blessing between Muslims when mreting each other to show they are of one race and faith. These are greetings used by Muslims around the world So that, wherever they happen to be, they can always identify each other by the familiar words. Liang felt at once a warm current surging through him.

"Ah, *Duoshti*!" he exclaimed. "Please come in and take a seat."

Having shown the visitors into the front room to benches by the table, he asked Jade Girl to serve tea. The term *duoshti* is understood only by him and those embracing the same faith. It means "friend," "compatriot" and "brother," for Muslims the world over are brothers. Jade Girl served the visitors each a lidded cup of tea, and they drank it all. Then the old man said,

"It's just for a drink of water that I'm stopping by here without being invited. But only after I'd made sure you were a *duoshti* from the Arabic *duo* (scripture) across the lintel of your door."

This was again most heart-warming to Liang. He was moved by the implicit trust of the visitors though they were merely passers-by and had nothing to do with his business. He had been living here in this lane for many

years, yet it had never occurred to him that he was duty-bound to do anything for *duoshtis* passing by his house, if only offering them a bowl of drinking water .

"Sir, may I know what line of business your shop is in?" the old man asked.

"Mine is a small jade workshop," replied Liang. "I'm incapable of doing anything except taking up this craft handed down to me."

"Ah, you are a pearl of Muslims, sir," the old man said with gratification. "We Muslims are closely linked with precious stones. Nephrite comes from Hetian in Xinjiang, turquoise from Persia, cat's eye from Ceylon, moonstone from Syria." Liang was astonished.

"You are a great connbisseur of jade, Venerable Sir." Smilingly the old man said,

"That's more than I deserve. I'm only quoting from the few time-worn books I've read, repeating the bits of information picked up here and there in my travels. I'm afraid I've made a fool of myself!"

"Venerable Sir, where do you hail from, if I may ask?"

"From far, far away," said the old man, "from Quanzhou in Fujian Province. It's been five or six years since I started out from there, travelling through prefectures and counties, footing it in the daytime and stopping to rest at night."

"I see!" A feeling of compassion swept over Liang for the men who had made such a long trek on foot.

"Are you coming to Peking to visit relatives or look up friends?"

"Neither. It's a long story."

*

As the old man drank his second cup of tea he closed those deep and bright eyes of his, as if recalling some events in the distant past. After a moment he broke the silence by suddenly asking,

"Have you ever heard the name Saihai I Gawamudin?"

"Yes, from my elders. It was in … in …"

Liang flushed for shame of his ignorance. He only knew that "saihai" was the title of honour for very high-ranking *ahungs* and had a very dim recollection of the name Gawamudin, but could not recall the date.

It was in the sa:ond year of the reign of Emperor Zhenzong of the Song Dynasty, that is, the year 295 in the Islamic Calendar, or the year 996 AD by the Gregorian Calendar, that Saihai Gawamudin came to China from the west." The elderly spoke with deliberation, without a trace of derision at Liang, for after all it had happened in the very distant past.

"The Saihai had three sons. The eldest was called Saideludin, the second Nasuludin, and the youngest Sa'adudin—all fine scholars. Their erudition was highly rated by the Song Emperor Zhenzong, who offered them official commissions, but they declined and were then appointed *imams* in charge of mosques. The eldest of the three brothers went to remote parts to spread the faith. What ultimately became of him is unknown. His two younger brothers were appointed by the court to set up mosques in the capital, one near the eastern wall of the city, the other in the southern suburbs, which is the mosque in Ox Street today."

"I see," Liang uttered softly and with understanding as if he had travelled through centuries of history alongside the elderly man, as if some clots long obstructing his veins had been removed, allowing his blood to flow freely. He had been a dullard up till now, ignorant of the tracks left by his ancestors.

In fact, if we trace the historical origins of Islam in China, we can date it earlier than the arrival of the old man's ancestor Saihai Gawamudin. In the first year of the reign of the Tang Emperor Gaozong (65Q-655AD), that is, the year 651 by the Gregorian Calendar, the third caliph of the Uthman Empire of Arabia dispatched an envoy to Chang'an to pay homage to the Tang emperor. But even that dates later than the time when the first Muslims set foot on China. A tombstone in Quanzhou dates a year earlier, the Arabic on which reads:

Tomb of Hussein Ben Mohammed Salatoi
Allah bless him
Died in the 3rd month of the 29th year of the Islamic Calendar

that is, in 650 AD.

From that time on Muslims from the Western Regions came to China at different times and for various reasons. They settled and propagated here, forming gradually what is known as the Hui-hui nationality, now known as the Huis. However, due to negligence on the part of historians, there is no definite date for Saihai Gawamudin's arrival in China, nor for the founding of the mosque on Ox Street. To this day, all such unrecorded deeds of the early Muslims in China remain puzzles as well as subjects of interesting conjecture for their descendants. Not

surprisingly, the illiterate Liang Yiqing had had no idea of all this and was left breathless with astonishment and admiration at hearing for the first time these events narrated by the Muslim elder.

"Saideludin went away to convert believers and what became of him no one knows. He's been forgotten over a millennium!" The old man sighed with re- gret.

"No one knows he, too, has offspring. I, Tuloyedin, am his direct descendant of the 25th generation." Thunder-struck by what he heard, Liang rose from his seat, murmuring,

"Ah, Saihai, Saihai." As if visited by the Holy Spirit, he was completely overwhelmed and filled with nothing save exaltation and reverence.

"No, I'm not a Saihai, just an ordinary Muslin like yourself, sir.' Tuloyedin went on with deliberation,

"These years I have been a roving dervish, visiting many an ancient mosque—starting from the Holy Fraternity in Quanzhou, thence to the Sacred Memorial at Guangzhou, the True Faith at Hangzhou, the Small Peach Orchard Mosque at Shanghai, the Pure Enlightment at Nanjing, the Tranquil Meditation at Xian, the Great Eastern at Kaifeng, the Great Southern at Jinan, the Mosque on the Qing River at Jining, the Cangzhou Temple and the Bozhen Mosques, Tianjin's Great Southern and Northern Mosques, and now I'm in Peking."

Listening to Tuloyedin reeling off in one breath a whole string of names of temples where he had left his footprints, temples which were scattered like stars throughout the greater part of China, Liang was wideeyed and speechless with astonishment.

As the two men talked, the boy who had come along with Tuloyedin gulped down the tea Jade Girl kept serving cup after cup, seven or eight of them in all, which showed how thirsty he must have been. Jade Girl, seeing how much respect her father had for the old man, was of course very polite towards the boy, filling and refilling his cup, though she was secretly amused by him. The boy, on his part, was too bashful to speak to this slim and snow-white complexioned girl. Nor did he dare to interrupt the elders, so awed by the dignified demeanor of Liang Yiqing. After drinking his fill, he sat woodenly on the stool next to the wall and glanced around the room, resting his eyes on the various jade objects that were on the table and the chest of drawers, shifting his glance at long intervals, murmuring admirations under his breath. The youth was astounded by what he saw. To him the Rare Gem Studio was a strange world that he had happened to break into, a world of novelty and mystery.

"So many places you and your boy have been to. Is the lad your grandson, sir?" Liang asked after taking a glance at the boy.

"No," replied the old man with a smile, "Allah did not bestow upon me any offspring. He's accompanying me on my travels. A *yatim*.\fn{Orphan} His Arabic name's Ibrahim."

The mentioning of his name roused the lad from his trance-like fascination in the jade wonderland. He turned to Tuloyedin.

"Baba, are you calling me?"

It was when the boy turned around that Liang Yiqing had a good look at the young face. Although shabbily clad, the lad was very handsome—a round face with a pointed chin, straight nose and pleasant-looking mouth, high forehead, jet-black eyebrows that were slightly knit as though he were thinking about something and the rather deep-set eyes flashing with intelligence. Liang thought to himself: What eyes! One glance was enough to tell they were the eyes of a Hui, of a person of competence! The boy reminded him of the time when he was the same age, learning the craft from his father who said to him,

"Little Qing, with eyes like yours, you needn't be taught the trade, you can learn by watching."

At the recollection he felt a tinge of sympathy for the promising lad, but he refrained from voicing it. Instead, he smiled at the boy and answered for Tuloyedin,

"No, Ibrahim, Baba did not call you. He was talking to me. Now go up for a closer look if you like." Then, turning to Tuloyedin, he asked,

"Does Baba intend to take him back to Fujian after your visit here?"

Unwittingly, Liang was addressing the old man "Baba " after the boy. In the parlance of Muslims, "Baba" is a courtesy title for elderlies and scholars, akin to "fuzi" (teacher) in the Han language, though it has come to be the tenn of address for grandfather. There was a twofold meaning in Liang's calling Tuloyedin "Baba."

"No, I have no family in Quanzhou. Ka'bah is my destination," the old man replied as he stroked his flowing beard.\fn{Ka'bah: a small cubical building in the courtyard of the Great Mosque at Mecca containing a black stone sacred to Muslims throughout the world. It is not only the chief object of their pilgrimage to Mecca, but also the sacrament in whose dircction they face when saying *solat* (prayers) five times a day. The English translieration of the term is "Kaaba."}

"Ka'bah! On a pilgrimage to Ka'bah, sir?" I Another astonishment for Liang. He knew that for all Muslims a pilgrimage to Ka'bah is their loftiest aspiration, their ultimate destination and their greatest honor. But Ka'bah was so very far away, at the ends of the earth. A journey that he, Liang Yiqing, a craftsman, had never even dared to imagine, and yet this penniless, wandering old man had the courage to make, and taking along a young boy at that! He could not refrain from asking,

"Is the lad going with you?"

"Of course," Tuloyedin replied calnily. "Ibrahim will go too. Without him I'd probably die before crossing all those mountains and rivers. May Allah bless our journey so that we may reach the Heavenly Hall safe and sound. If I should die on the way, at least Ibrahim won't give up. He's young; he'll certainly make it!"

At this, Liang cast a look of esteem at the lofty-minded elder Tuloyedin and the young aspiring Ibrahim.

*

Out of a strong sense of the bonds of religion and blood, Liang Yiqing insisted that Toluyedin stay longer at his place to recover from his fatigue and raise some money for the long journey ahead before setting out again. This might be their first and last meeting, he reflected. Tuloyedin accepted Liang's hospitality, but not any gifts from him. He said Muslims had no more regard for money than for drifting clouds and would be at home anywhere since all Muslims were *duoshtis* (brothers), and that he trusted that wherever he might be, there would always be a brother to offer him a clean bowl of rice and a clean cup of water, which would be more than sufficient for him.

At this, Liang again felt moved. He then cleaned the front room and put up beds for the visitors and himself, while his wife and daughters would sleep in the back room as usual. So the arrangement caused no inconvenience.

For the moment, Liang arranged for the visitors to bathe in the "water-room." The *ghusl*, or thorough ablution, is a required ritual before worshipping Allah. When they were unable to find any water during their years of roving, Tuloyedin and Ibrahim often had to resort to "token ablution"—first running their handS over the dirt on the ground and then rubbing their faces and hands in simulation of bathing, in devout Muslim fashion. Through taking "thorough ablution" here, the two travellers cleansed themselves of the filth as well as the fatigue accumulated in the course of their long journey.\fn{All this is specifically allowed in the Qur'an:H}

When the sun had sunk and night was thickening, Liang performoo *salat*, or worshipping Allah, after Tuloyedin. As prescribed, Muslims perform *salat* five times a day: early morning before sunrise (*Salat al-Subh*), in the afternoon (*Salat al-Zuhr*), at sunset (*Sa/at al-'Asr*), at dusk right after sunset (*Sa/at al-Maghrib*) and at night (*Salat al-'Isha*).As he was busy plying his craft all year round, Liang often neglected these all-important rites, unlike his wife and daughters who performed them every day without fail. Now that he had made the acquaintance of a descendant of Saihai, he could not but feel shame and, to amend his earlier negligence, was extra devout in performing the *salat* before daybreak the next day.

After the morning worship, Jade Girl set about to clean the house, front and back, a daily chore of hers. But before she had a chance to do that, the clever Ibrahim had given the workshop a cleaning already, for which he won a smile of thanks from her. Liang, however, would not take this in the same spirit. He chided her for lack of consideration for their guest and apologized to Ibrahim,

"I am sorry to have put you to such trouble. Very sorry!"

After breakfast Tuloyedin took Ibrahim out, first to pay respects to the remains of their forefathers at the mosque in Ox Street, then to visit and worship at the mosque at the Four Archways in the East City, Pushou Temple in Jinshifang Street and the Fanling Temple in Er-tiao Lane. These four great mosques of Peking were at least 500 years old and, as such, had long been held in reverence by Baba Tuloyedin.

After his guests had left to visit the mosques, Liang renewed his toil at the "water-bench." He felt as if God was helping him and found the work lighter and pleasanter than usual.

In the evening when the old man and the lad returned, Mrs. Liang served tea and dinner, at which Tuloyedin talked about his day's outing to everybody's delight. After dinner, instead of working as usual in the lamplight, Liang had very strong tea served and asked Tuloyedin to lecture on the Qur'an. The old man first recited some passages in Arabic and then explained them very clearly in the Han language sentence by sentence, word by word. For the first time in his life Liang came to know what *wa'z* (religious precepts) were. He had been muddling along in the dark all this time; now at the age of forty, he felt enlightened and found life more meaningful.

Without anything to occupy himself with, Ibrahim sat staring at the jade carvings. Jade Girl, who by nature was not at all shy, and never uneasy before strangers, went up to him, her younger sister in her arms.

"Have you any idea how these objects are made?" she asked.

Ibrahim was gazing at the piece *Prime Fruit of the South*, a cluster of fresh litchis, crimson as rubies, their jade-like flesh exposed where the shells had burst open. To Ibrahim, the litchi was particular dear, as it was native to his homeplace. Without thinking he said,

"Why, this … this isn't man-made! It must have been picked off a tree!" Jade Girl chuckled.

"You are funny! D'you really think it's real? That it's edible? Try biting it and you'll break your teeth! Let me tell you. It was made by my father. It took him three months to do it. Ibrahim could only gape in astonishment.

"See," said Jade Girl knowledgeably, "this is one large piece of agate. You know, agate may be white, red, as well as blue, green, pink and black. Sometimes a chunk may have several different colours, like this one. Before working on it, my father studied it over and over again and thought for days and days and finally hit upon this design. The parts that are red were cut into litchis, the streaks of green just right for the leaves and branches, and the white flecks that are good for neither shells or leaves, were made into the flesh of the bursting fruit. Now, isn't that a clever idea?"

"Ah."

Ibrahim was hard put to voice his admiration. Such .exppressions as "unexcelled ingenuity" and "heaven-inspired craftsmanship" were not within his vocabulary. He could only murmer,

"Made by hand? By the hands of man?"

"Of course by the hands of man." Jade Girl was proud of her father's superb craftsmanship. "There's nothing my father's hands can't make. Just take a look at this vase with a hundred chain-links!"

She was pointing at a vase carved of green jade. The body of the vase was square in shape and! bulging in the middle, its neck long and slender, its mouth small, and its surface satin-smooth without too much ornamental engraving. What was most fascinating was that the heads of two anImals on its sides were carved in high relief, each with a small ring dangling from the mouth linked to another ring, which in turn was linked to another, then another … until I they formed a chain. The vase was therefore named One Hundred Link Chain Vase.

"It's made of Dushan jade from Nanyang, Henan Province," said Jade Girl. "Isn't it a beauty? You know, these two jade chaina—"

"How are the links joined together?," asked Ibrahim after scrutinizing the vase carefully from various angles and failing to find any slits where the links were joined.

"What? The links joined together? Do you think the links were carved separately and then joined to each other? It can't possibly be done!" Jade Girl was amused by his innocence, yet she was proud in disclosing the secret.

"Just think. Jade is both hard and brittle. It can't be kneaded or welded. How could links made of it be joined together?" Ibmhim was stumped.

"1'll tell you how it's done. The whole vase is made of a single piece of jades tone; the rings are carved in a way so that they interlock with one another."

Ibmhim was astounded. Looking at the jade chains with their links separate yet interlocking, he could not for the life of him figure out what hands could have produced this miracle. He kept muttering,

"That's too difficult. Too, too difficult."

"Of course it's not easy." Racalling how her father had toiled day in, day out, she sighed with loving pity for him.

"If everyone could make an object like this, it would not be a rarity. Oh, my father, all day long he has nothing in his mind but jade, contemplates and handles nothing but jade. Grinding and polishing at the bench, spending weeks on a small piece, several months on a large one. I'm told there's a big mountain carved of jade in the Imperial Palace that took a large number of craftsmen more than a dozen years. And my Papa's Papa was one of them."

At this, Ibrahim saw in his mind's eye a long river of jade, thousands upon thousands of skilled artisans grinding away in silence until they were hoary-haired and drained of blood and life itself; grinding until the rough stones were transformed into priceless artifacts of beguiling beauty. Jade Girl's "Papa's Papa" is no more, but the treasures he created with his hands survive him; his superb craftsmanship remains alive; his descendant, Jade Girl's father, is carrying on. Yes, Ibrahim concluded, this long river of jade will keep flowing on for ever and ever Lost in thought, Ibrahim kept repeating Jade Girl's words, "Grinding, grinding" while unconsciously rubbing his hands. He was carried away by the miraculous creation of beauty .

"All jade works are produced through grinding."

Before Ibrahim, Jade Girl spoke like an experienced artisan.

"The more the grinding, the finer the piece. That's how the finished piece is so smooth and lustrous."

For demonstration, she picked up a small jade bowl next to the one-hundred-link-chain vase. Ibrahim took a careful look at the bowl. It was snow-white, lustrous and translucent, its body thin as eggshell so that the fingers of Jade Girl holding the bowl could be vaguely discerned through it.

The younger girl Little Jade reached out her hand and cried,

"I want the bowl. Let me have it!" Quickly Jade Girl withdrew the hand. holding the bowl from her younger sister, saying:

"You can't play with it. If you break it, I'll beat you, even if Papa doesn't."

Little Jade gave up, pouting in disappointment. To her, Elder Sister was the same as Papa and Mama, whom she must obey. Holding up the bowl in her hand, Jade Girl turned to Ibrahim.

"Have you any idea how jade gets to be so smooth and glossy? I'll tell you how. At the final stage of grinding, instead of using a grinding wheel, you use a bottle-gourd."

"A bottle-gourd?" echoed Ibrahim, his large jet-black eyes blinking. He could not for the life of him imagine what gourds had to do with jade carving.

"Polish the stone with gourds, that's how. And the gourds must be grown at Pony Bridge Village, those from anywhere else won't work. What's more, to polish the jade to a shine, you must apply some 'magic powder' to the gourds."

In her eagerness to show off, Jade Girl inadvertently let out the top secret. of jade craftsmanship. When she realized she had made a slip, she told herself that it did not matter as Ibrahim would be leaving in another day or two and was not in the trade anyway.

But the lad was enchanted by the almighty magic gourd and powder, by all that he had heard and seen. He felt as though he were in a fantasy land. The delicate jade bowl in Jade Girl's hand seemed to be a luminous moon veiled by flimsy clouds, shimmering softly over him and drawing him step by step closer.

"Feel it. Smooth as Little Jade's hands," Jade Girl said as she carried her baby sister up to him.

"Oh, it's smooth, very smooth." Ibrahim foolishly ran his fingers over Little Jade's small hand.

"Did I ask you to feel her hand? I mean the bowl."

Jade Girl could not help giggling, seeing Ibrahim so dense. Then holding the bowl up to him, she said,

"It's all right to feel it, really."

"Oh!" he took the bowl as if it were some sacred object. The jade bowl was now in his hands. As his rough fingers ran over its smooth, creamy surface, he felt a pleasant chill passing through his palms and thence throughout his entire body, as if he were touching the moon and stars in the distant celestial space. It seemed that this happy moment was what he had been living so very long for. He felt a contentment, excitement and elation he had never experienced before. As if he were holding not a jade bowl but some ethereal spirit with whom he was at one. He was intoxicated, transported, Ioblivious of everything, of even himself, enchanted by the jade fiend.

"Take care. Don't drop it!"

He heard a voice coming from he knew not where, a voice at once very distant and yet very close. Perhaps it was Jade Girl speaking, though he could not rocall who she was nor where he himself was. A strange noise suddenly breaking the silence of his fantasy land awoke him and he was back in the world.

Crash! The jade bowl slipped from his numb hands onto the brick floor, its fragments sheer as egg-shell scattering all over like bits of smashed thin ice in a river.

"Aiya! You, you!" Jade Girl's voice was trembling from fright.

"Oh, oh." Little Jade began wailing at the mishap.

As if struck by thunder, Ibrahim stood nailed to the ground like a wooden statue, staring dejectedly at the fragments, his eyes brimming with tears of distress and remorse. The bowl broken—broken in the twinkling of an eye! How had this happened? No more, that artifact of peerless beauty! No more, the treasure that had captivated his soul! As Jade Girl bent down to pick up the fragments, she sobbed in despair.

"The bowl is my father's love. It's his life. It's our means of living."

Ibrahim was struck dumb, his heart cut to pieces by a sharp knife. The commotion disrupted the discussion of religious tenets between the two men.

"What's happened, Ibrahim?" Tuloyedin asked as he came over.

No answer was necessary. He understood everything when he saw the shards of jade on the floor and the forlorn expression in Ibrahim's face.

Oddly, the old man only cast a stem look at Ibrahim, without scolding him at all. He stood by without uttering a word and, nonchalantly stroking his long white beard with his right hand, watched the owner of the Rare Gem Studio in silence. He was waiting to see how Liang, in the present situation, would treat his Muslim brothers. If

Liang should fly into a rage, well, that would go to prove that he was a mere miser, to whom it was pointless to explain true faith and religious tenets. To Tuloyedin, material wealth was but passing clouds and worthless dirt, burdens that the vulgar clung on to for dear life.

Unexpectedly, Liang took the matter lightly. Turning to Jade Girl, he chided,

"You really gave me a start by screaming and making such a fuss. I thought something terrible had happened." With that, Liang went up to Ibrahim and, patting him on the shoulder, said without any grudge,

"It doesn't matter, my dear brother. The trinket's broken. Just let it be. I can make another by working a few extra evenings and have it ready when the customer calls for it."

Tears gushed out of the boy's eyes. Lifting his head, he said to Liang doggedly,

"I'll … pay you back for it!"

"Pay me back for it?" Surprised by Ibrahim's stubborn pride, Liang said jokingly,

"I'm afraid that's beyond you. What'll you pay me with?"

"I can pay you back. I've got two hands; I'm strong; I can do anything," said Ibrahim, chin up and chest out, holding out to Liang his two hands, which, though not fully grown, appeared aged—coarse and chapped from exposure, calloused with manual labour and so scrawny that the bones and knuckles bulged out like bamboo roots from slushy earth.

These hands Liang grasped in his own. He could barely hold back his tears. Ibrahim bit his lips and then all of a sudden burst out crying,

"Kind master, please let me stay here and serve as your apprentice!"

The plea was a surprise to himself. In that instant, the long river of jade once again appeared in his mind's eye.

Ah, he thought to himself, this is what I want to give my life to; this is where I belong!

Liang did not utter a word. He seemed to be realizing for the first time that this boy, though only half as tall as himself, had aspirations as high as his own. He felt the same blood flowing through them. But he did not know how to answer the boy. Slowly and hesitantly Liang turned around and watched the serious-countenanced Tuloyedin. After all, the boy was Tuloyedin's and the two of them had a long journey ahead, a long way to travel to Ka'bah, the Heavenly Hall.

Ibrahim wiped away his tears with his hand and fixed his eyes at the old man who had brought him up and taken him over mountains and across rivers. Falling on his knees abruptly, he pleaded,

"Baba, forgive me. I can't go with you." …

268.158 1. Eyes **2.** Sleep **3.** The Wave And The Shoal **4.** Fire And Ice\fn{by Xiao Kang (1945-)} Funing County, Jiangsu Province, China (F) 2

1

When you lower your head,
Your long lashes
Screen the shadow;
When you glance around,
The warmth in your gaze
Brings stirring discoveries;
When you gaze,
Your sparkling eyes
Reveal a shy speech;
When you close your eyes
The universe resounds
In a soothing lullaby.
*
You are the soul's window
Storing thunderstorms.
Having you, I can bury
All squabbles and nags;
Having you, I've tasted
Honeyed silence.

*

Ah, let me look straight at you,
Listening to your eternal refrain,
Let me walk close to you, walking
From your eyes to the bottom of your heart.

2

My dear, please move away your arm
For I'm not used to, nor need
To fall asleep pillowing on it.
Don't linger in
Any silken entanglement,
Don't be drowned in a
Drunkenness that ensnares like a net, just
Save a little for the deep starry skies
Save a little for the rippling springwater
For sleep is a storehouse of energy
Don't let the springtime of youth
Wither in vain in the fire of passion.
*
My dear, please remove your arm,
Daytime din has ceased
Leaving only the night wind whistling
May your dream be a land on heroic shore
Forever blooming with fresh flowers and birds soaring
May my dream be a deep, deep sea
Where ships forever voyage to distant places
Then let us meet in our dreams
Ah sleep is life's germination
Let life's sweet wine be eternally
Brimming in the golden cup of new life.
*
My dear, please remove your arm
Let me say "good night"
Drowsiness has descended
Oh, I long for sleep, for sleep.

3

The small boat is grounded in the shallows
They've found the most isolated place
Everything disappears from the world
Only two souls singing,
Join the chorus of waves and shoals.
*
He silently ponders: that wave
How like a deeply loving girl
Charmed by the shoal she gently strokes his shoulders
And when she's stricken in his bosom of the shoal
How splendidly bloom the sea flowers …
*
She quietly muses: that shoal,
How like a lovesick young man

Loving the wave, he begs her to be his bride
Forever passionately in love,
Sharing one seabed …
*
Ah, lovesick shoal …
Ah, loving wave …
Her fine hair flowing in his arm's bay
He's drowned in her subtly heady fragrance.
Everything disappears in this world
Only the wave and the shoal pouring out their songs.

4

Fire are you
And ice I am
Having met you
How can it not melt
This long kept, unquenchable tenderness?
*
Fire are you
And ice I am
In the sunlight
I gaze upon
Your burning flame.
Its shine and transparency
And you, are you savouring
The snowflake's gleaming love
Pulsing beneath the light?
*
Fire are you
And ice I am
Doubting not the spells love casts
Hiding not the crazed outpourings of love
In the stillness of night
Beneath the shivering stars
It will quietly shout aloud
Crystal—
Soul's crystal
Whether it is fire
Or ice
Who can resist passionately loving
—Such innocence
—Such luminescence?

1946

21.65 Hong Taitai\fn{by Cheng Nai-shan (1946-)} Shanghai, China (F) 5

Everybody called her Hong Taitai.\fn{A note reads: *Taitai is the traditional term for Mrs. or wife, which fell into disuse after 1949 for being considered a very* bourgeois *title and was severely discouraged during the "cultural revolution." The Chinese term is retained here, rather than replaced with the English "Mrs." to call attention to this connotation which the term "Mrs." lacks*.} Fifty years ago that name was celebrated throughout Shanghai society. A party marking a baby's first month of life, a wedding banquet or a birthday all fell short of perfection if Hong Taitai was not in attendance. There was a period after 1949 when the words "Hong Taitai" seemed redolent of mothballs, as if they had been shaken from a

camphorwood chest. But within the circle of the few rich families in Shanghai, for example, they still carried a good deal of weight right up until the “great proletarian cultural revolution” of the 1960s. In Shanghai, one had one’s own little circle of happiness. And no matter how the storms raged outside, as long as one had three meals a day and stuck to one’s own affairs—and thanks to the government policy of buying out the *bourgeoise* one could rest assured of eating at the Park Hotel today, the Maison Rouge or Jade Buddha Temple tomorrow—no one would interfe.

It was a very active period for Hong Taitai. The managers of both the public and private sections of the big restaurants and hotels all knew her; she was a very warm person. If Hong Taitai came forward to do the honours for a banquet on some special occasion, it would be reasonably priced, but ample. And the food would be something special,quite out of the ordinary.

My first impression of her dates from my tenth birthday.

I was the ninth child in the family, nicknamed “Jiujiu,” or “Little Ninth.” My parents were in America. When they left they had been afraid that I was too small to make such a long trip and would be in the way. Then the situation had changed, unexpectedly and so greatly, and I was left behind in Shanghai for good to live with my eldest brother and his wife. My brother was twenty-one years older than I and often joked that he could have fathered a child my age. He did spoil me as if I were his own daughter. Fatherliness in an eldest brother has always been the Chinese way.

The day of my tenth birthday they did things up a bit on my account, though it was nothing more than noodles and a few dishes. In those days my brother and sister-in-law were rather careful of appearances. They couldn’t have competed with Hong Taitai at any rate; she was the wife of a *bourgeois*. Brother and his wife, no matter what, were subject to their work units, and they had to be careful. So they did no more than invite the brothers and sisters still in Shanghai over for an ordinary family dinner.

We had just sat down—we hadn’t even got around to pouring the wine—when there was a knock at the door, and a voice, vivacious and sweet, was heard:

“I’ve come to beg a bowl of birthday noodles.”

“It’s Hong Taitai!” my sister-in-law gasped, startled, and pushing back her chair she fled into her room to change her dress.

“That’s how thoughtful she is.”

My brother hastened to open the door; sisters and sisters-in-law busied themselves getting an extra bowl and chopsticks, bustling and rushing about. Thinking back on it now, this Hong Taitai’s entrance into my life was strangely like that of the domineering Wang Xifeng in *A Dream of Red Mansions* who always announced her arrival on to the scene with some arresting remark like: “So sorry I’m late welcoming visitors from afar!” The exact words were different, but the effect was the same. Her voice was so confident and hearty; she had an air of being completely at home.

“Hong Taitai!”

The family stood to greet her.

“Ah, I made it on time,” Hong Taitai said, removing her white kidskin gloves. She wore a square of checked wool on her head, the ends so long they fluttered with her every movement, adding immensely to her charm. When she took off her full-length cashmere coat, she was wearing a claret-coloured *qipao*\fn{A note reads: *Traditional high-necked, close-fitting Chinese dress*.} underneath, a phoenix embroidered in gold thread down the front, dazzling in its brilliance. In the 1950s such elegance had become a rare sight for anyone, let alone a child such as myself who had as yet seen nothing of the world. This sudden manifestation of such a gorgeously dressed beauty took my breath away.

She sat down next to me and pressed a red envelope into my hand. There was a shining golden character glued to the envelope—longevity—but because it was in the traditional, complicated form, it took me a moment to recognize it. At that time such red envelopes, used for giving presents of money to children on special occasions, were no longer on sale. Hong Taitai said she had glued it together herself out of red paper; the character was also her own handiwork.

“Hong Taitai, really, you shouldn’t put yourself out of pocket over Jiujiu’s birthday. She’s a child.”

My sister-in-law had changed and come back out, and though she was much younger than Hong Taitai, she looked faded beside her. The only thing one noticed in that whole room was that brilliant combination of red and gold: dazzling, but pleasingly so!

“Mr. Hong and I are old friends of your parents. I went to see Jiujiu at the hospital the day she was born. She was so alert and bright-eyed, such personality, not like most babies. When the nurse brought you in you were as

pink as a glutinous rice dumpling.” She described it vividly, and I was enthraled.

“At first your parents planned to come for you after a while, but now look … They must miss you terribly. I pity you that your mother isn’t here. So though I pay no attention when one of your brothers or sisters has a birthday, Jiujiu is different; I have to come to celebrate your tenth birthday, to stand in for your mother and raise a glass to you, wishing you long life!”

Her words warmed my heart.

After the meal, my brothers and sisters put on some music: *A Rose for You*, a Xinjiang folk-song quite popular at the time, and the brothers and brothers-in-law all surged toward Hong Taitai. But she frowned, and with a graceful flick of the hand in which she held a cigarette, said, “Put on Bing Crosby.\fn{Bing Crosby aka Harry Lillis Crosby (1904?-1977), American popular singer.} Us old folks like the old songs.” When that bewitching voice was heard, she laid aside her cigarette and began, tripping lightly, to dance. As she danced, the side slits in that claret *qipao* rose and fell, now hiding, now revealing her graceful legs. I really hoped I might grow up a bit faster and be all that she was: full of life, charming, beautiful.

When all the guests had gone, I took out the red envelope she had given me and counted: forty *yuan*! Forty *yuan* in those days!

“A grand gesture. Mr. Hong is the only one who could afford her,” sister-in-law said, pouting her lower lip. “What a memory she has. How could she remember Jiujiu’s birthday, let alone that it was her tenth!”

“That’s her stock-in-trade.”

Having said that, brother added sympathetically, “Her lot is a hard one, too. If she’d been born into a good family and got an education, she’d certainly have done well, an intelligent person like that.”

Only later did I find out that Mr. Hong was in the raw silk business and when Mrs. Hong took up with him, he was already quite successful. He had a wife and family, but he rented a small house in the western district of Shanghai and lived there with Hong Taitai. She it was he took everywhere with him, thus in everybody’s mind, she was “Hong Taitai.” But there was talk, both out in the open and on the sly, some of it not very complimentary.

As for the true facts of Hong Taitai’s background, no one was able to find out. Even the Hongs’ housemaid, Ah Ju, knew only that one night, carrying a white leather bag, she had arrived with Mr. Hong and had been there ever since. It was said that Hong Taitai was a good cook, and Mr Hong had grown pink and stout under her care. Almost overnight she became well- known; Mei Lanfang\fn{A note reads: *A Beijing opera star*.} and Zhou Xuan\fn{A note reads: *A popular film star*.} both were guests in the Hong family parlor. For a time, the house was filled with important guests every day. It seemed that this Hong Taitai had “arrived” in society the same way-a white leather bag in hand. And with her arrival, Mr. Hong’s business expanded.

*

My second meeting with Hong Taitai occurred while I was in senior middle school, at Mr. Hong’s memorial service. Elder Brother was the natural representative of our family; he took me along on the strength of my having been the recipient of Mr. Hong’s forty-*yuan* birthday gift. The service was held at the International Funeral Home. There were leading comrades from both the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference and the Association of Industry and Commerce present.

As we entered, I saw Hong Taitai dressed in a black taffeta *qipao* with close-fitting sleeves, wearing a pair of the black leather pointed-toe shoes that were extremely popular in the sixties. Though there were indications that she was putting on weight, her graceful waist made her appear as lovely as ever. She walked composedly among those who had come to pay their condolences, greeting those who ought to be greeted, nodding to those who needed nodding to. The grief weighing on her made her seem even more dignified and noble. On the hairnet holding the thick tresses was a spray of pure white orchids,\fn{A note reads: *Flowers, real or artificial, are worn as symbols of mourning*.} giving her a very refined air. As soon as her glance fell on us, she hurried to greet us.

“Jiujiu, you’ve become a young lady.”

Her gentle voice dispelled the dread I felt in this venue of eternal parting.

“You’re the next generation. Wear a yellow flower.” Her soft white hand fastened the yellow bloom to my blouse. She began to speak of all Mr. Hong’s good qualities, and as she spoke she grew sad and dabbed at the tears in the comers of her eyes with a flaxen handkerchief. By comparison with the main wife, weeping and wailing to one side, she appeared to be more highly bred, more worthy of the title Mrs. Yet in the end it was mere similitude, for when the formalities began, she conscientiously peeled off to one side, a mourner who knew her place.

“Hong Taitai will suffer now! This is really difficult for her!” the other mourners commented surreptitiously among themselves.

"Yes, Mr. Hong was a man among men. But was he willing to entrust the family property to Hong Taitai? Naturally, it was safer with his wife. With him gone, Hong Taitai is left with nothing, not even a last word. It's hard for her."

Hearing such talk, looking at the lovely black-garbed Hong Taitai, I thought of Chen Bailu in Cao Yu's play, *Sunrise*.

Once Mr. Hong died, we saw little of Hong Taitai. In the adult's eyes, she was, after all, a woman of uncertain past!

*

In a twinkling, I was twenty years old. The celebration was still a family affair. Recalling the gaiety of ten years ago, I couldn't help thinking of Hong Taitai. I accused Elder Brother of being a snob, but he said I was naïve. As we locked horns, there was a soft knocking at the door.

It was Hong Taitai's maid, Ah Ju, a woman about thirty years old from Shaoxing. She was carrying a red-lacquered tray which held a specially prepared duck. Attached to the duck was a glittering gold *shou* character—longevity—exactly like the one I had received ten years before.

"Hong Taitai's indisposed, so she sent me to convey her best wishes to Jiujiu. She prepared the duck herself," Ah Ju rattled off as instructed. One could see she had learned it by heart before she came. Everyone asked after Hong Taitai, and Ah Ju stammered. "The house has been let out. Hong Taitai has a second-floor room with a balcony and a room on the first floor for me and the kitchen. It's enough for the two of us; it's fine, just fine. Goodbye now."

With that she made her escape.

Everybody began to inspect the duck. It lacked nothing in appearance, fragrance or flavour. It was then the three hard years of natural calamities. A duck such as this one would cost at least ten *yuan* on the black market. At the same time that we were saying what a crime it was to eat Hong Taitai's food, we were all scrutinizing the duck. It was lean. It was quite possible that it was one Ah Ju had stood in line all night to buy, in which case it wouldn't have cost much more than two *yuan*. Since it had been personally cooked and sent over specially, it seemed to be worth much more than that. But the gift was small after all, so she didn't appear in person.

"She's a very capable woman!" everyone agreed.

Not long after, the tempest blew up in 1966\fn{The Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) is meant.} and people could hardly fend for themselves, much less worry about Hong Taitai.

*

Two years passed and things became relatively quiet, I happened to be walking by Hong Taitai's one day, and looking up at her balcony without thinking, I suddenly spied the old familiar curtain fabric. Spurred by this, I headed upstairs. A young man wearing a work overall with work safely printed on it barred my way and asked in a rough manner, "Who are you? Who are you looking for?"

"I'm looking for Hong Taitai," I stammered out.

I regretted that as soon as it was out. To call someone "taitai" in those days was to invite criticism.

Unexpectedly, he sang out, "Hong Taitai, someone to see you," and led me upstairs.

"Jiujiu!"

Hong Taitai welcomed me with surprise and pleasure and wiped away tears, moved. How rare in those days, a genuine sigh and embrace. I leaned against her bosom and cried.

The room was still furnished with French-style furniture. The mirror was covered with pictures of leaders, the best method of protecting mirrors in those days. Ah Ju brought tea, and I had just said, "Thank you, Ah Ju," when Hong Taitai corrected me softly:

"Call her Sister Ah Ju. I've adopted her. That man on the stairs was Ah Ju's husband."

Hong Taitai was wearing a blue Chinese-style cotton jacket. With her hair cut short, in revolutionary fashion, she looked much like someone who would be principal of an elementary school.

"Thanks to their moving in with me, no one dares bother me. The house was ransacked till there was not even one *yuan* left and I was half-dead myself. As I was crying over it, Ah Ju came and said we should bring her man to live with us; he was a worker and no one would dare bully me then. I said I didn't want to involve them in my troubles, but she said, 'Anyway I'm a servant. Even if worst came to worst I'd still be a servant. I'm not afraid.' I'm so grateful to Ah Ju and her family!"

"Hong Taitai," Sister Ah Ju cut her short, embarrassed. "I've told you before, don't call me Hong Taitai. Call me mother."

"Ah." Ah Ju laughed ingenuously. "I can't do it. I'm not used to it."

"I get only eighteen *yuan* a month for living expenses, so I have to depend on the two of them to take care of me, and they have two children of their own."

Hong Taitai sighed deeply.

"*Ai*, how could I have come to this! If I had only gone out to work earlier on, I wouldn't have got into this predicament, no income at all!"

Hong Taitai kept me on to dinner. She hadn't been able to break that habit. With Ah Ju, her husband and their two lovely innocent daughters, plus Hong Taitai and myself, there were six gathered round the square table. It was a home-style meal of two dishes and a soup with an additional plate of scrambled eggs in my honour. The bluish glow of the eight-watt fluorescent tube shone gently on us. Hong Taitai now and again put some food into the children's bowls with her chopsticks, very grandmotherly. I thought I heard them call her "Nanna," and I found it very strange.

"They mean mother's mother," Hong Taitai explained. "I like them to call me that."

The children, seeing their opportunity, purposely raised a chorus of "Nanna," and Hong Taitai beamed. I sensed that she had never before laughed so contentedly. Her son-in-law stolidly scooped in his food without saying a word. But when I was taking my leave he dashed ahead turning on the stairway lights all the way down.

"My son-in-law hasn't any education; he's a bit rough, but he's a very good man," Hong Taitai told me softly. "There's no need to be afraid of him."

When I got back and told my brother and sister-in-law what had happened, they expressed great admiration for Hong Taitai.

"That Hong Taitai, she can take the bad with the good. What an incredibly capable woman!"

Later I got married. Tied down to housework and child, I hardly made the effort to see my brother and sister-in-law, let alone Hong Taitai.

*

In 1982, my parents made their first visit back to Shanghai from the US. All the old friends gathered; and of course Hong Taitai was invited as well. During the "cultural revolution" many of them had lost touch with each other, and they were glad to renew relationships, but though it grew quite late, Hong Taitai still didn't appear.

"Where's Hong Taitai? We're waiting for her reappearance in society."

"Ah, didn't you know, she's a famous slowpoke."

Just as we were really growing anxious, she arrived, accompanied by Ah Ju. She was wearing a downy mohair coat over a close-fitting black satin jacket, and though her hair was raven black, you could tell it had been dyed. Yes, she had aged some, but she was as graceful and refined as ever. The company rose to greet her, but she pushed Ah Ju forward.

"My adopted daughter."

When it came time to eat, no place had been set for Ah Ju.

"Ah Ju, go out and have a bowl of noodles and come back for Hong Taitai in two hours," we suggested.

"Just squeeze together a bit."

Hong Taitai pulled Ah Ju to the table and asked the waiter to bring another bowl and chopsticks. The others were rather startled; the atmosphere grew somewhat embarrassed. Though society as a whole had changed, such circles still clung to iron-clad rules. Before all the hot dishes had been served, Hong Taitai got up to leave, saying she had something to do.

The gathering fell to discussing her.

"How could she take a servant into the family? She must be crazy!"

"Well, it's not so surprising. Her own background is more or less the same."

"That's what happens when one lives with servants. You become petty and overlook etiquette."

These dreadful comments, served up with the food and drink, dropped airily from their mouths. I hastily gathered up my child and left.

*

A few days ago, a woman friend of mine moved by chance to a place in Hong Taitai's lane, and I dropped by to see her since I was in the neighborhood.

She welcomed me happily.

"Jiujiu's come!" Her silver hair made her look kinder than ever. She said she no longer dyed it.

"I'm getting old, and it doesn't turn out well any more," she said, patting her hair. Sister Ah Ju politely brought tea and sweets for me.

"Jiujiu thinks of me. Of the old crowd, you're the only one who thinks of coming to see me. How big is your

son now?"

"Ten."

As I said it, I remembered my own tenth birthday and told her how struck I had been by her beauty.

She smiled wanly.

"That's past." She told me that in the beginning a few old friends still came to see her. Now everything was back to normal after the "cultural revolution." There were even *mah-jong* parties and dancing, but she was done with it all because her stiff old legs couldn't manage it now.

"Actually it's all a waste of money and time. Ah Ju is so busy. I can't do much to help her, but I can knit a few sweaters, to thank her for being so good to me. They're extremely frugal themselves, but they know my delicate appetite, and there's always one dish especially for me at each meal. There aren't many daughters—even natural-born ones—like that." She touched my sleeve, speaking emotionally, while her hands never ceased their work on the small sweater she was knitting.

"Mother Hong, what are you making?" A passing neighbour stopped in.

"My granddaughters having her baby any day now. I'm knitting it a little sweater."

"Well! The fourth generation! You're very lucky, Mother Hong!"

"Yes, I am," Hong Taitai replied contentedly, and she smiled.

72.90 Race Day\dn{by Bai Luo aka Bai Lecheng (1946-)} Guangdong Province, China (M) 4

On the screen, a dozen thoroughbreds lined up in their starting stalls. During the parade before the race, the blue of the ocean and the complementing green of the turf had delighted Zhang Fanzhou, but that delight was wiped out now by the tension that gripped him as he waited for horse number seven to break from the stalls.

From the instant the stalls opened, he had eyes only for number seven. Over a straight kilometer, the key to the race is the sprint finish over the last few dozen meters. His heart throbbed convulsively to the beat of the pounding hooves, an insistent rhythm that stopped abruptly as number seven sped past the finish post in first place.

He heaved a sigh of satisfaction and turned the television off. The rest of the card was of no interest to him. Two thousand Hong Kong dollars, half of his savings, had been riding on number seven.

Playing the ponies was something he had learned to do in a month or so, an indication of how well he had adapted to the local ways in the half year or more since he had fled the village school in Guangdong Province to a shack on the island of Hong Kong. But his past wagers had never been more than a hundred. This time it had felt like do or die.

His wife Mo Jinlan had gone out, taking three-year-old Xiaohao with her. She had told him she was going to Guntong to see her cousin and make arrangements to rent an apartment. Tomorrow afternoon, his parents would cross the bridge at Luowu, coming from China to share their life in the "paradise" of Hong Kong. "Paradise" for him was a cramped space between wooden slats, which he had taken for a thousand Hong Kong dollars shortly after he arrived. It was hard enough for the three of them to turn around in the few square feet they had, how could they fit another two people? Jinlan was probably right—they'd have to find some way to let the old folks live in comfort for the first while at least, then think again in a few months. That way they wouldn't be too let down when they arrived.

But what about the rent? He had his own way of looking at it. Jinlan was always nagging him, complaining that his mind had been "struggled" out of him by the village schoolchildren. The only thing those little hooligans wanted to learn was how to beat people with billy clubs and ransack homes. When they came to his house, there wasn't much for them. But they still called him an overseas Chinese bastard, and when they discovered copies of the cadre newspaper *Reference News* which he had stashed away under his bed, they accused him of "stealing state secrets" and gave him a vicious beating. Thus the farce was played out. Had they really beaten the sense out of him? His mind couldn't be completely useless—if it was, his boss at the restaurant would have been worried that he'd be forgetful, and would never have hired him to make deliveries.

Jinlan also nagged him about playing the ponies. But he'd only done it three times. Once the guys at the restaurant had clubbed together for a quartet. In order to get in with them, he'd pitched in fourteen dollars. They hadn't won, but he'd benefited from their loss. By putting in the fourteen bucks, he'd become one of the boys—now they called him "Ah-cheung" instead of "Mainland Cheung."

As a graduate in mathematics, he knew how to calculate whether something was worthwhile.

Another time was on his birthday. In a burst of inspiration he had tried his luck with a daily double using the numbers for the month and the date, and this time he won. He didn't make that much on it, since both horses were

heavily favored, but he was in bliss for days—Zhang Fanzhou's luck wasn't so terrible after all! The only thing that was terrible was that when he told his wife about his triumph, she'd chewed him out for being "without ambition" and "never getting ahead."

The third occasion was after Jinlan had been rushed to hospital with appendicitis. It had cost them a thousand dollars, which was more than they could really afford. He had hoped that the ponies would take pity on him and let him win back the money he had spent on doctor's bills, but this time his hopes were dashed and he lost a hundred dollars. It was just as well he no longer dared to tell Jinlan, or she might have got mad enough to take a turn for the worse, and then what would he have done? That was the most miserable day since he had come to Hong Kong!

But today was his happiest day. Five hundred dollars to win on a hundred dollar stake, and five hundred to show, multiplied ten times! He did some sums in the column of the newspaper and worked out that he would be picking up seven thousand dollars in winnings from the betting shop. Shaking with elation, he looked at his wife's picture on the wall. He wanted to shout:

"Jinlan, I was only worth two grand yesterday and now I have eight!"

But in the end he said nothing. He was afraid that Jinlan would still insist there was something wrong with his head, and even more afraid that she would fly off the handle again because he had been playing the ponies, and making such huge wagers!

He remembered that time when he had come back to the restaurant from making deliveries to find he was over twenty dollars short. After he got off work, he'd told Jinlan about it and she'd scowled and told him off:

"They really did beat the sense out of you! Just a three-figure number, a schoolchild could handle it. You've got a math degree and you still screw up!"

He didn't want to give up on this one and kept racking his brains in an attempt to remember which house it was that had underpaid him. The only explanation he could come up with was that somehow he had lost it himself.

Forget those minor irritations. Today he was a different man. He walked with easy strides, whistling a little tune. Then it occurred to him that it had been years since he had whistled; hurriedly he pulled his lips in and returned to his usual expression.

After picking up his winnings at the betting shop, he folded the thousand-dollar bills up small and slipped them into a hidden pocket in his pants behind his belt. Then he went down a side street, found his boss at the restaurant, and asked for three days off. Originally he'd planned to take only one day off to meet his parents, and to let Jinlan worry about everything else. She was at home with Xiaohao anyway and was quite prepared to look after his parents. Today, with money in his pocket, he felt different. Now he thought it would be fun to show them around Hong Kong and Kowloon.

After he'd had some dinner, Jinlan and Xiaohao came home. He asked Xiaohao if he'd eaten, and the child nodded. Jinlan just frowned when he asked her about renting a place.

"Nothing suitable?"

"Rents are too high."

"Don't fret, it's bound to cost a few bucks more to live in a high-rise."

"You can say don't fret, did you get rich all of a sudden?"

He said nothing, but whipped his hand away from the secret pocket. He'd been afraid she would ask him where he was going to get all that money from. He said nothing, and Jinlan spat out her resentment:

"Just one small apartment is twelve hundred a month, and that's all you earn! Maybe the landlord will tell us we can't cook, and then we can feed the old folks on air!"

"So what do you think we should do? They'll be coming tomorrow, we've got to have somewhere for them to move into, and you keep saying that this place is …" What had seemed like a heavy weight in his secret pocket was starting to feel lighter. Twelve hundred! His eight thousand wasn't even seven twelve hundreds, how many twelve hundreds was he going to need? He watched as his wife unlocked her camphorwood chest and took out an ornate box that she kept wrapped in a silk handkerchief. Xiaohao was playing on the bed with his building blocks, but when he saw the pretty box he crawled from the foot of the bed to the head, reached up, and begged for it. Jinlan glowered at him, and the boy was well enough trained to know he should pull his hand away and go back to his blocks.

When the box was opened, a pair of glittering gold earrings came into his view, engraved with the inscriptions "heart's desire" and "good fortune;" these were followed by a gold chain with a locket in the shape of the peach of

longevity. He remembered when he and Jinlan had met her father at the Overseas Chinese Hotel in Canton, after he had come all the way from Penang to see them. The wizened old man had opened the little box and said:

"Lan, the fates were against your mother; she couldn't live to see you married. I'm not much better, either—I have nothing to offer you as a wedding gift but these few pieces of jewelry. With them I wish that you will have your heart's desires and good fortune and always be happy together."

Poor old man! When they got to Hong Kong, they discovered he'd died the month before. He hadn't told them how sick he was, since he was afraid it might prevent them from getting their visas to leave China and take care of him.

He stole a glance at his wife. Tears had sprung to her eyes, touched off by the gifts and the memory of the giver. He was about to talk about it when Jinlan wiped her eyes and said:

"There's more than three ounces of gold in these, you'll get at least ten thousand for them. That'll pay the rent for the old folks for a year or so, and we can work out what to do after that."

He choked with emotion:

"How … how can we? That's all we have to remember … we shouldn't—"

She cut him off:

"We've your parents to think of, they'll be here right away. We only got their telegram a couple of days ago, and we don't have any time to raise the money any other way. If we don't rent a place now, there may not be any place later on. There's no time to hunt around. We've paid a month in advance, and bought a bed and a quilt. You can sell the jewelry first thing in the morning, then pick them up at the station and pay the landlord for another two months to secure the lease. That way they can rest easy for the evening."

Xiaohao was bored with his building blocks. Realizing he was being ignored, he let out a yell, knocked down the beautiful house he had been building, and howled for his mother to pick him up. Jinlan hugged the child to her breast, patting him gently on the bottom to get him to sleep. The child was exhausted after being out all day.

He replaced the lid on the box and wrapped it in its silk handkerchief. Maybe the sense had been struggled out of him, but he still understood her. Jinlan was a good wife, kind and upright; to be honest, she was more concerned for his parents than he was himself. Sure she complained, but who wouldn't when the rents were so high! But here she was, ready to sacrifice those pieces of jewelry that she had risked smuggling through customs in order to keep them and the memories they held. This wasn't just any jewelry!

He patted his secret pocket again but didn't dare come clean about it. She was bound to refuse to spend money that he had come by in this way, and they wouldn't be able to celebrate the fact that his good luck meant they could get out of selling her jewelry. He was starting to resent his wife's inflexibility, but he also had to admit that her judgment was seldom wrong.

His wife and son were already in their world of dreams, but he couldn't get to sleep himself. Fortunately, this week there was Saturday and Sunday racing, so tomorrow would be a race day too. Back and forth in his brain flashed the images of galloping thoroughbreds and golden rings and lockets.

Bright and early the next morning, Jinlan wrapped her treasures in their silk handkerchief and gave them to him. She instructed him to go to Guntong, sell the jewelry and bring the money home, then set out to meet his parents' train at Honghan. She figured that the train wouldn't get in till three, so they could be there in good time.

He draped his jacket over his shoulders and slipped the transistor radio from the dresser into one of the pockets. Then, after sliding his feet into plastic thongs and running his hand through his tangled hair, he trudged wearily out of the house. For all his exhaustion, he was acutely aware of two things. One was the jewelry in the silk handkerchief, which he clasped tightly to his chest. The other was the wad of banknotes, which he patted constantly to make sure it was still there.

When he got to the bustling Guntong market, he went to a restaurant for breakfast. By his watch it was only just after nine, and he knew that most of the stores would not be open yet, so he ordered another coffee and opened the paper to pass the time.

He flipped to the racing page and was instantly mesmerized. Once again, galloping horses and glistening jewelry flashed before his eyes. Now was the time to marshal his mathematical talents to assist him in his deliberations. He had more than ten thousand dollars worth of jewelry and just over eight thousand in cash. There was no way he could make a switch without Jinlan getting suspicious. He just had to get the money, right now! He wasn't going to put up with his wife sneering at his mental powers. What he needed most of all was a sum of money to get him out of his present bind. A grand sum, that would be best, enough not only to save the jewelry that had been left to them as mementos, but also for a spacious apartment for his parents, for Jinlan and Xiaohao,

enough to rid them of all their anxieties. He was as exhilarated as if he were himself astride some wild steed in full gallop. He jerked himself to his feet and strode out of the restaurant.

The atmosphere of the betting shop exactly suited his mood. The booths for filling out betting slips were crowded with people, packed so tight you couldn't even get water in between them. Late-comers, convinced that the ponies would treat them well this time, hunted out a place to squat or stand, then spread out their newspapers and betting slips and decided on a plan for the campaign ahead. Those with well-thought-out strategies had already joined the ranks heading into battle. When their turn came at the window, they fired off salvos of money, confident that the receipt from the cash register would soon be transformed into the spoils of war.

He squeezed in among them, oblivious of time, like a warrior locked in mortal combat, summoning up his last ounce of courage to defeat the God of Death, and await an anthem of victory. On such a day, a stake of a thousand to win was but an outmoded dagger. Only a bet of a thousand to win plus another thousand to show in each of the first four races would qualify as the heavy artillery of modern warfare. His firearm was primed, now he must set forth with guns blazing, to return only when the enemy's general was killed and their standard seized.

For all his modest appearance, there was something so manifestly heroic in his posture that it caused a stir in the line. Those close enough to witness it looked as if they would burst out cheering. His mind was set on the first four races of the day: if he could only win a succession of victories in these skirmishes, he would go home loaded down with booty—twenty thousand, thirty thousand, maybe even more! Intoxicated with the thought, he lurched forward, hardly aware of the direction he was headed in.

On he tramped, on and on, and when finally he looked up, an opulent aura of pearly light shone from the window, spraying his face with myriad jets and splashing him into wakefulness. From his torrid fantasy he returned to cold reality: his wife had instructed him to go to the goldsmiths and sell her jewelry. She had told him to be back by lunchtime and go with her to meet his parents. How was he going to manage it—racing didn't start today till one! How could he have failed to realize there would be a problem with the timing! He scratched at his head and cried out in anguish: It's true! With all their struggling, they've made me crazy!

If he were just to step right into the goldsmith's, the transaction could be completed in a couple of minutes, and he'd be able to get home in time with the money in his pocket. But how could he part with the "heart's desire" and "good fortune" rings and the longevity pendant, and never see them again? It had pained Jinlan so much to part with them, could he leave her with only an empty case? He couldn't sell them! He couldn't!

Suddenly decisive, he strode into a restaurant across the street and dialed a number. He spoke into the receiver without a pause:

"Something just came up, it's urgent. I can't come home right now. You and Xiaohao go ahead to the station, and I'll meet you there." He slammed the phone down before his wife had a chance to answer.

Never before had making a phone call taken so much out of him. Bone-weary, he slumped down on a stool. Maybe because there was racing today, it was quiet for a Sunday, so quiet he could hear his own heart pounding. He needed the peace for a while to sort out the chaos in his mind.

The waiter brought him a glass of water. Idly he glanced at his watch. It was almost one, so he might as well have something to eat. Which reminded him he should turn on his transistor. He fished it out of his pocket and held it to his ear. The familiar voices of the commentators were chattering away, giving their listeners the returns on the various stakes and introducing the horses. The voices were like an entrancing melody to him, instantly capturing his full attention.

The waiter brought a bowl of borsch and croutons. Mechanically he stirred it around with his spoon. The sense of hearing had taken command of his body, reducing the sense of taste to a vassal status.

The main course was spaghetti; this too he just pushed around on his plate. His pushing and stirring came to an abrupt halt; his fork stopped in mid-air, the noodles it had carried flopped to the table. The campaign had begun in defeat. He had lost the first race.

The tangle of spaghetti on his plate was knotted like his stomach. But to his ears came the sound of the beacon fires being relit; the prospect of the renewal of hostilities rekindled the hope in his heart. The waiter, who was bringing the dessert, was unperturbed. Such shows of temperament were commonplace on race days.

Dessert was a dish of pineapples in syrup, but he didn't even glance at it. He leaned back, eyes closed, waiting for them to come under the starter's orders. At the words "They're off" his body hunched forward involuntarily. His spoon lifted the morsels of pineapple into his mouth to the rhythm of the commentary, now slow, now fast, now slow again, then clattered from his hand to the table in final despair.

Half the empire was lost, but his valor was still as great as that of Xiang Yu, the hegemon of Chu. For all his conviction, he couldn't help feeling just a little panicky. He found himself starting to plead for mercy. He was

going to call to the waiter to bring something to drink when he discovered a cup of black coffee had materialized on the table beside him to revive his sense of taste. He only realized as he lifted it to his lips that it was bitter; he had forgotten to add sugar.

The bitterness had at least aroused his taste buds, breaking the absolute supremacy of the sense of hearing. Gradually he regained his other senses; the return of sentiment triggered in his brain the image of Jinlan. Through a haze he saw his parents standing at his wife's side, the four members of his family peering anxiously into the crowd, desperately looking for him.

He hung his head and prayed to High Heaven to protect him, to change his luck, to see defeat turn to victory in the next race before it was too late. He let his mind go blank for a moment, waiting for the moment when his luck would change. The atmosphere was stifling, like a lead weight on his heart. But he survived his suffocation, and the time came! Within a minute, the beautiful bubble was burst again.

Hysterically he poured the whole cup of bitter coffee down his throat, lurched to the till to pay his check and blundered out of the restaurant. He stumbled toward the goldsmith's store across the street and pulled out of his breast the little package that Jinlan had given him. He unpinned the package, set the handkerchief aside, and with a trembling left hand took hold of the golden jewelry, which sparkled all the more in the sunlight. He closed his eyes. Then, just as he was about to step into the goldsmith's, a piercing sound erupted from the transistor radio in his jacket pocket:

"And now for the next race! The next race!"

Eyes agog, he recoiled and whipped the stub of his betting slip out of his jacket pocket. In a final burst of lucidity he said to himself: They still haven't run the fourth! I still have the fourth! His strange behavior aroused the suspicion of the man in the goldsmith's store and attracted curious glances from inquisitive bystanders. But he just stood there staring at the jewelry in his left hand and the betting stub in his right, as if he was trying to judge their weight, unconscious of the world around him.

The sight of a policeman's billy club jolted him from his daze like an electric shock. Everything in his hands fell to the ground.

"What's your game?" demanded the policeman. "Got your I.D.?"

His eyes clouded over, he was dumb. The policeman lost patience:

"Put your hands up, I'm going to search you!"

"Clubs … still the fourth race … my … mind," he moaned, before he too fell to the ground.

The policeman pulled out his I.D. and notebook. Then he gathered up the betting stub and the items of jewelry one by one, went into the goldsmith's and made a call. One of the shop-clerks said a word to him. He walked back out of the store and picked up the silk handkerchief that lay nearby. The white silk was muddied by feet that had stepped on it.

A siren sounded.

The ambulance had arrived.

73.31 No *Cha* In The Investiture Of The Gods\fn{by Shi Song (1946-   )} Shanghai, China (M) 7

It was a summer afternoon. The River of Nine Bends seemed to have been pressed shallow by the sultry heat. The ink green shades of the leafy willows on both banks had thus indulgently invaded one third of the water. The river flowed smoothly and calmly below the willows. When sunlight flashed on it again, it seemed to have reached up and joined the azure and immense expanse of cloudless sky.

The indistinct cries of peddlers selling vegetables and wares at Chen-tang Pass were borne over the mile-long distance by the leaf- rustling breeze, in accompaniment with the sparrows flitting among the streaming branches of the willows.

T'ai Yi sat on a blue-green rock, his snowy white hair flowing over his shoulders. One foot was drawn over his thigh. The other rested lightly on the grass. A white flaxen Taoist robe hung down carelessly from his shoulders in numerous folds. Its broad and long sleeves covered the straw sandals on his feet. Bending over slightly, he seemed to be enjoying the wild lotus growing in the shallow midstream waters.

It was May. The wild lotus was in full bloom. But his countenance was expressionless, and his eyes vacant. For the whole morning he had been sitting there without the least movement, like a chessman left forgotten. A green grasshopper had been resting on his foot the whole morning, showing no intention to leave.

The lotus-blossoms bobbed, the willow leaves rustled, while the willow blossoms drifted dustily about. The river looked still, yet it was moving. Time seemed to be a copy of yesterday, yet it was changing. Revolving

repeatedly in Tai Yi’s mind were the words his favorite disciple’s voice had uttered in a dream the night before. The voice said pleadingly:

“Master, I am finally free, free to the point of tears …

“Sometimes I drift with the winds; sometimes I seem to reach everywhere, as if stretching in a deep yawn after a long sleep which has vanished like a streak of gray smoke. My memories and the scent of blood in my memories are both fading into the distance. But, oh, how empty is the void … If I have cast aside my body of flesh and bones because of the superiority of the soul, I still have to find a final resting place …

“I wish, master, to be a lotus in the river.”

T’ai Yi woke up in the morning, the dream still vivid in his mind. He hurried to the residence of General Li Ching, commander of the Army, and walked directly to the hall. Nobody stopped him. It all happened exactly as it had fourteen years before when No Cha had been born and T’ai Yi had taken him as his disciple. T’ai Yi, who had many times been summoned to the residence to tell fortunes by interpreting the signs in the heavens, was led by a guard to the hall decorated with pots of flowers and floral drapery.

It hardly seemed that fourteen years had already passed. T’ai Yi could still recall the haunting fragrance, heavy and unsettling. General Li sat there after a sleepless night, handsome and dignified as ever, but looking now as lifeless as a wax statue. An attendant was sent to bring the new born boy from the chamber. Though tranquil as a piece of drift wood, T’ai Yi was terribly shaken at the first sight of the boy. The boy’s head, twice the size of an ordinary baby’s, was already covered with hair. And that face! How much it resembled an old man’s! His cries seemed to be bursting from a chasm of internal darkness and the flailing limbs, hardly contained in the terrified attendant’s arms, struck out confusedly in the air; he seemed like a wild hare trapped in a net, ready to leap away and escape.

The attendant’s face paled. Even the general, his beard trembling, seemed to be bewitched as he stared at the restless creature that was his son.

“Ah, Priest, tell me, isn’t this an ill omen? Or could it be luck? The birth of this boy last night was a nightmare, many strange things happened—”

“My lord, birth is always an event to be celebrated, T’ai Yi said haltingly.

Then, T’ai Yi was told of the lady’s prolonged pregancy, her recurring and inauspicious dreams that were repeated day after day, the strange brightness of blood at childbirth …

“Shining scarlet,” the General had said. “For a moment, my eyes were dazzled, and involuntarily, I unsheathed my sword, and was about to cleave that red thing in two. But the crying, those dreadful cries enfeebled my hands. I was bathed in a cold sweat. Ah, Priest, when confronted with charging enemy troops and chariots, I am calm and unmoved, but this thing …”

At that point, Li Ching had turned back the florid blue silken quilt in the attendant’s arms. The bright reflection of the red sash wrapped around that baby’s belly made the pale face of the father glow.

“The strangest thing is that he was born with this sash.”

T’ai Yi was struck as he stared at the blood-red sash.

“My lord, was it the period of Ch’ou?”\fn{A note reads: *Period of Ch’ou, the 2nd character of the 12 earthly “branches,” i.e., the period of night from 1 to 3 a.m*.}

“Why, yes …”

*

With the color of blood lingering in his retinae, T’ai Yi once more entered the hall. The morning sunlight came through the carved lattice of windows and cast elaborate patterns on the slate-gray ground, brightening it gently. No one was there. Everything in the hall remained the same as it had been fourteen years ago. To reflect on last night’s dream, T’ai Yi sat down lightly on a small wooden stool and turned his eyes inward, beginning to put his confused thoughts in order.

A voice rose gently as a silken thread, as if in response to his expectation. It grew stronger, lingered and, finally, stopped with a buzz. T’ai Yi’s lucid eyes darted precisely to a place on the ground in the center of the hall. There, between shadow and light, a green-headed fly was sucking greedily from the earthen floor, where he saw blurred bloodstains …

“Master, my birth was a mistake whose cause remains a mystery. As far back as I can remember, I have sensed it through my mother’s indulgent love and my father’s exacting expectations. It seemed to me that they could not face the reality of my existence, but tried desperately to fit me for a pattern they had designed.

“My father had hoped that, like my two brothers, I should become a great scholar and general through literary and military pursuits. I exceeded his expectations in every way. Thus, not only were my brothers jealous of my

extraordinary strength, but even my father's frigid praise would sometimes flow from behind a mask of increasing hostility. I could see that behind his thinly disguised pleasure there was something strange. My mother, on the other hand, always treated me as if I were a babe in swaddling clothes, one who needed protection and security. I tried to make her happy, and always stayed by her side except when I had to go for my lessons or practice in the field. I did not go out for wild pleasures with friends of my own age. I would hasten to her, not to kneel and salute, as was the custom, but to nestle on her soft lap and let her enjoy the pleasure of cuddling me. However, I realized that in her pleasure there was a touch of uneasiness that she herself would not admit—'Why is this child so different from his brothers?'

"The truth is, I lived a life of contradictions and illusions, and, beneath it all, lay deep bitterness …"

*

A chanting interspersed with sobs had dispelled the dim vision of the boy kneeling on the ground. Then T'ai Yi tried to clear his mind. He stood up and paced back and forth by a pillar huge enough for two men with outstretched arms to encircle. Now dawn had broken. Birds were singing vigorously, and the peonies and osman thus were fresh with dewdrops. T'ai Yi saw No Cha's crippled attendant Ssu-mang sitting on the earthen slope at the corner of the wall by the blooming flowers. Idiotically, he sat there with his hands clasped on his deformed and twisted knees, shaking forward and backward, eyes vacant, humming some incomprehensible song. It was quite a while before Ssu-mang realized T'ai Yi's presence; he scrambled up and prostrated himself before T'ai Yi. Tears rained down on the dry, red earth.

"Ah, your Grace, your Grace, my young master is gone. I saw him ascend on a red cloud to the Western Paradise. Far, far up in the sky, he beckoned to me, saying with a smile: 'Don't worry, don't worry, some day I will come back to take you with me, and teach you great magic powers, to fly like the swallows, run and leap like the antelope.' Your Grace …"

T'ai Yi looked at the narrow, bowed head of Ssu-mang, at the awkward posture of his twisted knees that could not be brought together even in kneeling, while his tears continued to fall and vanish into the red earth.

"I know, Ssu-mang, I know all about it. Now rise!"

As if obstinate in anger, Ssu-mang would not turn up his hideous face.

"Your Grace, I have always known that my young master was a deity sent down to earth to live among us because he was so perfect and beautiful! The first time I saw him he was scarcely seven years old, and I was still a humble gardener. Watching him draw the bow with a touch of his father's manner, I was completely taken with him. He didn't at all look like a boy of seven. You could not tell his age from looking at him. He had snow-white skin, ink-black hair and eyebrows, powerful muscles, and those slanting eyes radiating calm and intelligence. When he turned and saw me, he fastened his stare on me without blinking. There was even a trace of a smile on his face. I must have been struck dumb; there I stood with some young plants in my hand, self-conscious about my own awkward figure which had never been looked at seriously because of its unworthiness. His stare scared me, and I thought that he was going to punish me severely because of my deformities and ugliness, but then I realized that his eyes were full of compassion and forgiveness …

"I fell on my knees, not before a child, but before a deity …

"Later, he asked my lord for me to be his attendant. What an honor it was for me! How willing I would have been to be the carpet that he walked on but I knew I was unworthy. Sometimes when the sun shone bright on the earth, I only dared to walk at a distance behind him to the field, afraid that the persistent presence of my ugly shape might incur his displeasure.

"I would hide in a shrub and watch him, stripped to the waist, shooting wild geese wit:h his ivory bow. I would watch his arrow go through the delicate head of a goose, and see the bird fall like lead to the ground. It was as if infinite strings of power radiated from his youthful body. He never missed anything. Watching him, I could not help clapping my hands in admiration and uttering cries of joy. Once, while picking up a gorgeously plumed goose from the ground, he heard me, and turned his head. How cold and sad was his stare; it made me run back to my hiding place in fear.

"My young master would hang up the birds and animals he had shot, and gaze at them for hours without any expression. Nor would he say a single word. I, so puzzled and listless, would try to find a word of praise for his skill as a hunter, but all my words choked in my throat. None of them was adequate for my master …

"One day, my lord the general brought home a young officer from the headquarters. He was said to be the best lancer in the regiment, an outstanding young man of nineteen. My lord told our young master to practice lancing with him. This pleased him very much, because he had very few playmates; thus, he soon got acquainted with the young man. They started practicing in the garden. My master used a short spear, while the young officer used his

lance. When watching attentively, I suddenly heard the young officer utter a cry and saw him fall holding his leg. The entire short spear had been plunged up to its hilt into his calf. Blood was spouting like a fountain to the ground. My young master was so frightened that he started to cry. I had never heard him cry. Though blood always frightens me, his cry was more frightening. I recklessly threw aside all scruples and ran to him and held him in my arms—I, an ugly cripple, would dare to hold the master in my arms! His shivering body was utterly cold, and I said, 'Master, don't cry, don't be afraid. He is an ordinary man made of clay; you are a deity from heaven. How could an ordinary human man fight with a god. He deserves his wound.'

"The master in my arms was all in tears and I also cried for a while. Then my lord came, his face stern and severe. He first gave orders to have the young officer properly treated. Then, he ordered his men to pull me aside, and without saying a word, gave me about a dozen boxes on the ear until my face was swollen to twice its normal size. You don't know how proud I was! It. was actually the most glorious moment in my life. I had held my young master in my arms and had received punishment for him. I hoped that the swelling on my face would never go down and I would lift my head very high for everyone to see—this was the proof, the proof of my special relationship to the young master …"

*

Another scene passed across T'ai Yi's mind.

"Master, I think that you must be the only person on earth who understands me. Otherwise, why did you teach me nothing but to look at the floating clouds in the sky when I was depressed? 1 know that now the brigands on the eastern plains are plotting a rebellion and my two brothers are waiting anxiously for battles in which they can distinguish themselves. The poverty-stricken people are huddling in their wretched hoyels. Women are baring their limbs and roaming about with hungry and seductive eyes. Oh, master, I am afraid.

"I often sat in my room upstairs, with my hands tightly clasped together and my knees drawn up, just waiting for the floating clouds to drift past the eaves. In this manner, I passed the time listlessly. At times, I would forget that I was growing up, and vaguely felt a sense of joy. Then an occasional flight of wild geese would cross my line of vision and shatter my tranquillity to pieces. The beautiful geese, on outstretched wings, struck so often by my arrows, ah, how they fell! When I saw the geese fly into view, the muscles of my arms would jerk against my will, as if urging me to take up the bow, to pull out the arrows, to taste fresh blood shed by my might. Cold sweat would trickle down my brow.

"How I love those geese flying gracefully in the sky, the carefree animals in the woods, and the companions I once had! But the birds and animals have become carcasses. And my companions were either frightened away or hurt by my strength. I simply don't realize my own strength and it has betrayed me. My mind has been shaped by the training and exercises of my body—a body whose contours spell only the word 'mental defective.'

"And now I know that no goose flying before me can go on unharmed. Any living thing—man or beast—that comes within my sight must die. In the deepest dark chamber of my memory are hung as trophies the dead bodies of everyone I ever loved, including the young officer who died of loss of blood after being wounded by my short spear.

"The only creature that still survives is the idiotic and muddy-headed Ssu-mang, whose limbs are clubbed like a lion's and whose face is deformed. I acquired him just out of sheer disgust. Poor Ssu-mang, when life became monotonous for me, I would make fun of him and frighten him. Ah, master, did you know that sometimes your cherished disciple could be very cruel? One afternoon about two months ago, Ssu-mang had kept watch at my door for the whole afternoon. He finally peeped in to see what I was doing. It was what I was waiting for; I captured him with my gaze, concentrating all my might in that stare, which penetrated his eyes, and pierced his heart. There I found cowardice, dread, and disappointment … He said, 'I am trying to keep you company, my young lord.' I said, 'Are you worthy?' He burst into silent tears, and trembling all over, he stammered, 'No, I am not.'

"But, in fact, Ssu-mang was worthy. That he had lived by my side for seven years is a proof. He is the embodiment of my mental deformity, and I could not hurt him.

"Realizing my own deformity, I could no longer go on deceiving myself by pleasing my parents.

"My father and two brothers drilled vigorously everyday. I could hear from afar the rustling sound of soldiers marching swiftly. But, on this particular occasion, I was incapacitated by illness—it was the only excuse for me not to join them. I knew that my father's displeasure with me had grown to the bursting point. He avoided seeing me, lest he should be carried away by some great rage.

"My mother would come up a dozen times everyday; sometimes she would not venture to say anything, and only sat by my bedside. Sometimes she would ask me tenderly, 'My son, aren't you too hot with such heavy

covers in this summer heat?' Indifferently, I would answer, 'No.' 'My boy, don't you want to joia your brothers?' All I said was still, 'No.' Pondering for a while, she would say with some relief, 'It is better this way, so you don't have to take part in war and bloodshed.' At that I would simply cover my head with the quilt.

"On that fatal afternoon, every bad omen possible occurred. It became hot without warning, and in the air there was not the slightest stirring. Amid the noisy cawing of crows in the garden could be heard the crunching sound of troops being drilled on the drill ground. The muffled sound of their marching to the rhythm of drum beats came across the distance, as if trying to break the monotony and to goad me on my way. While I was tossing and turning restlessly, a gleaming green shadow flashed over my fevered brow like an icy cold hand. I began to desire to go to a river, with which I seemed to have an appointment of long standing. Then I ordered Ssu-mang to saddle my horse.

"We slipped out of the back door of the garden without being noticed. The small pond and the pavilion outside the garden were enveloped in the misty, shimmering heat; even the fish in the pond were dozing in the shade of rocks. We sneaked quietly out of the city gate. When we were still not far from the city, peals of thunder burst in the sky, and the overhanging bluish-gray atmosphere broke into millions of raindrops as though coming to slake my thirst and my anxiety. As I reined in my horse and rejoiced in the rain that soaked my hair and clothes, I looked across the expanse of open field stretching before me. The hissing earth whispered its gratitude to the rain. Ssu-mang, awed, hid below the belly of the horse. When the storm was over, the overhanging bluish-gray air became crystalline, translucent and cool. One mile away, I could see clearly the River of Nine Bends which had been flowing long before I was born, slithering along like a snake through the gleaming grass to the distant horizon. A sense of piety suddenly took possession of me and drew me to the river.

"I dismounted near the river, and told Ssu-mang to ride the horse among the willow trees to cool it off. Poor Ssu-mang was so clumsy that he could hardly mount, and I had to push him up onto the horse's back. I gave the horse a slap on the rump. Ssu-mang went galloping away, struggling to remain in the saddle. I was elated. As I drew nearer and nearer to the river, the rippling water welcomed me as if numerous fish and minnows were murmuring their greetings. I took off my clothes as I walked along and dropped them beside the path. By the time I reached the river bank, I was entirely naked except for that red sash around my waist. When I walked into the river, the sash floated up, light as a cicada's wings. It was only then I noticed it. I had always taken it for granted and neglected it. It suddenly struck me that it was senseless to wear it all the time. The water reached up to my chest, the red sash loosened itself from my body as if knowing my wish, and drifted away from me. It was strange, Master, that at the moment of our separation, I felt that everything in me became insignificant. All the depression and sullenness that had been with me so long had gone with it.

"Then, I saw someone. At first I thought it was an illusion, or my own reflection on the river. He rose from the shallow river among the densely grown reeds and lotus blossoms, and swiftly fished up the red sash in his hand. Bright water-drops streamed down his chest which was slightly blue and reflected the lotus leaves. He wrapped the red sash around his waist, and smiled mischievously at me, showing all his fine white teeth. As if deliberately trying to shatter my illusion, he spoke in a metallic voice, 'Is this your gift to me?' 'No, it is my gift to the river.' I said. 'I am the river.' he laughed out loud, and rushed at me.

"Against the blue vault of the sky, his outstretched arms sprayed water drops sparkling like the hues on the wings of butterflies. I also laughed, but then he jumped on me.

"Master, oh, master, even at this moment I can not believe it. It was impossible. After only a few rounds in the water, his arms loosened their grip. His body floated up limply. He was already a corpse! …

"The water in the river became piercingly cold in the sultry heat of May, and my bath was ended. The sparkling current carried away a body wrapped in a red sash …

"Master, I had not been able to control my lust for the blood of the wild geese in the sky, and the animals in the woods. But this time, my mind seemed to be blurred. I could not recall how it all happened. Could it be that I killed an unknown youth on that afternoon only because I desired to take a bath in the cool water of the river? Having pieced together in my mind all the details I could recall, I felt I would have to pay dearly for what had happened."

The sobbing that had echoed in the gloomy valley became fainter and fainter. Here was Ssu-mang, still muttering monotonously to himself. T'ai Yi did not pay too much attention to what he was saying, but then his memory was drawn back to the garden of the general's residence as Ssu-mang suddenly raised his voice:

"It was a magnificent horse, shiny and black with its hoofs all white, so he was named Snow Treader by my young master. He was taller than a man. No one except my young master would dare to ride him. On that afternoon, I was told to ride him among the willow trees to relax him. My gosh, it seemed to me that I was riding

high up in the clouds or fog. My legs have been crippled since childhood; walking has been torture to me. And now, for the first time in my life, I felt that I was flying; the landscape and willows reflected on the river were blown backward. But when Snow Treader slowed down, I saw a strange scene. Two young men stood in the shallow water of the river still as a picture, staring at each other. Even the huge and splendid loaves of cloud seemed to be motionless. I could see very well that one of them was my young master. The other, your Grace, how could I describe him! Every one knew that the river god governing the rainfall of Chen-tang Pass was the son of the Dragon God of the Eastern Sea. It had to be him! Otherwise his skin could not have been so blue in color and covered with fishy scales. Then a quarrel seemed to break out between them. I could not dismount from the horse, and it was too far for me to distinguish their words. I saw him jump at my young master, and my heart nearly leaped from my mouth. The water, foaming white, splashed high in the air as my young master struggled with him in the water …

"Snow Treader gave a long and loud snort, reared up and threw me off his back. When I stood up, dazzled, my young master already had his clothes on. His countenance was as pale as if etched on paper, and drops of water dripped from his face and hair. No, they seemed to be tears from my young master's eyes and they foretold disaster. Nevertheless, a voice within me whispered comfortingly that my young master was a deity. Nothing could hurt him. And the river was so tranquil that what I saw a moment ago could only be an illusion due to being tossed from that horse. It was only much later that I finally realized my young master had actually killed him …

"When we returned it was already evening. My young master went back to his room without saying a word, and I sneaked into the garden. A few guards with lances were alertly stationed by the laurel trees, and I sensed that something serious had happened. No-one answered the questions I wouldn't stop asking, until a friendly sergeant told me that my master had done something disastrous.

"The slanting sunset shone on the huge white plaster walls. Its reflected rays brightened the empty halls and porticos. A moment later, my lady, supported by her maids, hurried past me. I saw them enter the hall from the back door and hide behind the screens listening to the conversation in the hall. My lady was exceedingly pale, she looked as if she had been weeping. Then, I became bold enough to peep in through the lattice of a window. What I saw was strange. My lord, whom I had always regarded as pre-eminent, was now sitting to one side. In his seat of honor, sat a bearded middle-aged man in a white robe.

"The setting sun gleamed ferociously on the newly washed wall of white plaster. It moved inch by inch to the hall until the scarlet light gradually moved to the face of the white-robed man. Suddenly he took out a red sash from his lap, his thin and stern lips curved, and he shouted aloud:

"'Look at this! Now, what can you say to cover your guilt?'

"My lord paled and his voice trembled. It was strange to see him, the most hot-tempered man I had ever known, humble himself and soften his voice, trying meekly to convince the visitor that since my young master was ill and in bed, he could hardly have gone out and killed anyone in the river.

"I was scared out of my wits. Could it be that Ao-kuang,\fn{A note reads: *Chinese god of rivers, often portrayed in dragon form*.} the Dragon God of the Eastern Sea, had come to revenge the death of his son? I looked carefully again, the white-robed man appeared to me an ordinary gentleman. But once when I talked with the keeper of the silkworms, she told me stories of the Dragon God. If he had come to the city, how could he appear in human form?

"At that moment, the light in the hall became stronger and stronger. The last rays of the setting sun intertwined as they were reflected against the walls on the four sides of the yard and shone full into the hall. In the light, the white-robed man seemed to grow in size. His white robe fluttered as if blown by the wind, and from his menacing aspect, it seemed he was about to envelop my lord in his dragon image. As a matter of fact, my lord looked shrunken and was shaking with forebodings.

"My young master must have heard what was going on in the front hall. With his favorite jade-inlaid dagger, he came swiftly through the corridor to the hall. His hair was still wet on his forehead. A murderous look on his face had given a sinister twist even to his noble features and his eyes squinted frighteningly. I grabbed his sleeve, crying. I begged him not to go in and fight with the Dragon God. He shoved me aside.

"The light in the hall turned to a cinnabar red, and I had not the courage to look any longer, afraid that the Dragon God might show his true self. Humble as I am, I knew I could not look upon him and live. I even clamped my hands over my ears. However, I could hear my lord cursing my young master and declaring that he had brought destruction upon the house … that my young master had been a curse on the family since he had been born with the red sash …

"Then I heard a woman's voice, feebly crying and calling the name of her son. I knew it was my lady behind the screen. Against her insistent weeping, I could hear my young master, speaking, slowly and clearly, as if biting

off each word with his teeth:

"'I am guilty. Nothing I have done has fulfilled my parents' expectations. But what i have done today will be my own responsibility. I am concerned with this earthly body only because it is loved and cherished by my mother and I owe this frame of bones to my father who has expected me to succeed in the world. And now, since this crime has disgraced my parents, the only way to ease my mind is to return to you the flesh and bones I received from you.'

"I heard a scrape, the sharp sound of a dagger drawn from its case; I hastened to the lattice, and in the blood-red rays which illumined the entire hall, I saw my young master kneeling in the center of the room, his chest and waist stripped bare. The dagger in his hand was raised high and the jewels on the handle sparkled. The sunset rays seemed to flash with a final brightness. Then the hall was enveloped in darkness. I heard a shriek. I do not know whether it came from my throat or from someone else's. I do not know whether it was my eyes that blacked out, or whether the sun had suddenly dropped behind the mountain."

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"Master, my tears are no illusion—though, at this moment, I am lighter than a speck of dust, and thinner than the wings of a butterfly. I am drifting in the void without direction, but my heart still lingers in the world, held there by love. To me, the birds flying in the sky, the animals procreating on the earth are burdens too beautiful to be borne. I know wars are approaching on the eastern plains and my two brothers, both brave men, are going to lead their troops into the battlefields. When my red sash is unfurled, thousands of dead bodies will be seen piled on one another. There will be throngs of weeping wives and children, and vultures circling overhead. All these, they say, are the foundations for a better world tomorrow. But what will the faith of tomorrow be? I see prostitutes, driven by hunger and lust, wandering over the land beyond the city walls. If only there were a magic panacea to satiate their cravings, they would not have to appear day after day on the muddy street corners to reproduce another generation of craving. … When I was freed from my earthly cares, I realized how blue the sky could be, but beneath this blue sky …

"That day, as I went to the front hall with my dagger, I was determined to achieve my freedom. To my amazement, my attendant, old Ssu-mang, all in tears, grabbed my sleeve and said to me, 'My young lord, my young lord, you can not go, you are a god, please don't leave me alone.' I could not restrain my tears. My pitiable, deformed Ssu-mang! I said, 'Ssu-mang, I am a god, and gods have their ways to follow. When I am gone I will not forget you. Someday I will teach you magic powers, to fly like the swallows in the sky; and run like the antelopes in the fields …'

"My blood finally repaid all owed to this short life on earth and I have gained my ultimate freedom. I can now look down upon the earth. Timeless and limitless space had become a single flat plane. I see only harmony everywhere. I should be happy, but, master, as you now hear, I am crying, the uncontrollable tears make me long to return to the imperfection of the human world. Through my tears I still see the gleaming river, exactly as it was on that May afternoon …"

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Ssu-mang raised his head. His tears were dried. The small, swollen eyes shone beneath his scanty eyebrows. He had now resumed his sitting posture by the blooming red flowers, and began to rock forward and backward, humming a sort of chant that mingled with some unintelligible soliloquy. He seemed to have forgotten the existence of T'ai Yi.

"My young master has abandoned his body of flesh, and gone riding on a vermillion cloud. He may have forgotten poor Ssu-mang in his happiness, but only Ssu-mang knows. I know that he was a god sent to earth for a time. This is my song, a song about him to sing to the children in the streets:

Many many years ago,
The lady of the Commander at Chen-tang Pass
Delivered a bright red ball,
From which emanated rays three feet long.
To gain some higher magic power,
He returned his flesh to his mother,
His bones to his father,
And has gone smilingly on a cloud from the earth.

Ssu-mang suddenly stopped his singing, and tilting his face, he asked himself in doubt:

"No, the body of my young master was left in the bloodstained hall. What, then, is gone on the cloud? Let me

think …”

*

Since early morning T’ai Yi had been sitting in the shade of the willow trees by the River of Nine Bends like a leftover chessman. Neither did the green grasshopper on his foot show any intention of leaving.

The willow blossoms floated in the air like light dust, the new willow leaves swayed in the wind, the lotus bobbed. The river seemed motionless, and also seemed to be flowing. Today seemed a repetition of yesterday; and yet it was totally different …

“On that afternoon, I took off my clothes, and left them along the road as I walked. I waded into the shallow river bed. The chilling water and reeds caressed my chest. The gleaming water seemed to swell before my eyes. I would have walked on, but the fragrance of the lotus detained me. If I still have the right to linger, if I may yet cherish a desire amid this total freedom, master, make me a lotus—a naturally blooming and withering lotus in the river where I sinned.”

Thinking of Ssu-mang’s unfinished song, T’ai Yi broke into a broad smile. He stood up, brushed off the light dust that had gathered on his knees. Walking to the river bank, he plucked a red lotus that was blooming magnificently near the shore. He stripped off its petals one by one, and laid them in the shape of the Primordial Triad\fn{A note reads: *According to* I Ching*, or Book of Changes, there is the primordial triad of Heaven, Man, and Earth. They are represented by diagrams which bring out the meaning of Yin-Yang, the two ultimates in Chinese cosmography*.} on the bank where the sand was washed white and clean. He broke the lotus stem into the pattern of bones and joints, and arranged them in order: upper, middle, lower—Heaven, Man, Earth—a diagram of Power. Then T’ai Yi stood stock still, pondering the diagram for a long, long time.

“No Cha, my beloved disciple! Even at this stage, you are still asking your master for a form! Here, laid on the ground, is the body for you to step into. And now Ssu-mang’s song will have a beautiful ending:

No Cha left his body of flesh,
And is embodied in a lotus.
He has become a deity with illimitable magic power.

No one could tell how long he had stood there. It gradually grew chilly. Breezes blew against his robe. Shadows fell and buried T’ai Yi’s eyes and the bridge of his nose. Standing before the diagram of lotus petals, he waited and waited. He waited for the descent of No Cha’s soul. Birds had returned to their nests, and the night air was tranquil and quiet. Slowly, in T’ai Yi’s left eye a lotus came into bright being. In his right eye was reflected yet arother lotus of consumate beauty. And the two aligned precisely to form a single flower, a lotus that bloomed by the pool of immortality.

79.86 The Woman Who Wears The Trousers\fn{by Wang Runzi (1946-)} “in a village in Wendeng County,” Shandong Province, China (M) 8

Sixty-year-old Suocheng had been timid and oversensitive all his life. His wife, Li Giulan, wore the trousers in the family. As head of the household, her name was entered in the household register instead of his, and her seal was used for the grain and money they received from the production brigade. When Suocheng came home after the day’s work in the fields, he ate his supper, wiped his mouth and then turned on the radio. He loved listening to news broadcasts and special programs for farmers and had no use for songs and operas on the air. The programs he followed, he said, opened his eyes and widened his vision. That was all he did every day, and he left to his wife all the household chores, big or small, such as cooking and tending poultry.

Of late, the craze among the farmers far and near had been the sinking of pump-wells, which instantly gave them water for washing so near their homes. Many families in Suocheng’s village had sunk such wells. When asked about his opinions, Suocheng merely said, “I’ll have to consult my wife.”

Ris wife's answer was:

“We’ll sink one too. What others can do, we can too. We’re just as sound in mind and limb as they are!”

So he told his neighbors with all the confidence in the world, “Of course we will! If you can do it, we can too.”

Suocheng sang his wife’s praises with deep admiration in his heart, for she was indeed a very capable woman. She had big feet and wore her hair in a bun at the back of her head. Ten years younger than her husband, she had a glib tongue and deft hands. She attended to everything inside and outside the house—getting proper clothes ready before the weather changed with the seasons, thatching roofs, penning piglets. She took care of everything, paying

attention to the last detail. Over the years, she had been extremely good at handling their accounts, not wasting a single cent, and yet she could be more generous than any man when necessary.

The evening before the well-sinking, Suocheng pushed away his chopsticks and the rice bowl, sat back with crossed legs, lit his pipe and turned on the radio. At first, he listened attentively enjoying it all, but then he suddenly switched it off.

Qiulan had been enjoying the program, too, while she was washing dishes in the outer room. She stretched out her hand, still wet, and pulled the string hanging from the wall in the inner room to turn the radio on again. She strained her ears as she continued her washing-up.

Annoyed, Suocheng went on smoking his pipe. After knocking the ash out of the bowl for the third time, he turned off the radio again. Qiulan was exasperated. She rushed in and, wiping her hands on her apron, shouted, "Honestly, that's the limit! You may not want to listen, I do."

"I've a headache," he murmured. "I want to get some sleep."

Qiulan's anger instantly melted away and she reached out to feel his forehead. "No temperature. Do you feel sick?"

He muttered, "Ummm …"

"I'll make some mung bean soup for you. You are always free from care and don't have to worry about anything. Now you're ill!"

After a few moments, she brought him some bean soup, sweetened with two spoonfuls of sugar. Suocheng finished two big bowls. It made him sweat profusely. He lay down, but the whole night he was turning and tossing in bed and could not get to sleep. Now and again, he got out of bed and smoked, knocking the ash out of the bowl onto the window-sill. By dawn, unable to contain himself any more, he woke his wife.Rubbing her eyes, she asked:

"You don't feel any better?"

"I want to talk to you about something."

"Go ahead."

Suocheng cast a glance at her and then lowered his head. He stuck his pipe into his tobacco pouch but couldn't fill it for a while. Impatient, Oiulan sat up and put on her clothes as she asked:

"Have you lost your tongue?" Pulling himself together, Suocheng blurted out:

"Let's not sink the well."

"Why not?"

"Didn't you hear what they said on the radio?"

"What did they say?"

"You know as well as I do."

Qiulan pushed aside her quilt and got out of bed. "Keep it to yourself!"

He clutched her arm. "Don't get so worked up. All right. I'll tell you."

"Out with it! I've no time to waste."

He drew closer and whispered, "The former landlords and rich peasants at Haoshan aren't classified as such anymore, not even Zhao Baiwan, who had been in prison for eight years."

"I know."

"They're in luck now; they're on an equal footing with us former poor peasants and hired hands."

"Yes." Qiulan bit her lips.

Suocheng lit his pipe and started puffing away. "So, we won't sink a well. Perhaps it would all be labor lost."

"Why?"

"You're a woman with a one-track mind. Let me be plain and honest with you. This house of ours was owned by landlord Liu Jingui. He's still alive. I hear that his son is a rich hotel owner in Japan and he has given our county government a car, a television among many other things. Even if Liu Jingui had died, his sons and grandsons would be able to claim back this house of ours. We'll lose it some day. You just wait and see."

"You're imagining things."

"Me, imagining things? No. Don't you know that our government's policies change all the time? You shouldn't be too sure of yourself."

Qiulan lowered her head and could not say anything.

"I've always let you have the final say in our family affairs. But you must listen to me this once. You'll have nothing to lose for that."

Qiulan burst out laughing.

“What’s so funny?” Suocheng was puzzled.

Qiulan split her sides as she thumped her husband with her fists.

He hastily covered her mouth with his hand, saying, “Don’t be silly. The walls have ears. You don’t want to wake up our neighbors, do you?”

Qiulan stared at him. “Idiot! I’ve wasted my bean soup on you. I don’t believe that the sun will rise in the West, nor can I believe the Communist Party will plunge us back into misery. Stop dreaming of problems and go back to sleep.:

It was already broad daylight when Qiulan got up. She called to the opposite room, “Aren’t you going to get up, Xin. huai? The sun is shining on your buttocks!”

Her unmarried youngest son, Xinhuai, entered buttoning his clothes.

“Do you, want me, Mum?”

She handed him some money. “Go and buy me some firecrackers.”

“What’s the occasion? We’re not building a house,"”Suocheng said.

“I just want to hear them crack,” barked his wife.

It was customary for peasants to let off firecrackers when they started building a house. No one had ever done so for sinking a well. But Qiulan insisted. She told her son to stand in the middle of the courtyard holding a pole from which hung a long string of firecrackers. Then she asked her husband to light them. Poor Suocheng struck several matches but failed to set them off. Qiulan grabbed the matchbox and lit the firecrackers herself. The noise drew a large crowd into the courtyard, while children ran here and there picking up the unexploded firecrackers. Bits of paper drifted in the smoke, making it a thrilling sight to see!

“Hold the pole higher, Xinhuai,” cried Qiulan.

The onlookers whispered among themselves, wondering why a frugal housewife like Qiulan was throwing money away for no purpose whatsoever. Just as the last ones exploded, Qiulan handed Suocheng a spade and said in a loud voice, “Begin digging, Xinhuai’s father!”

Somehow, not quite knowing why, Suocheng began digging with vigor.

*

When the well was dug twenty feet deep, they struck rock. As there was still no sign of water, Suocheng wanted to fill up the hole. But Qiulan would not hear anything of it, saying that since the well-site was on the same line as their neighbor’s they would sooner or later reach water. It was probably just under that rock. She called a stonemason in to blast it off.

When the explosives were ready, the loudspeaker called for Qiulan to go to the brigade cashier on account of some important matter. As she was busy sticking paper-strips on her glass windows to prevent them from cracking in the dynamiting, she said to her husband, “Go and see what it is all about.”

“But it’s you they want to see,” retorted Suocheng, rubbing his hands in bewilderment.

“Don’t be silly. Can’t you even take a message?”

Suocheng returned after a while and pulled his wife into the inner room. “Xinhuai’s mother, Liu … Liu … Jingui has … come back!” He was so nervous that he could hardly speak.

Stunned, Qiulan leaned against the door.

“He’s staying in the county guest-house. He said he’d come to see his old house tomorrow. You can guess what he has in mind.”

Oiulan was tongue-tied.

“What shall we do? Somebody has come from the county. He looked like an important official, and spoke like one too. Right now, he’s talking to the Party secretary in the accounting office; he said he’d be coming here in a minute.”

“What for?”

“To see our house. They’ll entertain Liu Jingui here, he said. There’s a truck outside the office. It is piled high with armchairs, carpets and wooden beds—much more impressive furniture than what Liu Jingui had before.”

Qiulan thought for a moment. “Are you afraid?”

“Of Liu Jingui? Hm,” Suocheng spat. “I wasn’t afraid of him when we reasoned with him at the mass meetings in the days of the land reform, so why now? I’m just afraid that we may not be able to get any support this time in our fight against him. The official sounded as if Liu were an emperor and me a mere poor country bumpkin.”

“Don’t tell me about that pitiful sight! Leave everything to me. Just go and tell the mason to get cracking.”

When Suocheng hesitated, Qiulan snapped, “This is our house and our courtyard! We can do whatever we like with it. Why should we be afraid?”

Looking out of the window, Suocheng saw people entering the courtyard! He pulled her sleeves and whispered, “Here they are. The one in front is the official.”

Qiulan brushed back a lock of hair hanging low over her brows, walking confidently out of the room and, leaning against the door, strained her eyes to size up the visitor.

The man in front was Sun, Director of the Administrative Office of the county government. As soon as he entered the courtyard, he looked around like a fastidious inspector and said, “What a dirty place! What’s the point of sinking a well now? It won’t do any good.” He walked cautiously to the edge of the well and peered down. Then he turned and asked the old Party secretary, “Can they finish it by tomorrow?”

“No. It will take another four days at least.” Sun thought for a while and said with an air of finality, “Then fill it up. A messy place like this is not fit to be seen by our honored guest. No people in other countries would sink wells in such a primitive way. It’s a disgrace for us Chinese if they see it.”

“They have already put in an enormous amount of work.”

However, Sun was insistent.

“Fill it up. Overall interests should come before partial interests. Now, let’s see the house.”

He was heading for the house when he suddenly found an angry woman blocking his way, with each of her hands holding on to either side of the door frame. She was staring fixedly at him with her narrowed eyes.

Sun was stunned. The Party secretary introduced them to each other. After this little ceremony, Sun broke into a smile.

“So you’re Comrade Li Qiulan. I’ve heard a lot about you.” He stretched out his hand politely.

However, Qiulan ignored it and refused to move, her face remaining impassive. “Whom do you want to see? Don’t you know this house has an owner?”

Sun gaped while Suocheng was pulling her sleeves from behind. Qiulan brushed his hands aside. Looking at Sun squarely in the face, she demanded, “If you know this house has an owner, you should have introduced yourself first. I’ve never seen such an intruder like you, poking your nose into other people’s business in their own house! Who is the owner of this house, I’m asking you?”

Sun blushed. His blood boiled, but then he thought as an important official, it would be beneath his dignity to reason with such a ignorant country woman.

“Director Sun is here on business, Qiulan. You should try to understand,” said the old secretary.

“I’m a frank person. As far as work is concerned, I’ve always cooperated with my leaders ever since the land reform movement. While people didn’t feel it proper to look the Lius up in those days, they could nevertheless call at my house any time. I have never kept any watchdogs. Liu Jingui may call on us, now as before, but I’ll not receive him as his humble servant! I treat everybody the same, officials or no officials. A couple of days ago when County Party Secretary Zhang came, he swept my courtyard as soon as he entered it. But Director Sun thinks it’s too dirty. This is no bachelor’s house. How can our courtyard not be messed up by poultry droppings and broken tiles and bricks? Why must we fill up the well? Just because of Liu? If you think my home is a disgrace to you, then take him to the foreign-style houses in the county town. You can entertain him there as an honored guest. If you bring him here, he should respect me as the mistress of the house. And that’s that.”

The Party secretary listened in perfect silence, while Suocheng had disappeared in the inner room.

Sun was annoyed, but he controlled himself.

“Comrade Qiulan,” he said with a forced smile, “I appreciate how you feel. But you mustn’t cling to your old peasant mentality. Mr. Liu Jingui is now a patriotic overseas Chinese. To modernize our country—”

Qiulan cut in, “You know state affairs better than I. Just tell me what you want me to do.”

There was a lot of hustle and bustle as people unloaded the furniture from the truck and brought it into the courtyard. Pointing to the beds and armchairs, Sun said, “Do your rooms up with these to show Mr. Liu how good life is in our socialist villages.”

Qiulan studied the extravagant furniture.

“Well, how do you like it?”

Qiulan asked with a sly smile, “You mean all that furniture will be mine after this? Good! I’ll keep it for my Xinhuai when he marries."

“No, no.” Sun shook his head vigorously.

Qiulan laughed but then her jaw fell again. “Then why did you bring it here? Just to show off? I’ve no use for it.” With a wave of her hand, she ordered, “Take the furniture away! I don’t want it. My courtyard’s too dirty. My house isn’t a show window.”

“Qiulan!” There was a note of severity in the Party secretary's voice.

Sun stamped his foot in anger.

"Leave it here. The well must be filled up right away!"

"Right away? Trying to step over me in my house?" Qiulan ran over to the edge of the well and shouted down to the stone mason.

"Light the fuse!"

"O … K" the answer trailed off from below. The onlookers were stupefied.

Suocheng stumbled out and pleaded with his wife, "Don't be so stubborn. Let them have their way."

She pushed him aside. "You're not as alert as you were. Keep off the well now." Then she climbed on to the wall of the pigsty and, cupping her hands over her mouth, cried out at the top of her voice:

"We're lighting the fuse, neighbors. Open your windows so the glass won't break."

The fields echoed, "Light the fuse!"

Sun turned pale with rage. "Take the furniture away. Quick!" he shouted to the men who had come with him.

Secretly amused, the old secretary left.

A muffled boom sounded. The ground shook. There was a surge towards the well-site. Qiulan stood under a tree, and tears were rolling down her lined face.

*

It was heavy snow one day many years before all this. At dusk, a carriage was rolling along a road, with bells jingling on the neck of the horse. The young driver, clad in rags, was shivering in his seat, holding his whip in his arms.

The carriage suddenly halted, and the driver jumped down and poked with the handle of his whip at something covered with snow in the middle of the road. Then he squatted down and pushed the snow away with his hands only to find a little beggar girl, stiff with cold, and there was an empty basket on her arm. A face shouted from inside the carriage:

"Get a move on!"

The driver came back with the little girl in his arms and called respectfully to the carriage, "Sir …"

The window curtain parted briefly to reveal two blinking eyes.

"Put her down," ordered Liu Jingui behind the curtain.

"Please save her, Sir. She might live," pleaded the young man.

"If she dies, will you buy her a coffin?"

The young man pleaded again, his eyes all in tears.

Liu swore. "What an unlucky thing to happen before the Spring Festival. Throw her away!"

Gritting his teeth, the young man put the girl back on the road and carefully covered her with his padded jacket. He cracked his whip over the horse and the carriage rumbled over the frozen ground. It was dark when they reached the village. After tethering the horse to a post, the young man hurried back to the same spot where he had left the girl and carried her to his hovel. As there was no fire, he held her close in his arms the whole night to keep her warm. At dawn she opened her eyes.

Excitedly the young man ran to his master.

"She's alive! She's alive!" he cried, his eyes glistening with tears of joy. He begged Liu to keep her, offering to work for him in return for, the whole year without pay.

Short and thin, the ten-year-old Qiulan—this was the little girl's name—had to work hard all day long, grinding wheat, milling flour, washing clothes, cleaning vegetables … Liu lorded it over her. Even his dog barked threateningly at her. She went about her chores jitteringly. She found warmth only when she returned to the little hovel, where the young driver, Suocheng, had been like a big brother to her. Fate had bound them together.

Seven years later, Qiulan had grown up.

One day she asked Suocheng, "You're almost thirty, Brother Suocheng. Why don't you get married?"

Suocheng replied honestly, "No one will ever marry a poor hired hand like me."

"Do you like me?"

Suocheng was taken aback.

"Marry me if you don't dislike me."

"No, no!" Suocheng protested.

Her eyes brightened as she continued, "Marry me, Brother Suocheng. Let's leave here and set up our own home. I'll devote all my life to you."

He stopped her and his heart was beating fast. "Don't say any more. The master will hear us."

"So what? I've had more than enough here. I would rather go begging."

With a sigh he got out.
One day, Liu asked him, “You want to marry Qiulan, Suocheng?”
“No … No.”
Liu laughed.
One evening, when Suocheng came back on an errand, he heard Qiulan crying in the hovel. He went in and saw a bald old man pulling at her and Liu, with one hand holding a water pipe, was pushing her. Qiulan refused to move, her hands clutching at the door frame. At the sight of Suocheng, she freed herself and flew into his arms crying, “Save me, Brother Suocheng!”
Holding her, Suocheng stared at Liu blankly.
Puffing at his pipe, Liu said, “You’ve come back at the right time. Say good-bye to your sister. She’ll soon be married into a good family and will live a happy life. This is Mr. Li.”
“He has sold me,” Qiulan wept.
It was a bolt from the skies.
“Sir, you …” Suocheng could not go on.
Liu continued puffing at his pipe, his head bent.
The bald man looked at Suocheng suspiciously and then asked Qiulan fiercely, “Who is he?”
Liu answered, “Her brother.”
Qiulan said nothing but bit her lips.
Mr. Li reached out and held Qiulan’s chin up. “Did you sleep with him? Speak up!”
Qiulan elbowed his hand away and replied at the top of her voice, “Yes. I’ve slept with him for seven years. I belonged to him long ago.”
Liu Jingui was stupefied.
Ashamed, Suocheng stammered, “You … you …”
Qiulan buried her head in his arms, weeping bitterly. Suocheng broke down too.
Mr. Li laughed coldly.
“Mr. Liu, you want to palm this whore off on me and ask such a high price for her?” He produced the indenture from his pocket, tore it into shreds and turned to leave. Liu tried to stop him but he strode off without casting a glance behind. Pale with rage, Liu grabbed Qiulan by the hair and hit her on the forehead with his pipe.

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The smoke had dispersed from the courtyard.
Unconsciously Qiulan raised her hand to touch the scar left on her forehead by Liu Jingui’s pipe. It still seemed to hurt, Liu might have forgotten the wrongs he had done her, but not Qiulan …
At her gate she looked at the tiled arch over the entrance. She had spent the better part of her life here, in days of the past as a maid, now as the mistress. She had been poor but now, though far from being rich, she was happy. The day she had dashed out of Liu’s home with a bleeding forehead, her poor fellow-villagers had helped her to set up a little shed, where she had married Suocheng. The next day, while he had left to do odd jobs, she went out begging again. She was happy to have her own home. When the village was liberated in 1947, the peasants settled their old scores with. Liu. The chairman of the Peasants’ Association, now the old Party secretary, took Suocheng and Qiulan to Liu’s house.
“From now on this house belongs to you,” he said to Suocheng. “You’ve earned it with your sweat and blood. It will be yours, your sons’ and your grandsons’.”
Qiulan threw herself upon the black gate and cried. Since then it had never occurred to her, not even when the situation looked threatening, that the house could ever be taken away from her. In 1948, when the Kuomintang attacked the key liberated areas and the landlords’ “home-coming” corps returned, the timid villagers gave back to Liu everything they had received in the days of the land reform. But Qiulan didn’t. And Liu Jingui was too cunning to make any rash move. When the Kuomintang troops withdrew from the mainland, he and his son fled first to Taiwan and later went abroad. In 1962, when the Kuomintang sent small armed bands to harass the coastal regions, Suocheng became nervous. But Qiulan hadn’t been afraid, believing that the Communist regime could never be shaken. Now all the landlords and rich peasants had been reclassified, not put in the same class as before. This was only reasonable, since they had been downtrodden for years and many of them had turned over a new leaf. But what did Sun have up his sleeve? Had he taken his cue from the Communist Party?
Qiulan felt hot and heavy in the head. Instead of going to the well, she went straight to her room and flung herself on the bed. When Suocheng offered to send for a doctor and cook her some mung bean soup, she said, “Why make such a fuss? Just give me a massage.” Suocheng put his thumbs on her forehead and began

massaging it.

When the Party secretary came in the evening, Qiulan asked him, "Is it true that the old order is being restored?"

He lit his pipe and sat on the edge of the bed. "I wonder why a strong character like you asked such a question!" he replied with a smile.

Suocheng added, "Qiulan's right. It looks like the political wind is blowing favorably on the rich and powerful again."

"Don't be silly, Suocheng. Remember this is a Communist state."

"I have no respect for a Communist like Director Sun."

"Why, then, didn't you argue with him yesterday?"

Oiulan glared at her husband. "He's too chicken-hearted to speak up."

The Party secretary laughed when he saw Suocheng blush.

Then Qiulan continued, "But Sun came here as a Communist official."

The tobacco in the bowl glowed as the secretary puffed at his pipe.

"You've a point there. The prestige of our Party has been undermined by unworthy Communists like him, and people now are not so sure of themselyes as they used to be. Sun and his like know only how to sail along, following the political wind. They'll use their power to bully others, all right. None of them is any good. And we mustn't judge the Communist Party by what they do or say. Isn't that right, Suocheng?"

"I agree with you." Qiulan bit her lips, lost in thought.

The Party secretary knocked the ash from his pipe. "What do you think, Qiulan?" he asked.

"What shall we do tomorrow?" she countered, smiling. "You're the hostess. We'll let you run the whole show and do whatever you like." He told them that a county clerk had called a moment before to inform him that Zhang, the county Party secretary, had reprimanded Sun, telling him to let the villagers decide how to receive Liu Jingui, who was coming only for a visit. The county government would provide a car for Liu the following day and he would come without the company of any county official.

Qiulan heaved a sigh of relief.

"To be honest, at first I just couldn't see why we should treat our old enemy as an honored guest," admitted the secretary. "Later, I realized that I was behind the times. We can't always look back and see things in the old light. We've treated people like him as enemies for many years. That's unfair. If they behave themselves and support the Party and socialism, it's not right to discriminate against them forever. Besides, Liu Jingui is a patriot. He's a Chinese."

Suocheng listened with rapt attention. Raising her head, Qiulan said, "Please call Secretary Zhang and tell him that I also have the conscience of Chinese and won't let the Communist Party down. And please … invite Liu here for me."

The secretary smiled happily.

"What shall we do with the well?" Suocheng asked.

"Go on with your work."

*

Beside the well was placed an upturned barrow, whose wheel was being used as a pulley for Suocheng and his family to lift baskets of stone from the bottom of the hole. They worked in unison, with Oiulan chanting, "One, two, pull!"

The courtyard was bathed in the morning sunlight. The pigs had eaten their fill and were rubbing themselves against the wall of the sty. A big white rooster was crowing, holding its head up high. As the wind blew, the dew-drops fell from the leaves of the gourd plants that entwined the thatched roof of the hut. The corn hanging under the eaves glittered in the golden rays. When the empty basket was lowered to the bottom, Oiulan wiped the sweat from her forehead and murmured to herself,

"It's more than thirty years. He must look old now."

"He was born in the year of the dog. He must be seventy-one now," Suocheng echoed.

"Perhaps I won't be able to recognize him when I see him."

"Did he get married again in Japan?"

"I don't think he did, from what I heard."

"Why has he given up his comfortable life over there and come back? To get his property back? Secretary Zhang said he had come only for a visit. Do you believe it?"

"It's hard to leave one's homeland. Some of our neighbors saw him weep when he left. Poor man …"

"Why must you pity him while he never showed any pity on us?" Suocheng was indignant. .

"It was all past and done with. Why not let bygones be bygones?"

Words of progress of the sinking of the well were being passed up from below:

"We've reached damp earth!"

"We can see a trickle of water now."

After three days of hard work the well had been dug thirty feet deep. At nine o'clock, a car engine was heard. Suocheng whispered nervously, "He's here."

Qiulan thought for a moment, and then said, "Xinhuai's father, you go and change into clean clothes. They're under the cushion of the bed." When he was gone, she told her son, "Get, your bike and go and buy me some lean meat in the East Village. I'll make him some dumplings with meat stuffing. That's his favorite." After Xinhuai had left, she picked up a packet of cigarettes from the window-sill and dropped it down the well, shouting to the stonemason below, "I am sorry I've a guest coming. Please call me when you see water." After making all these arrangements, she dusted her clothes and made for the gate.

A shaky, small old man entered, followed by a crowd of children. Was he the arrogant Liu? His head was bald with only a sprinkling of white hair and his eyebrows had almost gone. Visible on his shriveled face were the age spots. His legs were weak and he had to hold on to his walking-stick, with his back bent. His left hand was still clutching a water pipe, from which a wisp of smoke was curling up.

Qiulan shivered when she saw the pipe.

Liu stopped at the black gate, squinting at the woman standing beside it. He smiled awkwardly and then shook his head, showing no sign of recognition. Suddenly his hands trembled and his pipe dropped to the ground. He closed his lack-lustre eyes in pain, when he saw the scar on her forehead.

Her lips quivering, Qiulan gripped the door frame so hard that her nails almost sank into the wood. Neither could speak a word.

One of the children was yelling, "Look, the old man has dropped his pipe." The others laughed.

Qiulan was torn by a mixture of feelings. She shooed away the children, who dispersed and watched from a distance. Then she walked over and picked up the pipe for him. It was still the same one; only his fingers had left more marks on the copper. After so many years, he must have changed too.

Liu held out a trembling hand.

"You are Qiulan if I am not mistaken. I'm so glad to see you and my native village again …"

Qiulan's eyes were a little moist with tears as she wiped the dust from the pipe and handed it to him.

"Please come in. Suocheng has some good tobacco for you."

"How is Suocheng?" Liu took the pipe with both hands.

"He's fine. It's all thanks to the Party." Qiulan called over her shoulders: "Xinhuai's father, we have a guest."

Buttoning his jacket, Suocheng ran out but halted at the sight of Liu, and for a while remained speechless with amazement.

Liu shook his head with feeling. "You've grown old, too."

After a long time, Suocheng said, "I was born in the year of the rooster. I'm now sixty."

Qiulan laughed.

The tension was gone and they entered the courtyard. When Qiulan told him about the well, Liu nodded in approval. "The water underground is good. I did want to sink a well when I built this house, but I changed my mind for fear that it might bring misfortune to my family." He was laughing at his old superstition now.

"Water; water!" came the voice from the bottom of the well.

Oiulan clapped her hands in excitement and rushed over. Peering down the well, she asked, "Is there much water?"

"Yes. It's gushing out of a tiny hole."

Gillian turned and called to her husband, "Fetch me a ladle."

Suocheng put a gourd ladle in a basket and lowered it into the well. When he pulled it up again, it was full of water.

"Taste it, Xinhuai's mother. See if it's sweet or salty."

Qiulan took the ladle and offered it to Liu. "Please taste this water from your home village."

Liu was moved but did not dare take it.

"Come on," urged Qiulan. "We'll have plenty of it to drink later."

"Go ahead. You are our guest," Suocheng chimed in.

Liu took the ladle with his trembling hands and began drinking at large gulps, not bothering to wait for the dust

in the water to settle. He savored it, with his eyes half-closed.
“Sweet?” asked Suocheng.
Liu put the ladle to his mouth and took a few more gulps; tears were streaming down his cheeks.
Her eyes filled with tears, Qiulan quickly turned away …

82.37 Tale Of Two Strangers\fn{by Yuan Jen aka Wang Li-teh (1946-)} Hupei Province, China (M) 12

1

Just what season of the year is it, anyway? Sitting there in the car with nothing to do, fighting sheer boredom, Chi Kan-sheng suddenly felt the question jump out at him. In a world like this, it was hard to fix a definite answer to questions even so simple like this. What season is it? When you’ve really got to be clear about something, the thing to do was figure out just precisely where you were at the moment. Follow the path back to the beginning, he mused. And so there he was again, stuck in the sand of his question mark. And as for getting back to where it had all started—that was no simple thing to do.

If it weren’t for the taxi driver turning on a cassette recording of Copland’s *Appalachian Spring*,\fn{Composed in 1944 by the American composer Aaron Copland (1900-1990).} would that sudden intuition about the changing seasons of the year have occurred to him? What a taste for music the fellow had!

The human mind was a damn strange thing. Most of the time it was a container mysterious and deep, and the truth was you could never put a lid on it. And then sometimes it was more like a piece of embroidered cloth, the various pieces of fabric all silky and fine: it wasn’t that it was woven improperly, but rather that all the threads followed one another and twisted and turned until in the end they lay buried in a dark and sad mass of confusion. The present moment was an example of that. Copland was unleashing this magnificent array of spectacular wonders and colors of the universe, but if he looked outside the window, what did he see? Nothing but a sheet of chilly dull gray. Winter had all but finished its song. And spring? There wasn’t even a hint of its faintest notes.

The kaleidoscope world inside the car and the dreary cold outside the window were as real to him as they were deluding, and how could he, a lonely wanderer who had not found a place to plant his feet, a home he could call his own, manage to comprehend it all? These moments he was passing through seemed to say it well. As he sped along, he knew his life was unfolding before him like a far flung journey, the road before him calling for decisions. But what world had he spun out of in the past, and what land was he rushing toward now? One thing he was certain of: there would always be so much he would never completely understand.

*

That place called Wu-ho didn’t have any snow in the winter, and naturally it was much warmer than here. Wouldn’t spring just be starting to show itself now? Wu-ho didn’t have any real mountains, but there were hills as far as you could see. If you took all that glory in *Appalachian Spring* and could put it aside for a minute, well, wouldn’t a celestial melody like that capsulize the beauty of this dreamland of the East? It was not something he had complete control of. The very name *Wu-ho* stirred images of his father reminiscing, and set a flame alight in his imagination.

There was a tree that Wu-ho was famous for, called a tung oil tree. Wu-ho had so many tung oil trees! They were big and tall. Were they taller than mango trees, he asked.

“Much taller! *This place* doesn’t even know what a tall tree looks like!” his father replied with haughty con-empt befitting a tough veteran army officer, even though what he had commanded was only an infantry company. The tung tree fruit had an oil you could extract. The fruit was a green color at first, but then it got yellow, and finally it became red. It was the prettiest thing you could imagine! You could squeeze that oil out and use it for all sorts of things. This bit of information was what his father had told him, but the geography books agreed.

There were also bushes called “oil cha” trees. The plains were just covered with them. They weren’t as tall as a human being, and they produced a fruit about the size of small tomatoes. They began as a bright glow when green, and deepened to a rich red, and when they were completely ripe, their skin burst at the seams. The seeds had an oil you drew out, a very important, useful cooking oil.

“Did it taste good?”

“Ah! A little oily but not bad. A lot of folks on mainland China couldn’t even get their hands on two ounces of oil in a whole year.”

He realized that back then their Wu-ho was considered a wealthy place.

“Mountains everywhere, well, are there rice paddies that slope on the sides?” According to the geography

books, that's the way Shechuan province was.

"No, the incline on the sides isn't steep enough. In the middle of the plain you can plant and harvest. Rice paddies are all over the place there, and good for two crops a year."

His father used the lid of his tea cup to stir the foam that had floated to the top from the jasmine leaves. He pursed his lips, and then his eyes and voice fluttered off into the distance.

"What you use to till the fields are water buffaloes. There aren't many oxen, and they're for pulling carts. The weather in the old country's real good, the different seasons—four of 'em!—are just about perfect for farming. In the spring there's the spring rains. You have to wear the right head gear the farmers use, and the big rain coats. Looks like it's too hot inside for you, but in fact it's cool and comfortable."

He took this talk and let it roll around inside his head. Well, more or less, isn't it like "this place here?"

"Not the same! Oh no, not the same!" A determined note jumped back into his Father's voice. "In the old country there was so much bamboo, and the buildings were all taller, and no matter what you laid your eyes on, hell—it was twice as good as here!"

*

He was well acquainted with spring time in Taiwan's countryside, and he thought of it often.

He had tested into a well known middle school run by the county, and his father insisted on blurting out his pride in a unique "Did I tell you what school my boy got into?" fashion without a flint of sensitivity for his "Ah Dad, don't am-bare-ass-me-again, please, Dad!" feelings. Once school began, his father kept bringing up his intention to call on his teachers, to pay them the equivalent of an official parental visitation. He fought the idea doggedly, hoping to deter him by stiff resistance and gloomy silence.

But not long after the second semester began, he opened his eyes one morning to find his father all dressed up and ready to go. There he sat on the edge of the bed, smoking a cigarette. It was obvious he had taken excruciating care to choose just the right ensemble to wear. The clothing he had gotten himself into was immaculate to the degree of absurdity, and it waved a sort of fairy-tale-like wand over his entire countenance. His haberdashery clashed mightily with the tone of his skin, which was dark and leathery tough. His shoes were polished to a frightful gloss, his hair brushed straight back and worried into a hat-like formation, and his posture was absolutely rigid. Everything about his father was a loud announcement that he was a walking taro plant let loose from the boonies for an excursion to the big city.

He heaved a sigh of resignation, "Let it be!"

At that time, the city limits were not very well defined, and the school was on the edge of downtown. After getting off the bus there was still quite a way to walk, and then finally, after a good spell, you got to the middle of the springtime fields.

He led the way, the two of them using a path that served as a short cut, but one that was so narrow they could not walk side by side. That fact made it at least a little easier on him. His father clomped along in back of him, and complained with every step about the poor quality of the road. He knew full well that the real reason for the grumbling was he was afraid of scuffing up his shiny new shoes. His father's irritation gave him a distinct shot of pleasure. Even the harsh, unrelenting rays of the morning sun above seemed a portent.

There were freshly planted rice paddies close by, and the fields were squared off in individual terraces, with the tips of the rice shoots poking up through the surface of the glistening water. Men were working in some of the paddies, they were bent over at the waist, and they seemed to grow right up out of the water. Off in the distance a team of water buffalo stepped along in yoke and harness; they turned around and began their treck all over again.

He didn't know a thing about working the rice paddies. His impression was that even after they left the fields behind them at the end of the day, the backs of the workers were still bent in their labor, and the water buffalo continued to plod up and back, and back and up, as if to say, "Why not, the gods won't give us our rice for nothing, you know!" He could not see if the men or their animals were happy or sad. He felt simply that they were there, that their lives were hard, and that they were the focus of the portrait.

His father was probably already in an advanced state of discomfort because he wasn't accustomed to wearing the shoes. He kept stopping to stare off in all directions. So the son had to stop then too. He felt the length of the shadow his body cast in back of him, the top of it falling over his father's feet as he stood stock still in the road, knocking the mud loose from the soles of his shoes and then hobbling ahead another step or two. Eventually his father pointed off into the distance.

"Look over there at that mist floating over across the way! It's like that classic literary verse, 'Mist as soft as the dust left by wild horses scampering over the horizon.'"

The mist looked like floating dust all right, but "wild horses?" What bullshit! It was always that sort of thing.

As usual, he responded by silence.

At school his father hurried off to find the student advisor, and then after seeing him, he went back home. He didn't disturb class-time, which was a great relief to him. The advisor was the Chinese Literature teacher, also from the China mainland. The two of them probably talked together very easily. Afterwards he called him aside and said with a chuckle, "I had no idea he would be so familiar with classical sources. You can read extra articles and get a lot of added instruction from him." Of course the advisor did not know that at home there was scarcely a word exchanged between father and son. And as far as his father's classical roots were concerned, he couldn't care the less about them.

One step into their house, and it leapt off the wall at you—a great white poster with four lines of pudgy Chinese characters drawn in the style of the celebrated Tang dynasty calligrapher Yen Chen-tzu.

Asleep in the midst of spring
Dead to the rising of the sun
Hill and valley filled with the chirping of birds
Nights with sounds of wind and rain drops
Breezes gently humming
Who can count the leaves that tumble free and fall to the ground?

It's not enough to write it all down; you've got to plaster it back up again too. And not only that you plaster it up again, you've got to read it out loud too! And that word *chu*, you have to pronounce it with a twist of the vowel to make it almost a *chi*. And the *yeh* isn't *yeh* at all! It's got to be *yah*! After supper there was his cup of tea, and then he'd drag him all through the whole rigmarole again. He would listen with all his might, but by God, there was no getting around the rumble of *chu-ah*, *chu-ah*, until it leapt up inside him from the marrow of his bones, and all he wanted was to shout back at him,

"All right, all right! *This place here*: if it's no good, why don't you just go on back to the old country then, huh? *Chu-ah*! Go ahead and go back!"

*

The taxi had just turned off the highway, and he was approaching the airport now. The angle of the curve caused his body to shift to the left, and he cradled the bundle on his knees, steadying it with his hand. An exit ramp loomed ahead, the sides of the road were strewn with trees. The tops of the trees bunched together, tip to tip, and over the very edge of their heads the lofty tail of a plane poked out. Yes, that was it. People could go back home with something to show off that they had made their mark in the world. But he had not. Maybe he could grab a seat in the back of the plane, right over the tail lights, then he would be literally "clinging to the tail of an illustrious party" as the classical proverb puts it. It would be outrageous for him to brag about coming from a long line of erudite scholars. But hadn't he inherited something from his father after all? Otherwise, where did this ready wit come from?

Springtime in the Appalachias quickly turned into clouds on the horizon. What season was it that was coming so soon? Copland didn't really say, and now he did not want to ask.

2

When a person is looking for something, what they need is light. When they're looking for themselves, what they need is darkness. Chi Kan-sheng was well accustomed to laying awake in bed, and he had come to enjoy darkness and the kind of clarity it offered him.. That flash of an instant at the very threshold of birth, and the final seconds before death, perhaps those were the moments that offered the most luminous of lights? He guessed so.

The darkness of the sky, a dark so utterly desolate and deep, so overwhelming and vast that it could erase everything. Suddenly an impulse sprang to life inside him. If he could break the window next to him, if he could take out the urn with those ashes that were as white as snow, what would they look like? If every secret could be completely revealed, if all of everything could be poured back into the universe—well, there was no harm in that.

That day was the first time in his life he had ever seen the ashes of a human body. Alas, a person's ashes could never only be ashes, and they could never completely match the color of other burnt out things. How very different it was than what he had imagined! To get them out of the contraption at the crematorium, they had to pound the bones into a powder of the finest and purest quality, and then this stuff took on a texture that was eerily light and puffy. Until now he still felt it beyond his wherewithal to connect his father's face with the white stuff in that urn he was carrying.

After his mother died, the government granted his father leave to retire from the service and raise his orphan. He found a piece of land in the middle of the countryside on the edge of a military compound in central Taiwan, and built them a place to live with his own hands. Then the two of them, father and son, settled down there. In time the house, though small, acquired a certain celebrity status because it was indeed a very unusual place. Except for support beams, it was made entirely of bamboo, and, what's more, it was a remarkably tall structure, but a building without an upstairs: the upper level was not for living in at all! And so the tallness of the place seemed to have some poignant intention in itself.

"There's not a thing wrong with it, all the houses in the old country were built just like that."

The house was well built, his father told him. As he stirred his tea, the inflection of his voice seemed to send it afloat into a far off horizon.

But the people in the locale just could not get used to it, and they called it the *Ie* house after the Taiwanese word for "tall." The house became more famous than the military compound itself. Later the students from all around the area called him *Ie*, despite the fact he was actually rather short. This of course increased the cut of the nickname.

"Making a bamboo house isn't anything to talk about. The men in Wu-ho, you just handed them a clump of bamboo and a knife, and they could make anything out of it." That's how his father talked when people came to see their bamboo house. The end result was they accumulated some more stacks of bamboo.

Later he would come to know the meaning of "standing tall with bamboo pride." All the same, there was a great gulf between the deep and the shallow. With near sleight of hand artistry, his father wove together bamboo slats of just the right shade and hue, and he worked the corners meticulously. Even the outer edges of the drubbing had strips in three tones, managing in the end to look like fancy lace embroidery. Talk about a thing of beauty! It seemed as if it should have been shipped out of the country side for a public exhibition. But it was for his own enjoyment, and nothing more. In the beginning no one gave any thought to a couple left over pieces of bamboo siding. Except for the pleasure you could get from them, what use were good looking things like that?

Around the four sides of the house, circling the open space, his father built a bamboo fence, and then along the back border he set up a lattice, also made of bamboo. One morning his father went out before he even left for school, and when he came home that afternoon after classes, he found him home already. It was pleasantly cool inside the house, but his father lay on top of his bed as if there wasn't an ounce of energy left in his whole body. When he heard him enter, he blinked his eye a time or two, and spoke listlessly. He poured his father a drink of water, and through the back window saw a pair of sturdy bamboo poles with an elaborate lattice arrangement underneath, and the ensemble struck him as a sight both magnificent and beautiful. And yet somehow there was a feel to the scene much like the sensation of gazing at a strikingly attractive woman whom you knew with a single glance could not be trusted. It was disturbing.

At the far side of a large storage crate there was a tract of land, and a fence that formed a border. He saw a strip of newly sectioned off ground and a linking of bamboo rings. He thought to himself, before they moved here, didn't he once hear his father raise a certain topic with one of his buddies, something about this area perhaps having a position open, and he might start his own refuse gathering business? The phrase his father used was "refuse gathering." The children in that military compound called it "picking up garbage." Local kids termed it "trash collecting."

Army veterans used to be dark in color. After he became a professional—that again was his father's choice of words—*a professional,* his father's skin got darker every year. The truth is he looked as if he'd been painted over on purpose. His father said that back in the old country, once people got into their middle years and had made their mark, they made sure to get themselves a good coffin. And then with each passing year they'd throw on another coat of lacquer. If a man was blessed with a long life, that coffin shone so brightly that all you had to do was flick a tiny drop of paint onto the surface, and you heard a *ping* like a flake of gold clinking merrily against a hard flint stone. He knew it was blasphemous, but sometimes he couldn't repress the sensation that the color of his father's skin reminded him of that eerie custom back in the old country, and he felt nothing but contempt for the people there.

Although in his last years he had dropped the trash collecting, his father was still darker than most people. Who would have thought that he would in the end be reduced to a pile of lily white ashes? As he thought about it, he smiled wryly. He chuckled, and though the sound wasn't enough to outdo the bottomless darkness outside the airplane, it bounced against the window beside him like a pebble, sending back an echo that was dry, crisp, and chilly. It unnerved him some.

*

Wang Chao-nan, better known by his nick name "Old Ah-nan," came in from his school on the outskirts of the city to visit him. He had just taken him out for a meal at a popular beef and noodles shop, not expensive at all, only six *kwai* a bowl, and the servings the kind that made you doze off at the table the minute you finished eating. What probably happened that day was his dormitory was so full he couldn't offer Old Ah-nan a place for a nap. So they ended up wandering around on Roosevelt Road. It was one of those bright sunny days in winter. Ah-nan hadn't seen anything but rain on his campus for a long time, and he couldn't help but look up in wonder at the sky, which was as blue as an ocean.

"Hey, Old Le! Since when have you become an authority on midwifery?" Ah-nan suddenly snickered. It occurred to him that the old nick name was a reminder of how close they'd been all through the years. An-nan lifted his head and looked right into a sign that was blinking at them. It read, *The Kan-sheng Gynecology Clinic*. In a flash Ah-nan picked up on the coincidence.

"Hey, Kan! Will you just look at that name! Same as yours, isn't it, Kan? *Kan-sheng, Kan-sheng. Fuck-a-baby, fuck-a-baby*. That's it all right!" And then he fixed on his name and harped away at the rhyme it made with a certain memorable word. "You fucker, Kan, go ahead, Fuck-around-Kan, fuck around all right, Kan, and you'll get a baby, pal! Hey, the joint's named after you!"

He laughed along with the joke, but later he thought of Wang Chao-nan's own name, and more than that, he thought of Ah-nan himself. He and his name both seemed low. A university man ought to be above that sort of humor. These kids around here!

It was only much later that he came to understand that his father's calligraphy was really quite good, although at the time he thought he was just showing off. Later he saw his father's words, "Asleep in the mist of spring, dead to the rising of the sun." It was the first time his father's scripting of characters made an impression on him.

Those bamboo crates his father made, the ones that had five different colors: water marks from the rain eventually made the lettering fade away into a single mellow yellow. Actually it wasn't a bad color, not too deep, not too light. It more or less helped to alleviate people's attention. But good things can't last forever. One day when he came home from school, what did he find but two of the crates with fresh red lettering on them. *Kan-chi, kan-chi*—four characters, each more blatant than the other. He had drawn them on all sides, so they couldn't be missed, and sure enough he had them front and back, belly and behind, so you saw them from every angle.

Even a junk collector has to have a logo!

"Hey, Le! Your old man a clever old fucker, huh? He'll scribble that name of yours all over his garbage bins. *Kan ju chu, kan ju chu.* Kan Refuse Collecting! What a name! Might as well write: *Fuck-er Kan, fuck-er* on in, *fuck-er* on out, huh?"

He threw up his fists and went at Ah-nan.

The word *kan* itself wasn't listed in our textbook. How did Ah-nan know it? Once the fight happened, of course all the boys in the class knew the word. Well, he was short and thin, and from then on he took a lot of pounding; but he also handed out his share of bloody noses and black eyes.

"Wasn't I born in Taiwan? Why did you call me Kan-sheng?"

People had called him this all this time, and only now did he find out the name's all wrong. He resolved that regardless of the consequences, there was no way he wouldn't ask his father.

"Your mother got pregnant when we were still in the old country. We were only here two months when you were born. Of course your name was Kan-sheng. It has a very filial meaning!"

But he would not surrender. For once he would forge ahead all the way to the bitter end. His father had no inkling of what he had done in joining the double meanings of this Mandarin word *kan* with its counterpart pronunciation in Taiwanese dialect. He would sure as hell tell the stupid old son-of-a-bitch the suffering and God damn shame he had put him through. He would do it carefully, indirectly even, but he would do it. He wanted him to know.

"Don't pay any attention to them! These kids around here! They can't do a damn thing!"

You're the only one who can do anything right. You're the garbage collector.

But he only dared to talk like that to himself.

Couldn't I have gotten inside her eight months later? Couldn't I have the name "Chi Tai-sheng"—meaning "born in Taiwan"? Impossible. His father would never give him a name with a meaning that connected his birth with Taiwan. Unless he were named with the *chi* that meant "stay for a while," and not the one that meant "remember."

Chi Tai-sheng … *Chi Tai-Sheng*, stay for a while in Taiwan, stay only for a while. Yes, that's it!

His father's calligraphy didn't only win him a name in the neighborhood, "Bringing glory to a humble home,"

as the proverb puts it, later it literally "glorified" the door frames of their house. He didn't know when it began, but for a succession of Chinese New Year holidays the rhymed couplets were hung at door frames of the house. On flashy red paper the famous old saying was proclaimed:

Every year comes as trial and challenge, but every year we get by;
Not a home anywhere in sight, yet every place is a home for me.

Across the top of the door were the words:

Floating Life is a stopover.

That's the way it was. The father had stopped as a guest of honor, and the son shared the hospitality. One more year in exile makes for still another year. And what began as a visit turns into a lifetime.

They probably teach it to you while you're still in the womb. Those eight months of darkness had been exerting a decisive influence on his life ever since. Or, to put better words to it, they made it impossible for him to ever make a decision about anything.

He thought he spoke Taiwanese like a native, but Hsueh-hua poo-pooed it the very first time she heard him.

"Since I got out of college, I've used it less. I think I must have forgotten some of it." He fumbled for an excuse, and it was an unhappy thing, for it felt as if he'd lost something he thought was really a part of him. He was considered a good speaker of Mandarin Chinese when he lived in Taiwan, being a "Mainlander." Yet the first time he saw Yuan-li—talk about loss of face!—he wanted desperately to think he had handled it well, but he knew he had made a complete ass of himself.

"You're a Taiwanese? Listen to your accent and you know right away. Peking pronunciation is the basis for Mandarin, but it's not the same as Mandarin."

He tried to find an excuse for himself. He had said *shih* very smoothly, but had forgotten to curl his tongue back on *chu,* and he was sure Yuan-lin heard it. Not only could he not avoid feeling himself a fool, but this time he wasn't even sure what he had done wrong.

He had never really put into words the reason he let Hsueh-hua go to marry Yuan-lin, but in the beginning he felt it at least had something to do with comforting his father, a kind of compensation for the past. Yuan-lin was from Peking. When she was a child she had moved around with her refugee parents, and she happened to live in their neighboring region for six or seven years. For all practical purposes she was half a native to the area. Well, so his father felt an immediate sense of kinship with her from the moment he met her. There was no need for explanation. They talked warmly of the Chiang-hsi province he had heard of since he was a child, and it was almost like meeting someone from your home town in a far off and very foreign land. Not even ordinary grass and trees can be denied their emotions!

But it was not the same for him. There was no way in the world he could measure up to Yuan-lin in her way with the language, for example. Stretching back to the very beginning of his life, why, he'd never spent a single day over there.

And there was Hsueh-hua saying that when you really came down to it, he really knew very little about actual Taiwanese thinking and customs. Her judgment on the matter:

"Your Mainland origin probably influenced you some."

This was a shock to him, because after all, she had never even met his father. And that was another thing that was good. Hsueh-hua really was a local girl. He couldn't imagine what she and her father could find to talk about.

After darkness, calmness; and after calmness, tranquillity. With tranquillity there is the awareness of cessation. The jetliner was still moving along, but he sensed it had already come to a standstill. The body of the craft melted into the night, and the night faded into darkness. He was like an unripened seed planted in the midst of the darkest night. He felt clear-headed, but he did not know what night it was, or where he was.

Knocking down a drink or two, singing a song
Who knows the length of our days?

Let the booze give you courage! Come on, show us that voice of yours!

It was the traditional farewell ritual at the end of university days, and not an easy thing for a sensitive one like him. There he was with his classmates, the girls along with the guys, partying the night away. Four whole years, gazing out the same windows of the same classrooms, but together not all that often, mostly just fooling around.

And now the time had come to say farewell. Everyone shouts that it's his turn. No getting around it, now, got to sing the song now. "Only the booze can take away the sadness."

Tsao-tsao leads soldiers by the million all the way to An-nan, oh, so full of confidence at that time, that line of the song, one more time, let's go! You couldn't miss that rush of emotion. The old university gang: it was like a fleet of sailboats heading out to a brightly lit sea. Thoughts of those carefree days now long distant, how could you not feel a little sad! With his left arm covering his face, and drawing back his sleeve and hiding behind it, he lifted the glass with his right hand. He leaned his head back dramatically and downed every last drop.

High on the fringe of yonder tree top.
See the birds circling round and round
Never can they land or rest
No place do they find

The same windows, the same rooms … together we forged our way, together we took our rest, nothing special about any of it … it's only when you must face a farewell that you see the beauty of true friends. Ah, the lustrous sparkle of those marvelous days, but—you just can't go back to them, can't go back.

"The Duke of Chou worked so industriously that he earned the devotion of all the people in the world."

Your body's stuck in a tight little corner, but your mind can hold the whole wide world. His father said it well: only such a virtuoso as Yuan Shih-hai was able to recapture the heroic ambition of that ancient hero.

Everybody was so young then. It's all gone now, it's so damn sad. But he still should look out at the world with eyes held high, and his vision set on the far horizon. By the time he got the final refrain out, he felt as if he had never had a moment that happy in his entire life. His eyes were burning, and he slumped forward and bowed his head.

Excuse me everybody, please, for my lousy singing—no, ah, can't sing at all. He had to get hold of himself.

Expressions of deep emotion like that were out of character for him. He probably was a little tipsy. A performance like that was almost overdone. And Li Yo-lan was there too. Once he had felt a pang of yearning for her, oh, just imagine! Never again, never again. There'll never be another time.

Slowly he raised his head and made as if he would pour more into his glass. But all of a sudden the air in the room seemed weird to him, as if someone had sucked out its chemical base. There was no going back now. He looked around at everyone, but their expressions weren't natural at all. There was Old Fish Head already at the end of a cup of coffee, his hands toying with the china on the table, and people's voices, what was wrong? They seemed to clatter in the air. The side of Li Yo-lan's face had the final vestiges of a smirking little smile she couldn't rid herself of. And Wang Cheng-hsiung, a guy he had never managed to get along with at all, was trying to put on the kindest expression as if to make up for him.

His stomach was in an uproar, his throat felt like it had prickles stuck in it, and his face had taken on the gradual but rising effects of burning alcohol. He was not only angry with himself, he was ashamed too. He felt like a girl who had let love show for the first time, and gotten herself pushed away by a cruel lover. The early afternoon sun cast its shadow over the slippery hard surface of the floor. The rays spread out smoothly from his feet, the part above his shoulders concealed in a shadow. He thought of the paths running beside the rice paddies that spring, and of the wild horses kicking up their dust. Again he faced the rising of the sun, and saw the long shadow at his back, and his father's leather shoes. One thing rolls into another, and then it all happens over and over again. You can't get away from it, you can't break free.

"One—all right, turn—bright light—moon—the three—principles of the people. Can you hear it now? Concentrate! It's actually a four beat times two, one heavy, three lights, like the national anthem."

Studying it with minute care, and his father leading him on even more carefully yet, they tapped out the tune with their fingers as they went along. It was as if their hands not only kept time against the arms of the chairs they were sitting in, but were actually concocting that delicate magic in the air, that incredible thing so difficult to achieve between father and son, which the instruction manual termed, "Tenderness easily broken."

A tree takes ten years to grow, and a pair of *mu-ma-huang* trees his father had planted with his own hands now dwarfed the front entrance of the Le House. Still visible however were his banners which proclaimed poetic ideals. Beneath the shade of the trees in front there sat father and son, each on a single great rattan chair. They were listening to Yu Shu- yen's *The Inn*.

He couldn't find any tutoring work that summer vacation, and so he lived at home. But life back home wasn't all so easy. Time dragged; after all, he couldn't study every minute, and his father couldn't spend all his time

collecting garbage, either. The two of them had no way to avoid meeting each other. So what could they do? Study some Peking Opera! He found a way out for himself, and one for his father as well.

"One, two, three, four …" Without even thinking about it, there he was, wagging and bobbing his head with the tune,

Knocking down a drink or two, singing a song
Who knows the length of our days?

*

Yu Shu-yen was gone, and Yuan Shih-hai had his turn on stage. He was such an expert at those complicated and delicate gestures, all the vocal intonations, oh, he was a great one, that frail and fragile old fogy. But the sound of his voice had gotten to sound like a bully.

They mastered about one half of *The Inn,* his father said, but the deepest of its meanings was not something you could rush into. He understood it himself, but naturally finding the words for it was another matter. The trees hummed with the soft music of the cicadas, but they couldn't disguise the fragile nature of those moments. In all of their life together, didn't it only come down to a single fleeting summer?

Singing *Composing a Poem in the Heat of Battle* was so very much more than only getting the words out and swaggering around all puffed up with the role. Tsao-tsao was a crafty schemer, cunningly aggressive, just two steps ahead of the enemy every time in his strategies. The essence of the poem *Tuan-ke hsing* was that even when the words spoke of sorrow and nostalgia, down deep he was full of pride and complacency! The thing was to be faithful to your inner self! When you chanted the verses, the thing to do was to maintain the equilibrium, knowing when to let go, and when to hold your emotions in check. His father fixed his tea cup aright and used its topper to stir the tea leaves. He moved it back and forth, and when he realized his son did not look impatient with him, he took his hands off the cup and continued with his explanation. First he took him through those memorable old peaks and valleys of the Battle at the Red Cliff fought in the era of the Three Kingdoms and then he talked of the brilliant Su Tung-po and his famous essay, *Reflections Beneath the Red Cliff*. It was gradual, this awareness that the boy was not pretending an interest, and so he went on and on and spoke not in mere generalities, but quoted the text line by line.

He was mightily impressed by his father on that day, he was nothing short of hugely magnificent in his eyes. He looked up in fine admiration, and saw that the old man had risen so high that he could hardly catch sight of him.

His father finished his lecture and rearranged his tea paraphernalia. In the end he said,

"That's the way Peking Opera is. The background is all long ago and far away. The essential meanings go all the way down to the bottom. And not only that, do you see, there isn't a single sound that is not also a musical note, or a gesture that isn't part of a dance. So a chapter or an episode, why, you can see it a hundred times and not be bored! Now this local Taiwanese opera is just a bunch of noise, you don't know what the hell they're singing!"

It was as if the local shows were like weeds or worthless flowers in a foreign land, and you might just as well pick up your feet and stomp all over them.

The soft gentle singing of the cicadas, the luxuriant front courtyard. He had an impulse to sing or play a flute. In his whole life he only learned to sing one section of the Peking opera of Tsao-tsao's *Composing a Poem in the Heat of Battle*. But from that moment on he could never get himself to look at a Taiwanese opera again, or hear anyone say a negative word about Peking Opera.

Outside the window there had been an undiluted darkness, but now it seemed to have softened, and you could catch a glimmer of faintly colored sheet-like darkness behind. Perhaps behind that light there was again an incredible darkness.

His mind regained awareness of the plane in motion. But perhaps because he had been gazing at the dark for too long, for some moments he couldn't tell where the plane was headed.

*

The dark sky looked so limpid that it seemed it might never turn solid again. A chemist would term its rate of solubility high, its permeability low. It was like young love—strong and violent up till a certain moment, and then quite ready to spend itself into exhaustion, and slowly die off and diminish. It advanced from all sides and wrapped itself around the essence of every existing thing, and then it grew dim and faded away. It was its fate to embrace the height and depth, the shape and substance of everything that was, as if it were a great round ball. It

would transform itself into still another new force and then would burst forth into the spectacular light of a new day.

As the first rays of the early morning sun poured through the window, Chi Kan-Sheng suddenly became aware that although he and his father had been flying along for a good long time, still they had not quite left the world behind. Not a few people surrounded them, and not a few matters of practical concern still needed to be smoothed away. He didn't want to sleep any longer, just closed his eyes. Realities stood firmly fixed, but the light pouring in offered no guidance for his inner self. It helped him only to see more vividly the turmoil that was closing in from all sides.

He pushed his father along to the French window. The snow that lay on the ground beneath the pale tree branches was scattered and thin. Across the pond of frozen green he saw the shimmering reflection of the sun. A wild duck flew through the air from the opposite shore, and found a slippery landing upon the surface. Its little rear end flipped over backwards, and the two of them laughed. The hour was near sundown, and they were alone, father and son, and suddenly each recognized the singularity of the moment. A chill passed over him.

His father did not have many days left now, and he would come to the hospital to be with him whenever he had the time. He felt his body was there, but his mouth was someplace else. He just could not find the words.

"Ah, ahem … should take this chance, just the two of us here, Chi-sheng. There's something here to, ah, take care of with you."

So finally it was the sick man who took the initiative to break the silence. There was a solemn note in his father's voice, and it made him feel uneasy. The curious look on the face he saw reflecting back in the window made him fidget.

"When I made the arrangements about that piece of land and talked with you about it in that letter, you didn't offer any opinion. Later I found some people who were willing to invest, together we had an apartment building constructed on that piece of land and I got two floors for it. Well, later I sold that off for cash. When all that happened, you were still quiet about the thing. It was a little like you didn't want to get involved. And now the situation, well, now you don't have any choice. I fixed up your name in the paper work, and the legal briefs and my seal are all in my briefcase. Later on now, you just go ahead and take it all out. Whatever you want to do with it, you just go ahead and do it. Well, another way to look at it—that saying, 'With a little thrift comes a little fortune,' that's it. Your old man had a dirty job, but his money ain't dirty."

He moved his eyes from the lake outside the window, and his eyes dropped slightly downward. From the chilly window pane he saw a reflection of his father's face, with that indignant look.

As the sun prepared to drop from the sky in those years, he used to sit at his desk by the window doing his homework, and he'd lift his head and watch his father picking through his trash and separating it with meticulous care. He saw him weigh it up into two kilo stacks, and then saw how he threw himself into a ritual of shining and polishing and polishing and shining. If somebody had only given him a scale, he would have looked like a merchant fussing over precious jewels. He had two storage containers for his trash, and inside them he stored everything devotedly away. Every few days he would drag his treasures out and sell them to this or that specialist.

A few years passed, their life improved, and he began to hear people in that military compound connect his father's name to the Chiu-chiang River area back in mainland China.

"That Old Chiu-chiang," they said, "he's one sharp old geezer."

Wu-ho was such a tiny little place, and here his father had found more celebrity in a famous nearby city Chiu-chiang. His classmates from the nearby towns would josh him in Taiwanese dialect,

"Hey Le, your old man picking up hunks of gold or something?"

Indeed, when he took another look at the way the whites of his eyes flashed against the dark of his face, something whispered to the boy that his small fortune wasn't coming from thrift alone.

His father never let him do anything to help, just passed on to him all the pocket money he needed. At school he was acutely sensitive to other people's reactions, especially the sympathy given him by teachers aware of his family background. But he had far and away more money for personal spending than anyone around him. His comfort and his shame both sprang from the same well, and it was impossible to keep the two apart. It was only after he went abroad to study, only after he was established with a home and career that he could get his mind off that well.

Over a ten year span, he went back only twice. He felt his status as a guest much more deeply on the second trip. "The Tall House" had become a ten story apartment building. There were four families to a floor, and his father had two floors of his own. He lived in the middle unit. The front entrance belonged to everybody in the place, so his father had lost the privilege of posting banners of Chinese New Year Blessings over the doorways.

The capital coming in from garbage collecting had come to an end long before, and his father's financial situation had sky rocketed.

The whole piece of land had originally been public property. But by squatter's right, his father claimed it as his private estate. And after long years of fight and squabbles private estate. And after long years of fights and squabbles with the authorities, he won. It turned out that "this place" may never be like the old country, but it wasn't too hard for him to build himself a career of sorts here. As the Chinese call the shrewd people of Chiu-chiang, the old man was one sharp old geezer, all right.

Actually everything was quite perfect. The neighbors and friends treated him well, they were all model hosts. But still he felt like an interloper. He couldn't lay a finger on anything, or say a single word that didn't leave him feeling he'd somehow broken a taboo. His father was like a spoiled guest who enjoyed every scrap of profit he could glean from excessive hospitality lavished on him for a good long time by his kind host. And he in turn was his father's guest. Although neither had anything to complain about, in the end both sensed a certain desolation they could not put a name to. The father became an uprooted guest of honor for life, and he inherited the hospitality. It was all predestined.

And so the moment arrived. Before his father passed on, there was a farewell gift he wanted to offer him. He felt it made no sense for him to accept it, and yet he could not summon the courage to say no either. And so here he was, making this journey long and arduous, to receive something his father wanted him to accept.

"Just take it with a smile," as the Chinese often put it when urging someone to accept a gift. But how can he smile? It was such an absurd joke that he wanted to laugh. But at that moment all he could do was close his eyes and quietly chuckle to himself, for the darkness that had offered him comfort and protection was already gone.

3

He made his way slowly toward the door of the plane. Losing sleep was not a new experience for him, but lying there all cramped up, and then unfolding his body and forcing it to walk again accentuated his exhaustion. Between the cumbersome overnight bag draped over his right shoulder, which shifted and tossed with every step, and the urn of ashes in his hands, which required careful and respectful vigilance, he felt like a clumsy country bumpkin on a pilgrimage to the Holy Mountain. His father was his father, and after dying, still a burden on his hands. He thought about it dimly, and a sudden surge of nausea rose inside him, and with it, a hunger pang. Then it seemed to not be that either, but only a pit of anxiety he didn't want to think about.

"I can make a decision about it after I reach Tokyo."

Before he stepped out the door, that is, what he said to Yuan- lin. It was a moment that made them break out in laughter, because they both knew he was the sort of man who dreaded making decisions. And there he was. In Tokyo. Should he head west? Or go south? He had no idea.

"Dad let you talk him into it. He really wants to go to Wu-ho and take a look around."

"You'd better think about what's best though. I think he got used to living in Taiwan," she blurted out. "And going back, he'll be disappointed for sure. And there's no way he can stay there."

"It was you who kept talking all the time about how fabulous the old country was, how great and terrific it was, blah, blah, blah. And now that you've got him all worked up about it, you sing a different song. Well, you change his mind!"

"Oh, he is an old man now. I was just trying to cheer him up! He kept criticizing Taiwan up and down the floor —the economy was all twisted out of shape, no more standards in society, they were all a gang of crooks, that kind of talk. All right, so I did glorify it a little for him. I told him the old country was the Taj Mahal, the Golden Paradise, okay, okay. Let him keep his dream."

He was long accustomed to her sharp tongue, but every time she pushed her words all over the place like that, it still caught him off guard.

"I must say you have been very successful. He hasn't been only cheered up. Now he wants to consign his ashes. He says that he was young when he left, and now he'd be old going back, and who would know him in Wu-ho anyway? If he went back, the thing he'd have to do is find a grave site, and then when the time comes, he could lay himself at rest, kind of, well, return to his roots."

He used the cap of his cup and stirred the floating tea leaves. He stopped abruptly, lifted the cup for a sip. Recently he had discovered he had taken on more and more of the mannerisms of his father.

"Influence, influence. It was like a shadow following his shadow, an echo to his voice." His father pursing his lips at the taste of the tea, and then leading him ploddingly through another explanation of poetry, punctuating his

sentences with the topper from his tea mug. The two of them fused together in a single silhouette beneath the light of the lamp. How marvelous the term of influence was coined.

"It's something you'd better mull over slowly."

Yuan- lin was speaking in that Peking accent of hers. She paused and sat beside him. He could tell from the way she talked that she was trying to be patient.

"Those people over there don't care much about these spiritual notions. They look at the dead differently. When I was in Chiang-hsi, when people died, they were just pulled outdoors and thrown any old place. We'd be out doing our things, and we'd see the bones and whatever, and nobody thought much about it. If he went back and spent money on a grave, well, maybe it would be different. But the first thing is there'd be no one he could count on to manage these arrangements, and secondly, you can't be going back there all the time yourself. Who knows who would take care of it in the future? That's just the simple truth, you know. The best thing is for you to find some way to sit down and talk it out with him."

Well, "finding some way to sit down and talk" was no easy matter. He might get started all right, but hitting upon the right words was beyond him. But soon enough Yuan-lin herself managed to finagle an opportunity to do it. He was appreciative, and then afterwards, he felt guilty because his father stopped his glowing remarks about the old country. Besides that, he became more aloof towards her. From that time till the very end, his father never once raised again the question of going back to where he had come from.

It was as if he realized that there was no way for him to fight what was told him. And for things not told, he had no decision in the matter.

Just off the plane, he was making his way along in the exit chute, heading toward the stewardesses, who were dispensing the ritual good-byes to the passengers. His one hand cradled the urn of ashes, and the other poised itself to ward off the swirl of people around him. All of a sudden he sensed the strap of the carry-on bag catch up against someone's passing coat sleeve. He couldn't quite shoot his hand upward quickly enough to steady it, and for a fleeting split second there was panic all around. The young woman in front of him caught a quick glimpse and hurriedly stepped closer, thinking she could grab it for him. But her desperate lunge threw him all the more off balance, and heightened a palpable sense of crisis in the air. It was too late—the precious treasure had already been pushed into someone else's hands, and he sensed keenly that for someone else to touch such an object was grossly improper. He wanted to take it back, but somebody else was holding it now. The moment passed, and he felt more lost than ever. Simply put, it was a disaster.

The urn fell on the ground and was broken.

*

Chi Kan-sheng sat alone in the reception room with the package wrapped in golden paper before him on an end table. When he thought of how respectful and dignified it had looked when he began, and when now he looked at its torn and battered condition, he wondered how he would ever be able to raise his head again, so great was his shame. All the requisites of propriety, of decency, respectability, of filiality itself—all of that was broken now, and gone forever.

He leaned closer to the tea table. He placed his hand on the package. He couldn't fathom why it gave him such an uneasy feeling. He let the question roll around in his head, and then rose to his feet. He brushed out the wrinkles of his coat and solemnly bowed his head, as was customary in ceremonies of final respect. Then it occurred to him that as a matter of fact he hadn't done anything wrong. He stepped closer. Hadn't he taken great pains with every last detail, wrapping it with great care for the long journey, tying as securely as possible all those ribbon-like pieces of twine? Just now he had unloosened the knots. It caught a person by surprise, the way the shards of wrapping fell back and unfolded like petals of a wondrous yellow flower.

He examined the broken fragments. Though it was in five or six pieces, the urn had more or less regained its original shape. The powdery white ashes were still a shock, and when he observed the tiny flakes of black in their midst, he supposed it was his hair. When you're alive, it doesn't matter much if you've got a lot of it, or only a little. But after you die, it becomes something rather marvelous, doesn't it? It adds a rather pleasant mix to the pure white of the ashes. The softly resplendent strips and ribbons of wrapping paper embraced the urn and fell back upon themselves gracefully, as if leaping up in undulating waves. And in the bottom right corner there gently nestled several pieces of emerald green porcelain. It was like gazing at a magnificent creation of a master artist, a painting with every stroke the epitome of delicacy and harmony. Such was the impression given by the edges of the shattered porcelain that reflected back at him in the light. The pure white ashes formed a heart at the center of the setting, and made the deep green appear to glisten.

He leaned forward and gazed even more intently. He got closer and closer, pouring all his heart and mind into

it. Finally he reached forward and gently stirred the powder with the tip of his finger, as if he might unearth a clue to the mystery buried there.

He had no memories of his father taking him by the hand when he was young, and the truth was that once he had grown up, father and son had never touched one another. Even eye contact was difficult for them. Once the funeral ceremony was over with, it had dawned on him that the only truly incisive impression he had of his father's physical self was that unusually dark skin of his, and the equally extraordinary whites of his eyes. Now that he dared to face his father unflinchingly, to take his full measure as it were, the fact was that the only thing he could picture were those two colors of black and white. Suddenly tear drops fell; they rolled straight down his cheek into the white and the black resting amid the scraps of yellow paper. The tear drops formed a ring that spread rapidly, becoming in an instant larger than the black and white powder.

He embraced the urn from the corner of his eye, more convinced than ever that he could consign the ashes back to the universe, and in so doing release both the dead and the living.

There was a knock at the door. A woman stepped in, accompanied by a middle aged man in a handsome suit. He saw it was the woman named Jui, the one who said the accident with the urn was all her fault. When the two of them saw the porcelain vase now completely unveiled, they at first steeled themselves for his anger. A glance told him they were terribly anxious, just positively withering in embarrassment. In an instant Miss Jui was crying so pitifully she couldn't even speak.

He was almost beside himself with discomfort for them. Why should she take it so seriously, trouble herself so? He was about to blurt out, "Oh you know how accidents can't be avoided, please don't think anything of it," when he realized for a son to even contemplate such words was simply absurd. He didn't know why it had to always be this way, that regardless of time or place, he was doomed to never do the old man right. And just thinking of it in those terms and in the present circumstances made it all the more ridiculous. Was his father supposed to take responsibility for this failure of a son even after he was dead and gone?

Then his thoughts spun off into another direction. Added to his distress was a sense of cavernous shame, making it all the harder for him to find a way out of it. He pictured himself as a prisoner unable to tolerate more torture. He would rather fall dead at that very moment, or just pass out and then regain consciousness, minus an arm or leg if necessary. At least then he'd be beyond this.

This gentleman was an executive. He fumbled for words, kept stuttering all over the place trying to be polite, and he hardly heard a word of it. Looking quite at the end of his rope, the fellow said that time hadn't let him procure the right sort of vase to offer in exchange, and he didn't know if perhaps he could ever find it in his heart to forgive them? With the words still hanging in the air, he reached into a bag and drew out an urn quite similar in color to the original one, but a fair bit smaller. It was only after he pulled out still a second porcelain jar of the same type that he fully grasped his meaning.

His silence put unnamable pressure on the man, who dropped his head in a gesture of helpless embarrassment, and not until he summoned the courage to lift his eyes, that he noted a friendly face looking back at him. He paid no attention to his discomfort, but simply said quietly he was happy to accept this form of compensation. Then he politely voiced a request. He had just made a decision to go on to the China mainland after a week in Taiwan, and he wondered if they might be able to help him with the travel arrangements.

After they left the room, he sat down alone again before the table.

The human mind is a very complicated thing. You give free rein to a single nuance of an idea, and it may spin into a thousand orbits. You'll never drag it back down again. And if you manage to trace a path back to the very first trickling of it all, what you find is: it makes no sense.

Carefully he scooped up a small amount of the ashes in his hands and brought them over to the open rim of one of the urns. He held his palms upward, and let the powder drop gently between his fingers, as if it were sand flowing into an hour glass. The soft flakes fell to the bottom without a whisper, like seconds slipping away in time, melting into the long river of eternity. The lamp light sent its rays downward to embrace the oval inside his hands, caressing a shadow there. He pictured the scene below as a delicate waterfall, and a fleck or two of ash brushed across his chest. A human life cannot be called brief, but all that's left at the end, in a few handfuls, can be sent dropping into two very even paragraphs.

He stared dumbly at the pair of urns and marveled at nature's truths. The bones and limbs of a body will not be pushed about here and there, but after death, they disintegrate and blend together, and the one becomes the other. That was how it was. His father had often remarked, "Spirit gives breath to the soul; the soul gives shape to the spirit."

Now the breath is extinguished, and the bones, reduced to powder, will find a final resting place on both sides

of the Taiwan Straits. Freed at last, one half of his ashes will journey back to the land of his dreams, and the other half will stay in the beautiful island, Formosa. Those thoughts of the old land over the course of forty years belong now to the universe. No more cares, no more worries.

But for himself, before him he saw nowhere to go, and behind him he could find no road leading to where he stood. Though blessed with fullness of body and breath, what was the good of it! Oh, what was the good of it!

151.36 The Get-Together\fn{by Gan Tiesheng (1946-)} Peking?, China (M) 5

With the passing of the autumnal equinox, it was by turns rainy and cold. The potatoes were harvested from the fields. The big green grasshoppers, whose clacking noises are only heard in autumn, had soared up from the fields and glided down again. Another year was just about over.

It was at this time that I got a letter from her, sent to the little mountain village where I was team-hitching.\fn{Sent ("hitched onto") a rural productation team.}

September, 1975

Xiong Chang:

Do come to our village. On the last day of September, we are planning a jolly get-together. Banish all unhappy thoughts, and come.

I miss you.

Qiuxia

I did not write back. I even repressed all thoughts of her so as to make the coming meeting more "delicious." It wasn't easy! After all, my classmates—my fellow team-hitchers—had all dispersed, leaving me all alone. I had hoped to enter the university this year, but had once again been eliminated owing to problems with my family background. Then my bunch of egg-laying hens caught the chicken pest and died off one after the other; only my big strong rooster survived, but his characteristic clarion call was reduced to a pathetic croak. When the autumn wind blew, and the leaves scuttled, he would awaken from his lethargy and charge about panic-stricken in search of his mates. That woeful sound was enough to make one weep. . . .

I was enduring, desperately holding out—I did not write or think about her.

At last, the last day of September arrived! I was sure that she would be waiting for me at the gate of the compound. Why not? For one thing, she loved me. For another, of the thirty-odd team-hitching youth, only five or six remained, and half of them were permanently absent in Beijing while another two just roamed about. A couple of girls were all that were left in the once bustling compound! Thirdly, she had also failed to make it in to the university. In a word, our situations were too identical!

And yet, all there was to greet me at the gate were bunches of weeds, blowing in the wind. From within came frolicking noises! I walked through the doorway and was struck dumb: a girl dressed in a pink sweater was shrieking with laughter, stuffing a handful of chicken feathers into the mouth of a young fellow who had fallen on the grass. The fellow kept rolling to get away, while seven or eight young people looked on, clapping and hollering and laughing.

The girl caught sight of me. She walked over to me, wiping away her tears of laughter, and said:

"Oh, he is here. What is this? You didn't bring a thing? Come here to scrounge for food, have you? Off with you! Go get some wine!"

It was she—Qiuxia! Tiny teardrops still clung to her long eyelashes.

"I am not going!" I said laughing, but hating her a little inside.

"In that case, I shall have to dispense with courtesy!" she said in her loud, clear voice to those around, beckoning them with a waving handful of feathers.

The crowd closed in on me, rubbing their hands and rolling up their sleeves. Ah ha! They were the "long departed." They were the heroes "of great renown" in our county: Huo Bo, nicknamed Niuer,\fn{Second Ox.} had once carted off all the old belongings left behind by educated youth who had left the village, and auctioned them off in front of the County Educated Youth Office! Tall Wang Cheng once shook the county by traveling all around the country without a penny to his name! The two girls—Xiao Xiu and Xiao Lan—even the person least familiar with them could tell you ten exploits of each! The others—chess champion Wang Guoxiang and Yao Ben the tailor—now they could pass for the well-behaved …

"Oh, haven't seen you for ages! The absolute dregs have surfaced; the bottom of the barrel has been scraped!" I clasped my hands in greeting to all.

The pink woolen shirt flashed, and Qiuxia was at my side.

"You spoilsport! I am telling you, if you break the taboo again, I'll throw you out!"

The rowdy crowd gathered around, but with a haughty wave of her hand Qiuxia stopped them all. She dragged me away from the crowd and said in a low voice:

"The few remaining hitchers in the county are all extremely sensitive. It is best not to touch on issues concerning our situation. We badly need some fun!"

The kitchen was filled with the aroma of meat. She pointed at the wok big enough to cook a meal for thirty, and said:

"Ten chickens—how about it? You've never treated yourself this way?"

I was suddenly overwhelmed with tenderness. I wanted to have a few private words with her. But that rowdy Niuer came into the room, followed by Guoxiang and Wang Cheng. They stuck next to the chicken pot, as if the soup had cast a spell over them.

"Shall I get wine to go with this?" Reluctantly, I grabbed a five-catty jug.

"Bring some money."

We went into her dormitory. She gave me a furtive glance as she pulled money from under her pillow.

"You must have noticed! Let's not be so intimate …"

"Come on, what does it matter?" I protested.

"Of course it matters!"

"What?"

"People will be jealous, or it will trigger old memories … you understand? Let us have a happy get-together, to wash off the unpleasant—"

"It can't be washed away, nor is there any need to! You show such Buddha-like compassion for the others, but who cares about us?"

I grabbed the outstretched hand that was giving me the money, and conveniently pulled her onto my lap. Like an agitated cat, she darted away, and said with annoyance,

"How can you be so insensitive! Selfish devil!"

The door shut. Then I heard her laughter in the crowd. Anyway, I could not get excited anymore.

I had to admit that using a plastic sheet to cover bed boards for a table was quite a sophisticated idea. Yet I yawned. My gaze listlessly rested on the bowl of wine. I took a mouthful, and it was as if I had swallowed a hot, stinging little dragon. Wine, sweet potato wine—light purple—never had I tasted such stuff in Beijing. It was really strong! Who had covered the lamp shade with a piece of green gauze, saying that it signified freedom and joy? What a fantasy! I suppose I was still all right. The green gauze reflected in the wine was like water weeds, floating, floating—so much like water tinted red by the setting sun!

It reminded me of the reservoir near their village. There, Qiuxia and I had swum … the green algae getting tangled up with my legs—how awful. And what about the shallow banks? Stepping on that soft, sticky warm mud. Bah, that sickening feeling was so much like this "feast." I turned up the volume of the radio at the head of the bed to its loudest. Li Yuhe was singing

… lofty aspirations and great ideals are surging high …

I changed the channel—it was *Long Jiang Xiong*. There, the debate was heated over the issue of "sacrificing the pawn to save the chariot."\fn{\fn{Pieces in a Chinese chess game.} Another channel. Oh, finally, there was a voice:

… Confucianism … Confucian scholar … Old Man Kong … Capitalist roaders …

My head swam. I was just about to block my ears when Xiao Xiu screamed angrily:

"Can't you shut that off?!"

"Spare us!" the gang yelled at me. I wanted to enjoy myself too. I turned the radio off.

"Ahh …" I yawned again.

"Six six six wa!"

"Three horses ah!"

"Five bright heads ya!"\fn{Chinese drinking game.}

"Hey, we are happy, right!"

"Cheers!"

The room was filled with smoke. Someone tired of drinking. A match was struck—the wine was lit. The light blue flame caused a wave of exclamations. The bowl cracked. Blue flame raced along the table. Confusion. Suddenly everyone became a firefighter. Xiao Lan leaned her head against Wang Cheng's shoulder and said in an affectedly delicate tone:

"Oh, I am fainting …"

Qiuxia's pink figure flashed around.

"Eat, do eat." She served food to one. "Drink, do drink." She poured wine for another. "Don't be in a daze, be merry!" she whispered to chess champion Wang Guoxiang in a soft voice. And so Guoxiang woke up with a start, shouting:

"Cheers! How come I blanked out?" Thanks to her efforts, witty conversation,\fn{The text has: *conservation*.} humorous stories, and hilarious gossip, the party livened up again. But who was quietly sighing,

"Every festival day, you miss your dear ones even more."

No matter how carefully the voice dodged the crowd, the sadness and anxiety somehow crept into everybody's eyes. And so again the pink flash of a figure moved around again. She narrowed her eyes into a smile, shook her head, and said with sympathy in her voice:

"Drink, drink, eat! Let's play the drinking game! Niuer, do start!"

She was attentive to everyone but me. Pouring wine and serving food, she walked past me as if I were not there. I could not tolerate it any longer. Quietly I stood up, quietly I pulled open the door, and quietly I slipped outside. Gazing into the dark blue evening, I had the urge to shout songs to the stars! But I could only take a few deep breaths of the clear, cold air.

Suddenly, the door opened. Judging from the breathing and those familiar steps, I knew that Qiuxia was standing right behind me.

"Don't you feel that what you are shouldering is too heavy?" I asked. "How could you think up such a cruel game? You are urging the prisoners to dance by cracking a whip!"

"Nobody thinks of it the way you do," she said in a low voice.

"I cannot tolerate … all this," I said.

We were silent. There was the sound of autumn insects weeping in solitude.

"You should tolerate it. You should help me." Her tone carried a note of sad pleading.

"I … want to return to my village."

She did not say anything. A moment later, I could tell that she was heading toward the door.

"Qiuxia!" I turned, and dashed to her side. "Let's join each other! I shall come to your village, or you come to ours."

She was undecided.

"Then we would have to go through so much—start a new network of personal relationships, give dinners, hand out gifts …\fn{All of which would have to be done in order to facilitate getting officiasl permission for a transfer.} You know, I am so fed up with all of that … though it is awfully lonely here." She coughed. "Why bring that up again? Let's not talk about this, at least no tonight. Do come in."

"Then I shall go," I stubbornly insisted.

In the moonlight, she stared severely, straight into my eyes. Then she determinedly pulled open the door and went inside. I had gone beyond the door of the compound, but I returned. Inside, Qiuxia was vigorously beating the table with a chicken claw.

"Quiet! Quiet! I propose that each of us tell about the happiest thing that has happened in his life. Nobody is spared! If it is good, we will give three toasts; if not the person must empty six cups!"

The atmosphere in the house suddenly became like an examination hall—nervous, solemn, quiet.

Xiao Lan's eyes sparkled with a glowing memory. When asked to speak, she declined, saying:

"Happiness can't be spoken of."

Guoxiang was picking his brain to decide on the best of numerous happy incidents. After much hesitation, he gestured, smiled, and said:

"Nothing could be more exciting than knocking the loser's head after a game of chess—thump, thump, thump —all it takes is three knocks to make a huge bump on the head."

Niuer, the fellow who did not care much about anything, talked about a romance he'd had when he was twenty, acting out the affectionate gaze and smile of the girl in his memory. One didn't know whether to laugh or cry at this kind of acting. Watching his strange act, and the premature wrinkles on that thin, dark face, I could not help but shiver.

"Where is she now?" Qiuxia was always so concerned about others. Niuer's face was twisted. He stared at tailor Yao Ben, and in a muddled voice said:

"Where? It … doesn't matter. Some people don't even have as much as this memory!" Yao Ben hastily held up the bowl of wine.

"Oh … I have lived for a quarter of a century. 'Sewing wedding clothes for others' is my pleasure. Forget it, I have nothing interesting to say." He gulped down two mouthfuls, and began to retaliate:

"However, I do want to hear about present happiness. Niuer, when you were auctioning off others' leftovers in the county, your heart must have been—"

"You broke the taboo!"

Qiuxia interrupted Yao Ben with a bang on the table. This, however, did not stop the onset of silence. Obviously, it was again Qiuxia who, afraid that this mood would spread, blurted out in a loud, incongruous voice:

"All right, I shall talk about present happiness! You all know that I love to read at the dam of the reservoir. Several days ago, I was reading alone on the dam. I discovered a squirrel-like animal climbing skillfully on the dam wall, just like Pidefu\fn{A famous acrobat.} speeding on his motorcycle. I stared at it blankly, because it reminded me of life: if you are not skillful, you will drown, fall to your death. Suddenly I heard loud shouts: 'Miss, miss—' I lifted my head, it was the old fellow who was tending sheep over the hill. Shouting, he ran over desperately: 'Miss, miss—' 'What is it?' I asked. Panting, he said: 'Miss, miss … I heard that on the plain a girl hitcher drowned herself in a well … I, I wanted to mention this to you … She was so foolish, so young to take her own life …' I suddenly realized he was afraid that I was going to jump! Instantly, my heart swelled with emotion, that during such a desolate autumn there could be a stranger who cared about me."

Silence. Nobody said a word. I stared at her intensely, my temples throbbing. Qiuxia took a cigarette, but before lighting it she suddenly spat it on the ground, yelling,

"Damn! I broke the taboo! I shall drink six cups!" She scooped up the wine cups, filling one after another, and then drank each down in one gulp.

"Are you out of your mind?" I went forward and snatched the cup away.

"You'd better stay away from me!"

Without looking at me, she grabbed the cup again. I was embarrassed. But I still tried to take her cup away.

"What do you think you are doing?!" She glared at me.

"I shall drink for you!"

"Can happiness be substituted? Young man, be prepared to talk about your own happiness! Nobody can substitute for anyone else! Right?" She turned and asked the others loudly. She was getting drunk.

"Certainly."

"The role of the sorrowful ghost fits him well."

"Drink to get drunk!"

"It is not your turn yet to be chivalrous."

"Who needs you to help drink the stuff!"

"Make him talk!"

I was anxious. I did feel that I could help her! No, I was not going to talk! I did not have anything I felt happy about! I refused to beat my face until it was swollen to look plump! I did not want to lash out under the pretense of drunkenness! I … I was just going to yell when I caught sight of Qiuxia's face deliberately hidden behind the wine cup to block it from the others' line of vision. The look she gave me was so full of pleading, so full of painful patience, of a pure, self-sacrificing glow. She was asking for help from me with her eyes! I would be together with her, and shoulder the responsibility for generating fun!

But with this kind of party, what could I do? I returned to my seat, downcast. Time dragged on this way to a tasteless end, like that green light filling the whole room. The feast was dying down; the wine was nearly exhausted. Qiuxia looked miserable. She realized that her efforts had been wasted; she was disappointed, sad. When Niuer grabbed the last piece of chicken breast, I said,

"Wait!"

"What for?"

"See how much wine is left?"

Niuer emptied the wine jug—exactly a full bowl!

"The chicken breast belongs to whoever gulps down this bowl!" I said

"Is this shriveled piece of breast worth a week's headache? You don't even know how to bet!"

Sure enough, nobody took the bowl of wine.

"Didn't you want to get drunk anyway?" I teased Niuer. "'A thousand glasses are not enough for bosom friends.' That is an old saying. Somehow it does have a point." Niuer glanced at Qiuxia.

"Man is solid; fire, insubstantial. To put up a front, to create an atmosphere artificially, is self-defeating—"

"Bet! Let's bet!" Abruptly, I interrupted Niuer, "Whoever empties this bowl in one gulp, I … I will help him transfer back to Beijing!"

The room was silent for a moment. Then they clamored:

"Ha, what big talk!"

"Bragging isn't taxed!"

"Having a fantasy, are you?" Obviously, they did not believe my words.

"It is true. I bribed a channel. The people promised to arrange it all. I will let whoever drinks this bowl of wine have my chance. What about it? Nobody dares to take me on? I'll count to five: one, two, three"—I raised my voice, pretending to be resolute—"a chance missed, and that's it! Four—"

"Wait!"

Niuer rushed forward.

"He is finally speaking the truth after a few drinks—I shall drink it! It would be great to be able to drink heartily and then be transferred back to Beijing! Only a fool would not do it!"

"But there is one condition. There," I lifted the grate on the windowsill, "take this to the graveyard, straight inside, and put it on the tenth grave. If I don't help you transfer to Beijing, you can lynch me!" Niuer made a face, and to the others said,

"This bet of his is really weird! Let me tell you, this bet goes beyond the limit. There won't be anyone—"

Abruptly, Qiuxia pushed Niuer aside, and with a solemn air lifted the bowl, took a deep breath, and let the wine gush down her throat. She boldly flashed the bottom of the bowl, wiped her mouth, and, amidst cheers, grabbed the grate, pretending to balance herself without much effort, and walked out of the house:

"Wait till I come back before you take a torch to look for this—this … gra—grate …"

The crowd that remained, barely suppressing its laughter and curiosity, stealthily followed her. I took Niuer into the shadows, and spoke a few words to him. He then announced to the others:

"The compound is empty—1 shall stay and watch." He left.

A village night. The moon was so desolate. The rustling wind accompanied distant barking. Qiuxia dragged a long shadow with her, humming some tunes to keep up her courage and occasionally burping. She walked through a patch of melons, wound her way around a wheat field, jumped over a ditch. Beyond was the graveyard.

She leaned against an old willow tree at the edge of the graveyard, looked back at the road she had taken, gave a long sigh, and headed on.

An owl suddenly cried—it sounded like a child. The crowd that had scattered to hide now quickly came together. It was so creepy: the swaying tree shadows over the graves, the flashing light on the tombstones, a moist rotten smell, made everyone hear his pulse throb.

Suddenly, big Wang Cheng and Yao Ben yelled; Xiao Xiu and Xiao Lan covered their faces and fell paralyzed to the ground. A strange white figure sprang out from the dark graveyard and lightly and noiselessly danced around! Qiuxia made a startled noise and turned around to run. Instead, she stumbled headfirst into the ditch that went through the graveyard. The strange creature took a few leaps to the edge of the ditch, and cried with a hoarse voice:

Cats and rabbits are dancing together,
They step one, two, one.
Cats and rabbits are dancing together,
They step one, two, one.

I rushed over and pulled off the white bedsheet:

"Enough! Niuer!"

Niuer howled with laughter: "Marvelous! Absolutely marvelous! Dear fellow, incredible! You are now spared from the crime of lying!"

I pulled Qiuxia from the ditch.

"*Ai*, I am scared to death. I am really scared to death!" Devastated, she fell weakly into my lap.

I half carried her toward the house. The crowd gathered around Niuer, who was choking with laughter and giving an account of his stirring game.

Suddenly Qiuxia started to vomit. I stroked her back. Finally, she let out a few miserable cries and quietly wept. But immediately she restrained herself, only to lift her head up weakly, looking for the moonlight. Tears flowed silently down her cheeks. I said,

"You must feel wretched. Let it all out. You will feel better afterwards." But she shook her head, straining her neck to look back at the excited, chattering crowd.

"They were all, all very happy, weren't they?"she asked.

"No, more than that! Simply exhilarated!" I said with annoyance. I refused to turn my head to look at them.

"Cold, I am cold. I am really cold …" She folded her arms around her trembling shoulders.

My heart tightened, and an immense sadness surged up in me. I hastily took hold of my jacket—but a sweater had been thrown around Qiuxia, followed by a patched blue jacket, and then a third … They had quietly gathered With a calm look that covered her misery and anxiety, Qiuxia gazed into Xiao Lan's frightened eyes:

"I am not cold … really! Now, now … you … you, you had fun, right?"

She tried to act composed, struggling to pull the clothes from her body to return to them, but her trembling hand only clutched her own pigtail. Xiao Xiu rushed into Qiuxia's lap with a loud wail and broke down crying. Then they wept together. Niuer sank heavily onto the ground and punched his own head. Then he fiercely tore at his hair. Big Wang Cheng leaned his face on the rough old bark of the willow. I slowly lifted my head. The moon, through my tear-filled eyes, was a ball of angry fire …

*

Soon enough, another September arrived. We gathered together again, not at their compound but on the hill near our village. It was drizzling that day. Xiao Lan and I stood before the newly planted willow-staring at her grave. She had died. She had been alone, reading on the dam, and somehow had fallen and drowned. I buried her there. I tied some wild autumn flowers into a bundle, and placed it in front of her grave. The colorful flowers were covered with rain, like tears, like mourning. Xiao Lan looked at the soaked tombstone and over and over said:

"It will pass, everything will pass eventually, but nothing will be forgotten!"

Through the misty ranges of Taihang Mountain in the distant horizon, in the rustling autumn chill, a tint of light blue suggesting a gleam of hope stretched over the peak of the hills.

"It will pass! Over there it is already clear. Can it be far from here?" I said.

Xiao Lan gave me a silent glance. She did not say anything, but with sincere yearning she watched the patch of blue with its suggestion of hope.

That was the last day of September, 1976—only a few days before the fall of those four historic criminals.\fn{Jiang Qing (1912-   ), a one-time actress and the third wife (from 1939) and widow of Mao Tse-tung (1893-1976), and Zjamg Chunjao, Wang Hungwen and Yao Wenyuan; all of them sincere believers in Perpetual Revolution, who attempted to seize power upon Mao's death and were arrested and thrown into prison within a month of that event.}

181.8 Autobiographical Statement\fn{by Gena Chen (1946-   )} Hangzhou, Zhejiang Province, China (F) 5

I was born in Hongzhou, China, on January 3, 1946. When I was six months old, my parents, who both went to music school (my father was a violinist and my mother a soprano), went to Taiwan to look for jobs and never had a chance to go back. That was how we stayed in Taiwan, even though that was in 1946, three years before the Communist takeover in 1949.

My father got a job in Taipei Symphony Orchestra and my mother taught music at a high school. They liked their jobs and settled down. Why did they choose Taiwan over other places? I thirik one of their professors went to Taiwan and recommended they go there.

My paternal grandfather, Chen Shizhe, was born in 1891 in Nanan County, Fujian. He was a revolutionary and joined Sun Yat-sen's 1911 Revolution. He was very well-liked by the1ocal people. In 1925, he was arrested and executed by a Chinese warlord. My father, who was then five, and his sister, who was eight, were raised by their mother alone. After my grandfather died, people in his county erected a big monument commemorating him for what he did for the area. During the Communist regime, the whole monument was knocked down.

In 1989, my aunt, my father and some relatives made the government donate some money to rebuilt the monument. When the new monument was erected, it was a big event, a big celebration, and a book was written about my grandfather.

My maternal grandfather, Xie Touba, was an artist. He was born in 1902 in Xiamen, Fujian. He was fond of drawing at an early age. In 1919, he went to Philippines, studying fine arts at Philippine University. He graduated in 1925 but continued to study painting at Philippine University. During the afternoons and evenings, he taught at

a local Chinese school. In 1928, he was sponsored by his cousin who resided in Vietnam to go to France to study western painting. He enrolled in a fine arts college and graduated in 1934. It was very unusual that he went to Paris for ten years when he had family in China.

Then he returned to China, taught at Fine Arts Academy of Xiamen, Fujian Normal School, National Academy of Fine Arts at Hongzhou, and Fujian Normal University. He served as dean of Hongzhou Yizhuan.\fn{National Academy of Fine Arts of Hongzhou} He passed away just two years ago. I have a large scroll that was presented to him by one of his students at his ninetieth birthday celebration. People say "Bei Xu Nan Xie." Xu is Xu Beihong (a famous painter of Chinese style); Xie is Xie Touba. He had many students who guided the art world in China. I also have a painting, which I have had for over ten years, created and sent to me by one of his students who went to Taiwan. When we moved to St. Louis, we hung it up in our home.

My father, Chen Dunchu, was born on November 20, 1920, in Fujian. He graduated from National Fujian Music Academy in 1940, specializing in violin. My mother, Xie Xueru, was born on May 22,1926, in Hongzhou. She also studied at Fujian Yizhuan.\fn{Fujian Academy of Arts}

In the 1950s, even though Taiwan was not very prosperous, we did not feel poor. We had all we needed. We had two servants who were from the countryside, one taking care of the kids, the other doing household chores. It was quite common for people to have servants. My father worked at the Taipei Symphony Orchestra as a violinist. He later became concert-master and conductor. Later, he did not want to conduct, and so he became manager for the Taipei Symphony Orchestra for many years. He did many things for the orchestra, one example being the Taipei Music Festival. It was very successful.

President Li Denghui was Taipei's mayor at the time. President Li was a very serious classical music lover. One of the things they did during the Taipei Music Festival, rather than traditional concerts, was that they promoted a lot of traditional Chinese music, and folk Taipei music and opera. At the festival, President Li translated for Faust (the German Chancellor) a huge work from Chinese to German. His German must have been excellent in that he could translate the whole opera into German. President Li had his early education in Japan, and it was probably there that he learned German.

I have four siblings, and I am the oldest. Next comes my brother, Chen Langu, born in 1950. He is four years younger than me. I have two sisters: Chen Hongqi born in 1954, and Chen Baiqi born in 1956. We all work in the music world. My brother is a violinist, educated at Yale and Columbia University. Both of my sisters are cellists. One also graduated from Yale, the other from the Music School Of New York.

In the last generation, children did not have a choice to do what they wanted to. They all listened to their parents. That was what happened to us; our parents made the career choice for us. At least I know my parents made the choice for me and I like it very much—I do not know about my siblings. Between my siblings we have a large age gap. When I came to the United States, my brother and my two sisters were very small. My brother and I are five years apart, and my brother and other sisters are another five years apart. I came here when I was seventeen. Therefore, I do not know if they fell into music willingly or not. However, they are all doing very well.

My brother just came back from Beijing. The first time he was there, he could only stay for two days to give a lecture. Some of my mother's teachers had retired from Beijing Yinyue Xueyuan.\fn{Beijing Music Academy} but he met some of my parents' teachers. They were very moved seeing their students' child now lecturing at Beijing Yinyue Xueyuan. I am really happy that people of both sides (mainland and Taiwan) could come and go very easily.

My mother did not see my grandfather for about thirty years. When they met [again], it was very emotional for both of them. My mother went to China every year and every time she went, she just stayed at home to give my grandfather company. My grandfather was living in Fuzhou and passed away three years ago. My grandmother had died several years earlier. This is a historic tragedy for all the families. However, it is getting better, so I am very encouraged. I know I have a lot of aunts and uncles in mainland China, scattered all over the country. They [the government] send you to work in a certain place. I am not very familiar with my family history because my parents did not want to talk about it before. I think now they are more open to say things. However, one of my aunts did go to Taiwan to visit with my mother five years ago.

When I started playing piano at six, I had a lot of practice, about two hours everyday, very regimented. Practicing was part of my daily schedule. Because we lived in the staff housing area for the symphony people, all the children there were practicing music. Therefore, you do not question when you hear your next-door neighbor practicing. It was, in a way, a very good environment. You do not feel you are left out because everybody was outside playing [some musical instruments]. Every day, I was at home practicing. I had a very nice childhood. My practicing did not affect my academic work; I did very well at school. I went to Taipei First Girls High School. It

was very hard to get in. After junior high, my parents already realized that my life would be going in a musical direction and that the high school work would hamper my practice time. However, I did take the Liankao, the high school entrance examination, and I did get into high school.

I then went to Taipei Yizhuan (The Taiwan National Academy of Arts) to concentrate more on music. There I had fewer academic demands and more time to practice. Taipei Yizhuan was like a high school. Most people went there after junior high, at fifteen, like me, but others went after high school. It is a five-year academic program, focusing on music in my case. They also have arts-related subjects, such as painting, fine arts, and movie making. It is not equivalent to a BA; instead, you get an art diploma. I stayed there for two years and then I came to the United States.

I first came to New England Conservatory of Music in Boston in 1963 when I was seventeen. At that time in Taiwan it was true and it is probably still true that you can not come to the United States as an undergraduate. I was the second one from Taiwan, after the government enacted a new law, called Tiancai Ertong Chuguo Banfa,\fn{The Measure for Talented Youth Studying Overseas} to encourage talented musicians to go abroad after rigorous exams. They say you should go to develop your skill rather than wait until graduate school. I received permission from the government by taking a lot of tests to prove that I was worthy. I got four scholarships. At that time, the Taiwanese government only encouraged graduate students to study overseas. If you were a male, you could go overseas only after you served in the military.

I was quite prepared when I came to America. Other than English, where we had to study Shakespeare, no courses gave me a hard time. I had no problem at all with musically-related subjects. Because my foundation in Taiwan gave me a jump-start, I was much more prepared than a lot of my classmates. Before I came to America, I had learned two or three years of English in my regular high school English class. However, the Boston accent gave me trouble. I did tape a lot of lectures. I also had a lot of helpful classmates. I would listen to lectures several times. I would study my friends' notes and my notes and usually I ended up having better grades.

How was life besides academic work?

I had no life. It was academic work and practice, period. I was probably very naïve, unlike many American girls or boys at seventeen. I had never spent a night away from home before then. I had led a very sheltered life and did whatever I knew how to do, which was study and practice. I basically did the same thing in America, except everything was in English. I was not very different from what I was in Taiwan, but I did miss my family. I really realized I was away from home when I went back to my dorm and saw that my bed was still not made, because the servants made my bed at home. That was first time it hit me hard. I was sad for a while. However, after a while, I was okay. I just accepted it and did the best I could.

I stayed in Boston for five years. After I graduated from the New England Conservatory of Music, I went to Mills College in Oakland, California, which had excellent teachers there. It was a good time. It was during the Berkeley turmoil, and so I experienced things like sit-ins. I did not participate; howeyer, it was an exciting time for a young person.

Did I have any social activity?

In Boston, I participated in Chinese student choirs that are found at several colleges in Boston. I did the same thing at Berkeley. There was a choir company for the Chinese students there. My life was still mostly work, study, and practice, however. I do not think I was a very social person. As I get older, you may see me gradually becoming more outgoing.

I met Frank in Boston. He was at MIT;\fn{Massachusetts Institute of Technology} there was a student activity and we met there. We met again when we were at the UC San Diego during our separate careers. I did not know he was there, but when we met again, it was good. We started dating. I was in a PhD program and had my committee proposal prepared, but I did not finish my PhD. I was probably one year away from finishing it, but my focus was not on a career then.

Because Frank had to do his postdoctoral studies at Johns Hopkins University, we moved to Baltimore. We wanted to have children and I had some health problems. Otherwise, I might have finished my program. I do not regret what I did. I know I can still go back to finish it, but it is not that important to do it, because I like what I do now. I knew I always wanted a family. I think my generation is a cross between the old traditional values and the new options. Some people are very torn because they could see both sides. However, in my case that was not a problem, because I know I am not idealistic enough to pursue a performing life. I always wanted to have a family. I knew that kind of life could not accommodate a nice family life. It just worked out well in my personal case, even though I did have a choice, because I chose not to go the other route. I still have a professional life and I enjoy it very much. [By teaching], I can make a direct influence on a one-to-one basis. People I am fortunate to

have worked with over long periods of time say that I have made a huge difference in their lives. I find it very rewarding for me personally, and this way I do not have to be torn between family and career. Hopefully I do both well. You can only try your very best and deal with whatever is given to you.

When my children were younger, their demands on my time were not as great, so I continued to give recitals. When they got older, they became involved into all kinds of activities. With these factors, in addition to my teaching, it became unrealistic to keep a set schedule. I have two boys, Gregory is twenty-one and Jeffery is twenty. It has been a long time since I have seen them; when they do come, it is only for short periods of time. They are both in California. They are involved in the liberal arts; they are not going into science or music. One is interested in business, the other is interested in law, but they may change.

Gregory has a girlfriend, Michelle, a very nice girl. Michelle is white. He was, like me, a late bloomer. He never dated in high school. I think, this is his second girlfriend. His first relationship did not last very long. Gregory and Michelle have been dating for over a year. I do not care what race his girlfriend or future wife is, as long as they have the same values, they are good people, and good for each other. I am sure I have preferences, but it is not up to me. I do not let them know what my preference would be. I always tell them they have to fmd a nice person that is good for them, that is more important.

But my second son told me, without me asking him, that he definitely wants to marry someone Chinese. He is not dating seriously but somehow got this idea. My sons are so close to each other in age and come from the same family, yet they have different preferences.

They both speak Chinese fluently, though they cannot read and write Chinese as well. But they both went to Chinese school and they took Chinese in college. They grew up in Baltimore, where we lived for twenty-two years before we came to St. Louis. There were Chinese language schools there. My husband was very active in all these affairs. He was the chairman of the board for the Chinese language school for eight years. The Chinese language school was just taught one day of the weekend for two hours, just like the Chinese language schools here in St. Louis. I think in Washington DC there might have been more intensive Chinese language schools, but not in Baltimore. My husband insisted that we speak Chinese at home. He is very good in this way. He came here to America at the age of five, so that is even more incredible.

I have a very nice, very admirable mother-in-law. When they [my in-laws] came, they were the only Chinese family in Denver. They came to the United States in February 1948 with their two boys—one five, one three. They both had student visas, which I thought was highly unusual. Usually one spouse would come and the other would stay behind. I guess my mother-in-law is a very capable person. She was born at the wrong time—thirty years too early. They stayed in Denver until my husband went to college. My father-in-law had another job, so they moved to Buffalo, New York, then retired to Fremont, California. They are involved in math or chemistry, more traditional Chinese subjects. They are very interesting to historians. My mother-in-law would give daily Chinese lessons in history and geography. She was very persistent. Before her sons were allowed to go out to play with their friends and do their regular homework, they had to learn Chinese. They had to go through each book made available to them. I found my husband's drawing of what provinces the Changjiang (Yangtze River) flows through. My mother-in-law did not work when her children were young. When they were older, she taught at a high school for sixteen years. All three children—although the youngest one, Jerry, was born in United States—speak perfect Chinese, which was unusual for that time. My husband speaks Chinese with a Peking accent, while I speak with a Taiwanese accent. His family was from Jiangsu Province. But his parents went to Nankai Middle School, a boarding school in Tianjin. Then they went to Xinan *lianda* (the Southwest Associated University) during the Sino-Japanese war.

Am I a strict mother or a lenient one? I would say half and half. I am not very strict in a traditional Chinese fashion. We usually talk about reasonable discipline when we need to. I even do not remember if they had to sit in time-out\fn{A punishment where the child is forced to remain stationary somewhere for a certain period of time} or were not allowed to watch TV; though my children probably remember. Even if it did happen, it was very rare. They did not go through a teenage rebellion. They were okay, not as bad as people predicted.

I think my boys and I are as close as possible. Being boys, they tell me things that they think I need to know; no more, no less. They write e-mails, they know to call every Sunday. They do not discuss problems they had with me. At their age, they make a decision and then they tell us. Sometimes they ask our opinion, but we do not tell them what to do at this point. My husband is very westernized in this way. Sometimes, between him and me, we have different ways of looking at things, and he is very democratic. I think it's too much—just let them decide—it's definitely not the Chinese way. He has high standards such as honesty, integrity, and a sense of civil pride, which he wants to instill in them. Choice of lifestyle is a personal choice. It's up to them. I didn't participate in

any social organizations. I was very busy with Peabody where I taught and I had a lot of responsibilities. I taught part-time at first, and gradually I became full-time as my children's demands lessened. I also participate in a lot of statewide or local music clubs and organizations.

I taught one-on-one at Peabody; I also taught enrichment classes. That's a repertoire class, teaching students from various stages. Once a week different students would come. I taught a couple of classes for students, a combination of music theory, music history, and ensemble. We played for each other; that's why we call it enrichment class. There were usually six students in each class and the parents also would come.

These students came to Peabody after their regular school. They call it prep school. Prep schools have many missions; they can prepare people who want to go into music, but they can also accommodate people who just play an instrument for enjoyment, not necessarily to go into music as a career. We had a full range of students, and also a full range of ages, from child to adult.

When taking students, I select parents. When children are young, everybody can be educated. It depends on the parents' dedication, whether they have the right expectations and the right kind of attitude to guide their children. I feel that if I can get along with the parents, if we have the same kind of values, the children would definitely come easy. There were cases in which parents needed to guide the child. I enjoyed being very close friends with the parents because we all have similar outlooks. Students and parents became long-term friends. Basically I teach children between ages four and seventeen. I had fifty students when I was in Baltimore. Now I teach no more than fifteen students, because I want to practice more for my personal growth and accommodate my husband's job.

My husband moved here because he wanted to do biomedical engineering. There is good support here at Washington University from chancellor to dean. It was also a good time, because our children were old enough to go to college. We didn't have to worry about uprooting them.

I think Johns Hopkins is a very conservative place, and my husband's career was at its pinnacle over there. There was certainly a glass ceiling. He was named the medical school's full professor ten years ago. He was the only Chinese American to be named to this position in over one hundred years of Hopkins history; after him, no other Chinese American has been named, which I think is not logical at all. I am sure there are many deserving Asian Americans, but people still have very tight-knit outlook of others. There he reached the highest he could go, but he feels that he can make a big difference.

He is also very concerned with making sure there are role models of Asian American professionals in his position. He wants his children to know that you can be a leader and that you should be assertive. He also mentors a lot of other friends' children, and they seek his advice, so he feels it is important for him to be a chair in a very good program. Maybe indirectly, it allows other people to have some role models.

I am very proud of his determination. A lot of time we say that you have to be twice as good in order to compete with the mainstream, which shouldn't be. Unfortunately, sometimes even twice as good is still not enough.

His work now is wonderful. He has wonderful support. They are determined to make biomedical engineering the top priority at Washington University. He is very happy. Washington University is the third-ranked medical school in the country, and all the top biomedical engineering programs are associated with very top medical schools. Right now the program is just in its first year, and it's already ranked number twenty-two. He got his degree in the late 1970s in biomedical engineering; he was among the first wave of scientists involved in biomedical engineering development. In a way, the field has been in existence for almost twenty years, and it has become extremely important. They have wonderful students, all graduate-level, which is exceptional.

His job is demanding. He stays at work very late, but this is no different from before. He always works hard. It's definitely not a nine-to-five job. He has to recruit faculty, which takes a lot of time. He has to write a lot of grants and find the right kind of people for students to work for, so all of this takes time. He is involved in the lab as well. He enjoys it. His office is at the engineering school and his lab is at the medical school. He spends more time doing administrative work than writing grants and doing research. It is no longer a research job in which he tells his research fellows what to do. They correspond with him from Baltimore on how to use and maintain their grants. This is different from what he did before; it is more administrative; he manages the department. He wants to make a big difference at all levels, from undergraduate education to graduate students. He does this not just for himself but for every area where he feels he should be. He is a pioneer in this place.

He enjoys the administrative work more than he thought he would. Before when people approached him for that type of position, he wasn't ready and he thought he wasn't interested in it. He is very good with figures, very determined and methodical, the scientific type. Some people cannot do administrative tasks, He is very good, because he has been doing a lot of that anyway. In a big way, doing grants is similar to administration.

In the family affairs, I influence him a lot. We are very good at compromising if we have differences. If I feel strongly, I still do it my way. If he feels strongly, certainly he will do it his way. If it concerns our children, we defmitely have the same idea. We talk about it away from the children. We come to one decision. We don't tell them different things.

Do I have any religion? No. But this is also funny. This has probably been very Chinese. My parents decided I would live away from home, since I never spent a night away from home in Taiwan, and it was decided that I should go to Boston rather than New York, because in my mother's mind (and it's probably true), Boston is a safer place than New York, even though she has never been outside of Taiwan. She somehow found out that Boston is a Catholic town.

I was converted, I went through the training of how to become a Catholic, and became one in name. My mother felt that it was a way she could protect me—send me to a safe place and have me join the majority religion. It's very moving actually, when you think about it because that's all she could do for me being physically away so far.

In name I am supposed to be Catholic, but I never practiced it. My religion is very much a Chinese kind of thing, which is just being a very nice person, trying to be helpful, and living the way your conscience leads you. That's my religion. My.husband doesn't have any religion either. I have to come to peace with my own conscience.

What is my typical day? In the morning, we get up very early. After my husband has breakfast, we will talk about our day. He sometimes gets up at five-thirty. I will get up at seven. After he leaves, I practice, then do yard work. By that time, it is almost noon. Then I run errands. I will start teaching in the afternoon. Usually the class goes from early afternoon to late afternoon. The day goes by very fast. I might spend two or three hours at piano, two hours in the yard, do a couple of errands, start teaching, and cook dinner when my husband comes back. Sometimes, I cook dinner before I start teaching.

I cook every day. Very seldom do I take orders out. I enjoy cooking, so it's not a problem. Before the children came, I did a few cooking classes. I enjoy food. After dinner, we spend some time together. During the school year, we are out a lot of time on weekdays, either recruiting or going to school related functions. So we have a lot of social events. This is another reason why I can't teach a lot, because I have to go out on a couple of nights when I have class. I noticed that, last year, I had to go out often on Wednesday nights.

They do keep us very busy. For instance, last week, we were out four nights. We often invite people, senior members, trustees, or potential donors, into our home. I cook for those occasions. I coordinate department functions, such as dinners with graduate students and faculty; I deal with schedules and catering.

188.54 Living In A Big Cage\fn{by Fu Jiqing (1946-)} Shanghai, China (F) 2

I was born in Shanghai on December 26, 1946. I graduated from senior high school in 1966 at the start of the brutal Culrural Revolution.

My father was subsequently labelled a member of the "Six Black Categories," and our family was persecuted and all of our property confiscated. As the offspring of a "Six Black Category" member, I lived under awful conditions. The government had abolished the entrance examination for higher education, so after graduation I found a job as a factory worker. My entire generation of young people had been sacrificed for the Cultural Revolution. We were deprived of opportunities to further our studies and seek personal happiness.

By the time I was accepted by Shanghai's University of Transportation in 1979, I had already become the mother of a child. After graduation, I was assigned to the Shanghai New Electtical Factory, where I got to know a co-worker called Feng Suying and her husband the writer Wang Ruowang, both of whom are now living in the United States. It was under their influence that I gradually became part of the democratic movement.

Beginning in 1986, I often assisted Wang Ruowang in editing and copying out his essays and materials on different political subjects. In 1989, I participated in the democracy demonstrations in Shanghai. In July 1989, when Wang was under supervision and was prohibited from leaving his house, I continued to visit and keep him informed of what was happening in the outside world.

On September 8, 1989, Wang was arrested. On the same day, the Public Security Bureau detained me in connection with, as they called it, "Wang's crime of counterrevolutionary propaganda and incitement." Police officers searched my home and office, confiscating, among other things, my passport which had an Australian visa in it. I was therefore deprived of my right to travel abroad. Despite my innocence, the Public Security Bureau continued to summon me for questioning and search through my things. I have been living in fear ever since.

In 1991, Feng Suying established a journal called *Democracy Forum* in cooperation with the Hong Kong Alliance. I supported and assisted her in this. On April 18, the Shanghai Public Security Bureau launched an extensive campaign to arrest people related to the democratic movement, to Democracy Forum, and the Shanghai Human Rights Association. Eleven people were taken into custody. I was detained and subsequently interrogated for more than 30 hours. During the interrogation, I was asked the same questions again and again as a callous investigator banged on the table and shouted at me. Once again, the Public Security Bureau searched my home and office.

The Party Secretary of the factory where I worked demoted me from my job as an engineer to a position as a worker in the machine shop. Feng Suying was forced to retire from her job. They sent people to keep watch on me and give regular reports on my activities to the factory's Office of Labor and Security. My living and working environments felt suffocating: my every actions was under surveillance. I had absolutely no freedom. Whenever I made a phone call or wrote down something, someone's head would lean over to watch me. I was angry, but there was nothing I could do.

In 1994, one of my colleagues picked up a large pile of "communications reports" by accident. In the pile were reports on me written by my supervisor in the Labor Protection Section. This was clear evidence of the tyrannical control imposed on me by the factory. Every time I thought of the huge pile of reports on me, I felt as if a weight were being placed on my shoulders.

Living with this kind of pressure, I began to feel that my life was not much different from that of an animal: I had nothing but the right to survival

In 1992, Wang and his wife lefr for the United States. They continued to keep in touch with me and in February 1993, I helped them establish the Shanghai branch of the Chinese Democratic Party. We also decided at that time to show our support for Fu Shenqi, a Democracy Wall-era dissident who had just been arrested at the time. On March 1, the Shanghai Public Security Bureau detained me and Sun Un, a former journalist who had also been keeping in touch with Wang Ruowangin the U.S., at Shanghai No. 1 Detention Center.

I was put in a cell with women who had been charged with murder and told that people like me were even worse than murderers because we wanted to overthrow the Communist Party dictatorship. In the eyes of Party officials, their primary enemies are those who hold different political opinions.

On the same day, the Public Security Bureau ransacked my home again, for the third time. My family could no longer lead a normal life; my mother-in-law was lying in bed because of her bad back as a group of police officers came in and took things out of my drawers and closets. They confiscated my son's materials for applying to study in the United States. They even made my son go to the police station and asked him to say what crime I had committed. After questioning him, they told him that he was not permitted to tell anyone about the interrogation; if he told anyone, they said, he would have to bear me consequences.

I was detained for a month and a half. Before I was released, they wanted me to promise that I would not have any contact with Wang Ruowang and Feng Suying. If I did, they said, I would be sent to Tilanqiao Prison. When I went back to my factory, I saw a notice that said:

"Fu Jiqing was involved with the activities of overseas counterrevolutionary organizations and organized counterrevolutionary activities in this country. She has been questioned, detained and punished by the Public Security Bureau. In accordance with the regulations of this factory, an administrative demerit will be placed in Fu's file and she will be docked six months of her annual salary, bonus and monthly salary."

After that, most of my colleagues kept their distance from me, afraid that any association with me would link them to a "counterrevolutionary organization." I was absolutely isolated. The only thing I could do was to work very hard, doing the jobs that others refused to do. But my salary did not increase according to the mandatory rate and I was deprived of the benefits I deserved. In the factory, my mail from overseas was opened and read; at home, my telephone was tapped; and my visits with friends supervised. The Public Security Bureau could ask me to go to the police station at any time and required me to "voluntarily"show them my mail from overseas and report to them any telephone conversations I had wilth friends or journalists.

Under Chinese Communist rule, I did not have any rights or freedoms: I had no sense of security because I had to worry about being arrested or my h9ome beingsearched at any given moment. It felt like being under a sentence of life imprisonment. I had been released from detention, but in reality I had simply moved from a small prison to a big jail cage from which my protests went unheard.

In February 1994, I saw a beam of hope.

I received an invitation from a company in the United States to attend a conference. As a Chinese citizen, I had the right to take a private trip to the United States, but the Public Security Bureau and the factory only said, you

have the right to go, but in fact tried to prevent it. For example the factory and the head of my section postponed the issuing of the recommendation letter I needed to get my passport, did not validate my documents with an official seal, and sent along my “black materials” together with my other documents. No matter which department I went to, the chief would immediately know that I was a counterrevolutionary.

Often the Public Security Bureau officers would inadvertently give my case description. back to me after reading it and when I saw what they said about me in these “black materials,” I realized that I would not have a life as long as I lived under the Party’s rule. The Public Security Bureau continually postponed the date for issuing my passport. I had to face many problems and go everywhere to ask for hdp and it still took me half a year to get a passport while others could get one in a month.

But by the time I received the passport in July, it was already too late for me to get a U.S. visa as the conference date had passed. The Public Security Bureau knew that I would not be able to leave the country even though I had a passport.

In mid-August 1994, without the knowledge of the factory or the Public Security Bureau I began looking for other ways to leave the country. I was finally given a U.S. visa on September 16. On September 17, I got a plane ticket and on September 20, I left Shanghai secretly.

I had thought everything through seriously: if I continued my democratic activities and got in contact with my friends Wang Ruowang and Feng Suying while I was abroad, then the Tilanqiao Prison would be waiting for me once I went back to China; all the suffering would begin again. I would not be able to live in peace, but would be persecuted and denied any human rights or freedoms. This was not mere speculation, but the way I knew the Party would deal with me if I went back. So many people in past generations have died from persecution. If I had not had such a strong desire to get out, I too would have eventually died under such persecution.

When the plane took off, I felt mournful. I thought of how I loved my country, but I was scared of what the Communist Party could do to me, and would rather escape from that certain persecution.

268.138 1. I Am An Apple **2.** Sweat **3.** Evening Dewdrops Glimmering **4.** The Sun River **5.** To My Child **6.** I Am A Man **6.** The Last Bus: **Six Poems**\fn{by Fu Tianlin (1946-)} Zizhong County, Sichuan Province, China (F) 3

1

I am an apple,
A small bright red apple.
*
My smile swings on a child's face,
My sweetness flows into an old man’s heart,
I satisfy the hunger of a sailor on a long voyage,
I quench the thirst of a traveller in the desert,
I restore the health of a patient who has lost faith,
I give the healthy a more delightful life.
*
I am an apple,
A small bright red apple.
*
I am the daughter of the sun and earth,
I am the chorus of the flowers and leaves,
I am the moon and stars that can be plucked,
I am the pearls and shells that can be picked up,
I am the hardened sweat, the frozen dew,
I am the fire of hope and passion.
*
I am an apple,
A small bright red apple.

2

I've praised you with such sincerity
—You glistening sweat!
You're like dewdrops on grass at sunrise
Reflecting sun's radiance
Mirroring hills' jewelled greenness.
I've glorified you with such fervour.
—You glistening sweat!
Like streams crushing through cliffs
You cling yourselves to my forehead,
You slide down my back.
*
Today, tractors dash across the field
A thousandfold more efficient than the hoe!
I see the workers' faces sweltering
With the same glistening sweat.
You trudge close to all lives that toil,
Sometimes you're exalted, sometimes disdained.
When hard work is combined with wisdom,
You are round glowing pearls;
When hard work is joined by ignorance,
You are only tears, bitingly bitter.

3

Evening dewdrops spring from earth,
Upward from the foot to the top of trees;
Are they truly dewdrops or
Are they the day's sweat wakening at night?
*
Clear and gleaming upon wakening,
Quickly transformed into good rains,
For a harvest rich with fruits on branches,
How ardent and dedicated they are!
*
This moment moonlight has lit the lamp
To show me the true life of the orchard.
Drop by drop the wakened sweat moistens the soil
Quickening the growth of leaves, the probing of roots.
*
With care I pick up a drop of evening dew
And watch it sparkle
But it quietly slips through my fingers
Hastening to refresh the green, green orchard …

4

Chasing others in the fields, singing in the ditch
Jumping in green leaves, and gleaming on the branches
*
Ah, litchis have reddened, pineapples grown golden, and betel nuts turned emerald.
Ah, love's ripe, life's sweet, and desires consummately beautiful.
*
Lovely Island of Hainan, how can you sparkle so!
A sun in the sky, a sun in the river.

5

From the rubbish heap
I retrieve your lump of clay that
I’ve thrown away.
By the oil lamp
I begin again to mould
That which I have shattered—
Your dreams,
Your small cars, your small house,
Your small, small spacecraft.
*
Perhaps,
They are too distant
From your mother’s needs.
When I went downhill with the hoe heavy on my shoulder—
How I wished you had cleaned the house,
Lit the stove,
And steamed a pot of rice …
*
Weeping,
You retorted:
“Why must you write poems and sing songs?”
*
Ah my bright son
I chew over your words.
Are they sweet? Are they sour?
*
All is deep in sleep,
But your mother’s heart is like
Your muddled lump of clay,
Forgive me, my child,
Let me kiss away your sullen tears.
Let me light us this lamp of night …

6

If a sudden storm rises tonight
Don’t be frightened, Mama.
I am the man in the house.
I’m already six years old. I am a man.
I can raise the long whip of my top
And chase
The naughty wind to the dark corner
And punish it to stand still there.
*
Today is not Sunday and Papa won’t be home.
But don’t you worry, Mama
I am a man.
I know how to use Papa’s saw and axe
To split firewood for your stove.
Uncle says a man is great
And Mama you do have a man.

If you ever receive a wire
Sent from heaven,
That must be from your son, the great man
Who wants to pluck a bright star
To shine for you as you write deep into the night.

6

The last bus arrives at midnight
*
Snowflakes fall on us
As my brother and I stand here waiting
Waiting for someone to return from a hundred *li* away
Today she must do so many things that have to be done
Must travel the road that has to be travelled every day
*
My brother's padded cap turns white
My white scarf grows thick
The lady on night shift
Urges us indoors to warm ourselves by the fire
Saying it's twenty minutes before the last bus
*
No, no
We want to stand at the top of the stone steps
Stand beneath the street lamp
Beneath the street lamp stand two snow-children
We want to be spotted by her
The moment that last bus turns into the station
*
We'll take her by the hand, one on each side
Pouring out whatever comes to mind
She'll be surprised to see that we've grown up
We've learned to tidy our rooms, wash our clothes
And our homework has been signed
I've signed my brother's
And he's signed mine
But there is one thing we will keep secret
(We've put a hot-water bottle in her quilt)
*
Snowflakes are falling on us
The last bus arrives at midnight

1947

79.69 Old Sun Sells His Donkey\fn{by Zhao Benfu (1947-)} Fengxian County, Jiangsu Province, China (M) 7

Nothing in this vast world of ours is so strange that it does not occur somewhere, sometime. It was just such an unexpected event which finally made up Old Sun's mind:

"I'm going to sell that donkey!"

It happened one day when Old Sun had gone to the county town to deliver some goods for the purchasing station. By the time he had delivered the goods, and picked up something for someone in the village, it was getting late, and with sixty *li* ahead of him he hurried his donkey out of town and was on the same road whence they had come.

Old Sun was getting on in years. That morning he was out of bed at four o'clock, on the road by five, and had

to climb quite a few stairs in the department store. No wonder he was feeling drowsy even before his cart left the town. Walking alongside the cart, already half asleep, he noticed that once out of the town there were very few people on the road.

"I still have quite a long way to go," he thought to himself. "The cart is empty, and the donkey knows this road; why don't I just take a quick nap."

No sooner said than done. He hopped on the cart, and, holding his whip in one hand, fully clad, he fell asleep to the *clump*, *clump* of the big black donkey's hooves as it made its way along the road.

As it happened, not far ahead was a small gray donkey pulling a flat-bed cart. A corpse was lying on the cart and on either side walked the sobbing relatives of the deceased. Seeing a fellow donkey of the opposite sex, our big, black donkey was struck with a sudden and unreasoning passion, and, putting all other considerations aside, stepped up his pace to keep up with his mate, who was heading straight for the crematorium. Meanwhile, Old Sun had fallen sound asleep and was dreaming peacefully.

A number of corpses were lined up in the courtyard, in beds, stretchers, carts and the like, waiting quietly. The gloomy relatives were scattered about, squatting or standing, and they looked up blankly at the new arrivals. The big, black donkey, following close at the tail of his little gray friend, pulled up and got into line with the most well-behaved of manners.

Perhaps because these two carts arrived together, everybody assumed that two people from the same household had died. The two carts were immediately surrounded by a group of sympathetic and curious onlookers, whose questioning stares soon, turned into direct inquiries:

"Are they from the same family?" The relatives shook their heads and said:

"It started following us a while back."

This was odd, especially as the other cart was accompanied by neither driver nor relatives. A few plucked up their courage, and silently crowded around Old Sun, stretching their necks to have a better look into the cart: his face was ruddy, his expression serene; in fact, he did not look at all like a dead man. And, listen! The sound of breathing!

For one dreadful moment, the crowd stood stock still as if they had seen a ghost. The sight made their flesh creep and their hair stand on end. Then suddenly they drew back in a confused mass. What was going on?

The donkey, perhaps frightened by the crowds, or perhaps because it suspected they were going to take advantage of its master, threw back its head and began to bray loudly. This sent the other donkeys present into an accom-panying chorus of "*hee-haws*." The hitherto solemn atmosphere of the crematorium had suddenly become that of a lively donkey market.

Old Sun woke up in alarm and sat up to see what was going on. He rubbed his eyes. Where was he? Why was he surrounded by all these people, each wearing a different expression of horror or surprise, and some looking as if they were about to flee in terror. He steadied himself and looked around again. What was he doing in the crematorium? He was shivering all over. My God! What a lovely place to wake up in! And, these people think I am a ghost come back to life.

Old Sun was furious. He leapt from his cart as if to beat his donkey, then reconsidered. No, this was not the place. He had better wait until he had left this inauspicious crematorium. Without so much as raising his head, he turned the donkey around and whipped him out the gate.

To anyone else, this incident would have been a joke, but to Old Sun it was a matter of great significance. He maintained that this omen of ill-fortune only confirmed a premonition that he had been feeling for quite a few days.

Most of the people in the village would not have believed that Old Sun had something on his mind. Everyone knew that he had made a small fortune transporting goods for the purchasing station. Furthermore, with the new responsibility system, his wife could stay at home, while his son and daughter worked. However, all these chan-ges in the last couple of years made him uncomfortable. Surely, there was a hitch and he was not sure if the recent wealth of his family was a sign of good luck or coming misfortune! True, it was good money for the family, but it was money hard-earned. In fact, his job working as "the legs" of the purchasing station involved more hardships than most people would ever realize.

Old Sun's home was not far from the Yellow River, in a poverty-stricken and out-of-the-way corner where three provinces met and which the authorities had paid little attention to. The land was poor, but there was a certain kind of cogongrass\fn{A coarse grass used for thatching.} which flourished in and along the old course of the Yellow River, stretching as far as the eye could see, and it was as if, like this grass, the people of the area had learned to make do on this barren terrain. In addition to farming, most families raised livestock, and under the

blue skies of summer and autumn, with the sheep and cattle grazing among the blowing grass, one had the feeling of being in the vast grasslands north of the Great Wall. The raising of livestock had become an important source of livelihood for these peasants.

The county heads had set up a purchasing station. When enough sideline products such as sheepskin and wool had accumulated, a truck would be sent to take all the goods to the county town. However, livestock could not be left to accumulate, and, since the county found it could not afford to send in a truck every few days, "leg power" became absolutely essential for taking these animals into town as soon as they were ready to sell. This was considered a supplementary form of state-financed transportation.

Although the pay for "leg power" was relatively high, it was not easy to find people willing to do the job. A trip to the county town and back involved one hundred *li* in traveling time, which meant getting up at five, only to return late at night. Very few people were prepared to put up with such trying conditions, and, furthermore, few families could escape their household chores long enough to leave the village. The most tiring aspect of the job, however, was that because it was difficult to get anything in this out-of-the-way place, people were always requesting things from the county town: one family wanted some cloth, another needed some sugar, the production brigade was buying a water pump or fertilizer and would like to have it carted back, and so on. With more than one hundred families in the village, there were always some such requests. No one wanted to take on this much responsibility even though the job would bring home extra money. What was more, several years ago during the movement to "let mass criticism inspire great efforts," Old Sun, "the legs" of the purchasing station, had been publicly criticized and labeled a "self-interested" element, making the position even less appealing. Those who had the energy for the job felt that they could put it to better use elsewhere.

Old Sun had faced more than half a year of public criticism. Now, as a result of his constant running back and forth, his old case of rheumatism flared up. His left leg was permanently paralyzed by the long illness, and trembled when he tried to walk. Once a talkative and fun-loving man, he had now become silent, almost dull-witted. It was enough to bring tears to anyone's eyes.

In the fields a half-disabled worker like Old Sun could do very little to improve production, while, on the other hand, the purchasing station felt his absence sorely. If the sheep were not taken to the county town in time, they often became thin, sick or even died and the once-profitable purchasing station was now running at a loss. When the people of the village wanted to buy things, they could no longer ask Old Sun to pick them up on his way back home. Instead, they had to make a special trip themselves, wasting a good many labor hours. As time went on, everyone hoped someone would come forward to take on the job, but nobody volunteered. Before long, the people's thoughts began to turn to Old Sun again, but no one dared say anything for fear of reopening past wounds.

Old Sun was by nature happiest when he was helping others. When he saw the looks of appeal on the faces of his fellow villagers, he realized once again the trust they had in him. His feeling of abandonment began to disappear and his old enthusiasm returned. To everyone's delight, as soon as the government policies began to loosen up two years ago in the spring, he immediately borrowed money and bought himself a big, black donkey to start his second term as "the legs" of the village.

Yes, Old Sun had taken up his old job again, but not without careful consideration. He had suffered greatly in the last few years, barely escaping death, and who could be sure that the new government's policies would not take a turn for the worse any minute. He considered and reconsidered, but finally decided that not only he would benefit from the job, the villagers and the country would benefit as well. This should be nothing to be ashamed of! And so, for the last two years, throughout the sweltering heat of summer and the bitter cold of winter, this old man of sixty with a half-disabled leg had been working harder than most people do in a lifetime. His thirty-year-old son had got himself a wife, and the daughter he had originally planned to marry off in exchange for his son's wife had found herself a husband she liked. He even had plans to pull down his old house and build himself a new one.

Now, just as he was beginning to feel pleased with himself, as if he could again provide for his family, he began to hear rumors that the government's policies were going to tighten up again. Every night a small crowd would gather outside Old Sun's house to discuss one topic: when would things ever settle down and leave them to get on with production, a question which nobody could answer. All of this, of course, was only based on hearsay and what these words "tighten" or "control" really meant, whether or not transportation would be forbidden. Old Sun had not the slightest idea nor the ability to think clearly about the question. The government's policies over the last few years had, been constantly changing, so that something permissible one day might well be forbidden the next, and the very word "change" now struck terror into his heart.

A few days after the rumor had begun, the brigade leader notified everyone that the commune was to have a new secretary. This new secretary happened to be the same Vice-Section Head Han of the county standing com-

mittee, who had been responsible for labeling him a "self-interested" element only a few years before. Old Sun felt he had no small cause for alarm, for he had no way of knowing whether this leader named Han still wanted to "let mass criticism inspire great efforts." He remembered one criticism session at which someone had accused him of forgetting the basic principles of Communism. Old Sun had disagreed with him, at which point Vice-Section Head Han had frightened him nearly to death by announcing over the megaphone for all to hear:

"You are taking the capitalist road, and if you continue, that road can lead to only one place: death!"

From that day forth, it was as if he had been placed under a spell, and he muttered the words "road to death" to himself for the next half a year. Even today the memory made, his hair stand on end. The more he thought about it, the more nervous he became, until finally he worked himself into a state of absolute terror.

It was in the midst of this terror, of constant apprehensions and suspicions, that this omen of ill fortune appeared. Where had the big, black donkey taken him—and nearly succeeded in getting him "cremated alive"—if not down the "road to death!" Man is most likely to revive discarded beliefs in superstition when he feels his own life is out of his control: at this point, Old Sun was so jumpy that the slightest hint of trouble left him quivering with fear.

Having driven the cart out of the crematorium and back onto the proper road, Old Sun's fury came to a head. He yanked the cart to a stop by the side of the road, and standing in front of the donkey, began to whip him head-on. All of Old Sun's pent-up ire came raining down on the back of the poor beast, who reared wildly in the air and had soon got himself tangled in his harness. Covered in sweat and gasping for breath, Old Sun stopped and went around to the donkey's buttocks, tapping at its hoof with the other end of his whip.

"Lift your foot up!" he yelled.

But, the donkey had no way of understanding that Old Sun simply meant to untangle the harness, and, fearing another beating, lifted his leg and gave Old Sun a swift kick in the forehead. He cried out in pain, pressing his hand against the wound to stop the blood which was already seeping between his fingers and down his arm. It seemed Old Sun's troubles would never end. Another flick of the whip to the donkey's head sent it galloping off, pulling the cart behind. It did not take more than one hundred steps for the cart to go careening into a ditch with a great crash, but it took a good deal of effort, and the help of a good many men to get it out again. By that time the donkey had thrown its hip out of joint.

Returning home, Old Sun went straight to bed, where he lay, tossing and turning, for three days. He thought about every detail of what had happened from beginning to end. He was troubled by the thought that fate was simply playing tricks on him. Eventually, he came to the antiquated conclusion that life and death were decided by fate, wealth and poverty by the gods and there was nothing he could do about it. He began to feel that the black donkey was a kind of godsend warning him that misfortune lay ahead. If he gave up his job now mightn't he avoid catastrophe?

Old Sun had already hardened his heart to the idea of selling his donkey, but in its present condition he would have to accept a large cut in price, and he did not like that. As soon as the wound in his forehead had healed sufficiently, he led the limping donkey to the commune veterinarian.

Dr. Liu of the veterinary station was as eager as he could be to help, but unfortunately his skill did not match his eagerness. Ten years ago the excellent doctor Wang Laoshang had lost his job simply because he had once served as a horse doctor under the warlord Zhang Zuolin. If only he were here now, he would certainly be able to do something for this poor donkey! Dr. Liu circled around the donkey, and then asked Old Sun to tie it into the sling. Grabbing hold of its disjointed right leg, he tried to lift it a couple of times, panting and puffing with the effort, but he could not fit it back into position. Finally, wiping the sweat off his forehead, he said:

"It's no good! You'd better slaughter it."

"Slaughter it?" Old Sun would not allow that! He suddenly remembered all the things he liked about this donkey. After all that time together, wasn't it natural to feel some compassion for the poor beast. No, he was not going to have it slaughtered!

"Let me try my luck at the Liuzhen Fair," he thought. Perhaps someone would buy it, and if the donkey was properly taken care of Old Sun could rightfully say that he had saved a life. As for taking a cut in price, he was determined not to let it bother him.

Up at four o'clock, Old Sun fed the animal, made himself a little something to eat, and then led the donkey slowly to the street. By the time he had traveled ten *li*, some people were already on their way back home having finished their business in town.

Old Sun entered the town, and half-heartedly led the donkey to the north in the direction of the animal market. This market was located in a thickly-shaded willow grove. Every kind of livestock imaginable was for sale here:

oxen, horses, donkeys, mules. The market was comparatively quiet, except for the occasional whinny or bray of the animals. The buyers circled around looking over the livestock and each other in silence, quite different from the deafening atmosphere of a street market. In this kind of animal market both buyer and seller are experienced peasants, silent and calculating. According to the tradition of the market, all bargaining is done by means of eye contact and hand signals, and all prices are counted off on the hands.

Old Sun selected a crooked willow tree and tied his donkey to it. Then he brought out his tobacco, and squatted down to wait.

The peasants here thought of livestock just as they thought of the land, that is, with a special intimacy and tenderness. Ever since raising and selling private livestock was permitted, the animal market of the Liuzhen Fair had become a big attraction. One look around was enough to convince anybody that few people were buying animals for purposes of transportation; instead, most people were buying for domestic use. Any money these peasants had saved would be spent first on a horse or donkey, and not on a bicycle, for bicycles were of limited use, and they depreciated in value with wear and tear. A donkey on the other hand, had many uses: you could ride it if you needed to go somewhere—and on the sandy soil of the Yellow River valley it was no slower than riding a bicycle. But, of course, its main use was in farm work. The villages in this part of the country were scattered, and sometimes as much as ten *li* separated house from field. For carrying night soil or collecting crops, a donkey was as convenient as a boat in a region with many rivers or lakes. Furthermore, livestock produced nightsoil and after you had raised a baby donkey or calf for two years its price doubled. In comparison, the bicycle had virtually nothing to offer. Indeed, a first-class economist could hardly have analyzed the situation more thoroughly!

Old Sun took a look around him: today the buyers outnumbered the sellers. He felt extremely optimistic. It was not long before a man who seemed nothing but skin and bones walked over to Old Sun's donkey:

"Hey! Is this donkey for sale?"

Though Old Sun had seen this man coming from afar, he pretended not to have noticed him. He sat quietly smoking his pipe. Hearing this old man's question, he looked up at him for the first time and casually nodded his head. He planned to drive a hard bargain. Knowing that the buyer and the seller are engaged in a contest of will and of the ability to size up their opponent, too much eagerness to sell would certainly look bad. He was applying the old military tactic of leaving someone space, the better to trap him in later. Who could be sure: perhaps Old Sun was a descendant of the brilliant military tactician of ancient times, Sun Wuzi!

However, Old Sun's opponent was no amateur. He opened the donkey's mouth, then snorted, "Hmmm. Four years old," but from his tone of voice it was clear that he had taken a liking to this donkey. It was not until he stood silently stroking his long, mountain goat's beard and examining the donkey's frame that he noticed the slightly hanging back leg.

"Hmmm? Is it lame?"

"Disjointed. It's nothing. It'll heal good as new." Old Sun had managed to squeeze three sentences out of only eight words. Perhaps, the less he said the more likely the old man was to believe that the problem was a small one. But when Old Sun turned around, he found the old man had already gone. He stood up with a sigh, and yelled after the old man:

"Are you blind? This donkey can outwork ten horses. I'm not kidding!"

The old man did not even look back.

Just as Old Sun was beginning to feel discouraged, he felt a heavy tap on his shoulder, and turning around, recognized Hu Er from the local butchery. Hu Er gave him a nasty grin and said,

"What are you shouting about? Why don't you sell me your old lame donkey and I'll make it into soup!"

Old Sun would have preferred not to pay any attention to him, but he knew this fellow was hard to deal with and so, turning to him he asked coldly:

"What's your offer?"

"Heh, heh," Hu Er began to chuckle. "Would I cheat an old neighbor?"

Hu Er pulled out a cigarette and threw it in Old Sun's direction, but Old Sun threw it promptly back, pulling out his own bag of tobacco.

"I'll smoke my own," he said. He had a suspicion that the cigarette had its price. Apparently deciding not to bother with formalities, Hu Er lit his own cigarette, then cocked his head, one hand arrogantly clutching his lapel, and said to Old Sun:

"How about fifty *yuan*?"

Old Sun blinked with irritation: a nice-sized donkey like this—for only fifty *yuan*! A complete rip-off! He gave Hu Er a menacing look and turned his back on him without a word.

"Fifty-one." Hu Er maliciously upped his offer by one *yuan*.

"You can up the price ten *yuan* if you want, but you're not going to buy yourself an animal from me," said Old Sun with a shrug. He thought to himself: "You little twerp. You should be careful who you try to cheat: Old Sun's been around, you know."

Seeing the situation was beyond negotiation, Hu Er gave a "Hmph!" and left.

One by one people came over to have a look at the big black donkey, but one by one they left as soon as they noticed it was lame. For these peasants, buying an animal was like being blessed with a son: who needed one who ate more of the family grain than he could ever earn back in labor?

It was almost noon, and the marketers had for the most part entered the bargaining stage. Buyers had selected the animals they wanted and were no longer looking for new possibilities. The managing personnel were busy helping the two sides strike a bargain, usually after several prices had been indicated by hand, back and forth, with the middlemen's commission growing steadily at each exchange. Already, satisfied buyers were leading their livestock out of the market for home.

Old Sun's casual calm of earlier that morning had turned to uneasiness as he watched for potential buyers. He waited, but still no one approached him. Leaving a nearby acquaintance to keep an eye on things for him, Old Sun walked off to survey the scene for himself. He reckoned there were about seven hundred head for sale that day, and at least four hundred had already been sold. Donkeys and oxen were the most popular, though to Old Sun's surprise, some people were buying mules or horses as well. Apparently, the local peasants were fully confident that the government policies would not change for the worse, or at least the rumors of tightening up had not discouraged them from buying.

The trust and confidence of these peasants came as a shock to Old Sun, and for the first time he wondered whether the torment he had put himself through during these last few days was warranted.

As Old Sun wandered about in this half-daze, he suddenly heard the sound of cheering. He followed the noise to where a crowd of people were gathered around a black mule, all oohing and ahing in admiration. A short, pudgy fellow was pulling the mule through the crowd, his face flushed with self-importance. Hey! Wasn't that his son's uncle on his wife's side? He felt a surge of irritation: this little rat had bought himself a mule? When Old Sun was facing public criticism during the "cultural revolution," this coward had come to see him only once, and in the evening too, probably afraid to be seen! Old Sun had always held him in utmost disdain, but today, suddenly, he felt far inferior to this brother-in-law of his. With all those people crowding around clucking in admiration, no wonder Old Sun felt jealous. Suppressing his mixed feelings of disgust and admiration, he turned his back on the crowd and wandered away. He was certainly not going to exchange greetings with his relative under these circumstances.

It was in this state of turmoil that Old Sun returned to find his donkey surrounded by a small crowd. Was there, a buyer? Excited, he elbowed his way through the crowd, sizing them up as he said:

"Who's interested? I'm the owner."

All eyes were now on him as he tried his best to collect himself, wondering with irritation why he could not control his heavy breathing. A man of about seventy pressed forward. He had a clear, humane look about his face, with a black mole on his left cheek and a flowing white beard. On his right shoulder, rested a long, bamboo-joint pipe. Old Sun was filled with a feeling of great respect for this kind old man. Somehow he felt that he had seen this face somewhere before, but he could not remember where. This man had apparently already looked the donkey over thoroughly, for he approached Old Sun immediately and asked politely:

"How much are you asking?"

"How much are you offering?"

"Hmmm—I can't give you a counter-offer if you don't give me an offer," the man answered, smiling.

"I'll consider this much." Old Sun stuck out first one finger, and then five more.

"Such a fine donkey; I wonder why you are selling it." The old man seemed in no hurry to set a price. He acted as if he were simply chatting with a friend.

This comment struck Old Sun right where he was the most vulnerable, but doing his best to hide his uneasiness, he bluffed"

"This donkey … aah … this donkey is too hard to handle." He rubbed the scar on his forehead as if providing some sort of proof, at which the crowd burst out laughing. He added earnestly, "but, when it comes to work, this animal can't be beat."

"That's right!" the old man nodded in agreement. "Animals with strange temperaments are always good workers." Then walking around the donkey's hindquarters, he said casually:

"Leg out of joint?"

"Easily fixed. The donkey man can fix it in a minute," Old Sun explained, a bit too hastily. Some people in the crowd laughed again, and the old man smiled as he stroked his beard. Then he went on:

"It's hard to say. With a dislocated joint, if it is the kind that can be fixed all it needs is one switch of the whip, but if it is the kind that can't be fixed, all the yelling in the world won't help."

A strange diagnosis! This man must be an expert. A thought flashed through Old Sun's mind, and he asked abruptly:

"May I ask, your name is—"

"Wang Laoshang."

"Ahha!" Old Sun's guess had been correct. This was the same miracle doctor whom the veterinary station had got rid of ten years ago. No wonder he looked so familiar! Then, thinking of the comment about "the donkey man" which he had just made in front of all these people, he felt utterly embarrassed. He hurried over to shake Wang Laoshang's hand, saying distractedly:

"Excuse my poor memory. I haven't seen you for ten years. Mr. Wang; have things been going well for you?"

Wang Laoshang lost his job ten years ago, and had been sitting at home with nothing to do until just last year, when he was rehabilitated. As he was already getting on in years, the only convenient thing to do was to advise him to retire. His health and spirits had improved a great deal recently, and he had opened a small clinic in his house. It occurred to him, however, that anytime an animal outside the village was seriously ill he would have to pay a house call, and so, having made up his mind to buy himself a donkey, he had come to the market today.

He added that it would not be bad for business to put in an appearance at the livestock market. After buying a nice little donkey for himself, he had agreed to help some of his acquaintances to select livestock of their own. That was how he and his group of friends had come to consider this donkey.

With this introduction, Wang Laoshang pointed to the small group of old men and said politely to Old Sun:

"They are the people I'm helping. Why don't you suggest a price?"

Old Sun was deeply perplexed. Seeing so many peasants buying their own draft animals weakened his determination to sell the donkey. Giving up the animal now seemed very rash indeed. And now, hearing that Wang Laoshang had started his own private practice, he grew even more excited. Now, at last, this man could fully exercise his talents. As for himself, wasn't working for the four modernizations the same as fighting the Japanese had been in his day? And I have almost nothing to offer—just a whip and six legs, me and my donkey, to help the country and my fellow villagers as best I can! How selfish to always be worrying that a change in government policies will bring me misfortunes! If the policies had not changed in the last two years, would I have dared buy a donkey in the first place? Haven't I been able to find a wife for my son? Why was I so ready to believe any rumor that I heard? And, so what if there are changes! Things can only change according to what the people want.

Old Sun's mind was made up: he would be damned if he would sell this donkey! However, it was going to be difficult to back out now; having said he wanted to sell, how could he change his mind at the last minute?

He stood muttering to himself. Ahha! He had. an idea. He had originally aimed to sell the donkey for one hundred *yuan*, but he had changed his strategy. Holding out two fingers he said to Wang Laoshang:

"Here's my price," he thought to himself. "This will scare them away."

"Two hundred!" A few onlooker gasped in amazement. This old man was not playing fair.

Just then, a rough voice was heard from outside the circle of people, as a man elbowed his way to the center:

"How much? Two hundred for this rotten animal? It's an out and out crime!" It was the furious voice of the butcher, Hu Er.

"Fine! If you're not interested, that's your business," retorted Old Sun coolly. So saying, he untied the donkey and made as if to leave.

"Wait a minute! We're interested."

Wang Laoshang stepped forward, blocking his way. He grabbed the rope from Old Sun and turned to his friends:

"Who wants to buy?"

They stood nudging one another, nobody daring to open his mouth, each doing his best to retreat quickly and quietly. It was clear that they had not the slightest interest in buying the donkey. Old Sun chuckled to himself. Knowing perfectly well what was going through everyone's head Wang Laoshang laughed.

"I see everybody thinks the price is too high, but if the leg were healthy, I'd say it was too low, I think it's worth about"—he held out three fingers.

"Three hundred!" The onlookers gasped again. The group of old men still hesitated.

Wang Laoshang's smile suddenly disappeared, and he began rolling up his sleeves, warning those gathered around to see the fun:

"Everyone back up a few steps, please. Make room, please, make room."

Taking the whip from out of poor confused Old Sun's hand, he hid it behind his back. He told Old Sun to support the donkey's dangling right leg, while he walked slowly to the donkey's left front side. The crowd of onlookers was growing, all curious to see what sort of magic Wang Laoshang was about to perform, and they stepped back in silence to give him room. One could have heard a pin drop.

For about thirty seconds, Wang Laoshang stood quietly facing the donkey's left side. His eyes seemed kind, as he waited for the animal's apprehensions to disappear. Then, suddenly, with a great "Hey!" he gave the donkey's left ear a sharp thrash with the whip. Taken completely off guard, the donkey reared up, thereby placing the entire weight of its body on its left hindquarters, which made a slight crunching sound. When it had calmed down and placed all four feet firmly on the ground, the left hind leg had been forced back into its socket and was now the same length as the other three.

This technique, called "the magic whip," was well known but rarely seen. It simply used the animal's own body weight to force the bone back into the joint, and had proven far more effective than the usual rubbing technique.

Returning the whip and taking the rope from the hands of Old Sun, Wang Laoshang led the donkey twice around the ring formed by the onlookers. It limped only slightly from the pain; which had not yet had a chance to subside, but in every other respect the leg was as good as new. The onlookers sent up a cheer and broke into a round of applause.

At this point the people who had asked Wang Laoshang to help them buy a donkey came rushing forward, jostling one another for position.

"I'm buying!"

"I asked Mr. Wang first!"

"No, *I'm* buying!" The buyers were arguing heatedly when Old Sun suddenly shouted out:

"I'm not selling!"

Silence fell upon the crowd. All eyes were fixed on this old man with his donkey. Old Sun looked as red as a chicken which has just laid an egg. In one swift movement he snatched the rope from Wang Laoshang's hands and turned to leave.

So, the seller had gone back on his word! The crowd's mood changed abruptly. They looked from the face of the seller to the faces of the buyers and back again. What was going to happen?

One of the prospective buyers was an extremely thin old fellow, the same man, in fact, who had approached Old Sun initially. With a look of determination, he yelled to Old Sun:

"You've already set a price, and now you're not selling? Why the hell did you offer in the first place?"

A few others shouted in agreement, "You've got to sell now! What do you people say?" someone yelled to the crowd of onlookers.

"He'll sell after a good knock on the head!"

"Take the donkey first!"

And, with a cry, the small group of men rushed forward to wrestle the rope from Old Sun's hands.

Just in the nick of time, Wang Laoshang stepped up to the small crowd of buyers to call a truce and try to reason with them:

"Don't be ridiculous! There're plenty of donkeys for sale; go look for another one." He gave them a conciliatory smile, while the crowd joined in his efforts to calm everybody down.

As for Old Sun, having got what he wanted, he decided the best thing to do was to slip out of the mess as quickly as possible. Pushing through the crowd, as if deaf to the quarrel he was leaving behind, he threw himself onto the donkey's back, and with a loud "Gee-up! Go!" he was gone.

81.108 Sand River\fn{by Chung-hing Gosselin (1947-)} Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, China (F) 2

In the dark of night the long street pulsated like an icy river. Patrick was a bit late because the holiday was near, and traffic in the city had been so jammed. By the time he wheeled his fourteen-seat van up to *la place Denfert Rochereau,* people were already beginning to line up for soup.

Since the arrival of winter Patrick had already joined the charity group's soup kitchen several times, but it had always been at the city's north side location. This however was the south side site, and tonight was his first time.

He was still the one in charge of the temporary emergency shelter for the homeless. With the weather so cold (and it had been that way all winter) the season had already claimed the lives of several drifters.

Among the service workers this night, there were two Patrick already knew. In the grip of the frigid cold, beneath the glow of the street lights, he saw the folds and wrinkles on face after face, like slash marks left by the haphazard blade of an axe. Several reeked of alcohol, and a few were so drunk they weaved back and forth, seeming about to tumble into gutters by the wayside of life.

He put bowl after bowl of hot soup into the hands that stretched out to him in the dark, hands that were red, gnarled, and swollen. He then looked out at the bright and sparkling lights that shone with holiday spirit over the streets not far from *la place Denfert Rochereau.* He cast his eyes up the long and bustling street.

Patrick lifted his head from the steam that rose from the soup and saw a tall, good-sized man standing across from him. His back looked bent, but still he was big and tall. Hard to say how old he'd be. Maybe sixty-something? His face had so many lines it looked like he'd got a net draped over it.. The front of his head was half bald, and dirty gray hair hung down to his shoulders like the ancient mop-head of a fallen old witch. His two hands when he reached out for a bowl of soup were like a broken umbrella. They flashed several rings, one of which had the deep red hue of dried blood.

This bunch of wanderers with no roof over their heads had a thousand and one oddballs, and from early on Patrick had seen so many that they no longer looked strange to him.

They stood around in twos and threes in the cold wind, and chatted as they ate their supper and soup. He noticed the fiercest murmuring and sharpest voice belonged to the tall fellow with the white hair. He had no idea why such a group of men with troubles finding a place for sleep at night were actually talking about snow skiing and resort areas on snow covered mountains.

"That's kid stuff. I once put up a whole resort complex in a first rate fancy ski area …" The white-haired fellow's hoarse voice pierced the air and then fell. Some of the men were arguing, some laughing strangely, and some offering off-the-wall answers.

"This old codger comes here every night; says he used to be a successful architect, built a string of important things." An aide next to Patrick by the name of Jean-Louis shrugged his shoulders indifferently as he said the words in a low voice to Patrick.

Patrick couldn't help perking up his ears, because he was an architect himself. Economic conditions were far from normal, and things had been going down for a number of years. In a group like this, surely a number could have come from different professions and from warm homes and families. Lots of them had lost work, gotten divorced. First one drifter, then another, it really could happen, could knock them to the ground, make it impossible to get back on their feet again. If one of them had actually been an architect, well, it wasn't totally impossible.

"But this guy, hey," continued Jean-Louis, "he's a crazy dreamer. Makes no difference how you look at it, there's no way he was an architect. Well, I could believe he was on a work crew at a construction site." He took a deep breath. "There are lots of people around whose whole lives have collapsed. And even more with mental problems. A lot of folks claim they used to be the father of the Emperor, you know." Here and there were patches of two and three drifters standing around, eating, drinking and talking loudly in the cold wind. The voice of the white-haired one was the loudest, and seemed increasingly to ring like a cracked bell from the depths of time. It was a voice that relied on memories to clang out answers from empty caves.

"He says he and his partner, a fellow architect, used to have an office by the *Champs-Élysées*, in the most classy area. Later he and his partner had a falling out and finally everything just fell to pieces …" Jean-Louis was gathering things together as he rambled on. Suddenly startled, Patrick's mind flew like a bee line to the white-haired man's words.

"Call me Tandourin. On the Alps, I built the *Cîmes 2000.* Then on the *Côte d'azur,* I built the *Flots Bleus.* Who hasn't heard of those?"

Patrick didn't hear his name clearly, but his heart leapt in his chest. Things were more or less cleaned up now, and he purposely stepped closer to hear what he was saying.

"The *Val des Rois* on the banks of the Loire River and the *Escapade Verte* in the Vosges Forest." The voice continued to hollow out a space amid all the noise. People on four sides of him didn't bother to even listen, except for one man, that is.

"And also Corsica Island's 'Napoleon Garden,' Normandy's 'Apple Village' …"

These names first welled up inside Patrick's heart before he heard them on the lips of the old white-haired man. "Did you say your name was Tan so and so?" Patrick leaned forward to ask him. He stared closely at the man's face, and by now his heart was pounding. "Tandourin," he answered. Patrick's heart was hammering as he

heard the man murmur, “Hey old Brother! Not one of them heard a word I was saying. Nobody knows this famous architecture.”

“I’ve heard of it.” Patrick said it softly, and his voice dispersed like bone ashes in the cold air. But the old white-haired man didn’t even hear Patrick’s words. It wasn’t that he was drunk, only befuddled, like someone who had all but vanished in the thick of river made of quicksand. He stood there almost comatose before the middle-aged man staring at him.

Patrick looked him straight in the face, and saw how the wrinkles and lines fell across its texture like a many-sided net. It was like searching among the ruins for the scars of glory. Surely it was he! The thick bushy eyebrows, the aquiline nose, he who once appeared as nothing less than a classical carving no one dare touch, the one he worshipped as his idol …

That year Patrick turned twenty-one. He was studying architecture in college and was looking for a temporary summer job but didn’t have the faintest idea where to start. Through the help of friends, he landed himself a job at a master architect’s office near *Champs-Élysées*. Work at the office was already a whirl of motion, not to mention the “Napoleon Garden” project which was behind schedule. Aids were needed, and that was how Patrick got his first job.

Patrick had come from a quiet, simple town nearby, but this was a place of bustle and bustle, with traffic a constant roar and snarl. His eyes were dazzled. Business was booming at the master architect’s office. One project came along, and then another. Patrick’s colleagues were brilliant, efficient, and incredibly busy. His two bosses were both master builders in their forties. The short thin one’s specialty was design, and the big tall one’s, management. He was especially adept at handling clients. He wore his hair shoulder length, and dressed in the latest vogue, keeping abreast with the times. On his hands he always wore an assortment of large rings. This gave him the touch of an artist, and hinted at a knack for social relations. Seeing him with a champagne glass in hand, and with the champagne the sparkling color of gold, laughing his way through a company of well-dressed and *coiffured* guests, shining like a celestial star, shy Patrick was dumb-struck.

They built many a vacation resort in places known for their natural beauty. The tall boss was always flying off somewhere, to some towering mountains and great seashores, places Patrick had never been to. Looking at the blueprints and the scaled models of the building projects, Patrick felt transported. The fact is, at that time he had never even sat in an airplane. Patrick was thoroughly impressed by the tall brilliant boss. So it went on—everyone would work peacefully back in the office, when the tall one would return from afar. The doors would bang with commotion, the sound of loud laughter would ring in the air, and there would follow an exchange of hellos and how-are-yous. One time he marched in with his arms full of flowers freshly picked from down south, and handed them out to the women employees. It was as if he held the sun in his hands. Another time he rolled in from the east coast with bottles of white wine and shared them with everyone in the office … When we had a rare chance to sit down and chat with him, he’d offer a briefing on a series of flourishing, dazzling building plans.

“Life is in the palm of our hands, and we’ve got to give it the spark it needs to turn into a roaring flame.” When he threw words around like that, it was always in a comical, half-joking manner, and yet he seemed to have the flair and solid stature to support their meaning, as if he could make it happen. There was nothing arrogant about him, but he was in this constant circle of never-ending motion and never noticed the existence of a young man burying himself in the maneuver of levels and triangles.

Patrick worked for the company for two or three months. It was really an eye-opening experience, but he never heard from the company afterwards. Many years had since passed by. Now when he sat down in a train heading back to the suburbs at sundown, carrying with him the weariness of the day, watching the rice paddies and farmhouses quietly recede outside the window, day in and day out, month after month, year after year, Patrick couldn’t help dreaming what it might have been had his life been a story of success and glory. and wondered if he might have brushed with destiny but missed his chance to soar high. Then in his mind there would appear a form both tall and large, with chest outstretched, and hail; down to the shoulders. The eyebrows were thick, the nose long. The hands would glow with rings of many a hue and shape. He would carry the conversation with chatter and laughter, like a master magician juggling his life like a tiny round globe in his palm … Tandourin.

In this moment, as he stood opposite that face in the fierce cold wind, he felt he was recognizing a corpse. It was obvious that Tandourin hadn’t the faintest memory of the young fellow standing in front of him. What kind of crazy wind was this that beat him into such a decrepit state, anyway?

Patrick had a sudden thought: perhaps Tandourin could recognize him if he showed him his driver’s license with his twenty-year old photograph still on it. So he reached into his pocket and touched the leather billfold with his IDs in it. Yes, inside was his picture at twenty, frozen in time like fossils sealed in rocks. It would have

reminded this old man of his lost paradise. Then in a fleeting instant, he decided not to bring the picture out.

Nor did he say another word. The old man bobbed and weaved as Patrick steadied him into the van. Patrick passed the side of Jean-Louis and said in a low voice:

"He's not crazy. He used to be a successful architect, really."

Jean-Louis was surprised.

The air seemed to be filled with very thin ice. The bronze lion statue stood motionless in the center of *la place.* The colorful lights shone furiously. Patrick was accustomed to shuttling those whose lives had been a losing streak. But, tonight, his cargo seemed particularly heavy.

181.132 Excerpt from **A Generation Lost: China Under The Cultural Revolution**\fn{by Zi-ping Luo (1947-)}
Shanghai, China (F) 7

… Let me start when I was born.\fn{This novel constructed as a series of letters; I have edited away that framework as not germain to the subject at hand:H}

I rushed to meet the new world with the first rays of dawn in the year 1950. The enormous midwife brought me to my exhausted mother, saying cheerily,

"Congratulations, Mrs. Tan! It looks like you'll be buying another pink dress!"

My mother stared at me in disappointment. Since she already had a daughter, she had wanted a boy; instead, she had a less-than-appealing baby girl. The eyes were spaced too far apart and, although the head was round enough, the face had a distasteful flatness about it. While she couldn't make out the exact shape of the nose in the dim light, she could tell that it was not a pleasing one.

The midwife left the delivery room to inform the waiting family. After expressing his joy and relief that both mother and daughter were safe, my father turned to the little girl who sat next to him on the bench, dangling her legs playfully.

"Rei-qing, you have a new sister! How do you feel about it? Are you happy?"

My sister, four years older than I, quickly nodded yes. The midwife went back to check on my mother. Instead of finding the fatigued woman she had left only moments before, she saw that my mother was refreshed and strong.

"Look," my mother said. "She already knows how to smile!"

*

"We'll call her Xi-ou," said Chun-pu Chu, the most renowned artist of the age. As my father's mentor, the task of naming me fell to him. From a large red envelope that he had designed and painted, Chun-pu Chu produced a piece of silk twine strung with washer-shaped pieces of copper symbolizing ancient Chinese currency. The ornament was a traditional gift to wish the newborn long life and prosperity.

"This way, she'll have two names. You can name her Xi-ou, but at home, she can be 'Shiou' Tan." When pronounced as one syllable, the word is Mandarin for "beautiful."

"She was certainly born at the right time," he continued, "at the birth of the People's Republic of China. Xi-ou: the bird of hope, the dove of peace. She is the hope for the future, the fighter for freedom and equality."

My mother's wish for a boy came true three years later with my brother, Jian-nan. He was followed by another, Chi-kai, three years later. Still, every time I heard stories about my birth from my parents, I thought I heard my mother say,

"Look, she already knows how to smile!"

*

But life did not smile back. In 1958, when I was seven, my father, the editor of an encyclopedia at a prestigious publishing house, was branded a Rightist during the Anti-Rightist Movement that began in 1957. Though he had spent most of his life working for the revolution, jealous colleagues manipulated him into a vulnerable position. He was exiled to the isolated province of Qinghai, near Tibet. My mother, a journalist and novelist, also came under accusation. She was kept in Shanghai as a forced laborer so that she could take care of her four children.

Two years later, when I was nine, my father returned. The high altitude of Qinghai had taken its toll; he came home almost dead from anemia. I accompanied him on his visits to the Party chiefs to obtain the necessary papers allowing a permanent move back home from Qinghai. These officials were often rude or belittling, so one of the first things I learned in life was endurance, whether it was for embarrassment in school, society's vicious discrimination, or the harsh poverty forced upon me.

*

On a cloudy May morning in 1966, when I was fourteen, my sister and I went to the courthouse to eavesdrop on a trial. A man named Ji-wang Bai allegedly had conspired with two other people to defect to Hong Kong. He had confided in his sister and brother-in-law, who strongly urged him against it, but, unheeding, he attempted to cross the border in secret. The friends with whom he had planned to escape betrayed him, and he was arrested before the train had left the outskirts of Shanghai. The sister and brother-in-law were charged with failure to report the incident.

The trial had lasted a year and a half, and today, at last, the sentence would be handed down. Ji-wang Bai was my uncle, and my parents the sister and brother-in-law in question. Trials were not open to the public; only my uncle, mother, and father were present besides the magistrate, the court recorder, and two or three people from the Public Security Office.

Rei-qing kept guard while I climbed up the walls to find the room where the trial was being held. I grasped the bars on the window and pressed my ear to the wall to listen. The verdict was long, full of legal jargon and Communist Party propaganda. When the magistrate read that both of my parents were to be sentenced to seven years, I nearly lost my grip. My father was granted clemency to see doctors, but my mother was to be put into jail immediately.

The words exploded in my brain: For 2,555 days I would be a child without a mother.

Although we waited in the lobby for a full hour after the verdict was read, Father did not appear. Already very late for school, I could wait no longer. I had missed all of my four morning classes. When I raced through the school gates, the clock read 1:10. I pushed through the door, perspiration beading my forehead. Teacher Peng was writing something on the blackboard. At the sound of the door opening, he turned, drawing his eyebrows together in disapproval.

“Xi-ou Tan, why are you so late?” he asked sternly.

“I, I …”

Fifty-four pairs of eyes stared at me, and my stomach tightened.

“Very well, take your seat and explain it to me immediately after class.”

Teacher Peng turned back to the blackboard and continued writing his three questions. His handwriting’s slant to the right mirrored his body’s slight disfigurement. First he wrote,

“Why is Tan’s paper so much better than the others?” The second comment was,

“What made Tan’s paper so much more vivid and touching than any other even though everyone was working with the same subject matter?” The third and final comment was,

“What in particular demonstrates the superior writing quality of Tan’s paper?”

I opened my notebook and started to copy the questions, but my mind was still a thousand miles away. The words did not make any sense to me, and Teacher Peng’s handwriting did not help matters. Who was “Tanspaper?” I nudged my neighbor with my elbow and asked,

“What is he talking about?”

My best friend and seatmate, Ah-di Chen, giggled and opened her mouth to speak, but before she could tell me, the teacher had already turned around to find the disturbance. Ah-di jotted down something on the corner of a piece of paper, quietly tore it off, and passed it to me.

“Tanspaper means ‘Tan’s paper’—Xi-ou Tan’s paper!”

In today’s class, Teacher Peng would be commenting on the essays we wrote for the previous week’s assignment, *People’s Good Servant, Jiao Yu-lu.* Just as my mind began to reorient itself, the dismissal bell rang.

“Now,” Teacher Peng said, “I have mimeographed Xi-ou Tan’s paper and am giving each of you a copy. After break, we will divide into small groups and discuss it. For the last twenty minutes, I will give my own views on it.” He walked over to my desk and fixed his small, penetrating eyes on me.

“Xi-ou, this was an outstanding composition. I am going to recommend that this paper be entered in the Shanghai middle-school writing competition.”

I managed a faint smile. Sweat had pasted my hair to my forehead and my cheeks still burned from the long run from the courthouse. My heart had not yet slowed to a normal pace, and I was petrified Teacher Peng would ask me why I was late. Luckily, I was rescued when Old Man Xue, a former faculty member who was doing forced physical labor after being denounced in the 1957 Anti-Rightist Movement, appeared at the door. He bowed subserviently to Teacher Peng.

“What’s the matter with you?” Teacher Peng asked impatiently, making no move to invite the old man into the room.

“I would like to take some time off to go to the hospital to see an eye doctor.” He raised his head, exposing a

badly blackened right eye.

"What is it this time?" Teacher Peng asked in rage. "Today it's a black eye, last week it was a broken thumb, before that you broke three ribs. Tomorrow you'll probably come in with a gash on your check! Why do you always want to go to the hospital? Are you trying to avoid doing your share of manual labor?"

"No, no, Teacher Peng, I would never malinger! I was careless before; I promise I'll be more careful in the future."

Teacher Peng grabbed the excuse form and quickly signed his name. He was the chairman of a committee appointed to make sure that Old Man Xue was not performing any anti-Revolutionary activities.

*

The bell rang, ending the afternoon break. The students filed in and took their seats, and the discussion began. The room buzzed with voices as all the students tried to make their points at once. My thoughts were lost in the morning's events and I became oblivious to what was going on around me.

I was startled back to my surroundings by a shout.

Xiao-yi Wu now held the attention of the entire class.

"Here in this composition, Xi-ou says, 'Anyone who has ever made a mistake but corrected it is a good comrade.' What does this mean? Is Chairman Mao a good comrade? Has Chairman Mao ever made a mistake?"

Teacher Peng patiently tried to explain.

"Comrade Jiao Yu-lu was trying to unite all the comrades who had made mistakes in the past but had corrected them in order to further the cause of the Revolution."

"Don't try to avoid my question!" Xiao-yi Wu interrupted. "Answer me! Is Chairman Mao a good comrade? Has Chairman Mao ever made a mistake?"

The sensitive nature of the question terrified Teacher Peng, and he had difficulty formulating a response.

"Well, of course, Chairman Mao is a good comrade, and he has always been great and wise—"

"Don't beat around the bush! Tell me! Has he ever made a mistake?" Xiao-yi Wu demanded.

"Of course not, of course the Chairman has never made a mistake," Teacher Peng said automatically, as though he were raising his arm to block a blow to his face.

"Well, all right then. In that case, this composition is anti-Revolutionary," Xiao-yi Wu said confidently, and rose to his feet ready to leave. "I refuse to join this discussion!"

The classroom was silent.

Teacher Peng, a master teacher and Party member for more than ten years, dispelled the controversy with a wave of his hand.

"Well, class, Xiao-yi Wu has raised a very important question. Your discussion groups will now go over the question that he has brought up." He looked at his watch and continued,

"There are only twenty minutes left, and I had planned to summarize the discussion, but now I think that it is better if all of you continue. Tomorrow, I will use the first twenty minutes of your Chinese composition class to summarize." He paused and asked,

"Xiao-yi, what do you think of this arrangement?"

Xiao-yi Wu shrugged his shoulders nonchalantly and sat down, obviously satisfied with himself. Because his father was a high official in the Revolutionary government, Xiao-yi Wu was one of the young people honored by the title *Son of the Revolution*. This automatically made him a leader and a powerful threat. He was popular with the girls in the class, and many of them tried to catch his eye. I found nothing attractive about him, and I despised the way he looked down on other people. I was not surprised by his behavior, but I was shocked by Teacher Peng's handling of the situation.

*

While Teacher Peng frequently humiliated people like the Rightist Old Man Xue, he was generally a good judge of character and did not base his opinions on people's backgrounds. My parents had been labeled Rightists just like Old Man Xue, yet he was still supportive of me. Why such a secure and intelligent man should back down rather than confront Xiao-yi Wu was hard to understand.

My temples throbbed as I raised my hand to speak. I had once been comfortable arguing a point in public, but after 1957, when my parents were branded as Rightists, I preferred to stay in the background. I feigned shyness to deflect the jealousy of two girls who were class president and chairman of the Youth League. When we began middle school together, we were on the same level, but within a few years, I had surpassed them academically. When I resigned my post as class vice president in charge of studies, I lost all of my opportunities to distinguish myself, which deflected the envy of the two girls for a while. However, since I had more time for study, my

schoolwork improved even more.

The chairman of the Youth League sat behind me. Whenever she sharpened her pencil, she blew the graphite dust onto my spotless white shirt, chanting,

"Let one half be white, let one half be black, let one half be clean, let one half be dirty."

Ah-di would get angry, but I would laugh it off. For eight years I had been taunted by my classmates, and there was no more harm anyone could do me. Today, however, the controversy confronting me was far more serious, one I could not brush off as a prank. If I did not stand up now, I would be sealing my own political fate as well as that of my parents, who were already in trouble with the authorities.

I decided to fight back.

"I disagree with Xiao-yi Wu's point of view. All I wanted to say in my essay was that it is a good thing to see a mistake and correct it. When I wrote this paper, I had no intention of saying anything critical about Chairman Mao. This has nothing to do with the Chairman, and I don't know why Xiao-yi Wu is bringing him into the picture."

"Let me ask *you*," Xiao-yi Wu interrupted. "Is Chairman Mao a good comrade?"

I ignored the question:

"Those who make mistakes and correct them are good comrades, but this doesn't mean that good comrades necessarily make mistakes. If you understand the logic involved, then this statement is not wrong, even as it relates to Chairman Mao." Before Xiao-yi Wu could respond, the chairman of the Youth League rose abruptly and burst out,

"Xi-ou is trying to sneak out of this. There is a severe class struggle going on right now that everyone in the room should be aware of."

Teacher Peng obviously had lost control, and his sudden inability to deal with the situation in the classroom irritated him. The bell rang, signaling the end of the school day.

"Very good, class, tomorrow in our Chinese composition class we will continue the discussion."

*

After class, I ran home at full speed to see if my father had actually been released. When I entered the house and found him and my sister sitting face-to-face, I burst into tears. My father took out a handkerchief and handed it to me.

"After the sentencing, I went to the judge's chambers to see if he would release your mother in my place on the grounds that she is more essential to raising you children than I am. I also pointed out that she was still recovering from a major operation that left her very weak. The judge rejected the request, but I'll submit a formal written request later."

I was furious.

"Father, why do we have to accept this ruling? Can't we appeal?" He shook his head.

"No, if we ask for an appeal, things will only be worse. I remember back in 1957, the people who had asked for appeals after being convicted as Rightists were immediately condemned as enemies of the people. They were exiled to Mongolia or Qinghai, as I was, where they died of hunger and exhaustion. Appealing would just be beating our heads against the wall."

I quietly put down my schoolbags and went into the kitchen. I was so hurt by the realization that we would be without my mother that, for the first time in my life, I did not relate the day's events over the dinner table. I did not want to add the terror of the class debate to the family's worries.

My two brothers were too young to understand what was happening. Father and Rei-qing were so absorbed in discussing the wording of the formal request for Mother's release, they did not notice my mood. After we finished eating, I cleared the table and asked permission to be excused to do my homework. When I finished, I browsed through the books of Marx, Engels, Lenin, and Mao Zedong to find ammunition for the debate.

I had trouble sleeping that night. If I could not prevail the next day, I would be branded as anti-Mao and most likely sent to reform school for my political heresies. My family would certainly suffer ostracism forever. It was late, and the world was quiet. I opened my eyes wide and stared at the dark sky outside my window. The hours slipped away and I heard my neighbor's white kitten knock over a windowbox. I jumped out of bed and scribbled in my notebook,

"A cat has four legs, but everything with four legs is not necessarily a cat."

*

The next morning, several girls avoided me in the schoolyard. My nervousness increased, but when I entered the classroom, Ah-di's bright smile helped calm me.

Ah-di was from a working-class family. Instead of doing homework, she preferred to spend her time at the opera, where one tragic scene could make her cry for hours. When she began sitting next to me in class, I realized that she was not stupid, as she would say, she had just never learned to study. I taught her a few of my tricks, and her grades improved. We became close friends, and I learned from her a way of life far different from my own.

"Three generations of my family made bricks in a kiln," she told me. "When my sister entered ninth grade, she took me to the examination center so I could take the test to get into school. She met a boy there and quit school to marry him. He catches fish in the lakes around Shanghai and brings them into the city to sell. He makes a lot of money that way. I'm the intellectual of my family."

How romantic, I thought, to bake bricks and catch fish and quit school and get married! For a moment, I longed for a life without complications.

"What about you? What's your family like?"

I looked away briefly. Ah-di knew that I came from a bad, intellectual family, but she never allowed her pure working-class blood to get in the way of our friendship. The sister who had quit school to get married had the privilege of returning whenever she wanted and could continue her studies as long as she did not fail. On the other hand, my sister, Rei-qing, who had won a citywide competition in mathematics, took the university entrance exam twice and was turned down.

After the second refusal, she went to the Shanghai Office of Educational Testing and Admissions to find out her score. The administrator would not see her, but she later received the following letter:

> Comrade Rei-qing,
>
> We have received your request for admission to the university. We are denying it.
>
> It is clear that you either do not understand the concept of loyalty to the Party or are acting selfishly in seeking to advance your own goals rather than the goals of the Party. You should understand by now our concept of "one red heart, but two life paths." Our criteria for admissions are not based solely on scores.
>
> Regardless of this, you should be prepared to go where the Party tells you, to follow the life path the Party has chosen for you. Your duty is to go to the remote countryside and work there.
>
> The Party has made its decision. Do not submit another request.
>
> Revolutionarily yours,
> The Committee

I felt sick. If I told Ah-di that my sister could not get into college because of her scholastic ability, she would know it was a lie. If I told her that it was because of a bad family background, that would lead to a series of embarrassing questions.

"Do you have a sister?" Ah-di asked.

"Yes, I do. I also have two brothers." I stood up quickly. "I'm going to the library," I said, and left the room. I went into the bathroom instead, closed the door, and cried. When I returned to my seat, Ah-di asked me why I was crying.

"I wasn't crying," I lied, blushing with shame. "I just had something caught in my eye."

*

When the bell rang to begin class, the principal entered, along with the Party secretary overseeing the operations of the school. As a loyal Party member, Teacher Peng had reported yesterday's incident to his superiors. His nervousness exaggerated the slant of his body as he wrote the "controversial" statement on the blackboard. At the class president's command, the entire class rose. Ah-di reached over and grasped my hand firmly.

Teacher Peng cleared his throat.

"Secretary, Principal, students, yesterday we discussed Xi-ou's essay on *People's Good Servant, Jiao Yu-Lu.* Xiao-yi Wu has excellent political acumen. He made a deep interpretation of the statement referring to the man who corrects his mistakes, and he expressed his doubts as to its political acceptability. We appreciate such comments. I reported yesterday's events to the secretary and the principal, and they have chosen to attend our class today to observe our discussion. Everyone will have a chance to participate, as our visitors are interested in each individual's opinion on this matter. First, let us welcome our Party Secretary Zhang and Principal Chen and show our appreciation for their taking time out from their busy schedules to be with us today." Teacher Peng applauded and the class joined in.

Xiao-yi Wu repeated his statement that my essay was anti-Mao and the class president and chairman of the Youth League rose, belligerently parroting Revolutionary slogans. When the commotion subsided, I raised my hand.

"Very well," Teacher Peng said. "Now we listen to Xi-ou's opinion. I hope that after hearing the wisdom of her classmates, her understanding will have been elevated."

His noncommittal opening remarks dashed my hopes. My sole comfort had been the knowledge that Teacher Peng was on my side—that of reason, not ignorant mob rule. Now I was on my own.

"I have read over my composition and feel that I have progressed in my understanding of the meaning of this particular sentence. I am glad to say that I can explain it more clearly. I stand by what I said yesterday, 'One who makes mistakes and corrects them is a good comrade, but a good comrade does not necessarily make mistakes.' This is an example of a converse statement. Comrades who make mistakes and correct them are only one type of good comrade. The other type of good comrade is one who never makes mistakes. There is no unique correspondence between 'good comrades' and 'those who make mistakes.' Therefore it does not follow that good comrades have necessarily made mistakes.

Another example is a cat. All of us know that a cat has four legs, but we also know that many things have four legs, and yet are not cats, such as cows, sheep, and dogs. If we say, 'Tables have four legs' can we then also conclude that a table is a cat?"

The classroom was silent. Teacher Peng seemed to be thinking so hard that he forgot to ask me to sit down. Only when Ah-di raised her hand to ask permission to speak did his attention return to the class. Teacher Peng snapped uncharacteristically,

"Ah-di, you also want to speak? Just stand up; Xi-ou, sit down."

I was surprised. Although Ah-di could be boisterous with her friends, she scarcely uttered a word in class, and then only when asked. For her to raise her hand was something novel indeed.

"Xiao-yi Wu infinitely extrapolated Xi-ou's remarks to extend to Chairman Mao, and it was unfair. I am angry with Xiao-yi Wu for doing this!" She sat down.

Xiao-yi Wu stood up, panting like a hungry wolf who has just seen its prey escape into an unseen hole.

"You, you …" he began. "You are subservers to the Revolution!"

He had actually meant to say "subversive," but Xiao-yi Wu's mastery of language left much to be desired. Teacher Peng was mortified by his pupil's incorrect usage of Chinese, especially in the presence of the principal and the Party secretary. He had no choice but to correct him.

"Xiao-yi Wu, you meant to use the word *subversives* to accuse them of being anti-Revolutionaries. What you actually said was that they are loyal followers of Chairman Mao!"

The class laughed uproariously.

"You bourgeois intellectual!" Xiao-yi Wu shouted. "You are repressing Revolutionary students!"

Xiao-yi Wu had a sidekick named Zheng-gou Wang, who sometimes acted as his adviser. Zheng-gou was from a bourgeois family that was particularly looked down upon, so he sought every opportunity to ingratiate himself with the Revolutionaries in the class. He came from Canton and thus acquired the nickname of Canton Kiss Up.

Canton Kiss Up rose, cleared his throat, adjusted his glasses, and drawled:

"Recently, all the important newspapers and magazines have begun a very serious discussion of our loyal comrade Yao Wen-yuan's *exposé* of the anti-Revolutionary conspiracy. Such anti-Revolutionaries use their novels and plays to falsely accuse Chairman Mao and the Party's Central Committee. Therefore, there are some people who wish to use literature for their own anti- Revolutionary ends. There are also some people who wish to protect these enemies of our Revolutionary society."

The class murmured in confusion. Canton Kiss Up surveyed the reaction to his address, smiled with malicious satisfaction, and sat down. Teacher Peng checked his watch. Forcing a smile, he addressed the secretary and the principal, who were seated in the last row of the classroom, and asked them deferentially,

"Secretary Zhang and Principal Chen, do you have anything you wish to add?"

The administrators put down their notes and waved their hands to signify that they had nothing to say.

"Well, class, after these two in-depth discussions, we have clarified many issues in our minds. Such discussions are very healthy and beneficial to all pursuing the furthering of the Communist Revolutionary Ideals —"

Xiao-yi Wu interrupted yet again.

"Well, who is right?"

"Who is right is not what is important. What is important is the raising of consciousness brought about by this discussion."

"But, it's the difference between the Revolutionary and the anti-Revolutionary! How can you say it isn't important?"

"After class, I will be glad to discuss this further with you."
"A Communist is not afraid to openly express his point of view. Wen-shai Peng, we demand a direct answer."
Teacher Peng smiled and dismissed the class. …

192.91 Eight Hundred Metres Below\fn{by Sun Shaoshan (1947-)} Shandong Province, China (M) 7

The earthquake stranded four men in a shaft eight hundred metres below ground where they were squashed into a corner by a huge rock fall. Eight hours later they had hewn out a path with their picks only to find all exits to the surface blocked. They were practically buried alive. As they had come to this particular shaft to do a quick job, nobody knew they were there. What could anyone do even if they knew their exact location? It would take six months to reach them with the normal methods.

They could only wait for death to come. Their lives would ebb away slowly through cold and hunger. Death would only take them when it got tired of toying with them. Despair gnawed at their hearts. Someone began to groan.

Zhang Kun, the foreman, was a small man of fifty-five. His eyes were bleary from having worked forty years underground but they had a fierce expression. Now their steely coldness was menacing. He fixed them on everyone in turn before saying,

"Keep cool. We aren't dead yet."

That gave them a shred of hope. According to Zhang, if he remembered clearly, behind the wall of coal was a deserted seam from which all the coal had been mined dozens of years back. If they could make their way there, they could escape though an air shaft, that is, if it hadn't collapsed. Anyway, it was a forlorn hope.

Leng Xijun, a miner in his thirties and the strongest among them, threw all his weight behind his pick, sending sparks and bits of coal flying, permeating the area with the smell of sulphur. He wielded his pick tackling the wall of coal, despair and fear transformed into hatred. To live he must break through it, but it was harder than rock. With only his pick, it was an impossible task even in normal circumstances.

Wang Jiang, the youngest, was barely twenty. He was a despondent middle-school graduate, who had failed to pass the university entrance exam four months previously.

The middle-aged man with a long neck like a grasshopper was nicknamed "Chatterbox" because he talked non-stop and was a poor worker. He was amazed at Leng, who hadn't eaten all day, hacking away for all he was worth.

Leng admired only Zhang, a man who courageously faced any hardship, but he was getting old. The task of finding a way out naturally fell on his shoulders.

*

Suddenly, Leng was asked to stop. Startled he halted. His three friends put their ears to the opposite wall listening hard.

Thud, thud, thud!

Such a rhythmic sound could only be made by man. Surprised, he walked over and knocked the wall with his pick. He got a response. The sound of knocking can carry through a twenty-metre thick wall of coal. Judging by the loudness of this sound, the wall was only two to three metres thick. The sound of a voice, however, can only carry through a thickness of half a millimetre, so they could not find out who was on the other side. Chatterbox straightened up and announced,

"I know who it is."

"Who?"

"Li Gui."

Doubtless it was that rascal, no, thief! No one else could be in the area. They were a team of five men. At the first tremor, Li Gui had run off with all their bread, and was cut off from them when the roof collapsed. He must have thought the earthquake was a cave-in, in which case he would wait until rescued, eating everybody else's bread. He had never dreamed of being stuck in such an impasse and now had to beg help from those he had robbed.

Everybody fell silent. The man had stolen their means of survival eight hours ago. Did they want to save him? The ticking of their watches could be heard in the silence. Zhang commanded,

"Break through it!"

He pointed at the wall separating them from Li. There was no response from the tall miner.

"Did you hear me?" the old man demanded.

He was an absolute authority in this world of darkness. Even the mine director obeyed him when Zhang led a rescue operation after an accident, his short arms waving vigorously as he snapped out orders left and right like a general commanding an army. The tall miner replied bluntly,

"Nothing doing!"

"Why?"

"You know why."

"My orders don't count any more?"

"Of course they do. You were appointed foreman by the mine Party committee and the bureau Party committee agreed. But, as things go now, we're all facing death and death is the great leveller. It's hard to say who should give orders."

"But remember, we miners should always die together. We can't leave a man to die!"

"I don't want to die with him."

Nowadays the younger generation had minds of their own and could best their elders in arguments. Exasperated, Zhang shouted to the rest of his team members,

"What are you doing then? Take his pick." He forgot he had only two men under his command now, and neither was Leng's match.

"I dare you!" Leng looked murderous, raising his pick above him. Embarrassed when no one made a move, he confessed,

"I'm not being mean. But we're like clay buddhas crossing a river. We've no guarantee we'll survive, so who wants to be lumbered with that bastard? Let's put it to a vote. If the majority are prepared to die for him, I'll do the same."

No one was over-anxious to save Li Gui. What kind of a man was he? Let's examine his relationship with others.

*

As luck would have it, the first day the unfortunate middle-school graduate Wang Jiang began working in the shaft his path crossed Li Gui's. Wang's tub was derailed and, try as he might, he couldn't get it back on the track. Li, the only one behind him, looked on with folded arms and a smile. When Wang finally gave up, he walked over and said,

"Don't you want your coal any more?"

"No," replied Wang, utterly helpless.

"Sorry about that, little brother. I'll take it."

Strong as an ox, Li heaved and righted the tub and slowly hitched it to his own, leaving the gaping Wang rooted to the spot. They were on piece work. Wang had pulled the tub and filled it with coal and now would not get a cent for his back-breaking work since Li had just appropriated it. Furious, he felt he couldn't bear to be a miner. Later Li often taunted him,

"Might means right down here, little one." Once, when Li was pushing his tub too quickly down a slope Wang warned him,

"Take care, somebody's walking ahead."

This only prompted Li to give the tub a sudden shove so that it rumbled down even faster. If the man hadn't nimbly leaped out of the way the tub with its load of half a ton of coal would have sent him flying. Wang was almost scared out of his wits while Li remarked flippantly,

"It went so fast, I couldn't brake it!" Wang indignantly exposed him, but he retorted,

"If I hadn't let go of the tub, who would make way for me?" Then he tried to appease Wang by giving him a friendly tip.

"Nowadays everyone looks after number one."

Yes, he was only thinking of saving his own skin when he grabbed all their bread. Had the world really come to that? The apprentice miner wondered.

*

Chatterbox was filled with a sense of satisfaction knowing that Li was trapped. Heaven is just, he thought. The rascal has got what he deserved. His long thin neck had suffered a lot at Li's big hands. Whenever a quarrel arose, Li would pin him down, clutching his neck with his pincer-like hands, almost breaking it and demanding,

"Tell me, Chatterbox, do you dare to argue with me?"

"No, I don't."

"Who's in the wrong?"

"I am." Chatterbox only dared to curse under his breath behind his back.

"Son of a bitch! Some day you'll die a violent death if Heaven is just."

Li was cunning as a fox. The accidents he had been in maimed his work-mates but never him. He always came out in one piece.

"This time the old fox is caught," thought Chatterbox. "Thank heavens!"

Everyone is pleased when a bad person is punished. But if one is given a rod and told, "Teach him a lesson!" it isn't so easy. Now Leng's suggestion of voting was like putting a rod in everyone's hands. Chatterbox, who since childhood had been used to receiving blows instead of giving them, did not know what to do.

*

Leng had first seen Li in a bathhouse soon after he joined this team. A large, dark, naked man was groping about in the public baths.

"There are more wolves than meat," he cursed. "I just dropped a big cake of soap. Which bastard picked it up?"

His knotted muscles intimidated even Leng, who was six feet tall and a basketball player. When Leng happened to step on the cake of soap, he hesitated and then refrained from saying anything or picking it up for him. But that episode made him wary of Li.

Strong as Li was, no one wanted to be his partner. His temper drove everyone away, so he had to work alone. If somebody brushed against him or inadvertently stepped on his foot, he would pay him back right away. When the other man explained he had done it accidentally, Li would retort with a glare,

"Me too!"

At the break one day, a piece of coal falling from the roof had hit his head. He jumped up and his eyes narrowed, scrutinizing everyone. But he kept calm. The following day, Leng found him sitting all by himself in the same spot throwing coal at the roof, trying to figure out who had taken him unawares the day before. Leng shuddered.

No one dared to stop Li when he pushed his rumbling tub like a tank. Even the tall basketball player was all nerves, wondering if he happened to get in Li's way, should he step aside for him like the others? He was afraid to cross his path, yet at the same time he longed to pit his will against Li's. He felt that sooner or later, they would clash. But it had never happened. Li had cunningly sensed the tension between them and greeted Leng cordially every morning. Leng had told people more than once,

"Three years with Li in one team is enough to turn anyone into a beast."

He had snatched up a pick to attack Li when he was dirty enough to steal all the bread. But a stronger tremor had separated them. Now he was asked to save Li with the same pick. Hell, no!

*

At the end of 1980 there was a lot of talk when the bonuses were being handed out. The workers each got three hundred *yuan*, while members of the revolutionary committee got nine hundred. The workers complained that the cadres had grabbed too much money, while the cadres retorted that the workers were greedy, not satisfied with getting three hundred *yuan* for nothing. Li was the only one who considered the division reasonable. He said,

"Listen, when good cadres grab money, I support them. They're at least practical. Everyone likes money. Beware of those who don't reach out for those crisp notes. They're ambitious like Lin Biao and the Gang of Four. They want more money. They're really bad, devouring people without even spitting out their bones This is what the world has come to."

Old Zhang, who happened to hear this, was infuriated. He wasn't a money-grubber. A Party member for thirty years, he was the only one of the thirteen leading cadres to give up his bonus, feeling his good salary was ample reward. He didn't want a lot of money and he was not ambitious. He was due to retire after three months. He had cried,

"You're talking rubbish, Li Gui! So anyone who refuses to take the bonus is a follower of the Gang of Four?" Not knowing his foreman had not accepted the money, Li added ingratiatingly,

"It's the truth. Honestly, when I see money, I want to pocket every cent. Nowadays,.what leader isn't after money?" Zhang knew he and Li would never see eye to eye, so there was no use arguing with him. So Zhang mocked,

"You seem to know the situation quite well, young man. How much of the world have you seen anyway? Is it a long time since you were wet behind the ears?"

"I haven't seen much. Still, it's thousands of *li* around."

"You find things the same everywhere?"

"More or less. My hometown was poor and there were no bonuses. My county built a few new socialist villages, which were known all over the country. The newspapers carried articles about them; the radio made broadcasts. People even came from Xinjiang to learn from them. Travelling by car they saw blocks of nice brick houses along the straight streets. Anyone would think that the villagers were living in paradise. No one knew their actual state of poverty. I bought my wife a pair of woollen trousers when we got married. As I forgot to buy her a belt, she had to use a piece of cloth instead. Can you believe that? Two years after all the publicity, our county Party secretary was promoted to the provincial level, while the villagers had to leave home to make a living.

"Before I left, my weeping mother sewed five *yuan* in the lining of my padded jacket. I travelled three thousand *li* without touching it. When I was caught bumming a ride on a train, I was made to get off at a small station. I was so scared of that god-forsaken spot that I pleaded on my knees for mercy. One man pushed me off the train with a swift kick to my behind. It was night and the station was on a mountain far from anywhere. I hated the world and made up my mind right there to get rich."

Because of this, Zhang was not. as surprised or indignant as the others at his action. It was natural for a man who had only seen the seamy side of life.

Li feared neither the Party secretary, nor the mine director but only Old Zhang, knowing that he stood to lose if he offended him. Although a foreman was not a high official, he had certain powers such as giving extra work for more money, allocating easy work or turning a blind eye when Li slacked. Strong as he was, Li always flattered this little man whom he could knock out with one blow.

Zhang, who had worked in the mines since he was fifteen, knew of Li's weakness for money. He never ticked Li off when he played a trick, but let his pocket suffer\fn{Docked him some of his wages} making sure Li realized it was a punishment. Since it conformed to the rules and regulations Li couldn't complain. As soon as he repented, Zhang would find ways for him to make up his loss.

Li feared and hated the old man, while at the same time admiring him too. Zhang liked Li for his spirit, never sparing himself where money was concerned. He called the young men in his team lazy, claiming that miners in their forties would sweat for ten cents while they wouldn't lift a little finger for one *yuan*. When they called Li a money-grubber, Zhang scolded them,

"What do you know? If nobody wanted money there would be no mines in the world."

"You mean socialism depends on people like him?"

"It can't depend on you, coddled as you are. You don't work a hundred days a year, and drown yourselves in booze all day long, drinking as if you were going to kick the bucket sooner than we. And you have the nerve to mock him!"

The old man could do nothing with those who didn't care if they were demoted or fined. No one could be fired after all. In comparison, Li had his merits. Although Leng hated Li, Zhang admired his work. Even a black sheep was better than no sheep at all. Leng's disobedience annoyed Zhang, who was used to giving orders. Now at this crucial moment, his words fell on deaf ears. What the hell was this voting business? He was furious.

*

Leng solicited opinions.

"What's your idea, Xiao Wang? You speak first." The young apprentice was in very low spirits.

"I don't mind what you do. You're older than me. You decide."

"What about you, Chatterbox?" Leng fixed his gaze on his peer, who hurriedly replied,

"All right. I'll say something. Li is selfish, cruel and mean. He makes me puke. He's such a rat that today he stole from all of us. Let him stew in his own juice!" He stole a glance at his foreman and then hedged,

"But, to leave him is too … too … well, even if we did, we're not to blame. It's his own fault. Whatever we do, we're in the right "

"You haven't said a thing, damn you!" Leng was furious. Chatterbox, who had been bullied about by Li was now vacillating. Banking on a quick vote Leng became impatient. Neither Zhang nor he had won any support yet.

Zhang was moved. He realized no one wanted to risk their lives for Li or voice their opposition right away. As foreman he was responsible for everybody's safety. So he tried to persuade them, using a coaxing tone he had never used before in all his years underground.

"I know Li can be a swine, but he's not an enemy. We don't know whether we'll come out alive, but if we do we'll regret not having tried to save him when we see his wife and children. You're young. He'll be on your consciences all your lives. Life won't be worth living. That's why people die together in the mines. No one ever hesitates to save another." Chatterbox chipped in,

"Right. That's exactly what I said." Leng cut him short with a glare.

"What did you say?"
"I mean it, although I did not say it; we ought to think of his wife and children."
Leng threw the pick down.
"You do what you want. I won't lift a finger. Wait till he joins you. He may turn cannibalistic and eat you up too when he gets hungry!"

*

The digging began. While one worked, the others turned off their lamps and sat in the dark. Once the batteries were used up, they would be doomed.
A soft moan pierced their hearts. They knew who it was. The more the man tried to control his sobs, the harder it affected them. He was only twenty, so young. Zhang felt so harassed, his breathing became difficult. If they missed their chance of survival because of Li, he would be killing the youth. But what could Zhang do? How could he console him? Certainly not by saying,
"Don't worry, we'll cqme out alive." How could he guarantee that?
"It's glorious to die for the revolution."
That didn't hit the right note either. There were so many middle-school graduates; why had he been chosen to work here? If that was such an honour then the sons and daughters of the officials, who were given other surface jobs, were not doing glorious work. Zhang knew Yang had been assigned to his team because his father had offended some leaders. Why should he pay for his father's mistakes? Zhang couldn't think how to comfort him.
Chatterbox tried to crack a joke. He couldn't ask the boy, "Do you miss your wife?" so he joked at his own expense.
"My wife will miss me tonight. She'll have to sleep alone."
"Don't worry," Leng sneered, "someone will look after her. If you do go home, don't forget to cough at the window." His spirits rising, Chatterbox offered,
"Let me tell you a funny story."
In the darkest place in the world, the foulest language was habitual. A newcomer, who found it shocking at first, would gradually get used to it and appreciate the raciness. Chatterbox began,
"In my son's language class, the teacher wrote the word 'blanket' on the blackboard and asked my boy to read it. My darling son only stared at it. So his teacher prompted him. 'What's on top of the mattress in your home?' Blinking stupidly he answered, 'My mum.' His fellow pupils laughed. Then the teacher prompted again, 'What's on top of your mum?' 'My dad.'"
The !rapped men laughed uproariously until they grew hysterical
"Shut up! Stop that cackling!"
The old man shouted to no avail. He turned on his lamp. The madly laughing faces horrified him. To bring his men out safely, he must make sure they remained in a normal state of mind and kept their will to live. Excessive excitement could cause a nervous collapse and total apathy. Most of the time, people broke down not from a lack of energy but a lack of morale. He must stop them.
One by one he slapped them. Shocked, they grew quiet. Their eyes, wild with laughter, scared themselves. Leng jumped up to curse Chatterbox.
"You skunk! You stole the story. I've heard it many times. You pretended it was your son's."
He was covering up his agitation and his gratitude to the old man. Leng grasped the pick and attacked the rock with a will.

*

Another eight hours passed. The sun would be shining on the mine. Though darkness reigned eight hundred metres below the surface, everybody felt fresher out of habit. Li on the other side had a very good tool and the sounds he made showed that they were getting nearer.
When Leng's turn came again, he struck through with a hard blow. Air gushed in as Li made a small hole with his pick.
If it had been any man but Li, Leng would have made a big opening for him right away. As it was, his energy flagged.
"Crawl through yourself!" he called into the hole, threw the pick down and sprawled on the ground. The three other men moved over. No one stirred on the other side. Wasn't it Li after all? Why didn't the man speak? Then a loaf of bread appeared in the hole. A brown, round loaf. Their eyes and mouths watered as the maddeningly sweet smell assaulted their senses. Four pairs of eyes followed the bread as it rolled over. All of them leaned forward, but none picked it up.

Then a huge hand pushed another loaf through. It was Li. Thank god the heel hadn't already eaten up all the bread! He had saved some for them. Happiness filled their hearts, not because of the food, but because Li had proved himself human. They hadn't wasted their efforts. One by one the loaves kept rolling through until they counted ten.

The entire lot. Li's portion was still untouched. What will-power he had shown!

Anxiously they all reached out together to pull the big burly man through. The small opening tore his clothes at the shoulders. His high cheekbones were streaked with sweat and coal dust. He got to his feet and looked alertly at his mates. There was no hatred, only concern, warmth and pleasure. Tears welled up in his sunken eyes. He squatted down, his hands covering his face, and broke into violent sobs. The tears poured down between his fingers.

No one uttered a word. In the silence that followed, it was as if a strong ray of sunlight had pierced the cold dark pit. Warmth drove away hatred and estrangement. They felt a closer tie than they had ever felt above ground. They would give their lives to achieve such a closeness. They were united into an organic whole, which would never be destroyed whatever happened.

Silently, the old foreman passed out the bread.

*

People crossing oceans, deserts and forests are prone to lose their bearings. In a mine one doesn't use the points of the compass either. Relying on his memory, or the instincts of the old, Zhang led his men on. Exerting the little strength they had left, they groped their way forward, sometimes having to crawl on all fours, helping and encouraging each other. Each was not fighting for himself alone, but for the group. Individually, they would have given up long ago. After five days, they finally found the air shaft. Chatterbox, the last to reach the opening, looked up at the patch of sky.

"My darling wife," he cried with mixed feelings, "you're not fated to be a widow!"

Like a broken stalk, his head hung on his narrow neck. He crouched down and wept. Tears rolled down the faces of these men who had cheated death. Eight hundred metres above were the blue sky and clouds. The sun shone brightly on the earth where the green mountains rolled and the leaves rustled in the trees. How beautiful life was!

*

After resting for a while Leng, exhausted, began dozing off. They were safe now, he thought. They could sleep a little before starting the difficult ascent. Sleep was what they needed and wanted most. He closed his eyes. Zhang shouted hoarsely,

"Get up, damn you! All of you get up!"

He called them all sorts of names, but nobody heeded him. Leng closed his eyes, ignoring him totally.

"Get moving! Heaven gave you a big body, so put it to good use. When I was a young man …"

"Why is he picking on me?" Leng thought. "What's got into him? Has he gone crazy?"

This was Zhang's favourite beginning when he wanted to give the young people a piece of his mind: "When I was a young man: Leng's retort, "You were damn all. After so many years you're just a little foreman," would drive the old man crazy.

Leng wouldn't take that now. As he jumped up angrily he saw stars and his head throbbed with an excruciating pain. Startled, he realized that the foreman was trying to save them. Past experience told him that if they lay down for half an hour, they would never get up again. Zhang didn't want to scare them by telling them directly.

After an earthquake, all the gas from the broken coal seams seeped out of the mine through the air shafts poisoning anyone in the area. They daren't linger. Leng gave Zhang a hand in pulling everyone to his feet. He grabbed Wang's hand, urging him,

"Buck up and get a move on. You can rest when you're out." The boy flopped down like a noodle when Leng let go and pleaded,

"I'm so sleepy. Let me rest, you go ahead. I can find my way now." The foreman bellowed,

"Shit! You're useless! No wonder you had to come here. Did you sleep during your exams?"

The young man leapt up like a scalded cat. He had never expected Zhang, whom he respected, to taunt him like that. Quivering with fury, he dashed towards the air shaft. Groaning, Chatterbox went after him.

"You go and get someone to come and help me out," Zhang told Leng.

"No."

"Why not?" the old man demanded impatiently.

"You know why." Leng was worried. "Before someone could rescue you … you'd be …"

"You …"
The truth was like a blow. The old man dropped his head. Presently he straightened up.
"Get going and stop talking. As long as I …"
His efforts to rise were unsuccessful. He stumbled, bumping his head. Leng was appalled. He thought that Zhang had only lost confidence, but he was, in fact, totally drained of all strength. For forty years he had worked in the mines and now he had used up all his energy for others. He had none left to save himself. In desperation, Leng wanted to throw his arms around the old man and cry. Zhang stopped him with a severe glance, standing firmly with his head leaning against the rock.
"Quit it! Get going!"
Leng looked around at a loss. Only then did he notice Li was still there. Li tore up his trousers and made a rope.
"I'll carry you," he told the old man. "We'll stick together."
Leng tied Zhang on Li's back. They began the climb. Ordinarily the two men could have easily carried Zhang any distance. Now it was different. Li moved his legs with difficulty, slipping down when he had made a little advance. Leng crouched down and cried,
"Stand on my shoulder! I'll push you up!"
Li hadn't the heart to put all his weight on Leng's shoulder. Leng cursed in fury.
"Lost your guts? Stand on my shoulder! That's it!"
Leng straightened up, pushing Li and the old man up bit by bit. .
The two enemies had united together to save Zhang's life. It could not be done alone. Each step took them that much closer to life and that much farther away from death.
"People die together in the mines. No one ever hesitates to save another."
They pushed and climbed, advancing along the air shaft towards a new life.

1948

21.70 The General And The Small Town\fn{by Chen Shi-xu (1948-)} Jiangxi or Kiangsi Province, China (M) 6

In a small town like ours, miles from anywhere, the slightest change attracted great attention.
"Hey! Does anyone know why they're putting up a new house near the prison at the foot of Ringworm Hill? Who does it belong to? Are they enlarging the jail again?"
Ringworm Hill, about two *li* from the town centre, was actually a large rocky mound.
"You're all so dim!"
The owner of this mocking tone popped his head out from behind the door of a shop. He was the barber. He was bald on top, though his few remaining hairs on the sides of his scalp were carefully oiled and combed. Known as a newsmonger, he was an important figure in the small town. Though confined to his shop, he seemed to have his fingers on the pulse of the town and was the first to know of any new development. When passing on news, people often started with, "According to the barber …"
The barber liked to add a touch of drama to the news. If he heard something important, he never announced it in his small shop. He would, like now, step out and go to the crossroads where there were all kinds of stalls.
"I bet you've no idea. The house is for a general who will soon come here to live."
"What? A general? Come to live with us?" The news caused quite a stir. In a backwater like ours, the coming of a general was sensational news. It was indeed a great honor bestowed on us.
The barber cleared his throat and warned, damping their enthusiasm: "But don't raise your hopes! In fact, it's nothing special."
The listeners craned forward, their curiosity aroused, asking why.
"Why? Humph! Listen, but this is for your ears only. Don't let on. Strictly confidential! The general's been dismissed! He's been exiled here!"
"Exiled! Why?"
"He was a renegade."
People gaped in astonishment. Like a bolt from the blue it struck at their vanity. They were disappointed and downcast.
"In name he's a retired officer." An ingenious propagandist, the barber regained the listeners' waning attention. "He still keeps his rank of general." Then he continued in a low voice:

"He was allowed to keep either his army rank or his Party membership. I may as well tell you all about it. People like us are just ordinary citizens, that's all. But he was an officer and a Party member. Now why do you think he chose to remain in the army?"

He stopped abruptly, letting them ponder over this question. Holding their breath, they looked at one another, not knowing what to say.

Then a young porter from the transportation team, having put aside his barrow and elbowed into the crowd, broke the silence.

"In my view, he should have kept his Party membership. It's an honor!" Quite a few people seconded him.

The barber pursed his lips disapprovingly.

"No, it's better to remain in the army," an old tailor observed prudently. "A man has to eat. Where can he get money from if he is demobbed? What can he live on if he's no income? He's probably no skills and you can't expect an old man like ruin to till the land, can you?"

"Right, you've got a good financial brain," remarked the barber, patting him hard on his shoulder. Excited, the tailor grew red, feeling greatly flattered.

"That's just what the higher-ups thought too, so they pensioned him off, allowing him to wear his anny uniform." He paused to glance at the young porter and went on. "Don't you know, as a high-ranking officer he gets a fat pay?"

People exclaimed in admiration. But talking of money reminded the barber that he hadn't started work yet and he hurried back to his shop.

But someone caught his coat tail, asking, "Tell us, when will he come?"

"Haven't you anything in that thick head of yours?" He was obviously impatient. "Don't you see that house? When it's completed, he'll certainly move in there."

Reluctantly, people scattered, munnuring their guesses and predictions or sighing over the ill-fated general, taking the news to all the corners of the town.

*

Now, with the listeners departing, let's have a look at this lovely little town.

The town had two streets only wide enough to allow the passage of one jeep. Six hundred meters long altogether, they crossed at the center of the town. The streets were paved with flagstones here and there, while paint peeled from the jutting-out buildings. All these showed its antiquity.

A stream, only ankle-deep, meandered around the town. Unfortunately, on its banks were heaped piles of rubbish and debris.

It was really surprising! People gaped when they first set eyes on the general. Everybody thought the same.

"No wonder he was dismissed. An old duffer like him doesn't deserve to be called a general!"

What would a general look like then? Though we'd never met one before, he didn't fool us. A general should have grey hair, straight eyebrows, and perhaps a paunch. He must be tall and strong, looking impressive and awe-inspiring like in the ftlms. But this man was small, wizened and wrinkled. Moreover, he was slightly hunched and lame in one leg.

Far from being broken by his unlucky circumstances, he paid great attention to his appearance as if to make up for his poor physique. Whenever he walked in the streets, his uniform was always well ironed without any creases, and he held himself straight like a soldier. The red star on his cap and his two red collar insignia stood out brightly. No matter how stifling the weather, he kept his jacket collar buttoned. Though lame in one leg from an old war wound, he walked steadily.

However, all this unfortunately reminded us of his disgrace.

We often watched him, not in awe or contempt, but out of curiosity. He didn't seem to mind at all. On the contrary, he walked about, though with some difficulty, the second day after his arrival.

Leaning on his shining wooden stick, he limped from one end of the street to the other. Or sometimes, he strolled along the dry stream bed strewn with litter. Someone said, tongue in cheek, that the old man kept moving habitually because he had walked all over China!

After a short period, he began to make some unfavourable comments about our small town, in which we had lived happily for a long time. He asked, for instance, "Why don't you spend some money on putting a tarmac surface on the two streets?" or "Why don't you dig a large pit on the other side of the stream for your rubbish so that it can be made into compost?" Our sophisticated and clever local cadres would excuse themselves saying, "Where can we get the money for it? Our salaries are pretty low!" or "We're simply too busy!" Their listeners would chuckle, catching that dig at the general.

Our feelings towards this queer general were rather mixed. Though disgraced, he still got a decent pay. We all felt his criticisms and suggestions were well meant, yet no one was willing to befriend him.

Apparently, he soon noticed our mood, for he stopped making any more embarrassing criticisms. Instead, he found himself a place at the crossroads. There under an old camphor tree, whose top had once been struck by lightning, just opposite the barber's shop, he stood upright sometimes for hours, supported by his stick. Blinking his bleary eyes, he stood musing silently. No one knew what was in his mind.

His posture was really amusing. Vendors nearby raised their heads to glance at him from time to time, and even passers-by lingered to look at him before continuing on their way. Behind the glass windows of his shop, the barber gazed at him standing in the dusty street and joked cheerfully, "What do you think he looks like?"

"A sentry?" someone said. The barber shook his head.

"A traffic policeman then," said another. He shook his head again. After some further exchanges, the barber said matter-of-factly:

"Have you ever been to Hankou? At one end of Sanmin Road, there's a bronze statue of a figure standing erect and holding a walking stick. Just like him. Exactly!"

Gradually, people got used to seeing the general standing there, like a bronze statue. He became like the coppersmiths, cobblers and tinkers at the corners of the crossroads. If you didn't see one of them for a couple of days, you would feel there was something missing.

But he was not a statue, he was a man, and one with a shrewd mind moreover. And one day people would discover that he was also possessed of a hot temper.

One Sunday, there was a great commotion in front of the butcher's, as some young rascals with baskets on their backs fooled around, enjoying making a racket.

The general stood as usual viewing the scene, while his hand holding the stick trembled slightly and the veins in his temples swelled in anger. Suddenly he limped across, raised his stick and tapped a soldier on the back. Wet with sweat, he was squeezing his way through the crowds and shouting boisterously. Turning his head abruptly, he met the old man's blood-shot gaze. He withdrew from the throng at once and asked, "Anything I can do for you, sir?" Though a new recruit, he decided that the old man must be a high-ranking officer.

"Tidy yourself up before speaking to me!"

Darting a timid, worried glance at the general, the cherubic-faced soldier quickly righted his cap, did up his collar buttons, rolled down his sleeves, and finally lowered his head, staring down at his shoes.

"Which unit are you from? What's your job?"

"I'm a cook in the mess of the garrison stationed here."

A few brief seconds of silence followed.

"Attention!" the general suddenly shouted. This professional harsh order immediately silenced the noisy crowd. Heads turned to look at the two soldiers, who seemed oblivious of everything around them. Panting, the old man gave a second order:

"Turn left! At the double! Quick march!"

Still holding himself erect, the general breathed heavily, gazing at the retreating figure.

All was very quiet now at the crossroads. As though checked by some strange power, the jostling, noisy crowd automatically fell into line. At that moment, they felt the might of the old man, who had once commanded thousands of troops.

*

Not long after, another incident shocked the small town, making those who were inclined to side with the weak realize that something was wrong with their present situation.

It was inevitable that the old general, who had been through hard times, had had his health impaired. Apart from the care of his wife, once a head nurse in a large hospital, the general was permitted regular check-ups in an army hospital some fifty *Ii* away. A sign of charity perhaps. He could also go to the town's hospital in an emergency.

One day, he became pale and ill, breaking out in a cold sweat. As he was entering the local hospital, supported by his wife, a country woman who had been sitting on a bench by the consulting room suddenly tugged at his coat, begging, "Please save my child! I hurried over thirty *li* to get here before dawn, hoping to see the doctor as soon as possible, but …"

Inside it was so dim that they could hardly see each other. The general felt the boy's forehead, then started.

"Hurry up!" he shouted. "Take him to the doctor at once!"

Then he tore into the consulting room and said to the doctor seated at a desk:

“Doctor! Here’s an urgent case!”

Sitting behind the desk was the doctor, the wife of the town mayor and head of the hospital. Her occupation, social position and the way she carried herself served to demonstrate that she was the most important woman in the town. At that moment, she was listening to the heart of one of her distant relatives and chatting with the patient about her daughter’s dowry. She was so engrossed that she forgot to remove the stethoscope. Interrupted by the general’s cry, she glared at him and said:

“Register first.”

Then she turned back to her relative, all smiles.

“He registered ages ago!”

“Then you’ll have to wait …” “—Yes, it’s worth having a daughter.”

“But he was registered first.”

She turned abruptly and asked:

“Little Wang, did you call number one?”

“Of course!” replied a young nurse, bent over, giving an injection.

“See,” said the doctor and, turning to the peasant woman, she added, “you weren’t here when your number was called. You'll have to join the queue again:

“But I was here! Our village doctor told me that my boy was suffering from acute pneumonia …” The woman, carrying her child in her arms, broke off, out of either nervousness or disappointment.

“She probably didn’t hear you clearly,” said the general.

“Then she can learn a thing or two about our regulations. A country has its laws and a hospital its rules. If we don’t stick to the rules, there’ll be chaos, won’t there?” Throwing her stethoscope on the desk, she shot the general a reproachful glance.

“But this is an urgent case! You can’t be so rigid! Now, what number was this patient?” asked the old man, pointing to the relative.

“Hmmm! So you’ve come to make trouble today, eh? Are you the kid’s father or grandfather?”

“You should be ashamed of yourself!”

“What? Ashamed? You old fool! Why should I be ashamed? Am I anti-Party or a renegade?”

The general raised his stick

The cocky woman screamed, protecting her head with her arms.

It was so quiet that you could hear a pin drop in the room. Her relative was flabbergasted. Nobody came out to grab the general’s stick. It remained quivering in mid-air. People hoped it would strike the doctor’s snub nose.

But the stick did not fall. Instead, the old man stretched to grab the other end and snapped it in two.

Turning with difficulty, he asked his wife, “Is there any medicine at home?”

She nodded, knowing that he meant medicine for pneumonia.

In a trembling voice, he asked the peasant woman, “Do you trust me? Then follow us!”

The news of this incident soon got around. Now even timid people dared to show their dissatisfaction.

It was true that we were rather cut off from the world and, as a result, we were rather easily cowed. But it was precisely this that made us rely on our own judgements. If a “renegade” helped others in difficulty while a “Communist” bullied the people, shouldn’t their titles be exchanged?

For a couple of days, there was no sign of the general under the camphor tree. People began to anxiously whisper about him. It was said that his condition had taken a turn for the worse. And since the incident in the consulting room, he had been deprived of the right to use the town government jeep to go to the military hospital.

Late one night, some fine young men led by the porter came to the general’s house. They put the old man on a stretcher and hurried him off to the military hospital.

*

1976 began terribly. It was bitterly cold. Overhead the clouds were hanging thick and heavy, while the ground was muddy and slippery. Our little town looked more desolate than ever.

As if favoured by fate, despite the bad weather, the people in the town had the monotony broken by some encouraging news.

Just after the New Year, the barber came to the crossroads with an air of importance. No doubt, he had something vital to announce. People gathered round him at once. Having cleared his throat, he began:

“You know what, the general’s no longer a renegade! His case has been cleared!”

“Are you sure? How do you know?”

“You don’t believe me?” chided the barber, glowering at the questioner. He never tolerated any doubts about

his information. However, he went on, “If you don’t believe me, ask him.”
“I told him,” admitted the porter, elbowing his way forward. Not used to speaking in public, he blushed.
“When we were in the hospital, two men from the general’s original army came and said that the general’s record before he joined the Red Army had been cleared. He never betrayed the revolution.”
“Humph! Ridiculous to have wronged a veteran revolutionary for such a long time,” the barber butted in with his comment. “I said long ago that the general was every inch a damn good man! Indeed …”
“Indeed, sufferings test a man,” people sighed, sympathizing with the general.
“Then he’ll soon leave us, won’t he?” the tailor raised his question hesitatingly.
A far-sighted man! When the inevitability of this was forced into their minds, the townsfolk again became depressed.
“Well,” the barber said after a sigh, scratching his bald head, “it’s only natural. Ours is a small town. How can a little temple house a big Buddha?”
People felt sad. It was always the same: you realized a thing’s worth only when you had to part with it.
“What a mean lot you are!” the porter snapped in anger. “The Party and the State need him badly. You always wished him good luck. Now it’s come, you’re miserable. Isn’t that selfish?”
Yes, it was. The general had his work to do, which was of vital importance. After all, we couldn’t ask him to be our mayor, could we? So his leaving would be something worth celebrating.
People looked expectantly in the direction of the hill, hoping that the general would come and stand under the camphor tree as before. They longed to see him, and if possible, have a chat with him.
The desire to see the general grew stronger. Then someone suggested that everyone should go to call on him, since he had come back the previous day and was still unable to walk about.
Why not? So the crowds headed for Ringworm Hill. The desolate, rocky hill became a lively spot. Normally people steered clear of it, if they could. There was neither wood to collect nor grass to graze cattle. Moreover, for centuries, it was where those executed had been buried. If you had to pass this ominous hill, you’d certainly give it a wide berth.
But now, the house beside the prison was like a sacred place for pilgrims.
As they were swanning around the door, they saw the general inside, hunched over and looking thinner. They halted, not daring to cross the threshold, filled with shyness and awe. Even a wag like the barber was lost for words. Only when people nudged him did he mutter in a fluster:
“General!”
But it was inaudible, even to himself.
For some time, the general did not know what to say either, his eyes wide open in surprise. But when he soon realized their intention, tears brimmed over and streamed down his lined face.
Although Ringworm Hill was not far from the town, this was the first time that people had seen it joyfully. They were also astonished to find rows of pits for planting trees on the slope behind the general’s house.
“Are you going to plant so many trees, general?”
“Yes. I hope to change the color of this mound before meeting Marx in the nether world. It’s a pity that fruit trees won’t grow here. Still, we’ll make do with pine trees.”
“Do you mean to live here as a hermit?”
“Hermit?”
“Yes.”
“What an idea Ha! Ha!” The general laughed heartily until he was seized by a fit of coughing. Then he went on:
“My aim is to safeguard the small trees until they’ve grown big enough. When you’ve some time, we’ll divert the stream too, build some irrigation canals and a reservoir. This will help your fields. The hills will be green and the stream will retain water all year round. If we plant some flowers, and keep some birds and animals, we’ll have a fine park. I’d like to be the park keeper. And you, young man,” he patted the porter on his shoulder, “can bring your beautiful wife there and have fun. I assure you I won’t close the gate ahead of time!”
“Then promise not to hit them with your stick if you catch them kissing each other behind your house,” the barber teased, as the people roared with laughter.

*

How shall we say goodbye to him? What shall we give him as a keepsake? How can we keep in touch with him? Those were the questions everyone in the town thought and discussed. Some even quarrelled over the order of inviting the general to dinner.

But all of a sudden, the town was overshadowed by the death of Premier Zhou.\fn{1976; Mao Tse-tung died later that same year.} He died at a time when he was most needed. The morning that his death was announced, the general, supported by his wife, suddenly appeared under the camphor tree at the crossroads.

The sun was up, pale and dull. It was extremely cold. The small town looked more bleak and gloomy, silent as death, as if frozen numb by cold and sorrow.

The general, standing in the cutting wind, looked very pale and sallow, his deep-set eyes circled by dark shadows, his face grim. He stood erect, as solid as a bronze statue.

"Comrades!" he shouted in his hoarse voice. It sounded so unfamiliar that many stopped to listen to him. The old man bent down and unzipped his bag with an effort, revealing black mourning arm-bands. Raising his head, he uttered, swallowing hard. "Please …"

There was no need to say any more. People, one by one, took the bands and put them on their arms.

"Whose idea was this?" A hand, its fmgers brown from too much smoking, suddenly touched the shoulder of the general. It was the mayor.

The general was silent.

"We've already told you that no one is going to hold any mourning ceremony. What are you up to?"

The general did not even raise his eyes. Turning round, the furious mayor bellowed at the crowd:

"Don't move, any of you! Take off your arm-bands!"

But no one complied.

"Disobeying, eh? Old tailor, you take it off first!"

The tailor was stunned. Looking at the mourning arm-band and then at the mayor's angry face, he trembled for a second. Before dawn, the general had knocked at his door and given him a roll of black cloth. The bad news had upset him dreadfully, but he had realized at once what his visitor wanted him to do. Together, they sat down to work, grief-stricken. Now this indignant *petty* official was trying to force him to throw his band on the ground in shame. But it was not merely a matter of an arm-band, but of a heart loyal to the late premier. Could anything be more insulting? Clever, scrupulous and law-abiding, he never did anything harmful to others. Though he had bitter memories of being insulted and humiliated, none was worse than this. He would not swallow it.

He looked up and met the general's burning eyes, which scorched his heart. With quivering lips, he said slowly:

"Is it against the law to mourn Premier Zhou? Do what you like to me. I'm a tailor. I won't die of hunger wherever I go. Sorry, I won't take the arm-band off."

"To mourn Premier Zhou isn't against the law!"

"We won't take our arm-bands off!"

Those docile, unambitious people had gone mad! They stood united in rebellion! The sense of justice, buried in their hearts, had been aroused by a general in exile, shattering their traditional timidness and humility.

Nonplussed, the mayor turned to the general. But the old man did not even glance at him. Calm and concentrating, he seemed to be commanding a battle.

Only his wife knew the mental and physical pain racking his frail body. Despite his strained nerves and aching muscles, he stood erect. She dared not say anything, though her heart was torn.

"You'll pay for this!" snarled the mayor, his face distorted by rage. Then he took to his heels and disappeared round a comer.

Suddenly, the general gasped, short of breath, and collapsed.

A few days later, the barber heard the shocking news that the general would live in the town for the rest of his life as an "honorary" general, because of his new "mistake." This was the first time that the barber kept a piece of news to himself. He had no heart to pass it on.

*

Just like the changeable weather in early spring. the people became depressed once more after their few days of happiness.

Ringworm Hill was again silent. Crowds came to see the general every day, their faces showing no trace of joy.

The general never again left his bed after his collapse. In and out of a coma, he sometimes ran a high temperature, staring at the ceiling with glazed eyes, raving deliriously or muttering away.

One day, suddenly his mind cleared. Scanning each anxious face, which showed momentary delight and surprise, he said with difficulty yet distinctly:

"I … I will not leave you. I'll look after the park and … you must plant trees … repair the roads … dig a canal. You won't drive me away, will you? Good …"

The general died. But his noble character had left an indelible impression on the people.

Then came an order from the authorities: the body of the general was to be cremated on the spot. No notice was to be given to his relatives or mends and there was to be no obituary, no mourning ceremony. It was a stupid decision, but they wanted to have everything under their control.

In fact, no one complied with it.

The people were calm, yet stubborn, and did it their way. A mourning committee was elected, and it decided at once to hold a traditional, grand funeral.

Quickly, the townsfolk went into action.

The oldest citizen contributed his cypress coffin, the only one still remaining in the town; the tailor made the shroud that night; the barber spent a long time giving the general a face-lift. When the corpse was put into the coffin, incense and an oil lamp were lit. The boy whose life the general had saved, and his parents, had tramped thirty *li* to join the funeral. Dressed in mourning, he served as a filial son. People not only from the town but also from the surrounding villages came to present their wreaths and mourning streamers. The huge wreath sent by the nearby garrison, whose cook had once been scolded by the general, was particularly eye-catching.

The dawn sky was overcast on the day the funeral took place. Heavy clouds hung low over the town and open country. According to his will, the deceased wanted his ashes to be scattered over the hillside. However, the long funeral procession first headed for the town. With the bier at the head, carried by sixteen stalwart young men, people marched through both short streets, which nevertheless took them the whole morning. Finally they stopped under the camphor tree, and many people made memorial speeches expressing their grief, regrets and vows.

But two people were strongly against such a funeral.

One was the general's wife. She argued that her husband had been a Communist and a revolutionary soldier and had asked in his will to be cremated. Before she could finish, people pleaded with tears in their eyes. "The general would understand. He wouldn't complain. We've no objection to his being cremated later. But please let us have our way for the time being.

She closed her eyes with an effort, fighting back her tears.

The other was the mayor, but he could do nothing except peep through his screened window. Furiously, he vowed through clenched teeth, "Wait till I deal with you!"

*

One year later, the Gang of Four fell. It was not the barber or the old tailor, but the mayor and his followers, who were disgraced at last.

When the people began to modernize their small town, they first put the general's wishes into practice.

In the last three months of that year, pits for tree-planting were dug all over Ringworm Hill and some other hills near by; the rubbish dump by the stream was removed; and the two streets were given a tarmac surface. Diverting the stream was already included in the town's water conservancy plan, and the first phase of the project worked on by several thousand people was completed before the Spring Festival.

Everything went well and smoothly but, of course, there were occasional quarrels, too. Once, however, there was a bitter one which shook the whole town.

It was about whether or not they should build a monument in memory of the general under the camphor tree.

The porter and his mates were all for it, while the barber was in two minds. As people argued heatedly, the tailor picked his way into the crowd. Raising his hand, he pointed to the tree and said in a choked voice:

"Look here, what's better than this tree in memory of him? It's old and its bark has peeled, but its roots are still alive. Look at the new twigs and the lush leaves …" He faltered, swallowing hard.

Suddenly the townsfolk felt as if the tree had turned into the general wearing his green uniform buttoned at the collar, with a bright red star on his cap and red insignia on his collar. Leaning on his stick, he stood erect and blinked his eyes from time to time, silently watching the changes in the small town.

Imagining this, they forgot all about their disagreement.

39.160 & 40.21 1. The Nine Palaces **2.** The Way Of Heaven—Beginning Of Autumn: **Two Short Stories**\fn{by Zhang Cheng-zhi (1948-)} Peking, China (M) 14

1

Han Thirty-eight\fn{In the very small villages of a few hundred to a few thousand people, it may happen that, over the centuries, just a single exdtended family has come to live there, the rest dying out or moving away, all peacefully enough; and so commonly the

family name will be retained, of course; but the individual surnames will be reduced to numbers, since why bother about such things when everyone can easily remember what a person looks like by an assigned number; which, after all, in a small village of a few hundred or even a few thousand people, is the purpose behind personal identifications in the first place.} ran into that shaggy-haired fellow from the city right when the sun was burning up the desert with its blinding glare. After he got off the tractor, the young fellow had seemed like he wasn't sure where to put his feet, stopping and starting as he walked slowly along. Han Thirty-eight took one look at him and figured that he was planning to find an inn or a guest house among the handful of adobe huts in this tiny hamlet. Without stopping to exchange any greetings with Shaggy Hair, Han Thirty-eight went directly into the fields where he tended to his stand of corn, right there under the harsh, scorching rays of the sun.

That was about three or four days ago.

Today Han Thirty-eight was again working in his cornfield. The time had come, and the drought was so bad, he couldn't wait any longer to water the crops. For some time now he had been worrying about how he'd be able to repair the irrigation ditch. With his gimpy leg he could manage ordinary chores all right, but a big project like this was more than he could handle. While he was working in the field on the edge of the desert, he noticed that the shaggy-haired stranger was also wandering around nearby. Reckon he's found a place to stay, Han Thirty-eight thought to himself. I wonder who he is.

Between the highway to the north and the desert to the south, this was the only settlement for hundreds of kilometers around. Back when he was a lad Han Thirty-eight had once traveled to the next village, a whole day's journey by tractor. If his father hadn't given him a little plot of land so he could find a woman in that village to marry, he probably would have never even set foot outside this patch of red clayey soil. Ever since that trip he had spent all these years right here, standing watch over this field of red earth and looking out on the pale sands of the vast endless desert, day after day after day.

It wasn't just his leg that was lousy but his whole body—scrawny arms, with hardly any muscle on them, that tired after just a little work, joints that would grow stiff and crackle loudly when he tried to straighten up. Holding on to the sturdy cornstalks for support, Han Thirty-eight looked up for a moment and saw that shaggy-haired fellow again. I wonder what he does, he thought to himself.

Just then the fellow looked in his direction and gave him a sheepish grin.

Han Thirty-eight hurriedly cracked a smile in return, then went back to his chores.

The fiery sun continued to beat down on the tiny patch of silted ground at the northern edge of the desert. The clayey soil was so scorched it began to give off a reddish powder that wafted up into the brilliant blue sky. The desert lay all around, empty, arid—nothing but glittering yellow sands as far as the eye could see. With the rocky wasteland on one side and the endless desert on the other, the highway threaded through the landscape like a go-between, though no one quite knew where it led in either direction.

Rubbing his sore and watery eyes, Han Thirty-eight turned away from the scorching desert and resumed the task of leveling clumps of red clay with a shovel, and slowly, slowly, a rectangular plot began to take shape, its sides as straight as a ruler. Ever since he became lame from that childhood illness, he had had to do his chores in this fashion—slowly, unhurriedly. People in the hamlet were always teasing him, especially the tractor operator, Ma Zhuang'er, who would tell him that when he worked in the fields he looked like one of those actors singing a female part in Shaanxi opera. Actually he and Ma Zhuang'er had been friends since they were children, and he knew it was none other than Ma who had the greatest respect for him. Their fields lay right next to each other's on the alluvial plains of red clay, and every autumn Han's tall stands of corn would cut Ma Zhuang'er down to size. Whenever Han Thirty-eight thought about this his heart would be filled with a delicious tingle. Thick and sturdy, his cornstalks would flutter in the breeze like a grove of trees, their big fat leaves rustling loudly in the clouds of sand stirred up by the wind, and when the wind died down the leaves would again be a deep emerald green, almost the color of ink. The sight of it would so cow Ma Zhuang'er that far into the winter he would still be listless and droopy eyed, and he would spend all his time tinkering with his walking tractor until he looked like a regular grease monkey.

It was time to rest for a spell. Reaching for the earthen jug full of water that he had set down on the edge of the field, Han suddenly remembered the shaggy-haired fellow and turned around to look for him. Where did he go? He turned to look at the dirt road leading into the village, but that was empty too, and the only things he saw were the adobe huts and the mud walls around the vegetable patches, all coated with a thin layer of dust, squatting there in a rosy blur under the sun. Where did Shaggy Hair disappear to? Han Thirty-eight felt rather puzzled. In the shade of the cornstalks, he picked up the earthen jar and drank a mouthful, and as the cool water slowly moistened his insides he began to feel refreshed—even his burning eyes felt soothed.

The thing that really worried him was this eye disease of his. It had got to the point where if he so much as opened his eyes and looked around a field that was baking in the sun, drops of salty, bitter tears would run from his eyes in an endless stream. Sometimes all he had to do was glance at the parched red soil and his eyeballs would smart as if from the stings of a needle. Nobody paid any attention to an eye disease, it was not like a gimpy leg that was there for all to see. Actually nobody cared about a gimp either. There was a lame old man in the hamlet who made his living as a trader, leading his camels on foot from village to village in the outland. His woman was left to take care of the crops with the children hanging allover her, and whenever she was upset she would curse that good-for-nothing gimp of hers for not walking any faster to get home. She had every right to curse, Han Thirty-eight thought, having to drag around five or six kids while trying to farm thirty hectares of land, her hard life turning her coarse and dark like a lump of iron.

Picking up the pot again, he drank some more water, and that was when he saw Shaggy Hair. That fellow was going into the desert! He was so astounded that he set the jar down. No doubt about it, the young man was really walking away from him and onto the gleaming white dunes, dragging his dark shadow behind as he trudged along, his feet sinking into the sand with every other step.

How strange, Han Thirty-eight thought to himself as he caressed the clay pot. In this quiet and remote little village they never saw anybody from the outside. To the north, on the other side of the huge and ominous-looking expanse of wasteland, there was a string of Uighur settlements, all connected by the highway. But this was an isolated hamlet, far from the hustle and bustle of caravan traffic. And yet, somehow, for some reason, that stranger not only came here, but was now heading into the desert for a walk. Watching the tiny figure receding in the distance, Han Thirty-eight shook his head disapprovingly. That's an ocean over there, a big ocean, its waves of sand go on and on forever, what are you doing wandering around in there?

But he decided to stop worrying about what the stranger was up to, and, setting the water pitcher down on the ground, went back to smoothing out the soil in his rectangular plot.

On the edge of the gritty, lead-gray wasteland sat a reddish-brown hill of sand and gravel, and it was from this hill that the muddy red water ran down into the desert, ran and ran until, after so many years, it had managed to build up a fan-shaped delta of red clay between the barren gravelly flats and the desert to the south. Han's village was built right on this patch of red earth. Generations ago people began to bring in the clay by the river's edge to build their mud dugouts. As the adobe dried in the sun, it would turn a wretched shade of red that stung the eyes.

But Han Thirty-eight didn't mind this patch of poor, sourish red earth. Working on his little plot, he would wield his shovel evenly, accurately, breaking up the clods of sticky mud until they were spread out in a smooth powdery layer. For as long as anyone could remember, the Hans had made their living off of this patch of red clay and the two precious crops it produced—cornmeal that was white as snow, and big, luscious, golden-yellow apricots. Anyone who wanted to live comfortably in his old age would also have to look to this red earth for a little extra pocket money. In autumn, even old women in their seventies and eighties would hobble into the fields to help snap off the fat and sturdy ears of corn. At times like that, there was not a soul who did not feel happy and content, no one who thought this soil too parched, too sour, who found its burnt-red color irritating to their eyes.

And so Han Thirty-eight always worked diligently and conscientiously. When the fields were being irrigated he would never sneak home to sleep like the others; instead, he would squat in the fields all night long, keeping his crops company as they quenched their thirst. With his shovel he would dam and stop up the ditch here and there, diverting the water smoothly and evenly so that all his crops would get their fill. Right now it was an idle time in the fields, and all around not a soul was to be seen—except for Han, who was already working away quietly and steadily, leveling the ground and straightening the pathways between the fields, trying to get a head start because of his handicap. He was afraid of losing heart, afraid that, with his gimpy leg and his eye disease, he would fall apart while still a young man.

Squinting to avoid the brilliant glare of the merciless sun, Han Thirty-eight looked over at the desert. Beyond the haze of red dust hovering over the fields, he could see a shimmering vapor rising from the flat horizon far in the distance. That shaggy-haired fellow has disappeared, he's really gone into the desert, Han thought.

Dragging his crippled leg into place and steadying himself, he began to prod the ground deftly with his shovel. The soil was so sticky it had to be crumbled up into tiny pieces, and each field had to be laid out in a broad rectangular plot. He harbored a secret plan: next year he wanted to switch all his fields over to wheat. The size of his plots was best for planting wheat, he figured; he would plant twelve rows in each, and there would be room enough to use a walking tractor for the seeding.

How long can Shaggy Hair stay in there before he has to turn back? No matter what that fellow was up to, Han was rather curious about how long he would last in the desert. Have you ever seen an ocean? he asked that fellow

silently. Whether or not you have, that's an ocean in front of you. Having lived all his life on this patch of red earth, Han Thirty-eight had never seen an ocean himself. But he did walk into the great desert once upon a time—for three days, on the strength of his whole heart and soul, he had wandered around inside. Three days of walking in the endless waves of sand, and ever since then he'd felt as if he had seen the ocean.

A hot, dry wind began to stir, and the leaves of the cornstalks rustled in reply. Smoldering in the fiery sun, the desert to the south lay stretched out in an unbroken line all the way to the horizon, where, just above the rim, a dazzling bright light shone and glittered.

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Shaggy Hair finally collapsed next to a stand of red willows. It wasn't so much that he couldn't as that he didn't dare to go on anymore. Everything seemed calm and quiet, but that was only the feeling one had when nightfall first came upon the desert. That feeling belongs to a newborn calf who doesn't know any better, he thought to himself, it is the feeling of an arrogant, mad fool. So quiet—pulling his knapsack over, he laid his head down on it—so quiet that it really makes you feel as though you've left the world behind.

But at the moment waves of terror were washing over him, and every single strand of hair ached—they were all standing on end as if they would never ever lie down again. The night hung black and low over the desert. Forget about the ruins, even these trees might be the only stand around. You're lost, he thought, you don't even know whether you're still walking south. You can't wander around like this, if you want to find the ancient city you've got to know your bearings first of all. You didn't come here to fool around, you came to look for Toghuz Serai.

Actually there had been so many topics to choose from, including quite a few where the fieldwork would have been a snap. And then there were those topics that bore no relation to the real world, no more than a child's game of building something out of toy blocks. More than half of the dissertations in the journals were like that. So what if he found Toghuz Serai?—Shaggy Hair thought, knitting his brows—even that wouldn't be anything really creative. Perhaps it was because the pitch-black night hung so oppressively, because there was no moon or a single star shining through the darkness—whatever the reason, he found himself in a foul mood.

There was a famous ancient city mentioned in the history books, and in the geography texts there was the name of a site. That name was Toghuz Serai, and he had had a hunch that it was none other than the ancient city. But right now there was not even a flicker of phosphorescence in the desert at night—though there should have been, and not only phosphorescence but also huge forests of dead trees, dried-out waterways after the seasonal rivers had changed course and wooden beams sticking out of the sand dunes under which the ancient ruins were buried.

Sure, and buried in the sand there should also be a lovely two-thousand-year-old maiden whose beauty would be unblemished after all these centuries—he began to laugh at himself—her cheeks soft and rosy, her body swathed in silk and satin, she would be buried right next to this stand of red willows, and as soon as you arrive she would spring to her feet and begin to dance. What would be so significant about finding Toghuz Serai? That so-called historical geographic method—what an out-dated, useless crock.

He was exhausted. When he passed by that patch of red earth on the edge of the desert earlier in the day, he should have asked for some water from that young fellow working away silently in the field. He shook his water bottle gently, then ran his fingers through his tousled hair. Half a canteen left, he'd better save it for tomorrow.

Just yesterday he had been barely able to contain his impatience. After three or four days of being holed up in that tiny village of the Han clan his frustration had reached the boiling point. There were only about twenty-odd families in the hamlet, all of them living in those red adobe huts that were dug halfway into the ground. From the map it appeared he had made the right decision to get off at this place: going south from the village one should run right into the fabled Toghuz Serai.

But the villagers all seemed to be in a daze, never managing to say anything without first going "aw-aw-aw" for what seemed like forever—perhaps the fierce sun had gone to their heads. There was neither a village chief nor a headman, and the women, all flustered and jittery, would scamper to shut their doors as soon as they saw him.

When he finally got around to asking about Toghuz Serai it was even more ludicrous. The villagers looked him up and down through squinting eyes, their gaze finally settling on the hair on top of his head. They must be sunstruck, he again concluded, just think, their brains must have been fried by that hot sun, the same fireball that has been roasting the earth until it gives off plumes of dust even on an absolutely windless day.

He turned over, and a stream of sand swished down his collar while another rivulet flowed into his shoes. With a start, Shaggy Hair admonished himself: don't forget you're in the desert, a huge desert that's like a dead sea, so stop woolgathering and watch out for sandstorms. If the wind rises the sand will cover you, layer by layer, until it

has fashioned a nice round tomb over you. Then you wouldn't be able to gripe about the Hans' village anymore, then you would have no choice but to look underground for that two-thousand-year-old sleeping beauty.

On his guard now, Shaggy Hair did his best to stay awake, keeping watch in the deathlike silence that covered the desert. But the desert was fast asleep in the deep, dark night. Not a breeze stirred, and the sand dunes stayed where they were, not moving an inch. After midnight a few stars appeared in the sky.

This was the first time since Shaggy Hair took up his present occupation that he felt he was going to fail. Before he joined the museum as a researcher he had been a furnace attendant in the neighborhood factory for quite a few years. Back then he liked to work the night shift, and even when he didn't feel like reading he could always stare at the warm glow from the furnace, where the dense yellow flames would dance brightly in front of his eyes. He was never able to make one of those translucent, pale blue fires—his were always like a wood fire, hot, dry and intense. Anyway there was plenty of coal, and he loved to toss big shovelfuls of coal chips into the furnace and watch his own gigantic shadow flicker in the vast emptiness of the boiler room. What an enormous shadow that was, he thought, lost in a reverie. Back then, when he used to sit in front of the furnace watching that huge shadow dance on the wall, he would always fall into a brown study too.

Now those days of living by the sweat of his brow are gone forever—but in the last few years there has not been a single place, a silent, empty spot all to himself, where he could be lost in his own thoughts. Gone, too, are the mysterious flickering shadow and the incandescent flames that had seared his heart—instead all he has now is this life of running around with the aid of a compass and a map. He didn't want to think about those lovely furnace fires with such wistful longing. When he opened his eyes, however, and looked around at this corner of the great Taklimakhan Desert in which he was almost buried, it seemed to him full of hidden dangers and a secret restlessness—not something that would evoke any fond memories.

Hitching a ride on the walking tractor with that fellow named Ma Zhuang'er didn't turn out to be such an auspicious beginning after all. The village of Han was a genuinely godforsaken little hamlet. It didn't even have a travelers' tavern, though in the end he was allowed to lodge at the elementary school, and he spent the next three or four days trying to find out about Toghuz Serai. But all he learned was there were no camels, no donkeys, no cars or trucks, no means of transportation whatsoever. This village is at the edge of the world, the villagers would say to him. The desert? No one can go in there! As for camels, there are only two, and they've been gone almost a year.

At times like this all the hairs on his head would stand on end. How he came by this trait he had no idea, but whenever he made up his mind to go all out for something his hair would stand up in a tousled, shaggy mess. Back home in the city people often laughed at him because of this. His friends nicknamed him "Exploding Hair." Once, when he was still working in the boiler room, he was chatting with a girl he had just begun to date when she asked, very casually, how come he didn't know a single word of a foreign language, and right then and there his hair exploded. Later, when he ambitiously took the examination to become a researcher at the museum, his hair exploded again. The last time before this that it had exploded was when he tried for a promotion in the museum.

But this time, this time it's not working, he ruminated morosely, this time the smartest thing to do would be to turn back. This is an ocean—he thought to himself as he stared at the dark, foreboding sand hills lurking all around him—a dead ocean. And I don't even have a donkey, let alone a camel or a car. Nothing but a map and a canteen of water—a profound sense of grief came over him—and now the canteen is only half full, while the map, well, it turns out that the real function of a map is to lure you into a dead sea.

The young fellow who drove the walking tractor had told him that a long time ago everyone in the hamlet had been surnamed Han, but that later they began to take as brides young women from the clan of Ma, also ethnic Moslems, and so eventually there came to be two family names in the village—Han and Ma. Actually the roots of the Han clan were different: They were once the Salars of Qinghai province.

The Salars? he thought to himself, why did they come all the way here to the edge of the great Taklimakhan Desert? Surely not because of the crops one can grow on this red clay. He could tell just by looking at the fan delta at the mouth of the muddy red stream that the soil was quite acidic. What a shocking shade of bright red, he thought, it's a miracle they can get any crops to grow here at all. Right on the desert's edge, far away from any traffic and other human habitation, yet standing watch over the entrance to Toghuz Serai—what a strange place this is, this village of the Han clan with its red adobe huts. Why do the maps show it guarding the route to the legendary Toghuz Serai? he wondered.

One thing is for sure, though: this blazing, pitiless sun can definitely wreak havoc with a person's nervous system—perhaps he's already been out in it too long. For the last few days he had been feeling rather sick, as if

that dazzling sun had scorched him until he too had fallen ill. Smoothing his tangled hair, he tried his utmost to think calmly, dispassionately, to not let himself be upset by those dark sand dunes crouching menacingly nearby. Maybe he's not sick—after all, that fire raging in the furnace had been damned hot, too.

"But those days are over and done with," he heard himself saying out loud.

Just then another star appeared in the sky.

Shaking his flask, Shaggy Hair listened to the water sloshing around inside and again thought, I should have asked for some water from that young peasant working away so silently on his plot of land. He seemed to remember seeing an earthen jug on the ground next to the fellow, its gray color standing out bright and sharp against the field of red clay. Even under the fierce sun the young peasant had seemed so calm, so good-natured that he had left a profound impression. Watching him wield his shovel steadily, evenly, Shaggy Hair sensed that here was an honest and solid fellow, someone so accustomed to working under the burning sun that not only did he not find it torturous and wearisome, he seemed to actually take a certain pleasure in it—perhaps he was even humming a little tune to himself.

If only I had asked him for some water then, Shaggy Hair thought. He had charged into the desert on a burst of energy and enthusiasm, completely forgetting what anyone—even a schoolgirl in the city whose favorite pastime was munching melon seeds at the movies—could have told him: water is the essence of life in a desert. Well, it's too late now. If he were to press on into the desert with only half a canteen of water he might as well commit suicide right then and there. With the most vicious words he could think of he cursed himself roundly before finally calming down. Then, as he lay peacefully in the sand, he began to feel that, improbable as it seemed, the tension and restlessness were fading from the desert night. He continued to lie there motionlessly, waiting for himself to figure it out.

A corner of the sky began to stir, and as the commotion continued the intense pitch-blackness began to lighten little by little. Then a smooth crack appeared in the darkness, and, almost imperceptibly, a faint white streak emerged.

Straightaway he found his bearings. North, the direction he was facing, was also the way back. Some time during the night his tousled, unruly hair had calmed down somewhat. He smiled ruefully to himself. Actually you knew this would happen when you started out, that's why you only brought one container of water. You knew all along that with the likes of you, any attempt to find the ancient city of Toghuz Serai in the vast desert was doomed to failure.

He got up and started on the road back, his head hanging low, his feet trudging through the soft, loosely-packed sand. To his right, the ribbon of early morning light was beginning to spread.

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Han Thirty-eight came to the fields again, leaning on his spade as he walked slowly along. The next task was repairing the irrigation ditch—it was really in terrible shape. When he went to examine the trench that twisted and turned as it snaked from the river to his fields, he had found it overgrown with weeds and so full of gaps that water leaked from it all along the way, turning the clayey soil on both sides a sickening shade of bright red. I've got to dig it out again, Han Thirty-eight mused as he leaned on his spade. He'd heard tell that this old ditch was dug by their ancestors many generations ago, but now it just looked like a long, long worm with blood trickling out from allover its body. Not like the big trench, the one that had just been dug and was lined with gray-green cement, where the water gushing in from the river would swirl around and splash up in the air in a crystal-clear spray—what a beautiful sight, enough to make anyone feel all refreshed and cool inside.

But it's only the old gully that comes close to my land, Han Thirty-eight thought to himself as he knitted his brows. The big cement ditch was too far away to irrigate his fields. That Ma Zhuang'er is something else, so slick it's like he has slathered himself from head to toe with rapeseed oil soap. At the thought of Ma Zhuang'er he began to feel irritated and anxious. Today at lunch he had wolfed down his food without enjoying it one bit and then had rushed right back to the fields. Now, slowly sitting down on an embankment between two plots, he stared blankly at his beautiful strips of cropland and the battered old ditch, so dilapidated and cracked it was like a muddy rut. Han Thirty-eight turned his face away abruptly, he couldn't bear to look at it any longer. It seemed to him that the sun was purposely beating down on that old ditch to make it even more dried out and cracked, just to spite him. Those stinging drops of tears began to ooze out of his eyes again.

Scouring and splashing against its muddy banks, the river flowed in a southerly direction until it seeped into the dry, hazy desert. Though its channel was narrow the long-running stream had never once dried up. Year after year it would trickle through the fields and quench the thirst of the parched corn seedlings, pushing before it the silt it brought down from the mountain until, at the edge of the desert, it ran right up against the line of gleaming

yellow dunes, which stopped the advance of the moist red clay and forced it to spread out like a fan. Sitting on the raised border of his field, Han Thirty-eight looked into the distance at this red fan made from layer upon layer of silt. Reckon it was thanks to this piece of land that our hamlet had come to be in the first place, he thought, and then had managed, by hanging on to this bit of earth, to get a firm foothold on the edge of the desert.

He glanced back at his tiny village. The adobe huts baking under the sun were all dusted with a layer of dull red ocher. This most certainly is not that place called The Nine Palaces, the city of glazed blue tiles inlaid with emerald and jade that the old folk were always talking about. Nothing here but barren flats of gravel and a huge desert, except for Allah's little patch of red day and stream of muddy water. Our forefathers sure had gumption, he marveled to himself, they took root here on this poor barren soil in spite of everything.

Picking up his spade, he got onto his feet and walked over to the ditch. In the distance, barely visible through a shimmering vapor rising from the ground, the entire village appeared to have taken on a pale reddish tint, while a blurrily incandescent sun hung motionless above the desert, sending down wave upon wave of infernal heat onto this mortal earth.

Before he began digging, Han Thirty-eight cast his eyes over the lay of the ditch and then drove the sharp edge of his spade into the roots underneath a clump of weeds. Hoisting his good leg, he planted it on the shoulder of the spade and carefully balanced himself so that when he pushed down on the spade, his gimpy leg would be barely touching the ground. Then he gave a low grunt as he scooped up a big lump of clay with the roots still sticking out of it, and, making use of the momentum, swung the burnished spade handle up across his knees and dumped the heavy clod of mud onto a gap in the side of the ditch. Immediately, as the moisture evaporated rapidly from the damp clay, the deep red color began to fade from its exterior, and a whitish crust spread over the beveled gouge marks left by the spade.

Without a pause Han Thirty-eight heaped another spadeful next to the first and watched as the two lumps of soft mud settled into each other. Taking care to nurse his gimpy leg, he tossed pile after pile of heavy wet clay onto the clefts in the ditch, panting heavily as he worked, his arms straining until every muscle was stretched taut. Little by little, a length of ditch that had been an eyesore began to improve in appearance as the gaps in its sides, which had looked like missing teeth, became filled and smoothed out with clay.

Pretty soon the beads of perspiration on his brow turned into salty rivulets that washed over his sore and swollen eyes. His damp cheeks felt feverish and tight, as if a fieriness within were being suppressed and sealed in by his skin. But Han Thirty-eight paid no attention to any of this and continued to wield his spade evenly, serenely. Chunk after chunk of red mud squeaked as it was uprooted, then lay meekly on the embankment above the ditch. He could feel his sweat-soaked cotton tunic being dried by the sun, then becoming drenched again with the perspiration that welled up continuously. But he didn't mind the wear and tear on his clothes—besides, for a peasant a worn tunic was mostly a means of warding off the sun.

The important thing was to repair this old ditch. Every other family in the village would be able to irrigate their crops with water from the new cement ditch except for him and Ma Zhuang'er—their fields were too far away. Trying to get out of his share of the work, Ma Zhuang'er had told him that he had to drive his tractor to Hotan tomorrow, and even took the tractor apart right then and there and began to work on its grimy, oily parts like a grease monkey. Han Thirty-eight couldn't help laughing at this—ever since they were kids he'd been wise to Ma Zhuang'er's tricks. His cornfields were behind Ma Zhuang'er's, and were the last to be reached by the old ditch. Ma Zhuang'er knew very well that whoever was at the end of the line would have to make sure that the sections of the ditch before his were also in good repair, otherwise he wouldn't get any water at all. That lazy rat, Han Thirty-eight thought diffidently, as soon as I finish repairing the ditch all by myself and bring in the water he'll show up again, and then all he'd have to do is scratch an opening somewhere and there'd be water for his crops.

It was getting late. Hanging low in the western sky, the sun cast its slanting rays over the wide open desert, and the contours of the undulating dunes were etched in stark outlines of light and shadow. The village, a long stretch of dullish red, was still enveloped within the shimmering vapor rising from the ground. Squinting a little through his sore and swollen eyes, Han Thirty-eight continued to dig away at the ditch, steadily, single-mindedly, stopping only to grab the earthen jar for a drink of water. Turns out it's no big deal that Ma Zhuang'er has sneaked off to Hotan, he thought to himself. When he went to talk things over with Ma Zhuang'er last night he had been quite upset. Actually you were worried that with your gimpy leg you wouldn't be able to do the job alone, and you were hoping Ma Zhuang'er would lend you a hand.

At the thought of this, Han Thirty-eight chuckled out loud. How ridiculous he had been the night before! The important thing was not to lose heart.

He finished filling in another gap, and began to walk slowly along the bottom of the ditch. Even if you're in a

hopeless situation, as long as you don't lose heart you'll find a way out. You're still a young man, no need to worrying yet about the eye infection and the bad leg.

According to the stories told by the old folk, the Han clan hadn't always been part of the Hui Moslems. They were originally Salars from the twelve villages of Xunhua, in Qinghai province. Then, in one of the many persecutions during those times, troops sent by the Manchu emperor swept through the villages killing everyone in sight. A few families managed to escape this massacre, and, gritting their teeth, crawled out of the piles of dead bodies and fled along the edge of the Great Desert until—thousands of miles later—they arrived here. Eventually they became assimilated into the Huis, but at least those few families did not die out.

You can't lose heart, that's all, Han Thirty-eight thought to himself as each motion of the spade became more and more vigorous. It's no easy thing trying to make a living: digging a ditch, building a house, finding a wo-man—none of it is easy. But just hold steady, one step at a time, first switch your cornfields over to wheat, then you can send for the woman, and when you've got some money, maybe you can even build some brick houses with tile roofs right here on this red earth.

Lost in his solitary reverie, Han Thirty-eight continued to work evenly, rhythmically, digging up clod after clod of the sticky mud at the bottom of the ditch until twilight began to settle in all around him and smoke was beginning to rise from those blurry huts far in the distance. Above the desert, the setting sun—having turned a dusky red—seemed much more gentle now, and the dark green leaves on the cornstalks were glistening with a golden yellow light.

Just as Han Thirty-eight picked up the jar for another drink of water, he was again stunned by what he saw: there in the twilight, on the undulating, dark brown horizon of the desert was a human figure. It was only after he had searched his brains for some time that he remembered the shaggy-haired stranger who had walked into the desert around noon yesterday, all by himself. Under the setting sun, the desert lay stretched out to the south in gentle crests of soft round curves, and the slopes that were still in the light appeared smooth and clean, with not a single speck of impurity in sight. Squiggling along on the sand dune directly facing him, the diminutive figure stood out in sharp relief, looking like a tiny insect.

It's him! Han Thirty-eight thought in surprise. Yesterday that fellow walked into the desert without a word to anyone, and by now he's been in there almost two days and one night. It's time he came back, he must be so thirsty even his skin is burnt. What are you looking for in there? That's an ocean, I tell you, one that neither god nor man can go across. Han Thirty-eight gave the earthen jar a little shake: it was still half full with clear, cool water. That time I was even more hotheaded than you—three whole days and three whole nights I stayed in there.

He began to reminisce about something that had happened far in the past, something that now seemed as vague and hazy as if it had taken place in another life. He had no idea what that shaggy-haired fellow from the city did for a living, but he reckoned that the guy must have a lot of gumption. Well, you can't let that gumption get out of hand though. In silence he rubbed his fingers back and forth over the earthen jar, then set it down again in the shade of the cornstalks before going back to the ditch to work some more in the cool of the evening dragging his gimpy leg as he went. A soft warm breeze wafted slowly by, brushing lightly against his cheeks and giving him a pleasant feeling inside.

Bracing himself on his good leg, Han Thirty-eight bent forward from the waist and pressed the weight of his whole torso onto the sharp edge of the spade, his hands tightly gripping the slippery handle. With a squishing noise the spade sliced through the roots of the weeds and thrust straight down into the sticky mud. The faint but unmistakable sensations of wet earth sticking to the back of the spade and of roots being chopped by the blade traveled up to him through the smooth wooden handle. Han Thirty-eight continued to work silently, the evening breeze penetrating his tattered, sweat-stained tunic to caress the muscles on his chest.

I'll save that half jar of water for that stranger, he thought to himself, he must be all dried out and burnt. Again a remote feeling of blistering thirst wandered through his memory. What people are capable of if they have that strength of heart, that gumption, he mused as he panted for breath. Legend had it that when their forefathers escaped from Qinghai they suffered untold miseries and hardships along the way, but they kept their minds on Allah and on a place called the Nine Palaces. He remembered listening to his grandfather tell of the place: an unsullied land, with green grass that covered it like a carpet, and nine palaces of glazed blue tile standing in a row.

Vigorously tossing the last spadeful of red clay onto the side of the ditch, Han Thirty-eight turned around for a look. Before his eyes was a trim and tidy length of ditch, the newly-dug channel deep and even, the spine arrow-straight, the walls filled and sealed tightly with mud. Just a half day's worth of work and I've already covered so much ground, he thought with satisfaction as he panted heavily. Another three or four days and I can irrigate my crops, and Ma Zhuang'er—well, he could almost see Ma Zhuang'er chortling as he comes up and scrapes an

opening in the ditch to water his own land.

Han Thirty-eight chuckled and shook his head. That was the way Ma Zhuang'er was; he'd known him well ever since they played together as kids, and by now he was completely used to it.

He looked over at the desert, where the perfectly round disk of the sun was now nestled against the horizon. Below it the earth was a dark expanse through which a layer of deep red was still visible. The waves of sand holding up the setting sun seemed to have solidified, looking like an ocean that had gone to sleep. The tiny figure was still wiggling along, and now Han Thirty-eight could see that the fellow was walking stiffly right in his direction.

He sat down in the shade and felt around with his fingers for the water jar. I'll wait till that shaggy-haired fellow has had a drink of this cool water before I go. It doesn't matter if I get home a little late. He must be dying of thirst, Han thought, he was too hot-headed, too carried away with his heart's desire. Even our ancestors, those staunch and unyielding folk, in the end even they couldn't find those nine palaces of glazed blue tile and green jade, even they had to endure their grief and the injustices against them in silence and settle down on this bank of red clay.

He let out a sigh as he tore off a leaf from a cornstalk and began to wipe off the mud sticking to his spade. The figure shambling out of the desert was drawing closer and closer.

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Kicking the sand that challenged him at every step, Shaggy Hair gritted his teeth and stumbled along as his feet kept sinking into the soft sand. There was no way he could walk any faster. He had tried vigorously running a few steps, but he ended up wallowing in sand up to his knees. So he went back to the "camel step": lifting up the rear foot gingerly and taking as big a step as you can. And the desert went back to that lazy, monotonous rustling noise, as if it had all the time in the world to torment him. He scratched his head and glared balefully at this yellowish, hazy, endless trap. Right away the desert became silent and still, as if it were sneering maliciously at him. At first, perhaps helped along by the cool of the early morning, Shaggy Hair had walked in a straight line, plowing through dunes and hollows alike, forging ahead in long, swift strides, and in the semidarkness the desert had seemed to step aside and retreat before him, hurriedly opening itself up to expose its wide flat underbelly.

And Shaggy Hair had seemed to hear the desert swishing and whispering tauntingly under his feet: So you think you won, so you think you're some hero! When he took out his canteen for a drink of water, the desert had snickered behind his back, and when he screwed the cap back onto the bottle a gust of wind toyed with the flowing sand and hissed: have some more, drink it all up! And again he heard the sand screeching and laughing shrilly at him. But once the sun was high up in the sky, the desert gradually erased the insidious look on its face and, abandoning all restraint, began to torment him openly, ruthlessly.

Within the first hour after the sun became broiling hot, he was already feeling as if every last drop of moisture in his body had been sucked dry by those shiny golden needle-like rays of the sun. His skin felt like a parched and charred sack, drawn so tightly and painfully over his face and hands that he thought it would crack open at any minute. In that same hour he began to lick his blistering lips strenuously and repeatedly, but the desert, turning violent and wild under the fierce sun, was absolutely merciless as it seared his lips and left them encrusted with a layer of dried blood. Then, at about ten o'clock in the morning, a dry wind arose and swirled around him, leaving his mouth and throat so parched he couldn't even make a sound.

When he fell headlong into the sand, he clutched his water bottle for dear life.

No, I can't drink any now, I've got to save some for the afternoon, he told himself. He knew that in the afternoon it would be even more unbearable, but the desert was so delighted it began to shriek with joy, violently hurling sand and grit allover his body while screaming at the top of its voice:

Drink it, drink it all up!

But Shaggy Hair knew very well that this was just an ordeal he had to go through. The desert could not make him lose his bearings: each time the sun rose a little in the sky he would anxiously check his directions again. Using his watch, his compass and the sun, he was absolutely sure that he was walking step by step toward a green oasis, or perhaps he should say a red oasis, thinking about that peaceful patch of red clay. He had merely penetrated the outskirts of the desert, and even from this periphery he was now beating a retreat.

With cool detachment he trudged on, stubbornly saving the half bottle of water for the afternoon. Against the swirling yellow sands that obliterated heaven and earth as they assaulted him head on, against the blistering sun that burned him with its cruel flames—he fought back with all his strength, all the while laughing coldly at himself. He felt an indescribable sorrow. First the retreat, then this life and death struggle even after his defeat—all this filled him with a deep sadness.

Actually there's no real danger, he told himself, I'm sure I can get out of the desert and back to that red adobe village before it grows dark. Stumbling with almost every step, he trudged wearily through the sand, ignoring his cracked lips and his burning eyes, oblivious to the incandescent disk above his head. Toghuz Serai, Toghuz Serai, he thought to himself despairingly, I will never be able to find you now. After the two days he had just spent in it he was finally beginning to understand the desert, even as his eyes, burnt by the glare from the glittering yellow sands, had lost all feeling in them. I will never be able to reach Toghuz Serai, he repeated over and over to himself as he walked slowly along, mechanically moving his legs one in front of the other.

He remembered a magazine that he had once come across. In it was an elegantly written article, amply illustrated with photographs and charts, about the French scientist Teilhard de Chardin's expeditions in China.\fn{Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (1881-1955), French Roman Catholic priest, geologist, palentologist, and philosopher-theologian, one of the participants in the discovery of Peking Man.} The photographs showed several strange-looking vehicles, specially built for archaeological fieldwork, crawling across a mountain pass in Xinjiang province and lumbering beneath Dongsipailou, one of the decorated archways in old Peking. The mountain pass was full of jagged, grotesque-looking rocks; the antique archway was ornate and refined looking.

Angrily, Shaggy Hair bit his still-bleeding lips. What a first-rate vehicle that was! It had nonskid tires in front, caterpillar treads over its double wheels in the rear, and hanging from its front bumper there was even a metal pulverizer. It was a tank, an iron bear with a steamroller between its teeth, it was a monster. What was there to be afraid of if you were equipped with that? As for me, in this modern day and age almost a hundred years after Teilhard de Chardin, I can't even find a little donkey!

Clenching his teeth furiously, he continued to plod along, occasionally falling into deep sandpits, leaving behind him a zigzagging pathway amid the sands. The clumsy shapes of those strange field vehicles lingered for a long time in his mind: He could see them rumbling past with their road rollers lifted high up in the air, while in the background was the archway at Dongsipailou in turn-of-the-century Peking.

He had shown the magazine to the gray hairs at the museum, enthusiastically suggesting that the museum should also have a few of these vehicles specially made for their research. He would never forget the look the grayhairs gave him as they took in his shaggy hair, a look that even seemed to warn him not to forget his past as a furnace attendant. That's right—he told himself, wearily lifting his sand-filled shoes, his heart filled with a heavy sadness— made a mistake, you'e asking for the impossible.

By the time the sun began its descent in the west and the air had turned a little cooler, he was feeling as though he would soon collapse under the weight of this profound pessimism. Several times he wondered whether he had become sick from the relentless torture by the cruel desert and the harsh sun. Retreat, just beat a thorough, clear-cut retreat. The more expert, the more knowledgeable one was about maps and fieldwork, the more clearly one would see that this was the only way. In the last few years, ever since he started working at the museum, he had spent a lot of time doing research in the field, and underneath that thatch of exploding hair there was actually a cool head. He knew the way only too well. Under these circumstances—he thought to himself, angrily, bitterly—the only person who wouldn't know when to quit would be one of those silly girls who let their fantasies run wild, imagining herself to be the damsel in some romantic novel, inspiring her knight in shining armor to ever more daring feats.

All of a sudden he thought of his girlfriend. What would she say? he wondered. Most likely she'll send me a telegram of encouragement. Actually this savage and hideous desert may well turn out to be the one who really understands me. It's true—he smiled to himself, forcing his lips apart with great difficulty—the desert is the only one that really understands everything.

The long unbroken line of dunes glimmered in the twilight as deep shadows spread across the dark side of the slopes. Suddenly Shaggy Hair had a feeling that these dunes were the last ones he would have to cross. See how the ridge stands there like a thin, flimsy screen, he thought, its every undulation making it seem not only frail but —he knitted his brows as he tried to fathom the sandy ridge straight ahead—gentle as well. See how its color has also turned weak and flabby, no longer dazzling and irritating to the eye, see how it's looking at me quietly, thoughtfully.

Oh, hell, this must be a genuine case of desert sickness, he thought. He just couldn't stand it any more, all these crazy, absurd ideas of his, one after another: now finding fault with his girlfriend, now looking upon this evil desert as his closest friend, the only one who truly understood and appreciated him. I must be sick, he thought. All this has been such a blow, it must have been too much for me, and now I am sick.

When Shaggy Hair reached the crest of that line of dunes lying across his path, he breathed a sigh of relief. It was just as he expected. See, the patch of red soil was right there in front of him. The distant hills straight ahead

were already enshrouded in the evening haze, but he could still make out a gash that came zigzagging down from the mist and ended in a little motley patch of red and brown soil shaped like a fan. That's the river, those are the croplands, and over there is the hamlet of the clan of Han, he whispered to himself, identifying each in turn.

In the fading light of day he struggled to bestir himself, and then began to walk toward the settlement. The ground, suddenly turned hard and rough, rubbed painfully against his heels. He had no wish to turn his head, no wish to take another look at the desert.

*

Han Thirty-eight felt rather pleased as he watched Shaggy Hair gulp down the water. The two of them had not exchanged a single word, not even after the fellow had finished drinking all the water in the earthen jar, not even after his breathing had returned to normal and he had had plenty of time to stare into space, lost in his own thoughts. By now exhaustion had crept over every part of Han Thirty-eight's body-even his eyeballs ached and throbbed. He had only been waiting here for Shaggy Hair, and now that he had given him the jug of water, there was nothing else Han wanted to say.

Shaggy Hair sat in a corner of the cornfield and stared rather ruefully at the jar, almost as if he were in a trance. His face looked like it had been smeared with greasepaint—it was shiny and red, and the skin over his cheekbones was burnt and peeling. Without a word this peasant had given him some cool water to drink, which took him a little by surprise.

Han Thirty-eight was waiting quietly for this stranger to begin talking. Around the villagers he was known for keeping to himself, for never being the one to strike up a conversation. It was getting dark now. This was such a small village that he felt obliged to invite this young fellow to come home with him for dinner and to spend the night. The dull red sun was barely peeping above the rim of the sand dunes, and the Taklimakhan Desert, after having glittered brightly the whole day long, was already a dark shadowy expanse. The corn leaves began to rustle noisily as the first cool breeze of evening fluttered by. Some grains of sand flew against Han Thirty-eight's iron spade and struck with a few soft, metallic notes.

It was time to go home, Han Thirty-eight decided. Just then Shaggy Hair spoke:

"Mister, are you going back to the village?"

"Uh-huh, just about. And you, sir?" Han Thirty-eight asked.

Staggering a little, Shaggy Hair got onto his feet.

"Let's go," he said, as, with some effort, he hoisted his knapsack to make it hang more comfortably from his back. Exhausted as he was, he was all the more touched by the friendly manner of this peasant, and rather hoped he could stay in his company for a little while.

"Don't call me sir," he said. "You saw me coming out of that desert?"

"I saw you when you went in yesterday," Han Thirty-eight answered. "You've had a hard time these last two days," he said, looking sympathetically at Shaggy Hair's swollen eyes and blood-encrusted lips. "It's not easy to be out on the road. Come home with me, have some soup and noodles with us."

Shaggy Hair looked gratefully at the peasant's simple and honest face. He made an effort to fight off his weariness.

"That over there," he said, pointing at the desert with his chin, "have you ever been inside?"

To his surprise, the peasant nodded in reply.

"Went in there once for three days. But then I couldn't take it anymore, I had to come back out. It's wicked in there, just an ocean of sand, a dead ocean"—he paused—"and so I had to turn back."

Stopping in his tracks, Shaggy Hair stared intently at Han Thirty- eight as he asked:

"In the desert, is there a place called Toghuz Serai?"

Han Thirty-eight looked at him blankly.

"Never heard of it."

"In this village here, can I find a—a camel or a donkey?"

"No"

"A car? A tractor? Anything that can go in the desert?"

"No. Why do you want to go into the desert?" Han Thirty-eight asked innocently, gesturing with his upturned palms.

Becoming more and more agitated, Shaggy Hair almost shouted:

"Then do you have any bus service? Any kind of transportation? How do people get around?"

His guileless eyes wide open, Han Thirty-eight answered:

"No, no transportation." Then, after some thought, he added:

“There’s only Ma Zhuang’er’s walking tractor. He got that year before last. But he has to take it on a long trip, he told me that yesterday, said he has to take his tractor to Hotan tomorrow. He’s home today cleaning and oiling the parts, most likely he’s really going to Hotan tomorrow. Once he goes, there won’t be any transportation in the village at all.”

Han Thirty-eight gave Shaggy Hair the whole story. Then all of a sudden he remembered something:

“Wait, we have camels. Old Gimpy Leg has camels.”

Shaggy Hair grabbed him by the arm:

“Camels?!”

“Two of them,” Han Thirty-eight answered. “Old Gimpy Leg took them with him last year when he left, we haven’t seen any of them since. They’ve gone to Ningxia, I hear, Old Gimpy’s kinfolk are in Ningxia.”

Shaggy Hair walked along in silence, his head hanging low. By now the sun had already been swallowed up by the vast desert lying dimly to one side of them, and on the horizon nothing was left but a swath of fiery red clouds. The desert seems to be saying goodbye to me, he thought, or maybe it’s just taunting me. Well, there’s nothing more I can do. Didn’t you hear this peasant say, I have to turn back.

The village was drawing nearer. The low-hanging rooftops of reddish clay hugged the ground solidly, while wisps of white smoke from cooking fires floated among the dark green trees. What an interesting village, he thought to himself—hiding in the middle of nowhere, far away from any traffic route, hanging on for dear life to this patch of red earth firmly rooted at the desert’s edge. Well, it may be humiliating to turn back, but even that’s not easy, they don’t have any transportation at all in this village.

Han Thirty-eight walked alongside the fellow from the city, his spade hoisted over one shoulder. Somehow he began thinking back to his own journey into the desert. He was only a teenager then, brash and high-spirited. The legend told by the old folk was like a flame that scorched and licked at his heart. How terrible had been the atrocity his ancestors suffered, how deep their sorrow! It was said that in the prefecture of Xunhua the blood of the dead flowed like a river. The emperor had decreed that the Han clan was to be wiped out completely, and there was no one left to turn to, no place on earth where they could pour out their troubles and hope to find justice.

So they kept their grief to themselves and kept on walking, they would go to a place called the Nine Palaces, an unsullied paradise where, on a carpet of green grass, they would find nine palaces of blue glazed tiles and green jade, standing all in a row. But, the old folk said, when their ancestors reached this patch of red earth they found this ocean of sand lying across their path. Again and again they charged at it, but each time they failed, and no one who went into the dead ocean came back alive. Finally their ancestors plowed up the red clay and sowed their seeds in the furrows, built their holes in the ground of red adobe bricks, and, burying their heart’s desire, squatted here on the edge of the desert. As time went on they forgot their native dialect, and then, as they began marrying girls from the clan of Ma, they gradually became part of the Hui nationality. In the end the clan called the Salars disappeared, and in its place was the village of the Hans. He was just a teenager, Han Thirty-eight remembered, when, his heart burning from this story he had been hearing ever since he was a kid, he walked right into the desert carrying nothing more than a leather sack full of water. That was many years ago now, he thought to himself—back then the old ditch was still wide and deep, back then it didn’t need any repairing at all.

They had arrived at the door to his house. Putting down the spade, Han Thirty-eight pushed the door open for his guest and said:

"Go in, have some hot noodles in vinegar broth, it will really quench your thirst. Go on, and give me your knapsack.”

Inside, Shaggy Hair scooped some water into a basin and washed his face while Han Thirty-eight’s mother and younger sister bustled about in the courtyard. Then, after Shaggy Hair had taken a seat at the adobe table in the yard and guzzled down a bowl of salted tea, Han Thirty-eight walked over to him slowly—carefully favoring his crippled leg—with a big steaming bowl in his slightly tremulous hands.

“Eat, eat, there’s more when you finish this. And then you’ll bed down right here. After all, you’ve been in the desert, you must be dead tired,” he said cheerfully as he set down the bowl of noodles and vinegar soup on the table in front of Shaggy Hair. Then, folding his arms, he stood on one side as he waited on his guest, his eyes wide with attentiveness and concern.

Shaggy Hair felt rather embarrassed. What a simple, honest fellow, he thought to himself, he hasn’t even asked me who I am and where I’m from.

“I am an archaeological researcher at a museum, I came here to do some field work,” he said, by way of self-introduction. “Sorry to have troubled you like this. Look at me, what a good-for-nothing I am, the first thing I do is sit down and eat. I didn’t even accomplish what I came here for, and now all I do is sit at the table and eat,” he

said as he looked at the big steaming bowl in front of him.

Han Thirty-eight picked up the chopsticks and presented them to him with both hands.

"You've had a hard time, now please make yourself at home. This work you talk about, do you have to go into the desert to do it?"

"I'm looking for an ancient ruin called Toghuz Serai," Shaggy Hair explained, then, pausing to gulp down some hot broth, he added:

"'Toghuz Serai," don't you know what that means? It's Uighur for 'the nine castles.'"

"The nine palaces?" Han Thirty-eight cried out in surprise.

"That's right, But I wasn't up to the job, I didn't find it."

Suddenly Shaggy Hair remembered that huge shadow he used to see when he tended the furnace, That shadow was very big, he thought, and I was fooled by it.

Of course you couldn't find them, Han Thirty-eight thought, even our ancestors didn't, and there were none so brave as they, I carried a sheepskin pouch full of water, went into in the desert for three whole days, and I didn't find anything either. Well, well—he thought to himself as he looked closely at this shaggy-haired stranger covered with the dust of his travels—so this young fellow came here to look for the Nine Palaces. Shaggy Hair was busily wolfing down his food. This fellow is one of us, Han Thirty-eight thought as he stared at the head of tousled hair. No doubt about it, anyone who remembers the Nine Palaces must be one of us.

"Cheer up, Take your time, don't eat so fast. Want some hot peppers?"

Han Thirty-eight pushed the jar of hot pepper oil toward his guest.

"That place, Allah has hidden it, and we can't find it anymore. Here, have some peppers."

Sweating profusely, Shaggy Hair put away bowl after bowl of noodles until, so full he couldn't stuff another morsel into his belly, he waved his hands wearily and mumbled:

"Can't find it, that's right, nothing I can do. Why don't I go back, tomorrow I'll go back."

Han Thirty-eight hastened to remind him:

"The only way you can do that is to hitch a ride on Ma Zhuang'er's tractor. He's going to Hotan tomorrow on his tractor."

As he said this, Han became a little worried.

"Let me go talk to him, he'll do what I say. Otherwise, once Ma Zhuang'er leaves on his tractor tomorrow, there'll be no way to get out of here."

Shaggy Hair was silent for a long while. Finally he said:

"Let's go find Ma Zhuang'er."

Night had already fallen when the two of them walked out of the courtyard behind the low adobe wall. The sky above the little village was perfectly clear, as if nothing—no clouds, no water vapor, nothing—separated the village below from the brilliant black sky studded with clusters of sparkling silvery stars. Sloping this way and that, the adobe huts squatted silently as here and there an oil lamp cast a flickering orange-yellow light. To the south was a dark, shadowy expanse where nothing at all could be seen, though one could feel the desert's deep breathing on the night wind.

Han Thirty-eight limped along as he led Shaggy Hair past one compound after another, going ever deeper into the village.

Now and then a few grains of fine sand caught up in the breeze flicked against them as they walked.

2

Beginning of Autumn 1990 was a very mysterious day. Year after year, at the end of spring the people of Peking have come to wait in terror for the onslaught of summer—stewing every single day, until this year when they stewed every single moment. The cruel, incessant Peking summer had quite simply reached its extreme.

Time dragged hour upon hour—impossible to read, impossible to sit at a table. Not only in the broad daylight; the nights were also indescribably stifling. Burning in the pitch blackness was truly fearsome.

Sometimes I would sit by myself in this black heat, like a cinder in a stove not long since put out. Burning in my heart, a red red spark, constantly irritating me. Only as if everything depended upon it could one even begin to contend with this enormous dark heat. Sitting for ages in confrontation with it, sweat streaming down my back, conscious of the cold smile on my face.

In the few hours after dawn the world sinks once again into the brutal fry-roast. Rain is useless: running along the road your eyes see the rain drops as hot water hitting the ground. Under a raincoat, sweat seeps through your

shirt. God knows why people still wear raincoats.

Could anyone ever fully understand our cruel summers? Foreigners on the street, faces full of ignorance, covered in perspiration.

The taste of getting through the summer; Chinese people cannot describe it.

Later, even hotter, even more scorching, bit by bit I lose hope. If the heat persists even I will begin to doubt the Way of Heaven.

*

But that day was Beginning of Autumn. In the morning I walked imperviously into the fry-roast, my mind filled memories of sunny days in summer. On the wide steppes of Inner Mongolia the ultra-violet rays of summer were like paint, in one afternoon they could stain your cheeks red. One year when we were out on the grass, a student had returned from Peking, everyone had laughed; his little white face among a crowd of round red faces. The next day his face was red too. From then on I understood how the ultra-violet could burn.

But the ultra-violet rays thar burn skin are nothing like the summer days in Peking. The summer heat in Peking is repulsive, irritating, shameful, fills you with hate, though you don’t know what for. I was thinking about this as I walked into the dazzling sunlight, my mind a little shut off, weakened a little by the tiresome heat. So, as the moment drew closer I wasn’t paying very much attention. I hadn’t held much store by the calendrical divisions for some time, and couldn’t believe that Beginning of Autumn would ever come at the end of this Peking summer. I was derermined to hold out against this noxious day. There is an ancient poem: *Until the end of time I will stay with you*. I could really appreciate its poetry now. I should have written that moment down as it happened, but there was not the slightest need to record anything. It was printed on every calendar hanging in every home: August 8th 1990, “Beginning of Autumn.” But I hadn’t any idea it was coming. I wasn’t awaiting it in any way, hadn’t imagined the pleasure it would bring. In the long age of the fry-stew, foresight and intelligence, even imagination, had all wilted.

The morning of fire had passed.

Even at midday I had no notion of it. Just madly doing what I like doing best. It’s the only way of getting through life: to grasp firmly in the depths and testify with all one’s might. In the horrific sweltering heat everything assumed a ruthlessness, and a beauty which is hard to describe. This act was a religious ritual for me, body and soul were cleansed, transparent, it even felt as if life was exhausted.

As I walked into the afternoon sunlight I saw people’s shadows bending. I felt the sense of victory sweep over my face. Life has triumphed again, I thought to myself, here where one lives as a warrior.

The afternoon sunlight began to blaze with color, so beautiful one forgot the ruthlessness; there was almost the illusion of a thread of gentleness. As if a railway signalman in the middle of the Gobi desert suddenly heard behind him a soft, gentle sound like the beckoning voice of woman. Even if it was like that … at that moment I was not aware of it.

*

Suddenly, the moment I felt the “cool freshness” I stopped dead. The soft, gentle call seeped slowly, gently out, and in an instant—unimaginable—the unending stream of sweat pouring down my back dried. I looked around in surprise, and found that the people on the street—the people of Peking were all looking around too. Then, although there was no wind, the leaves of the lush trees quivered high up in the sky, a message passing between the crossing branches. I could have shouted out loud, everything was being taken by surprise, and in that one second the fresh air filled heaven, earth and the human world.

I all but wept. The cruel, age-long grilling really could come to an end, Beginning of Autumn was a reality. I was still for a moment, then the freshness in the sky began to move, swiftly. Like an enormous, formless hand pressing down a formless Way-of-Heaven-switch, sending down compassion and fairness, together with the cool freshness, into this cruel hard world. The blue sky suddenly lost that dazzling brightness, and was pure blue now; and the wind rose higher. Even the leaves on the tips of the branches were deep in contemplation, but the gushing cool freshness came filling the sky and land, and in this one moment all the cruel heat was wiped out.

I stood in the middle of the road, so moved.

I shouted aloud in silence. I am a witness, I testify to the reality of the Way of Heaven. The freshness is melting me, caressing me. It is a witness, it testifies that I have held out till today.

Beginning of Autumn. China’s terse conclusion, right. Suddenly I understood what the ancients meant: their bitter experiences, their patience, their feelings and judgements, found their way into their distinctions and conclusions. Beginning of Autumn, these three words, divide heat from coolness; they show a regular pattern, year after year they tell us stupid descendants—there is order in the Way of Heaven, everything is in the embrace

of something much larger.

From that Beginning of Autumn—I should say after that Beginning of Autumn moment—the people of Peking and I began to enjoy the pleasures of the cool freshness. Everyone was calmer and friendlier, waiting for the next even happier calendrical division. Northerners and Southerners\fn{Northern and Southern Chinese are meant.} alike could share in this pleasure. The rule of Beginning of Autumn had been upheld throughout China. I once heard of a foreigner who said in excitement, You Chinese people, your calendrical divisions are spot on! I think this is perhaps the last thing you can teach to a foreigner.

I thought back over the many years but couldn't remember. Every year Beginning of Autumn had come, but I had no feelings that I could remember. Maybe there'd never been such a ruthlessly cruel summer like this one past. Maybe I'd never learnt enough about the Way of Heaven.

For a long time I was moved by the great, gentle, cleansing infusion of the cool freshness. From that Beginning of Autumn moment to this day I am reminded, every instance of every day, of Beginning of Autumn's power. I will no longer react slowly, I will no longer mistake it, I will use body and soul to savor it, drop by drop, and make a record of it. I want to testify—the Way of Heaven does exist—although I already perceive the difficulty of bearing witness.

For China has long since concluded its testimony, in language so terse that only three words were used.

41.144 & 186.33 Excerpts from A Chinese Winter's Tale: **"Wedding Night" ; "First Acquaintance" ; "Off To The Northeast—And Into A Marriage!"** \fn{by Yu Luojin (1948-)} Peking, China (F) 11

1

… "Let's get to bed!" It was barely nine o'clock when Zhiguo hurried me in this way.

There was something shifty about the slightly coy and bashful expression in his eyes—it made me uneasy. What was the hidden meaning behind that look?

Right up to this day, we hadn't exchanged a single word about love; we hadn't even held hands! It was a perfect case of "marry first, love later"—typically Chinese! I myself was Chinese, and had nothing against Chinese custom. But that wasn't to say that I was happy about it either. I didn't love him at all.

Tonight, I would have my first lesson in marriage—what was to be the content of this lesson? What form would it take? What would it feel like? My mind was a complete blank on the subject. I'd never read medical books; my parents had never talked to me about it; my schools had never taught me anything about it; my friends were all like me, we'd never discussed the topic.

It wasn't until I went to the labor camp that I got any inkling of what it was all about, from the foul language the louts hurled at each other when they were fighting amongst themselves, hollering loud enough for the whole compound to hear. It was unfortunate that I'd received my first "sex education" from their dirty mouths! But our "reactionary" group didn't live with them or work with them; and the people in our group never talked about it. So it was no wonder I was still a complete ignoramus in this respect at the age of twenty-four.

And here I was, suddenly married. I was making the bed, when all of a sudden the foul talk from the camp came flashing into my head—was it really like that? But I quickly put a stop to this unpleasant train of thought—*surely a decent person couldn't act like that*? Zhi-guo certainly wasn't a lout.

"Put the quilts together," Zhi-guo ordered when I'd just finished making the bed—again, that strange look in his eye.

I rearranged the bedding compliantly, feeling more and more uneasy. Zhi-guo was washing his feet in the outer room. I took off my jacket and lay down without waiting for him.

This was the experience every young girl had to go through. Was it really my turn today? My heart was beating wildly.

Was there any joy? … No.

Was I shy? … No. Happy? No.

Content? No.

Afraid? Yes.

Worried? Yes.

Was I in pain? Did I have any illusions? I turned my face to one side, not wanting to see the lust in Zhi-guo's eyes as he came in— it was so coarse! I closed my eyes, and quietly, lost myself in my own fantasy …

We were sitting under the warm quilts in our pyjamas with our jackets draped over our shoulders, in a tender

embrace. I was expecting nothing, there were no thoughts in my head. I felt only happiness and contentment; I was as happy as an innocent child. All my past suffering was going to be tenderly soothed away in this one night. All my suffering. I had lost my job—my four years training as a toy-maker had been wasted—I'd been labelled a "reactionary"—I'd been put behind bars—the spark of my first love had been quenched before it could break into flame—my family had been deprived of its happiness—my beloved brother had been shot—and on top of all of this I had been compelled to abandon all sense of shame and sell myself in the Great Northern Wilderness—oh, after all this, after all this suffering, didn't I deserve some tenderness from my husband—from the man who'd "bought" me? Even though our union might look like some sort of deal, I wasn't a maid, a servant, or a whore! My marriage had been a humiliation, but still I cherished the hope that my humiliation would be dispelled by his tenderness, and that I would find some reason, however small, to love him.

I imagined us lying under the quilt, holding hands in friendship—it was the first time we'd ever touched each other. He took me gently in his arms, stroked my hair and my face and gazed at me fondly, treating me like a poor little child. It was right that he should comfort me like this, because he had suffered much less than I had. And I felt a deep contentment and a sweet happiness in this wordless expression of love. All the unhappiness and pain in my heart was melting away into nothing. The pleasant sound of his breathing was cleansing me of all my humiliation and pain. I was falling asleep in this tender embrace, dreaming sweet dreams the whole night through. And then the next day, the day after, and many more days would pass by, and this person who'd "bought" me treated me so tenderly that I came to love him more and more with each passing day, until the time came when I felt I must prove my love for him. And then, I said to him: "I want to have your child"—and after that, we would be truly married. How beautiful that would be! We just needed a bit of time, to fall in love

I imagined my gratitude and respect for him growing ever stronger with all the tenderness and love he gave me; no matter how many faults I might find in him, I would excuse them all, if only for the memory of these first nights …

Suddenly, a large foot landed on the quilt beside me, and I opened my eyes, leaving my fantasies behind. It was a size 46 foot, enormously large! I looked up at him timidly, and there he was—a six foot giant standing on the *kang* undressing himself He was bending slightly to loosen his belt. The lustful glint in the corner of his eye when he glanced at me was a million miles from the gallant knight of my dreams!

He sat down to take off his trousers, and proceeded to strip himself stark-naked, looking at me all the while.

What an ugly sight it was! I involuntarily closed my eyes, drew myself in, and clutched at my padded quilt, my heart cold as a sheet of iron.

I could feel his large hand lightly lifting up the quilt before he slid under it. His ice-cold feet and his hard, bony legs hurt me. My beautiful dreams were gone like fire-crackers, exploding into nothingness.

He began thrashing around with his arms and legs, roughly and clumsily stripping off my pyjamas and underwear and throwing them hurriedly aside; I just lay there like a terrified puppet, like a fish about to be killed, offering no resistance. Why did my life have to be so full of pain?

Before I could gather my wits about me, the whole weight of his body was pressing down on top of me; two large rough hands were gripping my head. I closed my eyes.

Oh God, his sticky tongue was frantically trying to push its way into my mouth! Oh God! I struggled with all my might to turn my face away, but I couldn't escape his "passion" however hard I tried. I felt a sudden pain in my crutch, as if I'd just been brutally attacked. This indescribable agony only lasted about a minute, when suddenly he loosened his grip and collapsed onto the pillow, panting convulsively. I tried to get myself free of him and then sat up, my whole body a mass of pain. I leaned forward and spat on the ground over and over again—my mouth felt unspeakably dirty!

I was about to put on my clothes and go and rinse out my mouth and wash myself, when I suddenly saw a patch of wet blood on the bed—I was horrified!

"What's that?" I gasped in alarm.

Zhi-guo raised his head. When his weary eyes alighted on the blood, he burst out triumphantly:

"Do you really not know?"

Suddenly he became all excited again, he clutched me in his arms and pressed me down on the kang, murmuring in my ear:

"The Golden needle pierces the flower of the peach.
The Silent maiden frowns to stifle her screech.

"—or so the saying goes. Ha, ha, ha."

Even as he laughed, his wet tongue was coming at me again. God! I pushed him off with all the strength I could muster, and got down from the bed.

"You …!"

I kept spitting on the floor, my face going white and then red with rage.

"What are you saying! You filthy brute!"

I washed myself thoroughly with hot water, and found some clean pyjamas to change into.

Zhi-guo stared at me in bewilderment all the while, with his mouth open. I didn't want to look at him at all. One more look at him and my eyes would be blinded by the filth.

But however much I might wash myself, I felt that I would never be clean again, as if countless poisons were eating into my body. I could never be clean again! What was inside my body was no longer completely my own; there was also something of him. And what did he represent for me? Love?—No! Shame and vulgarity, meanness and filth! I had hoped for love and tenderness that night, but instead I got a double sense of shame and humiliation! Pain and disgust, foul language, repulsive kisses, those were his gifts to me! Was marriage really like this? Would every night from now on be like this? I would rather die, I would never give in!—Just thinking of this, all the blood in my body seemed to be welling up inside—that cursed moment! How I wished I could strangle him! I simply could not bear the thought of his continued existence! In an instant, I opened the lid of the trunk and whipped out a pair of scissors which I'd recently bought for making clothes—the sharp blades flashed a ferocious blue in the silvery moonlight. Grasping the scissors in my right hand, I leapt onto the *kang* glaring fiercely at him, and spit out these words one at a time:

"Now listen here, Zhi-guo. If you dare lay a finger on me ever again, I'll kill you!—even if it means paying for it with my own life. You'd better beware!"

His mouth opened wide with fear and astonishment, and he stared at me dumbfounded as I pulled my bedding away from his side and put it at the other end of the *kang*. It was a long while before he got his breath back and mumbled in a baffled and choked voice:

"What have I done? … you're a strange one!"

I put the scissors under my pillow—from now on, they would never leave my side! I buried myself from head to foot under the quilt, but was constantly aware of the big black hairy ape sleeping at the other end of the *kang*. I didn't even want to hear the sound of his breathing. My mind was hopelessly confused, I couldn't think straight, I couldn't disentangle a single one of my thoughts. Sleep just would not come …

It felt like a long time before I calmed down. The big ape seemed to be asleep. I slowly lifted the quilt and sat up. Soft moonlight filled the entire room. I looked at him with disgust; his mouth lay slightly open in his sleep, it still made me feel sick. Even sleeping, he still wore that stunned and puzzled expression. I quickly turned my face towards the window and looked out into space.

Moon! Was this the happiness you had in store for me?

What did he know of love? Absolutely nothing! This was all he'd wanted out of me when he'd hurried me to bed—as if this was all the love he had to give, as if he wanted me to know that this was how he would be loving me for ever after. And in return, all I had for him was my pair of scissors—if I even chose to live after this. That moment was the sum total of our union; it was also the beginning of our separation. I would never acknowledge him as my husband, and I would never consider myself to be his wife.

A hundred years of bitterness and humiliation were contained in that cursed moment! How he had defiled the word "kiss!"

Ever since I first started nursery school at the tender age of three, the teachers were always telling us that the mouth was a breeding-place for infections and germs. I vividly remember when I was five, my father once kissing my cheek and leaving some drops of saliva on my face. I immediately ran to the inner room to wipe at it again and again with a wet towel, feeling very angry but at the same time afraid that my father would be hurt if he saw what I was doing. So far as I knew, the mouth was for eating, for talking, and for singing. At the labor camp, I'd learned that it could also be used for swearing, for words you couldn't even find in *The World Dictionary*. I'd read in novels that the mouth could also be used for kissing, but I'd never imagined it would be like this! There were quite a few kissing-scenes in films and novels. They neither offended me, nor excited me. I doubted the accuracy of the "burning hot lips" described in books—how could the body's heat be concentrated in the lips when someone was aroused? Had anyone ever measured them with a thermometer to prove that they were "burning hot?" This kind of cliche only reflected the personal taste of those particular authors. (Of course, it is my personal feelings on the subject that I'm writing about now; but I have no intention of imposing my views on others.)

Supposing we accept "burning" or "hot," I'd still not come across a single sequence in a film or a single passage in a novel which indicated the need to use the tongue when kissing! Where had Zhi-guo got that from? Did some people go even further? Did something as sacred and as pure as love have to take place in a hotbed of germs? Was that the only thing that gave it excitement? Ugh! It took an oaf to love in this oafish fashion!

What was love in Zhiguo's case? For him, animal desire had taken the place of love, brutishness the place of tenderness, and coarseness the place of nobility. But the blame for all my bitterness could not really be laid at Zhiguo's door. I myself had chosen to come to the Great Northern Wilderness! I could only hate myself, be disgusted with myself. Who else could I blame?

Oh, moon! Surely our society ought to bear some of the responsibility for all this? We are like simpletons as far as sex is concerned! Even mentally we are unprepared—we are so *naïve* about sex for people of our age! Surely we should have been taught something about it, as part of our general knowledge?

I remember my mother once telling me about these special colleges that were set up in Japan a long time ago, to teach young unmarried women a few basic facts about married life, and a girl wasn't allowed to marry without a certificate from one of these colleges—it wasn't a bad idea! But we learned nothing about sex, either from our parents or from our schools. The very mention of the word was something shameful and immoral, almost a crime. All of us women are going to experience that night, so why should any understanding of it be kept hidden and secret from us? Why should a motley collectIon of men be left to teach us instead, each in his own particular fashion?

Surely there is a more decent, a more pleasant way? Surely, instead of feeling ashamed and cheapened by men, it should be possible for us to recall happy memories of their tenderness and nobility when we speak of that first night?

Since Liberation, there's been no "sex education" whatsoever—worse than that, we've not even had enough of the most ordinary education, enough food for our most basic spiritual needs as human beings.

Those leftist fanatics, their heads full of one thought only—never-ending struggle.

What have they given to the people?! …

2

… Suddenly, the outer door opened. It was strange that our white dog wasn't barking, considering the reputation he had in the village for fierceness.

I pushed back the small stool and stood up from my bowl of washing; and looking out through the window, I saw our white dog in the yard, facing the outer door and wagging his tail.

Two men came in, and close on their heels the snowflakes, driven in by the biting north wind. From the kind of padded coats they wore, of a faded blue cotton, you could tell that they were Urblings\fn{Young school-leavers from urban areas; a category of unemployed young people, whose economic needs were not satisfied by the Communist system and who were accumulating in the urbanized parts of China. The Party dealt with them by at first strongly encouraging—and then, in the early stages of the Cultural Revolution, by forcibly resettling—them "up mountain or down country" to learn about life from their country cousins—a policy which largely failed, since both peasants and city-dwellers looked upon it as an unwanted imposition contrary to their fundamental natures} from some neighbouring village.

"Is this where Zhao Zhiguo lives?" asked the young man in front. He had quite a dark complexion, large darting eyes like a goldfish, and a thick top lip which curved up at the corners in a smile. The other man, whose face was hidden from view by his yellow padded hat, was stamping his feet to get the snow off his shoes.

"Yes, it is. Please come in," I called out to them. They came on into the room, bringing with them a rush of cold air.

"It's nice and warm in here," said the young man with the dark complexion. He took off his padded hat, walked up to the *kang,* and sat down. He took a look around the room and went on:

"We just about froze to death on our way here! And then half-way we ran into this blizzard!"

The other young man, as soon as he'd come in, had grabbed an old copy of the *Reference News*\fn{A digest containing summaries of news not appearing in the public media, including translations from the foreign press, previously restricted to Party members and bureaucrats holding administrative or similar positions of responsibiliity and power, but gradually becoming more widely available} which was lying on the *kang,* and sat down and started reading it without looking up, totally forgetting that he hadn't even taken off his hat.

"Would you like some water?" I put a thermos flask and two glasses on the small table between them on the *kang,* and then took a handful of fruit-drops out of the cupboard.

"Have some sweets."

Urblings had the habit of constantly dropping in on one another, so there was no need to stand on ceremony; I sat down and carried on doing my washing, chatting to them at the same time.

"Where's Zhao Zhiguo?" asked the dark young man. "He's been away now for a couple of weeks." I thought for a little while:

"It's the fourth of January today, isn't it? He went back to Peking as soon as we'd been paid for the year."

"Oh, did he? Then aren't *you* going back this year?"

"Us married people are not as free as you are! If I don't stay and look after things here, how do you suppose we'll manage this coming year? Anyway, which village are you from? And what brings you here?"

"We're from West River. We just came out for the walk," the young man said. "Do you know who we are?"

"Mmm, let me think, West River …" I put down my washing for a moment. "All the people there have been round to see us, except the W ei brothers."

"That's us! Got any tobacco?"

I handed him Zhiguo's tobacco pouch. He took a small piece of crumpled paper out of his pocket and began skilfully rolling a cigarette. Soon he was breathing out a pale cloud of smoke with the relish of a seasoned smoker:

"I'm Wei Li. And he's my elder brother, Wei Ying."

"Wei Li and Wei Ying?" As I scrubbed at the clothes, I thought to myself what a lovely ring the names had. "They're nice-sounding names."

The man who had been reading the newspaper suddenly looked up as though something had caught his attention, and gave me an apologetic smile, kind and slightly rueful. It struck me how soft and intelligent his face was, and how calm he seemed. Seeing his face was like suddenly pushing open the window of a smoke-filled room and catching sight of a silver crescent-moon hanging in the clear dark-blue canopy of the heavens. It was like a gust of cool refreshing air. Something about him reminded me of my elder brother, Luoke. Was it the oval shape of his face and his glasses with their clear plastic frames? Or was it his fair skin, his gentle features and quiet manner? It was hard to say.

"Actually," he took a close look at me and smiled shyly, "we first heard about you a long time ago."

"When?" I looked at him with great curiosity.

"In '66." His voice was so pleasant, so like my brother's.

"Do you still remember Wei Lan?" he asked.

"Wei Lan? Yes, I do!"

"She's my elder sister."

"Really?"

He smiled, and then lowered his head bashfully. My brother :was never so shy.

"Wei Li and I already knew about you then."

"But that's eight years ago!" I put down my washing for a moment and turned to him: "What did she say about me, your sister?"

"She told us that you once wrote her a poem singing her praises, and she said it made her feel so proud! And she gave us quite a detailed description of what you looked like." He smiled kindly.

"Oh yes," Wei Li laughed.

"So you see, we're really old friends!"

"How extraordinary!" I remembered her quite vividly. She had always stood out from the others. I could picture her clearly in my mind's eye. She had just graduated from university when I came to know her. It was '66, just at the beginning of the Great Cultural Revolution,\fn{*Wenhua dageming*; which the author attempts to cheapen by abbreviating it to "Cultrev", doubtless because her beloved brother had been shot for being critical of the Party and because she and countless people she loved and admired were tortured and killed by squads of illiterate, rampaging youths for no other crimes than honestly criticizing Party policy, or adopting Western dress or listening to Western music or reading Western books—or, heresy of heresies, openly disagreeing with Mao Tsetung Thought} and she had been sent to our toy factory as a member of a Squad.\gn{A temporary group of political personnel sent to a particular place by a Party Committee or organizaiton, basically to esure that local practice is in line with higher policy, to mobilize and to explain official policy to local people} I had graduated from art school in '65 and was then working as a trainee at this factory, and Wei Lan was put in charge of our carpentry workshop. All the other workers in my section were old men, and none of them ever said a word at meetings. I was the one who took the minutes, and since I was the only other young person there, Wei Lan was always trying to encourage me to speak up. Her efforts were in vain (after all, what could anyone find to say about the capitalist roaders,\fn{*Zouzipai*, which the author calls "Kroads"; "capitalist roader" was an expression introduced in 1965 to describe those politicians (especially Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping) who were adopting Soviet-style reforms, and who qwere therefore considered guilty of taking the "capitalist road"—

moving the country away from Communism by introducing material incentives (profits and bonuses in industry; privatly owned plots of land on the communes) to correct a flagging economy, the result of failed Communist industrial and agricultural policies of the 1950s} but I came to like her a lot all the same. We mostly just chatted about very ordinary things. She was interested in hearing about my family, and I told her a lot about what had happened to them all. She seemed to like me. In fact, I thought how nice it would be if my brother could get to know her, because he never had any girl-friends. She too had the same kind of glasses as Luoke, with clear plastic frames. She often wore a black and white checked silk blouse with short sleeves, and she had short hair; she was attractive though, not at all ordinary-looking. But her Squad left our factory soon afterwards, and I never saw her again. The mention of her name made it seem as though there was an invisible thread joining my fate to Wei Ying's, something very intimate and natural, something almost sweet.

"What did I write in that poem?" I asked, still trying to think.

"I've quite forgotten."

"You compared my sister to the sun." Wei Li drank some water, and laughed. "Once my brother went to your factory to take her some clothes. When he came home he was so disappointed he hadn't managed to see you."

"Is that true?" I was very flattered. But Wei Ying was embarrassed and looked down.

"How the time has flown!" Wei Ying finally took off his padded hat. His forehead had an intelligent look about it and his hair was soft and black. "Those eight years have gone by in a flash. Such great changes …"

Yes, the changes had certainly been great. Seeing Wei Ying today, I began to feel very nostalgic. But what was the good? I was no longer a little girl. His sister might not even *like* me now, if she were eager to see me again. I rubbed at the clothes, trying to banish these gloomy thoughts. I looked up at them both and asked,

"Are you really brothers?"

"Yes."

"But you don't look like you are."

"That's what everybody says," Wei Ying laughed.

"I'm the big, black oaf of the family, and he's the pale-faced scholar. Is that what you mean?" Wei Li's words made us all laugh. …

3

… In the Great Northern Wilderness,\fn{The vast undeveloped are of noarthern Heilongjiang Province, so-called because of its harsh climate and sparse population. Together with Jilin and Liaoning Provinces, and a north-easteraly extension of the Inner Mongolian Autonomous Region, it was once part of an enormous area called Manchuria, the ancestral homeland of the last dynasty to rule China (1644-1911)} the winter days are short. And at that season of the year, when farming was slack, people usually only ate two meals a day. As it was now time for the afternoon meal, I asked them to stay and eat. They accepted without any feeling of awkward- ness, and in no time at all, I brought out the steaming rice and a couple of dishes to go with it.

"Mmm! You eat pretty well here!" Wei Li picked up his chopsticks with obvious pleasure.

"Maybe a bit better than you do." It was not the first time I'd received this compliment,

"Better than us? What do you know about the way we live?"

He almost seemed to be disagreeing with me. But he was gulping down his food all the same. We sat around the small table on the warm *kang*, eating the good rice which had been distributed by our work-team.\fn{*Sheng-chandui*; the commune was divided into brigades, and the brigades were further divided into work-teams} It was that time of winter when every family had just killed its pig—so we had shredded meat with our pickled vegetable, and sliced meat with our potato; and we also had a soup made from turnip and shredded dried bean curd. The room was filled with these mouth-watering smells; and the good food made us more talkative and relaxed. The golden lamplight seemed to bring us closer together.

"How much has your work-team been giving you for a day's work over this past year?" asked Wei Li, chewing loudly. Even in his way of eating, Wei Ying was the exact opposite of his brother, and chewed slowly and carefully without making any noise.

"Less than the year before," I said. "One *kuai*\FN{A more colloquial word for *yuan*, the basic Chinese unit or currence, each one of which is equal to 100 *fen*} seventy."\fn{I.e., one kuai and 70 fen; in 1986 when this book was published this was the equivalent of about 35 New Pence Stirling}

"About the same as us."

"How much did you get this year, the two of you put together?" I wasn't expecting the embarrassed smile they gave me.

"Fifty *kuai* or so," said Wei Li with a shrug.

"Why so little?"

"We didn't get back from Peking until July," Wei Li explained. 'We've only been working for the last few months. Besides, if you include our ration of six hundred pounds of grain, plus a summer's supply of muskmelon and watermelon, plus firewood and oil and so on, we were lucky to get fifty *kuai*."

"Aren't you going back to Peking this winter?" I asked.

"Yes, we are," Wei Li said cheerfully. "I'm leaving the day after tomorrow. He'll follow later. My mother's been wanting us to go back for ages."

"This place of yours is so out of the way!"

Wei Ying had finished eating and put down his bowl. He leaned over and melted a little of the ice on the window-pane with his breath, then craned his neck to look out at the pitch black yard.

"It's such heavy snow, still hasn't stopped yet! There must be three *mu* of land round the house. Are those trees yours as well?"

"Yes, they are." When Wei Li had also had enough to eat, I got up off the *kang* to clear away the dishes.

"It *is* very out of the way here. That's why we got it so cheap. And I suppose that's how come the three people who lived here before were murdered by that Drossnik."\fn{*Liumang*; literally "layabout," "hoodlum"}

"You've really got guts living here! When that story reached our village, everybody was scared stiff." Wei Li grimaced, shaking his head.

"All by yourself in this lonely place—aren't you afraid? Nobody would even hear you screaming! No wonder they'd already been dead three days before the villagers knew anything about it!"

"We've nothing to be afraid of. She was loose, the woman who lived here before—that's how that Drossnik got away with it."

"But your Domper's\fn{*Hukouben*, literally "domicile-permit registration book"} with the First Team, isn't it?" Wei Ying asked. "That's more than half a mile away from here. So why did you buy a house here in the Second Team?"

"Our old house was so dilapidated. We were just thinking about building another when this murder happened here; nobody dared buy the place. Zhiguo and I came to have a look. It's got two big rooms—both facing south—and a storeroom, and three *mu* of land with more than a hundred young willow trees all round it, which we thought would provide plenty of osiers for making baskets … and then there's a walled yard with sixteen crabapple trees and a wild cherry, and there's a river running in front of the house. Of course, it is right at the edge of the village, and a little bit out of the way; but still, at two hundred *kuai* it was cheap. And anyway, Zhiguo's got a bicycle so it isn't too inconvenient for him to ride to the fields. It's only half a mile."

"Is that land round the house counted as Ownplot",\fn{*Ziliudi*, literally, "land reserved for private use," to cultivate and keep or sell the resulting produce on the open market. The existence of *ziliudi* has depended on the fulctuations of offical policy} asked Wei Ying, "or have you got other land as well?"

"They didn't count it last year, but this year they probably will. There's a new policy, isn't there?"

"You've got enough land here to keep you occupied the whole year round." Wei Li leant against the wall and breathed out a mouthful of smoke from his comfortable position on the warm *kang*. "How much did you make last year out of the produce?"

"We planted sixteen hundred tobacco plants and three thousand sunflower plants, and we sold them to the State for more than nine hundred *kuai*. And then we've got a small Ownplot for our family of three over in the First Team, one and a half *mu*, where we grow potatoes and pumpkins to sell; and we harvested two large sacks of crabapples—too much for us to eat by ourselves, so we sold them as well. Oh yes, why don't I cook us some melon-seeds."

When the melon-seeds were done, Wei Li put out his cigarette. The three of us took off our shoes, settled ourselves on the warm *kang* and started cracking the seeds with our teeth while we carried on chatting—for those of us who had enough to eat and warm clothes to wear, the slack winter season was really a pleasant time of year.

We talked at length about what was happening in the rest of the country, swopping bits of news we'd picked up from other Urblings who'd been to Peking. We talked about how the fanatics in power had managed to bring poverty even to those parts of the country which had no cause to be so poor, forcing peasants from south of the Pass\fn{*Shanbaiguan*, literally "Mountain Sea Pass", a famous town situated close to the Gulf of Bohai, at the extreme eastern end of the Great Wall of China, the point of access to the Northeast; of which the Chinese speak of being "within" or "without" the Pass} to brave the journey up to the Northeast in increasing numbers every year. We talked about the Floater settlements

("Floaters" was how the government described the itinerant peasants) and the terrible hardships these people had to endure when they first arrived. And we discussed how they were still up against the tyranny of Class Pedigree (which prevailed throughout the country-in the comparatively rich Northeast no less than in the poorer provinces), making it just as hard as before for the children of former landlords and Kulaks\fn{The Russian term for "rich peasants," whom Stalin attempted to liquidate as a class} to find a marriage partner and even harder to join the Party or Youth League. This artificially induced class struggle had not abated even in the fertile Great Northern Wilderness. We went on to talk about the overthrow of Lin Biao,\fn{The former Defense Minister and a follower of Mao from the beginning} his sudden transformation from close comrade-in-arms to Class Enemy Number One —a reversal of fortune which perplexed even the most ignorant old peasant woman.\fn{Lin Piao appears—the details of this are still murky—to have attempted to kill Mao, and then fled with his family to Russia, when his aircraft was intercepted by units of the Chinese air force and shot down, killing all on board}

The furious north wind roared, hurling itself against the windowpanes, making the room seem snugger than ever. Wei Ying involuntarily looked at his watch.

"Are you leaving?" I asked softly. He shrugged and smiled.

"It's about seven miles!"

"This damned weather!" said Wei Li, pressing against the glass at the bottom of the window. "The snow's already a foot deep, and it's still not stopping."

"Why don't you stay?" I urged. "You can't possibly get back in weather like this. You might run into wolves." They looked about the room, apparently embarrassed.

"Oh, that's all right. There's a little room in there which I can sleep in."

I got down onto the floor and raised the curtain which hung across the opening in the paper partition-wall.

"See. I'll sleep here."

"Well …" They thought about it for a while and eventually seemed glad to accept.

"All right?" I sat down on the *kang* and declared, "It's settled then. Good, now we can talk some more." So I asked them cheerfully: "What's life like for you?"

"Us?" Wei Li smiled. "Our group of Urblings broke up ages ago. Now we all fend for ourselves. The two of us bought a small lean-to and set up on our own. You must come and see our place sometime. Zhiguo came a long time ago."

"I heard that you were managing quite well. But I didn't know then that you were Wei Lan's brothers, so it didn't really mean much to me at the time."

"Could you tell me something"—Wei Ying hesitated—"something about your brother?" Seeing how I carried on crack- ing melon-seeds and didn't answer his question, he smiled wryly and added,

"You know, ever since '66 when I first saw a duplicated version of "On Class Background"\fn{A long essay written by the author's brother, completed in 1966, repudiating the Maoist theory of Class Pedigree, and objectively analysing the influence of the family on an individual, concluding that the influence of the family is insignificant caompred to that of society, and pointing out the dangers of the Class Pedigree theory—which said in practice, that, for example, the descendants of a landlord family would *always* be landlords, even though they might never have owned an inch of land—that reactionary, explotative ways of thinking are transmitted from one generation of a family to another genetically} posted on the wall, I wanted to meet the author so much. And then later, when the printed version came out in the *High School Cultrev Post*,\fn{*Zhongxue wenge bao*, a Peking newpaper published by the Propaganda Department of the High School Students Revolutionary Rebel Headquarters, which published this essay in its February 1967 issue} everyone wanted to know who had written it. I really wanted to meet this person—whoever he was! I only found out that he was your brother after we came here … but … aah!" He was too distressed to go on.

Wei Li looked up slowly from his reverie. There was an intense expression on his face.

"He was a martyr!" He repeated the words as if to himself, but with great emphasis: "A martyr!" I was just wondering what to say when Wei Ying suddenly changed the subject.

"I hear that your father and two brothers live up here as well?"

"Yes, in the village."

That was my reply, but inwardly I smiled. What a kind-hearted man you must be! I couldn't help noticing the expression in your eyes! You thought that maybe you'd upset me by mentioning my brother; and maybe you regretted bringing up the subject. But I'm not a sentimental kind of person! On the contrary, I'd like to tell the whole world about my brother!

"There really are so many things I want to ask you about." Wei Li was not as sensitive and tactful as his brother. "I have one question in particular," he said excitedly, "but I don't know if it's proper to ask."

"So, what is it?"

"Well, you see. . ." He hesitated and smiled awkwardly. "We don't understand why you married a man like

Zhao Zhiguo?”

“Like Zhiguo?”

I didn’t care for the way he put it. I noticed that Wei Ying was staring at me too. From the expectant look in his eyes, he seemed even more interested in my answer than Wei Li was.

“Ah!” I pretended a sigh of indifference. “It’s a long story. Let's save it for tomorrow.”

*

That night I slept on the wooden bed in the little inner room. So many feelings came flooding into my mind.

A joy and excitement welled up in my heart such as I had never experienced before. What could it be? Was it the whole effect Wei Ying had had on me—his gentle face; his sensitivity and his open disposition, which reminded me of my brother; his generous spirit and kindness; or his voice, which had a restful quality like soft music? Or was it because of some feeling he had kept for me from eight years before?

How I wished that we had met earlier! I thought with regret that if I’d only met him in October 1970 when I was on my way to the Great Northern Wilderness for the first time, and we’d had a chance to talk a little, then perhaps I would never have married Zhiguo.

But I had no right to think in this way. I must never forget that I was now a mother! I was not entitled to such thoughts. They were wrong! And besides, I hardly even knew him. Supposing I did like him, then the most I could hope for was that we could be friends. True friends, close friends even, but nothing more than that.

Yes, when Zhiguo came back I’d be really happy to tell him that I’d made the acquaintance of Wei Ying and that I’d like them to be friends as well; maybe Zhiguo would be as pleased as I was, and then the three of us would get along just fine.

Thinking of it like this set my mind more at ease. I put on the light, turned over quietly in bed and took up the notebook and pen which lay beside my pillow. The notebook had a sky-blue plastic cover, inscribed in gold with the words: “The World is Wide, and there is Much to be Accomplished.”\fn{The much-reprinted words of Mao’s exhortation to Urblings as they set off to build Communism in the countryside} It was a gift given to all Urblings the previous year by a group sent from Peking to convey “greetings and solicitude”. It was quite extraordinary that someone like me, someone with “reactionary ideas” who’d already been in a camp for a term of Labour Cure,\fn{*Laodong jiaoyang*, literally, “re-education through labor,” an administrative, rather than criminal, punishment, drawn up in 1957 primarily to deal with vagrants, minor offenders and troublemakers of various sorts, but also some types of political categories; according to which labor cure offenders retain their civil rights and have more privileges and a better diet than criminal offenders, each sentence normally extending for a term of three years (though renewable at discretion)} should now have become an Urbling here in the Northeast. When had the change come about? Who had been responsible for it? It was hard to say. All I knew was that I was now treated exactly like all the other Urblings. Nobody bothered to delve too deeply into the past. That was what I liked about the Great Northern Wilderness!

Whenever I held that black fountain pen of mine, it always seemed to weigh a ton. My brother was executed on March 5, 1970, and my mother and father had brought it back from the prison. I had kept it, determined to use it to try and complete my brother’s mission. I would use it to recreate his spirit, even if it took me ten years to do so. I carried on writing down my memories of Luoke in my notebook and didn’t go to sleep until about two o’clock in the morning.

The next morning, I got up quietly. Lifting the door curtain, I saw the two of them still sound asleep. Wei Li was snoring softly with his mouth half open; and Wei Ying was lying flat on his back under his quilt—from the neatness of the quilt and from his peaceful way of sleeping, it looked as if he hadn't moved the whole night. What a strange sight! He was so still, almost as if he had given up the ghost!

I went into the outer room to boil water for washing and for breakfast, trying to make as little noise as possible. But when I turned round, Wei Ying was standing behind me, looking very pensive. I couldn’t tell how long he'd been there.

“You’re up so early,” he said gently.

“Yes, I always am; but it’s not really all that early now,” I replied, carrying on cutting up the vegetables.

“Last night you were really burning the midnight oil, weren’t you?” he said in a soft voice.

“When did you go to sleep then?” He smiled shyly and said nothing more. This silent response seemed louder than words. It gave me a slightly uneasy feeling.

After breakfast, they were in no hurry to leave, and we sat around the small table on the warm *kang*, like we had the night before, chatting and cracking melon-seeds. I started talking about my brother.

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I spoke for a while, and then the three of us fell silent.

“He was truly a martyr!” Wei Li murmured, his intense expression betraying the indignation he felt in his heart.

“You know,” said Wei Ying, looking up with staring, thoughtful eyes, and with that same wry smile, “a young man in our neighbourhood was given eight years in prison just for putting up a poster saying ‘Long Live the Author of *On Class Background*!’” I breathed a deep sigh.

“My brother’s case involved a lot of people. They dug up the addresses of anyone who’d asked for a copy of the *High School Cultrev Post*, and all of them got into trouble. So did the editors of the paper, of course.”

“Your family must have suffered terribly. Wei Ying sighed a melancholy sigh.

“It goes without saying. What about yours?”

“Ours?” answered Wei Li, without giving Wei Ying a chance to speak. “My father was executed in 1950, when my brother was three and I was only two. My mother was a primary school teacher, she taught first year children. She’s been a widow ever since, with three children to support. My sister was a star pupil at high school—she did well in class and got excellent reports for general conduct; but she only managed to get into the Youth League in her last year of senior school. She had to wait six years! She really had a hard time getting into teachers’ college too. And then she wanted to join the Party, but no matter how hard she tried, she was always turned down because of her class background. She was really upset about it at the time, and later she gave up hope altogether. She once had a boy-friend but his class background wasn’t too good. Mother was set against the match and found her a man from a worker’s family instead.”

“How did they get along together?” I felt really sorry for her.

“Not too badly. They’ve got a child now.”

“Do you remember anything about your father?”

“No," said Wei Li, breathing out a puff of smoke. “In fact, we all hate him,” he went on at once, “especially my mother. He gave us nothing but misery.”

I didn’t quite understand, so I said nothing. And Wei Ying just hung his head silently as if something was on his mind.

“Did you have a hard time then, during the Cultrev?” I asked after a little while.

“Of course.” Wei Li followed the smoke rings with his eyes.

“For a whole month,” said Wei Ying, raising his head, “we all had to sleep in the railway station …”

He didn’t finish, and I didn’t feel like asking any further questions. No one wanted to talk about the sorrows of the past any more. They’d almost become too commonplace.

“Well, I really wish you'd tell us”—Wei Li looked at me searchingly as if he’d remembered something and said—“you know … hat I asked you yesterday?”

“You’ll be coming again, won’t you?” I stalled. “Let’s talk about it another time. If I finish the whole story this time, we’ll have nothing left to talk about!”

Perhaps it was the way I said it that made them both laugh. After a little more conversation, they stood up and said good-bye. It had already stopped snowing.

I walked with them to the edge of the village and gazed after them until they vanished into the distance. Wei Ying turned round and looked back, and again …

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I walked home slowly on my own, uncertain whether I was happy or sad. I don’t know how it happened, but as I gazed out over the white expanse of snow, I started making up a poem in my head:

Is this love, I cannot tell—
That gentle voice
Like mild sunshine.
Is this love, I cannot tell—
That tender heart
Plucking mine.
The song of the sea
Never moved me like this.
The murmuring pines
Never touched me like this.
A heart so open and pure,
Soft as spring wind.
A spirit bright and kind,
Crystal-clear.

In the ocean of friendship,
I will seek the source of strength!

That night, I slept so soundly and had such a wonderful dream.

The next morning, I woke up before it was light. Looking at the beautiful patterns the ice had formed on the windowpanes, I wondered to myself whether Wei Ying would come again. No, he would probably not come. He was too sensitive not to notice that I liked him. And he was rational. Even if he liked me too, he still wouldn't allow himself to be swayed by his emotions—I was married, and I had a child. Ah, if only husband and wife loved each other so deeply that no matter whom they encountered in their lives, they could always look into their hearts and say,

"But I love my husband (or wife) better."

Perhaps Marx and his Jenny felt like that about each other! But few of the married people I knew loved in this way. It was so sad to think that Wei Ying would never be coming again, that our first meeting would be our last! I was convinced he would never come again. I sighed a sad sigh to myself, and felt much better for it. That whole day, I sat at the small table on the *kang,* and continued to write down my memories of my brother.

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The next morning, I was carrying on with my writing when suddenly the outer door was quietly pushed open and there was Wei Ying standing in front of me, smiling.

"Wei Ying?" I called out in happy astonishment. "What a surprise!"

"A surprise?" he smiled shyly.

"Why didn't our dog bark? You must have thrown him something good to eat!"

"Of course not," he smiled. "It's because there's a bond, between me and anything connected with dogs."

"Do you mean me?" I laughed. "I was born in the Year of the Dog."

"No." He lowered his head in shy amusement and explained, "No, I didn't mean you. I didn't know in fact. . . What I said is true though, the dogs in our village very seldom snap at me, however fierce they are."

"Maybe you've got some kind of magic," I joked.

"What are you writing?" He leaned over to take a look at my book.

"Me? Just scribbling something to while away the time." I closed the book and got down from the *kang* to pour him a glass of hot water with some sugar in it.

"I thought you wouldn't come again."

"Why?"

How could I say why? So I just smiled instead.

"I know what you were thinking!" he said with a quiet, sensitive smile.

"Then it saves me the trouble of telling you!" I feigned an air of nonchalance.

"I don't know why it is, but I haven't been able to stop thinking about coming here to see you."

Goodness, that he should make this confession of his own accord! He was faltering, he seemed to be trying to pluck up his courage.

"Did you … did you come without any hesitation, or did it take you a long time to make up your mind?" I hesitated.

"You're a good guesser!"

He laughed happily. We were silent for a while, lost in our own thought. So it was love at first sight! For both of us! Who would have believed it possible! It so seldom happened! And yet, however close the bond between us was, we could never be more than friends. . . He looked up at me and then lowered his eyes.

"You know, it does puzzle us—me, Wei Li, and many of our friends—how you came to marry Zhiguo," he said to me softly. "Can you tell me?" He looked at me intensely, as if beseeching me for a reply.

Surely he hadn't come here today to ask me this? I wasn't interested in talking about myself if it was just to satisfy an idle curiosity of his. But his earnest, pained expression made it hard to refuse him. I was moved by his concern. What harm was there in his wanting to know me better, to be my true friend? He deserved my trust!

"You really want to know?" We sat facing one another, each leaning against a wall to make ourselves more comfortable. He looked at me attentively, as if preparing himself for a lecture by some distinguished professor.

Slowly, I began my story. …

72.98 Aunty Li's Pocket Watch\fn{by Liang Bingjun aka Le Si (1948-)} Guandong Province, China (M) 4

Everybody in the office had gone home. I was the only one left, finishing up copying the accounts, when all of a sudden the telephone rang. I picked up the receiver.

"Hello."

"Get me Director Wang on the line." On the other end of the phone was a slightly deep voice with a commanding tone. I recognized who it was and almost immediately stammered back.

"Uh, is this Aunty Li? Director Wang's gone."

"What time did he leave?"

"At 5:00. Quitting time."

"You must be joking! It's not even 5:00!" She slammed down the phone fiercely, and suddenly all I could hear was the sound of the dial tone. My ear was hot, but I didn't know if it was because of the scolding I had just endured or what. I looked at my watch. I had five after five. I looked back and the clock on our wall also read five after five. Director Wang obviously left according to the time on the wall. This time he really had bad luck. I silently turned my watch back five minutes, then, thinking about it, set it just a little earlier. I'd have to check it against Aunty Li's time, then it would be right.

In our factory, only Aunty Li's time is accurate. Nobody knows how long she's been working here. Some say she's been here since it started; others say she's related to the boss. No matter what, from the time our company was just a little Chinese-style sewing shop, with just a few seamstresses, up to right now, having developed into a large-scale Western-style garment factory, Aunty Li has always been here. No one knows exactly what her position is, but if you considered our factory a big family, then she would be the strict and authoritative grandmother.

She's always been here, issuing the rules, passing out rewards and punishments. If the seamstresses have a complaint, or if a staff member has an idea, for the most part they meet with her. We've heard a lot of stories passed on, of her promoting new people and extending benefits. But those are just stories. There are also those that hold her ability to determine right and wrong in the highest esteem, but that's just hearsay too. At least we're too young and didn't have the chance to witness the glory of her former days. By the time we started working here, her power was already supreme. We also never had the opportunity to see how it had been tested. She was already a symbol of legislation and enforcement. We're all quite afraid of her. If anything isn't to her liking, she immediately makes a phone call. We only have to hear that slightly deep voice with the commanding tone, and we know there's a problem.

Aunty Li's sense of time is as serious and principled as her sense of right and wrong. She has an old pocket watch that never leaves her person. People say it's one of the rare treasures that came to China during the Qing dynasty that her father passed on to her. The accuracy of that watch is well known. In any of the rooms of our factory, if any clock is slightly off, it always ends up being reset according to Aunty Li's pocket watch. Similarly, if there are any disputes between personnel, it's always Aunty Li's judgments that are the standard. Aunty Li and her pocket watch have really become a kind of law in our factory.

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So, the next day as I was telling Director Wang about Aunty Li's call, he looked a little frightened. Although he was still talking tough—he said something about managing affairs according to the clock—he obviously had a guilty conscience. He had lost confidence in himself and the clocks in our office. It wasn't too long before he was called in to see Aunty Li. He was gone for about half an hour, and when he came back he didn't look very good. I didn't dare ask him how it went.

At quitting time Director Wang was afraid to leave right away. He pretended like it wasn't any big deal, shuffling papers around. I obviously couldn't expose him. He stayed past five after five (that was the time by the electric clock on the wall; my watch, which I changed yesterday according to Aunty Li's time, read just 5:00), he took a deep breath and wasted a few more minutes, then, seeing there was nothing out of the ordinary, left quickly.

When it was five after five according to my watch (the wall clock was now at ten after), I put my things in order and was just about to leave.

But the phone rang suddenly. It was Aunty Li; she was looking for Director Wang.

"He left at 5:00." I could only be honest.

She didn't say a word. I got nervous and asked:

"Aunty Li … what time do you have?"

"Just 5:00!"

I promptly set my wristwatch back five minutes. You just can't trust these ordinary watches we have, I mean look, Director Wang's in trouble again.

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The next day Director Wang was again called into Aunty Li's office; this time he was in there even longer. Old Feng and Old Zhu of our accounting department were talking. Today they weren't talking like they usually did about our company's lack of benefits, the problems of promotion, or the meagerness of incomes. They were discussing Director Wang's situation. They felt like I did about it. Although it seemed Director Wang was being treated a bit too harshly, he had mistakenly believed the inaccurate wall clock, so what could we say? We were just like the other office workers, simply rejoicing in the fact that it hadn't happened to us, and calculating how to consider our own best interests. Afterward we'd just pay careful attention to the time. We both respected and feared Aunty Li, and luckily we had her to look to as a model, especially as a way to check our clocks. We should obviously follow her example. As Old Zhu said, if we're gonna work, we have to follow someone else's rules. At this point Director Wang came back. He looked even worse than yesterday, so we all just shut up.

Director Wang was quiet all day; he looked as though he felt he had been wronged. I lowered my head and didn't look at him. Anyway, the work was already enough to keep me busy. In the afternoon, the manager of the maintenance department (some people said he was related to Aunty Li) came with a technician to our department. My eyes, hidden by my work, looked ahead and saw a black pair of socks. The technician had taken off his shoes to stand on my desk to adjust the wall clock. The manager dialed Aunty Li on the inside line, then looked at the clock on our wall. He said to the technician:

"Slow it down by fifteen minutes and it'll be right."

I looked at my watch, and although I had adjusted it yesterday, it was wrong again now. I set my watch back another five minutes. I'd have to watch out for myself, be especially careful. I'd have to check it every day to make sure it didn't deviate from Aunty Li's standard time.

Then I heard the manager talking into the phone, saying, "The clock in the accounting department's fixed, now we're going to the factory."

After they left I saw Old Feng and Old Zhu lift their wrists to adjust their watches according to the time on the wall. Director Wang got up and hesitated at first, then he did it too. In the quiet office all you could hear was the clicking sound of the gears of the clock.

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From that day on, time was the popular topic of conversation in our office. The next day Old Feng shared with us a bit of inside news. He said because the company was approaching the day of our annual pay increases, they were paying particularly strict attention to the conduct of the employees. And Old Zhu followed with another piece of news: because of the economic depression, the garment industry was in a slump. The company was going to lay some people off, so it was a very serious situation. I heard these two different pieces of information with both joy and dread. We were insignificant office workers and would naturally give priority to playing it safe. In days past, they piled the work up on me; I always had the most work in the accounting department. I was also the last person to leave the office. The present situation seemed very different. At five o'clock, nobody was thinking about leaving, they were all still sitting obstinately in their seats. Today was Wednesday, but Old Feng, who loved to bet on the evening races, was surprisingly in no hurry to leave. Instead he asked:

"Do you think we should call and ask what time Aunty Li has?"

"Yes!" Old Zhu dialed the phone unbelievably quickly. I heard him say, "Is this Aunty Li? This is Zhu Jiming in the Accounting Department. Can I ask what time you have right now?"

Then he said completely submissively, "It's 4:55? Thanks, thank you." He didn't seem surprised in the least. He immediately took off his shoes, climbed up on my desk, and set the clock back five minutes.

All I could do was set my watch back five minutes. *Ai,* wrong again. It's lucky Old Zhu called to ask. These days you just can't trust your watch.

At this point Director Wang lifted his arm, then put it back down. I didn't know why he was hesitating. Then he suddenly said, one word at a time:

"Couldn't-it-be-that-Aunty-Li's-pocket-watch-is-wrong?"

I stared at him stunned. I hadn't anticipated that he'd say such a thing. And both Old Zhu and Old Feng, not knowing what to do, lowered their heads as if they hadn't heard anything. But no one heard it better. To come out with this kind of statement was not something to be taken lightly. And moreover, on what grounds could he doubt Aunty Li? She always maintained morality and discipline; she was both honest and strict. She was a model reproduction of the traditional Chinese mind. And her pocket watch was famous for its accuracy.

After Director Wang said this sentence he let his head droop down. He didn't look like he felt any better. It was probably because he'd been scolded that he was in a bad mood and had come out with this indignant state-ment.

The next day Director Wang didn't say a thing all day. The atmosphere in the whole office was a little bit stiff. I really didn't like it; in the past we had all been talkative and jovial. Director Wang would sometimes joke around, saying our factory was a harmonious combination of Chinese and Western elements, but we didn't have any of the benefits—only the disadvantages of both. For example, there aren't any measures taken for Western-style bonuses or material benefits, but there is the Western work system. There isn't any of the Chinese-style affectionate camaraderie, but there are redundant employees as a result of Chinese-style personal "connections." Afterward we could criticize the meagerness of the salaries, the gloominess of the future, and all that. But despite the fact that he'd said it, wasn't everybody still acting in the same old way? If you put it that way, though, everyone still seemed happy. And I know: Director Wang has always been inclined to respect Aunty Li. He'll occasionally pour out his grievances but he'll also say: "It's lucky there are still people like Aunty Li who hold firm to impartiality."

But now Director Wang was just silent, he hadn't said a thing. Maybe he just couldn't help but change his way of thinking.

I really couldn't bear the silence. The days seemed terribly long; it wasn't easy making it to the end of the day. Everyone tidied up their things, and I heaved a sigh. Director Wang looked at his watch, then looked at the clock on the wall. 5:01. He hesitated. He waited a bit, then finally cleaned up his things and left.

I just couldn't get the drawer of my old desk to close. I tried hard to shove it in, then swore at it, and grumbled that it hadn't been thrown out earlier. Just as I was straining, struggling with my desk, the telephone rang.

Old Feng answered it. I just heard him say, "He left." I knew it right away: this time Director Wang was really in a mess. I heard Old Feng ask what time it was, then he climbed up on my desk again and set the clock back five minutes. So now the accurate time was 4:58, instead of 5:03.

So it really wasn't quitting time yet. I abandoned my struggle with my desk, sat down, and continued transcribing.

Right after work I got a ride to the theater. I had a date with my girlfriend to see the five-thirty movie. When I got there I didn't expect to see her turning around to leave. I chased her. She ignored me completely, then finally gave me a good cursing. I didn't know what it was all about. She said I was half an hour late. I checked the time on my watch, which was set according to the clock at the office which was set according to Aunty Li's pocket watch. It was 5:30. But her watch and the clock in the hall at the theater both said 6:00. According to the man at the door of the theater, the movie had already been playing for thirty minutes. I never thought that I'd end up a victim of this clock question.

But compared to Director Wang's disaster, my problem was really nothing. The next morning when Director Wang came in he was immediately called into the office. After hardly any time he came back out, indignantly packed up his things, and left. People said he had been fired. No one dared ask him anything. Someone said he suspected that comment about Aunty Li's pocket watch was one of the reasons for his punishment. But it probably wasn't true, because when somebody got fired, no one was really very clear about it. As Director Wang was packing up his things, tearing up pieces of scrap paper, the calm expression on his face couldn't hide his rage. In the whole office, the silence was broken only by the mechanical whistling sound of tearing paper. Finally he left without uttering a word.

After he left, I had a feeling that something wasn't quite right, but I didn't know what it was. After a while I heard the sounds of talking and laughing behind me. I couldn't hear clearly, but it seemed to be Old Feng jokingly calling Old Zhu "Director," as if, since Director Wang was gone, his position was there for Old Zhu to fill.

But after a few days Old Zhu was disappointed. Aunty Li brought someone named Li onto the scene and introduced him to us. During the introduction, in passing, Aunty Li made a stern comment about justice. She mentioned the importance of submitting to discipline and respecting one's seniors. She especially stressed the traditional Chinese virtue of punctuality as something we mustn't neglect. I thought what Aunty Li had to say was very significant. In an industrial organization, discipline is very important. Director Wang's situation was extremely unlucky, but since things ended up the way they did, no matter who comes on the scene, we insignificant office workers will just have to keep on doing our work. As for Old Zhu, I don't know if it was because he coveted the potential connections of the position or what, but afterward he told us that the new director Li was really Aunty Li's cousin. But we didn't know whether to believe him or not.

The days passed as they had before, the only difference was that each day before quitting time Director Li would call to check Aunty Li's time. Each day we would discover that our watches were five minutes fast, and we'd promptly correct them according to her time. Each day when work was over we'd call Aunty Li, adjust our watches, then we'd correct the clock on the wall. It had become part of our daily routine, just like those letters full

of official jargon were part of each day's work, it was an indispensable verse of our closing song. And now each day, climbing up on the desk to slow the clock by five minutes according to Aunty Li's accurate time had become my responsibility. And of course I followed the director's orders, without the slightest doubt. I was just doing the work that was assigned to me. We can really do things without thinking.

At the beginning there was no problem. The days passed one at a time. Our factory gradually seemed to become a world apart from the outside. In each department our colleagues began to miss the bus and train. Missing the beginnings of movies and arriving late to parties gave rise to husbands' suspicions and wives' complaints for everyone. Nothing could be done about meeting the kids after school or missing night school. As for me, my girlfriend went from being mad at me to asking me rather humorously if I was working according to daylight savings time. But finally she couldn't take it any more and we broke up. But how could I say anything about it? I could only talk about Aunty Li's celebrated pocket watch, and about her strictness and her impeccable sense of time. I brought up several historical examples. From the time of the resistance during the Hong Kong occupation through a decade or more of prosperous economic development, Aunty Li's pocket watch played an important role in our organization. But my girlfriend—she just curled her lip and said we were completely crazy, and that we had fallen behind the real time and didn't even know it. Several of our colleagues were worried in the same way. There was no way they could persuade outsiders to believe Aunty Li's time was really accurate and that the outside world was a quickly passing mirage. People on the outside weren't in our organization, so there was no way to make them feel the soundness of Aunty Li 's authority. Half the time we were in the office, and the other half the time we were in the outside world; it started feeling like two different time zones. It was really a big hassle.

The days passed like this one at a time. Each day we'd leave work according to Aunty Li's time, but each day the color of the sky seemed darker. When other people went to work we were still at home sleeping; and when we got off work the streets were already peacefully without human shadows. I was really jealous of the outside world's night life, but all I could do was resent the fact that the external world's sense of time wasn't the same as Aunty Li's standard time. Everyone felt about the same way: some upheld Aunty Li's accuracy and spumed the reality of the outside world. Others started, as Director Wang had, to doubt Aunty Li. But these were both minorities; most people did things according to the rules, living one day at a time, where accidentally complaining was bad luck.

Each day when we got off work there were fewer and fewer people on the street. At first everyone thought we were the crowd coming out after the last movie, but a little while later people thought it was an illegal meeting and sent out the police to suppress our demonstration. In the early hours of the morning as we dispersed onto the completely empty streets, whether we were returning to the meanest alley or a new section of town, no one would believe that we were just coming home from work. The men were frequently searched by the police but even more frequently mugged in the stairwells; and a day didn't go by without a woman being attacked. But these sorts of things happened so often, and of course everyone was affected, so this also became a part of our daily routine.

Despite the fact that all the employees of the factory were coming and going according to Aunty Li's standard time, the rise and decline of the garment industry wasn't under the same control. Under the influence of the depression, the industry's tendency to grow was reduced; orders were down, and so was production. Within the factory, rumors were steadily increasing. Everyone was saying that America and Japan, and even a consortium of Eastern European countries, were going to buy into our company. The old look of our company was apparently going to change. I didn't know whether or not to believe this kind of gossip, until this one day when Aunty Li had me bring the account book to her office. As a result I saw an unfamiliar middle-aged man talking with her there. She passed the account book over to him. I stood to one side, bored, waiting, just like a page boy. He glanced at a few numbers, then said several things I didn't quite understand. I stood blankly behind him, leaning against the wall, practically falling asleep, when finally I saw him look at his wristwatch and say:

"It's almost 5:00, we'll talk again another day."

When I heard this, I couldn't contain my fright. I thought this guy would get a scolding. Behind him, the clock on the wall (no doubt adjusted each day to Aunty Li's pocket watch) now read 11:00 A.M. His watch, like most of the watches in the outside world, had clearly not been adjusted to Aunty Li's standard.

I waited for an angry rebuke. But nothing happened. I just saw Aunty Li amiably shake hands with this man, smiling as they parted. Not a comment was made about what he said. I thought maybe she didn't hear him, but ordinarily that wouldn't be the case. But then why? She opened the door to see the man off, then came back in and sat down without noticing me. I stood there behind her, trying my hardest to make a small sound to let her know I was there. But she didn't hear; she was concentrating on turning the pages of the account book on the desk. She had obviously forgotten I was standing there, watching her from behind. After a while she closed the account

book, then fished her pocket watch out of her pocket. She opened it, looked at it, then put it on the table. She stared into the empty space in front of her. After a minute she held her forehead as if she had a headache, then put her head down on the desk. I really didn't know what to do. Should I just stay here behind her, or go for the door? Now it seemed like I was behind her looking for other people's secrets. But it wasn't intentional. I could swear it was absolutely unintentional. I just couldn't bear staring at Aunty Li's full head of white hair. A moment before she had the bearing of an ordinary sickly old woman, displaying the frailness of her wrinkles. This really didn't fit in with my resolute, serious image of her.

Thinking about what had just happened, a faint feeling of uneasiness came over me. I felt like a worm was nibbling at me. Why hadn't she reprimanded that middle-aged outsider like she did the people in our factory in order to keep a proper sense of time? I really didn't understand. It was this that drew out my suspicions. It forced me, who had always just followed orders, to start thinking about it. It was this that got my courage up quietly to take a step forward to look at that famous pocket watch.

It was the first time I had ever seen a pocket watch in my life. It was next to Aunty Li's prostrated head. Set off by a few fragile white hairs, it was very different than I had imagined. All I saw was an ordinary open pocket watch, very old looking with a few greasy stains. The shell and the hands of the watch were rusty, and the numbers were blurred beyond recognition. Frankly, I couldn't tell if the hands were still moving or not. I just watched, and from a crack in the shell of the watch suddenly emerged a little brown worm.

76.1 Traveling Harvesters\fn{by Shao Zhenguo (1948-)} Peking, China (M) 17

It was not yet light, but in the east a patch of sky was whitening, slowly illuminating the county town of Qian-yang in Shaanxi Province and its single street, where all the traders came to hawk their wares.

Gradually, the outlines of the street became clearer, revealing dark humps of figures that looked for all the world like the old grindstones and stone lions which used to stand outside the houses of well-to-do families. As one came nearer, however, one could make out coiled legs and hunched backs of oddly strewn sleepers.

What were they doing there?

They were "chasing the harvest." They were the traveling harvesters from Zhuanglang.

Zhuanglang is a county in Gansu Province with a circumference of several hundred kilometers lying at the foot of the Guanshan Mountains. That might seem like a lot of land, but it's very densely populated and the gods have always looked on it unkindly—there's drought nine years out of ten and even to get 200 *catties* of grain per *mu* is no mean feat. Since the household contract system was implemented, they say a lot of places have been getting yields of 500 or 600 *catties*, but some of the mountain regions have no water and little fertilizer.

And then even if they have water they dare not put it on the fields. In Zhuangiang the soil is really weird. If you put water on it goes hard like a rock and crushes the young shoots. So when everyone has planted their bit of land, usually just over a *mu* or so, they go off and "follow the harvest.'

Every May, then, the men from Zhuangiang swarm across to Shaanxi Province to cut the wheat—they make the long journey to the East in one big leap and then slowly work their way back home. As soon as the wheat in Baoji is cut, it's just ripening in Fengxiang; when the harvest is over in Qianyang, you can still hurry to catch the one in Longxian. By June, they're not far from home and can get back in time to cut their own crop.

This way of following the harvest is a Zhuangiang tradition, handed down from their forefathers. The old men have always done it like this, and their sons learn from them—it's become ingrained, second nature. If a man from Zhuangiang doesn't go out to harvest, he feels uneasy all year long, as though there's something that he's forgotten to do. When you go out cutting you don't have to worry about food—your boss gives you your three meals a day, steamed bread and soup too, really good nosh. But it is not easy to earn those three meals—in the day the sun burns all the skin of your shoulders, and at night you sleep out in the fields or in some barn, completely exhausted, without a twitch, like a dead donkey. Getting your skin scorched is nothing, but if the weather changes and the first tiny spot of rain falls your heart just sinks like a stone:

"Shit! We'll never get the wheat in!"

If you have to stop cutting, the boss stops your nosh; you have to open up your ration bag and break into some parched flour or dried bread that you've saved from previous meals. And even that's not so disastrous: the worst thing is failing to follow the harvest from place to place. In the past couple of years there's been too many cutters and too few bosses. When a boss comes to hire people, he gets surrounded like by a swarm of bees, and it's devil take the hindmost—if you're a step or two too slow you don't make the harvest. And if there are a lot of cutters, of course, then the price drops; you used to be able to try for four or five *yuan* a *mu*, but nowadays the boss just

sticks out his chest and shouts, “One *yuan* twenty a *mu*, who’s coming?” and the harvesters have no choice but to go along with it. In a day or two the price has dropped to under a *yuan* a *mu,* or else they’ll forget about wages and just give you your food . You see that there aren’t going to be any more employers, and the wheat in these parts will soon be all finished; there’s nothing else for it:

“Come on, damn it, as long as we can fill our bellies …”

Back in Qianyang’s single street it was now fully light, and the place was getting lively with street vendors and traders. The harvesters were already sitting up, scratching the night’s mosquito bites on their legs, watching the mass of people, pushing carts or lugging shoulder poles, and looking to see if there might be any “bosses” among them.

With vigorous strides, a sturdy young lad walked over toward them.

“Dad! Can’t you be a bit flexible? You can’t just sit there forever! A moment ago a team leader from Shuichuang hired more than forty folk straight off at the bus depot.”

The lad had a fine build and a handsome face with large eyes which flashed with intelligence. He was wearing a white, sweat-stained shirt, patched black trousers and a pair of hemp shoes, completely worn away at the heels. Despite his clothes, however, he looked a picture of energy. ..

Wu Hedong looked up at his breathless son and then continued as before to sit on the concrete step and eat his parched flour. He managed to gulp down the last dry mouthful and then scraped the bottom of his bowl.

“Hold your horses, there’s no rush. I got a good look at this place last night. There’s a fair bit of wheat, thick wheat too. It won’t be gone for a while yet.”

And he shifted his gaze back to the people passing by. Wu Shunchang, as his name suggests, was an obedient son and, although he was burning with impatience, he sat himself resignedly down on the stone steps.

“Won’t you have something to eat? I’ve got some parched flour and hard bread. You can get a bowl of boiling water from that restaurant and give it all a good soak.”

“No, I won’t.” Wu Shunchang tossed his head, and his large, handsome eyes fell into a blank stare. He remembered the time, a few years back, when they had gone to cut wheat in Xian. They looked out over the vast expanse of the Qin Plain of golden corn, so densely packed that the wind couldn’t even bend the stalks, and the old man’s face lit up, and his eyes smiled like two sickles. Finding that the bosses were being really miserly and not paying much, Wu Hedong gave a grunt and lay down on the ground.

“God, I’m fairly whacked from the walk here, let’s rest first.” The idea being: let’s see if you won’t raise your wages a bit! The next day they came to look at the vast expanse of wheat and found that it had all been cut, every last stalk of it.

“Oh, that’s it! That finishes everything!” reproached Shunchang with angry tears. But Wu Hedong surveyed the fields full of bundles of cut wheat and pronounced once more:

“Humph! Just lumping those bundles back to be threshed will take a good few days. Don’t get impatient. We might as well go and rest again.”

But by noon there wasn’t as much as a bundle of wheat left on that whole plain.

“What do you think of that, dad? You’ve lived on the land all your life and you don’t know the old saying that ‘wheat’s only ripe for a day!’ People have to ‘snatch food out of the dragon’s mouth.’ Who’s going to wait for the likes of us! Wheat’s green in the morning, but by afternoon the ears hang and the grains fall “

“You know only too well. Want to teach your grandmother how to suck eggs, eh?”

Was Wu Hedong really not worried about missing the harvest now, then? How could he not be? You only had to look at his head which hadn’t seen a razor for many a day and now was thick with dust. Everyone else sprinkled their heads with a few handfuls of cold water and shaved themselves clean with their sickle-blades; it made them feel cooler and more refreshed. Wu Hedong, however, had heard the old folk say that you had to let your hair grow when you went harvesting. If you cut your hair you wouldn’t get to cut the wheat. You’d be sure to miss the harvest. He knew that it was just superstition, of. course, just a bit of nonsense, but even so wild horses couldn’t get him to shave his head.

Now, as he mechanically followed the movements of the passers-by, a look of melancholy was buried deep in his old, muddy eyes. Some parched flour was lodged in the black stubble of his chin, and his prominent Adam's apple bobbed up and down as he muttered to himself:

“Ah, in the old days we had ‘harvest-leaders,’ but now it’s every man for himself.”

A harvest-leader, otherwise known as a “harvest-bully,” was a strong young chap who thought he knew a bit of martial arts and could stand up out of a crowd of harvesters, strike himself on the chest and proclaim:

“I’m running this harvest! The price is five *yuan* a *mu,* and nobody better think about doing it for any less!”

And if anyone tried to hire himself he would get a good hiding. The bosses had their bluff called, and all they could do was to raise the price.

In the old days, Wu Hedong was a “harvest-leader” himself and used to beat his chest and shout the wage for the day. On one occasion, however, his act of whirling his arms and lifting a stone roller failed to frighten his opponents off; a number of hired thugs suddenly rushed up, knocked him to the ground and beat him so viciously he couldn’t get up again. He was still a little lame in his left leg to this day. At the time, he just gritted his teeth and told himself:

“Humph! The world goes in circles, rivers change course every thirty years. Just wait! When you come to our place as a traveling harvester, I’ll show you!”

The “thirty years” had gone by, and Wu Hedong was still a harvester. The passers-by, the traders and people coming in search of casual labor all seemed to be a head taller than him; their eyes darted side-long glances as they passed, but disdained to look him directly in the eyes. And who would look harvesters in the eyes? If you mention them, everyone says the same, for every ten of them there are nine thieves, and they’ll steal anything they lay their eyes on. When they eat in a restaurant they’ll swipe the rice-bowl and the chop-sticks too; if they get on a cart they’re likely to undo the ropes securing the brake, jump off and scarper with them So every year when the harvesters are due to arrive, all the householders take precautions and close their doors securely to avoid finding a bed-quilt stolen or a chicken missing.

But anyone who thinks he can take advantage of the harvesters, by saying they’ve cut a *mu* less than they have or something, has got another thing coming. Their legs are as precise as measuring rods—two hundred and forty paces is a *mu,* twenty-four paces is a *fen,* and you can’t cheat them out of a single *fen.* When Wu Hedong was a young man he came back from working on his bit of land one day and saw a hawk make off with one of his old hens. He stamped his feet and bit his lips in rage and only wished that he had wings and could fly after it. For days afterwards, he had a sick feeling in his heart about it, but eventually he dreamed up a plan of revenge. He ran up on to the hillside, stripped off his clothes and smeared his body with pig’s blood, and then lay down on the ground with pig’s offal spread out on his stomach, closed his eyes and waited for the hawk to come circling down to eat the tasty corpse. Sure enough the big bird flew down, its whirling wings covering the sky, and just the sight of its ferocious beak enough to scare anyone to death, but Wu Hedong lay completely still without the slightest twitch. The hawk jumped down on to his chest and was just about to peck at his eyes, when he opened them wide, whipped up his arms and grabbed the hawk by the neck. He then shook off the offal and went laughing back to the village. Everybody rushed out to see Wu Hedong beat the hawk to death, cursing it as he did so:

“I’ll give you what for, you thieving rascal! I’m a bigger thief myself. How dare you nab my chicken? And here’s what you’re going to get for it!”

When he had strangled the “roc” and skinned it, he took it to the local trading station and swapped it for a juicy, young chicken.

Shunchang watched as the employers slowly became fewer and fewer, but knowing how obstinate his old dad was, he didn’t dare say a word. He went and asked for a bowl of hot water from the noodle stall and silently began to mix his parched flour into it. Just as he had started eating, a tractor rumbled to a halt at the end of the street. A man stood up on the wagon and bawled out:

“Who’s coming to Nanchuan? The wheat’s not thick, I’ll pay two *yuan* twenty a *mu,* get on board anyone who wants to!”

“Hey, Shunchang, get your things together!” shouted Wu Hedong as he jumped up, picked up the carrying-pole with his ration bag, his old padded jacket, tattered straw hat and clanking sickle and with a few bounds leapt up on to the tractor cart.

“Shunchang! Quick!”

By the time Shunchang had rushed over, the boss had already counted out the cartful of men and waved his arm:

“That’s it! No more! Hey, didn’t you hear me!” he shouted threateningly, and with force he unclasped Shunchang's hand, which was clinging to the side of the cart. Looking up with his handsome face, Shunchang pleaded with the boss:

“Hey, Pop! Pop! Take me along, I’ve got to go with my dad!”

“No way. I’ve got enough now. Any more and it’s a wasted trip.”

“Let me on, Pop, please.”

Just then a sweet, crisp woman's voice called out:

“Anyone for Linyou? It’s hill country. We’ll settle on the price when you see the crop!”

The harvesters turned round and found a good-looking young woman of about twenty-five. She was clad in a traditional-style Chinese tunic, close-fitting black hemp trousers and embroidered black cloth shoes with button loops: neat and tidy from top to toe. The harvesters were all won over in a trice and rushed over toward her.

"I only want one!" she said hurriedly, and her deep, dark eyes skipped over the crowd and settled directly on Shunchang, who was still standing by the tractor.

Suddenly, the tractor rumbled off and Shunchang couldn't help turning around and calling after his departing father, "Dad—"

*

Linyou lies amid mountainous country with thick, green forest and gurgling springs. The yield of the crops isn't so high, but there aren't many people, and the weather is good for farming, so there is often grain to spare. If you tried to get anyone to settle there though, they would be sure to refuse. Due to some strange quirk of the environment, most of the families there have at least one "cripple"—a victim of a kind of Kaschin-Beck disease, with a large head, short body and crippled legs. It is mostly men who contract the disease, and so most of the laboring has to be done by the women. People from other parts tell jokes about them, like that the men can't get on the *kang* brick bed by themselves and have to get the women to help them up; or a father threatens his misbehaving son:

"You'd better not do that again! I might not be able to stop you, but I'll tell your mother when she comes back to put me up on the *kang,* and then you're really going to get a good hiding!"

Or there's the joke about the "healthy one" who can bash himself on the chest and say:

"Yeah, my legs might be a bit short, but that ten kilometers walk was nothing. Why, it took me no more than three days!"

For this reason, of course, they often need harvesters to go there. Indeed, the harvesters boast that if it wasn't for them, most of the grain in Linyou would be left to rot in the fields.

As Shunchang followed the young woman's steps along the narrow mountain path, the dazzling gold sun lit up the rich vegetation around them. Neither of them had much to say. Her embroidered shoes pattered ahead along the ground like two dancing black butterflies, while his heel-less hemp shoes clattered on after like a pair of flails.

"Come on!" shouted the young woman, breaking the long silence.

"Uh," Shunchang would reply, or at most he would say, "Yes, I'm coming," which meant that she should lead the way.

He stopped to change shoulders with his carrying-pole and turned to look at the tiny plots of land on the mountainside. The wheat was thin and of poor quality: only two hundred *catties* a *mu* or so. He could easily cut three *mu* a day at a price of at least one *yuan* a *mu.* Seventy or eighty cents would be all right, really … that would make two *yuan* ten or two *yuan* forty a day … on the plain you couldn't get through more than one and a fifth *mu* in a day, so it worked out at much the same. As Shunchang was doing his calculations he looked up ahead and saw that the woman had stopped and turned to look at him.

"How come we have to walk along in silence? Are you dumb or something?"

"Uh? Uh …"

Shunchang's handsome face looked blank, and the comers of his mouth curled upwards in an embarrassed grin.

"How much land has your family got, boss?"

She waited for him to catch up and then walked by his side, her "black butterflies" slowing their pace a little. She turned to him, her fair face suffused with pink.

"Oh, there's enough for you to cut, don't worry! There's three in the family, and we've got ten *mu* each. You work it out for yourself."

"Thirty *mu*! I'll have a job cutting all that on my own, it'll be completely yellow and starting to fall before I'm through all that."

"But there's me as well, don't forget," she said, looking across to him with her dark, pool-like eyes and replacing a fluttering strand of hair from her cheek to behind her ear. "Don't I look up to cutting wheat then or something?"

Shunchang didn't dare to look at those eyes for too long; he dropped his gaze, but his eyes fell this time to the swell of her breasts inside her tunic.

"What about your husband?"

"Him? Cut wheat? Haven't you been to Linyou before?"

"No, it's my first time."

As they spoke they came to the village—a stretch of dry river bed bounded on both sides by mountains. Strange-shaped rocks towered up out of the river bed; a shallow brook wove among them and birds flew to and fro on their tops.

"Look, there's our land," she said standing on the mountain slope and pointing ahead, "over there, that really green patch. And that's our farmhouse."

"Ah."

The yard-door opened with a creak. The young woman stamped her feet to knock the earth from her shoes and then went m.

"Come in, come in. What are you standing out there for?"

Shunchang had thought that he had better wait outside; hearing himself called into the yard he was at a loss what to do, and then, following his hostess' example, he stamped his feet vigorously on the ground, this caused him no little pain, for he had forgotten the shoes had no heels.

The yard was neat and tidy, the ground was swept clean, and on one side mustard seed had been laid out to dry. An old woman sat in the middle, turning the seeds with a stick.

"Ma, it's midday. Aren't you going to have a rest?"

"Ah, our girl's back, and who's this …?" The old woman shielded her narrowed eyes with her hand and looked at Shunchang.

"He's come to cut wheat for us," said the young woman hurriedly.

"Oh, well then, food's ready. It's in the kitchen. When you've eaten you can get cracking with the wheat, I can see the ears are getting really yellow."

Shunchang laid his cloth kit-bag at the foot of the wall, opened it up and took out two sickles and a grindstone. He asked for a bowl of water, then squatted down and began to sharpen the blades.

The old woman heard the swish of the sharpening sickles and narrowed her eyes once l1lore; the tops of the young lad's shoulders were smooth and round, and with each movement his muscles bulged. His chest was broad and straight and his long legs wide apart, his heels pressed powerfully down into the ground. My, he really looked like he could get through some work. He wasn't a bad-looker either: a round face, a bulging bridge to his nose, flashing eyes … if only my "bum" could have been like that!

"Grandma," Shunchang called to the old woman affectionately. "Don't worry about that wheat of yours getting too ripe," he said, running his thumb down the sickle blade, "I'm a quick cutter, it'll be done in no time."

The old woman blinked her eyes.

"Oh, what a good lad! Shuixiang, hurry up with the food!"

They turned around and saw that Shuixiang had already brought the food and was just standing there, thinking something over to herself

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As soon as the tractor chugged its way into Nanchuan, the heads of the households, who had long been awaiting its arrival, began to clamor:

"I want three of them!"

"I want two!"

"I want a young man!"

At the same time the loudspeaker of the production brigade was blaring out some wailing opera to form a scene as confused as a "mixed dumpling" of maize and millet.

People in Shaanxi Province like to eat "mixed dumplings," but Zhang Genfa had developed an appetite for other things. He was squatting leisurely to one side, with his arms crossed; he held a cigarette in his right hand, while on his left wrist flashed a brand-new watch. With wheat cutters you don't look for the fast ones, but the ones who can cut clean; and in bundling the wheat it's not prettiness that counts, but strength and durability—young lads tie bundles that fall apart as soon as you lift them. And they eat more too: young ones can easily get through seven or eight bowls in just one meal. He looked at Wu Hedong through screwed-up eyes and took out a packet of Peony cigarettes. The silver paper crackled as he opened it.

"Hey, Pops, catch."

A cigarette landed at Wu Hedong's feet.

"And I'll take you too, and you, and you. That makes four of you. Come on, we'll be off."

There was an old guy with a hunchback, one with a beard ringing his face and a middle-aged chap in his forties. They arrived at the field together and found that Zhang Genfa had a big crop of level wheat, so thick that you could hardly get a sickle into it and with such bulging grains and sturdy awns\fn{Bristles; the "beard" of wheat,

which terminate the scales of the spikelets.} that you could lay a mat on top and go to sleep. Wu Hedong threw his pack down on the field's edge, fixed the blade in his sickle and looked out over the wheat:

"But there must be over five hundred *catties* a *mu* there, boss."

"Oh no, there's never that much."

Zhang Genfa shook his head and linked his cigarette stub with another Peony cigarette.

"It may look quite even, but in fact it's pretty thin stuff. You can cut one and a half *mu* a day, no problem. Get yourselves ready and we'll get down to work. Oh, you're not hungry, are you? It's too late for breakfast really, so if you're not too hungry then we should maybe wait until midday."

"Well," said the hunchback, patting his stomach with his straw hat, "I wouldn't mind a bite to eat now, but there again I don't mind too much if we don't, I don't feel all that hungry yet. What do you lot think?" he said, turning to his comrades, his raised eyebrows indicating his dilemma.

Wu Hedong blinked his old, muddy eyes a couple of times, lifted his lame leg, hobbled a couple of paces over to the wheat field and began to cut the wheat.

Zhang Genfa's wife had just come out with a wicker basket. She saw the figures of the harvesters departing into the field and was on the point of calling out to them, but her husband waved over to her:

"Hey woman, go and get my sickle and hurry up about it!"

His wife stood apologetically for a while before setting off back to the house.

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The swish of the sickle was all that could be heard, and no steps were visible; every few swishes made a bundle of wheat, and after every few bundles a change of sickles was needed. It was approaching midday, but they had only cut a few tenths of a *mu,* and Wu Hedong's faded black coat was giving off steam like the cloth in a bamboo steamer. That bad leg of his had started to ache again, and he felt like sitting down and resting for a while, but then the image of Shunchang's mother flashed in front of his eyes: what would she be doing in the house now? Still stripping bamboo? She would strip the skin off each cane of bamboo, cut them down to the same length and thickness, steep them in water until they were soft and then weave them into mats or sieves. She had worn herself out with all that hard work and worry, but still they hadn't managed to settle Shunchang's marriage. They hadn't been able to raise the money for the betrothal gifts, and the girl had been married to someone else

Thinking of all this, Wu Hedong bent his lame leg and pressed on forward. The wheat fell, clump after clump The sun had already passed the zenith, and the loudspeaker had started up again. After another piece of wailing opera, it started to broadcast the brigade's own news:

"This year we have done even better than last. The more we use the contract system, the better off we're going to be."

It was all announced very grandly and sonorously in local dialect with thick Shaanxi accents.

"The award is given to the conspicuous householders—the Wangs, the Zhaos and the Zhangs—haven't made them too proud. They're not resting on their laurels, indeed their enthusiasm is even greater than before."

Zhang Genfa stood in the shade of a tree, listening to the broadcast. As he surveyed his fields of wheat, he couldn't stop a smile from breaking over his face.

"Hey lads, come under the tree and have a rest. We'll have our lunch now. Come on, everyone!"

Zhang's wife came out again with the wicker basket. She put the steamed bread and the cabbage down on the ground and stuck a spoon in the basin of soup:

"Eat up, lads. I'm sorry it's such poor fare, but I hope it fills you up, and help yourselves to the soup."

The harvesters crowded around, sat down on the ground and began to wolf the food down. The boss walked off somewhere, and the bearded chap saw his opportunity to stuff some bread under his shirt.The middle-aged fellow gave him a dig with his elbow though, and signaled with his lips in the direction of the tree, whereupon he replaced the bread in the basket.

Wu Hedong looked over at the scholartree—an old chap of seventy or more was lying on the ground, his head propped on the roots of the tree, looking like nothing more than a cow collapsed from exhaustion. He was muttering something with his old toothless mouth. Each movement creased his whole face up in wrinkles and caused his rough beard to jut up.

"Oh … it doesn't matter, take a few for yourself, it's all right."

As he spoke, a good-natured smile spread over his face.

The harvesters felt more easy at this, and Wu Hedong took a bread roll as well. He broke it into pieces and laid it out to dry in the sun so that he could keep it when it was dried. Suddenly, he thought of his son Shunchang. Was the lad eating his lunch now as well? And where could he be? …

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For lunch there was "oil-splashed noodles." Shunchang ate four bowls straight off and then saw that Shuixiang was carrying in steamed bread as well.

"Oh, I've had enough really, I've not even done any work yet," he said quickly, in some embarrassment.

"But you've been walking the whole morning, here have some," Shuixiang said.

Shunchang took a snow-white roll of steamed bread and wolfed it down.

"I'm going out to reap now, boss," he declared, wiping his lips.

"Oh, but the sun's too hot now, you'll be boiled alive, we'd be better to wait a while."

"Oh, but … I'm not afraid of a bit of heat." He picked up his sickles and strode out of the yard; Shuixiang followed his receding figure with her deep, dark eyes. Why had she chosen him that morning at Qianyang? Was it out of pity or simply because he looked honest and hardworking? She had first caught sight of him as he wandered around the end of the street, looking hard with those big eyes of his for someone to hire him, and she couldn't help measuring him up with her eye. Later, when the shop opened, she went in just to have a look around, and she saw him again. He had in his hands a pair of size 41 gym shoes and, lifting up his feet, tried them for size for a long time against the heel-less soles of his old hemp shoes mumbling softly over and over to himself:

"Five *yuan* … five *yuan*."

In the end he put the shoes back on the counter and didn't buy them. Later still, when she saw him clinging desperately to the tractor and pleading with the man, she for some reason suddenly felt a pain welling up inside her heart, and she couldn't stop herself calling out like she did. Yes, it was out of pity for him, but then again a lot of people had a hard time of it, so why was it just him she took pity on?

Shuixiang's face suddenly blushed bright red. She realized that it wasn't a harvester she had chosen, but something else altogether, and she cursed herself bitterly: Oh, you're a wicked woman you've no shame at all, a young wife with wicked ideas like that!

"Shuixiang!"

Shuixiang came to with a start and saw her mother standing on the steps of the south-facing main room.

"What are you doing standing there like a lemon? Why don't you go and show him where to go?"

"I … I was looking for my sickle." Her sickle and her straw hat were hanging right in front of her eyes; she took them down and hurried out. Shunchang was definitely no slouch when it came to reaping; most cutters just used their arms, but he even brought his legs into it. Before the wheat had fallen, his left arm circled round and rolled the wheat backward; when it was all rolled up into a big bundle, he picked it up between his sickle and his foot and threw it over to one side. But when Shunchang looked down for the patch of land down the hill he got a shock:

"By heck, how can the boss be that fast!"

Shuixiang knew herself that she was a fast cutter, and although her field was a little smaller than Shunchang's, she had soon cut it all and didn't feel the least bit tired. In fact, she felt as though her energy was inexhaustible. She stood up, took the sweat-cloth from her waist, and as she wiped her deep-rosy cheeks and slender neck, her eyes unconsciously strayed over toward Shunchang's side.

She vaulted nimbly over the earth bank and watched him from behind as he worked, with the cleanly cut field lying at his back. The stubble was short, and all the bundles of wheat were the same size and the ears together. Seeing how he worked seemed to give her even more energy; she bounded over in a few strides and began cutting at the edge of Shunchang's field.

"Hey. How come you're cutting here, boss?"

"Because I've seen you're cutting so slowly, that's why!"

Shunchang was struck dumb; he made a few hasty cuts and then lurched to a halt:

"But when we've finished, what about the wages? How are we going to work them out?"

"Oh, I know how," replied Shuixiang sharply, with a voice like a sickle scything through a wheat stalk.

"But …"

"All right, let's say you cut twenty *mu* to my ten, will that be good enough for you?"

"But that could never be right. Let's just say half each then and leave it at that."

Shuixiang smiled secretly to herself under her straw hat, and her red face shone. Without realizing, she began to move closer and closer to him.

The village of Nanchuan was wrapped in the gloom of evening, and along with it the gnarled old scholartree with the protruding roots. The harvesters had finished their supper and were sitting under the old scholartree chat-

ting to each other—the best way they had of relieving their tired bodies. The old hunchback puffed contentedly on his pipe, and each lungful was more delicious than the last:

"I remember we had to walk that day from Baoji to Fengxiang; it were getting dark, and my old legs were just about giving up, and then a car pulls up with some city guest in it. He looked like an official to me, and then he shouts, 'Hey you, get in here.' 'Heck,' I think to myself, 'what does he want to nab a harvester like me for?' I haven't nicked a thing. But it turns out he wants me to cut some wheat for him, and so I gets in that limo of his, and it races off over to his place! Heck, I might be a hunchback, but with luck like that a person don't have to scramble for everything. Those other folk may be able to buy tickets for the bus, but what's the point in getting there before everyone else? There's no bosses around to hire you and you're just left kicking your heels. Heh, heh."

"Ha, ha." The man with the beard, lying half back on the ground, chuckled and gave a belch. "You're better off walking if you ask me. Sitting in them cars fair tires a man out! Ha ha! Eeeee, everywhere's a lot better off than back in Zhuangiang. Have you seen the clothes they're wearing and the nosh they're eating around these parts?"

"Yep, you're right there," said the hunchback, picking up the thread of the bearded man's discourse. "Just look at our boss here. With a smart new brick farmhouse like that, it looks like there's room for his grandchildren and his great-grandchildren in that bloomin palace of his."

The middle-aged chap was a bit on the wary side for some reason, and he gave the speaker a nudge with his elbow, and motioned once more toward the tree. The old man was still lying over there on the ground. The harvesters were uncertain about his position in the bosses house-hold—his clothes weren't much better than their own, he wasn't ever called in to eat, and even though it was getting late he was still lying there underneath the tree. He never said much, and when he did he spoke simply and listlessly—just like the old scholartree, which stood quiet and still except when the wind ruffled its leaves and stirred its branches.

"What are you worried about? What he says, I gather, doesn't count in this household," said the hunchback, lowering his voice slightly. "The four sons in this family are all *cadres* in the town, you know."

"So that's why they got us 'four old men' to get their wheat in, is it?" rasped the bearded man, and the others laughed.

"Hey, don't interrupt me," said the hunchback, getting back to his original story.

"Well, I went over there early in the morning to get some water to grind my sickle and what do I see in that yard of theirs: carts, wheelbarrows, bikes, every bloody thing you can imagine. And have you seen that watch he wears? Brand-new, shines like gold, probably the best make in the whole bloomin world, if you ask me."

"I can see your eyes lighting up when you talk about that watch!" cut in the bearded man. "I bet you'd like to get your hands on it."

"Ha ha ha!"

"I said no interruptions, all right? Anyway, I was just on my way out with the water when this real beautiful slip of a girl walks in, and she smells so sweet, and her face is so white. Oh, you should have seen her."

"Ah, you talk a load of rot: if she's so nice why didn't you give her a big hug?"

"Ha ha ha!" The harvesters couldn't help roaring with laughter.

"Heh heh, I'd be afraid of getting a good thrashing on this back of mine, I would, heh heh," laughed the hunchback. "That was the *fiancée* of one of his sons, you see. They'll be getting married soon. Three thousand *yuan* it must have cost to fix that up. Beautiful thing she is too, a real smasher, and the boy adores her."

Wu Hedong couldn't keep his bristly jaw from shaking; his pipe quivered and showered sparks on to his foot, but he didn't feel anything.

"Hey mate, how come you've got so many worries?" asked the hunchback, drawing closer to him. This was the only way the harvesters had of showing their concern for each other. How can poor men show their feelings apart from drawing together in sympathy?

"I know you're still thinking about that kid of yours, but he'll be all right. He's at least twenty-six, isn't he? Yuu don't have to worry about him going hungry or getting lost. He's bound to have found work. You'll get together again at the next stop."

"How's the corn been over at Wujiahe this year?" asked the bearded man concernedly, in an attempt to console Wu Hedong.

"Oh, it's a bit better than before."

No matter what they said, who really understood his troubles? .

Wu Hedong wasn't someone to keep his problems to himself though, and supported by his companions' show of concern, he began chokingly to tell his story.

*

Shunchang's mother was really a woman with a lot of drive and energy. She worked day and night in order to get the lad's betrothal money together, and when it got dark she didn't want to waste the paraffin and so made do with moonlight instead. Her hands would get cut up from the bamboo, but she'd just suck them and swallow the blood. Wu Hedong's temper had got worse and worse ever since he got the lame leg, and even if he tried to say anything nice it always came out sour:

"What's the point of all this? We can't get a wife for him, so why bother?"

His wife would raise her head from the bamboo:

"Oh yes, and even if we don't find a wife for him, we've got to live, haven't we?"

Previously, because they couldn't find a hundred *yuan* or so, she had had to harden her heart and give their eldest son Shunsheng to a family beyond the mountains as a "live-in" son-in-law. With her son so far away, she couldn't often see him. As soon as she started to think about it, she felt bitter regretting that she had let her other son and his father down.

The more hardworking she became, however, the more she seemed to injure Wu Hedong's self respect as a "real man," and he was apt to vent his spleen on her at every turn.

"You spend all bloody day making those bloody mats and riddles, and what the hell do we get from it? Not enough for two square meals. You're no bleeding use at all to me, woman. Just bugger off somewhere else!"

After he'd cursed her and hit her, however, he was always filled with remorse and would limp off to some lonely spot to shed his tears.

"Well you old bastard you, every thirty years the river changes its course, does it? Well, I'd better get going and get on with it!"

In the second year under the contract system, despite all their efforts, the wheat-crop was devastated by drought. Shunchang's mother got really frantic, and sparing no effort she took the hundred *catties* or so of buck-wheat they had harvested and sowed it for a second crop. People normally sew one crop a year in Zhuanglang. Sowing broom-corn millet or buckwheat at the height of summer was just courting disaster—if you actually managed to harvest it you would never get all that much, and if the crop failed you had lost all your seed-grain. In the ten days after sowing there wasn't as much as a drop of rain. Wu Hedong took one look at the shoots and thought they didn't have a snowball's chance in hell. He went back in a raging temper and gave his old woman a beating.

"I said as how you weren't to sow it, but you wouldn't listen, would you, you old bitch! How are we supposed to get through the winter now you've thrown away our two hundred *catties* of corn? Just tell me that! I'll flay you alive and eat you, that's what I'll have to do!"

But within a month the buckwheat was already shooting up, and by the end of September heavy, full grains were weighing down the red flowers.

"Come on, Shunchang! Go and help your ma get the buckwheat in!"

The old woman was beaming with happiness; she worked non-stop for three days—pulling it up by the roots, binding it up, carrying it back to be dried, and then threshing it. She worked until the buckwheat was safely crammed into the grain-bins and then collapsed in exhaustion on the *kang*.

Ever since early childhood Shunchang had understood the trials of his parents. By the time he was ten, he would walk for miles up into the mountains to pick medicinal herbs, chop bamboo and collect firewood, and he would hand the little bit of money he made over to his mother. The first time he ventured up into the mountains and saw the peaks towering up into the clouds and the pitch-dark forests, where the only sound was the gloomy echo of your own coughing, and where the paths disappeared right before you, he was so scared his hair stood on end, and his legs were like jelly. After a time, however, he got to be able to find all the herbs like rhubarb, Chinese wolfberry and magnolia vine. According to the regulations of the forest authorities everyone had to pay half a *yuan* to enter the forest, and the only firewood you were allowed to collect was dead branches—if you chopped down a fir then you would be fined or even put in prison. Shunchang was an honest boy by nature, and even at the age of twenty-six he didn't know the meaning of the word "theft." That day he was with his dad on the mountain, each busy cutting bamboo on their own, and in the afternoon they came down the mountain together both carrying a big bundle of bamboo on their backs. Wu Hedong saw that his lad was puffing heavily, as though he were making harder work of it than normal.

"What's up? Are you not feeling well?"

"Oh no … I'm all right."

"Put the load further up, relax your back a bit more and bend at the waist …" As they came down to the

entrance to the mountain, there was a sudden crack as the rope holding Shunchang's bundle snapped under the load and it crashed down on to the path. The forest wardens came over to have a look; one of them gave the bundle of bamboo a kick, and with a crack several small fir trees, as thick as a man's arm, came loose from the center of the bundle, where they had been hidden.

For a moment, Wu Hedong was startled speechless. The wardens came over, and without demur grabbed Shunchang by the neck and started beating him. Wu Hedong rushed forward and pleaded with them:

"Take it easy, lads, if you want to hit someone, hit me. I'm his dad, I'm responsible."

As he spoke, Wu Hedong picked up the fir trees and put them to one side. He glared at his son with eyes burning with anger and limped slowly forward, a small fir tree trunk clutched in his hand.

"Who taught you to swipe other folk's stuff!"

"Dad, dad …"

"Tell me!" he exhorted, striking him a painful blow on the leg.

"Ow, dad …"

Shunchang fell howling to the ground, and before anyone could stop him, his father clouted him a few more blows.

"You've got us into trouble and made me lose face now. Am I, Wu Hedong, a thief? I'll give you a hiding, you thieving rascal! What the hell did you want to go and do that for?"

"Dad I'm sorry. Please forgive me."

"Tell me why!"

Shunchang lifted up his tear-filled eyes to his father, who appeared as just a dark shadow above him.

"It's Ma, she's been spitting … spitting blood. I didn't dare tell you, I thought I could make a bit of money, so she could go and see a doctor."

The small trunk fell from Wu Hedong's hand and clattered on the ground.

Wu Hedong rushed home, took his wife in his arms and choked with sobs.

"Oh I've cursed you and beaten you; and me … I'm not worth a shit!"

"But no two folk can get by together without having a few scrapes. When you say that," and sobbing she buried her face in his chest, "I'm afraid that I might … you'll have to arrange it, get a wife for him."

Wu Hedong hugged her tightly and stroked her face with his big, rough hand, its skin like tree bark.

"Don't fret. I'll get you well, and I'll see him married. We've had a fair old time together. Every thirty years the river changes."

Wu Hedong burst into sobs and could say no more

*

Wu Hedong knocked out his pipe, which had long ago gone out, and swallowed the bitterness from smoking.

"By heck. I'm not fit to be a father."

The evening breeze blew lightly through the old scholartree, and its leaves and branches seemed to start into motion.

The harvesters were silent; they felt as though they should say something but didn't know how to start. The old man under the tree lay completely still and seemed to be asleep. No one had seen his eyes, however, which were still staring wide out into the night.

They unpacked their kit-bags and were getting ready to spend the night on the ground when Zhang Genfa walked over humming tunelessly to himself.

"Didn't you eat well? I'm sorry it was such a poor meal "

"Oh no, it was really good food, really good."

"Come on then, lads, let's go and find you somewhere to sleep."

To the harvesters' amazement, Zhang Genfa walked off in the direction of the village. Surely the boss wasn't going to let them sleep in the farmhouse? On *kang* beds? It wasn't that they weren't used to it, of course; every house had an earth *kang* with a straw mat on top, but when you were out harvesting, getting to sleep on one was like seventh heaven. They hurriedly picked up their things and followed after the boss. Coming to the village entrance, however, the boss walked straight past and led them over to the threshing floor beyond.

"Don't take offence, lads, there's not much room in the house, you know. There's some straw in the sheds here and there's a watchman's hut over there with a little *kang*, that'll take two of you; it hasn't got a mat, but you can spread some straw out on it."

The boss left, and the harvesters lay down and slowly fell snoring to sleep.

Wu Hedong lay at the foot of a stack of straw with his old, patched padded jacket stretched over him. His bad

leg began to ache, and he pulled the jacket down lower.

The night was still. With wide eyes he looked up at the thickly dotted stars, as if he were trying to count them —… one … two …—and as if he was trying to think through his problems too. That star's me, that bright one over there is his mother, and that one way, way over there, that's Shunchang. There really was no end to her energy! No sooner had Shuixiang come back from the fields and hung up her sickle than she picked up the wooden pitchfork and noisily pushed all the mustard seeds drying in the yard into a big heap against the wall. Her mother stood up on the tips of her small feet and snatched the pitchfork from her.

"How come you're never tired, girl? Go and have a rest!"

Shuixiang let go of the pitchfork, but then picked up the carrying-pole with the empty pails. Shunchang, who was squatting at the side of the yard washing his face, immediately threw down the towel and strode across.

"Hey boss, let me go!"

"But—"

Shuixiang was caught in two minds, but Shunchang had already grabbed the carrying-pole and was walking off toward the gate. She quickly tickled the lock of hair from her cheek and shouted after him:

"Hey, do you know where the well is?"

The smoke from the kitchen curled lazily upward, and the stars had begun to sparkle in the sky. One of them wound the winch, and the other took hold of the pails of gurgling water.

After supper, Shunchang ground all the sickle blades one by one then spread out his pack at the foot of the courtyard wall, where he was intending to spend the night. He was on the point of lying down when the old woman called over to him:

"Hey, my lad, pick that up. I've already cleared a place for you in the straw shed. Come and sleep there."

"Ma—" complained Shuixiang, with a tone of coquettish reproach.

"Uh? What?"

Shuixiang had already pushed open the door to the room on the west side of the yard.

"Come and stay in this room, lad."

For a while, Shunchang was knocked speechless, and then he managed to say, "No, no, I couldn't. I'm fine anywhere. I couldn't really …"

The old woman was also momentarily lost for words, but when she saw the honest, humble look on Shunchang's face she couldn't help herself saying, "Yes, that's right. There's lots of room in the house. Come on." She took hold of Shunchang's arm, its skin peeling from sunburn, and led him over to the wing-room.

That room was almost bare of furniture, just a mat and a quilt on the *kang* and a table on the floor before it with a ticking alarm clock on top.

"This is our bum's room. He's gone off to some relalitives to loaf around; when the wheat's all cut he'll come waltzing back/"

"Uh …" Shunchang looked gratefully at the old lady, sat uneasily on the edge of the *kang* and ran his rough hand over its polished wooden edge. "Grandma—"

"Hey, don't call me 'grandma.' I might look old to you, but I'm only in my fifties, you know. It's just the hard times I've seen. My life only started getting better when I had Shuixiang, and I was over thirty then."

"Uh, but why can't your son do any work then?"

"*Eh*, he's not up to it, that's why, just like his father!" she replied, obviously with a stomachful of bitterness. With a trembling hand she struck a match and silently lit the paraffin lamp.

"All the sons I had were cripples. Two of them didn't live, and just the one survived. It'd have been better if he'd died, really. If it weren't for that girl Shuixiang, I'd have dropped off long ago, along with that old devil of a husband of mine."

Shunchang was a soft-hearted lad, and his eyes were already brimming with tears. The lamp was dim, however, and the old lady couldn't see them.

"You'll be tired out from all that reaping, son. You should get some sleep. I'm going now." She was on the point of going out of the door when she turned around and came back again.

"Oh, the quilt's over there, see … you can cover yourself with that."

For some reason she still couldn't bring herself to leave the room. Finally she inched over to the table, and in some embarrassment she stretched out her hand and picked up the alarm clock. She smiled awkwardly, with the dim lamplight illuminating her aged, gray face, and then retreated from the room.

Shunchang knew that she had taken the clock because she didn't trust him, but he didn't feel the least bit of resentment. He rather felt embarrassed that he had put the old lady in such a difficult position. He'd learnt a lot

from following the harvest, and he knew that he was being very well treated by being asked to stay under the same roof as his host. As he was thinking about what had happened, the door creaked open and Shuixiang came in, holding in one hand a brand-new patterned thermos flask and in the other two fine porcelain cups.

"You can have a drink if you're thirsty, lad. I'll leave them here." Then she took the alarm clock from her pocket and put it back in its original place on the table.

Seeing the clock Shunchang couldn't stop himself blushing, as though he'd actually thought of stealing. Shuixiang noticed his expression and quickly explained:

"My ma doesn't know how to wind it up. She has to get me to do it."

Shunchang could tell she was lying, but even so his face beamed with gratitude. Harvesters get to eat at hundreds of folks' homes, and they get to know which ones treat them well. But no matter how well he had been looked after, this was the first time anyone had looked up to him, trusted him, the first time he had known the feeling of being treated like a man. It awakened in him a dormant sense of self-respect; he savored the feeling carefully and found it also had a slightly bitter, astringent flavor to it, like when you have not eaten sugar for a long time and then suddenly eat a lot of it—you find it also has a bitter taste. Shunchang felt it like a stabbing pain in his heart, but at the same time there was someone's hand caressing the wound and soothing it. He couldn't stop himself raising his eyes and looking straight at Shuixiang, and it was if only then he discovered just how beautiful her face was, how gentle, how kind, especially her eyes, like two pools of water, so deep you couldn't see the bottom, and mirroring whoever looked into them.

Shuixiang shyly lowered her eyelids and looked down at the oil lamp; the wick was giving off fluttering and dancing sparks.

"Won't you have some water?" she asked, lifting the thermos as she did so.

"Uh, no thanks, boss."

"I've told you not to call me boss, but there you go again. Can't you try something else?"

"But—"

"My ma named me Shuixiang—"fragrant water"—she says the water's tasted sweet ever since she's had me." She poured out a cup of water and left it to cool. She was silent for a time and then suddenly blurted out:

"Hey, you're twenty-six. How come you haven't got fixed up with a wife yet?"

"Why do you ask me that, sister?"

The wick began to splutter even more. Shuixiang took a hair clip from her temple and prodded the flame with it.

"Well, why shouldn't I ask?"

"Hmm. Life's not easy over in Zhuanglang, you know. My folks haven't been able to arrange it."

Silence fell again, it seemed like for an age.

"How about if I lent you some money, then you could go and fix up a wife?"

"But, how could that be right? Oh, you're just making fun of me, aren't you, sister?"

"No, no, and then you could come over here every year … to cut the wheat."

The lamp grew suddenly brighter, lighting up Shuixiang's rosy face and casting the silhouette of her shapely figure on the wall.

"You'd better be getting some sleep now, lad. We'll go out a bit earlier tomorrow."

Shuixiang went out and hurried back to her room in the east wing.

*

How much can I make by cutting wheat year in year out? Well then. No, I can't make the lad wait any longer, he's going to be married by Spring Festival at the latest! If I can't earn enough money, then I'll take the house apart; I can sell the doors, windows and rafters and just leave the four walls—that'll bring in a hundred *yuan* or so. When I get back in a couple of days and reap my wheat, I'll sow some buckwheat like what my better half did. We'll pull through the winter on buckwheat and fetch another hundred *yuan* by selling all our wheat. If we can get seven or eight hundred together we'll see if the Songs' girl will marry him or not. If not then we'll have to have the hunchback for a relative! He says he's willing to take a bit less than that for his girl

"Hey, take it easy over there, father-in-law! Watch you don't do your old legs in!" shouted the old hunchback jokingly from a neighboring patch of wheat where he was loosening up his legs, stiff from squatting. "Are you trying to steal all my wages or what?"

Wu Hedong cut a few more sickles of wheat and then sat down to rest in the field. He lifted up his straw hat and blinked beads of sweat furiously from his eyes: by heck, that girl of his better not be a hunchback as well.

"Hey boss, won't you get grit in that watch wearing it cutting wheat?" asked the middle-aged chap next to

Zhang Genfa, as he changed the blade in his sickle.

"Ha ha, this watch? It's waterproof and shockproof, you know. Don't you think it can keep out a bit of grit? Solid steel, you see. Grit stands no chance of getting in."

Wu Hedong turned around to see the boss smiling smugly; he sighed softly to himself: ah, if only I had a watch, I wouldn't have to take the house apart. It was midday, and the sun was burning viciously. There's less wear on the sickle when the wheat's dry though, and it cuts quicker, so what if the sun was scorching?

The boss took out his sweat-cloth and wiped himself down. He stuffed the cloth back under his expandable watch strap—which, unbeknown to him, promptly snapped under the pressure.

"Hey, woman, bring us out some tea!"

The middle-aged man turned his head and continuing to scythe away asked Zhang Genfa:

"Hey boss, you've not brought out tea these past two days. How come you've just thought of it now? Ha, ha, just a joke. Don't get me wrong. I'll go and fetch it for us if you're thirsty."

"Oh no, you keep on cutting. The wheat's getting really yellow now."

As he spoke, the boss took off his shirt, rolled it up tightly and dropped it down on the ground by his feet before pressing on forward once more.

Most of the wheat had now been hacked down, and the field looked like a beach at low tide. The sun continued to beat down fiercely. Wu Hedong for some reason, however, felt cold chills running up his back. Dripping with sweat, he slashed away furiously with his sickle, hardly caring if it should slice into his leg, or even plunge into his body, or into his heart. He scampered over to the edge of the field and then worked back, tying the fallen wheat into bundles as he went. He still felt just as cold with his back to the sun. He blinked his old, muddy eyes furiously; it was sweat or tears he was blinking away, he didn't know.

As he yanked a bundle tight for all he was worth, the straw rope snapped, and it fell apart. He grabbed up the wheat once more and tied it again. His hands were trembling uncontrollably. What's wrong? What's got into me? Why do I feel so bad, like I could kill myself! If you really want to die you old devil, then just go off somewhere and lie down and die! What's stopping you? Only just don't disgrace yourself here. But still he couldn't stop his blood-shot eyes from straying over to the place on the ground where the bosses rolled-up shirt was lying.

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Shuixiang's wheat was now all down. The very last patch in the deep valley lay quiet and somnolent, like a silkworm fatigued after disgorging all its silk. The field was full of neatly-piled bundles of wheat along with some scattered wheat yet to be tied. On one side lay two sickles, close together; the blades were hot enough to burn one's hand on.

"Hey, brother, have a drink."

It was not clear when she had started to address him so familiarly, calling him "brother." She strode over to the edge of the field and gulped down a bowl of cold tea, then brought the tea-jug over to Shunchang. The last rays of the setting sun shone down through the tangle of greenery at the top of the valley, bathing Shuixiang in golden-yellow light and delineating the rounded contours of her graceful waist and buttocks. The tea gurgled crisply out of the jug, like the sound of the cooing and chirruping birds in the valley.

"Here, drink!"

Shunchang rolled down from the bundles of wheat, took the bowl and drank it down in one draught.

"Want some more? You'd better pour it yourself, I'm not waiting on you hand and foot!"

"Ha, ha, sister," laughed Shunchang guilelessly.

Shuixiang pushed the stray lock of hair behind her ear again.

"You really do say some stupid things. I'm a good few years younger than you, you know. Why can't you call me 'little sister' or something nice like that?"

"But—"

"But what? Wouldn't you like to?"

She straightened her slender neck and looked at Shunchang with her head inclined to one side.

Shunchang felt a sudden flush of heat run down his body, and, his chest panting, he couldn't stop himself saying, "Little … sister."

She smiled sweetly.

"You've finally got it right." The harvested field was laden with the smell of the earth and the strong, heady fragrance of wheat straw. Shuixiang lay down on a pile of unbundled straw and stretched herself out. Her black trousers were pulled taut by the shapely curve of her legs, which trembled slightly. Her deep, full bosom rose and fell inside her tight, sweat-soaked blouse. Looking at her, Shunchang felt. a tingling in his heart; for him this was

all a mysterious new world. Shuixiang rested on her elbow and turned her face to his.

"I'm from Zhuanglang too, you know. What, don't you believe me?"

"Ha, ha, of course I don't. You don't speak a bit like us Zhuanglang folk, do you?"

"And what's that got to do with it? I know that all Linyou is famous for is cripples, but they speak a lot better here than in your Zhuanglang, don't they?"

"That's right enough; other folk say our accent's so thick it hammers their eardrums to bits!"

Shuixiang gushed with laughter, free and unrestrained, like the gurgling stream in the bottom of the valley.

"Do you think Linyou's all right?"

"Oh, it's lovely here, really great!"

"Would you … would you like to come and live here?"

" …"

" …"

Shuixiang turned away. She looked out at the shorn fields as though she was regretting that the wheat had been cut so quickly.

"Don't leave just yet, brother. How about staying and helping me with threshing?"

Shunchang was at a complete loss for a moment, as though he'd lost something but couldn't remember quite what it was. He walked over toward her, unable to help himself.

How could he help falling in love with her? In all his twenty-six years, no girl had ever been so friendly with him; no one had ever looked twice at a pauper like him; he'd never said more than a few words to a girl, never so much as held a girl's hand, and here was this beautiful, kind, gentle young woman, who was being so intimate with him, calling him "brother." How could his passions fail to be aroused by her? And how could he have stopped himself calling her "little sister" just now? But even so, he felt that she really should by rights be a "sister!"

"No, I should go, really I should. I've already told my dad I'll meet him at the next harvest stop."

Shuixiang looked as though she had lots she wanted to say but couldn't bring herself to; she looked across at Shunchang with those dark, liquid eyes. Suddenly she felt a burst of compassion flush through her body.

"Brother!"

"Little sister!"

She slowly extended her hand, which seemed to be trembling slightly, and, with his pounding heart about to jump out his chest Shunchang took hold of it. She pulled him gently toward the pile of wheat. Breathing deeply, he slowly lowered himself down; the heady fragrance of straw and earth mingled together with the smell of body sweat. Beneath the crackling of the straw could be heard a faint murmur:

"Tonight, brother. Come to the room in the east wing."

*

That evening Wu Hedong was lying as before at the foot of the stack of wheat, staring up at the stars. There were so many of them, and so densely packed together; how could he find that bright one again? And how was his old lady doing now? You don't have to work day and night any more. You can rest easy. It won't be long before I'm home now, and I'll get it all fixed up for the lad by the spring, just you see.

He rolled over and pressed the ration bag smooth with his big hand. It was too hard and bumpy for resting his head on nothing but old, dry bread after all, and how could that be comfortable to lie on? He rubbed his head and lay back down again. After a short time he felt a gnawing hunger in his stomach; he rolled over again and opened the bag up. It was really big and seemed almost bottomless, able to hold a good few hundred *catties*. It was originally of plain, white cloth, but was now black and filthy like an old oil-rag.

All of a sudden he heard someone cough, and his hand holding the bag involuntarily began to tremble. He looked up and saw the old man from under the tree standing unsteadily before him. He was holding in his hand a pitchfork which he used upside-down as a walking-stick.

"Haven't you gone off to bed yet, grandpa?" asked Wu Hedong in greeting.

"Oh no, not yet. I'm watching the farmyard; if you smoke, be careful you don't start a fire."

As he spoke, his eyes came back to Wu Hedong's ration bag—he thought he saw something sparkle brightly in it. It was gone now though; his old eyes really weren't good for anything any more: they confused the earth and sky and saw stars on the ground.

His hands trembling uncontrollably, Wu Hedong hurriedly explained:

"I felt a bit hungry, you know, I thought … I thought I'd have a bite to eat."

"Oh yes, eat up. You shouldn't let yourself go hungry if you want to stay in good health. I'll go and get you

some water."

The old fellow smiled again with a genuine warmth and compassion, his face creasing up in wrinkles and his patchy beard sticking up.

*

The unlatched door of the east wing room and the still, quiet window were bathed in the light of the stars. Shuixiang wasn't sleeping; she sat numbly on the side of the *kang* and thought about lighting the lamp again, but without any real inclination to do so. The room was dark; only the window was light and it cast the square pattern of its frame on to the curtain.

It looked as though he wasn't going to come. She lifted the curtain once more and gazed across to the room on the west wing.

Shunchang was lying on the *kang*, unable to settle. Before his eyes he saw the image of a man: a man lame in one leg, with a head too large for his body, who could hardly count up to ten. He was still a man though for all that, a man with a crippled body and a crippled heart. How in all conscience could Shunchang go and hurt him?

"Brother …" the crackling of the straw and that low murmur, barely audible. He had taken her hand in his and held it tight, smelt the heavy, intoxicating fragrance of straw, of earth, of sweat, of bodies close together. The bolt was drawn back on the door, and the starlight shone in through and lit up two trembling hands. Uh, what's this? What's happening! The door was shut tightly. Without realizing quite what he had done, Shunchang had gone across and pushed his burly frame against the door. The image of the old woman's face rose unconsciously before his eyes.

When he returned from the fields that day, the old woman had cooked four dishes and poured out some wine.

"You'll be leaving early tomorrow, so eat up."

Shunchang could hardly hold his chopsticks or lift the food up to his mouth. He felt guilty before the old lady because he'd held Shuixiang's hand, and he was too ashamed even to appreciate her kindness.

"Come on lad, get tuck in, what's the matter with you?"

"But what about Shuixiang?"

"She said she was going to the supply and marketing co-operative to buy paraffin. She'll be back soon, so tuck in."

Uh, holding hands is just holding hands after all, and I could hardly have just ignored her, could I? He began to wolf down the "New Year feast," as it was to him: even at New Year people in Zhuangiang didn't eat as well as this. The old lady carefully counted out a wad of bank-notes, checked them again, and finally laid them on the table.

"Here you are, lad. We're paying you for twenty *mu,* three yuan.a *mu*."

"What? You can't possibly, grandma … really."

"Now don't get obstinate. You can't argue with Shuixiang, you know! Come on, eat up now."

Shunchang returned to his *kang* and thought through all that had happened.

"You must see why I can't, little sister. But I'll … I'll never forget you, never. You'll always be in my heart."

*

The curtain gently slipped from her fingers. She turned away and stared blankly at the polished table, the cooled tea, and the quilt rolled carefully out on the *kang,* all done for him. She remembered what she had said to him, "I'm from Zhuanglang too, you know," and memories of her early life came rushing back. She really was from Zhuanglang. Her mother died giving birth to her. That was back in 1958. The big famine followed soon after, of course, and seeing as they couldn't feed her in Zhuanglang, she was exchanged for some grain. Shuixiang never found out who her real mother had been. If she asked her new mother, she would explain tearfully:

"But I am your real mother, child, as real as any mother can be; you shouldn't listen to people's gossip."

What was she asking questions like that for? She'd suckled her and swaddled her, kept her alive through 1959 and 1960. How could any real mother do more?

"A widow with children has more trials than anyone," they say, and how many bitter days did she have to struggle through on her own? Shuixiang remembered when she had just started to talk and had asked:

"How old am I, ma?"

"You're three, child."

"How old are you?"

"Me? I'm thirty-three."

"When will I be able to start helping you do some work?"

"Why do you want to go and ask a question like that?"

Shuixiang made no reply, but looked at her crippled brother, her tiny eyes dripping with tears. Her mother understood at once.

"Oh, my child," [she said], and hugged her tightly, with tears streaming down her cheeks. She had initially bought the child, however, as a "child-bride" for her crippled son. Later though, when she saw how the child turned out, she didn't have the heart to go through with the plan, and accepted her heart and soul as her own natural daughter, but later still, when she saw Shuixiang growing up day by day, she realized that she'd soon have to leave and marry someone, and all she had done would be gone, all prospects of a decent, happy life would disappear. What choice did she have? She hardened her heart and told Shuixiang:

"Child, you're going to be married to your brother."

"What! Get married to him! Ma, I'm your own daughter, your own daughter. your own child, Ma!" She started to cry, and so did her mother, but Shuixiang wasn't even conscious of her own tears. All she saw was that her mother's eyes were wet.

"Don't cry, Ma, don't cry. I'll do anything you want me to, really."

She stared blankly at the shadow of the lattice-window on the curtain, as though she were counting through all the days of her marriage, from the age of fourteen right up until today. She had never been in love before, never, and she didn't know how she had managed to fall in love with *him*. She thought back to how she had cursed herself that time. Yes, she really thought then that she was being wicked, and right now she felt just the same: I'm a bad woman, a wicked young woman! You're right not to come, brother, you're right.

She collapsed back down on the *kang.* A gust of wind lifted up the lattice-pattern on the curtain.

*

The sky was just getting light when Shunchang climbed off the *kang* the next morning.

Without a sound, he tidied up the room, wiped the table clean and put the alarm clock, the thermos, the tea cup and the sparkling oil-lamp back in their places.

As he left the room, he thought about waiting until everyone was up and saying goodbye, but if he saw Shuixiang what could he say to her? He cast a last glance at the room in the east wing, picked up his kit and walked out of the yard-gate.

He passed the fields the two of them had harvested together, and here was the path they had walked along side by side.

"Anyone for Linyou! I only want one!"

"Come on … are you dumb or something …?"

"Brother …"

As he walked along, it seemed to him that he could see Shuixiang again and hear her voice calling him; he couldn't help but stop and look back—their farmhouse was already out of sight. There was just a deserted mountain valley and the occasional cries of dawn birds.

"Brother"—the voice rang through his mind once again. He turned around and was about to stride off on his way, but was forced to stop in astonishment.

Before him on the narrow footpath stood Shuixiang, her back to the sun, so that all Shunchang could see of her was a dark outline.

He hurried a few paces further forward and stopped once more. He could now clearly see her face, which was pale, like the white paper on windows. She had changed into a short, black, side-fastening jacket, which looked plain and solemn.

"I've come to see you off …" she said, and then stood lost for words. She took up the cloth bag hanging from her elbow and opened it to show Shunchang. In the bag were a few steamed bread rolls along with a pair of brand-new, rubber-soled shoes, size 41.

"The bread is for when you get hungry; the shoes are for the journey As she held the bag out her hands slowly began to shake.

"Don't you want them, then?"

Two streams of tears fell silently down Shunchang's face. His straw hat, sickle and ration bag slowly slipped from his shoulder, and unable to restrain himself any longer, he rushed forward and hugged her tightly, kissing again and again the lips of her pale, bloodless face: a flood of tears she had been holding back at last welled up from between Shuixiang's tightly shut eyelids

*

Wu Hedong waited numbly until the sky was light and then, his pack on his shoulder, left the village together with his work-mates. They came out of the entrance and were just about to reach the road when all of a sudden

they heard behind them the sound of hurrying footsteps and someone shouting:

"It's bound to be him that's nabbed my bleedin watch!"

Wu Hedong unconsciously quickened his pace.

"Stop!"

The four harvesters turned around in unison. The "beard" and the middle-aged chap both glared indignantly, while the old hunchback walked forward with a weary smile on his face; Wu Hedong, however, stood rooted to the spot, the expression drained from his features.

"What is it, boss? What do you want now?" asked the hunchback with a laugh.

Zhang Genfa pushed him aside and walked over to Wu Hedong.

"Hey you! When we were cutting yesterday, you … you were next to me, weren't you?"

Wu Hedong looked blank, his face a complete block of wood; but he slowly began to lower the ration bag from his shoulder. Suddenly an aged voice rang out:

"Don't move!"

Wu Hedong looked up and saw the decrepit old fellow from under the tree; now, however, his chest was bolt upright as he hobbled over.

"It's not him who's got it. I had a look through his bag last night, it's not in there. You'd better let him go." The old man turned to Wu Hedong.

"You'd better be off now; all of you, go on."

"What do you think you're playing at, Dad?" demanded Zhang Genfa.

"You'll get the watch back, don't worry. It's still here. In fact it was me that took it," answered the old man sternly.

"Where the hell is it then?"

"I left it back in the watchman's hut!"

The old man's voice rose more and more threateningly, and Zhang Genfa had no choice but to swallow his anger. The old guy turned to the harvesters again:

"Go on, get along with you now!"

Wu Hedong couldn't get his legs to move, though; the other three walked off ahead, and he was left standing paralyzed on the spot. The old guy returned to his previous manner, with his kind, gentle smile and his face creased up in wrinkles.

"Don't take it bad, brother. I know your problems; in the old society I spent half my life as a casual laborer. I know what it's like. My lad's gone and accused you wrongly, but don't take it amiss; here, here's a bit of money I've saved up. You can take it with you."

He held out the money in his gnarled, old, shaky hands. Wu Hedong felt as though he was slowly waking up out of a dream; his tears began to fall freely, and it seemed to him that only then could his old, muddy eyes clearly see the old man's face.

Sobbing to himself, he bent down and opened up his kit-bag, the old man sprang forward and grasped the top of the bag, but Wu Hedong unclasped his fingers; he took an old cake of steamed bread from the bag, and then from a hole in the bread he pulled out the shiny watch.

"I'm a thief. Me, Wu Hedong, a thief …" and he burst into sobs.

The old man couldn't stop his tears flowing in sympathy and Zhang Genfa's wife began to weep too

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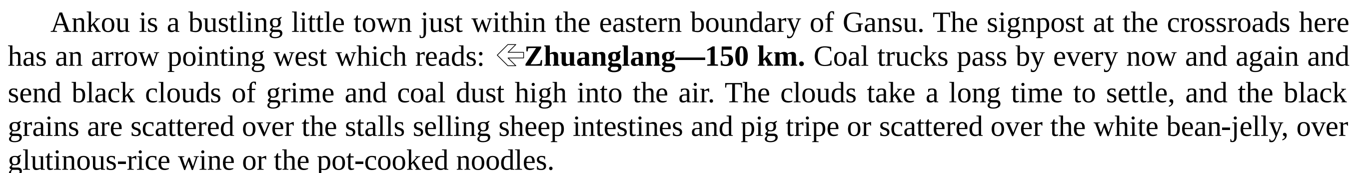
Toward the end of June, the harvesters returned in dribs and drabs from Shaanxi to within the borders of Gansu Province.



Ankou is a bustling little town just within the eastern boundary of Gansu. The signpost at the crossroads here has an arrow pointing west which reads: ⇦**Zhuanglang—150 km.** Coal trucks pass by every now and again and send black clouds of grime and coal dust high into the air. The clouds take a long time to settle, and the black grains are scattered over the stalls selling sheep intestines and pig tripe or scattered over the white bean-jelly, over glutinous-rice wine or the pot-cooked noodles.

It was already dusk. Outside a small restaurant five or six people were sitting on low stools around a small square table on which lay a bowl of soup and a small saucer of salt. The diners proceeded to dip their wet chopsticks in the salt and then stir up their bowls of soaking bread buns.

Wu Hedong, however, exceptionally for him, came out of the restaurant with a bowl of noodles. He carried it across to the table, watching it carefully at each step.

"Here you go, Shunchang. Get these noodles down you!"
"Oh no, you have them yourself!"
"Take them quick!"
Shunchang took the bowl, and as he ate the noodles he looked down at his father's bad leg. When he caught sight of the bare soles of his feet, he suddenly thought of the size 41 rubber shoes, and finishing off his noodles, he took them out of his pack.
"We'll start for home tomorrow morning, Dad, and then you can wear these!"
"Eh? How the hell did you buy expensive shoes like them?"
"I didn't buy them, Dad, they're—"
Suddenly, Shunchang's face reddened, and he found he couldn't think how to explain about the shoes.
"What the hell do you mean you didn't buy them'?"
Wu Hedong saw the confused expression on his son's face, he slowly lowered his eyes to the pair of shoes, and a shudder ran through his body.
"Where did you, get them then?"
"Well, they were—"
Wu Hedong, with a sinking heart, clattered his bowl and chopsticks down on the table.
"Dad, I was given them, they were a present!"
"A 'present'? You bloody thieving rascal, I don't know where you learned it from And you've learned to tell bloody lies too!"
Struggling hard to hold back the tears from his aching heart, he got to his feet, took the stick from his pack, and brought it crashing down on the new shoes, sending them flying out of his son's hands.
Shunchang knelt down and grabbed the stick.
"But Dad, someone really did give them to me!"
"Who'd give a little bugger like you anything but a kick up the backside?"
"It was—it was Shuixiang, she gave them to me "
Shunchang couldn't stop himself bursting into sobs.

*

The next morning Wu Hedong made his son wear the shoes himself, and they set off back home, father and son together, carrying their kit on their shoulder-poles.
"Let's get a move on, then. If we hurry back we'll still be in time to get our own harvest in …"

76.98 Little Grass\fn{by Jia Jun (1948-)} Hulun Boir, Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region, China (M) 5

As though he had just downed several bowls of alcohol, Bugabu, a veteran wrestler, grew red in the face. In his traditional wrestling vest and shorts, he stood by a fat referee, raised his head and sang in a husky voice:
"*Buhe—telibie*!"
This was the ritual song before a wrestling competition, meaning: "Wrestlers, come quick!"
Since the start of Nadamu Fair,\fn{A note reads: *An annual local gathering for wrestling matches, horse-racing, archery, song and dance and trade*.} the people of the grassland had been in a jubilant mood, but at the song of Bugabu, the noise quietened down, and soon even the larks chirping in the blue sky could be heard. Then, the crowd, men and women, old and young, started singing in chorus:
"*Buhe—telibie*!"
The unrefined but resonant voices were carried into the distance by the autumn wind. Amidst the singing, Nima, who had just been defeated by Bugabu, entered the ring. This forty-year-old robust man skipped up and down a little to warm up, and the ground under his feet seemed to shake. Presently, his opponent, Baers, a youth of sixteen or seventeen stalked over. When he jumped he alighted on the ground like a butterfly on a petal. Soon the two wrestlers were grappling with each other. The small but agile Baers tried to trip up his opponent, but Nima's two feet, like two tree stumps, never budged: Nima, too, tried to trip Baers, but the latter dodged to avoid being thrown. He was as swift as a little deer.
Amidst the crowd stood a man of over fifty staring at the young wrestler's legs. He was Zhou Yage, a wrestling and gymnastics teacher. The young man's agility and his attempts to pin down his opponent reminded him of his old friend Temuer in his younger days.
Claps and shouts encouraged Nima to win the tussle. Suddenly he lifted Baers off the ground like an eagle clutching a chicken and began to swing him round until he exhausted himself. Then he hurled him to the ground.

This took the spectator's breath away, and everybody was amazed. But Baers landed lightly and with one leap grabbed Nima, tripping him, and trying to topple him. An uproar of stamping, clapping and shouting burst out. Gritting his teeth, Nima resorted to his last ungraceful tactic. Using his weight he flattened his opponent on the ground. The whistle sounded, and the referee gestured that Nima was the winner.

Baers rolled over, jumped up and yelled at the referee:

"I lost! But let me try again. A return match. All right?"

Nima looked at Baers' grimy face and guffawed.

The referee's face was blank, just like a stone-carved statue of Buddha. He ignored Baers and raised Nirna's hand. But just then Baers made a dive at Nima, caught his leg and, with all his might, tugged at him until he collapsed. More shouting, clapping and laughing. Even the referee could not help smiling. Baers broke into a smile himself and having made a face at the referee ran away. Only Zhou had a stern face, aware that Baers was a promising wrestler. What struck him most was the boy's determination. It made a deep impression on him.

The competition continued. but Zhou was preoccupied with the young wrestler. He elbowed his way out of the crowd and strolled over to a meadow where he spotted Baers lying on the ground, face skywards. Only in shorts, he was bathed in the autumn sunshine. With his good tan and rippling muscles, he looked like a steel ingot just tempered in a furnace. Slowly Zhou made for him and then said:

"Hello, young man, so you've been hiding here!"

Baers smiled sheepishly. Removing the blade of grass from his lips, he asked cheekily:

"And who are you? Why are you looking for me?"

Zhou squatted and introduced himself, "I'm one of your colleagues. I hurried up here to take part in the fair. I made an appointment to meet an old friend of mine, Temuer, here. You must have heard of him, since you're both from the same place. He's the champion Mongolian-style wrestler in China."

Baers jumped to his feet at once, all his cheekiness gone. Sizing him up and down, Baers asked in awe:

"Are you … are you Uncle Zhou from Peking?"

"How did you know that?" Zhou was puzzled. Holding out his hand, Baers explained:

"I'm Baers, Temuer's son. Don't you know I'm also a well-known wrestler in this area, and a would-be champion! Whenever you write a letter, he always gets me to read it to him. Father's gone to fetch Little Tiger from the commune headquarters. He told me that you would come today."

Zhou, gazing at Baers' elongated eyes and tanned chest, seemed to see the young Temuer. A real chip off the old block!

"Tell me, Baers," he asked, "why are you hiding here instead of watching the competition?"

Baers raised the blade of grass with one hand and, with the other, pointed at the earth, saying:

"Uncle Nima pinned me down on the ground. But I won't accept defeat. Just you wait and see next year. Father's always saying that Mongolians are just like tiny shoots of grass. Neither burning, being trampled underfoot or covered with snow can stop them from growing. When the spring breeze blows, they break through the layer of soil and shoot upwards. One day, I will defeat Uncle Nima and all other wrestlers in this banner, in Inner Mongolia and in the whole country!" His head was high and unyielding.

In response to the boy's words, Zhou declared, "So you haven't learned to be a good loser! Come on, try me first."

Baers, with pent-up anger, clamped the grass between his lips, reared up and threw his arms round Zhou's waist from behind. Zhou felt his body shake. It must have been hard for even a strong fellow like Nima to defeat this young man, he thought. He tried to wrench himself free from the grip but failed, for the boy's arms were like a pair of tight iron clamps. This teacher of wrestling and gymnastics at the Central Academy of Physical Education made up his mind to enroll the boy on the spot.

"Hey, Baers, you little tiger cub, so you want to take it out on somebody else, eh?"

It was Bugabu. The old wrestler stalked towards Baers and, like lifting a bale of straw, carried his grandson under his arm and strode towards the ring. Not knowing what had happened, Zhou followed them.

After issuing prizes to the winners, the chairman of Nadamu Fair announced in a solemn tone that the honourable title of the banner "Daerhan Wrestler" was awarded to Bugabu. This brought the fair to a climax. Amid applause and exclamations, the chairman presented the badge, certificate and prize to Bugabu. Following him were three beautifullydressed Mongolian girls holding bowls of *koumiss*. Bugabu took them and lightly flung some of the liquid towards heaven, earth and the spectators, before gulping down the rest. Again the crowd shouted in excitement. Finally, according to custom, he must remove his wrestling vest and give it to the man he thought most promising. This was what they were all waiting for.

Bugabu scanned the crowd. It was quiet and still except for the larks' singing high in the sky. Nima was restless.

At last, Bugabu averted his eyes and, holding up his vest over his head, cried at the top of his voice:

"Baers, come over here! Put on my wrestling vest!"

For a moment, Baers, still chewing the blade of grass, could not believe his ears. His eyes opened wide in surprise. When he realized that he had been made the successor to the senior wrestler, he broke into a broad smile, then made an effort to curb his glee by biting his lips. With a feigned stern expression, incongruous with his age, he strode towards his grandfather. Delighted, he stretched out his hand to accept the vest. At that moment, a man in his fifties elbowed his way through the throng to stand between the two. It was Temuer!

"Father," he said to Bugabu, "don't you realize you're showing favouritism by giving your wrestling vest to your own grandson?"

Nima and some other wrestlers clapped and shouted, "Hear! Hear!"

Stroking his silvery beard, Bugabu winked at his son and said loudly to the crowd:

"Comrades, I've made up my mind to give this vest to my grandson, Baers. I've drunk milk all my life and I'm as honest as an ox. Do you think a man like me would show favouritism? As soon as my hand touches the backbone of a young horse, I know whether it'll be a shaft-horse or one which is only able to help pull a cart. I saw my grandson grow from a baby to a youth. I know how much strength he's got. Don't we often say, 'Don't look down on young grass. It can grow and cover the whole prairie.'"

His words were applauded by everyone. Even Nima and some other wrestlers exclaimed in approval. Presently Temuer's eyes swept across the crowd, searching for someone. Knowing Temuer was looking for him, Zhou stepped back lest he should be spotted. When the din died down, Temuer spoke up again:

"As a champion wrestler, my father has the right to choose his successor. But today I've brought you a young man. His name's Zhou Xiaohu.\fn{A note reads: Xiaohu *means "Little Tiger."*} His father, Zhou Yage, was my sparring partner and coach and trained me to be the first Mongolian champion of freestyle wrestling. I owe it all to him. Zhou trained Little Tiger when he was small, then he sent his son to live here on the grasslands. And as you all know Little Tiger won the second place for Inner Mongolia in the National Youth Freestyle Wrestling Competition. Now the Commission of Sports and Physical Culture of our banner has decided to recommend Little Tiger to study at the Central Academy of Physical Education. A son of a Han, a good friend of ours, he will soon leave us. Now, who do you think we ought to give this vest to?"

Having said this, he went through the crowd and came back with Little Tiger, who had been walking a horse.

Bugabu, still holding the wrestling vest, looked at Baers and then the broad-shouldered, strong Little Tiger. Baers stood beside his grandfather, the blade of grass between his lips moving up and down as he grinned. Bugabu gave the vest to Little Tiger. Who wouldn't want this vest? With trembling hands, Little Tiger accepted it. Bugabu stroked his long beard and said:

"Baers, Little Tiger, you're just like a pair of tigers. Listen, whenever you feel exhausted in the ring, just think of what I often sing." With this, he began to sing:

"*Buhe—telibie*!"

Standing amidst the Mongolians in their colorful robes, Zhou made an effort to hold back his tears. He gazed at his old friend Temuer's lined face and gray hair.

"So our youth has come to an end," he thought.

Then he turned his eyes to Little Tiger and Baers, his ears ringing with Bugabu's chanting.

*

It was under the guidance of Zhou that Baers and Little Tiger grew into two promising wrestlers. They were about the same height, the same weight at 52 kilograms and were tanned a dark brown. The only differenre was their eyes. Little Tiger's eyes were round and large, while those of Baers were long and narrow. They were as inseparable as a man and his shadow. At the end of the three-year course, a wrestling competition was held. Students learned on the grape-vine that whoever won might be chosen as a member of the Chinese team to take part in an international wrestling tournament abroad.

On the day of the competition, the academy's gym was decorated like a place fit for an international tournament. People from inside and outside the academy thronged round the ring, waiting to see Baers and Little Tiger wrestle for the 52-kilogram-grade\fn{About 115 pounds.} final match.

Presently Baers in a red vest and Little Tiger in a blue one faced each other across the mat. At the sound of the whistle, the two young wrestlers grappled like two oxen. Baers stood to tackle his opponent, which was the Mongolian way of wrestling he had learned from his grandfather when he was a child. The half kneeling position

Zhou had insisted on would not do. It was a crucial match, and he made up his mind to go about it his own way. He stood steadily and, at the second whistle, dashed and caught hold of Little Tiger's left thigh and, at the same time, thrust his right leg in between his legs. Using his left arm to block Little Tiger's waist, his right hand seized his shoulder. Unable to hold his ground, Little Tiger fell.

Baers had scored two points within thirty seconds!

Everyone applauded. So standing up worked. Baers knew his opponent would be more careful and do everything possible to win the second round. Feigning an attack, he kept his feet wide apart so as to entice Little Tiger to grab his leg. Sure enough, his opponent bent down and rushed to catch his left leg. Standing, his leg was as steady as if it had struck roots in the ground. Then Baers thrust out his right leg and tripped him up. Again Little Tiger landed on the mat, and people clapped wildly.

Baers had scored another two points.

Before he could steady himself, Baers' left arm was gripped by Little Tiger, and he lost his foothold and fell on all fours. Powerless in such a position, he had no way to defend himself and lost two points.

The wrestling match was divided into two bouts, each lasting three minutes. Baers still had a two-point lead. Though the first bout was about to end, Baers was still very aggressive. Again he toppled his opponent, and the score rose to 6 to 2 in his favor.

Little Tiger knew that he could not win the match. He was panting heavily while Baers paused just to steady himself. They sized up each other, looking for an opportunity. But the first bout was over.

The break lasted one minute. Baers took a towel and wiped his sweaty face. As he covered his face with the towel, he could not contain his joy any longer.

"Grandfather's a champion," he said to himself, "Father's the national champion of Mongolian-freestyle wrestling. I'll send a telegram to tell them that I am a champion too and that I'll soon go abroad to take part in an international wrestling tournament."

Proudly he swept his eyes over the crowd and noticed that Zhou, who stood by the referee, was looking coldly at him. Baers stopped grinning immediately. Zhou stared at Baers and made a gesture, which meant that he wanted the youth to wrestle in a half-kneeling position. It was an order.

"But … but that's tantamount to asking me to give up," he thought. However, he nodded reluctantly. Then he saw Zhou shooting an approving glance at his son. He seemed to be saying:

"Can you win this match, Little Tiger?"

This, of course, was a great encouragement to his son.

Baers was very depressed. Anger rose in his heart. The match resumed. Reluctantly and miserably he adopted the half-kneeling position, which in fact was his weak spot. But Little Tiger was in high spirits. He caught Baers' waist, and before Baers knew what to do, he was thrown down. He lost two points. Then, quickly, Little Tiger scored another two points to tie.

The second bout would soon end. Little Tiger was seeking an opportunity and suddenly he threw his arms round Baers' legs. Pushing and pulling, he finally succeeded in toppling him.

The referee held up Little Tiger's hand and announced the score of 7 to 6 in Little Tiger's favor. Baers hurriedly shook hands with him and the referee and left the ring. After dressing he ran out of the gym.

The sports ground of the academy was vast and green with grass. Sitting on the ground, Baers, for the first time, felt lonely and homesick. His mind was in a turmoil.

"Father asked Grandfather to give the wrestling vest to Little Tiger. This shows we Mongolians feel great friendship towards the Han people. But why should Uncle Zhou treat me like this? I'm no fool! I know he helped Father to become national champion. But why should he show favouritism in this important match by forcing me to do what I'm weakest at and let his own son win the match?

"People make sacrifices for the sake of friendship. But for the sake of his family, he sacrificed friendship. Huh! I'm a man now, otherwise, what wouldn't I do?"

Once when a bridegroom had ridden to announce the news of his wedding, Baers, only eight years old, had insisted on wrestling with him. But he was thrown to the ground several times. Then he got to his feet and crept over to the man's horse. While the bridegroom was talking to his grandfather, Baers mounted the horse and galloped away. When he got to the village where the man lived, he climbed on top of his yurt and peed through the window in the roof. On learning this, Bugabu gave the boy a good licking. His bottom was swollen and for days he could not sit on the felt carpet. On another occasion when he was defeated by Nima, he almost bit off his ear!

For friends, a Mongolian would lift a cup of *koumiss*, but to his enemies, he would raise his fists! Uncle Zhou

was a friend of his grandfather and his respected coach, so of course, he couldn't retaliate or use his fists. He remembered the first day he had met him when his grandfather had given the vest to Little Tiger. Grandfather was impartial, but Uncle Zhou was biased.

"I'll go and remind him!" he decided.

Baers snapped a blade of grass and, putting it between his lips, went to see Zhou.

He was sitting at his desk, deep in thought, his hands cupping his chin.

"Professor Zhou," he began casually, "could you ask Little Tiger to return that wrestling vest to me? I know you've treated me like your own son these years and I won't forget it. But today, at a crucial moment … I noticed your expression. You wanted your son to win. I won't fight over it, of course: I know I'm no match for him. Tomorrow we'll be assigned to new jobs, and I'll be going back to Inner Mongolia. I'd better take the vest back and be my grandfather's successor."

As a protest, he put the blade of grass on the desk.

Zhou picked it up and, weighing it on his, palm, said in a deep, low voice, "It's a custom in Inner Mongolia never to take back a present. And I still remember how you said to me the first day we met that you wanted to defeat all the wrestlers in your banner, in Inner Mongolia and the whole country. And now? Didn't you .lose to Little Tiger?"

In an effort to control his temper, Baers demanded:

"Why did you encourage Little Tiger by your glance? Why did you stare at me and force me to adopt that half kneeling position?"

Zhou laughed.

"You got too big for your boots after you'd won two points. That's why I gave you a warning look. If Little Tiger can defeat you just because of my glance, who else can you beat? After you've let off steam, you'd better go back to your room and have a good cry."

With these words, he lowered his head, ignoring Baers.

Once out of his office, Baers inhaled deeply.

"Cry? Have I ever cried? Am I that soft? I can beat Little Tiger! You're showing favouritisrn! But Little Tiger and I are good friends!"

He hurried off and found Little Tiger.

"Little Tiger," he called to him, "hurry up! Let's have another match. A return bout. All right? Come with me, or I'll give you hell. Hurry up! We'll be assigned new jobs tomorrow, so we'll soon be saying goodbye."

Little Tiger's stomach was rumbling with hunger, but seeing the stubborn gleam in his friend's eyes, he followed Baers into the gym.

*

The second day, Zhou, on behalf of the academy, announced the job assignments. At last, he came to Little Tiger and Baers.

"We've decided that Little Tiger is to work in the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region."

Then he spoke to Little Tiger:

"You lived there for some time, and the people there have great hopes of you. Bugabu takes you as his successor, and it's a great honor. We've contacted the provincial department of sports and physical culture and we've been told that you'll continue training there with Comrade Temuer as your coach. We're sure you'll be an excellent wrestler with the Inner Mongolian Wrestling Team."

Then he turned to Baers:

"The academy has made the decision that Baers stays in Peking and joins the National Wrestling Team preparing to go abroad to take part in an international wrestling tournament. In wrestling our country has the tradition of standing, but our wrestlers are not very good at the half kneeling position used in international competitions. Baers may be eliminated in the first round, but to train wrestlers, we'll have to concede something. A sportsman should never be afraid of defeat, but he must have the tenacity and will-power to defeat his opponent! Baers, you'll soon be a member of the national team, and wear the national emblem on your chest. Do you know what that means?"

Baers stood up, nodding with tears in his eyes, looking at his gray-haired coach and his friend Little Tiger. He realized he still had much to learn.

*

The National Wrestling Competition was held in Shanghai. Both Bugabu and Nima came as observers. Zhou led a group of wrestlers including Baers. He carried a big brown holdall with him instead of his usual small bag.

What's more, he would not let the boys touch it.

Temuer took Little Tiger to see Zhou. The two older men gazed at each other in silence as if confiding to the other his feelings. Little Tiger smiled warmly at his father, while Baers winked mischievously at his. Overjoyed, the two young wrestlers sat side by side on the edge of the bed pummelling each other.

"Go and enjoy yourselves outside," Zhou urged them.

At this, they jumped to their feet and ran out.

"This time, I'm pretty sure that Little Tiger will win. He's on his mettle and his skill has improved enormously this past year," said Temuer confidently.

"Well, I believe Baers will win," replied Zhou, his eyes also gleaming with confidence. "We've chosen the right person. Though he was eliminated in the first round of that international tournament, he has proved himself a promising wrestler. I have no doubt about his mental approach, strength and skill."

"Little Tiger's been with me day and night. I know he'll win." He was adamant.

"I know Baers like the palm of my hand. He'll be the champ, no doubt," Zhou countered.

They smiled at each other as though saying, "Let's wait and see!" Then they parted.

The indoor stadium was brightly lit. The green mat in the middle of the hall had become the focus of all cameras. Due to the average weight of Chinese wrestlers, 52-kilogram-grade wrestling was the item in which people were most interested. After the first few rounds, Baers and Little Tiger were the only two wrestlers left. for the final. The victor would take part in the World Wrestling Championship.

As Baers and Little Tiger appeared in the ring, a sports news-caster's voice was commentating for radio and television:

"The man in the red vest is Baers, a Mongolian wrestler. His name means tiger. His opponent, Little Tiger, is wearing the blue vest. He's a Han. Their fathers won the first and second prize in a national freestyle competition in the fifties. To commemorate that event and for friendship, they decided to name both their sons 'tiger.' So this is a match between two tigers."

Presently, everybody on the stand had his eyes fixed on the two "tigers."

Before Little Tiger entered the ring, his coach, Temuer, had told him:

"You must win! All we Mongolians are backing you."

Encouraged, Little Tiger was raring to go. But he never knew that his coach wanted him to win just because he wanted to show his gratitude to his old friend for his selflessness and for caring for Baers.

When Baers entered, Temuer looked at him meaningfully and pointed to his heart. Baers understood at once: What we Mongolians treasure is friendship, not personal gain. He made up his mind that he would display the skills taught by Zhou and let all the spectators see what a fine coach he had. Then he would give Little Tiger the chance to win the match. Baers was no longer the boy who could not bear to lose, but a mature adult.

They tied 4 each in the first bout, and there were 52 seconds left. Zhou watched Baers' movements intently. Presently, Baers pressed his chest on Little Tiger's left shoulder, while using his left hand to grip the other's waist, his right hand moved up to seize Little Tiger's right shoulder. Strange! Zhou was puzzled. Surely, Baers knew it was the neck he should seize. That was like ABC for a wrestler. Suddenly Zhou realized that Baers had done it deliberately. Little Tiger, of course, turned round and floored Baers. The score was 6 to 4. Deafening applause! What a beautiful move!

Knowing what was going on, Zhou shook his head and heaved a long sigh. What instruction could he give Baers during the interval? He knew the boy too well. In the past Baers had only thought about winning, but now he knew better. Besides, Little Tiger, trained by Temuer, was a tough match for him!

Baers kept his head down as if he had really been defeated. Zhou came over to him, thrust a black folder at him, and ordered:

"Open it! Have a good look at it!"

Inside the folder were a few clippings, some with photos of the Chinese flag being hoisted at international wrestling tournaments. On one sheet, there was a big circle inside which was a little blade of grass.

"Do you remember this?" Zhou asked, pointing to the grass. "I brought it here specially for you, understand?" He was very grave.

Baers nodded.

"Do you know what it means?" There was a quiver in Zhou's voice.

Baers shook his head.

"This … this means the first place! The wish of my life." His voice was very low. "You must win the first place in an international wrestling competition some day. So you must forget all your personal considerations and

defeat all your opponents. You can’t afford to lose, you know. You must win every match!” His eyes moistened.

Baers, clenching his teeth, lowered his head.

The second bout started. Little Tiger entered the arena, his ears still ringing with Temuer’s warning, “It will be a disgrace to the people of the grasslands if you lose! Understand?” So he must win too!

Presently, the match was almost finished. Both Baers and Little Tiger were exhausted. Panting heavily, they stood facing each other, both determined to win.

Again the two tigers were locked together. Three seconds before the end, Baers, at last, pressed Little Tiger to the ground. The referee helped raise Baers’ hand. The score wa:s 10 to 8. Immediately all the photographers swarmed round Baers.

He noticed when shaking hands with Little Tiger that his opponent lowered his head as though he had let down his Mongolian friends. He also saw the cold glint. in his father’s eyes, his grandfather’s pensive mood and Nima’s blank look.

Baers fled from the reporters and hid himself in a corner.

However, he was spotted. Zhou, Bugabu, Temuer, Nima and Little Tiger all came towards him. By now they knew everything. Little Tiger was close to tears. He held out a handkerchief to Baers. Temuer nodded to his son, grinning, while Nima raised his thumb.

Bugabu was the calmest. Looking at the two young wrestlers, he said in earnest:

"A good steed will never grab others’ fodder. My grandson doesn’t care about individual fame, only that of China. He’s lived up to our Mongolian expectations. Remember, Little Tiger, Baers, when you’re exhausted in the ring, think of our song.”

The old wrestler raised his head and red in the face began to sing in his husky, deep voice. But this time the song he sang was the national anthem.

Zhou took out the Mongolian wrestling vest, which he had kept for more than four years, from his holdall and offered it to Baers.

“Make it snappy! The loudspeaker’s calling you and Little Tiger. Put it on and go and get your prize. I hope one day you’ll mount the stand in this vest in a world wrestling competition.”

So for the time being what was on Baers’ mind was the blade of grass in the big circle

82.126 Spring Hope\fn{by Li Li aka Bao Li-li, Lily Hsueh (1948-   )} Nanking, Jiangsu Province, China (F) 9

He was in a state between sleep and wakefulness, seemingly about to wake up yet actually still half asleep. He thought the rumbling noise was the sound of a pneumatic drill digging up the surface of the road outside his home. When he fully regained consciousness he realized that the aches and pains he was suffering all over were caused by his falling asleep curled up in an airplane seat. He was surrounded by darkness with only the scattered light of reading lamps over a few seats. The snores of nearby passengers could be heard over the noise of the engines. He lifted his arm to look at his watch, but could not make out the time. He turned on the overhead light, still he could only see a blur. He had to fish out his reading glasses to see that it had been about six or seven hours since they took off from Los Angeles. At the beginning of the trip he was so exhausted that no matter how he twisted and turned, he could not find a comfortable position.

Later, after some food and two tranquilizers he started to doze off and finally fell into a fitful sleep. He was dreaming. His dreams were episodic and very involved, leaving him with no memory of any of them. It was more like seeing some dark shadowy figures or like looking at old faded photographs. He had a feeling that they involved his home town in Fukien. This he sensed rather than actually remembered. He had the impression that there was a little girl crying and tugging at his pants. And there was the vague form of the face of a woman disappearing behind a dark shadow …

He got up slowly, feeling faint. He held on to the back of a seat and stood there for a while, stretching his back and his limbs. The coolness in the cabin made him shiver. At times like this his wife Yin-ju would be handing him a sweater. She had spoiled him these past 30 odd years. He almost never had to manage by himself. The year before last, Yin-ju had to go to America to look after their eldest daughter Chin-lin, who just had a baby. About a month later his life had turned so topsy-turvy that he longed for her return. He wished she could come home soon, but he didn’t want to appear in competition with their daughter. After all he was well aware of the fact that Chin-lin was going through a lot after a Caesarean birth. Yin-ju, however, was very much aware of the state he was in. She very quietly arranged for Chin-lin’s mother-in-law to take over and quickly returned to Taiwan. After all, having been married for so many years, they were in tune with one another. Now that the children were grown

and gone she was even more attentive, looking after him, protecting him as if he were her child.

He staggered to the lavatory. The powerful fluorescent light made him look even paler. He stuck his tongue out and saw a thick layer of white. He sighed: if only Yin-ju were here.

But this was one trip he had to make by himself. He knew that it was something he had to face alone. No one, not even Yin-ju, could accompany him. More than thirty years had gone by. He was pushing seventy. If he did not face up to it now, he might not have another chance.

*

"Papa, hello Papa, can you hear me? Hello, hello."

Chin-yuan's voice came over the phone from across the Pacific. Over the background static, his voice was like a candle, sometimes bright, sometimes flickering faintly, weak yet piercing.

"Yes, A-yuan, I can hear you. Can you hear me clearly?" He too was shouting into the speaker.

"Papa, this call must be very expensive. I will talk about the important matter first … hello? Papa, I have bought a train ticket; I'll be leaving Peking tomorrow for Shen-tsun, the border town. Have you got your plane ticket yet? When will you be arriving in Hong Kong? Hello, Papa."

He hurriedly searched his pocket; Hsiao-lei handed him a piece of paper. He rubbed his eyes; Hsiao-lei now handed him his glasses.

"Hello, yes, yes, I am leaving Los Angeles on the twentieth and will be arriving on the twenty-first, Monday, at eight o'clock in the evening."

Hsiao-lei reminded him to mention the flight number.

"Very good, Papa, Chin-fang will be meeting me in Shen-tsun. She will be there on the eighteenth. We will probably be in Hong Kong on the nineteenth or the twentieth, at the latest. We have already been in touch with Uncle Chen. Papa, we will be there at the airport to meet you."

He became alert all of a sudden at this point, and realized only then that he was actually talking to Chin-yuan. Hefelt a lump in his throat and said, "G-good, A-yuan."

"Papa, we will definitely be at the airport. You wait for us; we will definitely be there."

"A-yuan," His lips felt frozen and stiff and he fought for control. "Good, you … be there, and I'll definitely, definitely …" He took a deep breath, recovered somewhat and asked, "A-fang, how is she?"

"Papa, listen, A-fang, if she should mention the letters you wrote her, you … just don't say anything."

"What? What letters?"

"Papa." The static reached a new high, and it rudely over-powered Chin-yuan's voice. Only a few words came through faintly, sounding like someone drowning. "I … A-fang … you wrote … don't say … just say …"

"Hello, hello, A-yuan, A-yuan!"

He was shouting. Now Chin-yuan's voice suddenly came across a little more clearly.

"We can't hear too well over the phone. Papa, we will talk about it when we meet. In any event, should A-fang mention your letters, don't say you never wrote any letters."

"Hello, A-yuan, what is this—"

"We mustn't talk too long. It's costing Hsiao-lei a lot. Papa, take care of yourself. We will meet on the twenty-first, and that's a certainty. Good-bye, Papa."

"That's a certainty, that's a certainty …"

He hung up and felt as if he were drifting in space. All he could hear was Chin-yuan's voice saying "Papa, Papa … a certainty; a certainty …"

*

They probably were running into turbulence. Suddenly the plane was bouncing up and down. Overhead, the "fasten seat belt" sign was turned on. The middle-aged man sitting next to him opened his eyes and yawned. As he turned his head their eyes met. The man smiled and said, "There will probably be another three hours yet or more." The man had a very heavy Cantonese accent, but he understood and smiled, nodding in agreement.

"Do you live in Hong Kong, Sir?"

"No, Taiwan, Taipei."

"Is that so? I go there often, company business," said the man as he handed him a business card. He accepted it out of courtesy but didn't bother to put on his glasses to read it. He said, just to make conversation,

"Business must be very good for your company."

"Nothing to speak of, nothing to speak of." The middle-aged man smiled very amiably, so his smug attitude did not bother him. "We are doing all right. We are just an intermediary serving between Taiwan and China mainland. Business is all right. All right. Am I correct in assuming that you, sir, are now returning to Taiwan by way

of Hong Kong after a trip to America?"

"Yes, I have two children in America."

Suddenly he remembered Hsiao-lei and Hsiao-yun and added, "Umm, I mean two boys and two girls …"

"Sir, you are really blessed." The man asked him about the purpose of his trip to Hong Kong. He was never very good at making small talk with strangers, and the business at hand was certainly something he would not discuss. He muttered a vague reply and felt somewhat apologetic. He really was in no mood, emotionally or physically, to carry on a conversation. He closed his eyes and pretended to rest. It crossed his mind that it was probably an old man's privilege to claim fatigue to avoid unnecessary polite conversation.

> Dear Father,
>
> How are you? It has been more than thirty years since I last wrote you. For a moment, after I picked up the pen, I did not know where to begin. To be exact, it has been thirty-eight years. There is so much I want to tell you. I remember when we parted in Foochow; I was only ten. You fondled my head then turned around and left. I stood there watching your retreating figure. Later I ran upstairs and watched from the porch as you walked out of the alley. The events of that day are the only things I remember. All that happened earlier are very blurry.

This letter was forwarded to Taipei through Hsiao-lei. Hsiao-lei went to Peking at least once a year, since the company he worked for had set up an office in China. On his first trip he approached a few organizations to help him locate Chin-yuan. When Hsiao-lei went back again the second year, he and Chin-yuan met in Peking. He really did not know what to write to Chin-yuan. After he left Foochow, he had stayed in Canton and Hong Kong for some time before going to Taiwan. The first couple of years in Taipei he had sent letters home through friends in Hong Kong.. They were discontinued after a while. He had no idea what was going through the minds of his mother and his two children back home; he did not even dare to venture a guess. He gradually learned to lock away his fear and his longing. He hardly even mentioned it to Yin-ju. He did not want to analyze himself: did his actions indicate guilt?

The only thing he remembered clearly from his dreams was his old mother's wide open eyes. They seemed to have something to tell him. He had dreamed of yet another face which appeared in the dark for a fleeting moment, then turned away as if to avoid his eyes, but he did see who it was; it was the face of the mother of Chin-yuan and Chin-fang, his deceased wife.

But he seldom dreamed of his two children. Was it because subconsciously he knew that the children were constantly growing, and they would not be the same as when he last saw them? He could only see their silhouettes indistinctly at a far distance. Whenever he woke up after dreams like this, he found it hard to go back to sleep. He would go quietly to the kitchen, make himself a cup of warm milk, and sit there in a daze until daybreak.

Yin-ju, of course, knew what was torturing him. Since he did not want to talk about it, she was very understanding and did not ask any questions. However, she was forever watching the ebb and flow of his emotional state. News of his mother's death came roundabout from a distant cousin in Singapore. It went through many hands; by the time the news got to Yin-ju it was a year later. At that time they had just lost a big sum of money in a joint business deal and were on the brink of bankruptcy. Yin-ju hesitated to tell him, though eventually she had to.

How he had survived those days, he dreaded to think back, as if afraid to touch an old wound. If it hadn't been for Yin-ju he might not have been able to control himself, might have done something foolish. Yin-ju knew that he must be worried about the children, and she tried to find out the whereabouts of Chin-fang, who had stayed in their home town to keep Grandma company, and Chin-yuan, who was attending school in Foochow. She was told it would be difficult to locate them during that turbulent time, and even if they succeeded, they might only be getting the children into more trouble; why bother?

He and Yin-ju thought it over and agreed. As their father, he had walked away from them many years ago. If they harbored any resentment or hatred, so be it. They were now grown. If they succeeded in locating them, then what? They didn't want to add to their problems.

He was never good at expressing himself in words, and he lacked the courage to touch the painful wound deep inside himself. What was there left to write to Chin-yuan? True, the sensation of fondling his head for the last time was still with him, but what could he say to a son now approaching middle age? Surely not "Papa is sorry," as they casually did on those television soap-operas. His own son, flesh of his flesh whom he had failed to care for and to raise, what had become of him? Hsiao-lei said Chin-yuan looked like him. He wasn't sure whether he was pleased or disappointed.

There was still Chin-fang. She had just learned to walk when he left his home town. A weak and motherless

child, she started to walk late. He vaguely remembered that she was unable to walk across a tiny ditch in front of their house and had to crawl over it, crying all the way …

Finally he wrote a very short letter, summing up over thirty years of life with a few words saying only that all's well with him. He sent, *via* Hsiao-lei, a picture of himself and Yin-ju and their two younger children in Taiwan.

After that his dreams became more disturbing. In his dreams the vague figures were always retreating. He knew in his heart who they were; he wanted to catch up with them, yet he did not dare. His feet refused to take a step, his throat closed …

*

The hostess announced that they would soon land at Hong Kong airport. He fastened his seat belt and looked aimlessly out of the window. It looked like a clear day with thin clouds. Slowly the airplane flew out of the layers of clouds. There, outside the window, right before his eyes the lights from the many skyscrapers covered the black velvety earth like a storybook display of pearls and diamonds. When he was last in Hong Kong in 1950, there were not so many tall buildings. In those days most people traveled by boat and were not able to look down on any of this. The man in the next seat, seeing that he was looking out, pointed out a few spots to him, but he hardly heard him. He only hoped that the plane would circle around a little more, giving him more needed time to adjust himself.

And yet he could hardly wait to step out of the cabin. He was familiar with the expression that "a feeling of timidity sets in as one approaches one's native land," but it never occurred to him that it could happen here. It must be that this feeling of timidity is caused by people, not places.

More than thirty years ago when he came to Hong Kong, alone and for a short stay, he never dreamed that this place would one day be the meeting ground for him and his son and daughter. A few years back, when Taiwan permitted its residents to travel abroad, it was very popular among his friends to visit Hong Kong. He alone was not tempted. But one time, an idea flashed across his mind momentarily: what if he quietly went from Hong Kong to … no, no, he no longer had any hope of finding them. It would be more difficult than looking for a needle in a haystack. What good would it do to make a trip himself? What would the consequences be? What about Yin-ju and the children in Taiwan? The whole idea that flashed across his mind was quickly abandoned..

Among his friends, he was known for his stubborn refusal to travel abroad and also for his stubborn refusal to enjoy life in other ways. For years he ran a small pediatric clinic. Anybody else would have accumulated a small fortune. Not him, he had only a small apartment. One of the reasons was that it took him quite a few years to recover from his business loss. The nurse at the clinic, however, put it more aptly:

"This is no way to run a hospital; this is like running a relief center."

Oftentimes, when she saw the fees he charged his patients, she mumbled, "Another freebie!?" Later she wouldn't even bother to comment. Yin-ju was like him too; she had never questioned him about the fees he charged. Their younger daughter Chili-mei once teased him and said,

"Too bad Papa does not speak a foreign language, otherwise he could go to Africa and be another Schweitzer."

Schweitzer? He forced a smile and thought to himself: I am not that great. He seldom analyzed himself, nor did he want to; however he was sure that his motives were selfish: to redeem his sense of guilt in some small measure, to ease the self-reproach, thereby giving himself a little bit of peace. That's all there was to it.

He thought that to adopt Hsiao-lei and Hsiao-yun was the right thing to do, his obligation, so he did it without giving it a second thought. Of course, he had Yin-ju's consent. Everybody else shunned those two children whose parents had been found guilty of a political offense. When it seemed safe, an old schoolmate came to him and commented,

"Among all the people from our home town and our medical school, only you had the courage and the sense of righteousness to do it."

Again his smile was contrived, and he kept quiet. In his heart he said to himself: what courage? What sense of righteousness? If Chili-yuan and Chin-fang were to become homeless orphans, he hoped that someone would take them in so that they wouldn't suffer from cold and hunger, and could have proper schooling.

However, he felt that even in a simple and straightforward matter like this few would really understand him, except Yin-Ju.

The plane had landed with a bump. Although the crew told the passengers to wait until it had come to a complete halt before leaving their seats, the anxious ones had already picked up their bags, big and small, and were standing in the aisles. He remained seated and mechanically smoothed his hair and straightened his tie. He could feel his heartbeat as clearly as if he were listening through a stethoscope. He took a few deep breaths, slowly; his palms were wet and cold.

He told himself that he had reached the end of this long journey. Now he had to go through immigration, baggage claim, customs and then …

Then he had to face two of the people he loved the most, but they were strangers to him, and they would judge him.

*

"Don't cry, be a good girl, don't cry."

The little girl opened her mouth wider and cried harder, tears streaming down her cheeks from her tightly closed eyes.

"Doctor?" the mother said worriedly. It brought him back to reality, and he removed the stethoscope from his ears, pulled down the little girl's dress and said very gently,

"It's all right. In a little while your papa is going to take you home in a honk-honk car, your mama will give you some medicine, and in a couple of days you will be well again to play with your friends. How's that?"

The vision of a little girl, a skinny and feeble child, crying as she crawled across the shallow ditch often came to mind. Her grandma was getting old; who was there to help her across a deeper and wider ditch? To take her to school? Who looked after her after Grandma died? Who took her to see a doctor when she was sick? Who was there to tell her the facts of growing up when she became a young woman?

He knew he would be hearing from Chin-fang soon after the arrival of Chin-yuan's letter. In the meantime he remained dazed. The letter arrived. He gently stroked the thin paper. The paper was of poor quality, and it looked as if it might fall apart at a touch. Water spots had blurred the words written in ink in quite a few places. The letter was short; she merely said repeatedly how happy she was to hear from her father after ten or so years, and that nothing made her happier than to learn that her father was in good health. He was jolted when he came across "ten or so years." It was probably a slip of the pen, since it was actually more than thirty years.

The childish scrawl of Chin-fang saddened him. As he lifted his eyes from her scrawl, there were, right in front of him, under the glass top, pictures of Chin-lin getting her doctorate and Chin-mei getting her master's degree. Both smiled the smile of the fortunate. The thin letter paper was making a small rustling noise. He became aware that his usually steady hands were trembling.

To write back to Chin-fang was even harder. Why should Chin-fang consider him her father? Why should she write? Why should she feel happy? He wanted to ask her: what kind of a daughter are you? Don't you understand what hatred is?

Of course he did not ask her any such questions. He just wrote a short letter addressed to both of them, and sent them a sum of money, all delivered through Hsiao-lei.

Chin-lin and the others asked him to make a trip to America again and again. He always refused, saying that he could not get away from the clinic. Then, one night Hsiao-lei called from overseas. It changed his resolution to never travel abroad.

"Uncle, I just returned from over there yesterday."

Hsiao-lei sounded excited. "Brother A-yuan said he often travels to the south on business, and he also found out that it is quite easy to apply for a permit to visit Hong Kong to meet with relatives. He wanted me to ask you if you could visit your relatives in America and make a detour to Hong Kong and meet him there. There is a possibility that Sister A-fang would be able to make the trip too."

"I …"

The possibility had never crossed his mind, and for the moment he did not know how to react.

"Let me think it over. You discuss it with them. If possible, of course I … of course …"

There was a map of China on the wall in their youngest son, Chin-hung's room. He tried to measure with his eyes the distances between certain places. All of a sudden the ridiculousness of the situation dawned on him. The hopeless regrets and repentance he had suffered for more than half a lifetime were caused by a separation of mere inches on the map. It was all very hard to believe, and life seemed so very unreal.

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He pushed the baggage cart and walked toward the crowd. As he approached a middle-aged man, a strange sensation hit him. He stopped and turned to look at the man in the eyes. It was not exactly like looking at oneself in a mirror, looking into a mirror would not be as startling as this encounter. It was as if the mirror image stepped out of the mirror and walked toward him.

It was all happening too fast; afterwards, it was impossible to trace the details of that moment. For example, did he call out to his son by name, or did the name stick in his throat? Did his son callout first, or did he gather his son in an embrace first? He could not remember any of it. He only remembered that once the son was in his

embrace, his only fear was that some evil magic might make him disappear. He couldn't let go. How long did it last? Chin-yuan let go first. Now he was able to look closely into his son's eyes. In those eyes shining with tears, there seemed to be a reflection of himself as if it had been locked in there all these years.

He turned and saw another pair of eyes, wide-open, full of sadness yet smiling. They were the eyes of his mother of whom he had dreamed countless times. They seemed to want to tell him something, but held back in silence. Then there was her lovely nose, her slightly protruding front teeth; his dead wife had stepped across time and across the barrier of life and death and stood in front of him—

"A-fang …"

When he heard what came out from his own throat, a trace of surprise flashed across his face. A-fang? That skinny and feeble weeping little girl?

She was still skinny, so thin that it was heartbreaking, and she was still weeping, yet smiling at the same time. There were wrinkles at the corners of her eyes as she smiled. He took her gently into his embrace. She was angular and all bones, and every one of them pierced his heart with pain. He wanted more pain. He couldn't tell how long he held her like that, though he was vaguely aware that it was longer than the total amount of time on the few occasions that he had held her as a child.

Mr. Chen, husband of a very good friend of Yin-ju's, had arranged for them to stay in a small quiet hotel in Kowloon, and he very thoughtfully showed them around the neighborhood, pointing out the locations of bus stops and restaurants, telling them that the service people spoke Mandarin and that the area was safe. He had been so nervous himself that he was in a daze. He forced himself to listen to Mr. Chen, but still he found it difficult to concentrate. All he could see was his son in a loose fitting western suit, who had as much gray at the temples as he did, but there was no sign of middle-age paunch. During the trip from the airport he discovered that his son was just as tongue-tied as he was when it came to social exchanges and small talk. The daughter had a head of shining black hair just like her mother. It was a shame she had a permanent wave, a head of tight and stiff-looking curls. She had probably done it specially for this trip. Her eyes looked larger than life, maybe because she was so thin. He wanted to look a little longer at those eyes, yet he was afraid to.

It was late at night when the three of them were finally alone in their hotel room. Although it was still daytime to him because of the time difference, he was exhausted, but not sleepy: The room was quiet for a few seconds, as if an air of strangeness finally fell around them.

Chin-yuan cleared his throat, got up and took a paper bag from his suitcase.

"Papa, here are come pictures taken recently of me, Hui-wen and our child." Chin-yuan enunciated each word distinctly, as if every word was carefully deliberated.

Chin-fang came over to look too, but he had a feeling that her mind was elsewhere. When they finished looking at the pictures, she hastily brought out a gray woolen vest.

"Papa, I knitted this for you; I wonder if it fits." She measured the vest against his body very gingerly; uttered a sigh of relief and said, "It will do; it will fit." She now seemed more confident of herself,

"I asked my sister-in-law to pick up the wool for me. I could not get any good wool even at the county seat. Peking has a wider selection; besides, Sister-in-law has better taste. I was afraid that I wouldn't be able to make the trip. I was going to finish it as soon as possible and mail it to Brother to bring to you."

He took the vest and stared at the endless stitches, knit and purl, knit and purl. He reached out for her hands and held them tightly in his own. Unexpectedly, he turned them over for closer scrutiny. Her hands were thin and hard; there were some thick calluses on the palms of her hand. He fondled them softly with his thumb. Suddenly he bent and buried his face in them for a long while. He raised his head and whispered,

"Tell Papa, A-fang, how have the years been for you?"

A-fang looked at him, then she slowly lowered her head and played with her own fingers. A long while later a tear drop fell on the back of her hand.

"Are you angry with Papa?"

She shook her head. Another drop fell on the back of her hand.

"Did you think that Papa deserted you and didn't want you any more?"

The words rushed out before he raised his head to look at Chin-yuan. Chin-yuan was watching him. Under the soft light in the room Chin-yuan looked younger than he had at first sight. Suddenly he felt lost and confused; he did not seem to be fully aware of the time and place. Chin-fang looked up and looked him straight in the eye and said softly but firmly,

"Long ago, yes. I was very young then. Everybody else had a papa and mama, and I only had grandma, I felt inferior. Grandma told me my mama died and my papa is a very good doctor who went far away to practice. He

will be back one day …"

He lowered his head and saw his fingers, long, thin, and pale. These hands had taken care of endless numbers of patients, endless numbers of children and old people. But how about his own two children and his old mother? How often had he ever touched them?

" … Many years had passed, when Papa still had not returned and had not even sent a letter, I recalled a story Brother told me. It was about a genie who had been locked up in a bottle. At first he hoped that someone would come to his rescue. When no one did for a long time he gave up hope and swore that he would eat whoever released him from the bottle …" She smiled sadly and went on, "I thought then that if Papa should actually come back one day, I was not going to speak to him. So, when one day Grandma told me that Brother had forwarded a letter from Papa, I made up my mind not to read it …"

He was taken aback and was about to say something when he found Chin-yuan looking at him and remembered, all of a sudden, what Chin-yuan had said during their overseas telephone conversation. He felt puzzled.

Chin-fang shook her head, sighed and said, "I was really very stubborn in those days. I was already in my teens, yet I was so childish."

Chin-yuan cleared his throat and said casually, "Hey, doesn't your oldest take after you? I was told that whenever the child feels upset, he hits himself on the chest."

Chin-fang smiled, embarrassed. Chin-yuan looked at his watch and said, "It's late. We'd better let Papa rest. We will talk some more tomorrow."

He interrupted immediately and said, "It's all right. I am not tired."

"Let me talk some more. Some of the things I want to say may not be known even to Brother. Much later, I could not help myself any longer, and I tried to read those letters when Grandma was not looking. After I read them I kept trying to figure a way to write back. In the beginning my mind was full of angry words. Later on, when I could not sleep at night I wrote Papa letters in my head. I told Papa whatever was bothering me as if I were putting them down in a letter. This way, as I was telling Papa all my problems, I would fall asleep. Funny thing was Papa seemed to know what had befallen me and what kind of trouble I was in. Papa was always there to enlighten me …"

He gave Chin-yuan a penetrating look; Chin-yuan, on the other hand, sat there looking down, like a statue.

"During the time of the Cultural Revolution our neighbors to the left and to the right had all been raided. I was really scared then. If those letters were discovered, there would surely be trouble ahead. Yet how could I bring myself to part with them? Later, when it could not be put off any longer, I had to bum them, except two that I considered most memorable. I couldn't bring myself to bum them, so I kept them on me … Papa, I brought them with me now."

"A-fang," Chin-yuan stood up and said, gently but firmly, "It's really late. Papa has been traveling by plane for over ten hours. We should let him rest." Then he turned to his father and said, "Papa, would you like to bathe first? I will see that A-fang goes to bed."

Chin-yuan's courteous words were persuasive. Chin-fang obeyed meekly; He felt that so many things were going through his head that he needed to take a warm shower to be alone with himself.

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He sat on the edge of the bed, staring fixedly at A-fang who was fast asleep. Now that those two eyes were closed, he finally found the courage to stare at her.

Chin-yuan came out of the bathroom, wearing striped pajamas. His face was pinkish and he smelled of soap.

"Asleep?" The older brother bent over and asked in a whisper. "Urn-hm. She is snoring," he said light-heartedly. Chin-yuan said, as he went around picking things scattered around the room, "These last few days have exhausted her. Not me; I often take trips for business and I'm used to them. She has never been far from home; has not had a good night's sleep for days … Papa, you don't smoke, do you?"

He saw Chin-yuan push the ashtray to one corner of the end table and answered him, "No. You don't either, right?"

Chin-yuan said, a bit embarrassed, "I used to. Social contact between colleagues makes it hard to refuse them. But, not long ago, when I succeeded in contacting Papa, I gave it up. I figured Papa is a doctor; you would most likely be against smoking. Good thing I was not hooked. It was easy to give it up." He nodded. Suddenly something triggered his memory.

"A-yuan, you must still remember that I did spank you once when you were young."

Chin-yuan's face was a blank. "Really? I have no impression whatever. Why?"

"I caught you strutting around with cigarette butts the guests had left behind." He sighed, "Chiefly it was

because I was about to leave and I intended to leave you with your uncle. I was worried; what if you picked up bad habits? I was worried." He muttered, "Good thing you don't remember."

"Uncle was very strict, otherwise I would not have been able to get into the university. But Papa, I did not study medicine. Are you disappointed?"

Watching the expression on his son's face, he smiled spontaneously; If his son wasn't already turning gray at the temples he would have said fondly, "You silly boy!"

His reaction put Chin-yuan at ease; he went on, "Good thing I was taken to Foochow then. They have good high schools. A-fang remained in our home town and was short-changed."

"A-yuan," he thought it was time to solve the mystery, "What about all those letters A-fang said I wrote her?"

Chin-yuan swallowed and said, "Oh, those. At the time I was young, and I didn't know whether it was the right thing to do. We received letters from you regularly after you left Foochow, some even after you got to Taiwan. Until 1952."

He tried to convert the year to the Republic of China calendar. He lowered his head; figured for a moment and said, "I think it was in the 42nd year,\fn{From 1911, the year in which the Manchu dynasty finally overthrown.} that is, 1953, when I asked another friend in Hong Kong to forward a letter to you, the previous friend had gone to Taiwan."

Chin-yuan nodded and said, "That's it. Since then, we have had no word from you. I was then more or less aware of what was going on, and I felt at home in Uncle's house. So, I took it well. However, Grandma was an old lady; and A-fang was still attending primary school. Those two were—"

Chin-yuan looked at him and stopped short. He both wanted to hear and dreaded to hear. A silence fell between them. Both turned at the same time to look at Chin-fang. After a while Chin-yuan whispered in an even lower voice,

"I seldom went back to our home town in those days. I heard things by listening to conversations between Uncle and Aunt. They talked about Grandma and how her sight was deteriorating, probably from too much weeping."

He sat there like a clay figure, head bowed, awaiting judgment.

"I heard that A-fang was not doing well in school, that she was bad-tempered and had an inferiority complex. Grandma couldn't deal with her. I kept thinking that you would soon find a way to send word to us. But ten years went by; I graduated from college and was assigned to work in Peking. One day it suddenly occurred to me that you probably were as anxious to correspond with us as we were to hear from you, and that the reason you did not write was because you couldn't. Should I, in that case, should I write to Grandma and A-fang on your behalf?"

"So, you, you—"

"So I did. Grandma gave me one of your earlier letters which I saved and carried with me all the time. I tried to imitate your handwriting. Papa, do you think it looked like yours?"

Of course he had thought so at first glance. He smiled and nodded.

"I fabricated a story and told Grandma that an acquaintance in the diplomatic service in Peking helped me make contact. I did not dare to write too often, lest I arouse their suspicion. Grandma was close to seventy yet still very clear-headed."

He nodded.

"I sent one every few months, mostly before holidays and the New Year, so that they could enjoy the holidays more."

Chin-fang turned in her bed; Chin-yuan gently straightened the blanket over her and continued whispering after hearing her even breathing, "A-fang told you that at first she was angry; wouldn't read your letters—I mean to say my letters."

Chin-yuan smiled; he too couldn't help smiling.

"Grandma said later she did read them. Not only that, if the next one was a long time coming, she would even question Grandma. I began to write more often. I feared that they might want to write back to you, so I told them it was next to impossible to send letters to you. I told them they should tell me what they wanted to say, and I would tell my friends, who would put it in writing when they were out of the country."

"How long did you do this?"

"Exactly ten years. During the time of the Cultural Revolution, everybody was in a state of confusion; I thought I should stop before I brought them trouble. But, Grandma was in poor health and she counted on those letters …"

He closed his eyes and did a little figuring, nodded and said, "So, you stopped after Grandma passed away."

"Yes. By that time A-fang was married and had a child of her own. She had grown up. I said to myself:

enough; leave it at that; more may bring on complications."

"No wonder A-fang said that there have been no more letters for over ten years."

"Lately I seldom think about what I did. It was A-fang who reminded me about them in her letter before we came. That was why I tried to tell you over the phone; A-fang may be very upset should she find out. But I couldn't really explain the whole situation over the phone."

True, lots of things could not be explained. His glance fell on this middle-aged man in front of him who looked just like him. If he were in the other's shoes would he have done the same thing under the same circumstances? Many years ago when he was a new father, he had fears that his child might not turn out as expected—he feared that the son might not be like him. However, after he had gone through life's many ordeals, his only hope was that the child would not take after him. And now, facing this oldest of his sons, he sensed a feeling of awe rising up within him. Was it because the son bore too close a resemblance to himself, or because he was not like himself in some aspects?

> My dear daughter A-fang,
>
> I am very happy to learn that you have graduated from high school and are now working. It is truly hard to believe that my daughter has reached adulthood. According to your grandmother you have always hoped that when you grew up you could follow your mother's footsteps and be a nurse, or be like Brother studying engineering. You were, therefore, upset at being assigned to work in a factory. The truth is there is no such thing in the world as a noble profession or a humble profession. One should be proud of oneself so long as one is supporting oneself and serving the people. Furthermore, the kind of work your mother and brother do may not be suitable for you or interest you. I hope you stay in the factory and devote yourself to mastering a skill.

Chin-fang shyly showed him the letter yellowed with age.

"I made a point of saving this one, because this was the first one I told Grandma I wanted to read. I read the others behind her back. I was really foolish, Papa. You won't be angry with me, will you?"

He smiled a forced smile and answered softly, "How could I be? If I were you, I would be mad with my papa too. This letter was well written.' He threw a glance at Chin-yuan and added, "Did you listen to your … eh, to the advice in it?"

"Certainly not." He noticed that in the short span of one day, Chin-fang was already beginning to act like a young girl from time to time, very much at variance with her forty years, but extremely touching. "I said to myself then: hum, old hash! However, after a few more letters from you, after you had repeatedly told me so, I began to see the points."

Chin-fang took out another letter that was falling apart at the folds.

> My dear daughter A-fang,
>
> I am happy to learn from your brother that you have a boy friend. Since he works in the same factory you must have gotten to know him pretty well. The important points are: A person's character, his health, his ambition to advance himself, and that he be filial to parents and sincere in dealing with his friends. If he possesses these qualities, no other stringent demands are necessary. Though Chin-yuan is far away in Peking, you could ask him to come back for a visit at New Year's to meet your friend. He is six years older and your only sibling, and you ought to listen to what he has to advise regarding such an important matter as matrimony.

At this point he looked up and threw an understanding glance at Chin-yuan.

Chin-fang blushed and said with a smile, "This letter was—"

Chin-yuan butted in and said, "This letter was worth saving. I went back to our hometown and looked over her intended on the strength of this letter. About two months later A-fang and A-hsin were engaged. It was settled very quickly."

Chin-fang patted her brother lightly on the shoulder and said, "In Papa's absence of course I had to listen to Brother. You did approve."

He watched the two of them and had a feeling of loss that a phase of life had passed him by.

"Papa," Chin-fang became very serious and turned to face him. He was startled by her gaze, a gaze that he recognized from way back. "I have been meaning to tell you that I am well aware of my temperament. It is not good and worse when I was a child. I went to extremes easily. It's true. If it hadn't been for your letters which showed me how to deal with life, making me feel that I had my father's love … if it hadn't been for those letters, I might …"

She covered her face and could not go on.

"A-fang …" He gently stroked her short, stiff black hair and said, "Listen to me. Actually, it was your brother

…” He looked up at Chin-yuan who repeatedly shook his head at him beseechingly. With great effort he bit back the words that were at the tip of his tongue.

So be it! Since it was Chin-yuan’s wish, let it rest at that. Just consider that his son had taken care of a matter that should have been his responsibility.

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The brother and sister would be taking a train up north in the morning, and he would be flying back to Taipei in the afternoon. They all got up before dawn—actually none of them were able to sleep; each heard the others toss and turn, but none dared to utter a sound.

All that had to be said was said; all the advice had been given again and again. The luggage was readied the night before. All the suitcases and baskets that seemed to take up so much space had been sorted out and tied together by Chin-yuan in neat bundles.

“Papa, we have repeatedly told you not to spend money on us or buy things for us, and here you are with all these purchases!” Chin-fang sounded just like his youngest daughter Chin-mei now.

“That’s right. Hsiao-lei told me that the income from the clinic is not much, and Chin-hung is still in graduate school; plus all the expenses for this trip, the hotel, food, and shopping. We feel uneasy.” Chin-yuan put a word in too.

“I have told you more than once,” he sounded almost impatient, “traveling expenses for you two were paid by the three older children, Hsiao-lei, Chin-lin, and Chin-an, not me.” He was close to losing control. “I, your father—I did not contribute anything, nothing at all! I didn’t do anything at all!” He felt a pain in his chest. On the surface he had managed to maintain a semblance of tranquillity and stability during the past five days. At this moment, it was all on the verge of collapse. “This is nothing, nothing! What’s a few earthly goods? Nothing! I am your father; you are my children! You have gone through so much hardship all these years. Can a few items compensate for your suffering? These worldly goods are nothing! I am nothing! I-AM-NOTHING!” He started to beat himself hard on the chest.

The brother and sister were so taken aback that they did not think of stopping him for quite a few seconds, then they begged him, “Papa, don’t, Papa!”

They grabbed his hands, yet he wailed,

“You still call me Papa! What sort of a papa am I—what sort of father …”

Chin-fang held him in a tight embrace, sobbing. Chin-yuan rested his forehead on his father’s shoulder, shaking uncontrollably. The inevitable emotional outburst that the three of them had tried to suppress since the night before had burst open like a dam.

Chin-yuan was the first to get hold of himself. He got up, poured a glass of water and took a tranquilizer from the bottle. He placed it in his father’s palm, and indicated that his father should take it.

When he quieted down, he realized that he was leaning against the headboard, with Chin-fang at the side of the bed, staring at him red-eyed. Chin-yuan sat on a chair in front of the bed, leaning slightly forward, taking his pulse with a very gentle touch.

“Do you feel better? Papa?”

He felt his heartbeat gradually getting back to normal; surely Chin-yuan was aware of it too from his pulse.

He nodded, turned his hand around and grabbed hold of Chin-yuan; his other hand was holding on to Chin-fang, watching them with his eyes, wordlessly. At this point he could see that all his wounds and hurts had been washed clean. They still hurt deeply, but it was a tangible sort of hurt; they were real hurts, as real as these two in front of him who were flesh of his flesh and bone of his bone. There was no need to hide the real hurt of parting, no need to pretend. He could now accept it with a heavy heart; it was only natural; there was no need to look for an escape.

At this time and in this place, he felt a vague sense of relief.

Chin-yuan looked at his watch and realized it was about time to go.

“I’ll go with you, I want to see you off.” He stood up. “Papa, didn’t you say that you are not going to see us off, not going to the station, because you may not be able to take it?”

“I’ll go. I can take it. There is nothing I cannot take. If I can this time, it will be easier next time.”

It took Chin-fang a few seconds to understand what he was saying; she broke out into a sweet smile which, in his eyes, was as beautiful as a flower in spring.

83.96 The Day He Was Fired\fn{by Yu Mo aka Wu Kuo-tung (1948-)} Huian County, Fukien Province, China (M)

11

We had our lunch at a place called *The Angel's Restaurant*. To have such a meal in a large restaurant in the crowded area of the city was like a dream. We hadn't had such a pleasure for almost two years or maybe more than two years; anyway, we thoroughly enjoyed this meal. The restaurant was full of well dressed, high class customers and to think that we were eating among them gave us a feeling of elation. After the meal we even ordered some cool drinks, orange juice of an appetizing color served in beautiful tall glasses. We wanted to enjoy the drinks slowly but unable to resist the tempting delicious taste, we gulped them down. Then we ordered another one and this time we were wiser for we used straws to sip them slowly. We did not talk much during the meal; from the very start, we concentrated on eating for the food tasted so good that we did not have a minute to spare. When we were having the cold drinks, Jill remarked on the excellent quality of the music in this restaurant and I noticed it too. Jill was always interested in music and I forgot everything else when I saw that she was happy. Of course, the things I forgot were rather important.

Our seats were against the wall. To be accurate, it was not entirely a wall for right beside us was a French window of transparent glass that occupied one third of the wall. It was very bright outside, the sunshine spilling beautifully all over the street with some of it cheerfully slipping into other people's shops. There were not many people on the street as everyone had gone into the restaurants. The streets around this vicinity were full of small and dingy looking restaurants. A better restaurant was in the basement of the bank in front of the park, a buffet restaurant but it was very small and could not be compared to this one. Moreover, that place was very crowded and everybody had to line up in front of the food counters so that often the line would extend up to the steps leading to the entrance, blocking people from entering or leaving. Come to think of it, eating is indeed an important affair and it really makes people happy to have a good meal.

Jill seemed to be very much in love with the music here and it was fun watching her wholehearted enjoyment. Originally, she had long hair, having had it cut only this summer and I did not know anything about it until it was done. She said she cut it for convenience's sake but actually I guessed she did it to save her beauty parlor expenses, which were exorbitant. Usually people do not give much thought to such expenses for once they become aware of them, they would feel sorry to have paid so much. Anyway, Jill is very clever and what she did was right. But sometimes, looking at her, she seemed to have lost her look of pure simplicity. Of course, she is already mature. I don't really know how to express myself. I only feel she has changed somewhat. For quite a few years now, I have cut my own hair very very short to save money. At first, I thought I looked quite energetic. But now, I look rather disheveled. Long hair sometimes makes one look rather strange. All these things are strange. If you do not think about them, they cease to exist.

"Today is a very good day," Jill said all of a sudden.

"Yes." I believed the music had moved her. "This morning, everybody said that."

"We must have spent a lot on this lunch!"

"Yes, quite a lot!" I said.

"I can tell that this place is different from the other places."

"It is different." I looked at the people around us.

"We shouldn't have come here."

"Why shouldn't we?" I said. "We've already eaten it."

She bit her finger. I looked at her and she quickly put down her hand.

"Please don't be so nervous. We must never regret," I said.

"I'm not regretting."

"Well, if you have no regrets, then please don't look so worried."

"It was you who insisted on coming here. All I said was we could go to a comparatively cleaner place, I mean just a cleaner place."

"I don't understand what you mean."

"You don't understand? I said I only wanted to go somewhere a little cleaner and quieter. All the small restaurants we went to were terribly overcrowded with people and flies."

"I know. Then, isn't this a good place?"

"I didn't say that this isn't a good place, but we're spending too much money here."

"You're regretting," I said.

"I'm not."

"I can tell." I gazed fixedly at her. This whole thing was really amusing and Jill was probably overexcited. I had not planned to come to this place. Usually I was very cautious even when I passed by this restaurant for they

always displayed their enticing dishes in the windows and made those who were not hungry, hungry and those who were hungry, even more so. Therefore one must possess a great deal of ... perseverance to avoid falling into their trap. I truly did not plan to come to this place, but I had not had good food for quite some time and my stomach suffered from the lack of it. In the end we just found ourselves here.

"Only this once," she said. "Although we had a wonderful meal here, we'll not make it a rule to come here again."

"I know."

"How long has it been since we had a meal like this?"

"Quite some time ago." I said.

"I still remember a wonderful get-together dinner once."

"I remember it too."

"It was really wonderful."

"Quite so."

"I would like very much to go through graduation again."

Jill laughed. "Do you think we'll get a dinner party like that every time?"

"I think so. That was something that you'll remember for the rest of your life."

"Surely there must be some other significance too."

"Of course, it was also your last meal."

"No, no."

"It depends on how you look at it."

"When I think of it, I'm nostalgic for that period of our lives," she said. "Why didn't we realize how good it was then. Everybody was eager to graduate. Now, after we have graduated, we long to go back."

"What do you want to go back for?" I asked.

"I don't know. I just wish to go back."

I lowered my head to sip the orange juice. They must have iced it ahead of time; I could feel its coolness inside me. They must have iced it before serving because they had not put ice cubes in it as that would have diluted and spoiled the taste of the fresh orange juice. First rate restaurants are always very particular about details like this. After a while, when I felt that Jill was not thinking about school days any more. I raised my head. She was concentrating on the music as if she had not heard any music for a good many years.

"Do you want to order anything else?" I asked.

"What! Are we going to eat some more?"

"I am asking you."

"No."

"If we don't order anything else, they'll chase us away."

"I don't believe they will."

"We can't spend the whole afternoon here eating our lunch."

Jill looked at her watch. "Forty-two minutes after twelve. We don't need a whole afternoon. Until one o'clock is enough for us."

"We can't stay here till one. You need ten minutes to walk back."

"All right, till twelve-fifty. We both have to go back. Will ten minutes be enough for you?"

"Enough. I'm not going back to work in the afternoon."

"What! You're having a vacation?"

"Yes."

Jill did not believe me. She knew my holidays. I usually had the first and last Sundays off every month. She remembered clearly for I had often complained that I didn't know what to do on the two working Sundays. Surely she remembered.

"Vacation! What vacation? Didn't you go to work in the morning?"

"Yes, but 1 have a vacation in the afternoon."

"I don't understand."

"Why can't you understand if they give me a holiday?"

"There must be some reason for it."

"No reason," I said, "they thought I looked tired."

"How do you feel?" She scrutinized me.

"I feel fine."

"No. No. You do look a little tired."

"Don't you talk the way they did, 1 really feel fine."

Jill stretched out her hand to grasp mine and said: "Maybe they are right. You should take a good rest."

"Yes, I will."

"How many days vacation?"

"Probably for a week."

God knows how difficult it was for me to talk this way and expect people to believe me. I cast a stealthy glance at her and she looked a little suspicious. She knew my boss very well. He would often ask us to work over-time for no reason and had cut our lunch time to barely one hour. Would a person like him give his employee a week's vacation just because he looked tired? Only God knows! But I had already gone so far; I must keep on and not slip up.

"Wow! A whole week. That's simply wonderful."

"Yes."

"What are your plans?"

"Plans? What plans?"

"You must make good use of your vacation; plan a schedule, then, you'll feel more relaxed."

"I agree," I said.

"Do you want to travel?"

"Perhaps, but it's no fun to travel by myself."

"Right. Do you still remember when we went on a trip with a whole bunch of people? What a wonderful time we had!"

I smiled. I don't know why Jill is always thinking about the past. I don't mean that the past is not worth recollecting but bygone days are bygone days. It is upsetting to be always thinking about them. Of course, Jill does not feel that way and she still looks quite happy talking about the past.

"I may take a trip home," I said.

"That's a good plan."

"I haven't been back home for over a year now."

"Do you get letters from Mother regularly?"

"Yes, she's fine."

"Some day, I'll go back with you to visit her. When was the last time I saw her? Let me see—ah! it was while you were in military training. Do you remember?"

"I remember. My first big vacation."

"We bought such a lot of fruits. We had such a wonderful time."

"Yes, we did indeed have a great time." I said. "Let's not talk about that again. It's difficult for me to decide what I'll do by myself. Anyway, I'll have some rest for a week."

"You deserve it."

I looked at my watch, it was twelve to one.

"We must go now. Whatever you do, you mustn't be late," I said.

"I know. Actually, many people are always late."

"That's their business but you mustn't be late."

"Jane said that I'll be an old hand in half a year's time and then, I can do as I please."

"You mustn't think this way."

"To me it's amusing. Jane doesn't care about anything. She's not only late but also leaves early."

"That's her business." I was afraid that Jill would also harbor such thoughts. "Please remember what I say. Do you hear me? That's her business but you should never be like that."

Jill smiled. I didn't say anything more and gestured at the waiter. He came quickly and handed me the bill which bore figures in it that were equivalent to the amount I paid for two weeks' groceries. When Jill watched me paying the bill, she called my name in a strange tone of voice: "Su Tsung-hsiung …"

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I had reason to say her voice sounded strange. There are various tones of voices but this tone of voice is unique. If you listen to it carefully, it is composed of a mixture of all emotions, generally the result of a feeling of uncertainty as to whether one is right or wrong in whatever one is doing. That morning, I heard something similar in the boss's office, although his voice was masculine and comparatively low it could still be classified under the same category. My boss was not bad at all, only a little too harsh. Now-a-days, bosses mostly have this kind of

dedication to their work and this is actually the secret of success.

I can't remember how it happened that morning. But it couldn't possibly have sprung up in one day. I say, not in one day but I can't say for sure how many days it actually took. In short, everything came to a conclusion that morning, probably at half past ten. I couldn't swear to it; maybe it was earlier. For our boss came to the office around ten and the first thing he did was to send for me. It seemed funny that I wasn't prepared at all, like a person being pushed on to the boxer's stand bare-handed, except that I was not as nervous. I was even more relaxed than when I came for my first interview.

At times, when I thought of what had happened during my interview, I felt it was hilariously funny. Especially when I started to stammer under the stare of that hollow-cheeked bald-headed secretary. He asked me, politely of course, how was my English. I ended in replying "Quite good." Good Heavens! I never realized that my answer surprised him. Then they asked me to chat with them in English. I asked them what I should talk about but they told me to talk about anything I liked. Well, under such, circumstances, .how could I just talk at random. I stared at them stupidly. Finally, I recited an excerpt from Lincoln's *Gettysburg Address*. When I think of it now, I feel that was really funny. I don't know if Mr. Lincoln was as nervous as I was, but they appreciated my recital, and applauded me. After they had given me this encouragement, I grew bolder and started to chat with them casually in English. I got the job the next day.

I was assigned to the export department, and I still belonged to that department until just before ten o'clock this morning. At the beginning, I did not realize how complex the staff of that department was. Being new there, I was mindful of every single thing. I took it on to myself to do a lot of work, my own and even that of others. After some time, I became aware of the baffling situation there. Especially those eagle eyes of the export department chief which would never let go of any new employee. They would always be fixed on your back with a ferocious stare until it gave you the creeps. However, an old hand in the department, called K'ou K'ai, was very friendly to me. He was two years my senior at college and maybe because we came from the same college, we got along very well. There was a time when he advised me not to work so hard. I did not see his point until he explained to me that if I worked so hard, I might cause somebody else to lose his job. Then, I began to understand a little but still I could not see the whole truth of the matter. As a matter of fact, up till now I am still in the dark. For, while the rest of them were worrying about losing their jobs on account of me, I lost my job first because of them.

K'ou K'ai was indeed an old hand and he was born smart. I often complain that I am not that kind of fellow who is always alert, always on his toes but even if I do get to be like that, I don't think I would like it. For if you see your surroundings too clearly, every aesthetic value would be destroyed. K'ou K'ai is like that and he thinks he is happy. Well, he seems to be happy but he is not making use of what he has studied and that ought to be painful. However, he does not give it much thought. Of course, I have said that those who brood over things will have a great deal of regrets. At present, I am much smarter. I don't think that much but it does not mean not to think at all. At times, things that happened in the past would still come to my mind. I haven't quite mastered K'ou K'ai's set of know-how. If I could master it one day, I believe I will be as happy as he is.

I guess it all might have begun to happen during the time when K'ou K'ai told me not to work so hard but I am not that sure; maybe it began earlier, as early as the day I started my work. Anyway, K'ou K'ai was right in giving me such a hint. Who would like to lose his job because of somebody else? However, I haven't quite understood how my hard work would effect others. I was only eager to do my work as perfectly as I could.

Now, it has finally happened! It happened right over my head. When they sent me to see the boss in his office, K'ou K'ai frowned at me. I believe he must have guessed what was going on but I hadn't. I had no idea what was going to happen. K'ou K'ai looked at me, standing beside the merchandise counter. He looked as if he wanted to walk over and talk to me but he held back. If he had come over and talked to me, he might have saved the situation but he refrained from doing so. As a matter of fact, I was not aware of anything going on. I remember walking away from him, waving my hand and smiling. When I think of it now, I feel all the more how wonderful he is!

In the boss's office, I did not see the hollow-cheeked and bald-headed secretary. I saw only the boss himself, sitting behind the big desk. When I entered, he was very polite. He did not put on airs as he always used to do. He asked me to sit down, offered me a cigarette and finally produced that strange voice in calling out my name: "Su Tsung-hsiung …"

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We walked out of *The Angel's Restaurant*. Jill seemed to be still worrying about the bill for our lunch. She did not talk and even her breathing became strained. As we walked along the covered sidewalks, the sunshine was really beautiful: even more so than seen through the glass windows. It reminded me of a popular song we sang at

college: *We Are Singing Under the Sun*. The wording of the song is very cute, saying something like: “We love each day and each day we love to sing under the sun.” Now, very few people feel like doing that any more. We had scarcely taken a few steps when we saw people rushing out of the restaurants in the neighboring streets. Everyone was in a hurry. There were also a lot of cars of all kinds, especially buses. Many people brushed past us, still chewing their food as they looked at their watches, and if they saw an acquaintance they would only wave a hand in greeting. Here, you often meet people you know especially those vaguely familiar ones who crowd on to the same table with you in small restaurants and whose names you never recall so one can only wave as a gesture of recognition.

At first, we walked under the covered sidewalks. Later, I was afraid that Jill would still be thinking of the lunch bill, so I purposely moved over to a window. Women enjoy window shopping. Although they know they cannot afford to buy anything, it is still a treat just to look at the things. When we walked near the windows, Jill was in better spirits. She leaned over and looked at every item in each window, pointing at this and that, most of those things she had looked at a hundred times before, but she still liked to look. I reminded her that we did not have much time.

“Wait. They haven’t sold the teddy bear yet. Look! It’s still here, untouched.”

“They are using it as a decoration.”

“No. Look! There is a price tag on its neck.”

“Now, everything has a price on.”

I looked at my watch then walked into the Consignment Agency.\fn{A note reads: *This refers to a type of boutique that sells imported goods, also acting as an agency to sell things for people on a consignment basis*.} The young girl behind the counter asked me what I wanted. I pointed to the teddy bear without looking at Jill outside. When the girl took it out, Jill nervously hurried inside.

“What are you doing?” Her eyes opened wide.

I asked the girl how much it cost and she offered it to me at a reduced price. I paid the money and asked her to wrap it up.

“What *are* you doing?”

“I’m buying a present,” I said.

“What! You bought it! Good Heavens! I don’t want it.”

“You want it.”

“I don’t want it. I only like to look at it.”

“Later, you can hold it when you go to sleep.”

“You must have gone mad! How can we buy this?”

“Why can’t we buy it?”

“It has no use at all.”

“Oh! Yes. You can look at it, touch it and hug it. It will give you pleasure and that is enough.”

“I don’t mean that. I mean we ought to buy things that are worthwhile.”

The girl looked at us while she was wrapping up the package.

“You know this thing is worthwhile or else you wouldn’t be thinking of it all the time.”

“We must have gone mad,” she said.

After the bear was packaged I looked again at my watch and hurriedly dragged Jill away. I couldn’t let her be late or she’d regret it later.

“We must have gone mad,” she said again.

“I ought to give you a present.”

“What! You ought to! You spend money on such things and you say you ought to!”

“We’ll buy something worthwhile, later, OK.?”

“Don’t you buy anything! You must remember, you mustn’t buy anything.”

“OK. I’ll remember.”

Jill kept quiet.

We started to walk fast. We could see Jill’s company across the street. Their building is very impressive, with ten stories or so. It is more presentable than ours. Of course, I should not have said “ours.” I could say that before ten o’clock but now I can no longer call it “ours.” Before we crossed the street, I stopped beside the traffic light platform and handed her the wrapped-up toy. She had a strange expression on her face. She looked as if she were going to cry. She has an upturned nose and at this moment it looked even more so.

“We must have gone mad.” She repeated.

"All right." I comforted her. "Let us be mad for once. Take it. Put it in the closet while you work, but don't forget to take it home with you."

"I will remember. We must … how could we have done such things, today? First, we went to that exorbitant restaurant and then we bought this."

I smiled. "Don't talk like that. Don't you think this is a happy day for us? You even said that today is our lucky day."

"What I mean is—we have surely gone mad."

"I know what you mean. It's time for you to go back to the office."

"I have to finish what I wanted to say."

"All right, go ahead."

"We spent a great deal of money today. How much did we spend?"

"I have not figured it out yet."

"If you keep on doing that, you'll form a habit of it."

"No. I'll not make it a rule."

"We can't do what others do. It's very important that we should be economical from now on."

"I'll keep that in mind."

She seemed to be wanting to say something else. Women are just peculiar. I hurried her to cross the street while the green light was on. She hugged the package and looked at me attentively for a few seconds before turning to cross the street. All that time, I had been paying attention to the cars which were waiting to turn round the corner. Usually they hasten to make the turn right after the light turned green, forcing the pedestrians to run through the crossing. I watched her running and noticed how attractive she was with her full figure. I could not remember the exact number of years we had been together. During our intimate moments, I would always fondle her smooth waist and feel that she was getting slimmer and slimmer. But she wasn't skinny thin. When a woman matures, she doesn't always become plump. She may seem to be thinner, but actually she gains elsewhere on her body.

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I had been watching her back till she arrived at the door of the big building. Then I quickly turned. I knew she would be stopping at the door to look at me. Then, we would be gazing at each other again before finally waving at each other as if we were parting for life. We had done that before and then I would have to run to get back to my office which was very annoying. Now, I didn't need to run. It was one o'clock and even if it were two, I still had no need to run. I turned purposely so that I would not be looking at her again. If I were to run, where would I run to?

I stood at the same spot and thought it was amusing to think about all these things. Then, I stared at the traffic lights, watching the cars hurrying past me and felt it was rather meaningless. Fortunately, the sunshine was beautiful and it made me look quite happy to be standing there.

I really didn't like to think about what happened that morning. It was just something unexpected and I am perfectly right in saying it was unexpected. They wanted to reduce the staff, and unfortunately I got laid off, and that was really unexpected. Of course, I knew it was difficult for my boss to do such a thing for he had confidence in my abilities, or else he would not have attached any importance to the whole affair. He got so embarrassed that he could not pronounce my name naturally. At the beginning, I smoked and waited for him to speak. It must be something urgent, for he sent for me right after he came into his office. That happened before so I was not nervous at all and I waited quietly. Later, I became suspicious from the way he acted. He kept sitting down then jumping up and walking to the window. I had never seen him so nervous. He spoke only after I had finished my cigarette. He first began beating around the bush. For example, he started with the question:

"Our company is doing well, isn't it?"

Of course, I answered in the affirmative.

"Do you know how our company is organized?"

"Not too well," I said.

"We hold a directors' meeting every month. Originally our company was owned by an individual. You know that don't you? They started badly and they nearly collapsed. Later, it went public and slowly recovered with the investments of the directors."

"I understand."

"You don't understand. They are always checking on us. Of course, they have the right to do it. Many organizations are like that. They do whatever they please."

I did not know what all this had to do with me. Directors checking on the business was just a matter of course. I was only a small clerk in the export department, I could very well turn a deaf ear to the business management of the company.

"They came once last week."

"Yes, I said."

"They discovered something wrong. They seem to think that we have employed too many people."

"Maybe we have." I said.

"When they questioned me, I had to tell them that some of the employees are here on probation. We usually employ people on that basis."

"Right."

"They wanted me to give a list of the names. Of course, I know that you have done good work but to be fair and square, we also haven't treated you badly, have we?"

"No."

"We all know the extent of the directors' power. When they reach a decision, it is hard to change it. We have to lay off some people."

"Lay off some people?" I repeated. Of course, then I understood what was happening.

"Yes, we are going to lay off all those who are on probation."

"Am I on the list?"

"Yes, I am sorry."

"Oh! Now I understand."

"I did indicate that it is not fair but, Su Tsung-hsiung, I do not own the whole company."

"Yes, I know."

"No matter how I argued, it was of no use. It is difficult to change whatever they have decided upon."

"Yes, you said so."

We looked at each other. He looked very embarrassed. He is a good boss.

"If you want me to, I can recommend you to another company," he said.

"Good. I'll think it over."

"Don't worry. You are still young and this world is for the young. You are needed everywhere. As long as you have the will to work, you are wanted everywhere," he said.

I had heard this kind of talk more than a hundred times. It is supposed to be stimulating.

"I think so too," I said.

"It doesn't matter so much for the young to go through some hardship. I suffered a great deal more than you did and I survived."

"Of course." I remained very polite.

"I have a lot of data on you. Other companies will soon discover that you are a capable person. They can come to me for references."

"Thanks."

"You are not going to change your address, are you?"

"That is hard to say."

"Please keep in touch with us. You are a talented person."

"Thanks."

"Good. Please go to the Department of General Affairs. They have everything ready for you."

When I left the office, I closed the door very carefully. I thanked the boss repeatedly for it was very kind of him to have been so considerate towards me.

At the Department of General Affairs, I saw the bald-headed secretary. He was frowning as he looked at me and all of a sudden, he seemed to be not bad at all. The boss had said that the company did not belong to him alone and of course, it did not belong to the secretary. His harshness could well be forgiven for he, also, could be fired at any moment. After I had received my salary and my severance pay, he came over and shook my hand.

"Did the boss explain everything to you?"

"Yes, he did," I smiled.

"They shouldn't have done such a thing."

"That's all right."

"Did he tell you who wanted to come in here?"

"No."

"Wonderful! So he didn't tell you anything."
"He said the company needed to lay off people."
The secretary shook his head. "Do you feel that it's unfair?"
I kept quiet. I was a little confused.
"It may be a good thing to leave this place," said the secretary. "I would like to leave too, but I'm old, you know."
"You mustn't think that way," I said. We shook hands and said good-bye.

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Of course, there were still things I did not understand fully, but I had to give up for the secretary was not willing to tell me everything. When I left the company, it was about half past eleven. It must have been somewhere around that time because it wasn't long after that when I saw Jill. The sun was wonderfully bright and warm. I stood under the sun for almost twenty minutes. I seldom got a chance like that. Everybody knows that sunshine is healthful but nobody has the chance to bask under it. Most people would always have a good sleep on holidays or else have fun with women. There were quite a few people like that in our company. After the holidays, they were always late for work and they come to the office with a body aching all over.

I stood on the street with nothing to do. Then, I saw a traffic policeman coming to regulate the traffic lights. Possibly he discovered the congestion of cars here. I stood beside him and watched. He did not see me at first. When he did, he smiled at me which was very nice. Usually the policemen do not have much of a smile for anybody, for their work is very exasperating. Now, he smiled; I believe the sun made him feel happy.

That policeman was, indeed, very well-trained. Shortly after he walked over, the cars were all under control and none of them dared to go beyond the line and that made it easier for the pedestrians to cross the streets. After having watched him changing lights several times, I wanted to walk away. I could not always stand there. I would have to find something to do. I had money in my pocket, an extra month's pay, what they called severance pay! Maybe, they were afraid that the laid off person would starve to death all of a sudden. They wouldn't have to hold themselves responsible if they had given him some money to live on.

I started to walk toward the heart of town and quickly headed for the post office at the back of our company. I wanted to remit some money to my mother. I sent money home every month so that she could have a better living. Being by herself, she was very lonely but she knew how to spend her time and I had also taught her ways to entertain herself. Of course, she wouldn't think of marrying again. It didn't make much sense to her.

The post office behind our company was the closest one. There were of course, post offices elsewhere, but I was used to this one. The people there were more polite and they did not put on airs. Sometimes, when you go to a post office to deposit or to remit some money, it is like entering the house of a debtor. The people there are not inclined to talk and strictly businesslike. There is nothing you can do about them.

I walked toward our company. At first, I was afraid that I might run into some of my colleagues but then, I thought it did not matter. I would just greet them as usual. Some time ago, there was a young man, like me, who had been fired. They gave him a farewell party. I did not participate because I didn't know him too well. I only knew that he was a good worker. What would happen to the company if the people like us all left?

As a matter of fact, our company couldn't care less. It was still a tall big edifice and could be seen several streets away. Especially with the neon lights on top, it shone brightly even in the night. I went past the company and walked through the parking lot. Perhaps I walked very fast for I did not hear K'ou K'ai shouting after me. I was taken by surprise when he ran up to me, all flushed in the face and gasping for breath even when he stopped running.
"What's the matter? Calm down."
"Where have you been to?"
"I'm standing here, am I not?" I laughed.
He shook his head and gathered his breath.
"At noon time, I mean at noon time. Good Heavens! I can't stand this running. I have grown old, all of a sudden."
"You are not used to running any more." I smiled.
"I was a track and field athlete and now I'm no damn good."
"Why did you look for me?"
"You're asking me and whom should I ask? Where were you at lunch time? I looked all over town for you."
"I had lunch at *The Angel's Restaurant*.
He opened his eyes wide. "What! *The Angel's Restaurant*! No wonder I couldn't find you. I looked everywhere

but didn't think of these kinds of big restaurants."

"I had a very good meal and felt wonderful."

He had a funny expression on his face. "What happened?"

"What happened? I went to *The Angel's Restaurant* to have lunch."

"Good Heavens! If you don't tell me what happened, how am I going to know."

"What do you mean?"

"You must have gone mad to go to *The Angel's Restaurant*."

"It was quite expensive but very classy."

"You went there just like that, without a good reason?"

"Yes."

"Just for the sake of having a good meal?"

"Exactly."

He shook his head, them pulled me away. "We cannot talk here."

"Why not?"

"It's the time when they're all coming back to work. We have to go somewhere else. You must tell me what happened this morning."

"They just fired me. It's as simple as that."

He was taken aback and then he said: "I guessed it. I guessed it already this morning. They'll do it sooner or later."

"I don't understand."

"It's just because you don't understand. If you did, it wouldn't have happened."

We walked out of the parking lot and I looked at my watch.

"You ought to go back to work now."

"The hell with it! I can quit also. It isn't much to speak of. You have to bear in mind. It isn't much to speak of."

I did not want to see him like this. I wanted him to go back to work. He looked very angry so I had to walk with him out of the parking lot and into the park. I asked him whether he had lunch or not. He shook his head.

"I'm going to invite you. They gave me some money."

"No such thing! I won't have it."

"I have already had a very good meal. You can also try for once."

"Unless I become absolutely heartless. It is your severance pay. Damn it! You want me to feast on your severance pay?"

"OK. You do as you please."

We went to the buffet restaurant in the basement of the Bank Building. There were not many people, for they had all gone back to work. K'ou K'ai asked me if I would like to eat anything there. I said no. Consequently, he took some food for himself and I had a cup of coffee. After we had sat down, I was still worried about his being late for work. I asked him if it really didn't matter, for it was already half past one.

"Don't you worry. I know what I am doing. I told you it isn't that important. I can also quit."

"Don't talk nonsense."

"Really. I can also quit. Tell me what happened."

"It happened all too suddenly." I said.

"Don't keep it all within yourself. Speak out. You simply have to speak out."

He must have thought that I had gone mad. The expression on his face seemed to say that I would have committed suicide if I did not run into him.

"I have had this kind of experience," K'ou K'ai said, "You know everybody has to have a first time; like a woman, the first time."

"Was it serious?"

"I slept for three days, three whole days. On the first day, I thought about what had happened. On the second day I was still thinking about it. Well, I gave it up on the third day. I gave up. I slept for three days."

"That wasn't too bad." I said.

"Good Heavens! I took some sleeping pills. I couldn't sleep unless 1 took some pills."

"Did it turn out all right?"

"Absolutely. I slept for three days. When 1 woke up, it was a real awakening."

"To what?"

"To what? To know that I was still alive, alive like anybody else. Look at me. Do I look all right?" He gestured

with his hands.

"You look great."

"But this is not me. Do you understand? This is not me." He smoked.

"I don't understand."

"I know." he said. "I have changed a great deal but other people cannot tell, but I know myself. Listen! You, also, cannot go on living in your own way any longer. You cannot. You must forget everything and start anew. Yes, that is what I mean."

"Did you do it?"

"Ugh! Started all over, to live their way, in anybody else's way. You do what they do."

"I understand," I said.

K'ou K'ai nodded and got us another two cups of coffee. He smoked fiercely, so I placed the whole pack in front of him.

"What did they do to you?"

"Nothing," I said.

"You must tell me."

"OK. They told me that they had to lay off extra people."

K'ou K'ai laughed loudly and I looked at him stupidly.

"You see, we were taken in. The hell with laying off people. It's a lie. It's like a country talking about disarmament. It sounds sincere, eloquent and even very convincing and that was how you fell into their trap."

"I don't know." I said.

"Even if they want to lay off people, you shouldn't be included."

"Ah! It's hard to say, I have no backing. I have nothing at all."

"That's just it. Some people have only their backing and nothing else."

"Well, it's their good luck."

"Do you know what kind of person they want?" K'ou K'ai smiled. "Me, they want a person like me, the present me, who slips away to drink coffee during office hours. One day, when I get promoted, you'll see me lying in a comfortable sofa, with my legs stretched up on the desk. You wait and see. They want this kind of men."

"Maybe."

"Have you looked at the whole of the export department? You've never looked at it carefully. Who comes in on time? You. Who leaves the latest? You. My God! If I were the boss, I would also want to get rid of you. I have to get rid of you. You will climb upward quickly and one day you will climb on top of my head."

I thought he was being funny in choosing such an example. I don't know if I could ever climb up to that position. But it gave me pleasure even to think of it.

"What do you plan to do now?"

"Rest."

"Great. Rest."

"I want to forget all about this." I said.

"You must. I will help you to find another job."

"That's good."

"We have to keep in touch."

"We will."

"Do you need anything?"

"What?"

"Money."

I started to laugh. "I have money right here."

"Cheer up!"

"I know. Look at me." I imitated his gesture of spreading out his hands.

He stretched out his hands and grasped mine. All of a sudden, we remained silent. We did not know what to say. I saw K'ou K'ai biting his teeth. He often mentioned that he had cavities and when they hurt him, he had to bite his teeth. He looked funny when he bit his teeth. He looked as if someone had hit him hard with a fist. We held hands tightly.

"Don't come to see me in the company," he said. "Don't come to that damn place. Get away from it the farther the better. Write to me or I'll go and visit you. Remember."

"I'll remember. Are you going to go on like this?"

"It's hard to say, it's not my world. It's somebody else's. Do you understand? It's somebody else's world."

"I understand."

"My world will come later. I shall search for it myself. Not right now. After three or five or ten years when I'm qualified to stretch my legs on the desk, then I'll try all over again."

"I believe we'll be very happy when that time comes."

We left the buffet restaurant in the basement and we were out under the sun again. Tomorrow might still be a fine day. Who knows? We still have half of today left. We walked toward the parking lot and we parted. We shook hands again and again. I told K'ou K'ai to say good-bye to everybody. After all, they were my colleagues.

After we parted, I looked at my watch and it was already past two o'clock. I went directly to the post office. It did not take long for it was very near. The woman employee there seemed to recognize me for she asked me if I wanted to remit money home again. I smiled at her and she handed me the remittance form and a piece of note paper so that I could write a note to my mother. I wrote the following note:

> Mamma,
>
> I am fine. I am remitting you a thousand NT dollars. Surprised? I'll get a raise very soon. Jill is also very well. We send our love and we are sorry for not having written for so long. I am busy with work here, but they are all very good to me. So you need not worry about me.
>
> Your son.

186.208 The Story Of A Chinese Acrobat\fn{by Yishujia (1948-)} Jinan, Shandong Province, China (F) 4

"I can only remember that my paternal great-grandfather's family was from Hongsong Village in Zhouping County, in Shandong. My great-grandfather died young, he was just fifty, and my great-grandmother lost her sight through illness, but she raised my grandfather and a great-aunt without remarrying. In those days widows remained faithful to their dead husbands by never remarrying. The fulfilment of duty was the only way their children could hold their heads up around other people.

"The impression I got when I was small was that my great-uncle had been to college, and that was why the whole family got an education. My great-uncle was a schoolteacher. My great-grandmother was supporting the family at that time; it was really hard for her. Once my great-uncle started teaching, he took all the boys in the family with him to Jinan to go to school: my great-aunt's boys, my father and uncles from our family. In our extended family, all the males in my father's generation went to school.

"I was seven.\fn{When she went to primary school} My school was the best in Jinan—my great-uncle taught there. There were forty or fifty children in my class, a lot more boys than girls.

"In those days our family owned a big, rambling house; we had livestock too, and hired hands to work our land. Just before Liberation, my great-uncle sold a lot of the family property. My great-grandmother was livid, she beat and cursed him, but later on she found out that he had been quite far-sighted: because our family property had all been sold, when the government determined class status after Liberation we were classified as middle peasants, otherwise we would have been classed as landlords and attacked. It wasn't just a question of a few houses, it was life and death.

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"I've heard the old people say that the Koumintang\fn{The Chinese Nationalists} were very harsh when they first came to power—they shot people dead in Nanjing, and called it "strict social cleansing". And afterwards our Communist Party used the same word and did similar things. A lot of women who had been prostitutes before 1949 were persecuted to death.

"My father was branded an active counterrevolutionary just because of a little thing. When my father left home to go to school in Jinan, he became friendly with an underground member of the Party. He couldn't tell my father that he was a Party member, but he did tell him:

"'If a time comes when you don't see me, don't hang around, go back home.'

"But my father forgot. Afterwards the Eighth Route Army came to Jinan, they had the city surrounded, he couldn't get out, but he had to eat. At that time the Koumintang had set up a *San Qing Tuan*—the Three Youth League—anyone who joined up would have work to do and food to eat. So, many young people in Jinan whose families didn't have a lot of money joined that society.

"He was just a *naïve* student in those days, he didn't understand politics, he joined because he was afraid he would starve. Jinan was liberated after three months, but my father suffered a lifetime of bitterness because of

those three months in which he didn't go hungry. He hadn't done anything bad, he couldn't shoot a gun or fight, he was an architecture student, but just because of that *San Qing Tuan*, he became a "wicked man" who could never say anything right. To this day I don't know what exactly the *San Qing Tuan* was, I've no idea what was so terrible about it. Even if it was a political organisation, it was all over in just three months, it was disbanded as soon as the city was liberated. My father really regretted it; if he'd just remembered what that man had told him, that if he couldn't see him he should leave, then he'd have been fine.

"Then he got in trouble again just after Liberation, when they were building the big City Government building. He was the project supervisor, checking that the work was carried out according to the blueprint, but he discovered that the stairs to the basement had been designed without a handrail, and the waterproofing hadn't been designed to deal with subsidence, so he reported it to his superiors, requesting modifications. But the leaders at that time were peasant cadres who'd fought their way to Jinan. They didn't understand; all they cared about was "more, better, faster, cheaper" and making revolution.

"My father asked them to stop work to put things right, but that was delaying the revolutionary task, out of the question! Then in the final inspection, a higher-ranking cadre who'd come to sign off the project almost slipped and fell into the cellar—and that staircase without a railing became evidence of my father's crime, a plot to injure revolutionary cadres. On top of that, leaks soon began to appear in the waterproofing, and that was deliberate sabotage! Nobody dared to testify on behalf of a counterrevolutionary in those days, so they arrested my father!

"I'll never forget that day. All these policemen came into our home, and there were more standing in the courtyard. My father didn't say a word, they just took him away, and I just didn't have a clue why. My mother didn't know the reason either, because my father had never discussed work matters with her. At that time everyone was very particular about "organisational discipline." It was forbidden to discuss work between husband and wife or family members.

"Some\fn{Of her neighbors} were pretty good,\fn{About her father's arrest} and still had dealings with us, but whenever there was the least sign of trouble I'd get called a jailbird's brat.\fn{"How long was your father detained?"} Five years, I suppose, though he was sentenced to twenty. My father never accepted it, he appealed, and finally the high-ups sent someone down to examine the scene of the crime and recheck the plans. In the end he was rehabilitated.

"She\fn{Her mother} was a gatekeeper at a neighbourhood-run chemical factory; later on she did embroidery. We only had twelve *yuan* a month for a family of five, for food, clothes and everything else. It was very hard. My mother had no choice—once I'd left home to work there was one burden less on the family. I know for certain that my mother had a very hard time, but she was a strong woman, she never talked about it. Whenever I talk about my mother I feel so awful, she suffered so much! She suffered all her life, and she died early too.

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"At the very beginning I didn't perform, I just had lessons and practised my acrobatic skills—the waist, legs and the crown of the head are very important in Chinese acrobatics. I got up very early every day; in the morning after breakfast we had professional practice and lessons; sometimes in the afternoon we had school, or sometimes the school lessons were in the evening.

"In those days we could never get enough sleep, everyone was constantly nodding off—one time in somersaulting class I turned a few somersaults and then went to sleep on the spot. The first time I performed I was thirteen. It was the dance *Catching Butterflies*—I can still remember it. I turned three somersaults and very nearly somersaulted myself off the stage. In those days it was very dark at the bottom of the stage—once the stage lights were on you couldn't see anything below the stage.

"We mostly went up into the mountains and to the countryside. The peasants had no cultural activity at all from one year's end to the next, and they loved acrobatics, which you could understand whether you'd been to school or not, so just about every family came to watch, lots and lots of people. There was no electric light in the countryside in those days, we used big hanging hurricane lamps to light the performances we held to bring cultural entertainment to the peasants, and to promote the Party's policies.

"Sometimes we'd move on very quickly; we'd put on two shows and then leave, then another two shows and off again. All our things went in two big horse-drawn carts, sometimes we even slept on the carts—from time to time there'd be a thump, and that would be someone falling to the ground. We often slept on the ground; if we did get a room there'd be no windows, you'd sleep over here, and over there the worms would be wriggling in and out.

"After a while conditions improved a bit—we got a tractor, later on it was trucks, ferries and trains, and in the 1980s, after the Reform and Opening, we even got to take a plane. When we retired we joked that we Chinese

acrobats had been on everything except submarines and the *Shenzhou VI*.\fn{The name of the second Chinese human space-flight (October 12, 2005), from the Jiuquan Satellite Launch Center in the Gobi Desert} Ha!

"In the countryside we used the threshing grounds.\fn{To perform on} Some of those big threshing grounds had an earth platform, others didn't. The countryside was very poor, but you still used to get people who went there to sing traditional opera, trading and singing opera at the same time—I think it was a bit like going to market.\fn{"Hardly ideal conditions for a performance!"}

"Too right! Take juggling stools with your feet: if there happened to be a strong wind, the stool would be blown to one side with one gust, and then, *whoosh*, it would turn over onto the other side, it was really difficult! If you were juggling umbrellas with your feet, *whoosh*, one puff of wind and you couldn't find your umbrella at all!

"You'd have to have another go. If you got it right the second time there'd be clapping from the floor, otherwise they'd curse you for a clumsy fool—peasants are very down to earth, you know.

"At that time I only knew to follow the troupe everywhere it went, I didn't feel anything really. It wasn't that comfortable in winter. I've always had pains in the joints on this leg, and why? It's from one year when it was snowing heavily outside, there was only a grass curtain at the window, we were all very tired, we just went to sleep wherever we fell, huddled in pairs for warmth. One quilt couldn't cover four legs, so our legs stuck out, and my leg got frozen; it itched and hurt like mad, and now I'm old it gives me trouble.

"We brought our own kitchen along with us, pots, bowls, ladles, oil, salt, soy sauce and vinegar, the lot, and we bought whatever vegetables they had locally.

"There were no rich places in those days. Shangqiu in Henan would have been the poorest. The wife of one of the troupe's members lived in Shangqiu, her children never had a chance to eat any meat, or to buy fish. The winters were bitterly cold, and for New Year she'd make the children grope for small fish in the ditches, and their New Year feast would be the whole family clustered around a pot of simple fish soup.

[The circuit tours went on] "right up to the Cultural Revolution. Before that we went to the countryside at fixed times every year to put on shows for the peasants, but after the start of the Cultural Revolution we slowly stopped going to the countryside, and stuck to doing revolutionary performances in the city. In any case, our wages from the state were the same wherever we were—I got 29.5 yuan every month for ten years, which nowadays is barely enough for a cheap family meal out!

[Revolutionary opera] "was ludicrous really, we were all idiots. We acted out battles, or things like "catching a spy", or taking American soldiers prisoner, that kind of revolutionary stuff, all fighting and killing. Some of the acrobats had good voices, so they'd sing a revolutionary song while making showy gestures, but I couldn't sing. Sometimes we did fancy work with staves, and that was the PLA fighting a battle. And tumbling? Boys would do the big somersaults, girls would do the fill-in parts in the background, cheering "Ten thousand years of long life to Mao Tse-tung!"

"Basically, all the acrobatic skill was lost. When we went to the army units to show our support, we'd perform *In Praise of Men He*, because we wanted to stick to the revolutionary model. This Men He was a hero of the Liberation, he died a hero's death to help the common people. Those of us who were playing the common people all had to wear Red Guard armbands. Nobody dared to have an opinion in those days, we just knew we had to go along with the revolutionary image. It was the Cultural Revolution, you couldn't do anything else. And we really felt that national costume was old, we should smash the old and embrace the new, so we ought to wear something new. It's no different from young people these days who wear those rubbishy clothes to keep up with the fashion; at the time that's what we thought.

"Originally it was pure skill and art. During the Cultural Revolution it was just revolutionary gestures, and you had to force words into the acrobatic numbers, to promote Mao Tse-tung Thought. Yes, it was all talk. The movements didn't matter, the important part was shouting slogans and making revolutionary gestures.

"For example, when I was doing fancy work with a stave, after I'd completed a set, I'd say, 'Revolution is not a crime, rebellion is just!', before I went on to the next part. Thinking about it now, it was truly ridiculous. At that time everyone was a lunatic, some were genuinely crazy, some pretending to be crazy; if you weren't crazy you didn't come up to the demands of politics, or match the current ideology.

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"Some people say that acrobatics is a catch-all designation for every kind of art that involves the human body surpassing its normal limits. Actually that's inaccurate. Acrobatics includes art, animal training, farce, vocal skills (including animal impressions and funny voices, puppet theatre, shadow plays and the like), and many other different types and varieties of strange techniques and skills, like sword-swallowing, fire-eating, cutting people or horses into pieces, everything of that kind. For this reason, the ancients also referred to acrobatics as "Strange

Theatre", the "Hundred Acts" and "Juggling Theatre".

"Compared with the acrobatics of other countries, Chinese acrobatics has its own special features: we attach a lot of importance to the skills of the waist, legs and top of head; this is what the phrases "artistic acting and lively fighting" and "tumbling from Peking Opera, skills with the head from acrobatics" are referring to. Seeking stability in the midst of risk, seeking peace in the midst of movement, seeking strangeness in the midst of the ordinary to attain perfection; the special characteristics of this art are displayed most plainly in *gucai* juggling: the performer wears a simple long robe, but can produce a thousand marvellous things from it; its philosophy is creating being from nothingness, light and heavy side by side, paper-thin flowery umbrellas, coloured balls, all kicked up high to flutter, twist and float. .

"Chinese acrobatics is very adaptable: you can set up a stage and put on a show in squares, theatres, streets or hotel rooms, for as many as a hundred people or as few as one. All this is the unique charm of our acrobatics, and China is internationally acknowledged to be the best country in the world for acrobatics.

"My specialities were the diabolo, magic tricks and light and heavy foot juggling. Heavy foot juggling is juggling with stools, light foot juggling is with umbrellas. You could say my best skill was heavy foot juggling, that's the juggling with stools; after that comes "mountain country drums and gongs", which I invented, playing music with the hands and feet, the feet beat drums and the hands beat other drums, the feet play the music while the hands keep the beat.

"When I was young, I was at the top of a human pyramid, and they juggled me along with the stools; as I got older and heavier I moved lower down the pyramid; in the last decade or so I was the one juggling all the people and stools!

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"I can't remember how many performances I did in how many places, but I do remember clearly that in South America alone I was in over five hundred shows. Hardly any records have been preserved from the Cultural Revolution, and they only started keeping records on the arts in the nineties. I must say, it was tragic, the way all those cultural relics were burned; in the palaces of the Tang dynasty.\fn{618-907AD}

"Chinese acrobatics was as important as music and dance, there were said to be many records in the history books. After the Song and Yuan dynasties\fn{Tenth-fourteenth centuries AD} song, dance and music were less highly regarded, acrobatics gradually became one of the humble professions, a poor man's job. In those days, who would keep records about poor people? Apparently, our troupe didn't start keeping records until after the Liberation. It's a shame they were all burned in the Cultural Revolution, a sin and a shame.

"We went to Japan for the first time in 1981; after that we were flown all over the place: Pakistan, Japan, America, Sri Lanka … The Philippines. And then we stayed in Colombia for over a year, but we never performed in Europe.

"I had the strongest reactions towards Japan and America; the other countries were pretty much like us. In America, there was such a distance between their country and ours. The people there were more civilised. I'll give you a practical example: when you get on a public bus nobody pushes you, people form a queue without being told to. The cities were cleaner than ours at that time too—after two months there, the soles of your shoes would still be clean. Nowadays our cities are a lot better, some are even cleaner than theirs.

"In those days we knew that life in the West was better than here, but when some foreigners asked us "Does China have milk candy?"\fn{A carmel-like sweet, high in energy and milk protein} we were furious.

"'How could we not have milk candy? We've got everything you have!'

"Behind closed doors we all admitred that they were advanced and we were poor, but we couldn't bear for anybody else to say that Chinese people were bad, or that we were deprived. How can I put it? Dogs don't hate their homes for being poor.

"Some places aren't so good. In South America people used to swear at us. I was told they were joking, but I could see they looked down on us Chinese. They liked white people. We just concentrated on our performance, we didn't have a lot to do with other people, as soon as the show was over we just went back to our dormitories or the hotel.

"The Americans were very friendly. In Latin America, Colombia, we had one performance a day, and we did all our everyday things together in small groups. We went together to the supermarket to buy food, and we brought it back, cooked it and ate it together. We Chinese always stick together, wherever we are.

"The first time we went abroad in the 1980s, we all went together to the tailors to get our clothes made, we all had the same clothes, from the skin out. We all had the same suitcases as well. After the 1990s they issued us with money instead, 700 *yuan* per person.

"To tell the truth, after the 1980s the country just kept improving, and things got better and better for us in every aspect of our lives. In any case, I had already experienced the humiliation of being a counterrevolutionary's daughter, so I passed over all these political movements and the rest of it in silence.

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"Children now are cleverer than in my day. Back then we did whatever the teacher told us; with kids today, once the teacher has told them something, they'll think up a few ways to improve it on their own, and a lot of the time they improve on the teacher's own version. They're clever, but it's harder to teach them. We were too obedient, we didn't dare slack off. Children nowadays can be lazier than we were, so they're harder to teach.

"Iin those days teachers were just like your parents, they lectured you and beat you, but sometimes we'd spend our birthdays at the teacher's home, and get-togethers at the teacher's were a regular thing. Now relations berween people have changed; all we have to do is turn up to class on time. There are rules about how to teach, we have to write lesson plans for everything. It was different then. We made it up as we went along, there was always the possibility of something new.

"In the past, when we Chinese studied acrobatics, it was beaten into us with a stick. By the time I was a student we'd been liberated, the teacher didn't dare beat us too much, but we all believed that corporal punishment was useful for training. The time I remember most clearly is once when I was being lazy and couldn't turn a difficult kind of somersault, then one blow high on my bottom, and over I went—the teacher had given me a taste of "dough drop soup". That's a knotted rope, a tool for corporal punishment, we called it dough drop soup, a blow from that really hurt.

"We still give the students a taste if they're disobedient. Why? Sometimes they're just lazy if they won't practise till they get it right, isn't that just a waste of their youth and ambition? So if somebody isn't prepared to keep practising and complains about being tired, I'll give him a taste, and up he goes.

"Corporal punishment while practising your art is against the law? So wasting life and time isn't against the law? Young people nowadays talk about "enjoying life". How many children understand what the real enjoyment of human life is? If you have no skills for life, no success in your work, if you can't cook or do the housework, will you be able to "enjoy life"? It's enjoying other people's blood and sweat! *That's* what I call a crime!

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"I was very young when I left home, and my family was nothing to be proud of, not like other people's, so the acrobatic troupe was like a family to me. Not only were we teachers and colleagues together for over forty years, the troupe took responsibility for everything: the flat I lived in, the children's schooling, work, medical treatment, all aspects of our lives. Even though I'm retired now, it still feels like a family to me. From the 1950s to the 1980s in China, most city dwellers were part of a work unit. Apart from the tiny minority who changed jobs or moved to another place to be with their spouse, the people in a work unit would generally stay there for the rest of their life. And since education, accommodation, medical care and even the next generation's jobs were all dealt with by the work unit, that next generation tended to stay in the same place, and work in the same professional circles. This gave rise to serious problems, as small, closed groups started to emerge, who in time came almost to form a monopoly.

"I can't say much for sure about our troupe's history. I know our predecessor was the acrobatic artist Guo Shaoquan's Tianjin Magical Troupe, which had started out wandering the roads and they finished up in Jinan, where they decided to stay. Guo's children trained up a batch of students, and the troupe expanded. After the Liberation it was nationalised, and a lot of dross got mixed in then—they brought in Communist Party leaders, administrators and the like, even though they didn't know anything about acrobatics. The people who didn't understand anything were put in charge of the ones who did—isn't that typical of us Chinese? …

187.88 Autobiographical Statement\fn{by Sue Jean Lee Sutettinger (1948-)} Canton, China (F) 4

I had a lot of fun growing up in New York's Chinatown. I remember the fun of having friends close by, or playing on the sidewalks—hopscotch, handball, tag, roller skating, and going around the block to the candy store. I remember the fun things.

I was also aware, from a very young age, of the diversity in cultures that I encountered in school. I remember making very good friends with two Jewish girls. It was probably an odd sight to many, but the three of us did *Havah-Nagilah* on stage when I was in the fourth grade. I got to know their families pretty well, and remember tasting Jewish food. In that sense, it was very rich. It was a very Americanized environment.

When I was thirteen or fourteen, I hung around with one group called the Continentals, and in keeping with the times, the boys wore black leather jackets, and hung around on street corners being cool, with ducktail type hairdos, and tight black pants. This was around 1963. There was almost a uniform of what the girls and guys who were a part of that social gang wore. Very often, girls would wear white shirts with black shorts. But I remember the white blouses with the initials on them. And we had our dances. The Continental group was a mixture of first, second and third generation Chinese teenagers, many of whom attended the Chinese school. And then there were other teenage groups, whose social life was centered around a church.

Our idea of rebelliousness was hanging around street corners. Because we were the Continentals we would go around finding Lincoln Continentals and try to rip the little Continental symbols off the cars. That was the time of the movie, *West Side Story*, where teenage gang rivalry was depicted.

These were gangs, but not as we know of them today—with access to guns, or extortion. These were social gangs much like the ones in *West Side Story.* They carried switchblades or chains—but that was as far as they would go in terms of weapons. And every now and then they would get into scuffies with Italian gangs, each maintaining dominion over their neighborhood block. And it was cool for us to be a part of that. And it was cool for the girls to watch how the guys would get hurt in those things.

I look back at my teenage years and think now that I was involved in some pretty off-the-wall stuff, being part of these gangs. And hearing the elders in Chinatown give us a bad name, and at the same time knowing we didn't do anything wrong—we just looked threatening because we hung around and shared that sense of rebelliousness —of wanting to be independent, grow up, and have an identity. My parents didn't know I was in a gang. They were very strict, and if we went to a party, often it was without the knowledge of my parents. We'd say we were going to the movies, and then we'd go to a party. At these parties, we'd do the twist, the cha-cha, the lindy, or jitterbug as it's called, and the Continental Walk.

There were all-Chinese parties, and strictly limited to groups we hung out with. The extended group had forty to fifty people. Dating was certainly not the young man asking shyly whether I would go someplace like a movie or dinner, then having him show up at my door with a corsage or something, and being nervous about talking to my parents. The dating that we saw on *Father Knows Best* was not the kind of dating experience I had. We didn't really date, one on one. We went out in groups to the bowling alley, ice skating, or to the movies. Then you paired off with someone. I don't remember being asked unless there was a dance or the movies.

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I remember being very insistent about going to Chinese school because my two older sisters went, and I wanted to go too. But I didn't start first grade Chinese school until I was two years ahead of that grade in American school. That was common. You often found older children in the lower grades because of ability. It was just the way the school was set up. We were all there, learning Chinese, memorizing the same lessons, and we were all competing for the same thing.

But the social life was different. And the friends I eventually chose to develop a social life with were mostly second or third generation Chinese Americans. There was still that sense of competition, and the ones you competed with were the immigrants.

School was from five to seven o'clock, five days a week. In my third year I started a Mandarin club because I was very interested in the dialect. I got our teacher to agree. Our Mandarin club would meet at four fifteen so that meant school started much earlier.

Chinese school was comprehensive. We learned history, science, social studies (but from a Chinese perspective), geography about China, and in some cases, the world. Very seldom would I mix the lessons from Chinese school with American school. They were two distinct worlds. With only two hours a day, what we did was very selective. We learned composition; we learned how to write. The whole method of teaching was so different from American school. There was a lot of memorization.

And penmanship, of course, was using the brush. It was learning how to write Chinese characters, with ink and brush. A very important part of that schooling was poetry.

The Chinese school also had a tradition of a drum and bugle corps. I was a baton twirler. And I was in it for four or five years.

All this time that this was going on, it never dawned on me to think about how much out of the mainstream of society we were. It wasn't until I left Chinatown that I realized what a homogenous community Chinatown really was. What a tight, closed environment we lived in. We interacted with the rest of the city only as far as our activities took us. But in terms of sufficiencies, such as food and social activities, it was very contained.

I can look back at my teenage years and see that it wasn't so different from other teenagers in other culture groups. It always amazes me how much of a New Yorker I was in terms of the environment. We had our dances, played our 45 records, had little transistor radios we played, and hung out on corners. Friends gathered after school at the local malt shop and had egg creams and french fries. These were all Chinese kids. Because the schools I went to were so close to the Chinese community, many of the students who went to the schools were Chinese, so invariably, I ended up hanging around with Chinese teenagers.

In my early teens, my parents did not think it was appropriate for us to be seen with guys. So I just didn't tell them. The activities I would do with a guy would be done in a group setting. So there was no need for me to tell my parents I'm going with so and so, because I'd meet up with a group anyway. When my parents said to me, you're too young to be dating, I assumed they meant Chinese guys. There wasn't even a race issue in that, because it was understood that I would eventually end up with a Chinese. They certainly didn't have to warn me not to date Caucasians.

At that point in my life, it never occurred to me to date anyone but Chinese because of the environment I grew up in. The school I went to had Italians, blacks, Jews, Puerto Ricans, whites—it was a pretty good mixture. But there was a sense of difference. I got along with people very well in school. I had some very good Italian friends —males and females—but it never occurred to me to date them. Or if I looked for cute guys, I'd be attracted to the Chinese ones and not the Caucasians.

Although by the time I got to college, I could say my horizons broadened a bit, and I could say there were non-Chinese guys who were cute. You found them attractive, but not to the point where you'd say, "Oh gosh, I wish he would call me up" or something. Again, I was looking for the Chinese or the Oriental guys.

I grew up in a very sheltered environment in Chinatown, and there wasn't the need to look beyond. There were plenty of guys around to date, and enough to have crushes on. And there were some in the school environment as well.

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My father was in several businesses. He owned an import-export trading company, and for a while he worked in a Chinese butcher shop owned by some relatives. He also had his own business of producing monosodium glutamate which he sold to restaurants. And then he started one of the first suburban Chinese restaurants in New Jersey in the 1950s.

My mother, because she did not speak any English, found work in Chinatown in a sewing factory. But both of them were pursuing ways of supporting a family that were not in line with their original interests. They were both college-educated people who had to essentially give up careers in their fields of interest to come to the States.

We were a poor family, and when I look back at it now I can see that. There were six of us living in a three-room flat. There were two small bedrooms and one room in the middle which had a sink and bathtub in it. We had to draw a curtain around us every time we washed. The bathroom was in the hall and we shared it with other families. This living arrangement was supplemented by our father's store, which was where we had our kitchen and cooked our meals. In the back of the store was a hallway which we used as a kitchen.

There was a living area in the back of this storefront and we spent most of our time there, so all we really did in the three-room apartment was sleep. My youngest sister and I slept in the same room as my parents and my two older sisters slept in a tiny bedroom of their own. As we grew up, there were times when the four of us would sleep in one bedroom. We were poor by middle class standards, but at that time the families around us were living in the same situation. I never felt spiritually poor.

I felt the difference when I visited beautiful homes and houses in suburban areas. When my sister and I went away for these summer programs sponsored by inner-city churches that matched up city children with families in Connecticut, I remember visiting a family for two weeks, and living for the first time in my life, in a single family house with a big yard and a big kitchen. The little girl who was my age had a huge bedroom of her own, that was almost larger than the three room apartment that we lived in. I became aware of the difference in living standards in a situation like that. But I never really felt that I was poor.

In looking back at the way my grandparents lived, I would say it was very poor. They lived in a garage that was in a city alley. It was a structure that was behind a building in Washington D.C.'s Chinatown that my grandfather was responsible for. And being a very humble man, my grandfather didn't see the need for a more comfortable environment. It was comfortable for him, so that was what he and his wife, my grandmother, would make do with.

There was a bedroom in the upstairs portion of the garage with a little kerosene heater. And downstairs was a concrete floor of the garage. It was not covered with anything—just bare cement. He lived this way for over forty

years. About a third of the downstairs was taken up with storage of very old things—like wood and glass. There was a junk pile stored in the garage and they lived in the other half of it. They set up a little living area of benches made out of wood and a wooden platform that my grandmother could lie down on. In the comer there was a two burner gas stove, that probably wouldn't meet anybody's fire codes these days. And they had a small old ice box. There was running water that came out of a pipe sticking out of the floor. There was a commode, but it was not one that you could flush. You had to pour water down there every time you used the bathroom.

And that was it. If we took a bath, we had to use a tin bathtub. There wasn't any hot water, so we had to boil it. And there was no drain, so we would have to carry it and dump it down the toilet, or down a drain in the alley. And the running water from the pipe had to be caught by a tin bucket that rested on a cut off stool. So if you were going to wash your hand you had to wash it over the bucket, and then you dumped the water into the commode.

My grandparents lived this way until my grandfather gave up his restaurant and retired in the mid-1960s. Then he moved to New York to be with us.

We cared for family elders, respected them made them a part of our lives. I remember when my grandmother was still alive. There was a time when we had to face a decision of either putting my grandmother in a nursing home or keeping her at home. And it was pretty much unanimous, as difficult a woman as she was, she should stay at home, even in her handicapped state after her stroke.

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I grew up in a very traditional family setting. I went to Chinese movies just about every week with my parents. As a first generation Chinese, I never even ventured a thought of marrying anyone but a Chinese. So when my older sister married a non-Chinese, I was very, very upset. I was disappointed in her and felt betrayed.

What changed my world completely was going away to a small college in Vermont to study Chinese in the end of my sophomore year. I had just been accepted to Princeton University for a special program and a summer of intensive Chinese at Middlebury College in Vermont was part of that.

For the first eight weeks I knew nothing but the study hall, dorm, eating hall and language lab. That was my world in Middlebury. I kind of isolated myself from some of the students, and maybe in away, I was reluctant to deal with it and rejected that kind of environment because it was so foreign to me. There were some Chinese Americans there—a few who were second or third generation. But the rest of the students studying Chinese were not Chinese. They were students from all over the country .

I was struck by the number of non-Chinese people who spoke the language very well and were studying the Chinese culture. They were studying history to an extent of being much more knowledgeable culturally of my heritage than my peers in Chinatown. I mean, to see a lecturer who acted more Chinese in terms of his mannerism and the way he spoke than some of my friends—when he was in fact Caucasian—was mind boggling. It was a shock. I was immensely impressed, and admired that. It was something that never occurred to me as being possible. I also met a Caucasian professor at Princeton, who had the grace, if you will, of a Chinese gentleman. He had more grace than many of the Chinese men I have come across. The image of a Chinese scholar, of a Chinese gentleman that we grow up seeing in the movies—soft-spoken, very intellectual, who knew the social nuances of a Chinese setting, in terms of what to say, how to act, how to respond, patience—this man embodied much of that. He was married to a Chinese woman. I am sure the way he developed was very much affected by his marriage to this woman. If I closed my eyes, I would have seen someone who was Chinese.

So it was like all different subcultures of this country converging on this little school. That was the first time for instance, I encountered a Californian—the free spirit of a Californian—who would take off on his Porche up the mountains of Vermont. You couldn't be in an environment like that without being affected by what was going on around you.

And at the end of the eight weeks, I just broke down. I became more social. I was finally able to interact with them on their level, a level that was comfortable with me. It was like the layer of sheltered life I had led in Chinatown just slipped away. It took eight weeks, but I was finally comfortable. I don't know if it was purely a race issue, or if it was exposure to different social groups.

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I met my husband there that summer. He's the first of five generations not to carry on the family business. They had always lived in Wisconsin. He works for the government. He was one of the brighter students at Middlebury who really picked up on the language, and showed a real appreciation for the culture and history. I was very impressed.

I couldn't have felt more loved from my first visit to meet his family. They were warm, loving, and they were not at all prejudiced against me. Or if they were, they certainly didn't show it. They had some concerns as to why

their son was dating a Chinese girl before they met me. But they thought that was part of the weird things he was doing in terms of studying Chinese politics. But once I got there, I felt very much at home. And they were very much in favor of the wedding.

My family was the complete opposite. My oldest sister married someone who was not Chinese and was the first in the family to do it. My father was very much against her marriage and tried to break them up any way he could. And in the end, when he couldn't he did not speak to them for a long time.

In my case, I was the second one to get married. He was so disappointed, hurt and maybe disgusted at the idea that this could repeat itself, that he didn't talk to me for a good six months before the wedding. So instead of doing everything he could to break us up, he just ignored me.

It was something I had expected. I had to consider that marriage very carefully because I knew all that I was giving up in terms of relationships with my family. So I was prepared for it, and in away, respected his decision not to support me, and not to come to my wedding.

In the end, about two days before I got married, my father and I had a long talk, perhaps worked out a mutual understanding, a respect for each other's decision, and things were fine after that. Now my relationship with my family is good. I often marvel at how well my husband and my father can communicate—even in Chinese.

My children, unfortunately, do not speak Chinese. Language is very important to me. It would be very nice if they could. Unfortunately I don't offer them the environment where they can learn it and speak it on a regular basis to retain it. And when they were little I would teach them a couple of Chinese words, and it was confusing—more confusing than helpful. Even when we went to Hong Kong and lived for two years, it was still very difficult for them to learn, again because the kids they interacted with were not Chinese.

But eventually I would like for them to make that decision on their own. I would encourage it. I don't go out of my way to force them or make them go to a Chinese school right now. But I hope that they will recognize the rich heritage that they come from and will eventually consider learning Chinese. But I want it to come from them. I don't want to force it.

I've always seen myself as a Chinese—even today. Though there are times I recognize how Chinese American I really am. The music, the culture, the issues of the time, I can relate to them. So in looking back to the sixties to the things I enjoyed doing and the things that affected me, a lot of us in the States shared that. And I think that is very distinctly American, rather than Chinese.

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My family is traditional in attitudes about how we were raised. We have a respect for our elders, and a very strong sense of identity in terms of heritage. We were encouraged to learn more and be sensitive to our history, where we came from, our people.

Whenever I visit my mother during a Chinese holiday and she has the special food and settings out to honor our ancestors, I always light some incense, kowtow several times and kneel before pictures of my ancestors. In my parents' living room, my dad has pictures of my grandparents and great grandparents. It's set up against the wall, and sometimes oranges and flowers are placed there on special occasions. My parents, who are both in their seventies, still journey twice a year from New Jersey to Washington D.C., to pay respect to my grandparents at the grave.

It's become a way for my family to get together. We would bring a chicken—special ordered because it must have a head and feet—roast pork, and a slice of pork fat and some sweet cakes to the cemetery. Then there are oranges and apples.

First we trim the grass around the grave markers, clean them off with water, then we place flowers and the food, and light candles and incense by the graves, offer them the food and then pour three tea cups of Johnny Walker Red on the ground. The food and whiskey is symbolic; it is our way of offering them a special meal each year to honor and remember them, so they won't go hungry. Then we burn paper money, lots of it—gold-sheeted, and even fake bills, so they will have money to spend. Then there are color sheets of paper which symbolize clothing. We burn that too. It's all done in a metal container. And we bring along a cassette of Chinese music which we play, so that my grandparents can enjoy the music while they are eating.

We do this every year, and it is a part of what my family feels is our obligation to our ancestors.

192.163 Excerpt from Wild Cat: Stories Of The Cultural Revolution: **"The Typewriter"**\fn{by Jia-lin Peng (1948-)} Willow Wood Town, "less than one hundred kilometers" from Liuzhou City, Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region*, China (M) 11

There's nothing eerie-looking about it—a portable Royal, at least forty years old and with two keys, A and E, blurred.*\fn{This is not the author's birthplace, which remains a mystery: it is where he had been teaching school upon completion of a course at a teacher's training college. All I know about his vital statistics is his birth year and that he was born somewhere in China:H}

It once belonged to my cousin, Mei-yin. She was a bookkeeper, and had suffered attacks of nerves. Her husband, Old Huang, a factory director, feared that her job was hurting her health, and hastily sought an easier one for her. One of his official friends consented to create a typist's position for her in the Foreign Trade Company of the city, provided that she could type. The workload would be very light, the friend promised, even a novice could finish one day's job in two or three hours. Old Huang bought a typewriter from a second-hand shop in Shanghai so that his wife could learn to type at home.

When my cousin was about to start her new job, the Cultural Revolution broke out. Some revolutionary rebels who were Old Huang's subordinates accused him of taking the capitalist road. As a matter of routine, they searched the couple's residence, and took away the typewriter. Like most people in this remote border province, who certainly had never seen an English typewriter, they might not have been able to tell the difference between it and a radio transmitter, such as one might see in a post office. More likely though, the rebels just needed a pretext to take over Old Huang's position. At any rate, they called it a radio transmitter, and accused my cousin and her husband of being secret agents in the service of American Imperialism. They confiscated the typewriter and locked the couple up in a "cowshed"—a kind of makeshift prison. My cousin was tortured to the point of insanity. As a reactionary, she was rejected by all insane asylums, which claimed they only served revolutionaries. Therefore she had to be cared for at home by her elderly mother. Meanwhile her husband remained in the cowshed.

One night, while her mother was sleeping, my cousin jumped from their fourth story window and smashed her skull on the pavement below.

Some months later, as it happened, the revolutionary rebels "liberated" Old Huang, classifying him among the revolutionary cadres. They returned the typewriter to him.

His mother-in-law, my aunt, was a superstitious housewife. Believing that "this tricky machine of foreign devils" was the demon who killed her daughter, she insisted on destroying it. While Old Huang didn't believe in demons, he did not want to keep a typewriter which reminded him of his wife's tragic death. So he gave it to me when I happened to visit them.

I'd always dreamed of having a typewriter. Though I had studied in the English department at teachers' college, I'd hardly had the chance to touch a typewriter there. After graduation I became a teacher at a commune middle school, where a typewriter was totally out of the question. Therefore, though I knew it might get me into trouble, I accepted the gift. I carried the machine back to my school in secret, wrapped it in my winter clothes within a locked suitcase, and stashed the case beneath my bed.

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Due to the Cultural Revolution, our school had not held classes for more than a year now. And it seemed there would be no end to the revolution. In our province, all the mass organizations had divided into two factions—the Red Flags and the Red Stars. Both factions declared their loyalty to the great leader Chairman Mao Tse-tung. Yet, they had countless quarrels with each other.

For instance, the Red Flags supported the former provincial Party Secretary as chairman of the Provincial Revolutionary Committee which was soon to be established, but the Red Stars accused him of being a capitalist—roader, and supported the former governor of the province. At first the two factions fought with pens and tongues-in what was known as *wendou* (verbal struggle). Then they fought with fists, swords and spears, and finally with rifles, machine-guns, dynamite and mortars. People invented a new word, *wudou* (violent struggle), to name this phenomenon. At our school, most teachers and students belonged to the Red Star Faction; but in our commune, as in the whole province, the overwhelming majority were Red Flags. In our commune there were seldom violent confrontations between the two factions. Even so, after the *wudou* broke out elsewhere, a few local Red Star activists mysteriously disappeared, while most of the others fled. Now there remained behind only two persons who had ever been Red Stars.

I was one of them.

Not that I didn't fear death. I stayed only because I believed the commune was safer than anywhere else I could go. I had arrived at the commune from teachers' college only a few months before the Cultural Revolution began, and I had no political ambitions at all. So I didn't have any enemies among my colleagues. Being a mild-tempered man, I had never been harsh to students. Since the very start of the Cultural Revolution, I had never

done anyone any harm, nor had anyone ever done harm to me. I had joined the Red Star Faction, but only in name, because most of my colleagues at the school were also members. And after two months I quit.

I secretly attributed my quitting to having studied Chairman Mao's works. In those years, if anybody did anything good, certainly in public, he or she would claim it was due to Mao Tse-tung Thought. For example, a young country doctor once successfully removed a huge tumor from an old woman's abdomen. He declared it was Mao Tse-tung Thought that had bestowed upon him the courage and skill to perform the surgery; and the patient said it was the Chairman Mao's quotations read to her that had given her the vitality to endure the operation.

I wasn't sure whether my quitting was good or not, but I did have to admit it was due to studying the supreme instruction—Chairman Mao's words. I was suddenly enlightened one day while reading over this quotation:

> A revolution is not a dinner party … it cannot be so refined, so leisurely and gentle, so temperate, kind, courteous, restrained and magnanimous. A revolution is an insurrection, an act of violence …\fn{The full quotation in which this excerpt is embedded, is quoted below. From the author's statement above, it is clearly taken from the little red book:H}

> A revolution is not a dinner party, or writing an essay, or painting a picture, or doing embroidery; it cannot be so refined, so leisurely and gentle, so temperate, kind, courteous, restrained and magnanimous. A revolution is an insurrection, an act of violence by which one class overthrows another.\fn{This, however, is but a tiny fragment of a long treatise which Mao Tse-tung wrote in March, 1927, entitled "Report on anInvestigation of the Peasant Amovement in Hunan," where it occurs in the following subsection entitled, "The Question of 'Going Too Far.'":H}

> Then there is another section of people who say, "Yes, peasant associations are necessary, but they are going rather too far." This is the opinion of the middle-of-the-roaders. But what is the actual situation? True, the peasants are in a sense "unruly" in the countryside. Supreme in authority, the peasant association allows the landlord no say and sweeps away his prestige. This amounts to striking the landlord down to the dust and keeping him there. The peasants threaten, "We will put you in the other register!" They fine the local tyrants and evil gentry, they demand contributions from them, and they smash their sedan-chairs. People swarm into the houses of local tyrants and evil gentry who are against the peasant association, slaughter their pigs and consume their grain. They even loll for a minute or two on the ivory-inlaid beds belonging to the young ladies in the households of the local tyrants and evil gentry. At the slightest provocation they make arrests, crown the arrested with tall paper hats, and parade them through the villages, saying, "You dirty landlords, now you know who we are!" Doing whatever they like and turning everything upside down, they have created a kind of terror in the countryside. This is what some people call "going too far", or "exceeding the proper limits in righting a wrong", or "really too much". Such talk may seem plausible, but in fact it is wrong. First, the local tyrants, evil gentry and lawless landlords have themselves driven the peasants to this. For ages they have used their power to tyrannize over the peasants and trample them underfoot; that is why the peasants have reacted so strongly. The most violent revolts and the most serious disorders have invariably occurred in places where the local tyrants, evil gentry and lawless landlords perpetrated the worst outrages. The peasants are clear-sighted. Who is bad and who is not, who is the worst and who is not quite so vicious, who deserves severe punishment and who deserves to be let off lightly —the peasants keep clear accounts, and very seldom has the punishment exceeded the crime. Secondly, a revolution is not a dinner party, or writing an essay, or painting a picture, or doing embroidery; it cannot be so refined, so leisurely and gentle, so temperate, kind, courteous, restrained and magnanimous. A revolution is an insurrection, an act of violence by which one class overthrows another. A rural revolution is a revolution by which the peasantry overthrows the power of the feudal landlord class. Without using the greatest force, the peasants cannot possibly overthrow the deep-rooted authority of the landlords which has lasted for thousands of years. The rural areas need a mighty revolutionary upsurge, for it alone can rouse the people in their millions to become a powerful force. All the actions mentioned here which have been labelled as "going too far" flow from the power of the peasants, which has been called forth by the mighty revolutionary upsurge in the countryside. It was highly necessary for such things to be done in the second period of the peasant movement, the period of revolutionary action. In this period it was necessary to establish the absolute authority of the peasants. It was necessary to forbid malicious criticism of the peasant associations. It was necessary to overthrow the whole authority of the gentry, to strike them to the ground and keep them there. There is revolutionary significance in all the actions which were labelled as "going too far" in this period. To put it bluntly, it is necessary to create terror for a while in every rural area, or otherwise it would be impossible to suppress the activities of the counter-revolutionaries in the countryside or overthrow the authority of the gentry. Proper limits have to be exceeded in order to right a wrong, or else the wrong cannot be righted. Those who talk about the peasants "going too far" seem at first sight to be different from those who say "It's terrible!" as mentioned earlier, but in essence they proceed from the same standpoint and likewise voice a landlord theory that upholds the interests of the privileged classes. Since this theory impedes the rise of the peasant movement and so disrupts the revolution, we must firmly oppose it.\fn{Selected Works of Mao Tse-tung, vol. I, pp. 27-29. So has our world become compartmentalized:H}

If a faction, no matter whether Red Flag or Red Star, was defeated in the revolution, the victors should not treat them like guests at a dinner party. I didn't want to be treated or treat others violently, so I quit the Red Star Faction and became a nonfaction-person. In the light of Chairman Mao's works, I guessed that middle-of-the-

roaders would always be the people whom the revolutionaries would try to win over. Therefore while the winners in the revolution might not award a medal to a middle element, it was unlikely that they would touch him.

I had other reasons to feel safe staying in the commune. I was somewhat useful to the Red Flags. Within the ranks of our commune, I could call myself a calligrapher and painter. Now and then, the Red Flags would ask me to write slogans or paint pictures, mainly portraits of Chairman Mao. My works appeared on the walls all over little Willow Wood Town, in which the commune government, as well as our school, were located.

Of course, I was not so naive as to think my safety was guaranteed. But I had one more thing in my favor—a sort of "political umbrella". The head of the Red Flags of the commune, Liao Zhi-gao, was a fan of the board game known as *weiqi* or *go*. But among the twenty thousand residents in the commune, there were only two or three other persons who played this game. I was one of them. Liao and I played together often, so we came to know each other quite well. You could even say we became friends. Now and then, we would have a chat, even a drink together. Needless to say, he tried to persuade me to join his faction. But I declined in a roundabout fashion, saying I still needed time to think it over.

"Don't think any more!" he said. "Vice Commander-in-Chief Lin Piao teaches us: 'We must carry out all of Chairman Mao's instructions, regardless of whether we understand them or not.' Chairman Mao asks us to join the Cultural Revolution, and we must respond to his great call, enthusiastically and unreservedly. You intellectuals always think you are wise enough to hold your own opinions. It is nauseating. That's why people call you 'stinking' intellectuals. It is also dangerous. Don't you know that's why Emperor Chin buried the scholars alive? This kind of self-opinionated attitude is totally wrong. That's why we want to remold your ideology."

However, he didn't bother me too frequently with this sort of rhetoric. To give him his due, this young man was rather kind to me. On his own initiative, he assured me that he would watch out for my safety.

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Therefore, while people were busying themselves with fighting or fleeing, I remained at leisure. I had no teaching work to do, yet received every cent of my salary. To kill time, I hung around a lot with some of my former students, who were about ten years younger than me. We swam, fished, hunted birds, and played basketball. One of them, Li Guo-ping, even became my close friend.

Li Guo-ping had finished all his courses and examinations in junior middle school just before the Cultural Revolution began and now, like all of his classmates, he was still waiting for the graduation diploma. He was the cleverest boy I'd ever met. But to a couple of my fellow-teachers, he had been a troublemaker who embarrassed them a great deal by pointing out their mistakes, asking questions they couldn't answer, and arguing with them—in class! I had to say that most of my colleagues had never gone to college, and were not really qualified to teach middle school.

But a few of them feigned excellence and treated students as if they themselves were wise men and the students idiots. If a student dared to show he saw through them, the teachers were furious. They took revenge on the student by punishing him unfairly or even trying to ruin his future. As a matter of fact, in Li Guo-ping's file, which was supposed to follow him for his lifetime and which he himself would never have a chance to read, the teacher in charge of Li's class had added a fabricated charge concerning his political behaviour, recommending that senior middle schools not accept him.

The Great Cultural Revolution gave students a chance to get even with the teachers they hated. They criticized, struggled against, tortured, even killed the teachers. As for the teachers themselves, either out of revolutionary zeal and hatred, or simply to save their own skins, they vied with each other in exposing each other's dirty linen. Any improprieties of the past were brought to light. This made their own time much harder. More and more teachers became "monsters and demons". And struggle sessions against them were held one after the other.

Yet surprisingly, Li Guo-ping never raised a finger to any teacher, even when it came to light that one of them could have ruined his future. After we became friends, out of curiosity I asked Li if he hated that teacher and why he hadn't taken revenge on him.

"Of course I hate the fucking bastard," he answered. "But if I kill him, it will happen in a man-to-man duel, not when his hands are bound."

That's why I respected him and chose him as my close friend, despite the fact that he was only seventeen. You didn't have to take precautions that such a boy would stab you in the back. In those days, such a person was so hard to fmd. But once you found one, you could feel the world wasn't quite as perilous a place as you had thought.

To be Li Guo-ping's friend, however, didn't always make you feel safe, because in his mind were too many unusual questions which could get both of you in trouble. For instance, he once asked me:

"Every morning the Central People's Radio Station begins broadcasting with a song, *The East is Red*, which tells us Chairman Mao is the great savior of the people. But every night the same station finishes broadcasting with another song, *The Internationale*, which says there is no such thing as a saviour. Which song tells the truth, and which song shall we listen to?"

Millions and millions of people listened to these two songs every day, but I bet few of them had ever entertained such a question. Though I strongly felt that too much thinking could get this boy, and even the people associated with him, into trouble, I simply could not help secretly admiring him. I treated him more as my classmate than my student.

Li Guo-ping liked me, I guessed, because I was easy-going and honest. Whenever he asked me about something I didn't know, I simply admitted it. This did not hurt his respect for me one bit. He said I was the "most learned person in the commune". It might have been because I could tell him stories I'd learned from foreign books which were certainly not available to a country boy, even before the Cultural Revolution. And since the revolution began, practically the only books one could find were written by Chairman Mao.

Li pestered me to tell him stories whenever he had an opportunity. I had to tax my memory to the limit to satisfy him. He liked Sherlock Holmes, Robin Hood and the Knights of the Round Table. But he was more fascinated by the real-life stories of self- made persons like Michael Faraday, Marie Curie, and Jack London.

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We became closer and closer. I forgot the difference between our ages and discussed all kinds of topics with him. I even shared the secret of the typewriter with him.

It happened one evening, when everyone else living in the school dormitory had gone out to watch a show staged by the County Performing Arts Propaganda Team. I stayed home to eat a chicken I'd bought from the fair that day. I invited Guo-ping to join me. After drinking half a bottle of wine, I lost caution and showed him the typewriter, while telling him the tragedy of my cousin Mei-yin.

I could see the tears shining in his eyes. But the story didn't scare him away from the "killer" machine. With trembling fingers, he slowly printed out a sentence:

"I want to study!"

Then he told me excitedly that he wanted to study everything that was supposed to be taught in senior middle school and in university. He asked me to teach him English and any other subjects I could. He said he had had this idea in his mind for quite a long time but had felt too embarrassed to ask my help.

I was touched by his earnestness. I promised to do my best to help him, but I didn't see how English could do him any good. Li Guo-ping argued English was the first thing he wanted to learn.

Obviously, it was the wine and the fact that I had shared my own secret with him which encouraged him to open his heart totally to me. He said that sooner or later he would certainly go to college, even if the Chinese ones were closed forever. He believed some university somewhere in the world would accept him. That's why he wanted so badly to master English.

I almost covered his mouth with my hand. What he had said was enough to put him into labor camp for several years. Yet, though frightened by his words, I simply could not say no. I agreed to teach him on one condition: he would never mention why he wanted to learn English again.

I scrounged up an English-Chinese dictionary, and a copy of *Essential English* with the last ten or fifteen pages missing, and bought two copies of the English version of *Quotations From Chairman Mao Tse-tung.* When we had our classes, we usually went to some remote site near a brook or river, fishing at the same time. In case we were found out, we would say we were learning Chairman Mao's works in English. Since the leadership proclaimed that we Chinese would soon liberate the whole world, we wanted to be ready to propagate Mao Tse-tung Thought among the foreigners who didn't speak Chinese.

Half a year earlier, no matter what our pretext, if we had done anything involving the "imperialist language", English, somebody would surely have found out about it through spying and gotten us into real trouble. But it didn't seem likely now, because the revolutionaries had much more fiendish enemies at hand to deal with, and more exciting business to occupy their attention.

In Liuzhou City, which was less than one hundred kilometers away, the *wudou* had escalated into fierce urban warfare. The Red Stars occupied the southern part of the city; the Red Flags encircled them. Thousands more Red Flag fighters were being sent there from neighbouring counties. My *go* partner, Liao Zhi-gao, whom I had not seen for quite a while, was in command of reconnaissance on the front. He became a legendary hero. It was said that he and his girlfriend, who was a cadre at a neighboring commune, had slipped into the enemy headquarters in disguise, and set off an explosion, killing twenty-four Red Stars as well as their vice-commander. I heard a rumor

that for his military exploit, Liao Zhi-gao was promised a very important position in the county revolutionary committee.

During those months together, Guo-ping learned very fast; I took the teaching more seriously than a paid job. Inspired by him, I also had a strong desire to improve my English. I began to listen to the English broadcasting on the BBC and VOA,\fn{Voice of America} secretly and always with earphones. Gradually, I understood more and more. As both of us made daily progress, we felt very happy.

Sometimes, I thought we were escaping from the real world and poisoning ourselves with something akin to opium. But at the same time, the more we learned, the closer I felt we were to another world, in which it was legal for a student to learn and a teacher to teach, in which one did not have to kill or be killed. I could hardly tell which of the two worlds was more real—the one we were in, or the one we tried to escape to. Were both unreal? Perhaps one of them was an illusion, the other a nightmare? I wished the illusion could last

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Unfortunately, the illusion didn't last It came to an end with Liao Zhi-gao's death.

One day, Liao, his girlfriend, and five other fighters fell into an ambush. Four of his men died in battle, and he himself received a severe head wound. His girlfriend and another fighter carried him and fought their way out. But before they reached the hospital, Liao died. Two days later, his body was sent back to our commune. His coffin was displayed in the meeting hall of our school.

It was a fair spring day. But the atmosphere of little Willow Wood Town was dismal, as if the sky itself was clouded with hatred and the air rank with fear. Not a single smiling face was to be found. The children were forbidden to play by their parents. On the walls appeared slogans, such as

"Debts of Blood Must Be Paid in Blood! We Vow to Avenge Martyr Liao Zhi -gao!" and

"Smash the Red Star Bandits' Lair! Exterminate the Red Stars!"

An ominous foreboding overwhelmed me. The typewriter beneath my bed made me feel I was lying on a time bomb. It could give a ready-made excuse for punitive action by the Red Flags, who were wild for revenge. I thought of dropping it into the river which was a few hundred yards from my place. But I held back, partly because I was afraid that I had been watched already, mainly because I hated to get rid of it. At the same time, however, I regretted having accepted it. I even went so far as to think that I'd been obsessed by it, and that my aunt was right: the typewriter was a killing demon.

While I was wringing my hands not knowing what to do, Li Guo-ping appeared. He offered to hide the typewriter in his own house. His family origin was poor peasant, he said, and his uncle was both a Red Flag and cadre at the commune. Nobody would search their house. Moreover, his parents were upright and kind-hearted persons. They respected me very much. Under no circumstance would they betray me.

Fearing that Li and his family would be involved in trouble, I refused. but he insisted. Before we reached an agreement, two Red Flags appeared suddenly at the door of my room. My head pounded violently, as if it would jump out from my mouth. The two men were indeed looking for me. What they said, however, calmed down my hean-beat. They handed me a photograph of Liao, asking me to make a large charcoal portrait from it.

"We'll bring you a frame in a couple of hours," one of them said. "As soon as you finish the portrait, please put it in the frame and carry it to the mourning hall." Then they left

I must have been over-sensitive. I thought it didn't look as if the Red Flags would avenge Liao's death upon a former Red Star like me. But Li still insisted that it would be safer to hide the typewriter in his house. Finally I gave my consent. After it was dark, he took it away.

By the time I finished the portrait, it was already about ten p.m. I brought it to the mourning hall. A guard put the portrait in front of Liao's vennilion coffin. The hall was dimly lit by yellowish electric lights. Before the coffin, several candles and scores of incense sticks were burning. The scent, mixed with a subtle foul smell, filled the air. On the floor, dozens of wreaths stood in rows. Many blue cloth sheets were hung on the walls, serving as backdrops to elegiac couplets and mourning phrases written on white paper. Several sheets repeated the same sentence:

"Comrade Liao Zhi-gao lives on!"

I too hardly believed that he was really dead. The good times we had had together flashed through my mind; sadness and sorrow gripped my heart. I stared at the portrait. If he was not handsome, he at least had regular features. Unlike an ordinary country youth whose facial muscles would freeze before a camera, he was smiling. And his smile was so self-confident, even conceited. At the time, he had had every reason to smile. But now, he was dead, rotting in a coffin behind the smiling portrait. What a cruel joke Fate made! Hanging my head, I was lost in black thought.

*

"Kneel down!" a woman yelled.

Before I realized that I was the one being addressed, somebody gave me a sharp kick on the back of the knee. I lost my balance and fell down. Then I found that two men had been pushed into the hall and forced to kneel beside me. They were Lin Yong-ge and Wei Cheng. Lin was a political science teacher at our school, who once had also been a Red Star. Wei was a Mathematics teacher at the primary school of the commune, who had never been a Red Star or a Red Flag but who had shown a strong preference for the Red Star Faction.

"Do you know why you are kneeling here?" the woman shouted.

The hatred in her hoarse voice turned my heart into ice. She was none other than Liao's girlfriend. I had seen her once but she did not know me personally.

"I know, 1 know,"—words gushed out from Lin's mouth without a pause—"I know I'm guilty of the most heinous crime, for which I deserve to die ten thousand deaths and even that cannot atone my sins. But I know the consistent policy of the Communist Party is leniency to those who confess their crimes, and severity to those who refuse to confess; it is a merit for a criminal to expose other criminals. I want to expiate my crimes by good deeds. I want to report these two men to you. I want to expose them both! I have kept a careful watch on them for a long time. He"—Lin pointed one hand at me, while the other hand fumbled in his pocket and took out a little notbook—"He is a reactionary, an enemy spy!"

It must be because of the damn typewriter, I thought. It could do great harm to Guo-ping and his parents as well!

"He dupes and corrupts students," Lin continued. "He propagates Feudalism, Capitalism and Revisionism! Here are the details." He consulted his note-book.

"Up to yesterday, he has shared ten chickens and four ducks with students, in order to win them over. The most serious crimes he has committed—"

"Shut up!" Liao Zhi-gao's girlfriend snapped. Evidently she was in no mood to listen.

"We don't need your babbling. Our eyes are discerning. We know everything each of you has done. Because of your crimes, I, on behalf of the Middle and Poor Peasant Supreme Court, sentence the three of you to death. The execution will be tomorrow, at Martyr Liao's funeral."

"You can't do this to me!" Lin sprang up and howled. "I'm a Communist Party member. I'm a Red Flag! I have followed the Party Central Committee and Chairman Mao closely, all along!"

One of the guards jabbed Lin in the kidneys with his rifle butt. It knocked Lin to the ground and silenced his hysteria. Whining miserably, he prostrated himself before the girl, and begged:

"Mercy! Please give me a chance. Zhi-gao and I are relatives. My great aunt married his grandfather."

"Pooh!" the girl spit at Lin. "You don't deserve to be his relative, you shameless bastard! Shut your mouth or I'll kill you at once."

At once Lin Yong-ge became mute. Wei Cheng's thick lips twitched, but no words came from his mouth. I myself was nearly paralyzed and speechless. I knew it was useless to say anything. They tied our hands behind our backs.

"Kneel there and don't move," the young woman ordered.

She and the guards walked out of the hall. The door was locked from the outside. We three were left in the company of the Martyr, waiting to be buried along with him.

Wei Cheng sat beside me, his back against the wall, his head bent to his knees. Sobbing, he mumbled as if to some invisible persons. A few feet away from us, Lin lay on his side, whining. Tears streamed down his waxen face, and the crotch of his pants was wet and stained with dust.

Suddenly, I thought they looked so funny. I couldn't help imagining how I myself looked … it must have been funny, too. Somewhere I had once picked up a statement by Samuel Beckett: 'The funniest thing is unhappy.' It had remained in my memory because I'd thought it was absolute nonsense. Now I came to realize how right he was!

Wei Cheng would die, at least partly because he'd showed too much preference for the Red Star Faction. However, the Red Stars had never rewarded him with any favors. They had refused to accept him as a member because of a "stain" on his record, which he himself had brought about in 1950, when he was only thirteen.

In that year, rebelling bandits occupied Wei's home town, a small mountain village, and took all the residents as hostages, including Wei Cheng. Only a few days later, the Liberation Army smashed the rebels and released the hostages. This whole incident didn't give Wei any trouble for years, until a political movement called "Four Check-into", which had begun a couple years earlier than the Cultural Revolution. The nationwide movement was

supposed to clean things up in the fields of politics, economy, organization and ideology. Everybody had to confess all kinds of wrongdoings and wrong thoughts. Being an extremely earnest man, Wei Cheng confessed that he had done an “evil deed” during the bandit rebellion in 1950: he had assisted the bandits in caring for their wounded, because one of them was his cousin. This confession stained his ‘til-then spotless record. After the Cultural Revolution broke out; the stain grew, totally blackening his political color. He had to hang a board labeled “Bandit and Historical Counter-revolutionary Element Wei Cheng” around his neck, and clean toilets at the school as well as in the commune administration building every day.

As always, he devoted all his body and soul to his work. The toilets became so clean that I hadn’t been able to refrain from commenting to Li Guo-ping:

“Even if only on account of this aspect, we can see the necessity of the ‘unprecedented’ Great Cultural Revolution. Without it, would it be possible for these toilets to be so unprecedentedly clean?”

Wasn’t Wei’s life-story both unhappy and funny?

Lin Yong-ge’s case was a different story, though it was also funny. He was a Communist Party member and had a good family origin—poor peasant. He was a willing activist, who always kept abreast of the latest political events. Above all, he was an unequalled source of information. People said he knew everything, from what was going on in Zhongnanhai, Peking,\fn{A district of the Forbidden City, the former Imperial Capital actually built within Peking itself} where the highest Chinese Leaders lived, to what was cooking in a colleague’s wok; you could do nothing “improper” without it being recorded in his notebook, which he always brought everywhere with him.

One thing Lin had never lacked was the favor of the leadership. Once, he had even reached the top rank among the Red Flags in our commune. However, he quit the faction and joined the Red Stars, because Premier Zhou En-lai had once called The Red Star Faction a “revolutionary organization” but the Red Flag faction only a “mass organization”.

Lin Yong-ge not only quit, he “turned his weapon around and struck”—revealing scandals among the Red Flags. After some time, however, the Red Flags were still in power and in favor with those above. Perhaps certain other top-ranking leaders didn’t share Premier Zhou’s opinions about the faction. Or had Premier Zhou himself changed his own mind? A humble person like myself could never answer such a question. But Lin Yong-ge this time quit the Red Star Flag faction, once again turned his weapon around and struck. He accused the Red Stars of being reactionary bandits, and applied to rejoin the Red Flag Faction. Many Red Flags wanted to reject and punish him. But Liao Zhi-gao, who was quite a tolerant man, pardoned him and accepted him.

Lin’s given name, Yong-ge, which he’d adopted at the beginning of the Cultural Revolution, meant “revolutionary forever”. Indeed he had always been a revolutionary or at least had wanted to be a revolutionary. This revolutionary person was now to die a “counter-revolutionary” death.

Wasn’t it terribly funny?

Lin’s whine turned into a loud groan. His body huddled up.

“Are you all right?” Wei asked him.

“My legs are twitching.”

With his shoulder against the wall, Wei stood up. He stopped the cramp by kicking Lin’s soles. A guard with a pockmarked face came in, asking,

“What’s the noise?” Wei Cheng explained, and begged,

“Could you give him some water? Please!”

“What? Water for him?”

With disbelief the pock-marked one looked at Wei, then at Lin. Without saying yes or no, he left. Ten minutes later, he returned with a water bottle. He unbound Wei’s hands and gave the water to him.

“This is for you,” he said. “Not for that fucking bastard.”

Then turning aside, the guard made for the door. Wei Cheng helped Lin Yong-ge to sit up, and put the bottle to his lips. Lin gulped and gulped; fresh tears ran down his already-stained cheeks.

“Thank … you … I … I …”

Lin tried to say something, but was choked with sobs...

Suddenly the contempt for Lin disappeared from my heart, leaving only pity. I might have been too hard on this poor fellow, I told myself. Whatever he’d done was just to get favor from the leadership, just to be revolutionary. And whatever he had done, he did not deserve death. Before he himself drank, Wei came to me, bent over, and said to me softly:

“Take some water, Little Zhang, take some, please.”

Watching him putting the bottle to my lips, I couldn't hold back my tears. They gushed from my eyes, running down my face and dropping on my chest. Oh, Old Wei, Old Wei, how could Fate be so cruel to such a good man like you!

*

Through my tears, I saw Liao's portrait. His smile now had turned into a hideous smirk. He was a killer! I hated him! He had killed so many people. Now he was going to kill us as well. He was grinning at us—his victims. Yet he had no cause to grin. He himself was a victim too! He was dead, rotting and stinking in the coffin. His fiancée would sleep with other men. Even the fiancée-widow was a victim, too. She could kill us and bury us with her lover. But could she revive him? What's more, who could say that someday a bullet wouldn't dash out her own brains?

Ha, ha! Funny, funny, it was really funny. All of us—the killed, the about-to-be-killed, and the killers—all of us were nothing but victims! What a practical joke!

Some great persons had said that the Cultural Revolution was a grand manoeuvre for emancipating all mankind. Would all mankind have to go through this? Would they want to be emancipated in such a way?

Perhaps there were too many people in Clina. Even if we wiped out half our population, there would still be enough manpower to liberate the other peoples of the world. Therefore, the lives of people like Wei, Lin and me were dirt cheap.

Who were we? The enemies of the laboring people? On the contrary, we belonged to the laboring people, we were the proclaimed masters of the country. It was unspeakably funny that the death of the masters of the country could be so cheap, or, in the words of the well-known saying now so frequently used by the revolutionaries, it could be "lighter than a goose-feather".

If Szuma Chien, who had made the famous remark that a death could be heavier than Mount Tai or lighter than a goose-feather, were still alive, would he think the death of people like us was lighter than a feather? Surely he would not. The people who used his remark, did they know its original meaning?

Szuma Chien himself was a victim of tyranny! Years after he had been castrated by the Emperor for speaking out in defence of an acquaintance, Szuma Chien wrote this comment in bitterness, to an innocent friend who was about to be executed!

I wished in the future there would be an historian as great as Szuma Chien, who would say unmistakably something like this: Any innocent and unnecessary death should be heavier than Mount Tai. No one should have the right to think any other human being's life, even an enemy's life, is as light as a feather. Otherwise, those in power will be able to wipe out anyone in their way, just by labelling them class enemies and reactionaries. Would ever such an historian appear? Would he ever know that in such a great country, under such a perfect social system, there once had been so many insignificant people who died so insignificantly? Or even if he knew the truth, would he have any chance to let people listen to him?

*

Anyhow, it would not make any difference to me, because tomorrow I would die. I still had a few hours to live. Why should I bother myself with the future? What's more, I shouldn't think of anything sentimental, like missing my poor mother. Let me just try to enjoy the last moments of my short life, by imagining myself doing something I should most like to do.

How about making love to a girl? But I didn't know what that was really like. Though I was twenty-six years old, the most sexual thing I'd ever done was to kiss my former college sweetheart a few times. What a shame! If I could have known I would die so young, and in such a way, I would have certainly behaved differently. I began to recall what the girl and I had done together and imagined I did something more exciting. However, it gave me no pleasure, only sadness.

Finally, I imagined I was writing my life story with the typewriter. The fmal chapter was about my own death.

How would I die? Would they shoot me, beat me to death, or find some more cruel way? A couple of weeks earlier, eye-witnesses had described a savage and bloody real-life scene to me. It repeated itself in my mind's eye, like a play now performed by a different cast:

> I was tied to a pole. Liao's girlfriend stabbed a sharp, shining dagger into my chest. My blood gushed out. She opened my chest, and seized out my still-beating heart. The mob, like a swarm of wasps, dashed to my body and cut off my flesh bit by bit with pieces of broken glass and china.

Scared by my own imagination, I could be cynical or philosophical no more. I was shaking violently. Sweat broke out all over my body. My hands and feet were as cold as ice. Though I kept telling myself to pass my last few hours like a man, it simply didn't stop my shaking. I called myself a coward and forced myself to erase the chilling pictures from my mind. But they appeared more vivid.

I actually felt pain at this point. But it was due to a humming swarm of mosquitoes which kept attacking me. Their sound was more annoying than their bite. It reminded me of a struggle rally before a person's execution, where there was always a lot of vehement condemnation of the soon-to-be-killed, and many rhetorical speeches justifying the killing.

"Fuck you!" I cursed aloud, then muttered: "If you want my blood, just suck since I'm tied up, but don't tell me you are serving a great cause and leading me to Paradise!"

The imaginary pictures turned into a movie-like illusion, accompanied by a voice which said:

> "Look, this woman is cutting the flesh from the bone, with apiece of broken china bowl, bit by bit. She puts the flesh into the out-stretched hands of her son, the skinny sickly-looking boy. The flesh will be cooked on a piece of pottery tile. It is believed the flesh can make the boy healthy and strong. It is also believed that the flesh must not be touched with metal, or it will lose its magic tonic and healing power. In the last few months, cannibalism has become fairly common in certain areas in this province, especially Wuxuan County. Not everybody who eats human flesh does so for medical purposes. Some just do it to show off their bravery, or their hatred for enemies. Some do it simply for fun."

The illusion continued:

> Newcomers arrive at the killingfield. "Better late than never," says a man, picking up a few bones from the pool of my blood. Some bones are still joined by sinews. "They will make a wonderful soup."

I couldn't stand any more. I felt sick and vomited violently. I smelled foul, and found that the crotch of my pants was wet. Soon I fell into a state of half-consciousness.

*

"Get up!"

Somebody kicked me, grabbed the rope which bound my hands behind my back, and pulled me up to my feet. Two armed young men escorted me to the commune administration building. I was shoved into an office. The number-two-turned-number-one Red Flag in our commune, Old Chen, was sitting behind a desk. At his side, stood Li Guo-ping's uncle.

"Zhang Le-tian," Old Chen shouted at me. "You must make a clean breast of your reactionary criminal activities."

"I've never once committed a crime," I answered defiantly. Since I was going to die, I didn't bother giving consideration to my manner of speech.

"Confess your crimes or I'll kill you! You cunning spy." Old Chen slapped the desk.

"I tell you, we know what you really are. You are not only a Red Star agent but also a spy in the service of the foreign master! We have human testimony and material evidence."

He picked up something up from beside his chair and put it on the desk. It was nothing else but the typewriter.

I was stunned. Surely, Li Guo-ping had betrayed me. I didn't care what this would cause me since I was about to be killed anyway. What broke my heart was that, in this world, one could trust absolutely no one; one could not believe in anything. Not anything!

My lips twitched, but I couldn't utter a word.

Before I recovered from the shock, Li Guo-ping's uncle leapt on me.

"I know why you are silent," he snapped. "You want to die so that your collaborators can remain at large." Striding towards me, he added slowly and clearly,

"But we will not let you die so soon, so easily. We have already reported you to the county authorities. We'll send you to the county seat. There I bet you'll tell the whole truth."

Now the truth dawned upon me.

Li Guo-ping and his uncle were trying to save my life!

"I'm willing to write down all I know," I said. To write meant that I could get some time to consider.

Old Chen threw a pad of paper and a pen on the desk. Guo-ping's uncle untied my numb hands. They left, posting a guard at the door of the office.

*

The night was still. A clock in the building struck three. Somewhere outside in the dark, an owl began to hoot.

Facing the blank paper, I could do nothing but scratch the back of my head. Which "master" should I pick? CIA or KGB? Who were my "collaborators"? Anything I wrote could be used against me, and my false incriminations could ruin innocent people.

But on the other hand, I had to write something, or else I would certainly be beaten up before they sent me to the county seat.

Finally, an inspired idea got me out of the dilemma. Chairman Mao taught us,

"Every kind of thinking, without exception, is stamped with the brand of a class."

So every action should certainly have its class and historical root. Why didn't I begin with the popular method of criticizing, "digging deeply the historical root"?

I began with writing from memory a couple of Chairman Mao's quotations as the guideline of my "confession". Next, I exposed my "reactionary historical roots"—the crimes committed by one of my forefathers who had taken part in the war to put down the Taiping Revolution in 1851. In fact, to my knowledge, he was the only member of my clan who ever committed any reactionary crime. I criticized this alleged criminal act of my great-great-grandfather from the angle of class struggle. I based my arguments as much as I could on Mao Tse-tung Thought, making the style as elaborate and wordy as pos-sible.

*

Even before I was born on the paper, the first light of morning appeared. Soon they took away what I'd written, and loaded me and my "transmitter" aboard a truck, bound for the county seat.

The truck bumped along the dirt road. Thanks to a rain shower before dawn, it wasn't at all dusty. I greedily breathed the fresh moist air, and looked around. Distant mountains were capped with white clouds. In the morning sun, rice shimmered a translucent green; blossoming rape fields were almost luminously yellow.

A moss-tinged stone bridge stretched over a swift brook. A huge banyan tree, aged but still full of vitality, shaded the bridge with an evergreen canopy. Sitting beneath the tree, a young woman, with her breast exposed, was suckling her baby. Her bare feet were dangling into the water. Beside her, was a basket of clothes and a washing club. Steps away, a little boy was stalking something—perhaps a cricket or a butterfly.

What a peaceful scene! The world had never seemed so beautiful to me. Tears welled in my eyes. I almost cried out,

"Oh, please do something to make this world a better place to live! Don't let these people become killers or victims!"

I felt a strong impulse to do something to make a brighter future for them as well. But my hands, numb from being bound, mocked me; my own ominous future loomed in my mind. Very likely, the county authorities would know that my typewriter was not a transmitter; they might send me back to the commune.

What should I do? What could I do?

*

I was led into an interrogation room.

"Oh no," I groaned in my heart. "I am finished now."

An army officer was typing on the typewriter, using all his fingers, though slowly. He held up his head and measured me with his eyes. Unexpectedly, 1 read sympathy and a faint sadness in his gaze. He was about the same age as me, fairer than most soldiers I'd seen. And his heavy-lidded slant eyes and stalwart body showed that he might be from the north.

The man whb escorted me had left. Now there were only the officer and me in the room.

"Sit down," he said, with a wry smile. "I used to own this same kind of typewriter myself. 1 dreamed of being a diplomat, but I've become a soldier." He grinned bitterly again.

"Tell me, what's this nonsense."

"Please don't send me back," I begged. "Please put me in jail." I told him what had happened to me.

The young officer listened to me silently, while idly playing with a pen in his hands. When I finished, he was still quiet, as if lost in his own thoughts. With a sigh he broke the silence.

"All right," he concluded. "I can put you into jail for a while." He looked into my eyes earnestly.

"I'm terribly sorry. But this is all I can do." He shrugged his shoulders and spread his hands in a gesture of resignation, whispering in English,

"Sorry, but … good luck!"

*

In the county jail I lived a peaceful life for almost ten months. During this period, the Party Central Committee issued a proclamation, ordering the Red Stars to lay down their weapons. Those who refused to surrender were wiped out by the Red Flags, aided by the People's Liberation Army. When I was set free, not only was the war over, but the "Force 12 Typhoon"—a bloody purge in which countless lives ended in "atypical deaths"—also calmed down.

I returned to the school and no one touched a single hair on my head.

Wei Cheng and Lin Yong-ge were far from being as lucky as I was. On the same day I was sent to the county seat, they were killed at Liao Zhi-gao's funeral. Lin Yong-ge was bound to a pack of dynamite, and blasted to pieces. Wei Cheng was buried alive with Liao's coffin laid upon his body, leaving behind a pregnant wife and two children.

The widow was obliged to pay for the executioners' job; they took away her only hog as a "burial fee".

*

Without the typewriter, I would have certainly disappeared from the face of the earth that day. So I had to say that hardly before I typed anything on it, the typewriter itself substituted a comma for the final period of my personal history.

Fifteen years later, the government returned to their owners all remaining objects that had been illegally confiscated during the Cultural Revolution. The typewriter was sent back to me. But it was out of order already. I kept it as a souvenir of those days. Every time I looked at it, guilt mixed with fear overwhelmed me. I felt guilty for not writing something with it, but was too fearful. Hundreds of times I told myself I should make the old machine work again, yet I was glad that it didn't work. It was too appalling to imagine what new role it would play in my life.

Finally, however, this typewriter was put to work. In March 1987, my former student, Li Ouo-ping, now a Ph.D. in mechanical engineering, came back to visit me. He had realized his pledge. In 1972, Li escaped to Hong Kong. He managed to do well there, and finally received an education in the United States. Now with his wife, a Chinese Canadian, he returned to China for a visit. He spent two days with me, and fixed the typewriter.

As soon as the old machine was ready, I fell under its spell. Poking with two fingers, and wrestling with almost every word, I wrote this story over six painful months. Frequently I felt that it wasn't me but the typewriter itself which was writing, or that I was guided by the spirits of countless people like Wei Cheng, Lin Yong-ge, even Liao Zhi-gao.

Liao's death hadn't turned out to be heavier than Mount Tai. Less than two years after his death, according to the new policy of the Party, his body was dug out from the site for revolutionary martyrs and reburied among others whose deaths had once been described as "lighter than a feather", but now were simply referred to as "atypical".

Several times, I tried to quit writing, because it was too painful for me. However, I always resumed. I knew I would never have peace with myself until I put the fmal stop to this account.

But when I was putting the final stop on the draft, by an inexplicable typing mistake, it turned out to be a question mark instead of a period.

Does the typewriter itself wonder if this is really the end of the story?

268.147 1. Three Leaves **2.** The Greens **3.** Where Are Days? **4.** Soft, Soft Her Footsteps **5.** The Bowl-Shaped Heart **6.** *Yin Niu Si*: **Six Poems**\fn{by Mei Shaojing (1948-)} Chongqing, China (F) 5

1

Three snips of tender leaves like three green birds
Proudly stand on the tree trunk.
*
The trunk sends forth only one green twig,
Where three birds perch.
*
What lovable little creatures they are!
They're still singing for this felled tree.
*
Though only three small leaves, they still shout to the world,

Reminding people of the tree’s full glory of spring now ravished.

2

On this poor, bony land
As fire flares in the black night,
The greens also flare up the thy.
*
When will the greens
Forever sheathe this yellow earth?
Ah, in those days when even the sky was yellow,
I’ve fancied
A fabulous green sun.

3

Days are garlic and wild scallions, still sprinkling loose dirt,
Days are newly rolled hemp ropes, still damp with water
*
Days are four thousand nights of deepening stillness,
The sound of water rocking in a wooden bucket on a mule’s back.
*
Days are the revolving poplar door that squeaks on rainy days,
That keeps turning in my tired dreams, now bright, now blurred.
*
Day are a thirst-quenching blue plum, a paper-cut silhouette
Of farmers bent with grain under fierce sun on hills’ plains.
*
Days are thick leafy shades, umbrella-like,
Skidding down my aching arms to burrow underground.
*
Days are water cans storing up sweet and clear thoughts,
Pouring out tears and sweat to choke my throat.

4

i

Just as I set down the hoe
I heard soft,
Soft footsteps.
*
“I come to keep you company.”
Through the window hole
Two gentle eyes
Looking and smiling at me.
*
I was twenty.
She just sixteen.
Why was I smaller than she?
*
Just as I put down my bowl
I heard soft,
Soft footsteps.

*
“I bring you a present!”
She said.
Something in her hand,
Moving.
*
A little blue fish
Made of shining silk.
Ah, what clever hands!
*
“Done with your work,
Through with your meal,
And still want to read! Goodness me!”
She laughed, teasing me.
Then we tussled and played silly.
*
“Wish I could go to school too.”
She drew a long, long sigh.
“But my mother has already
Arranged a marriage for me.”
“You aren’t going to obey her?”
“But there’s no man to work the fields at home …”
She’s as meek as a lamb.

ii

While I read my books,
She would thread her cloth shoes
By a small lamp.
“So, get married!
Get yourself a man!”
I screamed at her.
Quiet, quietly she left.
*
She wanted my snapshots,
One, two, small, large, she wanted all.
Still thought it was too few.
*
“Don’t we see each other every day?
You’re not leaving the village.
Are you afraid I’ll run away?”
*
“No one is the same.
Sooner or later you’ll leave,
I know.”
*
One day came a picture-taker
She suggested we two
Have our picture taken.
Ah, those pink sweetpeas
Blooming halfway up the hills.
*
We had just finished cutting the wheat,
Just hoed over the corns when

Her wedding day,
Oh, too quickly,
Arrived!

iii

After meals
I no longer hear
Her soft, soft footsteps.
*
“Beaten again!
Her man is such
A cane!”
Whispered my new companion
Very faintly.
*
After setting down my hoe
I no longer hear
Her soft, soft footsteps.
*
“She’s pregnant!
Still going to the fields?”
There are always new reports.
*
I remember
How she held the awl,
Staring ahead,
“Shout!
Shout!”
She looked so funny.
*
Ah, why get married?
Why give birth?
Who knows?
Who knows?

iv

Such wails in the village!
This day
I shall never forget.
*
She was only eighteen.
Because of childbirth
She has died.
*
So full of life
How could she be dead?
Never to talk.
To laugh again …
*
On the wall in her house
There still hangs the picture
Of the two of us.

I know behind us.
Those pink sweetpeas
Blooming halfway up the hills.

v

Sky has darkened again,
I hear footsteps,
Soft, softly coming.
*
“I come to keep you company.”
Two gentle, gentle eyes
Smiling through the window.

5

Those old bowls before me
Steaming hot
Float fragrance everywhere.

But all I can see
Is the gleaming sweat
On a hot face.
*
Under the sun of a young spring
Quietly, quietly
The mountain stream
Lets out its warm breath.
*
I try to change
My bowl-shaped heart
Mould it
And fire it
In the suffering of our race.
*
Let such a heart,
The bowl-shaped heart
Be filled to the full
With all the words hotly passionate
That still exist in this world.
*
Then let it send forth
Its own fragrance
From many many kilns to float
Drift after floating drift.

6\fn{One of the names of a Meihu tune, a kind of folk tune popular in the central and western provinces of China such as Shaanxi, Shanxi, Tgansu and Ningxia}

Never have I heard such a Meihu tune, ah,
Such a melancholy melody as *Yin Niu Si*.
*
Now I know how shaky is my heart,
Time and again it has stumbled on the frozen river.

*

Several times he seemed wanting to cross over
But finally decided to leave me far behind.

*

At least he still walks ahead of me,
After crossing the river there's Shanxi.

*

Who has anything to say to each other?
There's only the "Silver Button String" echoing sadly from afar.

*

Who lets him teach me to wrap rags around worn shoes?
Who would let the rags show from his tattered jacket?

*

There's a piece of loose cotton on the tattered jacket
He ignores my question, "Does this come from the back?"

*

He only asks me to step on it,
He only asks me to step on it.

*

I've never heard such a sad Meihu tune.
Where is it playing now, this *Yin Mu Si*?

191.168 Excerpt from **Captive Spirits: Prisoners Of The Cultural Revlution**\fn{by Yang Xiguang [Light at Dawn] aka Yang Xiaokai [Little Victory] (1948-2004)} "the caves of Yan'an"; "northeast China", Chana (M) 10

1

Satisfied that the paperwork is in order, Warden Liu places his pen on the table and looks up, first at me, then at the olive-gray light at the window. Rising, he switches off the lamp and rubs his knuckles.

"Yang Xiguang, let me tell you something. This place is nothing but a giant dye vat. It doesn't matter if you're pure white when you come in; by the time you leave here, you'll be covered with stains."

I do not respond. The interrogation is over. We are halfway down the southern corridor when he pulls me aside nervously, a curious gleam in his eyes.

"See here, this place is packed full of cow-ghosts and serpent-spirits—not what you're used to. Mind they don't lead you astray." Then his face hardens, and without another word, he marches me over to Number Nine and unlocks the door.

Where is this Number Nine? Hours pass, maybe even a day, before the full weight of realization comes home to me—it is February, 1968 and I am at Zuojiatang.

*

Mechanically, and yet as in a dream I recall the events of the past forty-eight hours. I am sitting on a train from Wuhan to Changsha and can see nothing—my eyes are covered with a towel, my hands handcuffed behind my back. Every couple of minutes the smell of urine floats by, as do the soft voices of a young woman and my two guards. I know they are mocking me, Yang Xiguang, the student who wanted to smash the government machine. \fn{The following statements appears in the Forward to this book: "What had landed Yang in these extraordinary circumstances were his ideas. As a nineteen-year-old Rebel Red Gyuard, he had circulated in early 1968 an essay entitled *Whither China*? In it, he had proclaimed that the major conflict engulfing China was not between Mao's supporters and enemies, nor between China's proletariat and the formerly wealthy classes. Rather, akin in many ways to the Yugoslav dissident [Milvan] Djilas' notion of a 'new class,' Yang had written in 1968 that the major conflict lay between a "red capitalist class" and the masses of the Chinese people:—'At present over 90 percent of our high-ranking officials have formed into a unique class—the red capitalist class. … It is a decadent class impeding historical progress. Its relationship with the people has changed from that of leaders and followers to rulers and ruled, to exploiters and exploited, from equal, revolutionary camaraderie to oppressors and oppressed. The class interests prerogatives and high income of the red capitalist class is built upon repression and exploitation of the masses of the population.' A not entirely dissimilar view of the polity, though broached in non-radical terms, brought a million people into Tiananmen Square in 1989. But two decades earlier, much as in the tale of the small child and the emperor's clothes, Yang Xiguang's observations had stepped outside the ideological paradigm that people permited themselves to entertain. He was not just expounding heresy—it was heresy of a sort the students of Yang's generation had never imagined could exist."}

I can hear their words but shut them out, thinking of how last month, before I ventured out into the rural areas of Hunan, I had delivered a week's worth of newspapers and clean clothes to the place where my mother had been placed under house arrest. It was the last time I would see her. She had been acting strangely—nervous and distracted—asking again and again about me and my younger sister Yang Hui. I did not know then that these were the actions of a woman who knew she would never see her children again, who had already resolved to hang herself, and yet could not quite let go.

Just weeks ago Kang Sheng,\fn{A Politburo member and Deptuy Head of the Central Cultural Revolution Group from May 16, 1969 throught the Ninth Congress of the Chinese Communist Party, held in 1969} Jiang Qing,\fn{Mao's fourth wife, acting in her capacity as Deputy Head of the Central Cultural Revolution Group} and Zhou Enlai have met in Peking to convene a special session of the Hunan Provincial Preparatory Revolutionary Committee. At the meeting they announced that my essay *Whither China?* was an ultrarightist, reactionary document! It could not have been written by a high school student—not even by a college student—they declared: it must have been composed by a "black hand" operating behind the scenes. Someone in a high position within the Party, someone like my parents.

At the same meeting Shengwulian, the Rebel umbrella organization to which I belonged, was declared to be a counterrevolutionary organization. Throughout Hunan, and throughout all of China, a massive witch-hunting began in earnest.

The residents of Changsha are sympathetic to Shengwulian; friends had arranged for me to stay low at the homes of the Rebel group Red High School Committee. Days, I remained indoors reading; nights I disguised myself in a leather overcoat, a large fur cap, a surgical mask, and a pair of plain glasses then combed the streets, flashlight in hand, reading the big-character posters. One night I stayed at the home of one of Yang Hui's classmates, where I learned the details of how my sister had gone to collect our mother's body. My mother, it would seem, had been accused of being the "black hand" responsible for writing *Whither China?*. Before a public gathering, her hands had been dipped in black ink, and she had been "struggled against" as she knelt on the ground. I dared not imagine my mother's appearance in death. I took from my bag the last picture she had given me, her loving smile untouched by house arrest and struggle sessions. Tears filled my eyes.

The voices of the guards interrupt these memories, and I catch the words "famous reactionary." These words sting me. I will not accept such a destiny.

*

I was born in heady times, in the autumn of 1948, as the Civil War was nearing an end, and the tide was turning in favor of the Communist camp. My parents had just been transferred from the caves of Yan'an to northeast China. The Communists had just won a minor battle in that area, so I was familiarly called Xiaokai, or "little victory." It was only when I began school that my parents addressed me by my formal name, Xiguang, meaning "light at dawn."

My father was a member of the Hunan Provincial Party Committee; my mother, Deputy Head of the Provincial Trade Union organization. I had grown up among the Communist aristocracy and drunk at the well of communism. Up until high school, I was in awe of the revolutionary heroism of the Communist Party which had conquered the Nationalists. The novels and the revolutionary memoirs that all children read were steeped with the dogma of revolutionary violence as a means to overturn unjust regimes.

Though not immediately apparent, political upheavals continued within the Communist Party after 1949. My family's first setback occurred in 1957, for that was the year my brother and uncle, like so many others, were labeled "Rightists."

Then, in 1959 we said goodbye to my father as he retreated to the countryside; he had spoken out against the Great Leap Forward. Three years later the Party reversed its policy. My father's name was completely cleared by Party Central, and our family was reunited. With the new emphasis on knowledge and grades, I was accepted to the competitive Changsha First High School. Like the rest of my family, I was a beneficiary of those relatively "rightist" policies.

But in 1964 politics took command and once again I felt myself being pulled to the left. My parents, especially my mother, tried unsuccessfully to temper my leftist bent. When the Cultural Revolution began several years later, I threw myself into anti-work group activities. The "work groups" were teams sent by Communist authorities, at the direction of President Liu Shaoqi, to regain control of university campuses which had been paralyzed by rebelling students. During that same period both my parents were criticized by the Hunan Provincial Committee. My father was pronounced a "counterrevolutionary revisionist." I was persecuted by the work groups and the original "pure-red" Red Guards looked down on me because of my parents' bad name. It was only natural for me

to oppose the “blood line,” the caste system based on “pure” class origins. I joined the Rebel faction of Red Guards composed of students coming from “bad” class origins.

Then, in the autumn of 1966, I became active in the city-wide efforts to rehabilitate the “counterrevolutionary” Rebel workers and began to support Xiang River Storm—the first Rebel, quasi-political party in Hunan to contain, not just students, but also individuals from different professions.

The Conservatives and the military had combined forces during the February Countercurrent to crush most of the Rebel organizations, including Xiang River Storm. During that period I continued to protest against the persecution of the Rebels and was briefly imprisoned by the military. As soon as I was released, I rushed off to the nation’s capital to gather information and speak with the Red Guard groups there; it was in Peking that I first encountered the big-character posters critical of the privileged class of Communist society. I decided to investigate the social origins of the Cultural Revolution, confident that my findings would fit nicely into Marxist-Leninist theory.

My data collection began with an interview of our family nanny, who had surprised us at the beginning of the Cultural Revolution by suddenly joining the Rebel organization for nannies. We had been exploiting her, she announced. She made it clear that the deference she showed my parents had been completely feigned; deep down, she and most of the other Changsha residents hated the Communist cadres and their arrogant ways. Troubled, I recorded my findings, for her hatred for those at the top could not be explained in terms of Mao’s “protracted revolution under the dictatorship of the proletariat” or “the struggle between the two lines.” I continued to pore over the works of Marx.

Then I went into the countryside to carry out a series of interviews. I spoke to the educated youth demanding to return to the cities and to workers who were forming union-like organizations. I spoke with peasants as well, who were surprisingly vocal about their unhappiness with the Communists’ land tax policies.

In *Whither China?* I recorded my conclusions—that a new privileged class had formed, which was, as Marx put it, “suppressing and exploiting the people.” Nothing short of a violent, Paris Commune-style revolution would remove this class, paving the way for open elections and a democratic state.

China’s top leaders in Peking had assumed that by throwing token support to the Rebels at strategic moments, they could neutralize their political adversaries. They had never dreamed that a Changsha High School student would take the call for revolution seriously enough to attempt to define a defiant, new Rebel vision. To them, my essay appeared as if from nowhere.

*

A screech of the brakes and the train comes to a halt. I am led off the platform into a vehicle, but in what direction, I cannot be sure. Surely this must be Changsha. I begin to imagine what detention will bring. Images of the lower classes described in Gorky’s *Lower Depths* and My *Universities* fill my head. Before the Cultural Revolution my life had lacked for nothing materially, yet to my sixteen-year-old mind, my days had been empty. Now, two years later, a part of me aches to plunge into the “lower depths” and investigate these colorful people. Until the nation’s political chessboard changes, that will be my game plan.

My blindfold is removed, and I find myself in a small, dark room, squinting at a flickering light.

2

At my first meal the inmates cling to me. One in particular seems very unwilling to leave.

“It’s tough for you newcomers when you first come in. After a while, though, you’ll get used to it—everyone does. Come on, try to eat.” Tall, muscular, and attentive, this man who hangs by my elbow gives me the creeps.

“I really don’t feel like anything.”

“It won’t get any better,” Luo Gang continues gently, sweeping his arm broadly to one side. He flicks his wrist and points to my bowl. “You may be in here a while. I mean it: if you don’t eat something soon, you’ll collapse.”

His words drift past. My thoughts are occupied with the political situation in Peking. How long will it take this time before Shengwulian is rehabilitated? It is February, the beginning of the lunar year. Though I am inwardly moved by his concern, I do not reply.

“Well, then let me help you clean up,” he says, removing the enamel bowl from my hands as he speaks. As I turn away, he lifts his chopsticks and hastily shoves the bowl’s contents into his mouth.

Three days later, I begin to appreciate exactly what I have forfeited. Too late.

*

One month passes. The pit in my stomach is now a source of constant pain, and my heart races wildly. In June I learn that this man who appropriated my food with such finesse is a professional pickpocket.

Like every child who learned to read during New China's first decade, my mental image of prison was imprinted by the dark dungeons of *Red Cliffs* and its riveting tales about the Nationalists' wartime political prisons. They were vile places, we knew, where hunger and terror reigned.

Though Zuojiatang Detention Center is a product of socialist construction, it has a certain reputation of its own. Conservative Red Guards bandy the name to intimidate Rebels, "black capitalists," and "reactionaries"; parents, to chasten disobedient sons and daughters. For many years, Zuojiatang [Zuo Family Pond] was nothing but a little plot of land surrounding a pond in the southeastern outskirts of Changsha belonging,. one assumes, to a family named Zuo. It grew in time into a dingy residential area. By the late 1950s, however, the name "Zuojiatang" meant only one thing: the massive and forbidding detention center where I have landed. By now the red-brick buildings have turned purple with age, though the roof tiles remain their original dark red. It is said that the layout of the facility is modeled after Soviet prisons.

*

Luo Gang is an enigma. It's almost uncanny, the resemblance he bears to the Western actors in *King Arthur and the Knights of the Roundtable.* His skin is fair, almost translucent; he has large eyes and long, thick eyebrows. And like the Occidentals I have seen in movies, he uses exaggerated gestures, opening his mouth very wide and jutting out his chin when he wishes to show surprise or disdain, or to indicate that something is out of the ordinary. If he is feeling down, he shrugs his shoulders dramatically in resignation, or rolls his eyes up to the ceiling. Such hyperbole is simply not Chinese; it makes one jumpy, and gives the impression that the person is frivolous and doesn't know his place. And yet somehow I find myself befriending this man.

Though at first he won't admit what it is he does for a living, he speaks freely of all sorts of things only a pickpocket could know. Practically every word out of his mouth is "black language;" the filthy *argot* of the bandit. Half of it I can't even understand: no one at school or in the Provincial Committee compound ever talked like this. Instead of "soldiers," he says "grain-eaters"; to him, they are nothing but big "rice barrels" who sit around, waiting for meals. Paper currency is "big leaves"; grain coupons are "little leaves". There are even special words for the numbers one to ten.

One problem plagues him; he is *milao*—starved—in every sense of the word. There is no smoking in the *haozi.* Luo Gang spends his waking hours fantasizing about "chasing dogs," picking up old cigarette butts. He can be sure of netting a cigarette for every question answered at pre-trial interrogation, but these never last very long; one needs a steadier supply. But he's in luck, for a fresh opportunity arises every time he is paraded around the streets for criticism, a common enough occurrence these days. That's when Luo Gang chases down a lot of dogs.

But since matchcs, too, are prohibited, creating a fire is even more problematic than obtaining tobacco. First you pull tiny bits of straw from the mats used as summer bedding, twist them into a thin "braid," pull a tuft of wadding from a quilt, and carefully wrap it around the straw. Then one has to remove a plank from one of the beds, ever so quietly, and rub it back and forth like crazy until the cotton fibers begin to smoke. By blowing gently, it is possible to bring the little ball to flame; if you blow too hard, though, you have to start all over again. The process can take hours. Luo Gang has never been much at playing chess, guessing riddles, or solving brainteasers, but when Number Nine is out of matches, he is the first one we turn to. You have to respect a guy who can make fire.

My sleep is fitful, riddled with dreams. I am betrayed by someone I trust. I am arrested. A driver and two rifle-bearing privates escort me to the Wuhan train station. I sit in the train for hours. When my blindfold is untied, I see a man in a faded green shirt and blue pants. Warden Liu.

"This detention center is run by the Military Control Commission of the Bureau of Public. Security," he announces stiffly. Then I wake up.

*

When it comes to food, we are all *milao.* The three daily meals we are given are calculated to keep us just barely alive, so that about an hour before mealtime, everybody gets up and stands in the middle of the *haozi,* excitedly, as if a great event is about to take place. What we are waiting for is five ounces of rice—a child's portion—and a ladleful of vegetables cooked in water laced with a few drops of oil. The rice has been carefully premeasured, steamed in individual bowls, and stacked up on a wheeled carry; the vegetables are dumped in one large wooden bucket carried about on a shoulder pole.

The turn of the lock and a rush for the door. It is the biggest and the bravest, men like Luo Gang, who end up with the bowls that seem to be just a little bit fuller than the rest. He stares at each ladle of vegetables, wide-eyed, like a water buffalo. Sometimes the portions aren't even close to being equal and there are fights.

Xiao Fuxiang, a machine technician arrested in 1965 as a "class enemy," holds the *haozi* long-timers' endurance record. After four years in Number Nine, he scarcely looks human. I marvel at the transforming power of hunger. Within six months fat people become unrecognizable. Thin people soon take on the appearance of mummies.

My sexual urges have all but disappeared. As flesh melts away, my wet dreams decrease from once a week to once or twice a month. There are no secrets in Number Nine. Under the tutelage of Xiao Fuxiang, one of the mummies, inmates routinely jump out of bed after their nocturnal adventures, wash themselves, and put on clean clothes. I am much too embarrassed to follow suit. Only gradually am I emboldened by the example of Xiao Fuxiang, who on such occasions never fails to trumpet the glad tidings, disclosing as a matter of course the woman of his dreams on that particular evening.

For large men like Luo Gang, the accumulated effect of hunger is not merely a matter of comfort, but of life and death. He knows it. There is little he can do. Whenever he is allowed to go in the courtyard, "out into the open air,"—a privilege once granted prisoners every month but all but forgotten after the chaos of the Cultural Revolution—he yanks up tiny bunches of weeds to chew on. One day he finds a toad hopping about the courtyard. He skins it the moment he returns, grinning all the while, and before it stops twitching, pops it into his mouth. To get it down, he pats his chest and stomach.

Real meat exists only at our imaginary dinner parties, the spontaneous festive gatherings we hold whenever we get punchy and dizzy. One inmate who is familiar with Changsha's better restaurants begins by reminiscing enthusiastically about the three-delicacy and spicy beef noodles at the Yang Yu Xing. Others think back fondly on feasts of Hunan-style roast duck at Qi Zhen Pavilion, the steaming, meat-filled buns at the Garden of Virtue, or the twenty-odd varieties of rice noodle soup at the Peaceful Haven. As privileged residents of the Provincial Committee compound my family had eaten well, but I had never known the extent of Changsha's wonderful cuisine.

Luo Gang tells me how, on a good day, he and his friends would spend a small fortune on gourmet banquets; it is not surprising that the pickpockets are active participants at. all our imaginary parties. They can relate the definitive method of preparing mouthwatering fare such as tiger-skinned pork shoulder, detailing how to select the best cut of meat and how to sear the skin to an appetizing golden brown; for steamed pork with seasoned rice powder, they share their secret method of slicing the pork belly into wide but thin slices; they explain to us how to prepare pork skin for mock shark fins. The longer we listen, the hungrier we become. These evenings conclude with a solemn pledge: as soon as we get out, the first thing we are going to do is to make a grand tour of the city's restaurants, making sure we sample each and every one of these notable dishes.

Ever since the onset of the Cultural Revolution, it has been forbidden to send care packages. This does not keep inmates from quietly passing the word to their families:

"Put lard in toothpaste tubes, dried shredded pork in the linings of jackets and quilts, glucose in medicine bottles."

If you are connected, you can buy rice. Those prisoners whose relatives are too poor to send clothing, and whose appetites permit, find out quickly that a bowl of rice is the most precious commodity in the *haozi*. The secret rice trade flourishes.

Luo Gang is supplied by Little Boss, a short man in his early thirties whose family had been important Changsha capitalists with Nationalist ties. In 1949 the Little Boss lost his source of income and some ten years later got involved in the grain coupon "business," brokering grain coupon transactions. These, of course, were quite illegal, and he soon found himself a "guest" at Zuojiatang. His business instinct serves him surprisingly well here, where a bowl of rice can be exchanged for a piece of clothing, or for a two-*kuai* prison coupon, the mimeographed prison .currency which can in turn be used to acquire toothpaste, paper, and soap. That means a bowl of prison rice is worth the daily wage of a typical worker—ten times more than the price of rice on the outside.

Although demand is high, Little Boss is forced by hunger to limit his sales to one bowl a week. On the appointed day, he stays in bed late, forgoing breakfast, until almost lunchtime. By noon he is so weak he can barely stand. It goes without saying that transactions of this sort violate prison rules, so Luo Gang discusses terms with Little Boss in a corner where nobody can hear them. In less than a month's time Luo Gang has traded in all the clothes but the ones he has on.

He has become almost crazed with hunger, at times laughing bitterly, then suddenly silent. Or he sinks into depression, wailing out endless verses of *Night Song*, a bandit's dirge that I have never heard before:

Life on this earth is not so great,
We're worse off than roadside grass,
The grass, it dies, but comes back in spring,
People die, and are never seen again.

The door suddenly swings open.

"Xiao Fuxiang, you're wanted for questioning." At the sight of Warden Liu, Xiao quickly jumps from his bunk to the floor and scrambles to pull on his shoes.

"Just what do you think you're singing?" bellows the warden.

"Cadre, sir," Luo Gang replies, rushing to the door, "I'm so hungry I'm ready to hang myself. Whatever I've done, if you're going to sentence me, do it now. Take me out, tie me up, hang me from my wrists, and paddle me fifty times—it's all right with me. Anything would be better than slowly starving to death in here."

The warden knows very well that Luo is one of Zuojiatang's "frozen bean curds"—even when you fry them, the oil and salt never get to them. Smiling weakly, he replies,

"So, you still think you can lead a decadent, revisionist life? Now then, that's exactly why we want to remold your thoughts. We Communists don't ever beat anyone, nor do we ever sentence wantonly or kill—"

"You just keep us hungry and helpless," mutters Luo Gang.

"Straighten up!" The warden's face flushes with anger. "You're out of line."

*

As it turns out, Warden Liu is not one to talk. Soon after this incident he himself is packed off to a May Seventh cadre school for remolding by individuals who are more radical and more revolutionary than he. His replacement is a military man, a bearded lieutenant in the 47th Army whom we privately refer to as "Whiskers."

By midyear, all the regular Public Security prison staff, the Conservatives who are affiliated with the Public Security Bureau, the Procurate, and the courts, are gone. The first notable change brought about by the Hunan Military Control Commission is the frequency of beatings.

Since the door to the detention center office is usually left open, we always know when Whiskers is laying into someone. Several weeks after his arrival, I climb up onto the front window bunk, where I can just make out the silhouettes of our bearded new warden, wielding a club, and another man, trying to protect his head and glasses with his hands. The glasses look vaguely familiar—they remind me of the ones worn by a Hunan University student leader of Shengwulian's Tertiary Education Storm.

"Zhou Guohui!"

My voice rings throughout the quadrangle. When Zhou looks in my direction, Whiskers beats him harder than ever. Angrily, I cry out again,

"Don't hit him!" Several other inmates watching from their windows began to chant, quoting from Mao,

"Fight with words, not weapons!"

Whiskers begins to walk in the direction of Number Nine and I know I am in for a bad time. Watching quietly as I put on an extra shirt, Luo Gang tries to stuff his cap on my head, but I won't let him.

"All right," he whispers, "but when he hits you, remember to cover your belly and your head with your hands-the other places all have bones to protect them. Whatever you do, don't let them bust up your head and belly."

In a matter of moments we are in the detention center office, where Whiskers loses no time in pummeling my head. I concentrate on cushioning his blows, aware nevertheless that out in the courtyard dozens of inmates are squatting or kneeling on the upper bunks, their angry faces pressed to the bars.

"Don't beat prisoners!"

"Fight with words, not weapons!"

The guards who have been standing by in the courtyard start to hurl stones at any prisoner they catch shouting. As the blows continue to shower down, I can see guards jumping all around. No sooner do they aim at the north wing than the southern *haozi* start up. Stones and voices fly back and forth, with Luo Gang's voice the loudest of them all, until the guards finally call for reinforcements, and the heavy, iron gate swings open. Mounted machine guns roll in. Soldiers carrying loaded rifles rush through the massive iron gate and spread quickly throughout the courtyard, positioning themselves at the doorway of each of the twenty-four *haozi*. Only then does Whiskers finally put down his club. The entire incident has lasted about fifteen minutes.

Zhou Guohui and I are subsequently led by two important-looking officers through the corridor, out of the quadrangle, and into a nearby pre-trial interrogation room. They are surprisingly polite.

"If you have an opinion, you can communicate it to me," says one of them, looking at me. "But don't be starting trouble."

"The last couple of weeks the guards have been beating people almost every day. Chairman Mao says to fight with words and not with weapons. Don't these people carry out their work according to the directives of the Chairman?"

"Beating people is not acceptable, it's true," the officer replies. "But creating a disturbance is worse."

*

It is the summer of 1968. The political situation that seems to be shaping up throughout China is extremely delicate, for the balance of power between the Rebel and Conservative factions has just begun to shift in favor of the Rebels. It's a good time for the members of Shengwulian to push for rehabilitation. The 47th Army can't be sure which way the political tide will drift next: everybody remembers how, just last summer, the radical Rebel group Xiang River Storm was officially cleared in a similar face-off, so the military has adopted a very cautious wait-and-see attitude toward Shengwulian celebrities such as Zhou and myself.

Perhaps that is the reason we are not punished further for our defiant behavior. The beatings subside for a while. And Luo Gang takes a fresh look at "weak scholarly types" like me. He begins to open up.

The chaos of the last couple of years was a pickpocket's dream.

"Didn't Lenin say, 'Revolution is the people's carnival?'" he winks. Luo Gang joined Xiang River Storm and had been on the scene when the Rebels seized the guns. In ordinary times everyday citizens were not permitted to get their hands on weapons, and the pickpockets had a field day. When he was wounded in the 24th High School Incident, the final battle in a series of military confrontations between Changsha Rebels and Conservatives in 1967, he was treated like a war hero. Along with his comrades-in-arms, Luo Gang had a chance to try out some of the .59 millimeter pistols and semi-automatic rifles, and to steal several trucks from the arsenal. He taught himself how to drive. Too bad, he recollects wistfully, he never did figure out how to use high gear.

I seldom hear the word "pickpocket" used within the confines of Number Nine; the preferred term is "Master Pincers." But in the parlance of Luo Gang, what he does is "catching fish." When he returns from being marched around town, he will say things like,

"A lot of fish out there today—too bad my pincers were all cuffed up. Damned if I wasn't just like a fly sitting on a bull's balls—I had to move where they did."

*

In my heart I know he is treating me particularly well, both because I am a celebrated political underdog and because I am relatively young. Even so, he gets on my nerves. I simply cannot stand the boundless enthusiasm with which he talks about women.

"Take off your dust mask, let me take a look," he chants again and again. "If you haven't married anyone yet, you'll have to marry me!"

The song drives me absolutely crazy. Even less amusing is his tale about how he and a friend became obsessed with the gradually swelling breasts of their female classmates in elementary school. Luo's friend had made him a bet: If Luo could touch one of those "things" without making the girl angry, he would win one *kuai*.

"It's a deal," Luo said without hesitating.

The next day after school, while they were walking around, they spotted a couple of girls heading in their direction. Luo Gang quickly looked away, he tells me with a smirk, and cocked his head toward his friend as if he were in the midst of a serious conversation. Then, just as the girl closest to him brushed past his shoulder, he turned around, and spat right in the middle of her chest. Losing no time, he pulled out a handkerchief and dabbed furiously at her blouse, apologizing all the time. Spitting in public was not unusual in those days, and the practice was by no means limited to men, so it didn't occur to the girl to be angry. She was even a little embarrassed at all the fuss he was making and kept protesting,

"It's all right; it's really all right."

Luo Gang grins at the memory of his victory: He had, at the age of thirteen, maintained his honor, won a sizeable amount of money, and satisfied his curiosity all at the same time. So vulgar does he seem to me that I actually feel ashamed for him.

"No game on earth is more fun than 'playing women,'" he says.

Graphic descriptions of his various exploits dominate his conversations to such an extent that I begin to suspect the *haozi* gossip is true, that picking pockets is not the only reason he is in prison. Though I never inquire

as to his specific charge, whatever it is, it is bad enough for him to avoid mentioning it. If one is to believe the rumors, he did something in a hospital involving a nurse.

"It was some sort of sex crime," whispers Xiao Fuxiang to me one day.

"How do you know?"

"Last week he came back from pre-trial interrogation pretty shaken. The prosecutor was a woman—Can you imagine?—and I guess she was pretty tough. She even asked if he "got in" and if "liquid" came out! A woman! So he must be in for rape, or something close to it, don't you think?"

*

Luo Gang's class origin was bad; not "red" enough to go on to high school. With no money and a lot of time on his hands, he had loafed around for a spell, then started to steal. When he first began his apprenticeship with an old pickpocket, Luo approached his targeted victim six times, only to walk away five. The sixth time, he returned with what he was after. Half of the money went to the old man and Luo Gang had spent the rest the same day. After that, he tells me, "catching fish" became his life.

"It must be hard to take a wallet from people who are wide awake without them feeling anything," I ask somewhat self-consciously, knowing that I must sound naïve. "Do you have special tools?"

"'Course we do—razor blades. You hold them between your index and middle fingers, so with a flick of the wrist you can open up a slit for the fish to come out. But most of the time we don't need any tools."

With great excitement, Luo proceeds to describe his life during the early sixties. There had been a girl pickpocket on a train—her fish-catching skill was unerring, and Luo Gang fell for her, head over heels. They wandered around for a couple of months, stealing together by day, sleeping together at night. Then one day when he opened his eyes, she wasn't there.

"The damn whore," he mutters bitterly, "once you came, she didn't even know you were alive."

On the road he often awoke feeling panicked, haunted by the feeling that he was being pursued. One afternoon another pickpocket ran up to him, pushed a watch into his hands, and ran off again. Before Luo Gang had realized what was happening, he was surrounded by an angry mob and beaten until he was almost unconscious.

"When brown mud drops into your pants, it always looks like shit," he grumbles. Recalling the violence of that day and others, Luo surprises me by speaking almost affectionately of the Public Security Bureau.

"You know, whenever I'm caught in the act, I always try to get to the nearest branch as soon as I can," he says earnestly. "Otherwise my hands, my legs—my whole body gets smashed up."

It was the Public Security Bureau who subsequently sent Luo Gang to a home for juvenile delinquents too young to be sentenced, where he stayed until he was assigned to a factory as an apprentice worker. Since the hours were long, "fishing" had to be fit into his spare time. But he was strong and full of life, and quickly became popular with the factory girls, who called him "Spartacus" because he reminded them of Kirk Douglas. Factory life brought men and women into constant contact, and incidents involving "moving hands and feet" were common. During the numerous weekend trips into the suburbs of Changsha, it was inevitable that he would have "romantic" interludes. Yet when he recalls his trips to places like Yelu Mountain or Liuyang River, he makes a point of telling me that what he had enjoyed most was "discussing his beliefs."

"What?" I interrupt. "Did you say *beliefs*?" I can't possibly imagine what beliefs Luo Gang might have, unless it was that 'there's nothing more fun than playing women.'

"All my girls know I believe in *The Vagabond*.

"That Indian movie?"

It slowly occurs to me what he means. It's not a bad movie. I saw it in the late fifties when it ran not only in China, but in the Middle East and the Soviet Union. The story of a judge who believed in the "blood line," or the "theory of lineage," Raj Kapoor's *Vagabond* had everything necessary for mass appeal—a poignant love story, an intricate plot, biting social commentary, spectacular song-and-dance numbers, and, not incidentally, a likable anti-hero named Raj—a pickpocket who lived on the streets of New Delhi.

Convinced that "thieves beget thieves," the movie begins with an Indian judge unjustly convicting Jagga, a man whose father and grandfather were notorious bandits, but who himself is innocent of any crime. Now embittered, Jagga plots to teach the judge a lesson by abducting his pregnant wife and raising the child—the young Raj—to be a robber. The judge is unaware that he has a son, and adopts a girl named Rita, who being as intelligent as she is beautiful, becomes a dedicated attorney. In a strange twist of fate, Raj and Rita meet each other outside the courthouse, then again in her opulent home. They fall in love and Raj proposes, only to be driven away by her father. When Raj is arrested a second time, Rita learns of his real identity, and in an eloquent closing

statement reveals to the courtroom Raj's hidden past, whereupon Raj receives a relatively mild sentence of three years.

"I like the ending the best," Luo Gang tells me. "You know, when Rita sees Raj off to labor reform camp. Remember?" I nod with a faint smile.

"She says, 'I'll be waiting for you, Raj.'"

Luo's expression is radiant, as if there were really a beautiful woman standing right next to the bunk. He has forgotten, of course, that there aren't any "labor camps" in India, nor do I remind him.

It is only natural that he identifies with Raj, I reflect. Luo Gang, too, was deprived of an education because he lived in a society that embraced the "class line." But though he recognizes the inequity of all this, he doesn't dwell on his lot. For better or for worse, he is already a pickpocket, and seems to thrive on the defiant lifestyle that he leads.

The Vagabond and its music has reached out to more than just prison inmates—even small children know the melodies and can sing the Chinese lyrics. *Rita's Song*, a soft, romantic tune, seems to be especially popular among the pickpockets and is often heard in Number Nine. Ever the free spirit, Luo Gang has his own favorite, the title song, *Raj's Song*, or *Vagabond*, with its snappy rhythm reminiscent of the pulse of a large, prosperous city and the pickpocket's turbulent life. Rocking his shoulders to the beat, he hisses,

"Damned if I'm not just like a beggar screwing an asshole—it's a poor sort of happiness we're stuck with on this earth."

The muscles on his face twitch.

*

Labor camps are not new to Luo Gang, and this is his fourth stay in the detention center. He pulls me aside one day and says quietly,

"That guy Liu is 'KGB'; he's always sending snitch reports to the cadres. I think he needs to understand some flavor."

"Flavor," of course, refers to the "flavor of human kindness."

"Him?" I ask, looking over this man in his late fifties who is said to have served as a Nationalist official and is in Zuojiatang on a charge of graft. Although Old Man Liu has always been extremely polite to me, come to think of it, he does seem to act excessively meek when the authoJities are around, and he is downright rude to the pickpockets.

"Sure. He's an historical counterrevolutionary. The Communists always use old guys like that to keep an eye on the practicing counterrevolutionaries. Sure. The same way they use common criminals to keep the counterrevolutionary criminals in line. Haven't you noticed every morning how Old Man Liu is always one of the first ones up? How he always wants to be the one to dump the pot or to bring in the hot water? What, you thought he was a hard worker?"

"Historical counterrevolutionaries" were individuals who had been pronounced guilty of political crimes before 1949—usually individuals associated with the Nationalist regime; "practicing counterrevolutionaries" referred to individuals who committed "counterrevolutionary crimes" after that time.

One or two days later, Luo Gang magically acquires one of Liu's "reports" and shows it to me. On special paper available only to the pre-trial interrogation officers I read the carefully written words:

> Cadre, sir: In Number Nine, Wen Liusheng recited aloud and wrote from memory the feudalist weeds *Three Hundred Tang Poems* and Zhu Geliang's *Great Generals*. On June 7th, Luo Gang introduced his pickpocket experiences to another prisoner. On June 11th, in an attack against our new society and socialism, Zhao Dewen said that his present salary could have bought twice as many things before Liberation. Signed, Liu.

One after another, Old Man Liu's fountain pen, ink, and paper all take off without wings. I never see Luo Gang make a move, just Old Man Liu rushing about, muttering and cursing,

"Who took my pen?"

Then it finally hits him, and as the pickpockets later joke, he is "like the blind man who has finished a bowl of sweet dumplings—he knows exactly how many he has eaten." Somebody is trying to get even, of that he is sure—but "like a mute who has swallowed an herbal tonic, he is unable to tell of the bitterness."

Old Man Liu has had ample occasion during his lengthy tenure as an "historical counterrevolutionary" to witness pickpockets gang up and beat "KGBs," or snitches, to death, so he isn't going to pursue the matter. In light of the possibilities, he figures, losing a pen isn't so bad.

In the next nationwide anti-crime campaign that comes along, Old Man Liu is sentenced. Life: a term so heavy that it is clear that the authorities have judged him not only on the matter of misappropriating public funds, but on his "historical" background as well.

"It's just not fair!" he cries out over and over. "This society eats people alive!"

Only then does Luo Gang's resentment toward him dissipate. Old Man Liu moves over to the transit cell.

Not long afterwards Luo Gang, himself, is handed ten years for whatever it is that he has done. At the age when he still needs "growing rice"—men being considered fully "grown" at twenty-five, women at twenty—he is now so thin that he bears no resemblance to the man I first met. His sentence is read aloud to him in one of the pre-trial interrogation rooms, as is the standard practice, and when he shares the news back at the *haozi*, everybody starts shouting, insisting that it's too severe.

But Luo Gang is beaming with pleasure and relief. He calls a friend in Number Ten, shouting at the top of his lungs,

"Well, it looks like the Public Security organs just got themselves another free piece of good muscle. Hey, hey! I'm off to the labor camp brigade to eat 'growing rice'!"

During an inmate's final weeks, family members are permitted a single visit to Zuojiatang. It is the only time that such a meeting can take place, regardless of how long one is detained. Since the authorities are the only ones who know the actual departure date, most relatives report to the prison soon after sentencing.

Luo Gang waits in vain for the guards to announce that he has a visitor and then leaves quite suddenly, on a blustery, rainy morning in December 1968. From atop my bunk, I try to picture him filing out the main gate with the other prospective laborers, slowly making the thirty-minute walk to the train station, accompanied only by a few guards, who must be cursing the inclement weather. It dawns on me that none of his "Ritas" ever showed up.

There will be no one waiting for Spartacus Luo. …

40.133 The First Day\fn{by Ye Si (1948/49-)} Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, China (M) 3

The morning light streamed in and shone on a tumbler. Ah Fat glanced at it and saw a wisp of a rainbow gleaming on its surface. He blinked, the rainbow was gone. He narrowed one eye and looked again. There it was: red, orange, yellow, green. . . .

"Hey!" Ah Hung came over and said in a low voice, "The boss is looking at you."

Ah Fat blinked again and rubbed his eyes. But it was no use. He felt himself blushing, even his earlobes burnt. A pair of eyes seemed to be following him everywhere, even much later, when the people at a nearby table started to leave and he hurried over to clean up.

He stacked up a few plates and took them to the kitchen. As soon as he opened the daor, he was greeted with the heat of the kitchen and the smell of fried eggs. He took a deep breath. The smell of fried eggs was really good! He went into the courtyard, and, as instructed, put the plates into a red plastic bucket. The white plates with the yellow streaks of egg yolk on them sank at once into the grayish soapy water.

When he came out again, he saw a cup of tea standing on the counter. The man they called Uncle Ah Kuen was standing there idly. Ah Fat checked the order, and took the cup of tea to table number seven. On his way, he stole a glance at the boss. Ah, he wasn't looking at him anymore. The boss was now standing by the door and concentrating on frying hamburger steaks.

Ah Fat looked at the tumbler again. It was now empty, with a deep brown ring of tea dregs at the bottom. Tea stains marked the spot on the table where the glass had stood. The patron at that table was now reading a newspaper. Others had finished their breakfast and were leaving one after another. The woman in a green dress at the next table also left.

"Seven dollars," Uncle Ah Kuen called out lazily to the cashier. Ah Hung turned round and said to Ah Fat,

"That woman is mad!" Ah Fat would not believe him.

"This is your first day at work. There are many more things you have no idea of!" Ah Hung said. "She comes every morning, and sits there mumbling to herself."

"She looked all right just now, didn't she?"

"It's just that you didn't notice," Ah Hung replied.

The man who was reading the newspaper had put it down and was picking his teeth with care. They went past his table. The floor around his chair was strewn with toothpicks. Ah Hung walked straight on, without so much as a look at them. Ah Fat couldn't bear the sight and swept the toothpicks under the chair with his foot.

"What a mess! That man is such a pain!" he grumbled inwardly. Uncle Ah Kuen was telling Ah Hung about the

greyhound racing the previous week, keeping Ah Hung from his work,
"It just wasn't possible! The fourth race. Who'd have thought—" Miss Wong, the cashier, chipped in,
"Who'd have thought that you, too, would lose!" Uncle Ah Kuen snorted in annoyance and said,
"Who said I lost? I just didn't win." Miss Wong burst out laughing. Ah Hung turned to Ah Fat and asked,
"You like greyhound racing?"
Ah Fat shook his head. Uncle Ah Kuen cast a sidelong glance at him and said,
"I guess not. A good lad, eh?" Ah Fat blushed and defended himself,
"No, it's not that …"
But Uncle Ah Kuen ignored him and turned to greet the boss's wife, who had just arrived. This was the first time Ah Fat had met her. She was standing by the door where the boss was frying hamburger steaks. The hamburger steaks were gleaming with oil, and the sausages were slowly turning in the oven. They looked delicious. She was chatting in a soft voice with the boss. It looked like she was laughing too. Ah Fat thought she seemed a kind and warm person. Miss Wong asked Uncle Ah Kuen,
"Are you going to watch the military tattoo tonight?"
"What military tattoo?"
"It's the programme for the first day of the Hong Kong Festival. It was reported on TV. It's at the Hong Kong Stadium." They went on talking about the military tattoo.
"Lunch is ready!" Ah Hung said as he came in from the kitchen. He told Ah Fat,
"Hurry up and eat. You'll have a busy time at noon." Ah Hung sat down at the table and said,
"Great! Soup with pig's bones!" He rested his legs on the chair opposite him and let out a deep breath. Ah Fat tried to do the same, but his legs were too short and couldn't reach the chair opposite him. Still, he let out a deep breath.

*

The place began to get really busy from about half past twelve midday. People arrived in droves. First came groups of women from the factories. Then office workers from nearby buildings. And then mechanics in blue overalls. As soon as one stood up to leave, another took the seat. Ah Fat dashed about, feeling a little overcome by the heat. His hair could have done with a wash, and the smell of his sweat-mixed with the faint odor of his unknown predecessor's white shirt that he was wearing was making his head spin. There was noise everywhere. He came out of the kitchen carrying a dish of beef curry with rice and a bowl of noodles with roast duck leg, put them down on the tables of those who had ordered them, then went to collect the coffee cups and sandwich dishes. He saw someone going up to the cashier, and so he shouted,
"Three fifty!" Then he showed someone who had just entered to this or that seat, brought the ketchup or salt to a table over at the other side, took the empty dishes into the kitchen and came out again to clear another table, wiping away with a piece of cloth the bones, stains, and crumpled paper napkins... .
Ah Fat was melting under the heat. He unbuttoned his shirt, just as Ah Hung had done. And he watched with admiration as Ah Hung picked up a whole stack of plates, with three or four tea cups on top, and teaspoons as well as forks and knives, and strode off. That was neat! Unfortunately, Ah Hung didn't manage to carry this feat through. The smallest plate at the top fell and smashed to the floor. The boss happened to be around and he flew into a temper. Ah Fat saw that the plate was just a small one, and yet the boss got really angry.
"You people do nothing but break the dishes! You people do nothing but eat." He kept saying, "You people", "You people are like this:".
Ah Fat felt that he, too, was being scolded even though he hadn't done anything wrong. At this, a wave of grievance surged up in him.

*

In the afternoon, the patch of sunlight before the door slowly faded. Ah Hung, who was leaning against the cashier's counter, yawned; Uncle Ah Kuen yawned too. Ah Fat, like someone infected with the disease, also yawned.
Miss Wong at the cashier's seat burst out giggling. The boss, who was sitting at one side reading the newspaper, looked up and glared at them, then buried his head in the paper again. He picked up a red pen and started marking down his choices for the grayhound racing. Uncle Ah Kuen asked,
"Any that take your fancy?"
The boss thought for a while, then handed over the newspaper. Ah Fat happened to be standing there, so he had to take the paper from the boss and pass it to Uncle Ah Kuen. Later, Ah Fat saw that his hand was stained with red ink and the dark print of the paper. He was about to rub off the marks with another hand when Ah Hung nudged

him and said,

"Here comes the lorry with the soft-drinks!"

Ah Fat didn't know what he should do, so he just followed Ah Hung's example. Ah Hung went to the back of the restaurant, so he followed. Ah Hung lifted up a crate of soft-drinks bottles, so he too, lifted one up. He saw a few dozen soft-drinks bottles on the floor. They were of different shapes; some clean, some dirty. He liked those that were clean and rounded in the middle. He picked them out and put them all into the same crate. But Ah Hung snapped at him,

"Don't dilly dally! There's no time!"

Then Ah Hung snatched up a handful of bottles and stuck them all into a crate. No more fussing around sorting them out.

Ah Fat lifted up a crate, carried it out, loaded it onto the lorry, then took down another crate of soft drinks from the lorry and carried it inside. This new crate was much heavier. Ah Fat was huffing and puffing by the time he set it down where the old crate had been. When the job was finally done, Ah Hung sat down to recover his breath, hanging his head. Ah Fat noticed that he looked quite pale, and was rubbing his eyes with his fingers. Ah Fat asked,

"Are you all right?"

Ah Hung shook his head, annoyed, and did not reply. Ah Fat felt a little tired too. He went back into the shop. Someone came in and the boss glanced at Ah Fat. He had to go at once to take the order.

"Tea with milk. Buttered toast."

Ah Fat went to place the order. All this time, Uncle Ah Kuen was standing beside the customer, absorbed in studying the tips in the newspaper. Uncle Ah Kuen now sighed and said,

"It's going to be tricky this week!"

Someone else came in. Uncle Ah Kuen still did not move. Again, Ah Fat had to go and take the order.

After a while, someone called him from behind. It was Ah Hung. He went over; Ah Hung indicated with his finger a plate of toast behind a pillar. Ah Fat was quite hungry, and helped himself to a piece. He had taken a few bites when a thought occurred to him, so he leant his head out from behind the pillar—the boss was still buried deep in the newspaper and didn't see them. But Ah Fat remembered what had happened that morning and what the boss had said:

"You people are all the same!"

The boss was right. He felt as if something had got stuck in his throat, and he couldn't swallow anything. He was still chewing, but only mechanically, and the taste was gone. Ah Hung nudged him again, and pointed at the remaining piece of toast on the plate. He shook his head, and said he was full.

Ah Fat leant against the pillar, and straightened out his white shirt. It belonged to someone else and was too loose, it didn't fit him. Over on the other side, someone came in. Ah Fat was about to go over when he stopped. He had made a mistake, it was the boss's wife returning. She sat down opposite to the boss and they began talking in low voices, as if discussing something important. Ah Fat looked at them, then turned to study the red and yellow menus pasted on the wall. A fly circled slowly over a table, he followed it with his eyes. It flew inside a glass cabinet full of tumblers through a narrow opening between the glass doors; it dashed about inside the cabinet, banging against the stained surfaces of the glasses, swooping and swishing about in the narrow space looking for a way out, but was hopelessly trapped. A shrill voice broke the silence.

"You think I don't know? You think I don't know?"

It was the voice of the boss's wife. Everyone turned and looked at her. She went on,

"You make me work my fingers to the bones for you. And you use the money to buy her a watch!"

Her face was red, her thick lips opening and closing, spitting out the words. The boss kept his voice low. He seemed to be pacifying her.

"Why shouldn't I talk about it?:" She went on in a loud voice,

"I tell you. I know how to use eyeliner too, and I can put on a miniskirt and a pair of platform shoes!"

Her voice, a little hoarse now, sounded as if it was choked with tears. Ah Fat never imagined they would be like this. Ah Fat didn;t know what to do and just stared blankly at those around him. Miss Wong was looking down and adding up the bills, pretending to be unaware of everything. Uncle Ah Kuen was hiding behind his newspaper, but Ah Fat could see from one side the look of derision on his face. Ah Hung was leaning against the pillar behind him, his head lowered; he seemed exhausted, completely oblivious to what was happening.

A customer stood up to leave. Ah Fat hurried over and gave him his bill. Then he took the dishes to the kitchen. He nearly stumbled over a broom. Only then did he realize that the ground along the edge of the ditch was littered

with leftover food, bits of fishbones and waste paper, empty lunch boxes, ice-cream paper cups, and a few iron wires. Before he had not noticed these things.

When he came out again, the boss's wife had gone. The boss looked a bit gloomy. Uncle Ah Kuen had put down his newspaper and was setting the tables for the evening. Ah Fat was nursing his elbows. It had been a very busy evening and his hands were quite sore. Perhaps that was because it was his first day at work, he thought. All things considered, he hadn't done too badly.

Just now when Ah Hung was taking some dishes into the kitchen, he nearly dropped another glass on to the floor again, Ah Fat didn;'t know whether it was because Ah Hung's hands were shaking or what. Ah Fat began to feel a little worried about Ah Hung; he wondered why there was always this tired look on Ah Hung's face. Right now, Ah Hung was leaning against the seat behind him.

But soon, Ah Fat's mind drifted to other things. He looked up at the clock and thought—just another half an hour and he could get off work! He could step out of the door and go home! Home! The boss had left, Ah Fat had no idea when. Miss Wong was sitting at the cashier's seat chatting with Uncle Ah Kuen about how exciting the military tattoo this evening was going to be, how spectacular. When she finished, Uncle Ah Kuen began to brag about how good he was at gambling! He even urged Miss Wong to bet a few dollars and try her luck. Once they started, the two really went on and on, non-stop.

The people at a table behind him had left. Ah Hung was not there, so Ah Fat went and cleaned up. When he pushed open the door to go into the kitchen, he saw that it was dark in the courtyard. He put the plates and cups into the bucket, and stood watching as the white plates and cups sank into the grayish black soap water. There was a gust of wind and he could feel a chill in the air.

He went into the lavatory, and pushed open the door of a cubicle. Somebody was there—he hadn't locked the door. The man inside pushed the door shut. But Ah Fat caught a glimpse of the man.

It was Ah Hung. He was inside, as if puffing on something! Ah Fat caught a whiff of a sharp, strange odour. Ah Fat staggered out, and went back into the shop. Uncle Ah Kuen and Miss Wong were still chattering about gambling. Ah Fat found his heart pounding, about to jump out of his mouth. He had stumbled upon a secret, had caught sight of something he had no business knowing. He felt confused, he wasn't sure whether it was what he thought it was. He remembered that pallid face of Ah Hung, remembered the way Ah Hung seemed to be puffing at something, and that sharp, strange odur! These images were firmly inaprinted on his mind, indelible!

He went all the way to the front door before he stopped, as if trying to get as far away as possible from those ugly, haunting images. His heart was still racing. Beside the door, he saiw only a few pieces of unsold hamburger steaks on the black iron plate; they looked dry and shrivelled now.

Miss Wong and Uncle Ah Kuen were still chattering. Ah Fat didn't hear a single word they were saying. Not until Uncle Ah Kuen tapped him on the shoulder did Ah Fat realize that they were asking him sonaething.

"What?" he looked up.

"I was asking you," Miss Wong said, "how do you feel about your first day at work?"

"Nothing special," Ah Fat shook his head and forced a smile. He stood there against the gradually darkening sky, smiling as if in a trance, as if in fear.

1949

39.129 Looking For Fun\fn{by Chen Jiangong (1949-   )} Beihei, Guangxi Province, China (M) 22

"*Zhao-le*"—that's a Peking expression meaning "to look for fun." It also happens to be Pekingers' favorite pastime. They're fond of it, they're good at it, and this fun is not so hard to find. Keeping a pet nightingale is a kind of fun. So is flying a kite. So is nursing a bowl of wine over a clove of garlic. Even when they talk about death, for instance, Pekingers don't say, "So-and-so died," they like to say, "he's gone to hear the crickets chirp"—as though they could find some fun even in that.

Next to the Temple of Heaven is an area called Heaven's Bridge. In the old days it was a lively fairground where the common folk went to have themselves some fun. Performers had nicknames like The Eight Oddballs, with acts to match: people like Cloud Flier with his comedy routines, and Golden Choppers with his scenic pictures and popular ditties.

And Soldier Huang. The story went that this fellow had fought under Marshal Chang, who was trying to restore the overthrown Manchu monarchy.\fn{The last of whose rulers abdicated in 1912.} When the restoration movement fell apart Soldier Huang became just another down-and-out warrior-except he found a way to keep up

the good fight. Every day he would show up at Heaven’s Bridge, pick a spot, then launch into one of his “harangues.” From ancient emperors to modern rulers, from the high and mighty to the *hoi polloi*—no one escaped his acid tongue. And all this he did in incomparable style: phrases rhyming, voice ringing, mouth foaming, fingers jabbing. Six deep and a traffic stopper, the crowd around him would lap it all up with cheers and applause for every other word. Needless to say Soldier Huang got a big kick out of all this and would strut around like a cock of the walk. Even his listeners would feel as if they had gone from rags to riches overnight and had the whole world at their feet. Standing up at Heaven’s Bridge to “harangue” or to take in the “harangues”—that was one way of having “fun.”

Ever since four theater companies from the province of Anhui came to the capital and took it by storm—that would have been about two hundred years ago now—their style of performance has developed into what is known as Peking opera, so popular it's a rare Pekinger who can't sing a few bars at least. Even pedicab drivers and street vendors would often park their wares by the roadside and toss off a song or two—especially pedicab drivers and street vendors and all those stuck at the bottom of the heap, who had little hope of getting out from under, let alone becoming a big shot and going down in history. Their only thrill came when they sang a few arias and made believe they had turned into the heroes and legendary figures of their favorite operas. Even prisoners on their way to face the firing squad would often break into song, There they were, clearly branded with their crimes, all trussed up and piled onto a donkey cart, soon to depart forever for yonder banks of the Yellow Springs—and they would still manage to let loose with a couple of songs, to the cheers and ovation of bystanders. To sing at a time like this and to listen to this singing—that was another kind of “fun.”

Face has always meant a lot to Pekingers, so it should come as no surprise that “emptying your pockets to buy face” was also a kind of “fun.” You say you haven’t got a penny to your name? Not to worry. What you would do is hang around in one of those little bars where you sat on a plank right across the top of the wine barrels. Don’t think that just because the customers were mere porters and peddlers and pedicab drivers that they wouldn’t know how to do things in style. Let them sit around the wine barrels and a couple of shots of rotgut later the boys would put on quite a show. This one would tell you how he once killed six men with one blow, that one would go on about the time he singlehandedly took an enemy fortress. If you were all strangers who had just met, so much the better; the tales would be even taller since you were all in the dark about each other. Anyhow by this time everyone would be pretty well plastered and the sky was the limit. You might tell someone you’ve been to the moon and he would answer, “Hear! hear!” Later, after you’d eaten and drunk your fill, you would get to your feet with a flourish and call for the tab. Even if you didn’t own a red cent you would act like Mr. Moneybags himself. When the waiter came back with the bill you’d wave your hand airily and say: “Charge it!” Before the words were quite out of your mouth you would already have made your grand exit. Wasn’t this a kind of “fun” too?

Well, all that was once upon a time. Things have changed, Pekingers are much better off now. But not everyone is living happily ever after, so “looking for fun” continues to be a popular pastime. Take those guys on the street who have deliberately stuck a foreign label on their dark glasses or their denim pants—that’s their way of having some “fun” too, only they prefer to be “seen and not heard.” Then there’s this young fellow I know who believes in just the opposite, who likes nothing better than to strut down the street all day with his radio-cassette player blasting away, loud enough to wake the dead. If you asked him why, he’d say:

“Without this thing, nobody would even give me a cross-eyed look!”

You might call this a kind of “fun” too.

Anyway, old or new, these antics all seem kind of ludicrous to sophisticated folks. And in a way they’re right. You say you’re just a seamstress darning raggedy clothes for folks as poor as you? Well, that’s your lot in life. You’re never going to turn into Wang Bao-chuan the Chancelor’s daughter no matter how many times you sing her song. You’re a pedicab driver? Then you should know your place. Maybe it’s true that you once had the famous opera star Yang Xiaolou as a customer. Maybe it’s even true that you got ticked off at him and chucked him into a ditch. Sure you fixed him. He kept right on being famous opera star Yang Xiaolou, whose funeral was attended by sixty-four pallbearers and all due pomp and circumstance, while you’re still a pedicab driver, lucky to have two people carry your coffin like a crate of cabbages to your final resting place! And as for those foreign labels on the sunshades, you can stick them on your forehead if you like, you’d still be a ragpicker’s son who’ll never set foot abroad. Life is a dud and you want to have some fun to even the score? Stuff and nonsense! Maybe that’s why people who look for fun so often end up as other people’s laughing-stock.

On the other hand, what’s so ludicrous about this? Life may be a dud, but if you can’t even have some fun then what’s the point of carrying on? According to the Austrian psychiatrist Adler,\fn{Alfred Adler (1870-1937), Austrian psychologist and psychiatrist.} it was the twin curses of psoriasis and his small size that drove Napoleon to conquer the

world, to become emperor of all he surveyed. The common folk of Peiking are not quite so ambitious. All they want is to get together with their buddies and shoot the breeze or sing a few songs to drive away dull care. Is that so much to ask?

So it seems that what goes on at the Bean Street Block Office Cultural Post (just a little ways west of Winch Handle Alley), where every evening a bunch of oldtimers get together to ham it up (occasionally joined by some younger folks or old ladies who would show up to watch), now acting out a few parts from the opera *The Ferry at Xiaoyao*, now singing a few arias from *Attack on Dengzhou*, now spinning some yarns when they run out of breath, this one claiming he studied under the famous singer Gao Qingkui who had shot to stardom after appearing in *The Ferry at Xiaoyao*, that one saying he trained with Ma Lian-liang, celebrated for his performance of *Attack on Dengzhou* … so what is going on here is a practice not only sprung from deep cultural roots but firmly based modern psychoanalytic theory as well, it seems.

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The Bean Street Block Office takes care of the dozen-odd alleys in the neighborhood, including Winch Handle Alley. Not much else goes on at its cultural post besides these amateur songfests. The “concert hall” used to be a warehouse, so you can imagine how simple and crude everything is: not even a ceiling, only rafters sticking out overhead like so many ribs; the cement floor pock-marked with bumps and hollows; performers and audience alike sitting on benches arranged in circles that push all the way up against the walls.

In the middle of the room is a clearance about the size of your palm, and part of that is taken up by a furnace, leaving room for two or three people at the most. You’re all right if you sing standing still, maybe you can even strike a few poses. If two of you wanted to do that you would start bumping into each other. If you want to ham it up you’d better watch out for the furnace. It’s a good thing that most of the people who’ve come to enjoy themselves are oldsters who don’t have much left anyway in the way of posture and looks. That’s why there’s never been anything like a full dress performance here. At most they do a duet on the “stage;” anything more than that and some of the parts would have to be sung from the benches. But don’t let appearances fool you: if you sat yourself down, closed your eyes and listened carefully, you’d hear singing that’s not only tuneful but soulful as well—nothing fancy, of course, but quite respectable all the same.

Sure the oldtimers like to tell a tall story or two, but their tales usually have a few strands of truth in them. Take the one about having trained with Ma Lian-liang: They probably did spend some time together as novices, only Ma made it to the top while this fellow lost his voice and ended up selling tea on the streets. But that’s another story. And that one about having studied under Gao Qingkui, that’s probably true too, only the guy forgot to tell you how he became addicted to opium later and ruined his career.

But never mind. Most of them are at least veteran opera buffs, well versed in the matters of the opera world. One listen and they’d know which school\fn{The variety of Chinese opera known as Peking Opera developed during the 19th century as a synthesis of various provincial forms; but the first fully deveoped form of this art occurred during the Yuan Dynasty (1279-1368).} it was, whose style of singing. Maybe you’ve never eaten pork, but still you know how a pig runs, don’t you? So don’t underestimate these old codgers. See that one over there, all bundled up in a padded overcoat, hands tucked in his sleeves and peering around like a numbskull? But when he sings, ah! what a voice—rich and clear, natural and graceful, exactly in the style of the immortal Mei Lan-fang! And look at this one over here: white haired, wrinkled, bent almost double, nothing at all impressive about him—until he opens his mouth, and out comes a voice so velvety-smooth, so effortlessly beautiful, straight from the school of the great Yang Bao-sen. There are actually some older opera buffs who find the style of the young singers today not up to snuff, who come all the way out here just to satisfy their craving for the real thing—like it or not, the customer is always right.

So it stands to reason that it would take someone pretty special to handle these fans and fanciers of Beijing opera, someone who has sung professionally with a company, say, or at least appeared in a fair number of amateur performances. Otherwise how can you hold their attention, let alone win their respect? But that’s hardly the case at the Bean Street Cultural Post: The commander-in-chief of this band of hearties is, believe it or not, a seventy-plus ex-coolie by the name of Li Zhong-xiang!

Old Man Li lives at 10 Winch Handle Alley. He has a square head, a broad face, and a deep, booming voice. When he walks you can tell right away that there goes someone who used to work as a coffin carrier: small even steps, chest and stomach thrust out, hips tucked in, toes turned slightly outward. His eyes may droop at the corners and he may be getting along in years, but his complexion is always ruddy—as a result of his tippling, that’s true—and he is still as cocky as a young whippersnapper. Actually, among the group of regulars there are many who can sing and act much better than Li. Some had gone through formal training, some had studied under famous coaches, there are even those who still appear professionally with various companies.

As for Li, at different times he had worked as a coffin carrier, a pedicab driver, a waiter, plus quite a few other jobs, but none that had anything to do with opera. Before retirement he did work as a doorman at a theater, but that was a theater for plays. Still, from the way he's always going on about "Chang-hua this" and "Chang-hua that,"”you'd think he and Xiao Chang-hua—athe opera star so famous for his clown roles—were at least bosom buddies if not blood brothers. In fact he and Xiao Changhua had had no more than a "wonton relationship."

Back then he was a waiter in a snack shop and so poor he couldn't even afford the few pennies for a ticket, but his craving for opera kept gnawing at his insides. So he would pack an order of wontons in a container, march up to the door of the theater and barge right in.

"Hey, where do you think you're going?"

"Delivering wontons to the star."

The guards actually fell for that line! After the first couple of times they didn't even bother to stop him anymore, figuring that whenever Maestro Xiao performed he had to have his order of wontons from this particular shop. Truth to tell, none of the wontons ever saw the insides of Xiao Chang-hua's stomach. As soon as waiter Li got inside the theater he'd hunker down in a corner somewhere and enjoy the show and the wontons at the same time. Using this trick he got to hear a good many performances by Maestro Xiao, even some by Mei Lan-fang. Well, on a diet like this even an idiot could learn to sing a few snatches after a while, and today our friend Li can still do such a perfect imitation of Mr. Xiao's comic accents that he would always bring down the house. Whereupon he would say, with an air of vindication:

"You know, if I hadn't been so poor back then that I couldn't even afford the props to get started, I could've turned 'pro.' I could have been a star, just like Chang-hua!"

Of course, anyone who knew the least bit about opera could tell that Li Zhong-xiang was light years away from becoming a star like Xiao Chang-hua. But to these diehard fans, Li's passion for Peking opera made him a man after their own hearts. So they went along with his conceits and good-naturedly called him "The New Chang-hua,"even bestowing on him the title of "Chief Coach" that Mr. Xiao had held in his company's school. Li was always one to take charge anyway, with or without a title, so he was only too happy to assume "officially" the job of overseeing the activities of the cultural post.

Older residents in the Bean Street neighborhood, especially those living along Winch Handle Alley, have come to know Li inside out over the years. They remember how, back when he was just a young fellow working as a coffin carrier, he would get up at the crack of dawn, slip into his green uniform, put on his felt hat with its plume of chicken feathers, and sit on the bench outside the Eternal Peace Funeral Parlor, chatting with passersby while he waited for his assignments. Then he worked as a waiter in the Pot O' Plenty Wonton Shop, but less than a year later he got fired for always sneaking out with an order of wontons to see his "freebie"shows. After that he was reduced to hanging around the little teahouse where people who needed a day laborer would come and give him an odd job or two. Still later, he moved to 10 Winch Handle Alley and became even more of a fixture in the neighborhood.

But what the old folks remember best was the time back in the spring of '35 when the usually down-at-the-heels Li suddenly "made it." Well, maybe to say he had "made it" was stretching it a little, but to his belt-tightening and penny-pinching neighbors it sure looked that way. What they saw was a Li who no longer went hungry two meals out of three and whose clothes had fewer patches on them.

According to Li Zhong-xiang himself, it all began when he met a Mr. Jiang at the little teahouse, who would show up every other day or so, grab a hold of Li and spend a few hours just chewing the fat with him. Afterward Mr. Jiang would slip him the equivalent of a day's wages. His neighbors on Winch Handle Alley were all green with envy: What's so hard about smoking some fine cigarettes and sipping choice tea—for free, you understand—meanwhile rattling away about anything and everything under the sun? At the end of it you'd get a day's wages to boot. Talk about your cushy job!

Everyone told Li he had met his lucky star, a bigshot, that from then on he would have it made. Li himself didn't think so, because one day he accidentally discovered that the lining of Mr. Jiang's coat was patched together from remnants, just like his own. He would mention his puzzlement to anyone who would listen:

"What a strange fellow, this Mr. Jiang—he sure doesn't have money to burn, so why is he throwing it away on just having someone to shoot the breeze with?"

It was true that Mr. Jiang was no bigwig, and Li Zhong-xiang never made his fortune either. When the Marco Polo Bridge Incident\fn{A note reads: *Incident between Chinese and Japanese soldiers on July 7, 1937, at the Marco Polo Bridge on the outskirts of Beijing, marking the beginning of the war between China and Japan*.} came to pass Mr. Jiang dropped from sight. As for Li, he continued to hang around the teahouse waiting for odd jobs: fixing up a shop front here, helping to

bury a dead child there. His teahouse "encounter" gradually slipped from people's minds.

But after Liberation, Mr. Jiang turned out to be an honest-to-goodness bigshot. By then Li Zhong-xiang had become a pedicab driver. One rainy day he was waiting for customers in front of a theater. No one seemed to want a cab, so he parked underneath the marquee to get out of the rain. Just as he was beginning to get restless, he overheard some theatergoers talking about this show that was all about a funeral parlor. That caught his ear. He thought to himself, it's time to get up-to-date and try one of these new-fangled plays, he had nothing better to do anyhow. So he bought a ticket and went inside. Not halfway through the first act and you could have knocked him down with a feather: wasn't all this exactly like the stories he used to tell Mr. Jiang? When he asked around he discovered the playwright was none other than Mr. Jiang Tieya himself, who was now also the head of the theater company. After the show Li Zhong-xiang got his pedicab and rushed backstage. Sure enough, Mr. Jiang remembered him and welcomed him with fine cigarettes and choice tea, just like in the old days. Li said:

"Mr. Jiang, I don't want to push pedals anymore. You're the boss around here, aren't you? Can't I come work for you?" Mr. Jiang asked:

"What can you do?"

"I've picked up a few tricks from Chang-hua, and I don't get stagefright either," Li answered. Mr. Jiang laughed:

"That's Peking opera. Here we do plays." But Li persisted:

"I don't care what kind of show it is, I've taken a liking to your theater anyhow, because you speak up for us common folks. Just let me work as a janitor or something."

And that's how Li became the doorman for this prestigious theater. The news caused a sensation on Winch Handle Alley. Those of his neighbors who had seen him in front of the theater all agreed, this time Li had really "made it."

Just look at him on opening nights, all spiffed up in his spanking new tunic suit while he bustled about greeting everyone, shaking hands with those who arrived in limousines and inviting them in. He was quite an impressive sight!

Ah, but like they say, "Don't pick up the kettle that's not whistling"—in other words, let's not bring up other people's sore points. Much as Li Zhong-xiang likes to run on at the mouth, to show off, have you ever heard him talk about what really happened at the theater? True, he had bought himself a nice new suit with nary a wrinkle in it, and on opening nights he would carefully put it on, then hurry to the theater, where he would stand at the entrance eagerly greeting everyone, shaking hands with those who pulled up in limousines, showing them in—

"So glad you came!"

"Do let us know what you think!"

"This way, please!"—so that quite a few people actually mistook him for the company director or the playwright. Yes, all of that was true. But what's the big deal? He figured that he got this job thanks to Mr. Jiang and it was the least he could do to put his best foot forward for his boss. So, as with everything else he really enjoyed, he would bustle about on his job, full of enthusiasm and swagger.

But soon he noticed something wrong. People in the company began to look at him in a funny way, the youngsters began pulling his leg and calling him "Director Li" or even "President Li." He didn't really mind any of that, but then even Mr. Jiang seemed to find him standing in the light. On opening nights, when he would rush excitedly to the theater in his natty new suit, all set to receive the crowds, Mr. Jiang would always find some excuse to send him away from the entrance: Would he move the flowers over there please, and see that the VIP lounge was properly set up, then … and so on, back and forth.

Li finally got the picture: To stand at the door in fancy clothes, shaking hands and making small talk—that was only for high society, not for the likes of him! But he was also a little hurt: just because he had been standing in the wrong place, was that any reason for them to give him such dirty looks and to snap at him? Why didn't people ever try to put themselves in others' shoes? He loved the theater, he was so proud of it. Whenever he recalled that he was one of its members he would hold his head high. If I was standing in the wrong place couldn't you have come right out and said so? Others may not understand me, but at least you, Mr. Jiang, you should know me better than this!

Know you how? You can't be forever wearing your heart on your sleeve, can you? And even if you did, and others got to know you, so what?!

Li was over forty when he finally got married. Less than two years later his wife died while giving birth to their son Dezhi. Years passed but he did not remarry, though to tell the truth he had his share of sexual yearnings like everyone else—especially when you remember that he could feast his eyes on pretty young actresses all day

long at work. One day, while he was going about his job, he happened to hear the splashing of water mingled with women's voices laughing and chatting. The sounds came from the women's locker room upstairs, where the actresses were showering and changing after a performance. Even Li himself didn't quite understand what came over him then: he came to a stop, turned his face upward and stared at the open window, as if he really expected to see something up there. Actually nothing at all could be seen from down below.

But this routine became almost like a nervous tic with him: Whenever he passed under the women's locker room he would compulsively slow down and gaze up at the window. Wouldn't you know it, someone reported him to the higher-ups. And probably because it was Mr. Jiang whom he respected the most, Mr. Jiang it was who came to have a talk with him. In truth Mr. Jiang himself knew that nothing could be seen from downstairs. If Li had flatly denied ever looking up at the window that would have been the end of the matter. Instead he said:

"I was wrong. I did try to look, But I couldn't see anything."

Li thought to himself: What's the big fuss, doesn't everyone have a few indecent thoughts now and then? I just won't do it again, that's all. But alas, my friend, people really got to know you well this time. So what happened but the whole bucket of shit came down on your head and you ended up being the butt of everyone's jokes! All those lovely young things who used to call him "Uncle Li" or "Master Li"—how sweet were their voices!—what did they do now but wrinkle their noses at him as they passed by. The young fellows were even more insulting:

"Hey, Gramps, go buy yourself a mirror!"

These were all educated folks, cultured people. Now if they all behaved like that virtuous Liu Xia-hui of old who remained cool as a cucumber even when pretty women climbed onto his lap—well, then, that's one thing. But these were people who made fun of Li while they carried on with their floozies. Were they phonies or what?!

After this Li Zhong-xiang became listless and droopy. No longer did he go on about Maestro Xiao one day and Maestro Yang the next. Time and again friends tried to set him up with another mate. Before the incident with the women's locker room it would probably have been a simple case of "Yes" or "No." But now for some reason he made this rule for himself: He had to tell the woman about the incident, if only to test her. Of course the matches all fell through. So much the better, he thought. What if he had ended up with a dame who was a self-righteous phony—he could never put up with that!

Just before the Cultural Revolution began, he started seeing the widow Lu Gui-ying, who worked in the box office at the theater. He was fifty-five then and she fifty. His only thought was to find a mate, someone he could talk to, someone who'd take care of him, just as he would take care of her. He and Widow Lu got along famously, but when it came time to lay his cards on the table, right away he said:

"There's something I've got to tell you. I don't have a very good reputation at the theater. There was this incident—"

"Enough already," interrupted Lu Gui-ying, "that's ancient history, I know all about it. Besides, we're no spring chickens, and who can honestly say they've never done anything to be ashamed of?"

Before this Li Zhong-xiang had been somewhat hesitant about proposing since Lu Gui-ying had three children from her previous marriage, but when she said those words to him his heart leaped and he thought to himself: at last! All these years no one had ever said anything like this to him, as though they were perfectly honorable, gentlemen and ladies all, while he was the only goddamn lowlife! But when those honorable folks lay in bed at night and looked deep into their hearts, could they honestly say they've never had a dirty thought in their lives? Well, why get all worked up over this anymore? At least there were still people like Lu Gui-ying in this world. How nice it would be to marry someone he could talk to, someone like her.

Alas, this match also fell through. Lu Gui-ying's in-laws set her own children on her to object to the marriage, and naturally quite a few nasty things were said about Li Zhong-xiang. Not wanting to hurt his feelings she told him only that her kids were almost grown, she had sweated it out so far already, why not just let it be. But by then he had heard the real story from someone else.

When the Cultural Revolution ended Li Zhong-xiang was sixty-five and old enough to retire, But he was rather reluctant to say goodbye to the theater. He especially hated to part with that play about the coffin carriers, which had remained in the theater's repertory. Whenever someone mentioned this play his heart would skip a beat, even though he would never again get all spiffed up and stand next to Mr. Jiang greeting guests at the theater entrance. Nor would he ever mention again how back in '35 Mr. Jiang used to look for him to chew the fat with in the little teahouse. The theater had hurt his feelings. But if it hadn't been for another stupid thing he later did, something that led to his feelings being hurt again, he would have hung around a few more years just so he could watch his favorite play a few more times.

During the Cultural Revolution he had "saved" Mr. Jiang's life, although Mr. Jiang never knew anything about

it. Back then Mr. Jiang had been beaten up, openly attacked in the newspapers, criticized on the airwaves—things seemed headed for the breaking point. One day Li Zhong-xiang happened to pass by the Peace and Happiness Restaurant (in those days its name had been changed to the more revolutionary—sounding Long March Restaurant) when he saw Mr. Jiang through the plate-glass windows, sitting alone before a tableful of food and drinking away morosely. Li thought to himself, this doesn't look good at all. Whereupon he ran back to the theater and scrawled a note, something to the effect of:

"We love your plays. Please don't give up."

That was about all Li could manage—you didn't get to be very literate in those literacy classes. He didn't dare put his name on the note, so he signed it only, **The Revolutionary Masses**. Then he rushed back to the restau-rant and asked someone to bring the note in to Mr. Jiang.

After the Cultural Revolution Mr. Jiang was restored to his post, and at a rally to celebrate the revival of *The Coffin Carriers* he talked about how he had decided against suicide because of a note from an anonymous play-goer, tears streaming down his cheeks as he spoke. After the rally Li Zhong-xiang deliberately went up to Mr. Jiang and shook his hand. Of course, he never breathed a word to anyone about the source of the note. On opening night of *The Coffin Carriers,* Li couldn't resist getting his suit out from the bottom of the chest and putting it on once more to go to the theater. He had long ago learned it was not his place to bustle about where Mr. Jiang was standing. But as soon as Mr. Jiang saw Li in his once-familiar outfit he said:

"Master Li, we need some help backstage. Would you mind going back there to give them a hand?"

Well, it was high time that he retired. This time for sure he was going to retire.

To this day that certificate with the words "Honorable Retirement" in gold on a red background is still hanging solemnly on his wall. He still remembers the farewell party the theater gave him, still remembers how Mr. Jiang brought him back to 10 Winch Handle Alley in his own sedan. When Mr. Jiang and the other top brass of the company came in and sat down in his tiny house, he could feel the tears rolling along the wrinkles in his cheeks all the way down to the corners of his mouth, where he could taste how salty they were. Sheepishly he wiped them off before anyone noticed.

He began to regret his decision: How quick he had been to feel wronged! Before Liberation he had pulled rickshaws, carried coffins, suffered all kinds of abuse and taken it all in stride. But now, now he's become a sissy, good times have spoiled him. Three square meals a day, a solid roof over his head, and he starts to fret about petty things! Couldn't he see Mr. Jiang was busy? How could he expect Mr. Jiang to think of everything, to stop and worry about his tender feelings?! Besides, was it right for him to butt in where he didn't belong? Was it right for him to want to peek into the women's locker room?

But all this belongs to the past. After seeing Mr. Jiang and the others off in their car that day, Li Zhong-xiang suddenly felt his days were numbered. Take it easy, live it up a bit—that was all the fun he could expect. What else could there be?

Then, lo and behold, right there on Bean Street he discovered the gang of old geezers making music and making merry! Here were people after his own heart: coffin carriers, pedicab drivers, snack peddlers, poor folks all—not a single bigwig among them, but not a single phony either. Not three days after Li Zhong-xiang started coming to this place but he perked up again. At the theater he'd always had to be on his best behavior: no dirty words or they would make fun of him, no good-natured puffery even or they'd think he was laying it on too thick. After his fall from grace it became worse: he had to tiptoe around, all meek and mild, playing the fool. Anyway, the theater people were always using big words and dropping names that ended in "ski" or something like that, none of which he knew. But here at the Bean Street Block Office Cultural Post he felt right at home.

So he began to sing, to gab, to bustle about with gusto, just like that fun-loving, fast-talking, opera-singing young coffin carrier of forty years ago. Sure he knew that among his new-found buddies were many fine singers and experienced performers. So what? Everyone was there for the fun of it, not to nitpick. And now they were calling him "The New Chang-hua" and "Chief Coach." That was fine with him. A chief coach takes care of business, and he was just the man for the job.

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Hanging out with this bunch of opera buffs at the Cultural Post, Li Zhong-xiang began to bubble over with energy. Meanwhile, his arrival on the scene made his new friends bubble over with enthusiasm. Li plunged right in and took charge: one day he would announce the schedule of performances, the next he'd begin to assign roles, the third day he would bring along someone to sing the old man's part, the day after that, who knows, he might find two people to try out for the part of the general. Or he would go talk to the people in the Block Office about whether they should give their "company" a name, whether they could get a few more props, and so on, and so

on.

His constant dickering with the office produced at least one benefit: the Cultural Post was now open every day instead of every other day. His other efforts also bore fruit: A band was pulled together, complete with gongs and drums and strings. But they were still in need of someone to play the part of the dashing young man. The company used to just get one of the old guys to fill in, but that left a lot to be desired. It so happens that young Guo Sen-lin, who lives at 26 Winch Handle Alley, not only is a graduate of an opera school but also a member of a professional opera company, and, what's more, his specialty is the role of the handsome young fellow. Time and again the guys had invited Guo to join them for a little fun, but he had always refused. Actually the fanciest part Guo Sen-lin had had so far was that of a spear carrier, but he thought himself too good to team up with those "crazy old fools." Leave it to Li Zhong-xiang to bring him around.

"I swallowed my pride and went all out," said Li. Three times he called on young Guo, now giving him the hard sell, now sweet-talking him with promises of "top billing" and "starring roles," and finally all but dragged him in.

Then there's the string player they now have, Old Mr. Li, who had actually studied under the famous musician Xu Lan-yuan himself. Old Mr. Li pays for a monthly bus pass out of his own pocket and spends an hour commuting each day just to play in their band—all because Li Zhong-xiang had happened to meet him one day at the Heaven's Bridge bus stop, struck up a conversation, and invited him to join their fun. That's why even though Chief Coach Li would often throw his weight around at rehearsals when he hadn't the foggiest idea how to direct the performance, and everyone would then give him a hard time about how he was faking it and getting things all tangled up—in fact the guys all appreciated the many things he had done for the group.

Lately, though, while no one had actually said anything, they were all thinking to themselves: I say, old buddy, aren't you getting a bit carried away? It was fine in the beginning when Li would boost their ranks with people who knew their stuff, and the more the merrier. But he didn't stop at that, or limit himself to the Winch Handle Alley crowd. Wherever he went, whenever he saw an old man squatting in the sun in front of a store or drinking silently in a wine shop, he would strike up a conversation with him. At the first mention of worries or troubles Li would start saying how much fun it was to get together with the guys every night and sing some opera, as if the only way the man would find relief from his problems was by following Li back to the Bean Street Cultural Post. It was becoming a habit with Li Zhong-xiang, a bad habit.

One day he brought along his neighbor across the way, Old Man Hao of 9 Winch Handle Alley, and solemnly announced to everyone:

"My buddy here is an old hand at playing the part of a young woman."

The fellows had long ago heard of Old Man Hao, of how during the Cultural Revolution his house had been searched and his valuables confiscated, and how later he had been compensated in cash for all of it. They also knew his son Stinky, who was always zooming up and down the alley on his motorcycle and making a huge racket. But no one had ever heard of Old Man Hao's talents on stage. In fact it was only that very day that Hao himself, under Li Zhong-xiang's enthusiastic "coaching," had found out about his own "talent." Li was just going out the door when he saw his old neighbor squatting in front of the wall on the other side of the alley.

"Well, well, what are we trying to hatch here?" Li joked.

Old Man Hao sighed but said nothing. Li had to press him before he would say what was wrong. Turned out the old man was ticked off at his new color TV set:

"Who knows when they'll start smooching or messing around in bed. Or else there'll be these men and women with bare thighs that look just like carrots, bouncing all over the place! How embarrassing to be watching this stuff with my two kids! If I don't watch TV I might miss a good show, but if I do I might get all this crap instead!"

Right away Li Zhong-xiang saw his opening and jumped in:

"Now, now, don't get your nose out of joint about this. Why don't you come with me instead? We'll have some good clean fun!"

"Singing opera? But I don't know how."

"Don't try to be modest with me. You're a Manchu, aren't you, and all Manchus can sing Peking opera. You can't fool me. I'll bet you even studied singing—you probably did the part of the young woman. Yes, and I'll bet you looked pretty good back then. How about singing a few lines to show your stuff?"

Would you believe it, Old Man Hao actually got all stirred up, and right then and there belted out a song. But what on earth was our Chief Coach thinking when he said:

"You'll do fine! Just come with me and practice with the band for a few days. In no time you'll sound just like Maestro Mei!"

Maestro Mei indeed! As soon as Old Man Hao opened his mouth everyone burst out laughing: wonderful! He couldn't even carry a tune in a bucket!

Once is about enough for this kind of thing, wouldn't you say? But our friend Li didn't seem to have learned from the experience at all. A few days later he was drinking in a little wine shop when he ran into another "old pal"—well no, they had never met before, but they had hit it off right away, so in a twinkling they had become fast friends—and found out his buddy was down in the dumps because he was being bossed around at home by his daughter-in-law. So of course Li pulled him into the fold right away:

"Let me give you some advice. Drown your sorrows in singing instead. Why don't you come with me. I'm in charge over there. You can't sing? Never mind. Even listening can help you forget your troubles."

For heaven's sake, he's just like those old men in Peking who are always urging you to take rendan pills—they cure everything, you know—or those old women in Guangzhou who are forever offering you some "antirheumatism" oil. No matter what ails you, Li gives the same prescription:

"Come with me, we'll sing a few!"

Time and again he did this. The Bean Street Cultural Post had been in the pink because of Li Zhong-xiang; now, because of him, it was becoming red hot—too hot, in fact. Two more circles of benches had to be added in the hall: now the open area in the middle was no longer even "palm sized." As for the performers, they no longer had to bundle up in overcoats nor tuck their hands up their sleeves, even on the coldest nights, because just to stand up there was almost to cuddle the furnace as you sang. Something else left the veteran fans not knowing whether to laugh or cry. Those new hands like Old Man Hao who had come aboard thanks to Li Zhong-xiang's prodding—they all seemed to have let his words go to their heads, honestly believing that with a few days' practice they would "sound just like Maestro Mei." So they really knocked themselves out at rehearsal every night, howling out aria after aria the whole evening long.

Meanwhile the real "pros" were left waiting in the wings, Worse yet, since many of the newcomers were folks with a bellyful of woes, they couldn't help but air their grievances every chance they had. After an aria from *The Wulong Courtyard* bawling out nasty women, this one would grouse about his nasty wife; after a passage from *The Four Mandarins* singing the praises of honest officials, that one would sigh and mutter:

"How few there are today!"

Or someone would run on and on about the injustices done to him or to a friend or to a friend's friend. *The Inn of Good Fortune* would lead to a lament on snobbery and social climbing. *Banquet at the Border* would bring on a tirade about "that good-for-nothing son of mine." From headaches to heartaches, from tight corners to loose ends—they would babble away about everything under the sun.

Meanwhile some poor soul would still be trying to sing on the "stage."

Things were getting out of hand, but the fellows didn't want their chief coach to lose face, so they kept their mouths shut.

It was Guo Sen-lin, the spear carrier all pumped up for "top billing" and "starring roles," who first reached the boiling point. He went to Old Tang Heshun, the Block Office cadre in charge of the Cultural Post, and threw a fit:

"Did you ask me here to sing or to watch them butcher everything? Why don't you just butcher me instead? I'm cutting out!"

Old Man Tang is a big, tall fellow who is always hunched over, looking for all the world like a huge dried shrimp. The fellows would irreverently call him "Shrimp Head." As a lad he had been trained to sing the young female roles—you could tell from his looks even today that he must have once cut quite a smart figure onstage. But then he started to grow, and grow, and grow. You couldn't very well play the delicate heroine when you were at least half a head taller than the warrior hero, could you? So he was limited to concert singing. People who had heard him at the old Peking Number One Teahouse before Liberation remembered him well for his fine voice and amazing breath control: he could hold on to a note forever, it seemed, and you could never tell when he inhaled between phrases.

Who would have thought that only a few years later he would lose his voice? After that happened Tang decided he was never going to make it as a singer in this life, so he turned to his only other skill: he became a scribe, writing letters, petitions and the like for customers at his sidewalk stand. Not long after Liberation he went to work for the Street Committee, and because of his background was put in charge of running an opera club for the Cultural Post—back in his old profession, you might say.

But his luck was no better this time around. During the Cultural Revolution he was accused of having organized a decadent capitalistic club and was given a vicious beating by the Red Guards. It's kind of funny when you realize that the characters in the operas they were singing at the club had all lived at a time when the capitalist

class wasn't even on the horizon yet. But that's neither here nor there.

After this our friend Mr. Tang was really through with the world of opera. If it weren't for his job he would turn tail and run at the first note from a gong or drum. The authorities solemnly promise there will be no more "mass movements," but who can say for sure? Anyway, he's finally got it figured out: It has been written in his stars that he is not to have anything to do with opera in this life; the slightest contact and he's in for it. But how to keep his distance when he is still on salary as the cadre responsible for the opera club? It would be such a pity to retire and throw all that good money away. So very reluctantly he had decided to stay on as the Cultural Post's "Shrimp Head."

To fulfill his official obligations as well as to protect his own hide, he handles two items, and two items only. First, he keeps an eye on the newspapers every day to see whether they are about to "criticize" something or other. What for? In his own words:

"So's we can fix up the outside."

Actually it's all quite simple. On one side of the Cultural Post's front door is a board for wall posters and newspapers. Whenever Old Shrimp Head sees a slogan mentioned in the press he would clip it out and post it on the board under the heading Notices—you know, articles with titles like Criticize Bourgeois Liberalism or Clear Away Spiritual Pollution, The space is usually chock full of clippings. Of course he knows better than anyone that no matter what is posted on the outside, inside the hall they're still singing vintage operas, the old war-horses.\fn{As opposed to the operas which emphasized Maoist doctrine which were the repertory of the Peking Opera from the 1960s to the mid 1970s.} But he keeps at it anyway, if only to give himself a little peace of mind.

Second, he would write new lyrics to old songs to keep up with "current events," whether they be the "one child per family" campaign, or a crackdown on crime, or "traffic safety month." If the District Committee decides to put on a show tomorrow, the Bean Street Block Office Cultural Post would be ready to roll. In a contest to pick the block that is "The Most Advanced in Cultural Activities," an ancient love story like *The Romance of the Western Chamber*\fn{A small section of which is included in the Protocol for World Peaces, under its more familiar Western title of *The Dream of the Western Chamber*.} would go over like a lead balloon, but something like *The Virtues of Vasectomy*—now there's a winner for sure!

In the beginning Tang Heshun was more than happy to let Li Zhong-xiang take charge of the opera club. At the least Tang could save on tea leaves, to say nothing of time and energy. He might even have someone to take the blame in case anything went wrong. But now it seemed he had no choice but to step in. If he continued to give this fellow a free hand who knows where they'll all end up? Even if the outsiders Li brought in didn't cause a lick of trouble, how were they all going to fit into the hall?

Li Zhong-xiang himself had not yet caught on to the problem. Every evening he would sit around as usual with his old cronies and sing a little, chat a bit, hold forth on matters big and small, all the while thinking to himself that he was doipg a pretty good job as chief coach. It wasn't until he heard what Tang Heshun had to say that the problem began to register. But after giving it some thought he wasn't at all convinced. Didn't everyone come here just to have some fun? If Guo Sen-lin really wanted to be a "star" maybe he should go somewhere else instead!

"Whoa there! You never know when to stop, do you? So they call you 'Chief Coach,' but that doesn't mean you really have an opera school under your command. Just look at the people you've dragged in: they're not exactly opera school material—more like inmates of an old folks' home!"

Tang Heshun was about the same age as Li Zhong-xiang and they had always been on familiar terms with each other, so now he minced no words:

"Give me a break, will you? Those old geezers you brought along who can't sing worth a damn—let them go somewhere else to get their kicks!"

Old Man Tang didn't really mean it of course, but Li Zhong-xiang was cut to the quick. All those fellows he had invited along, were they all to be drummed out just like that? Sure he would lose face, but that wasn't the point. What he couldn't stand was the thought of them going back to squatting in front of a store, or squabbling with their sons and bickering with their wives. For a long time he didn't say a word. Finally, his eyes drooping like a hound dog's, he said:

"All right, all right, can't we at least leave things as they are? How're you going to keep some and not the others?" He thought for a while longer, then added with a sigh:

"Let it be. We're all at that age now, all camels on the wagon—it's the only fun we have left."

Reckon few of the young folks in Peking today would understand what he meant by that.

In the old days there used to be a lot of camels in Peking—that's how this saying came about. When a camel died it was put on a wagon and carted away to the slaughterhouse, to be recycled into soup bones and other useful

stuff. After a life of hard labor this ride on the wagon was the only "fun" the poor camel ever had. Some sense of humor, eh? Anyway, the saying was quite popular with folks like Li Zhong-xiang. After a hard day's work carrying coffins, he would plop himself down in a wine shop somewhere, order a double shot of Burning Blade and sigh:

"Camels on the wagon, that's the only fun we'll ever have!"

By now it's become one of his stock phrases, so we needn't take him too seriously. Besides, to the old codgers he had recruited into the "company," their nightly music-making might well be the only fun they have left.

Tang Heshun is a sensible and sympathetic man, and he understood what was going through his friend's mind. After thinking it over for a little while, he said:

"All right, let's do this: Those who're already here might as well stay, we're not going to kick people out anyway. But as for the rest of the world, why don't you leave them where they are? One more person and this place is going to burst apart at the seams!"

"It's a deal!" Li Zhongxiang waved his hands in delight. "I'll get that into my thick skull, I promise you. If I bring in one more person I'll be a donkey's ass!"

*

An oath is a most useless thing. Take our friend Li Zhong-xiang—not three days had gone by before he brought along another old crony to join his fellow buffs. What're you going to do—really make him walk on all fours? Of course he had an explanation:

"But what else could I do? I can ignore the boss, even His Majesty the Emperor himself, but this is my old buddy Wan-you who helped me out when I was desperate. I can't just watch him go to pieces."

Qiao Wan-you is ten years younger than Li Zhong-xiang. He was still a child when Li was already making a living carrying coffins. When Qiao was twelve his father died and left the family destitute, so to help make ends meet he would earn a few pennies working as an extra in funeral processions, carrying a paper willow tree or holding up signs that said Silence! or Make Way! Bachelor Li had only himself to support, and every so often he would help out the Qiao family. When Wan-you's mother came down with the "swelling sickness" back in that terrible winter of '33, it was Li who pawned his clothes to buy medicine for her. When she died, again it was Li who got together a few of the guys to talk the Fellowship Pharmacy into donating a cheap coffin, then helped Wan-you bury his mother. To Li Zhong-xiang all this was no more than "looking out for each other."

"What friends are for?"

So when it comes to acts of kindness it was actually Li who had done the first good turn, even though he has forgotten all about it himself.

Long ago in Peking there was a man who specialized in the scattering of paper money at funerals. He went by the nickname of "Hairy Patch," because of the tuft of long hairs growing out of the mole on his chin, and few if any knew his real name. As a boy Hairy Patch had also worked as an extra at funerals, but he grew tired of other people teasing him about how little money he made, so he went all out to become the best paper strewer in the whole city. It was said that when Hairy Patch scattered paper money he would have one stack under his left arm, another in the crook of his elbow, the third in his left hand; then he would wave his right hand an—swoooosh!—every last piece of paper would be whirling and swirling up, up past the top of the four-storied Sipailou, where they would dance in the air like so many snowflakes before fluttering slowly onto the ground, and no two pieces were ever found to be stuck to each other.

This skill alone was enough to make him famous allover Peking. The story went that it was he who did the honors at the funerals of the powerful warlords Yuan Shikai and Li Yuanhong. On a good day he would make a hundred silver pieces, on a bad day at least twenty, and that was not counting the clothes he would get as a member of the procession. It wasn't long before Hairy Patch had made enough money to open up his own business.

Qiao Wan-you was also determined to make good, and following in Hairy Patch's footsteps he too learned to scatter paper like magic. When Hairy Patch died Wan-you became the undisputed champ of his trade. Times had changed, though, so he didn't make as much money as his predecessor had—oh, maybe only five or six silver pieces each time—but he put it to good use. Unlike so many others, he didn't smoke, drink, gamble or whore around, and he had a good mind for business to boot. For instance, he got together a gaggle of kids to walk behind him at funerals picking up the paper money he had just scattered. Afterward they would hand it over in exchange for some candied crabapples. When he got home Qiao would carefully string up all the pieces of paper, sprinkle some water on them, then squeeze them between a couple of wooden blocks, and presto!—they were ready to be used again at the next funeral. Meanwhile he would pocket the money each customer paid him for the paper.

After a few years Qiao Wan you managed to save up a tidy little sum, found himself a wife, and bought the

little compound at 10 Winch Handle Alley. That was during the days when Li Zhong-xiang was hanging around the teahouse waiting for odd jobs and living from hand to mouth. As the saying goes, it never rains but it pours. Sure enough, just then the mud hovel he was living in collapsed, leaving him without even a roof over his head. As soon as Qiao Wan you found out about this he insisted that Li move in with them. At first Li refused. Was this what it had come to? All those years of hard work and he didn't even have a place to call his own, he'd have to live off his young friend instead? How humiliating! But then where else could he go? So in the end he gave in and moved into 10 Winch Handle Alley. After much courteous yielding back and forth, Qiao Wan-you and his family took the north house and Li Zhong-xiang the west. The house to the east was rented to a couple who made their living as street vendors. They have since retired and gone to live with their son, leaving the house to their daughter Lai Yu-fang and her husband Wang Jin.

It is now some forty years since Li Zhong-xiang first moved into 10 Winch Handle Alley with Qiao Wan-you and his family. Except for the ten years or so during the Cultural Revolution when all private property was confiscated and everyone had to pay rent to the government, Li had been feeling ill at ease all along. Once or twice he had asked Qiao if he shouldn't be paying him something in the way of rent. Before Li had finished talking, the normally quiet and mild-mannered Qiao Wan-you would get all red in the face and sputter:

"That's an insult!"

So Li had to let the matter drop. This is what he was referring to when he said Qiao had done him a great kindness. Of course it wasn't the money he meant so much as the friendship behind it. By comparison he felt that what he had done for Qiao long ago was no more than a snap of the fingers. He had to find some way of repaying Qiao's kindness or he would never feel good about himself.

One day around noon, Li Zhong-xiang was having a drink at home when Qiao Wan-you walked in without knocking—he didn't have to because after all these years they were just like family to each other.

"Where's Dezhi?"

Dezhi is Li Zhong-xiang's son. Normally he would be at work at his own little tailor's stall at the market, but that day he had taken time off to have some fun.

"Has the kid got a girlfriend now?"

"It'd be about time, he's already thirty-three," Li Zhong-xiang said as he poured a second bowl of wine and set out another pair of chopsticks. Once he had run into his son walking with a young woman on Bean Street. He had seen her before—she would drop by the Cultural Post from time to time—kind of pretty, not a bad figure either. But who knows whether she's actually Dezhi's girl- friend?

Now that he's getting on in years Qiao Wan-you no longer denies himself everything. Once in a while he would down a few drinks too. He is a slight, wiry man with deep-set eyes and a narrow, straight nose, and his boyish face and silver hair give him a gentle and serene look that matches his easygoing nature, so rarely found in what used to be called the "lower classes." Although a man of few words, he has never been tongue-tied around Li Zhong-xiang. But today for some reason he was silent as he sipped his wine, head bowed and seemingly lost in thought.

Finally he let out a long sigh, lifted his head and looked around the room.

"Yep, this is a much better arrangement. You were smart not to get married again. At least you've got your peace and quiet!" Li Zhongxiang answered:

"He who is wearing shoes always imagines how cool and comfortable it would be to go barefoot, while he who is barefoot always envies the one with shoes. To be honest with you, if it wasn't for the fun I get from my opera club every night, I might well be looking around for another mate."

Qiao Wany-ou fell silent again.

"What's the matter, Wany-ou? Whatever it is, two heads are always better than one." Li couldn't stand this wishy-washy routine any longer.

"There's nothing you can do to help." Qiao smiled weakly, then added:

"All right, I'll tell you. The people from the courthouse are coming tomorrow to investigate. Chuan-sheng and Xiu-lian are getting a divorce."

Xiu-lian is Qiao Wany-ou's daughter and Chuan-sheng his son-in- law. The two had met while working in the same factory. After the wedding Chuan-sheng moved in with his wife's parents because there was no room to spare at his own parents' house.

Li Zhong-xiang was furious when he heard what Qiao Wan-you said.

"But it's only been six months since they got married. What is that son-of-a-bitch up to?"

"It's not his fault. If I were in his shoes I wouldn't be able to stand it either!" Qiao sighed again. "Forget it,

dirty linen should be kept out of sight. To tell the truth, I don't even know what to say tomorrow to those people from the court."

Li didn't press him any more. He knew what a proud man his old friend was, and if Qiao didn't want to talk about it he certainly wasn't going to pry.

But in fact Qiao had been doing a slow burn for days now and was about ready to blow his lid. Besides, while he is usually pretty reserved, a few drops of liquor would loosen his tongue immediately. A couple of bowls of the potent Peking Daqu down the hatch and it's as if what was on his mind would turn musty if he didn't give it an airing right away. By then you would have no choice but to listen.

To begin at the beginning, it all had to do with his wife, who used to sell "watch-it food" at Heaven's Bridge. You can't find this stuff nowadays, but once upon a time it was very common. Actually it was just table scraps from restaurants—"leftovers" to some, a "hodgepodge" to others, but a "specialty of the house" for poor folks. In the same bucket you'd find big pieces of meat along with fishheads, fishbones, egg shells, peanut shells, toothpicks, cigarette butts and … you name it. It was served up right in the bucket too: for every five picks with your chopsticks—no matter what you fished out—you'd pay one copper, so you'd have to "watch it" as you tried to pick up only the meat. As for the proprietress, she would be busy keeping an eye on you: five passes with your sticks and she'd put a little bamboo marker next to your bowl—you can bet she was "watching it" as closely as you. Now you see how the name came about.

After Liberation "watch-it food" went out of style, so Mrs. Qiao stayed home to take care of her family and to help out at the Street Committee.

The Street Committee is always trying to improve the well-being of the people, including their minds. For volunteers it can count on all the old men and old women who have nothing better to do than stand on the street corner all day talking about the importance of family planning to anyone who would listen. Or else it would hold discussions for the old folks on such serious issues as "alienation." From their discussions they might conclude that something was "entirely necessary and very timely," when in fact it was "entirely unnecessary and very harmful," or entirely necessary for some people—cadres, say, or intellectuals—but entirely irrelevant to old ladies. In other words, what's sauce for the goose is not always sauce for the gander. But somehow these folks never got the point.

Anyway, no matter what they were doing Madam Qiao was always right there in the thick of it. Not long ago, as part of the campaign to crack down on "criminal behavior" and arrest "bad elements," she had put on a red armband and "patroled" the neighborhood. The young toughs hanging out in the area—up to no good, that's for sure—have maliciously dubbed her "Inspector Boundfoot." What a pity there are not more old ladies like her! Why then China would have no trouble transforming itself into a modern, civilized society—in one great leap, I dare say.\fn{A satire, of course, on the "Great Leap Forward" campaign (1958-1960), which was supposed to instantaneously transform China into a self-suifficient industrial and agricultural economy, but had to be abandoned when the effort failed through bad planning and mismanagement, and resulted in the loss of an estimated 20,000,000 lives in a subsequent famine.}

On the other hand, while it is all well and good to be so concerned with public affairs, it is something else again when you poke your nose into everyone's private affairs. Qiao Wan-you used to keep a pet nightingale. "Twenty cents a day just on birdfeed—is money burning a hole in your pocket?! You keep this up and I'll feed it twenty cents worth of poison!" So he switched to gardening. "Listen, ''m not going to pay for all that water!" The poor guy would no more than use a toothpick but she would find something in that to nag him about for hours on end. And she has forgotten none of the tricks from her "watch-it" days, glaring so suspiciously at everything and everyone it's enough to drive you up a wall. It is only because Qiao Wan-you is such an easygoing fellow that for the longest time he hadn't bothered to argue with her. But when she began to meddle in the affairs of her daughter and son-in-law, that was absolutely the last straw.

Xiu-lian is the Qiaos' youngest daughter, and, as in that folk saying about youngest daughter being like mother's undershirt—in other words, closest to the heart—she was their favorite child. Needless to say Mrs. Qiao was tickled pink that Xiu-lian and her husband were to live with them after the marriage. But a few days before the wedding, she summoned them into her presence and very solemnly said:

"So, you're getting married soon. It'd be none of my business if you're not going to be living here, but since you're going to be right under my nose I've got to tell you this: That 'thing,' it's not like your three meals a day, once a week is plenty often. If you go at it all the time it's no good for either of you. Anyway, I'm not going to let my daughter be abused, understand?"

If you think that's outrageous, wait till you hear what else she pulled on them. Being normal, healthy folks and newlyweds to boot, the young couple had an understandably hearty appetite for sex, so it was only to be expected

that they wouldn't always stick to the "established plan." Unfortunately, only a wooden divider separated their "honeymoon suite" from the older couple's bedroom. Worse yet, Mother-in-law had brought her "Inspector Boundfoot" tactics right into the home. A light sleeper, she would wake up at the slightest rustle from the next room and, without pausing to find out whether it was fact or fantasy or false alarm, she'd bang on the divider and give them a thorough tongue-lashing. Can anyone in his right mind put up with this sort of thing? Never mind the two young folks, who have gone from rows to blows to divorce petitions—even someone as patient and tolerant as Qiao couldn't help but blow his top:

"What the hell's wrong with you?! Sticking your nose into everyone's business, every goddamn piss and fart."

The old man almost kicked the bucket when he heard her reply. In a voice loud enough for the whole neighborhood to hear, Mrs. Qiao retorted:

"And why not?! Let me tell you something, you men have no idea what we women go through. Back when I first married you, I was your mother's slave by day and by night, dammit, I was your slave. You were such an animal you never let me get any sleep. Listen, things have changed, we women have been liberated, you can't walk all over us anymore!"

Qiao Wan-you kept on drinking as he spilled his guts to his old friend. By now he had had more than three bowls of wine, even though two is his usual limit, and he was beginning to slur his words and to stammer:

"Y'know, s-soon as s-she opens her mouth m-my poor noggin hurts!"

"What a d-d-disgrace! A goddamn d-dis-grace!"

In the end that was all he could say, over and over again.

Li Zhong-xiang looked at the sorry figure across from him and his heart sank. He thought to himself: of all the problems in the world, old buddy, you had to come up with something like this! If it was money you needed, I could give you three or five hundred easy. If you needed some work done you could count on me and my son, and we could even get more help. But something like this—you know how the saying goes: Even a wise man would have trouble settling a family quarrel. What am I going to do with an old married couple like you two—pack you off to get a divorce also?! Then again, all these years you've never once bellyached or asked me for anything, all these years that I've been living under your roof—what kind of a friend would I be if I can't even come up with something to cheer you up at least?!

In this state of agitation, plus having had a few too many himself, Li Zhongxiang forgot all about his oath. Just like those old men in Peking who would instinctively reach for their rendan pills at a time like this, or those old ladies in Guangzhou who would turn to their "antirheumatism oil," he didn't even hesitate before snatching away Qiao Wanyou's wine bowl and saying:

"Listen, Wan-you, the ancients said: 'Each to his own.' Stop worrying and don't pay any more attention to your wife's bitching. Why don't you come with me—we'll sing a little opera and have ourselves some fun."

"Sing? Opera? Me?"

Squinting his eyes Qiao Wanyou shook his head from side to side.

"I … d-d-don't know how."

"Well then, how about doing the 'background'?"

"B-background?"

"Sure, background music—play the gongs, cymbals, strings, anything you like."

"D-don't know none o' that n-neither."

"So you'll learn! I bet you're a natural. Just look at how you learned to scatter paper money."

"Ummmm." Qiao Wan-you thought for a moment, finally sighed and said:

"Why not? It sure b-beats being yelled at. All right, I'll try it."

Li Zhong-xiang dug out an old *erhu*\fn{A note reads: *A two-stringed instrument played with a bow*.} from heaven knows where, and the very next evening brought Qiao Wan-you with him to the Cultural Post. Perhaps our Chief Coach did feel a little ashamed to have broken his promise, because he also brought along a fold-up chair from home and settled his old friend—the retired champ of the paper money scatterers—in a little out-of-the-way corner.

From then on, every evening when the band played away on their *erhus, jinghus, yueqins*,\fn{A note reads: Jinghu, yueqin*: stringed instruments*.} hardwood clappers and the like, providing "background" for the action on stage, you would see in a little cranny on the east side of the "concert hall" a thin-faced old man, eyes half closed and head swaying, an *erhu* in his lap. That was none other than our friend Qiao Wan-you.

But if you listened carefully you'd discover that the sounds of the *erhu* came from elsewhere. Even after he became one of the regulars and had been "sawing away" for quite some time, the most Qiao could manage was a very simple overture. And even then he would often miss his cue.

*

You'd be wrong if you thought our chief coach would take on anything and everything, that he would make his opera "company" open to all comers. It all depended on who the "comer" was.

The fellows, though, didn't let him get off lightly for his breach of promise.

"Hey, Chief, got any more old timers on Winch Handle Alley? Why don't you round them up all at once, instead of wasting time going after them one by one?"

"You know that pair of stone lions in front of Number Twenty-nine? They've been looking kind of depressed lately. Listen, Zhong-xiang, why don't you bring them over for a song or two?"

Li knew they meant no harm, so sometimes he'd sass them back, sometimes he'd just laugh it off. He really couldn't blame them for having a joke at his expense. If you counted off all the old guys on Winch Handle Alley, you'd find that aside from those working as "consultants" for that travel agency set up by the unemployed youngsters in the neighborhood or as watchmen for the warehouse around the corner—to make a little extra besides their retirement pay—and except for those who couldn't move around much anymore, why, everyone else had been recruited into the "company." Well, there was that other one, Han De-lai over at Number Nine, who came a couple of times and could actually sing quite well. But he really got off on the "Anti-Spiritual Pollution" campaign and started to browbeat everyone about it. The guys would have none of that, of course. Instead, they charged him with spiritually polluting the cultural post and really made a monkey out of him, so he never showed his face again. Now if they wanted to recruit anyone else from Winch Handle Alley it would have to be those two stone lions!

Then one evening out of the blue came Wang Jin, Li's neighbor across the yard in the east house.

And as fate would have it, the opera for the evening was *Qin Xiang-tian*, one of the classics that people never seem to tire of, perhaps because of its story about good winning out over evil: poor scholar Chen Shi-mei passes the imperial examinations, climbs the ladder of success but abandons wife Qin Xiang-lian and their children; eventually, however, he is given the punishment he deserves by the righteous official Bao Gong.

Somewhere in the middle of all this melodrama Wang Jin walked in. Wearing a blue polyester tunic suit, a brown hat, black-framed glasses, and a dark look on his face, he sat down without a word or a nod to anyone. He was still sitting there tight lipped and buttoned up when Li Zhong-xiang finally noticed him.

"Well, well, the gang from Number Ten is all here," Li whispered to Qiao Wan you and chuckled softly. But he couldn't help feeling rather puzzled. What was a young man like Wang Jin—and well educated to boot!—doing in a place like this?

To the residents of Winch Handle Alley, Wang Jin is quite an impressive character. Even Li Zhong-xiang, who has been living in the same compound with him for some twenty years now—even he was quite taken aback when, about a year ago, Wang's wife Lai Yu-fang very smugly announced that her husband had written a book, thick as a brick, and had been paid more than four thousand *yuan* for it. Sure Li Zhong-xiang knew that Wang was quite an accomplished fellow, a graduate of Qinghua University and all that, but then he had been branded a "rightist" and ended up working as some sort of a technician in a factory. Someone introduced him to Lai Yu-fang, and not long after that he moved in with her without any kind of ceremony. For the past twenty years he had kept a low profile, going to work every day and helping out around the house afterward, lighting the fire or fetching water from the public tap down the street, or playing with their daughter.

In short, there was nothing at all remarkable about his daily routine. So how did he come up with a book "thick as a brick?" Magic? Sleight of hand? But however he did it, the book itself was real enough, and so apparently were the four thousand *yuan*—as can be seen from the fact that his wife no longer had to work at home gluing cardboard boxes. Besides, for a while you had no choice but to hear all about their good fortune from Lai Yu-fang herself. See that sedan waiting in front of the compound several times a week? That was to take her husband to his lectures, she said. You know he's stopped working at the factory, don't you? That's because he has been transferred back to the university, she said, no more "nine-to-five" work for him. Then finally Lai Yu-fang showed everyone that book, "thick as a brick." Sure enough, right there on the cover was Wang Jin's name, and inside—why, it was so full of diagrams and charts and foreign words it made your head spin!

However, it wasn't long before Lai Yu-fang lost her smug look. The two of them started going at each other like cats and dogs, and the word "divorce" was thrown around more and more often. Living in the same compound and running into them every day, Li Zhong-xiang couldn't help overhearing all this, but he had no idea who was in the right. On the one hand, he found that broad Lai Yu-fang pretty disgusting. For instance, in the summertime she would waddle around the yard in a sleeveless undershirt, her tits flopping around underneath like two flatfish. Ugh! Then there's the way she yells at her old man—like a fishwife, a spitfire, a regular shrew!

Whatever, the woman is no angel. On the other hand, Li Zhong-xiang would think, no matter how much of a bitch she may be, there's that ancient saying: “Forget not the friends from your humble days, cherish the wife who saw you through hard times.”

But this Wang Jin—no sooner is he doing a little better but he wants a divorce and a new wife—he’s no saint either. In fact he’s just like that scoundrel Chen Shimei in the opera! And when Li Zhong-xiang thought about their daughter Yuan-yuan he became absolutely furious with Wang:

“How heartless can you get, abandoning your child just like that! So you’ve come here to forget your troubles, have you? Fine, maybe you’ll learn a few other things while you’re here, like: we may not be bigshots like you, with your book ‘thick as a brick’ and the thousands you made from it, and the sedan taking you all over town while you parade around like a VIP, but at least we know right from wrong. We may be poor but we still have our honor! After Bao Gong finishes off Chen Shimei here, we’re going to put on *The Censuring of Wang Kui* just for you!”

The Censuring of Wang Kui is also about an ungrateful husband, and it is perfectly understandable how Li’s thoughts went from Wang Jin to Chen Shi-mei to Wang Kui. Then again, it’s only human to make a mistake once in a while. And this time our friend Li Zhong-xiang, who has always tried to give people the benefit of the doubt, forgot that there are usually two sides to a story, and that while there are cads like Wang Kui and Chen Shi-mei, there are also husbands who are in the right.

When the passage from *Qin Xiang-tian* was over Li stood right up and launched into his “censuring” of all heartless husbands:

Pleas and appeals you would not heed,
Power and riches have turned your head.
Conscience, honor-both have fled;
Cursed be your name long after you’re dead.

Li Zhongxiang poured his heart and soul into the song, and whether it was because of his surprisingly moving performance, or because there were those who understood what he was driving at and wanted to help teach Wang Jin a lesson, the audience responded with loud applause and cheers.

At half past ten as usual the group broke up. A light snow was falling as Li Zhong-xiang and Qiao Wan-you made their way home. A short distance ahead of them on Winch Handle Alley walked Wang Jin, a solitary and rather pitiable figure. Normally Li would still be a-tingle with the evening’s excitement, singing and chatting away while Qiao would hum along by his side. But tonight Li felt rather ill at ease. Why were the three of them not walking together when they had gone to the same show and were now headed for the same place?

Something else nagged at him even more. It all had to do with the passage from *The Censuring of Wang Kui*. Why on earth did he do it? What business was it of his anyway? If Wang Jin was in the wrong, the court or his work unit would take care of that. Most likely the poor fellow was feeling pretty low and had come to forget his troubles for a while. Why did he have to give him a hard time on top of everything else?

Wang Jin reached the gate first and held it open, waiting for the other two to catch up.

“Thanks,” murmured Qiao Wan-you.

“Not at all,” said Wang Jin, locking up after they had stepped through.

Li Zhong-xiang was silent, but he felt even more ashamed of himself.

The next night Wang Jin showed up again at the Cultural Post and again sat glumly through the entire evening without making one sound. After the show Li Zhong-xiang cleaned up in a hurry so all three of them could walk home together.

“Professor Wang, you like to sing some opera, eh?” Still feeling a little sheepish about the night before, Li searched for some way to break the ice.

“No, no, I can’t sing at all.”

“Oh, so you like listening to it then?”

“Uh, so-so.”

What else could they talk about? Li couldn’t think of anything. Nevertheless, from then on every evening after dinner the three of them would leave the compound together and walk to the Cultural Post, then come home together around half past ten. Wang still kept to himself, answering only when spoken to, and then only briefly. And he always wore a pained look, like he was going to the dentist’s instead of to a show.

It wasn’t long before Li Zhong-xiang realized that Professor Wang was a complete ignoramus as far as opera

was concerned. A true fan has certain tell-tale traits: for one thing, as soon as the gongs and drums start up he would sway and nod to their beat, completely lost in the music whether he was singing or just listening. But Professor Wang merely sat there like a log. That alone was enough to make Li Zhong-xiang suspicious. Then one night, as he was getting ready to go on, Li saw Wang Jin sitting there stock still, as usual. Partly to make amends for the time when he "censured" Professor Wang, and partly to see how much the good professor really knew about opera, Li asked Wang if he would fill in for a minor part.

"I … I can't," Wang got all flustered and shook his head vigorously.

Li persisted:

"There's nothing to it, not for an old hand like you. You don't even have to get up on stage. Just answer "Oh!" at the right places."

Now for anyone the least bit familiar with Peking opera this would be child's play, but for Wang Jin it was a tall order: He had no idea where the "right places" were. "Oh-ing" when he should have been silent and silent when he should have "Oh-ed;" he had them rolling in the aisles before the show was half over. To think that Li Zhong-xiang had once asked him if he could sing a few passages. What a laugh! He didn't know the first thing about Peking opera.

However, his unintentionally comic debut didn't seem to dampen Wang Jin's "enthusiasm" at all. He continued to leave the house with his two neighbors every evening and to come home with them after the show. And he continued to be tight lipped and sad eyed. By now Li Zhong-xiang was thoroughly baffled: why did Wang come along when he knew nothing about opera and seemed to care even less? Didn't he have anything better to do? Like writing another book, "thick as a brick."

Finally Li couldn't contain his curiosity any longer. As the three of them were walking home one night, he decided to get to the bottom of the matter:

"Professor Wang, I hope you won't mind if I ask you a personal question."

"What is it?"

"Please don't get me wrong, I'm not trying to throw you out or anything."

Li paused for a moment, then, pointing to Qiao Wan-you, he continued:

"Guys like us, we've got one foot in the grave, and what's more we've got no 'culture.' We have nothing better to do than sing a little opera every night and have a good time. But you—tell me, why are you hanging out with us? I'd understand it if you were a real fan, but you don't even know enough to do a walk-on. So what gives?"

Wang Jin smiled ruefully, but said nothing.

Qiao Wan you picked up where his friend left off:

"We're over the hill and pretty useless. But you're different. Frankly, if we didn't know you could write books we wouldn't have bothered. So tell us, why are you wasting your time like this?"

At these words Wang almost broke down and cried.

As a matter of fact Wang knew three foreign languages and was an expert in computer software. The time was ripe for him to pursue his career ambitions, and he had plans to write a whole series of books, not just one or two—until the problems at home drove him to distraction. Not only was Lai Yu-fang ignorant and narrow minded, she was so hot tempered she'd fly off the handle over the merest trifle. Even back in the dark days when Wang Jin was living under the stigma of a "rightist" he would often think of his former girlfriend. But while he couldn't help but be attracted to beautiful and refined women—after all, he's only human—he had never even considered being unfaithful. No matter how unpleasant Lai Yu-fang may be, he could never forget that she had braved the times to marry him when he was still branded as a "rightist," that she had borne their daughter and taken care of the family. No, he couldn't leave her, not after all they had been through together. Now that their circumstances were improved he had plans for Yu-fang to take some courses, hoping that in time the distance between them would be reduced. Little did he dream that his whole world would be turned topsy-turvy by that one letter.

The letter was written by his former girlfriend. To this day he himself doesn't understand why he held on to it. Was it because it brought back so many lovely memories? Or was it because in the letter she had described her wretched family life, providing company for his own misery? Whatever the reason, there was no denying that the letter had stirred his emotions so that he couldn't bring himself to burn it. Instead he locked it away in a drawer, thinking that was the end of the matter. He neither kept the appointment she proposed nor did he ever write back. After all, he was a rational man—so rational he even considered showing the letter to Yu-fang before deciding against it. She didn't have the capacity to understand the matter. She would have gone on the warpath right away, charging up to the other woman's house and calling her names like "slut" and "hussy," maybe even throwing a fit

and rolling on the ground in public. Why make her blood boil with this letter? Why provoke her into hurting another person?

But Wang never considered what would happen if Lai Yu-fang ever discovered the letter herself. Then, he could talk a blue streak, explain, clarify, swear by all that he held sacred, even admit that he had been "unfaithful" in his heart—and still not convince her of his innocence.

And that's exactly what happened. When she found the letter, she insisted that he go along with her to teach the woman a lesson.

"Didn't you just swear you had a clear conscience? Then come with me to tell that bitch off! No? I knew you didn't have the guts! But I do. I'm going to make sure those hussies know never to mess with me. So she wants to snatch you away, eh? Well, she can just forget it!"

From then on every female who called on Wang Jin, whether colleague or student, would have to suffer the lady's black looks. Sometimes she would even slam the door right in their faces. There was no reasoning with her at all. The more he tried the more insanely jealous she became.

"What's the matter, did I upset one of your little darlings? You feel sorry for her, don't you? Well goddamn it, why don't you ever think about me instead?"

Then she would blubber and bawl and cause a brouhaha that would set the whole neighborhood on edge. No one can put up with this kind of caterwauling day in and day out, much less a man like Wang Jin who was trying to concentrate on his career.

"All right, all right, forget it! If that's how you feel, why don't we just get a divorce?"

The words tumbled out of his mouth before Wang realized what he was saying. He was at his wits' end: He couldn't read, couldn't work, he couldn't produce anymore. Was he going to spend the rest of his life being raked over the coals for this one incident? But in trying to get it over with he had only made it worse. Their work units became involved, the Women's Association began to investigate. The verdict: she was the noble and long-suffering Qin Xian-glian, he the contemptible Chen Shi-mei, of course,

"But what's the use of telling you all this? You probably wouldn't understand anyway."

Smiling bitterly, Wang Jin shook his head and began puffing away on a cigarette. After some time he let out a long sigh:

"Believe me, I really appreciate your concern. But where can I work on my book? At home? As soon as she sees me sitting down at my desk she'll storm right in and tear everything up, screaming at the top of her lungs, 'Go ahead! Write your goddamn book, you son of a bitch! The more you write the worse you get! I'd rather go back to the old days when we were living from hand to mouth!' If I go to my office she'll say: 'Sneaking out to see your sweetheart, eh?' Even if I do find a place to work I've lost my concentration. To be honest with you, going to the show with you two every night is just about the only thing she'll allow. 'Yes, go along with them, go hear how Bao Gong fixed Chen Shi-mei. That's what'll happen to all you heartless bastards!' If you don't believe me just look over at my house tomorrow evening. She'll be parked right by the window watching me as I step out the door. If I don't walk out with you two she'll run right after me and start a fight, no question about it."

Li Zhong-xiang and Qiao Wan-you sighed again and again as they listened to Wang's story. When he was finished, the three of them stood wordlessly under a street light for a long while. Li's heart ached at the thought of a learned man like Professor Wang killing time every day with all these old codgers, forcing himself to listen to something he didn't understand at all. Then Li remembered how rude he had been when Professor Wang first joined them, and he could have kicked himself for it.

"Professor Wang, I'm so sorry, I didn't know. That day when I sang the piece from *The Censuring of Wang Kui* I was wrong, so wrong …"

"What piece?"

"You know, the one I sang the first time you came here."

"Oh, that one. What's wrong with it? I kind of liked it," said Wang Jin, looking nonplussed.

Li Zhong-xiang sighed again as he became even more heartsick. Wang had not understood a word of what he was listening to that night. Just as well.

They lapsed into silence again. After some time Li Zhong-xiang suddenly spoke up:

"Professor Wang, I'm just an uneducated stiff who used to carry coffins for a living, so please forgive me if I get out of line. You know me, I like to have a good time, and I like others to have fun as well. Especially those who're worried and depressed—I really want to help cheer them up if I can. But I've been thinking: there's nothing I can do to help you with your problem."

"Oh please don't say that!" Wang Jin interjected. "It makes me feel much better just to tag along with you two

every day.”

“Stop kidding yourself. You can’t go on killing time like this. And if we let you we wouldn’t be doing right by you or anyone else.”

Li Zhong-xiang folded his arms across his chest and continued:

“Let me come straight to the point: The opera club is no place for you, Professor, and I can’t let you come anymore. Don’t think I'm throwing you out because I don’t like you or don’t want to help you out—after all, we’ve been friends and neighbors for many, many years now. On the contrary, it’s because I don’t want to see you waste your time hanging around this place. Me and Wan-you here, we’re not much good at anything. Even if we could talk the hind legs off a donkey and went and told everyone we met that you'’re no Chen Shi-mei, that’s still not going to help you very much. If we tried to whack some sense into the dame, make her see what a great guy her old man is, it wouldn’t work either. For one thing it’s against the law. Besides, if she got hurt it’d not only add to your worries, it’d also cost you a pretty penny in doctor’s bills!

“So let me make a dumb suggestion. She watches you from the window every night, right? Well, let her watch all she wants. You just come along with us as usual, but once we get out of the alley we can go our separate ways. To each his own, I always say. We trust you, we know you’re not going to meet a mistress somewhere. Just find yourself a quiet spot and write another book, ‘thick as a brick,’ all right?”

Now it was Wang Jin’s turn to ache inside. That was how, in addition to the fun they had every evening at the Cultural Post, Li Zhong-xiang and Qiao Wan-you came to enjoy another kind of “fun:” escorting their pride and joy, Professor Wang, out of the compound and down the alley, so he could go to the university library to write his book, “thick as a brick.”

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Every evening at half past six sharp, “Shrimp Head” Tang Heshun would unlock the door of the Cultural Post. Then he would either go next door to Liu Shan’s to play chess or to the reading room to clip newspapers. Right on his heels would appear Li Zhong-xiang in his distinctive bowlegged walk, to be followed immediately by Qiao Wan you, carrying his battered *erhu* like some priceless treasure in a satchel made of blue twill. Once inside, the two old fellows would bustle around boiling water, making tea and setting out the benches, while one after another the troops would show up. Finally all would be ready—and the gongs, drums and clappers would take off! Everyone’s spirits would soar, especially those with troubles of one kind or another, a disobedient son, say, or a nagging wife. For a few hours at least, their problems can all go to hell. Not even paradise on earth could hold a candle to their home away from home!

People are easily satisfied, especially someone like Li Zhong-xiang. To the ancient saying, “He who is content will always find happiness,” Li has added his own: “He who has fun will always be content.” In other words, Li would win coming and going. At home he had a dutiful son who always made sure that there were five full bottles of Beijing Daqu stored under his bed and a carton of Hengda cigarettes lying in his drawer. Content with how things were at home, Li Zhong-xiang had found happiness—just as the ancients prescribed. Moreover, every evening he would walk out of the courtyard with his old buddy Qiao Wan-you and his new friend Professor Wang, until they got to the end of the alley and went their separate ways; every evening he and Wan-you had “fun” not only from their music making but also from helping a friend in need. Having found this fun. they were quite content—that was from following Li’s own prescription. And thus overflowing with happiness and contentment—not to mention a goodly amount of Beijing Daqu—Li Zhong-xiang’s face became even ruddier, his tales even taller, his bowlegged walk a positive swagger.

To be sure, whenever he saw some old fellow his age just squatting somewhere and puffing away silently at a cigarette, he would still feel a twinge of regret, as though he had let a pearl slip through his fingers. But his hands were tied not only by his own word of honor but also by the limits of the Cultural Post. When he thought about it, though, he would realize how silly he was. So many ways to have fun under the sun: bird keeping, chess playing, tea tasting, kite flying, sauntering, exercising, shadowboxing—what’s the worry?

While Li Zhong-xiang was always worrying about others, he never thought the day would come when he himself wouldn’t be able to have his fun.

One evening just before Chinese New Year, the diehard opera fans showed up as usual at the Cultural Post, humming and swaying as they strolled in. But though the door was open, there was no hot water, no tea, and the benches were piled this way and that. Li Zhong-xiang and Qiao Wan-you were nowhere to be seen. Surprise turned into consternation when they remembered Hu Si, who had been one of the regulars. Almost seventy he was, but his voice was still deep and resonant as a huge brass bell—perfect for the part of the general. One night he was singing away lustily with the rest of them, the next night he didn’t show up, and never did again. A stroke,

they later heard—gave up the ghost just like that. Ever since then, whenever one of the company was absent no one wanted to ask why.

So they all breathed a sigh of relief when Qiao Wan-you appeared in a little while. Finally, someone asked the question that was on everyone's mind:

"Hey, Wan-you, where's Zhong-xiang?"

Usually they all called him "Chief Coach" or "The New Chang-hua."

But not today.

Qiao Wanyou set his *erhu* on his lap and began to tune it. For a long time the only sound coming from him was the squeaking of strings. At last he said slowly:

"He's not coming today. He doesn't feel so good."

"What's wrong?"

"Oh, not much. Headache and a fever, I think."

Qiao Wan-you didn't want to tell them what had really happened. Li Zhong-xiang would be so embarrassed.

In fact the evening had started out as usual. They had hollered for Professor Wang to join them, then the three of them had left the compound together, again as usual. But after they parted company with Wang at the street corner, Li Zhong-xiang's face fell. Gloomily he said to Qiao Wan-you:

"You go on ahead, Wan-you. I'm not going tonight."

Qiao was completely taken aback. Rain or shine, Li had never missed a single evening. What on earth was going on?

"I don't … feel so good."

Alarmed, Qiao asked:

"So why did you even come out? Go home and get yourself to bed right away!"

Li Zhong-xiang shook his head, a mournful smile on his lips. Hemming and hawing, he finally said:

"To tell you the truth, Dezhi came home when I was having dinner just now and asked me not to go anymore."

"Why not?"

"He said to me, why don't you take up something else instead? You can watch TV, listen to the radio, anything but go howling with the rest of them at the Cultural Post. He said people were laughing at us."

"Why doesn't he mind his own business?"

"Well, I guess in a way it is his business. Didn't I tell you he's got a girlfriend now? The girl lives right on Bean Street, I think it's the one in the plaid jacket who sticks her head into the Cultural Post once in a while. More than likely she's said something to him about us. I can't say as I blame them. To the young folks nowadays we're all just a bunch of old crackpots. My guess is, Dezhi doesn't want her to know his dad is the leader of this pack of old loonies. She might find us embarrassing."

"Oh no! He's not even married yet and already he's thrown his old man out the window. You should go, just to spite her! If she thinks you're embarrassing then she shouldn't marry into the family."

Again Li Zhong-xiang smiled sadly. His son had had a hard enough life, he said. Dezhi was twenty-five before he got permission to leave the rural commune to which he had been sent during the Cultural Revolution, but right after he returned to Peking he had come down with tuberculosis, so he had gotten off to a late start finding a job and finding a wife. Finally he was able to learn a trade at the tailoring school and had just opened up his own little stall in the market.

"He works hard every day, summertime he even works late into the evening under a street light. But at least he earns enough to keep the two of us going. You've got to admit he's a good son, he always keeps me well supplied with liquor and cigarettes. He's over thirty already and this is his first girlfriend, though he's still too timid to actually tell me about it. What he's done is to ask me very nicely not to go opera singing anymore. Well, a person's got to put himself in other people's shoes. Wouldn't you do the same for your boy? …

"Anyway, that's enough of that. You'd better hurry along before the guys think I've gone to hear the crickets chirp!"

Waving his hands, Li Zhong-xiang sent Qiao Wan-you on his way.

At the Cultural Post Li's absence put a damper on everyone's spirits. The other day the Block Office had asked them to put on a show for the New Year festivities, but now without Li Zhong-xiang there was no one to whip things into shape, and the evening just dragged on. Little did the fellows suspect that their chief coach, far from lying in bed at home, was at that very moment standing like an outcast on the corner of Winch Handle Alley, drinking in every last note floating out of the Cultural Post. Just then it was Old Man Jin singing, no doubt about it. He's the one who claims to be distantly related to the famous opera star Jin Shao-shan. But listen to him:

When I am idle I look out at the mountains,
Stroll on the slopes when my spirits are low.
One day outside the fort a strange wind was blowing;
I let it pass, then grabbed its tail to see—was it friend or foe?

Ugh! Off-key, off beat—how awful can you get?! Even his words came out fuzzy, like he was sucking on something! Li Zhong-xiang was dying to storm in and chew him out: You call this singing?! You may be related to Jin Shao-shan, but no one would ever know it from the way you're mewling! …

The longer our friend stood on the corner listening, the more pathetic he looked. There he was, itching to get in there and show them how to do it right, although often after his "demonstrations" the fellows would hoot and howl scornfully:

"Stuff it! I can do better than that!"

Maybe so, but not to let Li sing at all was pure torture to him—you might as well have him bound and gagged!

While Li Zhong-xiang was thus loitering on the corner, he happened to spy his son Dezhi and a young woman walking down Bean Street. His pulse quickened: that's her, no doubt about it—the one in the plaid jacket, lives right next door to the Cultural Post. These two are going steady for sure. Dezhi looks real sharp tonight, from his new jacket down to his shiny leather shoes. Son, you may be meek as a mouse in front of your old man, but I bet you're as bold as the next guy right now, I bet you'd even put your arm around her waist right in public! …

Dezhi and the girl headed west. A shiny pair of skates peeked out of the straw basket they each carried. From the looks of it they were going to the rink in Taoran Pavilion Park.

Li Zhong-xiang brightened up all of a sudden. Last night he had set it up with several of the guys that he would sing something from *A Gathering of Heroes* tonight. Now was the time to sneak in and do it; besides, he had to take care of that show for Chinese New Year. He hesitated for a moment, but then he turned and went in the same direction as his son—he had to find out what time the rink closed.

In his threescore years and ten Li Zhong-xiang had seen all sorts of goings-on along the frozen moat: children sledding, folks in the old days cutting out blocks of ice and hauling them to their ice-houses—but he had never seen so many smartly dressed young people, gliding around like swans on the mirror-smooth ice in the rink. Some pretty music was playing softly in the background, music that sounded kind of foreign but not too wild. The girls were all rosy cheeked and merry eyed, their silvery laughter twinkling in the air as they skated arm in arm with their young men, spinning and darting and flitting this way and that, their legs twirling and turning ever so gracefully. Li Zhong-xiang couldn't quite believe his eyes—he got dizzy just watching them.

Completely forgetting why he had gone there in the first place, he continued to stare at the figures on the ice. Had there been places like this when he was young? Probably. But back then they were not for the likes of him, a lowly coffin carrier. Never in his whole life had he ever lived it up the way these kids are doing! The more he thought about it the more furious he got at his son: bastard, you've got plenty of time left to enjoy yourself, but don't you know that for your father, singing some opera every night is all the fun that's left to him, just like the camel on the wagon? …

When he came out of Taoran Pavilion Li Zhong-xiang felt a little hungry, then remembered that he hadn't had much at dinner besides a couple of drinks—his son's words had stuck in his craw and killed his appetite. Right at the entrance to the park was a newly opened snack shop, a lively little place bustling with people. Li thought to himself, well, why not go in and get an order of wontons?

The people sitting inside were all couples who had just come from the rink, their skates still sticking out of the bags stowed beneath their seats. Many of the girls were wearing colorful wool knit caps, and their pretty perfumes hung coyly in the air. Slowly sipping their beer and soft drinks, couple after couple billed and cooed to each other, paying no attention to anyone else in the wonton shop. But as soon as Li Zhong-xiang stepped in the door he felt completely ill at ease. Although no one so much as glanced at him, he was sure he stuck out like a sore thumb. Turning on his heels he walked back out the door and down the steps, wondering to himself if Dezhi and his girlfriend would also be coming here in a little while. He could just see them now, rosy cheeked and sweet smelling just like everyone else. And like everyone else they would order one beer, two sodas and two bowls of wontons. They would bill and coo and gaze into each other's eyes and …

Shame on you! You're not jealous, are you?! Then all of a sudden he thought about Lu Gui-ying. She had probably remarried a long time ago. Why the hell did I give up so easily when she said, "Let it be."? Who cared what others thought as long as she and I were sensible about the whole thing? Why did I let other people run my

life? What an ass, what a goddamn ass I was! And still am! …

Furiously Li Zhong-xiang kicked a pebble lying in his path and sent it scudding to one side. Then he turned onto the sidewalk outside the park and started to walk home.

A short distance ahead some maintenance work was being done on the roadway. Red signal lamps marched across the asphalt, and a big cauldron sat over a blazing fire in the middle of the sidewalk. While the roadwork crew waited for the tar to melt, a large crowd had gathered around to watch a game of chess by the light of the fire. From time to time there would be whoops and cries of:

"Head him off, head him off! Move the 'chariot' and head him off!"

"No! No! Pull back! You've got to pull your 'horse' back!"

Li Zhongxiang wasn't particularly interested, so he merely glanced at the crowd as he passed by—and almost walked right into the tar kettle. For whom should he see among the onlookers but Professor Wang himself!

Wang Jin saw Li at the same instant. Nervously he pushed his glasses back up on his nose and opened his mouth as if to say something, but nothing came out. His face was a study in embarrassment as he came over and joined Li.

The two of them walked along very slowly. For the longest time neither said a word. Finally, Li Zhongxiang couldn't hold it in any longer.

"Well, have you been there and back, or haven't you gone yet?"

"Where?"

"Where! Where are you supposed to go every day after me and Wanyou walk you out of the alley?" It was all Li could do to keep from blowing his lid.

Wang Jin walked for a while with his head down, then pushed his glasses up again before answering:

"To be honest with you, I … I haven't been going there for quite some time now."

"You mean, you mean …" Li Zhongxiang racked his brains for a more delicate way of putting it, but finally gave up. "Excuse my language. You mean you've just been jerking us off?"

Wang Jin sighed deeply. Again they walked along in silence until he said:

"I did go in the beginning, but after a while I couldn't see the point of it anymore. Let me tell you what happened. They took away my position as project director—the work unit said it was because of my poor morals and bad character. So why should I bother?"

"Tell me the truth. Were you fooling around or not?" Li Zhongxiang had a lot of faith in the work unit.

"If I was, would I have been standing there watching a chess game?"

"Then why don't you tell them what really happened? Why don't you tell them it's not because you want to get rid of that broad, it's because you've had it up to here with her nagging and her orneriness and—"

"I did, but they … Let me tell you something: Just because you say so doesn't mean they'll believe or understand what you're saying. I'm the rotten Chen Shi-mei and she's the saintly Qin Xiang-lian—now that's a lot easier for them to understand. That opera's been around for at least a hundred years!"

Li Zhong-xiang said no more. Professor Wang had a point there. Take himself for example: how many times has anyone really understood him? Bustling about in front of the theater, the pride and the pleasure he took in it—did anyone understand him then? Getting a little turned on outside the women's locker room—who else besides Lu Gui-ying understood that? Even your own son, the one you raised from the time he was still shitting and pissing in his pants—what does he understand about the fun you get from singing a little opera every night?

The night was not very cold, but a brisk wind was stirring. Little swirls of dust and litter rustled along in the gutter as the two of them walked on in silence.

Just before they reached the gate to their courtyard Li Zhong-xiang spoke up again:

"Well, Professor, when all is said and done there seems only one way to handle this: Look on the bright side and wait your 'turn.' That's what it all comes down to these days. Look at Stinky next door. He was riding along on his motorcycle one day when he got slapped with a big fine. Yep, you guessed it, that was back during the traffic safety campaign and it was his 'turn' to get it. When I warned my son to get a bell for his bicycle he said:

"Don't worry, all I have to do is make it through this month and I'll be all right."

Sure enough, all month long he took the back alleys to avoid the cops. Now that Traffic Safety Month is over he's home free. You're going through a rough patch at the moment, but someday it'll be a fellow's turn to make his case. Then you'll be in the clear and you can go back to writing your books."

Sometimes Li Zhong-xiang made a lot of sense, other times he was full of crap, so there's no point in taking him or his blather too seriously. But he always meant well, and Professor Wang appreciated that at least. Whereupon, with a nod and a smile that looked more like a grimace, Wang opened the gate, stepped into the courtyard

and disappeared inside his house.

Li Zhong-xiang found his house still empty—Dezhi had not yet come home from his date. Lowering himself into a chair, Li's eyes fell on the five bottles of Beijing Daqu stacked under his bed. There was a time when the mere sight of them would have warmed the cockles of his heart, and if an old friend should drop by and happened to ask about his son, Li would have proudly shown him the bottles. But today for some reason an undescribable anger flared up inside him. Son of a gun, so you're treating me like a buddha, making me regular offerings of liquor and cigarettes to keep me happy and seal my lips, eh? To hell with that, I'm your father! Sure Professor Wang is a sadsack, but that's because he lets himself be henpecked. I'd never stand for that. I've still got what it takes to tell my own son a thing or two.

Li made up his mind: As soon as Dezhi came home he would ask him to please "withdraw" his liquor and his cigarettes. I'm no goddamn clay idol, I don't want any of this stuff. What I do want is to go singing every night over on Bean Street. You go tell that wench of yours it's nothing to be ashamed of. Why, back in '31, even the mayor himself sang in a production of *Qin Xian-gtian* at the Number One Theater over on West Willow Street, complete with costumes and makeup and everything! Your old man never got to go skating, never got to take a girl out for beer and wontons, and now at my age you want to stop me from singing too? No way!

Around eleven o'clock Dezhi came home.

But not a peep came out of Li Zhong-xiang.

"Dad, you didn't go … out tonight?" Dezhi asked as he set down the roast chicken he had brought home—probably as a special treat for his father.

"Mmmmm."

"Dad, if you get bored, why don't you watch some TV? I'll have enough saved up to buy a color set in just a couple of months."

Dezhi seemed to want to do everything possible to make up for his father's loss.

Well, how could Li Zhong-xiang stay angry at Dezhi? Where could he find a better son? Besides, so what if he stopped singing opera every night—it really wasn't a matter of life and death, was it?

"Dad, maybe you'd like to keep a lark instead? I'll get one for you tomorrow, and then it can learn to sing along with the one at Mr. Hao's next door. It'll sound so pretty, you'll see."

Li Zhong-xiang puffed at his cigarette in silence.

"Or Dad, maybe you'd like … some tropical fish?"

Still no answer.

"Or Dad, maybe—"

"I want to go fishing!"

With a roar Li Zhongxiang brought his son up short:

"Go! Get your old man two fishing poles! The best kind—a hundred *yuan* apiece! Don't be cheap!"

*

"*Zhao-le*"—that's a Peking expression meaning "to look for fun." It also happens to be Pekingers' favorite pastime. They're fond of it, they're good at it, and this fun is not too hard to find. Keeping a pet nightingale is a kind of fun. So is flying a kite. So is nursing a bowl of wine over a clove of garlic. Even when they talk about death, for instance, Pekingers don't say,"So-and-so died," they like to say, "he's gone to hear the crickets chirp"—as though they could find some fun even in that.

But I am repeating myself.

And every evening it is still the same threesome-Li Zhong-xiang, Qiao Wan-you, and Professor Wang—who walk out of 10 Winch Handle Alley together. Where are they going tonight? Besides singing opera, what other kind of fun would they find? Well, in a city as big as Peking, with people as fond of fun and as good at finding it as Pekingers are, there is really no need to worry.

One thing is for sure.

They are not going fishing, even though the fishing poles Dezhi bought continue to lie around gathering dust under the bed.

39.156 & 94.219 & 192.141 1. The Tree Stump **2.** Festival **3.** Father**: Three Short Stories**\fn{by Ah Cheng aka Zhong Acheng (1949-)} Peking, China (M) 12

1

As soon as sunlight appears at the east end of the street, a short, squat stump of a tree crops up. Youngsters passing by pay it hardly any mind, laughing and chattering as they bustle along. Hill folks come trudging in under towering bundles of twigs, all held together by swaths of burlap tied around their foreheads. Thus constrained from looking around, they too rush by without a glance. A plume of smoke wafts up out of the stump. An old man sees it, and, standing with his hands behind his back, asks hoarsely:

"Hello, have you eaten yet?"

Smiling faintly, the tree stump nods once or twice, answers the question by asking it in turn, and then, falling silent again, watches slowly as passersby hurry on their way.

The tree stump had no name, neither first nor last, people just called him Granddad—what did they call him when he was young?—no one seemed to know. And how many years had the tree stump seen? Nobody knew that either. Young and old, everyone on the street called him Granddad, from tiny tots to their elders to their elders' elders—no one could even tell which generation he belonged to, all they knew was he was old. So old, that he would smile slowly, smoke his pipe slowly, and when he lifted his hand slowly to wipe his face slowly, even his muscles—shriveled and near to transparent-would fall slowly, slowly back into place.

Once in a while folks from the big city would walk down this street, entering from the west and going east, peering left and right, looking up and down, poking around asking this and that and enjoying themselves no end—but just as they were about to turn back, they would catch sight of Granddad, and then their hearts would shudder, and for a good part of the day they would feel ill at ease. If by chance they started at the eastern end, the whole street would seem lifeless and gloomy from first to last, and though they may admire it for its antiquarian air, in the end they would feel a heaviness of the spirit and, sighing now and again, depart. Granddad was rather like an uninscribed stone marker, timeworn and weather-beaten, on which passersby could read the street.

The street was very old, very worn. The shopfronts were wide but not deep, room enough for no more than a shallow little stand, displaying packs of inexpensive cigarettes with brand names like Golden Sand River and Red Tassels, though here and there a few packs of Spring City would lie about, their foil wrappings covered with a layer of dust since customers for this costlier brand were few and far between. There were also shops that sold notions and dry goods, whose fresh bright colors stood out all the more sharply against the stores' battered wooden shutters. It is said that the look of the street can be traced all the way back to the Song dynasty—hard to believe, but, on the other hand, what's not to believe?

On either side of the street was a row of blackish tile roofs, with tufts of fragrant thorough worts\fn{Otherwise known as wild hoarhound.} springing up among the cracks. When the thorough worts were in bloom, the entire street would be filled with the scent of this favorite herb of the kings. Visitors from the city would then marvel and sigh, envious that their own plants in their ceramic pots back home—specially inscribed with the legend "Fragrance for the Study"—never grew with quite the same luxuriance and vigor.

The street was also very narrow, so narrow that if a peddler were to try to shift his shoulder pole crosswise from one shoulder to the other, the pole would thump against the stores' shutters on either side. Rows of cobblestones ran down the center of the street, while on each side was a foot-wide shallow ditch in which the street's sewage was drained away, the water running clear when it rained, and muddy when the skies were clear. Laden with kindling, wild game and medicinal herbs, men from the mountain villages would come down to the street to sell their wares. Afterward, the money burning a hole in their pockets, they would burrow into some tiny wineshop to drink until, many rounds later and thoroughly soused, they tumbled into the foot-wide ditch where they would sleep off their drunken stupor, after which they would drink again, until they found they had no money left, and then, all muddy and wet, they would stumble home.

The street lay at the center of a ring of mountains, in the valley plains that people in Yunnan call *bazi*. In fact, all the major towns in that province are situated on such bottomlands, and even the largest of them—cities like Kunming, Dali and Chuxiong—are to be found in *bazis* encircled by countless mountains, the only difference being that in their case the plains are broad and wide. This particular *bazi*, though, was very small—so small that when you stood at one end of the street, you could see the mountains towering over it on all sides just as if you were standing in a little alleyway in a crowded city, looking up at the tall buildings all around.

But small as it was, this *bazi* was still the flatland at the bottom of a valley, which meant it was at the confluence of several rivers and streams, which meant it was a center, however small, of commerce and culture. The commerce consisted of not much more than the buying and selling of firewood, rice, local products, dry goods and sundries. As for the cultural part, well, that's a very long story.

Legend has it that in the time of the Three Kingdoms, the brilliant statesman and strategist Zhu Ge-liang came all the way to Yunnan in hot pursuit after the renegade Meng Hu. Late one night, Zhu and his exhausted troops

were passing by this street when, through the murky darkness, his eye was caught by an inscription pasted to a door. Intrigued, he stopped his carriage and got out for a closer look. Much to his surprise he found that it was a couplet written on two vertical strips, the first line of which read:

Where the ruler transforms himself, his subjects put on a new face.

The second, and complementing, line was:

Where the common man uses brawn, the gentleman uses guile.

What's more, across the top between the two vertical strips was a horizontal inscription that read:

If you perceive, ask not.

Zhu was astounded to find evidence of such an extraordinary intelligence in a region long considered to be primitive and uncivilized. The couplet—with its allusions to the divinations in the *I Ching*\fn{A manual of diviniations, probably compiled before the 11th century BC.} on change and on power, and finely balanced between the ominous and the auspicious—was actually about the art of governing, and, moreover, articulated perfectly Zhu's own strategy for subjugating the border tribes. Zhu was just about to look for the owner of the house in order to take his counsel when he realized that he and his troops were in a valley surrounded by tall mountains, and, fearing that the whole thing would turn out to be a trap, decided to press on instead.

Later, after his expedition was over, he sent an emissary back to the street, only to learn that no trace of either the couplet or its author could be found.

Well, a legend is just a legend, but perhaps this one was not without some basis in fact. For example, at every celebration of the lunar new year, the street would be festooned with propitious couplets, many of which would contain some unusual expression or a peculiar turn of phrase, which a person of erudition would recognize immediately as a quote from some ancient and venerable source. But if one were to ask the head of the house about it, he would most likely answer that he had no idea what it meant, it was just something he had seen his elders write, and they in turn had learned it from their elders, and that in carrying on this tradition each generation was merely hoping to bring good fortune to the family. Another local custom—a quaint and charming one—was to ink the bottom of a rice bowl and stamp it onto a couplet, to signify the wish:

May every mouth in this house be safe and sound, may the porkers in the sty be fat and round.

There was only one elementary school here, but many of its graduates did well enough to be accepted by the middle school in the county seat, and some even went on to the university in the provincial capital. After that they would find many opportunities to put their talents to use in distant places, and often it would be a good eight or ten years before they came home. Whenever a local kid won some honor or made good in that outside world, the news would somehow find its way back to the street and in no time at all would be on everyone's lips, and then pity the poor passerby who, when asked whether he had ever heard of so-and-so from these parts who had done such-and-such, should so much as hesitate at all, because he would thereupon be branded an ill-informed ignoramus, while the folks on the street would continue to bask blithely in their native son's reflected glory.

But what filled the residents of the street with the most pride was the fact that so many famous songsters came from within their midst. In the many mountains of Yunnan, people can often walk almost shoulder to shoulder and yet not be able to grasp each other by the hand, because between them would be a deep canyon, and it would take them at least a half day's journey up hill and down dale in order to meet face to face. Bored with trekking along in the mountains all by themselves, the solitary travelers naturally welcomed any encounter with another person and, with it, the chance to talk. But to raise their voices and shout at each other across the chasm? Well, one couldn't keep that up for very long, and besides, it would sound too much like a shouting match, and that would be no fun. So instead they would carryon their conversation in song—a way of communicating that was as entertaining as it was effective. And if the travelers who met across the canyon happened to be a man and a woman, it was only to be expected that they would tease and flirt with each other, letting fly all manner of suggestive puns that city folks would find too raunchy but that were so clever and witty one couldn't help but be tickled by them. Fortunately, while the verbal salvos could be as off-color as one pleased, any attempt to go beyond mere wordplay was a strict

no-no. After the joking and the bantering were over, the two people would go their separate ways in the mountains, and that would be the end of that.

The story is told of the fellow who was once outsung by a woman: As she went on her way singing gleefully about her triumph, the news of his defeat was spread for miles and miles around, and after that he could not get any woman to marry him. He was so upset that he went to pieces, singing and squawking to himself incoherently, incessantly, until one day when he took a bad fall and ended up crippled. When the woman found out about this, she was so stricken with remorse that she decided to marry him, and they lived out their days singing to each other. And that, so the story goes, was the origin of many of the best and most popular songs in these parts. Then, in modern times, someone who made his living writing movie tunes came and collected these songs, and that was how they came to be sung across the length and breadth of China.

In spite of its small size, the street used to play host every March to a grand and festive event, when songsters from all the nearby settlements would gather on the surrounding slopes to take part in round after round of singing, until in the end a winner emerged—the one who had outsung them all. Afterward this champion singer would be treated like a conquering hero and invited to sing at each village in turn, where everyone would sit around a bonfire and listen, enraptured, to their honored guest until the wee hours of the morning and even beyond. From then on he would be recognized wherever he went in the mountains and accommodated in whatever he desired, including, of course, affairs of the heart.

So it was that whether young or old, male or female, any resident of the street who could not sing would be considered deficient somehow, like a mute almost, and not only would this hapless person be left out of all the fun, he would find himself left out of most other things in life as well.

Sad to say, this singing came to a sudden end when it was branded as one of the "Four Olds." In its place, the fn{A note reads: *The* Four Olds: *old ideas, old culture, old customs and old habits—all condemned during the Cultural Revolution*.} only songs heard in the street were those sung everywhere else in the country. People who overheard the school-children at their music lessons would sigh and wonder how these new songs, so insipid and monotonous, could even be considered songs at all. The music teacher came to be regarded as the number one nincompoop of the street. But as the days wore on, the street lost its own music. Once in a while, in an unguarded moment someone would burst into one of the old songs, but after one or two lines he would catch himself and then, his mouth agape, would freeze on the spot until he was quite sure that no one had heard him, whereupon he would quickly and furtively lick his lips in relief.

But while the street may have lost its voice, the songs lived on in the mountains, where you could sing freely and openly without being recognized. And so what if you were? Even if they went after you, how would they ever find you? Whenever someone in authority denounced this behavior at a meeting, people would pretend not to hear or act dumb, as if this were a story from the edge of beyond, and of course nothing ever came of it.

But with the demise of the songfests, the title of champion singer also went unclaimed for years.

Then suddenly, out of the blue came the news that people were beginning to sing again in Kunming, not just one or two here and there but thousands upon thousands of them all gathered together, and not just singing but competing again in one of those lively singing meets. There had been no explicit directive lifting the ban on singing, but as other activities became permitted one by one, people came to realize that they would also be allowed to sing their old songs again.

For more than a fortnight the street was abuzz with talk about the revival of the singing meet on its customary date in March. Residents of the street, determined to revive not only the songfest but also the special stature of the street itself, had gone to great lengths to organize the event and to publicize it among the neighboring villages. The news spread so quickly along the grapevine that soon everyone within a hundred miles knew about the meet. When the big day finally arrived, a huge throng almost ten thousand strong converged on the *bazi* and took their places on the slopes of the surrounding hills, their excitement rumbling in the air like distant thunder. Even officials from the county and the special administrative district were there: At one end of the street several tables had been set up for them, complete with a row of chairs behind and a row of tea mugs on top. It was an honest-to-goodness big event.

The first to sing was someone from the street, but no sooner had he finished when the response wafted down from somewhere up on the slopes, and thousands of heads turned in the direction of that sound. Undaunted, the first singer piped out his rejoinder, and again a retort came right back. So it was with each new verse, the sea of heads turning first one way and then the other, and the competition began to heat up.

But soon the audience noticed something rather peculiar about the singers: they were all middle-aged, in their forties at least, while the young folks just sat there, listening and laughing and clapping and calling out encourage-

ment from time to time, but taking no part in the singing. There were probably some among them who could sing a little, but they knew that their repertoire was limited at best and insipid to boot, and so decided to stay out of the contest rather than embarrass themselves in front of all those people.

An old cadre from the special administrative district who was in charge of cultural activities sighed as he reminisced about the time, oh, thirty or forty years ago, when he came here for the same event and heard a fellow who could sing circles around everyone else and who, after a fortnight of competing against all the best songsters in the area, won the title of champion singer. When the cadre asked about the name of this singer, he was greeted with an indignant glare and the scornful reply:

"What! You mean you haven't even heard of Li Er?"

Sighing again, the old cadre wondered if anyone knew whether this Li Er was still around. One of the officials from the street who was playing host to the visiting dignitaries mulled this over and finally, after racking his brains, said:

"I wonder if that's Granddad?"

The word was put out, and, what do you know, the answer came back that Granddad was indeed Li Er and none other. The young folks, stunned to find out the old tree stump had had such a colorful past, were all kicking themselves for having paid such little attention to Granddad when they walked by him every day, and now they all rushed to join in the search for Granddad.

Actually Granddad was sitting right there in the throng on the hills, listening to the singing with a hand cupped behind one ear, all the while smoking his pipe and smiling slowly, as was his habit. Someone with a sharp eye spotted him and led the search team up the hill and through the crowd to Granddad. Not knowing what was going on, the audience saw there was a commotion on one of the slopes with a bunch of people standing around an old man, and they began to fear that after all the effort that had gone into reviving this singing meet some hooligans had come to disrupt everything. Even the singing stopped. But when word began to spread that a champion singer of long ago by the name of Li Er had been found, the news created a furor in the crowd.

Most surprising of all, at least to the young folks, was the spectacle of all those elderly grandmothers weeping softly as they pushed their way down the slopes to see the fellow they once knew, to ask him whether he still remembered the words of his songs and the girl he sang them to on such and such a date once upon a time?

The young folks, tactless and insensitive as the young are wont to be, naturally began to snicker and make fun of what they considered the unseemly behavior of these old women. Imagine their surprise when Granddad not only remembered but chatted amiably with all these grandmothers, each of whom had been a well-known songster in her own right back in the old days.

The cadres hurriedly got up from their chairs and offered them to the old folks. Someone stood up and, singing, told all the people on the slopes about what had just happened. The applause that swept all over the hillsides startled a flock of birds flying by overhead and threw them into disarray, but, finding no place to land on the slopes, the birds flapped their wings and went on their own way.

Naturally everyone clamored for Granddad to sing. A smile spread across Granddad's face, and with the laughlines still in place, he said slowly:

"I will need a partner."

Then, turning around, he asked one of the old women to join him.

Blushing pink as a peach blossom, the grandmother walked up to him daintily and, brushing away a tear, asked Granddad to begin.

Closing his eyes, Granddad let out a long note. Right away a hush fell over the audience, and even the sky seemed to recede. Though his voice was somewhat hoarse and uneven from years of disuse, Granddad had lost none of his easy charm and mischievous wit:

On yonder hill there stands a pipa,\fn{A note reads: Homophones for (1) a kind of tree with yellow edible fruit and (2) a plucked string instrument with a fretted fingerboard.}
Whose it is I do not know.
I'll carve and shape it into a pipa,
From my arms it will not go.

Before Granddad had quite finished, a thunderous round of cheers and applause broke out allover the hills. But this old woman was no ordinary grandmother either, and straightaway she was ready with her reply. Her voice still clear and bright, she also started off with a long note that immediately got a big hand:

Oh—I am the pipa on yonder hillside,
My roots are buried deep and strong.
Awake, oh fool from your pipa dreaming,
All you're clutching is your own little prong.

Once again the hills resounded with a roar of cheers and applause. The youngsters were all dumbfounded: Who would have thought these old folks had once been so bawdy and full of life! They may be old now, but they were still flirting and teasing, and the old songs—like fine wines—had aged gracefully, growing in richness and charm yet maintaining their zest and humor. And, in a trice, some smart young folks had learned the songs by heart.

Not concerned with winning or outdoing anyone, Granddad went on to sing a few more verses against some of the other grandmothers, all of whom beamed with pride and joy at the honor they were being given in front of all these thousands of people. Even their children and grandchildren were surrounded by admiring throngs, and, giddy with all this attention, began to hold forth as if they knew everything under the sun.

Someone from the street brought out some wine and proposed a toast to the old folks. As Granddad took a few sips, veins began to pop out all over his forehead. He was just about to sing again when he suddenly stiffened and fell backward, a trickle of saliva seeping out between his clenched lips. They rushed up to help him, only to realize that Granddad had suffered a stroke. He died as they were carrying him home.

From then on this street and these mountains once again resounded with their own songs. The name Li Er was etched in the minds of the young folks, who never tired of telling every outlander about this Li Er. Everyone felt that Granddad had erected a monument for this street, for these hills.

2

The wheat was just about to ripen when the grown-ups got a bunch of guns from somewhere.

It was the first time Xiao\fn{A note reads: *"Little." All the children's names in this story are prefaced with "Xiao," a common diminutive*.} Long had seen a real gun. Until then all they'd had in the village were those old-fashioned ones, the kind where you had to stuff the black gunpowder into the barrel. You also had to measure the powder didn't get wet, because it wouldn't catch, and then you'd have to dry it by stir-frying. You did this by taking an iron skillet and heating it over hot coals, the setting it on a cool surface before pouring in the damp gunpowder. Next you stirred it slowly, steadily, until there were no more wisps of steam. Finally you poured it out, and it was ready to use. One time, before the Cultural Revolution,\fn{Officially, The Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), a period of time in which some tens of millions of local social, political and military leaders of Communist China were forced to undergo self-criticism in conformity with the theory that, if a revolution is to be permanent, it must be perpetual in its essential nature.} Xiao Rong's father was drying gunpowder when someone called him. He turned his head to look, and the powder exploded, leaving one whole side of his face permanently charred. Not only that, but the eye on that side looked like a rabbit's, and the ear like a tree fungus.

After that, the children were no longer allowed to watch, but the chickens could still run around the iron kettle as the powder dried.

Nor were the children allowed to go into the hills with the grown-ups to watch the hunting and risk being attacked by an injured animal. The people of Pingzhen took care of their children. If something unfortunate happened, what good would it do to cry or carry on after the fact? If an accident could be prevented, then it should be.

But the children were allowed to watch executions. Pingzhen was not too far from the county seat, and right outside the village was n open stretch of land on the riverbank. A criminal sentenced to death in the county court would be brought over in a big truck and flung down onto the floodplain by the river. A guard would check him over and make him kneel with his head down on his chest, waiting for the final order. The children would cover their ears, but they could still hear the shots ring out. Afterward the prisoner would fall onto the ground, blood streaming from his gunshot wounds. Sometimes a person who had been shot dead would still twitch and turn, slowly, until a man in white walked over and did something to the body, and it would lie still. Xiao Long was really curious about how the man in white did this, but he could never slip past the guard who blocked the way.

Once, just before the order to fire was given, a prisoner suddenly got to his feet and began to run. The firing squad was accustomed to shooting at stationary objects at close range. So, while the convict kept running, not a peep came out of the guns. The crowd that had gathered to watch began to jeer. Then shots rang out. But they missed their mark. More shots—but still no hits. By this time seven or eight rifles were firing away, but the prisoner was already beyond their range. Everyone on the riverbank was hysterical with laughter, even the other

convicts waiting to be executed. The squad leader and two of his men went after the escaped prisoner and finally brought him back. Holding back their guffaws, the soldiers carried out the execution. The incident was later retold and passed along in many different versions. What Xiao Long remembered was how the man had stumbled as he ran, hobbled by the big round stones on the floodplain.

So this wasn't the first time Xiao Long had seen a real gun. It was just the first time he had seen a real gun up close. While his father wasn't looking, he even touched it. It felt cool.

*

When it came time to test the gun, Xiao Long's father looked round for a target. Xiao Long's mother told him to aim it at the sky, so he wouldn't hit anyone. But he told her that's what guns were for—hitting people.

Xiao Rong's father came looking for Xiao Long's father, saying, "Hot damn, this time we've got the real thing. Those Red Rev Rebs\fn{A note reads: *Short for Red Revolutionary Rebels. Political Struggle during the cultural Revolution in China (1966-76) often devolved into factional fighting, with each faction seeking to distinguish itself from its rivals by, among other things, assuming a "more revolutionary than thou" rhetoric that was reflected in its name. Such names were often abbreviated in daily usage*.} are going to be in for it!"

Rubbing a bullet head against his pants leg, Xiao Long's father answered, "Yes, but I hear they got hold of some guns too."

"Not even close," Xiao Rong's dad countered. "Besides, the Fifth Detachment is on our side. That Captain Hu—you know, the chubby one, joined the Eighth Route Army\fn{A note reads: *the army led by the Chinese Communist Party during the War of Resistance against Japan (1937-1945). Soldiers who fought in this army were accorded great respect and prestige after the Communists assumed power in 1949*.} back in '42—he keeps the higher-ups informed about what's going on."

"I hear the other side's got people with good connections too," Xiao Long's father said as he pressed the bullet tip against his cheek.

Losing his temper, Xiao Rong's dad cocked his head to one side and shouted, "Who's side are you on, anyway, the Red Reb Central's\fn{A note reads: *Short for Red Rebels Central Command, another typical name for one of the many factions operating during the Cultural Revolution. At times such groups became the only administrative authority in given localities*. It was essentially government by teenagers (whose basic customary organization is a gang); but it prospered because Mao Tse-tung and his intimates began it and fostered it, and because for several years, it was allowed to practice its brand of revolutionary purity without interference from the army—or, indeed, from any traditional political or legal authority. Mao seems to have been convinced that young people were the true repository of revolutionary change.} or the others'?"

Xiao Long's mother stood in the doorway and said, "Don't argue when you've got guns in your hands. Why are you arguing while you're waving those guns around?"

The two men picked up their guns and went outside, shifting their weapons from one hand to the other as they rolled up their sleeves. Xiao Long began to follow them out of the house.

"You come back here this instant!" screamed his mother.

Startled, the two men stopped and turned round to look. Xiao Long's mother ran over and grabbed her son, muttering angrily, "Haven't you seen enough killing already?"

The two men broke into laughter and went on their way.

The Red Rev Reb gang was the first rebel organization in the county, but it took only three days for people to figure out what was going on and to set up their own groups, one after another. Because it was close to the county seat, Pingzhen was a natural target for organizing, first by the Red Reb Central, a newer group, and later by the Red Rev Rebs, the original gang. So now all of Pingzhen's accumulated problems—from the most piddling to the most pressing—and the resulting bad blood among the villagers found new channels and champions for its expression—by force, if necessary. Because each side swore allegiance to Chairman Mao, the confrontations had intensified and escalated until, finally, guns entered the picture.

The children of Pingzhen were not allowed to watch grown-ups drying gunpowder or hunting, and now, they were also forbidden to play with the children of those who belonged to a rival faction. When the Red Rev Reb controlled Pingzhen, their children could go outside to watch demonstrations, rallies, and members of the Red Reb Central gang being paraded in the streets as counterrevolutionaries and beaten with sticks and chains. And, of course, when the Red Reb Central wrested control of Pingzhen, *their* children could go onto the streets to watch demonstrations, rallies, parades, beatings of Red Rev Reb members, and so on.

*

At the moment Xiao Long was quite bored. He looked around at the chickens, then up at the birds and the sky, all the while hoping to hear a few gunshots. A long time passed, but he heard nothing.

Slowly he sidled over to the courtyard gate and stopped. Then he stepped outside and, again, stood still for a few moments. Leaning against the door frame, he stuck his hand under his shirt and nonchalantly scratched

himself on the back for a little bit, then on the belly. Suddenly he darted from the door. When he didn't hear his mother calling after him, he began to walk more confidently down the deserted street, hugging the wall just in case.

Not much had changed on the street. As usual there were some new slogans plastered over the old ones, and, as usual, a chicken was foraging among the globs of rice glue at the foot of the wall. Stomping his feet, Xiao Long ran a few steps closer. The chicken quietly darted away, cocking its head as it eyed Xiao Long. Angry that the chicken hadn't even bothered to cackle, Xiao Long stood by the wall and wouldn't let it get back to its meal. Unfazed, the chicken strutted casually to the other side of the street. Spreading out one waiting and one leg, it stretched itself languidly and shook its feathers a few times while leaving a pile of droppings on the ground. Then it began pecking at the feathers on its chest and back.

Pretending his hand was a gun, Xiao Long was aiming it at the chicken when, suddenly, a shot rant out from far away. Absorbed in its grooming, the chicken was oblivious to this. Xiao Long, though, was so excited he began to shout: "Xiao Rong, Xiao Rong, my dad's shooting a real gun!"

In the twinkling of an eye Xiao Rong came running out of the gate next door, followed in hot pursuit by the screams of his mother: "You little bastard, go ahead, just die in front of my eyes, you brat. that crazy dad of yours, he's going to get shot one of these days. Go ahead, run, you little son of a bitch."

As the two boys raced through the village, a sense of life began to stir in the street.

*

A big locust tree stood at the edge of the village. In summer, caterpillars dangled from its branches, gnawing at its leaves until they were full of holes. Next to the tree stood a smithy, and inside the shed was a brick furnace. When the blacksmith was at work, the coals glowing in the furnace grew brighter, then dim, with each blast from the bellows. The children loved to watch the sparks fly from the anvil every time the hammer struck the red-hot metal. They watched until the blacksmith set the hammer on the ground, upright, and, without casting a glance at anyone, muttered: "Let's rest a while." Although he could easily have boiled water over the fire in the furnace, whenever had to, because one of the children would always dash home and bring back a kettleful of boiled water. It was a great honor to have the blacksmith accept one's offering of water. When the break was over, the donor, puffing with pride, would invariably assume he had a right to stand closer to the action, so the blacksmith would have to yell at him to get out of the way.

Xiao Rong ran into the shed and scooted onto the top of the furnace to catch his breath. Xiao Long joined him, also puffing and panting. It had been a long time since the shed had been used as a forge, and the place was now filled with a stale, musty odor.

"My mom and my dad had a big fight," Xiao Rong told his friend. "He even slapped her hard on the face."

"Your dad and my dad went shooting together," Xiao Long replied. "Did you hear the shot my dad fired?"

"That shot was fired by my dad!" Xiao Rong argued.

"No way!" countered Xiao Long. "My old man would get to shoot before yours did!"

"You're full of shit!"

"YOU'RE Full of shit!"

Suddenly a voice behind them said, "Are you guys playing a game?"

Turning around, Xiao Long and Xiao Rong saw that it was Xiao Quin, whose house was right behind the forge. They fell silent. Xiao Quin's father belonged to the Red Rev Reb gang.

Leaning against the door, Xiao Quin lifted her leg and fixed the setrap on her shoe. Then she set her foot down and stomped it a few times for good measures. Neither Xiao Long nor Xiao Rong said another word about the guns. Instead, they stared straight ahead at the road leading out of the village.

"Look, my mother made me some new shoes," said Xiao Qin.

Xiao Long took a sidelong glance. "What's so special about new shoes?"

Xiao Quin replied, "They're for the festival tomorrow."

Drawing a blank, Xiao Long asked, "What festival?"

"It's Children's Day, silly!" Xiao Qin replied.

"Look, if there's no school,\fn{A note reads: *During the cultural revolution schools were closed in many places for long periods of time*.} there's no Children's day," quipped Xiao Rong. "You can only have Children's Day when you have school. When the teacher says it's time to celebrate this or that, *then* we have a holiday. That's the way it always was, don't you remember?"

This reminded Xiao Qin of something else. "Hey, I heard that Teacher Zhang's leg is still broken. My mom says that if they can't fix it, he'll become a cripple."

“You mean Baldy Zhang? He was beaten by that teacher who came down from the country. Did you guys see the beating?” asked Xiao Long.

“yes, I saw it,” Xiao rong replied.

“So did I. Boy, he hit him harder than my father beats me,” Xiao Long tittered.

“What are you guys going to do tomorrow to celebrate?” Xiao Qin wanted to know.

“Us?” Xiao Rong hesitated for a moment before weaving in the direction of the fields outside the village. “We’re … we’re going to play in Deep Gully, right, Xiao Long?”

Xiao Long answered gleefully, “Right. you’ve got to celebrate a festival with special games. That’s much better than new shoes.”

Pleased with themselves, the two comrades jumped down from the furnace and, arm in arm, began to head for home.

Xiao Qin called after them, “Can I come too?”

Xiao Long stopped. He hemmed and hawed but didn’t say anything.

“Please let me come,” Xiao Qin pleaded. “I promise I won’t tell my parents.”

“OK,” Xiao Long finally agreed.

“Can Xiao Liang and the others come along too?” Xiao Qin added.

This time it was Xiao rong who answered: “OK, but you guy will have to listen to us, because we’re in charge. We’ll go there tomorrow night. And make sure the grown-ups don’t find out!”

*

That night, at dinner, Xiao Long’s father announced: “We’re going to see some real action. Those Red Rev Rebs want to take over all the water in the irrigation ditches, including what we need for our wheat fields. We told them no way, that water is ours, and they can just forget it.”

Xiao Long’s mother said, “Well, we’ve gong through this before, threats and all. But now, with all these guns … why don’t you stay out of it this year?”

Xiao Long’s father didn’t reply. He took a mouthful of food and began munching noisily.

Xiao Long took the opportunity to pip up, “Ma, tomorrow’s a festival.”

“What festival?”

“It’s children’s Day, don’t you remember? Xiao Qin was already wearing new shoes today.”

As soon as he mentioned Xiao Qin, Xiao Long wanted to kick himself. But neither his father nor his mother seemed to have noticed. They just said, “Oh,” His mother added, “you’re right. Well, then, tomorrow you can wear the jacket you got for New Year.”

*

Only the chickens and the dogs knew that the children of Pingzhen had sneaked out of the houses and were now walking along the riverbank. When Xiao Long pointed out that the grown-ups might still see them there, Xiao Qin reminded him that he and Xiao Rong had said they were going to play in Deep Gully. So they all crept through the wheat fields and made their way to the big irrigation ditch.

By then the setting sun had lit up the top part of the eastern bank and was bathing it in an orange-red glow, but the other side of Deep gully had already let off the heat of the day. Even the grass was beginning to perk up. The water in the ditch splashed and gurgled as it flowed along. Down in the gully the children could shout and holler and not be heard by anyone, so they screamed and screeched to their hearts’ content as they ran along the slopes of the canal. Their only other companions were the insects that buzzed about and the swallows swooping from one place to another.

Then the moon’s reflection in the water grew smaller and smaller, and darkness settled in. Three or four stars twinkled steadily in the sky, while many more fireflies flitted here and there.

Suddenly, Xiao Qin exclaimed: “I lost my flashlight!”

“You brought a flashlight along?” Xiao Rong asked incredulously.

“Didn’t you guys say we were going to play night battles?” Xiao Qin retorted That’s why I brought a flashlight. If I don’t find it I’m going to be in big trouble, because my dad and mom will find out I’ve been here.”

Everyone got all excited and began to feel around on the ground, looking for the flashlight. When Xiao Liang found it, they all crowded around.

“How does it work?” asked Xiao Long.

“You push it this way, and the light comes on. Pull it back and it goes off,” Xiao Qin told him.

“Let me see,” said Xiao Long as he grabbed the flashlight. A little flick, and a beam of light gushed forth. “Wow!” he cried as he aimed it at the sky. Insects caught in the glare became blurry streaks of white.

Suddenly shots rang out.

Stunned, the children fell onto their stomachs. Bullets whizzed overhead, each trailing a think, bright strand of light, to be met by another barrage from the other sides.

Much later, the shooting finally stopped.

Xiao Long was the first to find his voice. “I bet they can’t hit us down here in the gully!”

Xiao Qin burst into tears and said, “Let’s go home!”

“Let’s do it one more time,” countered Xiao Long. He pushed the switch again, and once more the threads of light stitched back and forth across the night sky.

“It’s like at the blacksmith’s!” cried Xiao Rong.

“It’s like firecrackers at New Year’s!” Xiao Liang chimed in.

In their excitement and glee, the children sprang to their feet and flicked the switch again.

Xiao Long thought he heard a stone ricocheting against the side of the gully. Turning to look, he saw that both banks were suddenly awash with the red glare of a setting sun. Only this sunset was full of noise.

The flashlight flew way up in the air. When it finally hit the water, it was still shining. Gradually a school of small fish, bathed in the red glow, began to nibble at the round lens.

3

One evening in March 1987, I was at Xia Yang’s New York apartment. The place had been remodeled into a studio in great haste, and it looked so old that one might expect it to crumble at any moment, although in fact there was no such danger. What I did not expect, however, came through a long-distance call from the other part of the globe—my father was seriously ill. I immediately made preparations to leave for home.

My family had lived under the shadow of my father’s serious illness ever since the early 1960s. In the summer, I remember, when we and our neighbors were mingling noisily in the yard, mother used to come out to hush us. We were too young to keep father’s illness in our minds all the time.

Father came down with hepatitis while he was being reformed in a labor camp in Lushan. The illness went from acute to chronic, and eventually developed into the cirrhosis that was to cause his death. Just when we were prepared to face father’s imminent end, the Cultural Revolution started.

Back in 1957, father had been branded a “rightist.” So he was merely a “dead tiger.” He was “criticized and struggled against,”\fn{A popular form of political activity during the Cultural Revolution. These strug- gle meetings were endorsed by the party and organized by the Red Guards and mass organizations. At these meetings “enemies” of the revolution were criticized and often physically abused} placed beside “active” enemies at mass meetings, and struggled against;\fn{Those who had been criticized and put in the category of “enemies” before the Cultural Revolution. Although they were not the main targets of the Cultural Revolution, they did not escape. They were dragged out again for criticism, mainly for symbolic purposes} confessions, labor—all were invoked for the purpose of humiliating him symbolically. Then he was sent off to a cadre school.\fn{A re-education-through-labor program for party and government cadres as well as for intellectuals during the Cultural Revolution. It was based on a letter from Mao to Lin Piao of May 7.1966}

In those days, whatever happened to father was taken for granted, even his certain death. But father did not die then. He actually lived to see 1979.

That was an important year to father, as was 1957. I remember one day before the New Year’s, a phone call took me home to see him in the evening. Father sat by the desk, his back toward the light. He always faced the desk light when he worked and turned around when he was tired. Mother said,

“A man from the Department of Organization\fn{A major department of the Party, in charge of recruitment, promotion, and other personnel matters} came to tell us that all cases for the rehabilitation of rightists in the country are to be cleared before New Year’s. Father is on the list. What do you think of this?”

The only thought I had was that the name Zhong Dianfei\fn{The name of the author’s father} would no longer be preceded by adjectives.\fn{After he was branded a “rightist” in 1957, his name, whenever mentioned officially, was preceded by that adjective} But I did not speak my mind because I knew this mattered very much to mother.

After 1957, mother single-handedly supported her five children, her mother, and her brother, who was a college student. It is impossible to measure, even now that I have grown up, the amount of hardship she went through. I remember that our clothes were handed down from the older to the younger brothers. The material was the most durable kind of corduroy. When we walked, it rubbed between our legs and produced scratching noises. All our clothes were homemade in the traditional style, which could be worn back and front, leaving two pale worn spots on both sides where we sat.

When they could no longer be worn, grandma would tear them apart and use the rags to make soles for our shoes. Grandma always complained about the pain in her shoulder. She had to hand-stitch over twenty shoes for us every year.

We raised chickens with their eggs in mind. In winter, the chicks lined up along the windowsill, picking dried paste from between the lattice and the paper, leaving the window as tattered as a temple after a storm. For people everywhere in China, those were the hard times. For a time, locust tree blossoms ceased to be only herbal medicine.\fn{Locust-tree blossom is a traditional ingredient of Chinese medicine; but during the famine years (1959-1961) people used it as food}

Shan Shan, my youngest sister, was weak and sick from malnutrition; Da Lu, my third younger brother, once came back with mother beaming with excitement because they had found some young sweet potato vines to feed the family; my fourth younger brother, Xin Zuo, nearly stuffed himself to death with meat at a dinner party to which he was invited—the first in our family had he died. Yes, life was harsh for everybody.

But I cannot imagine how father endured life in the labor camp. Sitting in a chair, I pondered how to explain to father that I did not think much of his rehabilitation. I did not want to hurt mother's feelings. Father might also get upset because, after all, this was a matter that had altered his entire life.

That father was a "rightist" affected our lives too. My eldest brother, Li Man, could not go to senior middle school. It was because children from families such as ours were not allowed to enter college, and senior middle schools prepared students for college. Li Man was a talented student. His grades were always good. Even today, it's hard for me to imagine what kind of psychological impact this must have had on the mind of a boy only in his teens. But father insisted that he repeat the senior middle school entrance examination the following year. This, I think, was father's way of maintaining faith. In 1978 when he passed the examination and was eventually allowed to go to college from the village where he had been sent to settle,\fn{Colleges and universities were closed down for five years after the beginning of the Cultural Revolution. When most of them reopened after 1971, the university entrance examination system was replaced by the working-class recommendation system in order to emphasize the ideological background of the candidates. In 1978, with the downfall of the Gang of Four, the old examination system was restored. Li Man passed the exam that year and went to college } father mentioned it only briefly in a letter. I wonder what else was on his mind when he wrote the letter by the desk light.

When I reached eighteen, father made a point of telling me: from now on, we are friends. From this I realized that I had reached adulthood. My feelings at that moment must have been similar to those of the young men in ancient China after their coming-of-age ceremonies: the feelings of self-confidence and gratitude, and a sudden surge of inner strength. So that evening I finally conveyed the words of a son from the standpoint of a friend.
This is what I said:

"If I were overjoyed tonight, my past thirty years would be reduced to nothing. As a person, you have already affirmed yourself. There is no need for others to judge you. If the power of such judgment is in the hands of others, they may well support you today and deny you tomorrow. Therefore, in my view, your rehabilitation has no real significance outside of mere technical convenience. Moreover, the political vicissitudes that have afflicted you are not without blessings. They have forced me to rely on my own efforts to acquire confidence in life, although for you these twenty years must have been brutal."

Father replied with a smile"

"Now the tenure of my Party membership has been confirmed as forty years. Just imagine, half of the time I wasn't in the Party. Your mother has made some beef stew today. Why don't you go and see if yon can buy some noodles. We're going to have beef noodles today."

Mother was happy too, telling us how she couldn't have bought the beef if she hadn't asked so-and-so for help. Father then asked if she had garlic. How can we eat beef noodles without garlic!

After 1979, father started to write a great deal. His essay "Reflections on Film Literature" published in that year's *Literary Criticism* reminded many people that he was still alive. The China Film Publication House planned to put out a volume of father's essays written before 1957. So father sent me out to track down his old articles. The newspaper section and the magazine section of Peking Library are located in two separate parts of the city. Since I had just been transferred back to Peking from the countryside and had not yet found work, it became my full-time job to shuttle every day between east and west Peking. Government libraries do not have an index system. I had to look through every issue and page of the newspapers. Magazines with their annual indexes were a great deal easier.

For his article "The Gongs and Drums of Film," father was singled out for criticism by Mao Tsetung himself. I was only eight years old at the time and did not know what to say when questioned by my teacher. So I parroted

that father was a bad man. I did not use the word “enemy” because I was too young to understand what “enemy” meant. Only twenty years later was I finally able to read this article with my own eyes. I made a photocopy and took it home to father. He also had his own feelings about it. For fear of offending certain people, the publisher named the collection *The Sunken Land*.\fn{In the early post-Mao era, although the Gang of Four had been condemned, Mao’s image was still protected and his thought still held up as the only ideological guideline in China. Since Mao had personally criticized “The Gongs and Drums of Film,” to use the same title would suggest opposition to Mao’s thought, and Mao’s associates who were still in power could find fault with it. According to Ah Cheng, his father settled on the title *Sunken Land* because he wanted to indicate that a person condemned by the party disappeared from the face of the earth. Such had been his fate for the preceding twenty years}

Father preferred to use the old title, “The Gongs and Drums of Film,” but had to compromise in the end. A friend who was a seismologist would have bought the book by mistake had I not told him that it was not the kind of work of reference he thought it was.

Many people began to visit father at home. Mother reminded him to remain vigilant against certain faces. Although father understood and deplored the rapid switch from cold shoulder to glad hand, he was hospitable and offered whatever was called for.

Father knew many people who did not survive. He recalled that in the 1950s he attended the premier showing of Lao She’s\fn{Pen name of Shu Qingchun, a famous social novelist in China and regarded as the chroincler of life in Peking just as Dickens chronicled the London of his day. Many of his best works were published before 1949} play, *The Young Task Force*. In the midst of socializing with the guests, Lao She turned to father and lowered his voice:

“Is it worth your while to come and see such a play?”

Father told many stories about Zhao Dan,\fn{A famous actor and writer from Shanghai respected not only for his artistry but also for his intellectual integrity} but he wrote only one article about him: “Zhao Dan’s Last Words.” It echoed what Zhao Dan had said in his own article, “Policies Too Specifically Imposed, No Hope for Art and Literature.”

My father and I used to discuss whether the professionally ignorant should lead experts.\fn{An argument of long-standing in Communist China—whether intellectuals and technical workers should be supervised by non-expert Communist cadres (the “red vs. expert” dispute). Before and during the Chultural Revolution, those who opposed this view were criticized} I maintained the view that they should. Experts should concentrate on their profession. If they become political leaders, they would be unskilled for the task. Wouldn’t that be wasteful? To quote ancient sages:

“The incompetence of one makes room for many others to be competent; inactivity in one nurtures the energies of many.” Father added,

“It is actually the experts who are better at distorting facts and framing charges. Leaders with professional expertise can hit your vital parts, doing internal damage, while leaders ignorant of the professions can at most make a fool of themselves. For less pain and damage, the latter are indeed a much better idea.”

Although I seldom offer grand theories, I use the phrase “I think” rather frequently. Father therefore told me that when doing self-criticisms\fn{During the Cultural Revolution, everyone who had been criticized had to write such confessions repeatedly to show repentance} in the cadre school, he was frequently caught for saying “I think”: how dare he use “I think” even when he is being criticized! This is extreme *bourgeois* individualism! Father was very grateful to a man in the same cadre school who had been labeled a “historical counterrevolutionary.”\fn{People so labeled “not because they actively opposed the revolution but because they had worked for the previous regime or had been members of the Nationalist party} Seeing that father had trouble getting his self-criticism approved, he offered to revise it for him. The product was not only approved, but also became a temporary model for other inmates. When father inquired about his tricks, this person replied,

“I used to work for a Nationalist newspaper; my professional capital was the ability to write this stuff.”

What a pity that the confessions and self-criticisms from all over the country had been destroyed, father thought.\fn{When the Cultural Revolution ended, most victims were rehabilitated and their written confessions and self-criticisms were officially destroyed as unpleasant reminders of their persecution} It would have been a good idea to publish a selection of the best self-criticism literature. When Ba Jin\fn{Pen name of Li Feigan, one of the most highly regarded novelists in modern China} proposed the construction of a Cultural Revolution Museum, father said that the exhibits should include the various confessions and self-criticisms.

I added the suggestion that a dictionary of Cultural Revolution terminology be published, or else future generations would find it difficult to decipher these documents. One such example was the term *jiao dai*\fn{Confession and self-criticism}. Another is *zui*, an adverb meaning “very,” which was triplicated before certain nouns.\fn{For example, the standard way of saying “the great leader of China” became “the great, great, great leader of China.”} Our descendents might think that their ancestors were, for a time, all stammerers. This could create complications for

ancient anthropology, ancient medicine, and ancient semantics in future generations. My comment brought roars of laughter from father.

Father had two things which made me envious: his laughter and his nose. When I was too young to evaluate the judgment imposed upon him, his laughter convinced me that he could not be a bad man. According to physiognomy, father's nose was a sign of sure fortune and prosperity. In reality, however, his fate did not fit with what his nose suggested. I think this had to do with his involvement in films. After all, it has only been a hundred years since film was invented, too short to be embraced by physiognomy. But then, one can hardly reach such a conclusion, since the good fortunes of most film stars *do* have to do with good looks.

Every year, a film or two would run into trouble. I asked father why. He replied:

"Films are the only art that can get into the central party headquarters at Zhongnanhai.\fn{That part of the Forbidden City in Peking where Mao and other leaders lived and where the Central Party Committee has its offices} Access to such a place brings trouble to them."

I, for one, disagreed with the theory that film scripts should be more literary. Father questioned this:

"Well, how are you going to make the censors who read only classic literature understand what you want to do in the film?"

I then realized that father had chosen to do something he had always known was dangerous. His nose, no matter how fortunate it appeared, could not have saved him. Mother was always angry at father because he did not bother to get proper rest. I think I understand him. Certain people simply cannot afford to rest. To them, rest means giving up, and then death approaches.

Heavy snow in New York. In America, people are not in the habit of seeing guests off at the gate. So Xia was waving farewell only at the studio door. For a moment I thought I was back in Peking and could go straight to the hospital to see father and to joke with him. Father burst out laughing and said,

"Go take a bath."

The Dream of the Red Chambert ends with a scene of heavy snow, a scarlet cloak, and two lonely lines of footprints. What one man leaves behind is not the same as the chaotic imprints in Manhattan.

Father died on March 20. I arrived one day too late, both in theory and in practice, due to that arbitrary dateline across the Pacific.

Before the cremation, streams of visitors came and went. Some had genuinely looked forward to father's passing. This made father appear more like a soldier than the meek Chinese scholar he had actually been, who did not even have the means to take a proper bath. In the summer, he carried water out to the yard and bathed in one of the corners, surrounded by a piece of cloth. In the winter, public baths were like hospitals. One had to wait for one's number to be called be- fore squeezing inside.

Father was getting old, so I went with him lest he fainted. Soaking in the hot water, he closed his eyes tightly, painfully enjoying the luxurious comfort. I had the urge to ask him what he thought was the greatest happiness in a man's life, but I did not for fear he would blurt out his feelings. Whenever father stayed in a hotel for a conference where there were bath facilities, he would always invite friends of a similar fate to go and take a bath. Then they would sit around, their hair dripping wet, and talk about things other than bathing. Father did the same thing when he was in the hospital. The nurses were not at all surprised to see his wet-haired visitors. Ever since the beginning of Chinese civilization, shower and bath had always been regarded as the most important things for health next to food and drink. Bathing was such a serious matter that it was supposed to have strong effects on the heart. After the Han dynasty, the Japanese imitated the bathing techniques and greatly elaborated on them. When I asked father about his impressions after he had come back from a visit to Japan, his answer was

"Could take a bath any time." What else? He answered,

"So we won the war."\fn{According to Ah Cheng, his father was with the People's Liberation Army during world War II and fought behind enemy lines. In 1945 he witnessed the surrender of the Japanese army. When he went to Japan and compared its postwar achievements to China's backwardness, he could not help wondering at the hollowness of the Chinese victory}

Although the China Eilm Art Research Center was responsible for arranging father's funeral, the Peking Film Studio offered to send special staff along to help. So did film studios throughout China. Mother was deeply appreciative but declined them all. Nonetheless, Wu Tianming\fn{A famous film director and head of the Xi'an Film Studio} managed to send people from the Xi'an Studio to help. He himself was standing outside the funeral hall, arms folded, in utter silence. People from the Shaanxi area are among those who, since ancient times, have watched many happenings in China. He understood what this scholar had done in life, what he had hoped for, and what he regretted..

I went with my elder brother to collect father's ashes. The front hall of the crematorium was empty, no container in sight. It was only with the help of a worker that we finally found an iron dustpan sitting in one of the corners of the hall. We bent over to see father in gray ashes. The laughter had gone, and the nose too. Only a few droplets from his melted glasses lay frozen on the bony forehead.

"The Gongs and Drums of Film," *The Sunken Land, Essays of Inspiration,* and *The Technique of Films* were the only few offerings in front of father's portrait, books he labored from his very heart.\fn{According to Ah Cheng, he feels sad that due to the political circumstances, his father, an intelligent and committed person, toiled for his entire life to produce only a few works. There is a tremendous sense of waste}

40.164 Wood\fn{by Ng Hui Bun (1949-)} Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, China (F) 9

The rain was pattering. The mountains looked even more blurred. I began to feel a little annoyed. Had she got it wrong? Perhaps he was just an ordinary poet. I should have learnt more about him before I came.

As soon as I stepped into the woodland, I began to feel somewhat uneasy. The trees there were of all kinds, their hard sprawling branches blocked the way almost completely, and his house was at the very end of the path. I really wondered whether I should push on. It was early winter. In this deep valley where the sun could hardly penetrate the dense trees, my light coat offered me little protection against the chill of the misty November wind. Then, the path came to an end.

His house looked shoddily built, the walls and roof were some medium-sized timbers put together. The timbers were still overgrown with mosses and mistletoe. In front of the house was a clearing with weeds and logs; the soil was a sort of pale yellow. As I came near the house, I discovered that there was no door, just a very narrow entrance. Some hoarse and creaking sound came faintly from the inside, and it travelled gently, yet unmistakably, in the wind.

I dared not enter rashly, so I stopped for a while by the door. The house didn't seem to be fitted with windows, it looked quite dark inside, quite deep, too. I called his name and knocked lightly on the wooden walls, but there was no response. I hesitated, then went in.

The house was empty. In the feeble light, I saw him standing in the middle of the room, his back towards me, sawing a section of a trunk. His long coat, in sober color, reached almost to his heels. I called his name again. He did not answer and just went on sawing, backwards and forwards, backwards and forwards. His movements, slow and relaxed, were more like those of someone posing rather than someone at work. Then he laid down the saw, picked up a plank, and used it to carefully push open the big skylight above him. The wind gushed in at once, sending the dust on the floor swirling. In the white sawdust dancing in the wind, I saw him turning around slowly. Light from the skylight enshrouded him like a drape, then spread around him. And yet, what an old and desolate face it was! I had thought that he was only about sixty and would still be full of life—the life of poetry—but what I saw now was an old man, gaunt and withered.

"I am a reporter from a magazine house. Can I talk to you?"

He picked up the saw, put his hand on a log lying horizontally on two sections of trunks, and sawed lightly on the log. He was bald; his hair, almost the color of wood, fell to his shoulders from below his earlobes and the back of his head. In the harsh sawing sound, his dry, wiry, and slightly wavy hair quivered. He was wearing a long, loose, old-fashioned coat, the sturdy, bulky shoulders of the coat standing in sharp contrast to his shriveled neck. It reminded me of the kind of coat I had seen in old movies. I went up to him and said:

"Can I talk to you?"

As he sawed, his eyes were not set on the wood, but at a distance about two feet beyond. His pupils were a strange color, like a tea stain, and they also spread like tea stain, making it hard to tell the pupils from the white of the eye. His mouth could hardly be seen, as he had lost all his teeth and there was nothing to support the muscle around it. Deep furrows ran along the sunken muscle and curved right into the mouth. They looked like the sun's rays etched on copperplate. The sun was a void at the center, a black sun.

"I've heard people reciting your poems and I really like them."

I had come across his poems by chance and they had stuck in my mind. It was the Mid-Autumn Festival, my colleagues were having a gathering at a friend's house. I was a little apprehensive of this kind of gathering. I was used to being alone. My interests were different from theirs, or perhaps I was too *gauche* and tongue-tied to join in their conversation. But I did listen to the young woman when she recited a poem.

They were teasing a colleague about her romance. Amidst the noise and excitement, I saw a huge dragonfly flying into the room through the gap of the half-opened blinds. It was a beautiful dragonfly, with an elongated

body almost completely lemon yellow in color, and transparent wings criss-crossed with dark brown veins. It circled low and rested on the coaster beside me.

After a while, it flew off, flitting about over people's heads. Where had it come from? Why did it bother to fly to this city through the dust and the cold?

They were still laughing.. No one seemed to have noticed it. Then, I saw the young woman sitting slumped in the rocking chair next to me raise her head slightly in the direction of the dragonfly. She had soft shoulder-length hair and one of her hands was resting on the arm of the chair. My heart started to pound, faintly. I had seen her before—she had written many charming and sad stories for the magazine. Sometimes I ran into her, but she just bowed her head and walked past me softly.

Soon, she noticed me too. She bit her lower lip and smiled quietly, brushed back the hair draping over her forehead, and settled back into the chair. I took a step forward. They were still chattering behind me. The light seemed too glaring.

"You saw it?" I asked.

"Yes," she replied softly, glancing at me, and lowered her eyes again.

"Beautiful, isn't it? Few of them are dark brown in color."

"Yes, it's beautiful."

She leant an elbow on the arm of the chair, then rested her chin on the back of her hand. Under the white lamp, the color of her scarf looked soft and mellow.

"Do you know this poem about a dragonfly?

Between dream and silence you skim,
Stirring the hesitation in the water

"What?"

"'Stirring the hesitation in the water'—that might be used to describe it," she said lightly.

"I don't know it. How does the whole poem go?"

She recited it softly. Her head tipped to one side, she fiddled with the end of the scarf on her knees and rocked slowly in the chair, coming in and out of the light, in and out of the light. The glimmering light and her soft voice made everything appear unreal. Then, she looked up and smiled shyly.

"You like it?"

"Oh, yes. I've never come across people writing in that way."

"I'm surprised you like it. Your poems are very different."

A tuft of her hair was dangling down and she tucked it back behind her ears. Then, she stared at the bits of paper on the floor.

I felt a little hot.

"Whose poem is that?"

"It's the work of a very strange man. He came to Hong Kong a few years ago. My aunt knew him in the past, and likes his poems very much. She said he had published two volumes of great poems, but she hasn't seen him for years."

"Where does he live now?"

"On one of the outlying islands. I can get his address from my aunt. If you like, I can give it to you in a day or two. It's difficult to find him, though. Some of my friends went there once but failed to meet him. Maybe you can have a go. You write poems; he may be willing to talk to you. I do want to know how he's getting on, it's just that I don't feel like venturing out on my own."

She rolled the scarf in her hands and bowed her head slightly.

My heart was pounding madly, probably because of the heat. Feeling a little thirsty, I stretched out my hand to reach for the cold water on the table. But I was so nervous I dropped the coaster, which fell by her heels. I put down the glass at once, but she was already bending down slowly for the coaster, her scarf brushing the floor.

"Your scarf is soiled."

"Oh!" Then she broke into a smile again.

*

"Can I read your poems?"

But there were no books in this house. It was almost empty, not even a bed could be found. All that could be seen were boards of different sizes, piled high along the walls, some long, some short, some thin as a sheet and

half transparent, others cracked, looking like the face of a clock, or hollowed out in the middle, like a wheel. Many were covered with moss, patches of gray clustered together in the corners of the walls. They were soggy, and smelt of damp. Many were rotten and useless, but still had grains. What did he want them for? Did he sleep on them?

"I've heard that you've been here quite a few years. Do you still write poems?"

She had told me that he had stopped writing poems at least a decade before he came to Hong Kong. In all that time, he had published just a few articles. Nothing else was known of him; there was no way of finding out more information. And now his silence made it hard for me to continue asking him questions. Was he the right man? Could it be that he and the poet just happened to have the same name?

Watching his expressionless face as he went on sawing, I began to feel a little uneasy. He didn't seem to be concentrating on his work, and he didn't seem to be deep in thought. He must have noticed me, but why didn't he pay me any attention? I had asked him a very simple question. Why this silence? Once in a while, he'd raise his head and look at the sawdust quivering in the white sunlight, but he didn't stop sawing. The rust-colored saw continued to slice through the frosty air, backwards and forwards.

Then I left. What kind of person was he? He puzzled me. Did he really write poems? Had she perhaps made a mistake? When I came back from the visit, I could not help phoning her and asking her to come out and meet me. Well, just to ask her about him.

Standing by the lamppost opposite her house, I felt a little nervous as I waited for her, my coat fluttering against the occasional car that swished past me. I was the sort of man who could not be sure of a lot of things, who was afraid of loneliness and yet could not get along well with others. Nothing decisive would happen to me.

"Have you been waiting for long?"

She walked towards me gracefully.

"Not really."

It had rained earlier on and the road was filled with big puddles dark with the reflections of trees in clumps. Shewas wearing a chequered dress, white on beige, and a long scarf with alternating bands of beige and brown. In this gloomy weather, it greeted me like a cool, bright smile.

"I wanted to meet you because I want to know something about him."

"Haven't we just discussed him on the phone?" she smiled and said gently.

I had no reply.

"You really went to see him?"

"Yes."

Then I told her about the meeting in detail.

When I came to an end, she frowned, as if in disbelief.

"I can't believe it," she said.

"What did you think he'd be like?"

"I never imagined he'd be so old and gaunt. I learnt his poems from my aunt. When my aunt came to Hong Kong, she stayed with us. Whenever she couldn't sleep, she'd recite his poems. I slept in the bed beside her, and gradually I remembered the poems by heart. But lately my aunt has changed. Doesn't say much, and every so often, she raps on the desk with her knuckles. I'm afraid of her."

She stretched out her hands to receive the falling leaves.

"You know many of his poems?"

"A dozen or so. There's one I like very much, *Bottle*. Let me recite it to you."

Then she began. Her hair streamed in the wind behind her back, revealing the gentle lines on her forehead. Her soft voice wafted rhythmically through the chilly air. When she had finished, she looked up and asked:

"Do you like it? Don't you think his poems are gentle and charming? They are full of love and hope. My aunt told me she used to have a big album bound between white boards. It contained all his works which had not been included in his poetry collections and were precious. But, someone took it away when they began criticizing him. She couldn't get it back no matter how hard she tried."

"What did they criticize him for?"

"I don't know. My aunt didn't say. She's not the chatty type. She only told me that he had never written any love poems and had always been alone."

She kicked a stone before her carelessly, slowly unraveling the scarf she had rolled up in her hands. Then, letting her hair drape over her face, she asked softly:

"You haven't written any love poems either, have you?"

A motorcycle was fast approaching us from behind. It sped past us, but the loud roar of its engine vibrated in the air for a long time before it died out, like a quenched flame. I felt a little flustered.

"Look at that motorcycle!"

"I can't understand some of his poems though. I just think they're so unaffected, so charming. Anyway, I like them. Well, I don't understand many of your poems either, but I like them too."

She broke off at the stem a leaf which was leaning towards her, and rubbed it gently on her face. She tilted her head to one side, looked at me, and grinned. She was not the kind of girl who was always happy, but in the sunlight, her face glowed and she looked quite radiant. I caught a whiff of the fresh scent of leaves on her, I could hear the gentle rustle of her clothes as she walked beside me. But I was aware that a lot of things were just fleeting shadows, shadows of what I hoped would really happen. A tuft of my hair was tickling my face, and I flicked my head to toss it back. I took a deep breath, then a step forward. I'd better not go off into wild flights of fancy. I wanted to say something, but I couldn't find the words. She also grew quiet and we walked in silence. I didn't take the chance, so nothing happened.

"This is where I live," she said at last.

For many days after our meeting, I could not calm myself down, and kept wondering why she was so fond of his poems. She was a sensitive girl. When I had seen her in the past, she had always looked down and walked on softly. It was hard to believe she could discuss his poems with such childlike tenderness. It had been a long time since I had last met a girl like her. However, I was no good at taking my chances, I worried for no reason. I could feel faintly that I was going to spoil something. But why did I keep thinking about her? Weren't the poems enough to think about?

What kind of person was he really? Was he as wonderful a poet as she had made him out to be? What had come over him? How had he got through those few decades? I couldn't find out anything more about him. The friends I knew well—none of them had heard of him. And there was just no way of finding his poetry collections. How could a person just vanish into thin air? What had he gone through? Where could his poems be?

In the reference room of our magazine house, I went over the bound volumes of *Humanities Literature* published over the last twenty odd years. I didn't find anything.

In the end, I learnt about an institution specializing in providing information on Chinese literature and history for foreign scholars. I went there on the pretext that I was helping a French reporter, who had recently arrived in Hong Kong, to find some material on modern Chinese Literature, and borrowed several rolls of microfilm of a few literary journals. Then I borrowed a microfilm reader from a professor friend and studied the microfilms carefully.

But still, details about him were scanty. None of his poems could be found, and there were just a few articles denouncing his works. His poems were accused of being glutted with images and lacking in clarity. One critic said he was like a goldsmith, interested only in refining words in his own laboratory, and he used excessively accurate words to "create a philosophical maze." In an age when there was a general trend towards clarity, he sought to lead the masses to an "open grave of obscurity." Strangely, however, another critic attacked him for writing in too "objective" a manner and for being too "frosty" in his attitude. His descriptive passages, this critic said, were too plain; there was no implied meaning, no love, no concern for the people in society, and no social consciousness. Yet, another critic dismissed his poems for being too materialistic. His poems, according to this critic, "have a tendency to fetishize objects and reveal an infatuation with the industrial civilization. While they are good at describing cities, there is no glorification of progress to lift the spirit, no far-sighted vision about the future, and they show a lack of confidence in humanity."

These comments confused me even further. How could a man be charming as well as frosty, full of love and yet lacking in concern for others, have hope in things and yet no confidence in humanity? Why were these critics' views the polar opposites of hers? Were they talking about the same man?

Night had fallen. The moon looked a little clumsy and grimy.

It couldn't possibly be she who was mistaken? Her face—so soft, so still—rose up in my mind. And that pair of fair hands shading her eyes as she looked at the sunlight that crept through her fingers! I felt a gentle surge of something in me, but when I was about to reach out for it, it was gone. Oh, why was I thinking about these things? I decided to visit him again. If I could get him to talk to me, then everything would be clear. Surely, she'd be interested to know too.

*

When I arrived at his house, I could not help but hesitate. The sun was blazing, the soil a dazzling yellow. The material I had brought with me felt even heavier.

Inside, everything looked the same as when I last visited him, except that the place seemed even dimmer. The skylight was closed. There was no light except what could seep in through the narrow slits around the window pane. I could just faintly make out the window pane, blurred at the edges: it looked like a wound that might heal well. By the door lay a newly felled trunk; its branches, still uncut, stretched clumsily to the corner of the wall.

"It's me again."

I had not expected any replies from him, still I could not help but feel a little sad. What had I come here for? I had no way of knowing if he would speak to me or not. I looked at him, at a loss what to do. He had no shoes on; his feet, covered with sawdust, seemed to have turned the color of wood. His movements were light, it was as if he was working on a delicate job, and there was no salvaging it if he went wrong. He pulled the saw as far backwards as possible, waited a while, then pushed it gently forwards. Between these two movements, he drew a luxurious arc in the air with his elbow. Sometimes, when the saw got stuck in the wood, he would stop, sweep away the little twigs sticking out from the teeth of the saw, then pull it backwards again. Suddenly, I thought of his eyes. They were not the color of tea stains, they were the color of wood—the brown sawdust scattering in the air.

"Can I talk to you again? I came once before … also at this hour … I am from a magazine house …"

He still did not look at me.

"I just want to ask you a few simple questions … I've heard your poems … and I like them. Why don't you write poems now? … Or is it just that you don't publish them? … Your poems are charming, why did some critics say you're frosty and obscure? … When did you last publish your poems before you came here …? Are you living alone …? Why have you sawn off so many logs? Do you mind stopping for a moment? … Oh well, it doesn't matter, it's all right if you don't stop …"

The whole house rang with my voice. Outside, the wind was rustling the trees. My throat was seized with a pricking pain like that brought on by a coughing fit. I grasped a twig beside me and rolled it on my palm, the bark hurt my skin.

"Could you please answer my questions? I write poems too … I just want to know your views on poetry. I really like your *Dragonfly* poem—really like it. Say something, please. I will understand. I write poems too … Not great poems, but I keep on writing. Please say something. I can understand. I really write poems myself—no kidding. I can understand everything … Say something, please! I'm not making this up—do believe me. I really write poems—really … Shall I recite my poems to you?"

I was sweating allover, my mouth seemed to be watering with acid. I felt suffocated.

Then I heard a voice reciting a poem. Bitter, trembling, that voice floated into the chilly, murky shadows. I panicked, was that my own voice?

The wind began to rise from some remote mountain area. The distant sound of wind sweeping past the branches, rocks, and brown soil could be faintly heard. The room was filled with swirling sawdust and dust. The pale sunlight penetrated through the clouds and crept in through the slits between the planks on the roof, enwrapping him in a tangle of dusty, quivering lines. He looked even less like a living man. Suddenly I was filled with rage. I scratched hard a section of a trunk beside me, leaving deep white lines on the surface, which looked bloated, swollen and ugly. How could he be a poet? He was just a madman working on a ridiculous job at the wrong time and in the wrong place. His past setbacks had worn him out, there was nothing left in him except some habitual movements. Why did I bother to come here? What had he got to do with me? I wanted to move him with my poems, but he just went on marking time with the rhythm of his saw. He was living in another world, where there was no memory, no feeling, no shadow, no people, and no self. Why did I bother to recite my poems to him?

*

For days after I left him, I didn't feel like talking to anyone. It could be because I had never tried to reach out to people, never given anything to anyone, and had never even been aware of this. I had been wasting my life and I could no longer afford to do so. But perhaps there wasn't much I could give now. When we were young, we were so foolish, so wasteful, we could hardly imagine that anything would come to an end. But now, even before the end was in sight, we just grasped anything that came our way and wouldn't let go. But why did I keep thinking about such things? I stayed at home for days. Outside all was quiet. Only snatches of conversation from some television programme and the occasional barking of a dog drifted in. The sounds rose slowly and steadily into a perfect arc, and then was no more, in sorrow gone. Sometimes, I thought I heard an aeroplane passing by, then everything returned to silence.

I never again touched the films I had borrowed; the microfilm reader was littered with old newspapers, many of which were stained. He simply wasn't a poet, why should I bother?

And yet, a letter from a far-away friend changed all that again.

*

I had wanted to write a novel about palace dance in the Tang dynasty, and had asked this friend to help me find a few old dissertations in his local library, as the material there was more abundant and complete. One morning as I left my house, I received a small parcel in the mail. The sun was shining brightly on my desk before the window. I sat down and tore off the wrapping paper. Inside were photocopies in different shades—extracts from various journals and books. Under the sunlight, I looked over them. Then, in a blank space on the last page of an article, *Blue Sorrows, Ensemble Dance*, I found a poem written by him.

It was a poem about trees. Different kinds of trees. Trees dead or dying—rotten and disfigured by the wind, sunk deep into the ground, or struck dead by lightning, cleft apart, their branches stretching out like scorched fingers. Trees washed away by waves, shapeless or misshapen; trees ravaged by weather; trees, sulphur-yellow, fallen to the ground, their bearing lost. But behind all these, behind the lime, grit, scars, and salt, there was

The firmness, and the scent of wood,
The scent of growing trees
Weaving its way through the delight of night
And the colors of seasons.

It came into his room, and his fingers caressed the rough texture of the trunk, the pricking sensation of the bark. And still the rings continued to grow, round and round,

Rising above the abyss of destruction,
Decline, decay, and death
To join the songs of rivers.

My face was now in full sunlight. There was a touch of winter scent in the air. On this December morning, the distant mountains were shrouded in mist—a light veil of yellow. I could feel faintly a warmth spreading through my body. It was a feeling at once familiar and remote. There had been a time when this feeling was lost, I couldn't tell why. But now it came back to me again in the hazy winter mist. Was that why he continued to work? I remembered how he had stood there, his back arched, sawing the logs slowly and tenderly, letting the planks crack in his hands and filling the narrow space of his room with the fragrance of wood. It was like a hint, a sign of perseverance, like what he said in his poem. But what had he been through to make him end up as he now was?

I wrote at once to ask my friend to help me find out more information about him. I also continued to work on the microfilms. There was, however, nothing about him in the journals for many years after.

I began to feel a little apprehensive. Had he vanished? Just like that? Then, in the March issue of the 1958 volume, I found a notice carrying his apologies to the public, in which he admitted to a few mistakes he had made in an article he'd written on poetry. The notice was short, the mistakes were not explained. And in a 1967 article published under the name of Jiu Feng, I found this sentence:

> He could have spent these few years on a careful self re-examination; unfortunately, he made no attempt to consolidate his progress; instead, he took the road of retrogression and strayed farther and farther.

What had happened to him in those few years? And for what reason?

I spent three whole days and nights on the microfilms, not giving myself a break until I finished reading everything. But his name never appeared again. Was that when he had stopped writing poems for good?

I told her at once all the things I had learnt, hoping that her aunt could help. But her aunt could no longer speak. His poems, though charming, could no longer soothe away her haunting memories of the past. She remembered only her life in those days, endless days when she stayed shut up in a house, listening to the dull, repetitive sounds droning in the cold street outside. Thud. Thud. Thud. It was the sound of death. A vehicle drove away with a carload of dead bodies.

Was he thinking of the past too? He was old: how much longer could he last? I was a little frustrated. Why was it that one could only get to know another person within such narrow confines? Why was the link between people so fragile?

I already felt a little uneasy when I was talking to her on the phone. I had been going on and on about my discoveries, then I noticed the iciness coming from the other end. When I arrived at the coffee shop, she was

already there. She had on a grayish-blue woollen sweater, and was leaning against the brown plaster wall. She stirred her drink slowly. Her hair draped over her face again. It was still a soft and peaceful face, but the sun was shut out. I told her the story again from the very beginning. She listened quietly. Sometimes she raised her head, and then continued to stir the coffee, which had long gone cold. When she talked about her aunt, she rested her chin on her hands, and her voice became cold and distant, as if that was already consigned to the past. The air extractor above me rumbled, I gathered my spirit.

"His poems are really great!"

I quickly drew out from my pocket that poem of his which I had copied down and handed it to her. She read it for a long time, put it on the table, and said lightly:

"It's great, but there are parts I can't quite understand."

I wanted to tell her my views, but her indifferent expression choked my words. She was gazing at a poster on the pillar.

"You want to go and see the German puppet show?"

"No, not really. It's so cold."

It started to rain when we left.

I felt defeated. Two people had failed to meet due to some time lag, and could not be together. This could well be all my fault. I had messed up everything and now she had withdrawn into her own web. There was nothing I could do to save the situation. I was a man who didn't know what to do with love. I supposed I could only look for a safe haven somewhere else. But what could the poet give me? Throw me into even greater confusion probably.

Why was it that everything always came to a deadlock at a certain stage?

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Time passed; nothing happened. I kept waiting. For a long time, there was no news about either of them. Perhaps everything had simply vanished. I spent my days waiting.

After several months, I got hold of a diary. The diary was quite thick. It belonged originally to my friend's uncle, a book-seller of pirated editions. He passed away not so long ago, and his family gave my friend all his books and manuscripts. My friend sold most of the books, keeping just a few for reprint, and the manuscripts were laid aside. I was in his house and happened to be leafing through the diary when suddenly I saw his poems. Without thinking twice, I asked my friend to let me have it.

The whole diary was filled with poems. Beside his poems, there were the works of many other poets—good ones, bad ones. About twenty pages were scribbled with his poems. Not many, but good enough for me.

Having got hold of the diary, I read and re-read his poems at one sitting, not stopping until dawn arrived. It was early summer now, and a few stars were glittering in the clear sky. I caught a whiff of something, like someone cooking wheat. In the car-park behind the house, the sparse shadows of trees swayed visibly. It was very tranquil. Occasionally, some wandering cats ran by and rattled the gate, then all was quiet again. I felt a wave of uneasiness rising in me. Was that because of her? But still, I felt happy.

I read his poems again, and once again. Then, I closed the diary and sank into deep thoughts.

His poems could be divided into three main categories. Poems in the first group were about simple feelings and ordinary things—the rising sun, the rain, the rocks, some plums, autumn tinted with the color of palm trees. Poems in the second group dealt with streets, cities, houses, and buildings. The last group was purely about objects. There was some truth in what the critics said about him, but they had all taken the part for the whole—they had simply seized one aspect of his attitude towards life, imposed on it their own attitudes or beliefs, and then claimed that this picture of him was a full portrait. My understanding of him was no more complete than theirs, having read so few of his poems.

Still, I had the feeling that he was more interested in the simple things of everyday life than in abstract concepts. He loved the seasons; he loved salt, bread with a sweet taste, coffee, sleep, fresh air, friendship, and trees; he loved what you could see and touch. If some of his poems were charming, that was not because of his choice of subject matter but because the way he presented to us this ordinary world was extraordinary and charming. He let us see that our monotonous everyday life could also be charming, let us feel that there is poetry in even the most mundane things.

He rarely wrote about himself. He always wrote about objects and events in the outside world, as well as the relationship between the two. That was why some described his poems as "objective." He seldom wrote about sad things either, or chanted slogans. He planned everything he wrote with meticulous care. Yet, beneath the apparent detachment and behind the objects and events he described, one could feel the turbulent flow of his emotions, his

warmth and concern for people. In his poem *Window*, he wrote about a man sitting alone in a house and then hearing a blind fortune-teller walking past his window, the tap of the fortune-teller's walking stick resounding in the desolate darkness of the night. The poem was written in a plain style, but its impact was strong. We could feel the darkness outside the paper window, the blind man groping and shivering in the cold. We could hear, in the clang of the fortune-teller's gong, an ominous note presaging the fate of man.

His poems about streets and objects were also not purely descriptive. The various shapes, colors, and arrangements were all richly suggestive in meaning. One was about a big red oil tanker parked right at the edge of a flight of stone stairs. It was a very powerful poem, heavy with a sense of impending thunderstorm, of danger and disaster. It was amazingly close to a prophecy. His most recent poems were mostly descriptions of things broken or discarded—cracks in the walls, plaster flaking off the ceiling, crushed earthen jars, abandoned wooden carts, cement floors, cold glints on broken copper knots, wood fragments wrinkled or gnarled, and worn-out bamboo baskets—as well as hanging objects like strings, hangers, timber articles, coat-hangers, deer carcasses. The threat of death was palpable, but there was also an unyielding spirit, a stubborn refusal to give in.

And that explained all.

When I finished reading, it was already about six in the morning. I rang her at once. She was probably still in bed, but it didn't matter. Surely she would be glad to hear this news, and then everything would be different.

The phone rang for a long time before I heard her sleepy voice. I had really woken her up. I told her my discoveries at once, then hurried out to wait for her in the park opposite her house.

The park was still in cool shadows. An old newspaper was swept by the wind to the middle of the lawn, then swept away again. Under the yellow lamp light, I saw dewdrops glistening faintly on blades of grass.

Then, she came up to me slowly, a figure drifting through the mist. In the dim morning light, she looked even more like an illusion. I waited for her to sit down on a bench, then gave her the diary. She took it without a word, the expression on her face like a kind of sorrow at dawn. She put the diary on her knees, glanced at the cover, then turned to the pages I had marked with narrow strips of paper, and read each page carefully. Sometimes, she turned back the pages and read again. Her head lowered, her hair clinging to her face, I could only see the silhouette of her forehead and nose. In the gentle breeze, under the yellow light, I could feel a drowsy tenderness. Then, she closed the diary and raised her head.

"What do you think?" I asked.

She looked a little confused, her head tilted to one side. The lights in the park began to go out, the sun had not yet risen. The hair on her forehead was streaming back in the wind. How pale she looked!

"I like several of them, like *Plaster on the Wall* and *Rock*. I think they are great. But many of the rest I don't much care for. Why did he write so many poems about things shattered and damaged? Decay and disintegration terrify me. Once started, there seems no stopping the process, the sinking will continue, on and on."

Her head bowed even lower. I saw her feet gently rubbing the sand on the ground.

"It won't be like that," I said in a low voice.

Then, silence fell on us, heavily, steadily, like a gray net over our heads. The sun rose gradually, but I was overcome with despair. She had withdrawn completely into her self now. When she had reached out to me earlier on, I did not have the courage to take the chance, I had hesitated. And now, the only remaining link between us was gone. She was no longer interested in him. She would feel we had nothing in common anymore, and there was nothing much we could talk about. I, too, was a sinking person: what could I give her anyway? She was left with her own silence.

Then she stood up. It was still quite dark. I offered to take her home. She didn't turn back and just waved her hand perfunctorily. In silence, she slowly disappeared into the gloomy mist. Occasionally, the headlight of a passing car would mark her out in clear relief. And then, the shadows returned.

I felt icily cold. Would everything vanish just like that? I was the sort of man who didn't know how to handle my feelings, didn't know how to manage things.

Back home, I locked myself in my room for days. Full of frustration, I read his poems again and again. Now I had nothing but him. But could I, like him, rise from loneliness, above all that had been lost or destroyed, and continue to grow? Light was streaming in through the windows, the glass top of my desk basking in the warmth of the sun. I could smell in the wind the fragrance of trees from afar. Anything was possible, I thought. I decided to visit him again; he was now my only comfort.

*

When I reached his house, it was past ten. The trees in the sun were glittering white and silver. The lingering morning mist made his house seem much more pleasant, and his back less crooked. I called him, then sat on a pile

of planks by the wall. The fresh scent of newly felled logs filled the air inside the house. Why had I never noticed it before? Next to the entrance, there lay some long twigs overgrown with green leaves—they were not there last time. The skylight was still closed, I went and opened it. The strong summer sunlight poured down in a cascade, waking the dust in the house and dispersing them hastily in the air.

Then, I began to recite my poems. In the sawdust and sunlight, I felt much more tranquil. I had no more reservations, no more fear, no more sorrow, and no more expectations. I recited slowly and smoothly, beginning from my first short poems. I was not a great poet, and had written many shoddy pieces. But I wanted him to know me, everything about me—all my uncertainties, fears, stupid mistakes, happiness, as well as my recent sufferings. I, too, was a simple and taciturn person, so I could only rely on my poems. He would understand me. I was not looking for any response, but I knew he was listening. Was he really? It didn't matter. I heard the hoarse and creaking sound that came from his saw. The aroma of the newly felled logs caressed my face, I felt the dazzling sunlight and the beating of my heart. Wisps of summer mist rose in gentle twirls into the sky, drifting past his loose coat and rippling over his face. The wind stirred the new leaves on the ground; the crickets chirped. We, too, seemed part of the summer days.

Then darkness fell slowly. Thereafter, I spent many Sundays there. I recited all my favorite poems to him, and told him why I liked them. Snatches of my memories; something from my imagination; some possible meanings. I had never talked so much and probably never would again. But I had never felt more at ease.

Now and then, we would fall silent, and listen to the wind sweeping through the trees and heading straight to the flood-land stretching for miles behind the house. In the calm autumn days, there was sometimes just the continuous sound of sawing and our own breathing. Sometimes as the crimson evening light of late autumn streamed in through the skylight, we would watch the sawdust dancing in the air. Sometimes, we just watched the cloudless sky, or the twittering birds in the distance. And in these peaceful, tranquil afternoons, I felt as if I had been fully compensated—for everything that I had lost through fear and hesitation, and everything that I had failed to obtain because of my own inadequacies.

And in all these days, he still remained silent. The wind and rain came in and out through the narrow entrance. He kept his head lowered and went on working, the creaking of his saw echoing in the room. But, for all his habitual movements and silence, I could detect some slight changes.

On fine days, when the sun no longer dazzled the eyes, he would raise his head, look at the skylight and sway weakly for a good while before stopping. When the wind smoothed out his hair over his shoulders, and the cold sunlight fell on him, I could see a face glowing with a light tan.

Many a time when I recited to him my poem about shabby streets, he would bend down, pick up the saw, rest it in the slit of a log half-sawed, and brush the handle of the saw lightly. Then watching it quiver, he would sigh as if he was humming a harmony. And when I finished, he would carry on with his work quietly.

I noticed too that he no longer just ate the leaves on the trees, and he spent more time outdoors felling trees. When the wind and rain leaked from the skylight, he began to take shelter in the corner of the walls.

All these signs—so consistent and yet so ambiguous, perhaps even meaningless—could not but shak me.\fn{The text has: *shook*.} I wrote a long poem.

It was a poem about him, about his loss, his obsession with wood, his perseverance, the pose he struck with his movements, his silence, his despair in decrepitude, and also his gradual opening up.

I spent hours on this poem, all at one sitting. I was exhausted when I took it to read to him. I sat on the floor leaning against a big log lying horizontally on the ground and recited the poem quietly. The sun rose. I felt a warm current flowing gently in my body. To my surprise, he was listening carefully, a newly sawn piece of wood clasped under his arm, his head tilted slightly to one side, so rapt he let the wind drape his long brownish hair over his face. Outside the faint sound of branches dropping to the ground could now and then be heard, and the air was rich with the scent of bamboo flowers. I was breathing lightly.

Then, I saw him raising his head slowly and looking fully at me. His eyes were the boundless color of wood. I felt a little stunned. This was the first time he had looked at me in all those days. The sunlight was trickling through his hair and over his clothes, highlighting the edges of his hair and clothes in gold. Amidst the dim surroundings, he looked even less real. I bit my lower lip lightly, and watched him sitting down slowly, weightlessly. The sun had risen even higher, its rays pouring in through the skylight and splashing all around us, engulfing us in the white light of the rising dust.

Then, I saw him handing his saw slowly to me. The air was still full of the shadows of dust. All of a sudden, I felt a strong gust of wind sweeping in from outside. I shivered, I caught in the wind the strong stinking smell of wood and the damp gathered in the shade. The swirling sawdust choked me, I wanted to roll up my collar. I felt a

chill running through my limbs. The sun was still shining. I heard the sound of my body condensing into ice. I froze.

41.114 & 63.18 & 151.8 1. Happiness Street **2.** The Homecoming Stranger **3.** Moon On The Manuscript**: Three Short Stories**\fn{by Shi Mo aka Bei Dao, Zhao Zhenkai (1949-)} Peking, China (M) 20

A late autumn morning. The street was bleak and desolate. A gust of wind rustled the withered yellow leaves on the pavement. The dreary, monotonous cry of an old woman selling ices could be heard in the distance. Fang Cheng pulled his old black woollen coat tightly around himself and kicked a stone on the ground. It wedged itself in the iron grate in the gutter with a clunk. The call from his sister just now had been really too fantastic: young Jun had been flying his kite in this street yesterday afternoon, yes, this same bloody street, when all of a sudden, he had disappeared without a trace; in broad daylight! His sister's sobs, followed by the beep signalling the line was disconnected, had upset him so much that his head was still ringing. Sun, the section head, was sitting opposite him at the time, and had given him an inquisitive glance, so he had put down the receiver and done his utmost to look normal.

Across the road, a row of locust-trees had been sawn down to the roots, the trunks lying across the pavement. A yellow Japanese forklift was parked by the side of the road. Four or five workmen were busy attaching hooks to the sawn-off trees and loading them onto a large truck to the tooting of a whistle.

Fang Cheng approached the old woman selling ices.

"Such fine locust-trees, how come …"

"Ices, three cents and five cents." The shriveled mouth snapped shut.

"Comrade …"

The old woman's strident voice robbed him of the courage to repeat his question. He crossed the road to the truck. A young fellow who looked like the driver was leaning against the front mudguard smoking.

"Excuse me, what's going on here?"

"Don't you have eyes in your head?"

"I mean, what are you sawing the trees down for?"

"Who do you think you are, going round poking your nose into everything? Are you building a house, and you want us to leave you a log for the roof beam? I'll tell you straight, I can't even get one for myself."

Flicking away his cigarette butt, the driver turned round and climbed into the cab, slamming the door behind him.

Fang Cheng bit his lip. A middle-aged woman carrying a string bag was walking past. He caught up with her.

"Excuse me, where did you get those turnips?"

"At the greengrocer's over the way."

"Oh." He smiled politely and walked with her for a few steps.

"How come these trees have been cut down? Such a shame."

"Who knows? I heard that yesterday a kite got caught in the trees, and some young rascal climbed up to get it." She suddenly fell silent and hurried off nervously.

A long shadow slipped across the ground. Fang Cheng swung around. A man wearing a leather jacket pulled a green army cap over his eyes, gave him a swift glance and walked past.

It was only then that Fang Cheng noticed the high outside wall exposed behind the stumps of the felled locust-trees. The plaster was so old that it had peeled off in places, showing the large solid bricks underneath. He took a deep breath, inhaling petrol fumes mixed with the sweet scent of locust-wood, and walked back along the wall. Before long he came upon a recess in the wall enclosing a gateway guarded by two stone lions. The red paint on the door had faded and was covered with a layer of dust, as if it hadn't been opened for a long time. On it was a very ordinary plaque with the words:

13 Happiness Street

and beneath it a cream-colored buzzer.

Fang Cheng went to press it, but it wouldn't budge. On closer inspection he realized it was moulded from a single piece of plastic and was purely decorative. He stood there bewildered.

As he drew back a few paces, trying to get a clearer view of the whole gate, he bumped into an old man who

happened to be passing by.

"Sorry. Excuse me, who lives here?"

He stopped short. The terror that welled up from the depths of the old man's eyes made Fang Cheng's legs go weak. The old man stumbled away, his walking stick beating an urgent and irregular rhythm as he disappeared into the distance.

A young boy walked by, absorbed in whittling a branch from one of the locust-trees with a penknife.

"Hey, where's the neighborhood committee office, young man?"

"Turn at the lane over there," the boy sniffled, pointing with the branch.

The narrow lane twisted its way through the shoddy makeshift houses. From time to time Fang Cheng had to walk sideways in order to prevent the boards and exposed nails from catching and tearing his overcoat. At the entrance to what looked like a rather spacious courtyard at the far end of the lane two sign boards were hanging side by side: Neighborhood Committee and Red Medical Station. Both were; covered with the muddy finger-prints of children. He pushed open the door of the room on the north side of the courtyard and stuck his head inside.

"Did you bring the certificate?" asked a girl busy knitting a jumper.

"What certificate?"

"The death certificate!" she said impatiently.

Everything in the room was white: the sheet, the folding screen, the table, the chairs, and also the girl's lab-coat and pallid face. Fang Cheng shivered.

"No, no, I've—"

"Listen, if we don't sign it nobody's going to let you hold the funeral service!"

"I'm looking for someone."

"Looking for someone?"

She looked up in surprise, lifting her hair back with one of her knitting needles.

"Don't you know what's proper?"

"But this is—"

"The Red Medical Station."

Retreating into the yard, Fang Cheng noticed a dense crowd of people in the room to the south. He walked over and knocked on the door.

"Come in," a voice said.

Inside about a dozen people were seated around a long wooden table, all staring at him in silence. The light inside the room was so dim that he couldn't make out their faces, but judging from their heavy bronchial wheezing, most of them were old women.

"Has it been signed?"

The question came from a woman at the far end of the table. From her voice she seemed pretty young; she'd be the chairwoman or something.

"No, I—"

"Then they're still alive and breathing," she broke in sharply.

A howl of laughter. One fat old woman laughed so much she started gagging, and someone thumped her on the back.

"I'm a reporter," Fang Cheng explained hastily.

Instantly the room fell deathly silent. They gazed stupidly at each other, as if they were not too sure what he meant.

The chairwoman was the first to break the silence.

"Your papers."

Fang Cheng had barely taken out his press card when it was snatched away by the person nearest the door. The card in its red plastic cover was handed round the table for everyone to look at and comment on. As it passed from hand to hand, some of them shook their heads while others spat on their fingers and rubbed it. Finally it reached the chairwoman. Gripping the card, she studied it carefully, then got the old man in glasses beside her to read it aloud. At last she gave a nod.

"Hmm. Have you come to take photos?"

A buzz of excited confusion filled the room. Dull eyes flashed, people nudged and tugged at each other, and one old woman who had fallen asleep propped against the table actually woke up. It was as if something that they had been waiting a lifetime for was finally about to happen.

“You can take our picture now, we’re in the middle of our political study,” the chairwoman said haughtily. “Sit up everyone, and don’t look into the camera!”

They all sat up straight, and there was a loud rustle as they picked up the newspapers on the table.

“Hold on, I haven’t brought my camera. I’m here on another matter. I’m trying to find out who lives at Number 13 Happiness Street.”

“How come you never breathed a word of this earlier?” said the chairwoman, obviously quite put out.

“You didn’t give me a chance—”

“All right then, what do you want to know?”

“It’s about Number 13 Happiness Street—”

“Someone alive and kicking? That’s none of our business. On your way then, and next time don’t start gabbling away at us again, these old bones can't take all the excitement.”

“Whose business is it?”

“Quiet! Let's get on with our meeting. Now, where were we? Oh yes, this case involving Dumb Chen from over in the Fourth Xiang-yang Courtyard. He’ll live on in our hearts forever and all that, but people have started asking why he’s still being issued with a face mask every winter—”

“Maybe his corpse is still breathing.”

“We’ll issue you with a cauldron to lie in when it’s your turn to go to heaven, so you won’t have to straighten that hunch back of yours …”

A strange rasping sound came from the corner.

They started to quarrel, their voices getting louder and louder. Fang Cheng took advantage of the confusion to slip out. When he reached the gate he breathed a long sigh of relief, feeling that he had actually almost died himself.

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He took a wrong turn. The buildings inside another compound were being pulled down, and clouds of dust filled the air. A crowd of children pressed around the entrance, peering inside. In the yard the workmen were chanting as they swung a wooden pole against the gable of the house to the east. A structure like a well was under construction in the middle of a stretch of rubble.

“What is this place?” Fang Cheng asked the children.

“The local housing authority,” a young girl replied timidly. Stepping over a pile of lime, Fang Cheng ran into a young fellow carrying a bucket of cement.

“I’m a reporter, where is your foreman?”

“Hey, Wang!”

A head popped out from a scaffold.

“What is it?”

“The newspapers again.”

Wang leapt down nimbly and put down his trowel, wiping his forehead and muscular neck with his sleeve.

“Well, you lot are on the ball all right, it’s our first go at this particular innovation—”

“Innovation?”

“Sounds as if you’re here about cadres doing manual labor again. Your paper’s carried that news a good half dozen times already, and the only thing they ever change is my name. If you fellas keep it up it won’t be long before I’ll have trouble figuring out what I’m called. Take a look at this job. What’d you reckon?”

“What exactly is it?”

“A house, of course. The latest style.”

“Actually, it looks like a …” he bit back the word “tomb.”

“A blockhouse, right? But it doesn’t have peep holes in the sides.”

“What about windows?”

“They’ll all be on the roof.”

Wang rubbed his hands in glee, flicking off small pellets of mud.

“Ideal in case of war, keeps out robbers, protects you against both wind and cold, it’s got lots of advantages. It’s something we learned from our ancestors.”

Our cave-dwelling ancestors, Fang Cheng smiled wryly.

“The thing is that houses like these are cheap, you can build ’em by the dozen with pre-mixed concrete. They’re easier to make than chicken coops, and they’re more solid than a blockhouse. If this catches on, you and me’ll both be famous. For starters I’ll get a new house, and sit in an armchair at the bureau office. But don’t put

any of that in your story.

"Here, take a look at the blueprints. We're in the middle of a demolition job, so the air's not too clean. Hey, Li, are you taking that shovel's pulse or what? Look lively now and bring a stool over here …"

Fang Cheng felt a bit dizzy.

"It's all right, I'll look these over back at the office. By the way, do you happen to know who lives at Number 13 Happiness Street?"

"Dunno, that's not our business."

"Whose is it then? Whose business *is* it to know?"

"Don't blow your top, let me think about it for a second … you could try asking. around at the bureau, they've got a big map there. It shows everything down to the last detail."

"Good, I'll try them."

"Do us a favor while you're at it, take this blueprint with you and give it to the director. We'll get a pedicab to take you."

"No need, but thanks all the same."

"This time be sure you don't get my name wrong," Wang shouted after him.

Fang Cheng staggered out and stood in the middle of the road, staring at the sky.

*

The secretary darted out from behind the door, her heels clicking.

"Director Ding will be very happy to see you, Comrade Reporter. The other seventeen directors would also like to talk to you, at your convenience of course. Director Ma would like to give you his view on the question of the revolutionary succession; Director Tian wants to give you a run down on his war record; Director Wang would like to discuss the simplification of Chinese characters—"

"Which one of them is the real director of the bureau?"

"Here we make no distinction between the director and assistant directors, we simply list them all in alphabetical order."

"I'm sorry, but I'm a bit pressed for time. I'm here on another matter. Anyway, how do all the directors know I'm here?"

"They were at a board meeting together just now."

"Am I breaking it up?"

"Don't give it another thought. They've been at it for nine days already. They were only too glad to take a break."

The director's office was thick with smoke. A pudgy old man with a healthy-looking complexion standing beside the conference table extended his hand to Fang Cheng with a broad smile.

"Welcome, have a seat. Look at all this smoke, it's a form of collective murder—"

"What?"

He waved his arms around in the air in an attempt to disperse the clouds of smoke.

"The fact that I'm an optimist has been my salvation, let me tell you. Have you heard of a medicine called 'Anliben'?"

"No."

"It's a miracle drug used overseas for people with heart trouble. Does your paper ever send you abroad?"

"The chances are pretty slim."

"Then could you ask someone to help me get some?"

"I'll see what I can do. Do you have heart trouble?"

The director immediately looked glum.

"I'm an old man, getting past it. Who knows, maybe the next time you come it'll be Director Ma sitting in this seat."

He cleared his throat.

"But let's get back to the matter in hand. Major political campaigns bring about major changes, and major changes promote further political campaigns. In the current quarter we've completed 158% of our work plan; compared with the same period last year—"

"Excuse me, Director Ding, I haven't come here on a story."

"Oh?"

"I want to make some enquiries about a house. Who lives at Number 13 Happiness Street?"

Beads of sweat appeared on Ding's shiny red face. He pulled out a handkerchief and wiped his face.

"You're not trying to trick me with some difficult question, are you? A big city like this, how could I know every house on every street by heart, like a production chart?"
"I heard that you've got a big map here …"
"Yes, yes, I almost forgot."
Groping for a small bottle in his pocket, he poured out a few pills and popped them into his mouth.
"What do you think of the chicken-blood cure?"
"I haven't tried it."
He pressed a button on his desk and the red curtains on the wall parted slowly. He picked up a pointer, whipped the air with it energetically, and went up to the map.
"How about the arm-swinging cure?"
"I'm sure it helps."
"Yes, it's very effective. Happiness Street … Number 30 … ah, a coal depot."
"I'm after Number 13."
"13 … 13 … come and see for yourself, my friend."
It was a blank space.
"How come it's not marked?" Fang Cheng asked in surprise.
Director Ding patted him on the shoulder.
"Look carefully, there are quite a lot of blank spots on this map. No one knows what these places are."
"No one knows?"
"Nothing to be surprised about. It's just like all the blank spots in our knowledge of medicine."
"Not even the Public Security Bureau people?"
"Why don't you go and see for yourself, we open out onto their back door; it's very handy. What do you think of gadgets like pacemakers, are they reliable?"
"Pacemakers? I don't know much about them."
Fang Cheng felt around in his pockets and fished out the blueprint.
"This morning I went to the local housing authority and Wang, the foreman, asked me to give this to you. It's the innovation they've been working on."
"That fellow's too active for his own good. He's like a bloody magician, always coming up with some new gimmick. There's still a lot of major business here we haven't had time to get round to yet."
Ding frowned, rolled up the blueprint and threw it into a wastepaper basket in the corner.
"It's thanks to people like him that there's never a moment's peace and quiet anywhere."
The secretary appeared at the door.
"A message for all directors. The meeting is about to resume."

*

Fang Cheng showed his press card to the guard standing at the opening in the iron fence which surrounded the Public Security Bureau.
"I want to see the director of the bureau."
"Interrogation Room I."
"Uh?"
"Up the stairs, first door on the right."
"I'm a reporter."
The guard looked at him blankly, not bothering to reply.
Fang Cheng went up the stairs, and with the help of the faint light in the corridor found a door with a brass plaque nailed to it:

Interrogation Room 1

He knocked. No one answered so he pushed the door open and went in. It was sumptuously furnished, with a red carpet on the floor and some leather chairs set around a tea table. It was not in the least like an interrogation room. He heaved a sigh of relief and sat down.
Suddenly three or four policemen came in through a small side door escorting a man in a gray Mao suit. The man was of medium height, and his swarthy face was like an iron mask, cold and stern. A policeman wearing spectacles moved to his side and whispered something in his ear. He nodded.

“This is Director Liu,” Spectacles said by way of introduction. “Please be seated.”

The director’s voice was deep and harsh. He and Spectacles moved to the chairs opposite and sat down. The other policemen stood at either side of them.

“Director Liu, there’s something I would like to ask you,” said Fang Cheng.

“Just a moment, first I’ve got a question for you.”

After a moment’s pause, Liu proceeded.

“If I gave you five matches to make a square, how would you do it?”

Fang Cheng stared at him in astonishment.

“Now, don’t be nervous.”

“I’m not nervous.” He thought hard, but his mind was a complete blank.

Suddenly, Liu gave a harsh laugh, and turned smugly towards Spectacles.

“This is typical of ideological criminals, they always try and find a way to use the extra match. Ordinary criminals are another case altogether …”

“You have a thorough grasp of the psychology of the criminal mind,” offered Spectacles obsequiously.

“This is an outrage!” Fang Cheng protested.

“Don’t get excited, young man, and don’t interrupt me when I’m talking.”

Liu turned to Spectacles again.

“The important thing to note here is that by using psychological tactics you can force the criminal’s thinking into a very small space, or shall we say a surface, where he can’t possibly conceal himself, and then he’s easily overwhelmed. Do you see what I am saying?”

Spectacles nodded. “But … but how can you tell he’s a criminal? From the look in his eyes?”

“No, no, that’s all out-of-date. Ideological criminals can easily disguise their expressions. Listen, everyone you confront is a criminal, and don’t you ever forget it.”

“Everyone?”

“Yes. That’s what class struggle is all about.”

“But … then … that’s …” Spectacles spluttered.

“All right, you ask too many questions, I have no alternative but to put you down as ideologically suspect.” Rudely cutting Spectacles short, Liu turned and looked sternly at Fang Cheng.

“State your business, young man.”

“I … I want to make an enquiry about a house.”

“Good, go on.”

“Who lives at Number 13 Happiness Street?”

Director Liu froze, but in an instant a barely perceptible smile appeared on his lips. Spectacles, still looking crest-fallen, opened his briefcase and took out some paper, ready to take notes. The two policemen stood next to Fang Cheng. The atmosphere in the room became tense.

“Your name?” Liu asked sharply.

“Fang Cheng.”

“Age?”

“What do you take me for? I’m a reporter.”

“Hand over your papers.”

Fang Cheng drew out his press card and passed it to one of the policemen at his side.

“Examine it and take his fingerprints. Also, find his file and check his ideological status,” ordered the director.

“What am I being accused of?”

“Prying into state secrets.”

“Is Number 13 Happiness Street a state secret?”

“Whatever no one knows is a secret.”

“Including you? You mean, you don’t know either?”

“Me? There’s a certain continuity to your case, you won’t even co-operate during interrogation.”

Fang Cheng sighed.

“Next question …”

Towards evening, Fang Cheng was released.

*

The municipal library was empty except for the faint but pervasive odour of mould. Fang Cheng leafed through the catalogue, finally locating the book: *A Study of Grave-Robbing Techniques Through the Ages.* He

noted down the call number and rushed upstairs to the reading room.

A middle-aged woman with prominent cheek-bones standing behind the desk looked at the slip and then studied him.

"Are you an archaeologist?"

"No, I'm a reporter."

"Are you planning to visit some tombs for a story?" she said half-jokingly.

"I want to uncover some secrets."

"What secrets can you possibly find in this book?"

"A place where life has ended can still contain all kinds of secrets."

"Doesn't anyone know what they are?"

"No, because even the living have become part of the secret."

"What?"

"No one knows anyone; no one understands anyone."

The woman with high cheekbones stared at him.

"Good heavens, you must be mad."

"It's not me who's mad, it's heaven."

She turned away and ignored him after that. Nearly an hour later he heard the clickety-clack of the book trolley, and the book landed on the desk, raising a cloud of dust. Putting it under his arm, Fang Cheng went into the reading room and sat down at an empty desk in a corner. He leafed through the book, taking notes from time to time.

A pale square of sunlight moved slowly across the table. Fang Cheng stretched and looked at his watch. It was getting late. Before long he found himself surrounded by other readers. Strange, they were all concealing their faces behind thick books. Looking more carefully, Fang Cheng shuddered. They were all reading the same book: *A Study Of Grave-Robbing Techniques Through the Ages.* He broke into a sweat, and stirred uneasily in his seat.

As he slipped out of the library he was aware of a shadowy figure following closely behind. He went into a small lane and then suddenly turned back. The man didn't have time to conceal himself and they met head-on: it was the fellow in the leather jacket he had bumped into the previous morning in Happiness Street. As soon as he emerged from the lane, Fang Cheng made a dash for a trolley bus at a nearby stop. He jumped on board, and the doors closed behind him with a squeal.

When he got off the bus he looked around anxiously and only relaxed when he felt sure he had not been followed. He thrust his hands into his overcoat pockets and did his best to regain his self-confidence and courage.

At a crossing a boy ran past flying a kite. The string in his hand was taut and the kite danced in the air. A high place, of course! Jun had disappeared while he was flying a kite. It must have been because he had seen something from a high place. What an idiot I've been, he thought, why didn't I think of that earlier? How awful, he'd almost let himself be suffocated like a rat trapped in a hole …

He bought a pair of high-power binoculars at a second-hand store and set off in the direction of Happiness Street, working his way towards his target through a maze of lanes and alleyways. Finally he saw a tall chimney towering alone in a stretch of vacant ground, surrounded on all sides by broken bricks and rubbish.

He made for the boiler-room at the foot of the chimney. A wizened old man was stoking the boiler as an airblower droned in the background. His tattered sweat-stained work clothes were held together at the waist and swung back and forth in time with his monotonous movements.

"Can I interrupt you for a minute!" Fang Cheng called out.

The old man slowly straightened himself, turned his long, skinny body and walked over to the doorway. His face was covered with coal dust and ashes.

"Who're you looking for?" he asked.

"I wonder if you could tell me where this leads to?"

"Heaven."

"No, what I mean is who's the fire for?"

"How should I know. They pay me, I do the work, that's the way it is."

"If they pay you, there must be some evidence for it."

"Ah, yes. Now where's my pay slip got to?" he said, patting himself up and down. "Must've used it to roll a cigarette."

"What was written on it?"

"Let me think … seems it might have run something like this: 'Burn enough to make a thousand black clouds.'

Hah!"

The old man grinned, baring his teeth. Against his grimy face his broken and uneven teeth seemed extremely white.

Fang Cheng took off his black woollen overcoat.

"Can I trouble you to keep an eye on this for me. I'm going up to take a look."

"You don't want to leave a note for your family?"

"What?"

"You're the twelfth so far. Just yesterday a girl jumped …"

The old man went back to stoking the boiler. Tongues of flame shot forth.

Fang Cheng gazed up at the chimney, which seemed to lean slightly. He went to the foot of the iron ladder and started climbing. The houses grew smaller and smaller and it got so windy that his clothes flapped around him. When he reached the last rung, he steadied himself. Hooking one arm through the ladder, he turned around and began to survey the scene with his binoculars. Rooftops, date trees, courtyard walls … all came clearly into view.

Suddenly he stiffened, and the hand holding the binoculars began shaking. He couldn't believe his eyes. Finally he managed to collect his thoughts and refocus the lenses. He searched carefully in every corner, but didn't see even a single blade of grass.

"Oh bloody hell." he muttered to himself.

As his feet touched ground he heard someone calling out sharply behind him:

"Don't move. Where do you think you're going now?"

Not at all surprised, he brushed the dust off his clothes and turned around. The man in the leather jacket gave him a shove, and they walked towards a jeep parked some distance away. Twisting his head, Fang Cheng saw the old man stoking the boiler while thick smoke continued to billow out of the tall chimney.

"Black clouds," he said.

*

Fang Cheng was sent to the lunatic asylum.

When he looked at the people running in circles around the desolate grounds and the outside wall covered with weeds, he finally understood: so now he too was inside the wall.

2

Papa was back.

After exactly twenty years of reform through labor, which took him from the North-East to Shanxi, and then from Shanxi to Gansu, he was just like a sailor who, swept overboard by a wave, struggles blindly against the undertow until miraculously another wave tosses him back onto the same deck.

The verdict was: it was entirely a misjudgment, and he has been granted complete rehabilitation. That day, when the leaders of the Theater Association honored our humble home to announce the decision, I almost jumped up: when did you become so smart? Didn't the announcement that he was an offender against the people come out of your mouths too? It was Mama's eyes, those calm yet suffering eyes, that stopped me.

Next came the dress rehearsal for the celebration: we moved from a tiny pigeon-loft into a three-bedroom flat in a big building; sofas, bookcases, desks and chrome folding chairs appeared as if by magic (I kept saying half-jokingly to Mama that these were the troupe's props); relatives and friends came running in and out all day, until the lacquer doorknob was rubbed shiny by their hands, and even those uncles and aunts who hadn't shown up all those years rushed to offer congratulations … all right, cheer, sing, but what does all this have to do with me? My papa died a long time ago, he died twenty years ago, just when a little four or five year old girl needed a father's love—that's what Mama, the school, some kind-hearted souls and my whole social upbringing, starting from birth, told me. Not only this, you even wanted me to hate him, curse him, it's even possible you'd have given me a whip so I could lash him viciously! Now it's the other way round, you're wearing a different face. What do you want me to do? Cry, or laugh?

Yesterday at dinner time, Mama was even more considerate than usual, endlessly filling my bowl with food. After the meal, she drew a telegram from the drawer and handed it to me, showing not the slightest sign of emotion.

"Him?"

"He arrives tomorrow, at 4:50 in the afternoon."

I crumpled the telegram, staring numbly into Mama's eyes.

“Go and meet him, Lanlan.” She avoided my gaze.

“I have a class tomorrow afternoon.”

“Get someone to take it for you.”

I turned towards my room. “I won't go.”

“Lanlan.” Mama raised her voice. “He is your father, after all!”

“Father?” I muttered, turning away fiercely, as if overcome with fear at the meaning of this word. From an irregular spasm in my heart, I realized that stitches from the old wound were splitting open one by one.

I closed the composition book spread in front of me: Zhang Xiaoxia, 2nd Class, 5th Year. A spirited girl, her head always slightly to one side in a challenging way, just like me as a child. Oh yes, childhood. For all of us life begins with those pale blue copybooks, with those words, sentences and punctuation marks smudged by erasures; or, to put it more precisely, it begins with a certain degree of deception. The teachers delineated life with halos, but which of them does not turn into a smoke ring or an iron hoop?

Shadows flowed in from the long old-fashioned windows, brightly illuminating the opaque glass desk-top. The entire staff-room was steeped in drowsy tranquillity. I sighed, tidied my things, locked the door and, crossing the deserted school grounds, walked towards home.

The apartment block with its glittering lights was like a huge television screen, the unlit windows composing an elusive image. After a little while some of the windows lit up, and some went dark again. But the three windows on the seventh floor remained as they were: one bright, two dark. I paced up and down for a long time in the vacant lot piled with white lime and fir-tree poles. On a crooked, broken signboard were the words:

SAFETY FIRST

Strange, why is it that in all the world’s languages, this particular word comes out sounding the same: papa. Fathers of different colors, temperaments and status all derive the same satisfaction from this sound. Yet I still can’t say it. What do I know about him? Except for a few surviving old photographs retaining a childhood dream (perhaps every little girl has such dreams)—him, sitting on an elephant like an Arab sheik, a white cloth wound round his head, a resplendent mat on the elephant’s back, golden tassels dangling to the ground—there were only some plays that once created a sensation and a thick book on dramatic theory which I happened to see at the waste-paper salvage station. What else was there? Yes, add those unlucky letters, as punctual and drab as a clock; stuck in those brown-paper envelopes with their red frames, they were just like death notices, suffocating me. I never wrote back, and afterwards, I threw them into the fire without even looking at them. Once, a dear little duckling was printed on the snow-white envelope, but when I tore it open and looked, I was utterly crushed. I was so upset I cursed all ugly ducklings, counting up their vices one by one: greed, pettiness, slovenliness—because they hadn't brought me good luck. But what luck did I deserve?

The elevator was already shut down for the day, and I had to climb all the way up. I stopped outside the door to our place and listened, holding my breath. From inside came the sounds of the television humming, and the cliches of an old film. God, give me courage!

As soon as I opened the door, I heard my younger brother’s gruff voice:

“Sis’s back.”

He rushed up as if making an assault on the enemy, helping me to take off my coat. He was almost twenty, but still full of childish attachment to me, probably because I had given him the maternal love which had seemed too heavy a burden for Mama in those years.

The corridor was very dark and the light from the kitchen split the darkness into two. He was standing in the doorway of the room opposite, standing in the other half of the darkness, and next to him was Mama. The reflection from the television screen flickered behind their shoulders.

A moment of dead silence. Finally, he walked over, across the river of light. The light, the deathly-white light, slipped swiftly over his wrinkled and mottled neck and face. I was struck dumb: was he this shriveled little old man? Father. I leaned weakly against the door. He hesitated a moment and put out his hand. My little hand disappeared in his stiff, big-jointed one. These hands didn’t match his body at all.

“Lanlan.”

His voice was very low, and trembled a little. Silence.

“Lanlan,” he said again, his voice becoming a little more positive, as if he were waiting eagerly for something. But what could I say?

“You’re back very late. Have you had dinner?” said Mama.
“Mmm.” My voice was so weak.
“Why is everyone standing? Come inside,” said Mama. He took me by the hand. I followed obediently. Mama turned on the light and switched off the television with a click. We sat down on the sofa. He was still clutching my hand tightly, staring at me intently. I evaded his eyes, and let my gaze fall on the blown-up plastic doll on the window-sill. An unbearable silence.
“Lanlan,” he called once again.
I was really afraid the doll might explode, sending brightly-colored fragments flying all over the room.
“Have you had your dinner?”
I nodded vigorously.
“Is it cold outside?”
“No.” Everything was so normal, the doll wouldn’t burst. Perhaps it would fly away suddenly like a hydrogen balloon, out the window, above the houses full of voices, light and warmth, and go off to search for the stars and moon.
“Lanlan.” His voice was full of compassion and pleading. All of a sudden, my just-established confidence swiftly collapsed. I felt a spasm of alarm. Blood pounded at my temples. Fiercely I pulled back my hand, rushed out the door into my own room and flung myself head-first onto the bed. I really felt like bursting into tears.
The door opened softly; it was Mama. She came up to the bed, sat down in the darkness and stroked my head, neck and shoulders. Involuntarily my whole body began to tremble as if with cold.
“Don’t cry, Lanlan.”
Cry? Mama, if I could still cry the tears would surely be red, they’d be blood.
She patted me on the back. “Go to sleep, Lanlan, everything will pass.”
Mama left. Everything will pass. Huh, it’s so easily said, but can twenty years be written off at one stroke? People are not reeds, or leeches, but oysters, and the sands of memory will flow with time changing into a part of the body itself, teardrops that will never run dry.
. . . a basement. Mosquitoes thudded against the searing light bulb. An old man covered with cuts and bruises was tied up on the pommell horse, his head bowed, moaning hoarsely. I lay in the corner sobbing. My knees were cut to ribbons by the broken glass; blood and mud mixed together. . .
I was then only about twelve years old. One night, when Mama couldn’t sleep, she suddenly hugged me and told me that Papa was a good man who had been wrongly accused. At these words hope flared up in the child’s heart: for the first time she might be able to enjoy the same rights as other children. So I ran all around, to the school, the Theater Association, the neighborhood committee and the Red Guard headquarters, to prove Papa’s innocence to them. Disaster was upon us, and those louts savagely took me home for investigation. I didn’t know what was wrong with Mama, but she repudiated all her words in front of her daughter. All the blame fell on my small shoulders. Mama repented, begged, wished herself dead, but what was the use? I was struggled against, given heavy labor and punished by being made to kneel on broken glass.
. . . the old man raised his bloody face.
“Give me some water, water, water!” Staring with frightened eyes, I forgot the pain, as I huddled tightly in the corner. When dawn came and the old man breathed his last, I fainted with fright too. The blood congealed on my knees …
Can I blame Mama for this?

*

The sky was so blue it dazzled the eyes, its intense reflections shining on the ground. I was clutching a butterfly net, holding a small empty bamboo basket and standing amidst the dense waist-high grass. Suddenly, from the jungle opposite appeared an elephant. The tassels of the mat on its back were dangling to the ground; Papa sat proudly on top, a white turban on his head. The elephant’s trunk waved to and fro, and with a snort it curled round me and placed me up in front of Papa. We marched forward, across the coconut grove streaked with leaping sunlight, across the hills and gullies gurgling with springs.
I suddenly turned my head and cried out in alarm. A little old man was sitting behind me, his face blurred with blood; he was wearing convict clothes and on his chest were printed the words “Reform Through Labor.” He was moaning hoarsely:
“Give me some water, water, water …”
I woke up in fright. It was five o’clock, and outside it was still dark. I stretched out my hand and pulled out the drawer of the bedside cupboard, fumbled for cigarettes and lit one. I drew back fiercely and felt more relaxed. The

white cloud of smoke spread through the darkness and finally floated out through the small open-shuttered window. The glow from the cigarette alternately brightened and dimmed as I strained to see clearly into the depths of my heart, but other than the ubiquitous silence, the relaxation induced by the cigarette, and the vague emptiness left by the nightmare, there was nothing.

I switched on the desk lamp, put on my clothes and opened the door quietly. There was a light on in the kitchen and a rustling noise. Who was up so early? Who?

Under the light, wearing a black cotton-padded vest, he was crouching over the waste-paper basket with his back towards me, meticulously picking through everything; spread out beside him were such spoils as vegetable leaves, trimmings and fish heads. I coughed. He jumped and looked round in alarm, his face deathly-white, gazing in panic towards me.

The fluorescent light hummed. He stood up slowly, one hand behind his back, making an effort to smile:

"Lanlan, I woke you up."

"What are you doing?"

"Oh, nothing, nothing." He was flustered, and kept wiping his trousers with his free hand. I put out my hand:

"Let me see." After some hesitation he handed the thing over. It was just an ordinary cigarette packet, with nothing odd about it except that it was soiled in one corner. I lifted my head, staring at him in bewilderment.

"Oh, Lanlan," beads of sweat started from his balding head, "yesterday I forgot to examine this cigarette packet when I threw it away, just in case I wrote something on it; it would be terrible if the Team Leader saw it."

"Team Leader?" I was even more baffled. "Who's the Team Leader?"

"The people who oversee us prisoners are called Team Leaders." He fished out a handkerchief and wiped the sweat away. "Of course, I know, it's beyond their reach, but better to find it just in case …" My head began to buzz.

"All right, that's enough." He closed his mouth tightly, as if he had bitten out his tongue. I really hadn't expected our conversation would begin like this. For the first time I looked carefully at him. He seemed even older and paler than yesterday, with a short grayish stubble over his sunken cheeks, wrinkles around his lackluster eyes that seemed to have been carved by a knife, and an ugly sarcoma on the tip of his right ear. I could not help feeling some compassion for him.

"Was it very hard there?"

"It was all right, you get used to it."

Get used to it! A cold shiver passed through me. Dignity. Wire netting. Guns. Hurried footsteps. Dejected ranks. Death. I crumpled up the cigarette packet and tossed it into the waste-paper basket.

"Go back to sleep, it's still early."

"I've had enough sleep, reveille's at 5:30." He turned to tidy up the scattered rubbish.

Back in my room, I pressed my face against the ice-cold wall. It was quite unbearable, to begin like this, what should I do next? Wasn't he a man of great integrity before? Ah, Hand of Time, you're so cruel and indifferent, to knead a man like putty; you destroyed a father before his daughter could remember his real face clearly … eventually I calmed down, packed my things into my bag and put on my overcoat. Passing through the kitchen, I came to a standstill. He was at the sink, scrubbing his big hands with a small brush, the green soap froth dripping down like sap.

"I'm going to work."

"So early?" He was so absorbed he did not even raise his head.

"I'm used to it." I did not turn on the light as I went down along the darkness, along each flight of stairs.

*

For several days in a row I came home very late. When Mama asked why, I always offered the excuse that I was busy at school. As soon as I got home, I would dodge into the kitchen and hurriedly rake up a few leftovers, then bore straight into my own little nest. I seldom ran into him, and even when we did meet I would hardly say a word. Yet it seemed his silence contained enormous compunction, as if to apologize for that morning, for his unexpected arrival, for my unhappy childhood, these twenty years and my whole life.

My brother was always running in like a spy to report on the situation, saying things like, "He's planted a pot of peculiar dried-up herbs," "All afternoon he stared at the fish in the tank," "He's burned a note again …" I would listen without any reaction. As far as I was concerned, it was all just a continuation of that morning, not worth making a fuss about. It was my brother who was strange, talking about such things so flatly, not tinged by any emotion at all, not feeling any heavy burden on his mind. It was no wonder; since the day he was born Papa had already flown far away, and besides, in those years he was brought up in his Grandma's home, and with

Mama's wings and mine in turn hovering over Grandma's little window as well, he never saw the ominous sky.

One evening, as I lay on the bed smoking, someone knocked at the door. I hurriedly stuffed the cigarette butt into a small tin box, as Mama came in.

"Smoking again, Lanlan?"

As if nothing had happened I turned over the pages of a novel beside my pillow.

"The place smells of smoke, open a window."

Thank heavens, she hadn't come to nag. But then I realized that there was something strange in her manner. She sat down beside the small desk, absently picked up the ceramic camel pen-rack and examined it for a moment before returning it to its original place. How would one put it in diplomatic language? Talks, yes, formal talks …

"Lanlan, you're not a child anymore." Mama was weighing her words. It had started; I listened with respectful attention.

"I know you've resented me since you were little, and you've also resented him and resented everyone else in the world, because you've had enough suffering … but Lanlan, it isn't only you who's suffered."

"Yes, Mama."

"When you marry Lianping, and have children, you'll understand a mother's suffering—"

"We don't want children if we can't be responsible for their future."

"You're blaming us, Lanlan," Mama said painfully.

"No, not blaming. I'm grateful to you, Mama, it wasn't easy for you in those years—"

"Do you think it was easy for him?"

"Him?" I paused. "I don't know, and I don't want to know either. As a person, I respect his past—"

"Don't you respect his present? You should realize, Lanlan, he showed great courage in staying alive!"

"That's not the problem, Mama. You say this because you lived together for many years, but I, I can't make a false display of affection—"

"What are you saying!" Mama grew angry and raised her voice. "At least one should fulfill ones own duties and obligations!"

"Duties? Obligations?" I started to laugh, but it was more painful than crying. "I heard a lot about them during those years. I don't want to lose any more, Mama."

"But what have you gained?"

"The truth."

"It's a cold and unfeeling truth!"

"I can't help it," I spread out my hands, "that's how life is."

"You're too selfish!" Mama struck the desk with her hand and got up, the loose flesh on her face trembling. She stared furiously at me for a moment, then left, shutting the door heavily.

Selfish, I admit it. In those years, selfishness was a kind of instinct, a means of self-defense. What could I rely on except this? Perhaps I shouldn't have provoked Mama's anger, perhaps I should really be a good girl and love Papa, Mama, my brother, life, and myself.

During the break between classes, I went into the reception office and rang Lianping.

"Hello, Lianping, come over this evening."

"What's up? Lanlan?" He was shouting over the clatter of the machines. His voice sounded hoarse and weary.

"He's back."

"Who? Your father?"

"Clever one, come over and help; it's an absolutely awful situation."

He started to laugh.

"Huh, if you laugh, just watch out!" I clenched my fists and slammed down the receiver.

It's true, Lianping has the ability to head off disaster. The year when the production brigade chief withheld the grain ration from us educated youth, it was he who led the whole bunch of us to snatch it all back. Although I normally appear quite sharp-witted, I always have to hide behind his broad shoulders whenever there's a crisis.

That afternoon I had no classes and hurried home early. Mama had left a note on the table, saying that she and Papa had gone to call on some old friends and that they would eat when they returned. I kneaded some dough, minced the meat filling, and got everything ready to wrap the dumplings.

Jianping arrived. He brought with him a breath of freshness and cold, his cheeks flushed red, brimming with healthy vitality. I snuggled up against him at once, my forehead pressed against the cold buttons on his chest, like a child who feels wronged but has nowhere to pour out her woes. I didn't say anything. What could I say?

We kissed and hugged for a while, then sat down and wrapped dumplings, talking and joking as we worked. I

was almost on the verge of tears from the gratitude, relaxation and the vast sleepiness that follows affection.

When my brother returned, he threw off his work clothes, drank a mouthful of water, and flew off like a whirlwind.

It was nearly eight when they got home. As they came in, it gave them quite a shock to see us. Mama could not then conceal a conciliatory and motherly smile of victory; Papa's expression was much more complicated. Apart from the apologetic look of the last few days, he also seemed to feel an irrepressible pleasure at this surprise, as well as a precautionary fear.

"This is Jianping, this is …" My face was suffocated with red.

"This is Lanlan's father," Mama filled in.

Jianping held out his hand and boomed, "How do you do, Uncle!"

Papa grasped Jianping's hand, his lips trembling for a long time.

"So you're, so you're Jianping, fine, fine …"

Delivering the appropriate courtesies, Jianping gave the old man such happiness he was at a loss for what to do. It was quite clear to me that his happiness had nothing to do with these remarks, but came from feeling that at last he'd found a bridge between him and me, a strong and reliable bridge.

At dinner, everyone seemed to be on very friendly terms, or at least that's how it appeared on the surface. Several awkward silences were covered over by Jianping's jokes. His conversation was so witty and lively that it even took me by surprise. After dinner, Papa took some Zhonghua cigarettes from his tin cigarette case and offered them to Jianping. This set them talking about the English method of drying tobacco and then on to things like soil salinization, the insect pests of peanuts and vine-grafting. I sat bolt upright beside them, smiling like a mannequin in a shop window.

Suddenly, my smile began to vanish. Surely this was a scene from a play? Jianping was the protagonist—a clever son-in-law, while I—I was the meek and mild new bride. For reasons only the devil could tell, everyone was acting to the hilt, striving to forget something in this scene. Acting out happiness, acting calmness, acting out glossed-over suffering. I suddenly felt that Jianping was an outsider to the fragmented, shattered suffering of this family.

I began to consider Jianping in a different light. His tone, his gestures, even his appearance, all had an unfamiliar flavor. This wasn't real, this wasn't his old self. Could strangeness be contagious? How frightening. Jianping hastily threw me an enquiring glance, as if expecting me to repay the role he was playing with a commending smile. This made me feel even more disgusted. I was disgusted with him, and with myself, disgusted with everything the world was made of, happiness and sorrow, reality and sham, good and evil.

Guessing this, he wound up the conversation. He looked at his watch, said a few thoroughly polite bits of nonsense, and got to his feet.

As usual, I accompanied him to the bus-stop. But I said not a single word along the way, and kept a fair distance from him. He dejectedly thrust his hands in his pockets and kicked at stones.

An apartment block ahead hid the night. I felt alone. I longed to know how human beings survived behind these countless containers of suffering and broken families. Yet in these containers, memory is too frightening. It can only deepen the suffering and divide every family until everything turns to powder.

When we reached the bus-stop, he stood with his back to me, gazing at the distant lights.

"Lanlan, do I still need to explain?"

"There's no need."

He leaped onto the bus. Its red tail-lights flickering, it disappeared round the corner.

*

Today there was a sports meet at the school, but I didn't feel like it at all. Yesterday afternoon, Zhang Xiaoxia kept pestering me to come and watch her in the 100 meter dash. I just smiled, without promising anything. She pursed her little mouth and, fanning her sweaty forehead with a handkerchief, stared out the window in a huff. I put my hands on her shoulders and turned her around:

"I'll go then, all right?" Her face broadening into dimples, she struggled free of me in embarrassment and ran off. How easy it is to deceive a child.

I stretched, and started to get dressed. The winter sunlight seeped through the fogged-up window, making everything seem dim and quiet, like an extension of sleep and dreams. When I came out of my room, it was quiet and still; evidently everyone had gone out. I washed my hair and put my washing in to soak, dashing busily to and fro. When everything was done, I sat down to eat breakfast. Suddenly I sensed that someone was standing behind me, and when I looked round it was Papa, standing stiffly in the kitchen doorway and staring at me blankly.

"Didn't you go out?" I asked.
"Oh, no, no, I was on the balcony. You're not going to school today?"
"No. What is it?"
"I thought," he hesitated, "we might go for a walk in the park, what do you think?" There was an imploring note in his voice.
"All right." Although I didn't turn round, I could feel that his eyes had brightened.
It was a warm day, but the morning mist had still not faded altogether. It lingered around the eaves and tree-tops. Along the way, we said almost nothing. But when we entered the park, he pointed at the tall white poplars by the side of the road.
"The last time I brought you here, they'd just been planted." But I didn't remember it at all. After walking along the avenue for a while, we sat down on a bench beside the lake. On the cement platform in front of us, several old wooden boats, corroded by wind and rain, were lying upside down, dirt and dry leaves fonning a layer over them. The ice melting in the water crackled from time to time. He lit a cigarette.
"Those same boats," he said pensively.
"Oh?"
"There're still the same boats. You used to like sitting in the stem, splashing with your bare feet and shouting, "Motor-boat! Motor-boat!" The shred of a smile of memory appeared on his face. "Everyone said you were like a boy."
"Really?"
"You liked swords and guns; whenever you went into a toyshop you'd always want to come out with a whole array of weapons."
"Because I didn't know what they were used for." All at once, a shadow covered his face and his eyes darkened.
"You were still a child then."
Silence, a long silence. The boats lying on the bank were turned upside down here. They were covering a little girl's silly cries, a father's carefree smile, soft drink bottle-tops, blue hairclips, children's books and toy guns, the taste of earth in the four seasons, the passage of twenty years …
"Lanlan," he said suddenly, his voice very low and trembling, "I … I beg you to forgive me."
My whole body began to quiver.
"When your mother spoke of your life in these years, it was as if my heart was cut with a knife. What is a child guilty of?" His hand clutched at the air and came to rest against his chest.
"Don't talk about these things," I said quietly.
"To tell you the truth, it was for you that I lived in those years. I thought if I paid for my crime myself, perhaps life would be a bit better for my child, but—"he choked with sobs—"you can blame me, Lanlan, I didn't have the ability to protect you, I'm not worthy to be your father."
"No, don't, don't …"
I was trembling, my whole body went weak, all I could do was shake my hands. How selfish I was! I thought only of myself, immersed myself only in my own sufferings, even making suffering a kind of pleasure and a wall of defense against others. But how did he live? For you, for your selfishness, for your heartlessness! Can the call of blood be so feeble? Can what is called human nature have completely died out in my heart?
"Twenty years ago, the day I left the house, it was a Sunday. I took an afternoon train, but I left at dawn; I didn't want you to remember that scene. Standing by your little bed, the tears streaming down, I thought to myself: 'Little Lanlan, shall we ever meet again?' You were sleeping so soundly and sweetly, with your little round dimples, the evening before, as you were going to bed, you hugged me by the neck and said in a soft voice, 'Papa, will you take me out tomorrow?' 'Papa's busy tomorrow.'' You went into a sulk and pouted unhappily. I had to promise. Then you asked again, 'Can we go rowing?' 'Yes, we'll go rowing.' And so you went to sleep quite satisfied. But I deceived you, Lanlan. When you woke up the next day, what could you think—"
"Papa!" I blurted out, flinging myself on his shoulder and crying bitterly.
With trembling hands he stroke my head.
"Lanlan, my child."
"Forgive me, Papa," I said, choked with sobs. "I'm still your little Lanlan, always."
"My little Lanlan, always."
A bird whose name I don't know hovered over the lake, crying strangely, adding an even deeper layer of desolation to this bleak winter scene. I lay crying against Papa's shoulder for a long time. My tears seeped drop by

drop into the coarse wool of his overcoat. I seemed to smell the pungent scent of tobacco mingling with the smell of mud and sweat. I seemed to see him during the breaks between heavy labor, leaning wearily against the pile of dirt and rolling a cigarette, staring into the distance through the fork between the guard's legs. He was pulling a cart, struggling forward on the miry road, the cart wheels screeching, churning up black clods of mud. The guard's legs. He was digging the earth shovelful after shovelful, straining himself to fling it towards the pit side. The guard's legs. He is carrying his bowl, greedily draining the last mouthful of vegetable soup. The guard's legs.

I dared not think any more, I dared not. My power to imagine suffering was limited after all. But he actually lived in a place beyond the powers of human imagination. Minute after minute, day after day, oh God, a full twenty years. No, amidst suffering, people should be in communication with one another, for suffering can link people's souls even more than happiness, even if the soul is already numb, already exhausted …

"Lanlan, look," he drew a beautiful green necklace from his pocket. "I made this from old toothbrush handles just before I left there. I wanted to give you a kind of present, but then I was afraid you wouldn't want this crude toy …"

"No, I like it." I took the necklace, moving the beads lightly to and fro with my finger, each of these wounded hearts

On the way back, Papa suddenly bent over and picked up a piece of paper, turning it over and over in his hand. Impulsively I pulled up his arm and laid my head on his shoulder. In my heart I understood that this was because of a new strangeness, and an attempt to resist this strangeness.

Here on the avenue, I seemed to see a scene from twenty years earlier. A little girl with blue hairclips, both fists outstretched, totters along the edge of the muddy road. Beside her walks a middle-aged man relaxed and at ease. A row of little newly-planted poplars separates them. And these little trees, as they swiftly swell and spread, change into a row of huge insurmountable bars. Symbolizing this are twenty years of irregular growth rings.

"Papa, let's go."

He tossed away the piece of paper and wiped his hand carefully on his handkerchief. We walked on again.

Suddenly I thought of Zhang Xiaoxia. At this moment, she'll actually be in the race. Behind rises a puff of white smoke from the starting gun and amid countless faces and shrill cries falling away behind her, she dashed against the white finishing tape.

3

Sunlight slid onto the glass desk top. A warm band of orange trembled lightly as I lowered my eyelids. It was a still morning. At intervals the oppressive sound of popped rice spread through the lane. A war was going on in Afghanistan. A jumbo jet had crashed in southern France … The world was so concrete, as if meaning only existed in a given concrete time and place. The tired and drawn face in the mirror when I was washing this morning resembled a cornered beast. At the public lecture a few days ago, the university students had started to hiss, and someone handed up a slip saying

"You represent us? How disgusting!"

The grating sound of the microphone's alternating current gave me the opportunity of silence. What more had I to say to those fellows, who considered themselves so superior?

I opened my eyes and blew lightly, and the snow-white cigarette ash on the glass top was like a flock of seagulls skimming over the water. At low tide I would almost invariably go hunting for shellfish with my playmates. We would knock off oysters from the rocks one by one and pour them into our mouths. There were also small crabs that hid in the seaweed or under the rocks …

I'm a fisherman's son, but it seems as if this was no longer a fact but only a line in a dossier. Had my mother not died and her brother taken me to Beijing, at this minute I would probably be sitting on the deck of a chugging, throbbing motorized junk, smoking a long-stemmed pipe and surrounded on all sides by fishing nets full of salt slime and the odor of fish. I spread out a hand: pale, slender, not a single callous. Fate is incomprehensible, perhaps the only thing that is incomprehensible …

Someone knocked on the door, so lightly that at first I thought I'd heard wrong. It was a girl with short cropped hair that had a brownish tint.

"Is Mr. Ding here?" she asked timidly.

"That's me."

"I …" her round face flushed.

"Come in and tell me what's on your mind."

She almost kicked over the thermos flask on the floor. “I’m sorry—”
“It doesn’t matter. Please sit down.”
After some hesitation she sat down on an old stool beside the couch, placing her old satchel on her knees. “My name is Chen Fang, I’m a student at the Normal College. I came because I like your stories.” She laughed apologetically.
“Which ones do you like?”
She thought it over. “I like *The Relic*.”
“As far as I’m ccncerned that’s become a relic itself. What about the more recent ones?”
“Er …” her tone was a little uncertain. “I haven’t read them yet.” I got on my guard, thinking she might be one of the students who had been booing.
“What’s the reaction of the students around you?”
“I’m not sure. Some people seem to think they aren’t as deep as before.”
“A hole in the ice is deep,” I said.
The girl seemed to be a bit nervous, continually fiddling with the frayed strap of her satchel, twisting it back and forth around her fingers.
“Would you like some water?”
“No, please don’t bother, I’m going in a minute.” She took out a thick manuscript from her satchel.
“I tried to write something. It’s fairly poor. I thought I’d ask you to read it, is that all right?”
I took the manuscript and weighed it in my hand.
“Are you in the Chinese department?”
“No, physics.”
“Your first try at writing?” She nodded earnestly.
“Take my advice, stick to your own field and don’t waste your efforts on this.”
She shrugged “Why?”
“It’s sour grapes.”
“Really?”
“I say that because I’ve tried.”
She laughed, very sweetly, and for a moment her ordinary-looking face appeared beautiful. “But I’ve always liked sour things since I was little.”
I bit my lip and remained silent.
“And you can make sweet wine with sour grapes.”
“Sweet wine?” She stood up.
“Anyway, I;’d still like to try.”
“Very well then, I won’t say any more.” At the door she turned her head.
“I thought, I thought you would be full of confidence.”
“Confidence? The word is too abstract.”
“What is a concrete one then.”
“Life, writing,” I grimaced, “and confidence, too.”
After seeing my visitor off, I sat down again at my desk. Perhaps this was the beginning of a story, starting with the conversation about sour grapes, and then what? I picked up my pen, screwed off the cap, and stared at the metal nib.
What was the matter? It was fine weather outside, and I was shut up in a room, like a fly in winter. I used to be able to write eight thousand characters a day, “like a fountain “, to use the old lady’s expression. She saw herself as my protector. One look at that stupid face would make anyone contemplate suicide. Perhaps a difficult labour is a good thing, a new beginning. How droll, a man approaching forty still talking about new beginnings. Emperors build their mausoleums when they’re still in their teens. Ordinary people are lucky, you can go for a walk after work, of slip off and have a drink, you don’t have a load of worries …
The pen slipped between my fingers and poked a hole in the right upper comer of the manuscript, splashing a big blob of ink on it. Idly I drew a crescent moon.

The sight of Juan coming in aroused a feeling of time fleeting. It was as if in that second, memories of the past welled up and swirled around me, forming a background in disharmony with our everyday life.
“Why’re you looking at me like that?” she asked.
“Nothing,” I said dully. She pulled out Dongdong from behind her. “Say hello to daddy.”

Dongdong stood between me and Juan, looking glum and gazing blankly at the floor.

"Say hello." Juan's voice was a little impatient. Dongdong still stood there, not budging.

"The teacher says he had a fight with the other children this afternoon, he grabbed some one's car … I'm exhausted." Juan settled her bottom on the couch and sighed.

I went over and hugged Dongdong, prickling him with my moustache as I kissed him. Not saying anything, he dodged aside, detached himself from me and toddled over to the desk.

"Moon," he muttered, stretching out his small hands to the manuscript. Juan bustled over.

"Ah, the great author, he can't produce a single word, but he knows how to doodle. There'll soon be a mountain of letters piled up demanding stories. I wonder how you're going to meet those debts."

"I don't owe anything to anyone," I said stiffly.

She smoothed a crease on my sleeve with her fmgers, giving me a quick glance.

"I only owe myself," I said then.

"What's up with you?"

I stayed silent.

She walked over, patted me on the shoulder and stroked my face.

"You're tired."

I looked into her eyes and gave a forced laugh.

"What's bothering you?"

"Nothing."

"Then why this?"

I grasped her hand. "I'm tired."

"You've got such a terribly gloomy expression. Shave off that moustache tomorrow. I'm going to chop up some meat, I bought some chives."

I sat down at the table and stroked Dongdong's downy head. This time he did not dodge away.

"Daddy will buy you a car tomorrow."

"I don't want one," he said, staring at the paper.

"Why not?"

"Fatty said the car was his grandad's." He suddenly lifted his head and asked, "What's my grandad?"

"A fisherman."

Dongdong turned his head to look at the goldfish bowl on the side table.

"What sort of fish?"

"All sorts."

"Where does he live?"

"He's dead."

Dongdong raised his eyes in surprise.

"He drowned at sea."

"Wasn't he careful?" I shook my head.

"Were you sad?"

"I was only three then."

"I'm four and a half."

"Yes, you're a big boy now." Dongdong drew his forefinger back and forth on the manuscript.

"Teacher says the moon is round."

"She's right."

"Why didn't you draw it round?"

"Each person has a different moon."

"Grandad's moon?"

"Quite round." I remembered the small dark cottage piled with fishing gear. I often burrowed myself in there, to lie alone on the dried fishing nets. Moonlight filtered down from the cracks between the rafters, murmuring in the sea wind, an accompaniment to the monotonous sound of the waves.

*

"Posterity equals zero," Kang Ming smacked his lips and threw the matchstick into the ashtray. "Zero, old man."

I shook my head, reluctant to continue the argument. All arguments were meaningless. I knew he was needling me, trying to draw me into a game that I was already tired of. Every Saturday evening as a rule he would occupy our twelve square metre room in his own unique way.

"There's no need to feel any responsibility in regard to posterity. The question's very simple, no-one has to feel responsible in regard to anyone."

"Do you have a responsibility to yourself?" I asked.

"That's a complicated question."

"No, it's also very simple. People now tend to put the responsibility on society all the time. In fact, society is composed of individual people. If each individual refuses to accept responsibility for his own acts, how can we expect any social progress?"

"OK, I give up. Your wife?"

"Taking the child back to her mother's."

"Writing coming along well this time?"

"No."

He turned his head and looked at me. One eye was very bright, reflecting the light from the standard lamp, the other was in a dark green shadow. .

"You've changed," he said.

"Really?"

"Probably it's the conscience of the artist pressing on you so hard you can't breathe."

"I'm not an artist, never have been."

"Your name is big enough."

"It'd be bigger if I started a fire on the street."

"Don't set your demands too high, old man." I stayed silent.

"The question is not how you or I think, of course it's a good thing to develop your own brain." He got up and walked to and fro, his shadow slipping across the wall. "One thing should be understood, we are merely society's luxuries."

"I don't understand."

"It seems that only we 'commercial' editors know how the market works …" He walked over to the desk and picked up the sheet of paper. "Interesting. Do you know what makes the moon appear full or not?"

I gazed at him. He turned around and leant against the table, smiling enigmatically.

"It's the result of the earth beneath our feet blocking off the sunlight, common knowledge."

*

The paper at the end of the cigarette began to curl up, covering the red fire that was gradually darkening, the blue and brown wisps of smoke mixing together. Although technically deficient, the girl's story still touched me deeply. The tragedy was certainly her personal history, the beginning and the end of love. To search for love in this loveless world is very difficult, but loss is something instant and eternal.

"The business about the room, haven't you been keeping up the pressure for it? The application's been in for months."

A rustling sound, it was Juan taking off her clothes. The cigarette ash tumbled off, falling in separate flakes on the manuscript.

"Go and see Xu tomorrow, one word from him is more effective than you making ten visits to the Association."

"I'd prefer not to."

Was that my voice? People can never hear their own voices accurately. How long can this voice linger in the world? At most seventy years, then it will disappear along with me. But the noise of the sea never ceases, never ends. I write something, it is printed in a book, but who dares guarantee that twenty or thirty years later people will still be reading it? Not even just twenty or thirty years, the younger generation have begun shaking their heads right now.

"Ge's wife, he works in our factory, she's in a washing machine factory, they're having a trial sale, only a hundred and fifty …"

What lasts forever? Eternity in art is too terrible, the sight of it strikes fear into people's hearts, like a cold gravestone. It demands a writer stake everything on a single venture. The bed boards creaked, Juan was turning over. Seagulls staked everything on a single venture. No one who has heard their full-throated, doleful wail could doubt this. Why am I always thinking of the sea lately?

I drew a deep breath, smoking relaxes me. A piece of cigarette ash fell near the moon. Ah, the result of blocking sunlight. Yes, artists are still men. I really shouldn't look down on Kang Ming, we're all the same. And he has his own reasons, too. Perhaps lying is man's basic nature, and being sincere is acquired; sincerity must be studied. Is the problem only in speaking truthfully?

"It's getting late," Juan said in a muffled voice.

This was a hint. She was waiting for me, just as primitive tribal woman waited for the hunter, no, fisherman. The fishing spear in his hand, an animal skin around his waist, he utters a full-throated cry answering the summons.

"Yes, this month it's our turn to collect the water and electricity bill, last month the electricity was so dear, there must be someone stealing the electricity …"

I wonder if the small dark cottage still exists? The pungent fishy smell, the slippery floor, the small iron bucket hanging from the ceiling to catch the rainwater. Haven't been home for many years, I really should go back and look around.

"Tomorrow evening you should go to our place and pick up Dongdong. I may be working overtime."

My father, to me, will forever be a mystery. How he drowned not even I know. He didn't leave a single thing behind. No, he left me. And what shall I leave behind?

I stubbed out the cigarette and switched off the lamp. Everything disappeared, the moonlight poured in, I remembered the girl's smile.

"Why don't you say something?" Juan snorted, and turned over facing the wall. She was angry, but it was a pretence. I turned down the quilt and pulled her over by the shoulder, watching her quivering eyelids in the dark.

"All right," I said. She slowly lifted her arm, moving her face nearer.

"The business about the room …"

*

"Here's to your creative work, may it be an eternaJ fountain!:" said the old lady.

I put down my cup.

"What's up?" the old lady looked at me.

"We should drink to Xu's health."

"May as well, I suppose. To my reluctance to go to the grave," the old man said.

The old lady placed a piece of fish on my plate. "Try some, it's yellow croaker, my own work."

"Excellent."

"Compared with your stories?"

"Much superior."

The old lady moved closer, with a mysterious air. "There is something you must thank me for properly …"

"What?"

"Guess."

I shook my head.

"Go on, guess." She trod on me with the tip of her foot.

"That's enough." The old man impatiently knocked the plate with his chopsticks. "Stop making such a fuss, if you've something to say, come out with it."

"It's none of your business!" The old lady gave him a baleful look. "A few days ago, Mr Zhang, the director of the press, was here; I mentioned you to him. He's agreed to publish a collection of your work."

"Oh."

She waited for me to make a better response.

"Thank you, but …" I knocked the table with my knuckle. "Why don't we wait a little, we can talk about it later."

"What?"

"I haven't put together anything decent yet."

"Ho, here am I burning joss-sticks and the buddha turns his backside to me."

"He's looking ahead," the old man mumbled, sucking on the fish head. "Mm, mm, wait and see."

"You've been waiting all your life, and in the end, all you've got is a name with nothing to show for it except your memoirs, huh?" the old lady said indignantly.

"What're you yelling?" The old man thumped the table. "At least I've got something worth putting into memoirs."

"Humph," came from the old lady.

The old man's good humor revived after a minute. He dug out a dark brown fish eye and looked it over carefully.

"Think it over, don't let this opportunity slip by." The old lady clasped her arms around her shrivelled chest and sighed. "I'm going to take a look in the kitchen."

"The old nag," muttered the old man, waiting until she had gone out the door. He turned towards me, "Don't listen to her gibberish."

"She means well."

"There must be something bothering you." I gave a noncommittal smile.

"It doesn't matter, literary men are given to over-sentimentality." He concentrated again on the fish eye.

"I'm just a little unwilling." He lifted his head and gazed at me expressionlessly.

"How old are you?" he asked.

"Thirty-seven."

"Do you know how old China's history is?" I didn't answer.

"Five thousand years." He stretched out five crooked, trembling fingers. "There's no harm in waiting a bit longer, young man." As he finished speaking, he downed the fish eye in a single gulp.

*

I sat down at the desk. I knew this would be the inevitable result. I could not go back to the deck, to the rocks, to the small dark cottage where the moonlight rang out from the rafters. I had a slight headache, it was the wine—the sun-dried grain was to blame, the sun was to blame. I felt a sadness I had not known before, and felt like crying although I hadn't cried for years. Perhaps my tears were saltier than others. I was a fisherman's son. My father died at sea. His boat overturned, and there wasn't even a corpse, but they set up a wooden tablet for him in the village graveyard. There were many wooden tablets there, facing the sea, facing the sunrise every morning.

I was fortunate. I wonder whether authors who have been published often go past bookshops and look at their own books behind the glass. Hard-back and paperback. The hard-back editions have characters stamped in gold on the outside, and the cover is made of soft, pliable leather. They are more fortunate than I.

Fortunes can change, however. I shouldn't stop. I didn't choose this opportunity, it chose me. Actually, nothing is of much importance in the end. My nerves are weak, I'm always being troubled by nightmares, night- mares that trouble my peace of mind. That fish eye has seen everything there is in the sea: seaweed, electric eels, mother-of-pearl … yes, oysters too.

Don't stop, I'm only thirty-seven, that's still an up-and-coming age for writers. That girl's smiling face didn't hold beauty and purity alone. A smile can cover up anything. But where the smile has been, a scar or wrinkle will remain. I pulled open the drawer and gingerly touched the dog-eared corner of the manuscript. Sour grapes will onliy ripen and turn into wine if there is a sun. She had hope. Although the students' booing ws not very pleasant, it nevertheless held a sun-like sincerity and honesty.

Oh, what's the point of thinking of these things, life is always concrete, I have known love too, I have the right to describe this love too. It was a secret, a secret that couldn't be transcended in a tragedy, but I've had my brush with it. This isn't plagiarizing nonsense, of course it isn't.

I spread out the sheet of paper with the drawing of the moon and began to write.

*

Holding a toy car in his hand, Dongdong was kicking a stone, humming snatches of a song which seemed to be a story about a cat and a butterfly.

"Hurry up, Dongdong," I pulled hias small hand. "Stop kicking that stone." He looked around at the dark shadows of the pedestrians and traffic around us, still humming.

"Daddy, look at the moon," he said.

The moon was big ad round.

"That isn't your moon."

"No, it isn't."

"Where's your moon?"

I said nothing. We were walking under the dense shade of a pink siris. I knew he was looking at me intently, but he couldn't see my face clearly.

74.79 When I think Of You Late At Night, There's Nothing I Can Do: Five Tales Of the Wen Clan Cave Dwellers\fn{by Cao Naiqian (1949-)} Shanxi Province, China (M) 4

1: In-Law

The early-morning stillness is broken by the braying of a donkey. Blackie says:

"That fucking in-law has come for you." The woman says,

"Stall him while I put on my pants."

"Shit," Blackie says, "what difference does it make?"

The woman blushes.

"Just say I'm sick and I can't go. It's that time of the month anyway."

"I can't do that," Blackie says. "Chinese don't go back on their word."

Blackie walks outside to greet his in-law, who is tethering his donkey at the gate. Blackie turns and shouts into the cave:

"Go fetch a chicken. I'll get some liquor from the commune."

"In-Law," Blackie's counterpart says, "I brought a bottle since we always drink yours."

"When did we start worrying about yours and mine, anyway?"

Blackie's woman walks into the yard and, without a glance at either man, heads for the chicken coop.

"No need, no need for that. A cow fell and died last night at our village," the in-law says to Blackie's woman. "I borrowed this donkey from the brigade leader, and the son of a bitch was cooking a pot of beef." He takes a leather bag from around the donkey's neck.

"Here, take it. You might need to cook it a bit longer."

Head lowered, Blackie's woman takes the bag and goes into the cave without a glance at either man.

While they are drinking, Blackie says:

"It's that time of the month. Day before yesterday. Want to wait till it's past?"

"Fine with me."

"On the other hand, the brigade leader might deduct work points for keeping his donkey. You can take her now. Just wait till she's finished before she does it."

"Fine with me."

"Bring her back next month. I can't borrow a donkey."

"Fine with me."

After they finish drinking, Blackie says to his woman, "Put on those clean clothes. I don't want people in the other village laughing at me."

"No need. The commune's on the way. I'll buy her a jacket and trousers there."

Blackie sees his woman and in-law on their way, across one ravine after another and over a series of ridges.

"Go on back," the in-law says. "Here's the mountain."

Blackie says, "You go on up the mountain. I'll head back." He hesitates, then turns back. The in-law smacks the donkey's rump with his large fist; the animal starts clip-clopping down the road.

Shit. Go on, go ahead. A thousand *yuan* less would be the same as handing me his own daughter. Shit. Go on, go ahead. It's only one month a year. And Chinese don't go back on their word. These are his thoughts as he walks.

Blackie takes another look behind him and sees his woman's turnip-like feet dangling alongside the donkey's haunches, swinging back and forth.

Blackie's heart, too, is swinging back and forth.

2: Woman

Wen Hai finally got a wife, which made the villagers very happy. But people listening at the door that night said she wouldn't let him do it. She refused to loosen the knot in her red sash and spent the whole night crying.

Later on, they said that not only would she not take off her trousers for him, but she even refused to work in the fields. And when Wen Hai came in from a hard day's work, instead of cooking for him, she did nothing but cry; she kept it up all day long.

Before long, the village was in an uproar. Not taking her trousers off for him is one thing, but refusing to work the fields and not cooking are things he should not tolerate.

"The founder of the Wen clan cave dwellers would not have tolerated this," they told Wen Hai.

"What should I do?"

"Beat her till she comes around."

“Can I do that?”

“Go ask your mother,” said a man whose face was creased and pitted like a newly plowed hillside and on whose chin grew a wispy goatee like partially chewed grass on a grave site.

Wen Hai went and asked his mother, who told him, “Trees need to be pounded if they are to grow straight. Women are the same.”

So Wen Hai went home and, taking his mother’s advice, beat his wife black and blue.

People listening at the door reported, “It worked. Wen Hai is doing it to his wife right now, and he keeps saying, ‘Fuck your old lady. You think I’m screwing you? No, I’m screwing that two thousand *yuan*. Fuck your old lady. You think I’m screwing you? No, I’m screwing that two thousand *yuan*!’”

“That’s exactly what Wen Hai’s daddy did to his mother back then,” someone said.

Not long afterward, Wen Hai’s wife started cooking for him.

After that, Wen Hai’s wife was seen following him out into the fields, keeping her distance, a hoe over her shoulder.

“My, my, black-and-blue.”

“My, my, black-and-blue.”

The women in the fields scrunched up their mouths, blinked their eyes, and shook their heads.

3: Leng Two’s Madness

No one knew why Leng Two went mad after being just fine for so long or why, after bemg mad for so long, he got better again.

Leng Two’s father suffered from shortness of breath, and since herbal medicine had no effect, he thought about going to the mines to get some ephedrine from Leng One.

“Go on,” his wife said. “He hasn’t sent us any money for at least half a year. And bring some burlap bags back home with you.”

So Leng Two’s father climbed unsteadily onto a manure cart heading to the mines. The day after his father left, Leng Two went mad. The same thing happened as before; he kept shouting over and over:

“Murder! Murder!”

Leng Two lay face up on the *kang*, slapping it with his big, swarthy hands, making it resound like a threshing ground. When he tired of that, he pressed the back of his head against the hard brick sleeping platform, arched his back, and shouted:

“Murder! Murder!”

When he tired of that, he recommenced slapping the kang. Not daring to leave his side, Leng Two’s mother kept a vigil beside him.

We’re done for if he really commits murder. He would have to be possessed to really commit murder. These were her thoughts as she stood by the stove. She wiped her eyes with her sleeve.

“So fucking poor,” Leng Two said often, “that we can’t even eat oatmeal bread without mixing it with wild yams.”

Leng Two’s mother replied, “That’s to save money for you.”

“How many fucking years of going without oatmeal bread will it take to save up two thousand yuan?”

This time, Leng Two’s mother went ahead and made some oat- meal bread. But he wouldn’t eat it. He just kept shouting, “Murder,” and slapping the *kang* until he wore holes in the grass mat, which had already been mended with burlap bags.

Villagers said that if the barefoot doctor, one of those itinerant care providers, could do no good, she ought to ask the spirit healer to look at her son. But Leng Two’s mother just shook her head, for she knew from experience that neither the barefoot doctor nor the spirit healer could cure him.

We’re done for if he really commits murder. He would have to be possessed to really commit murder. Again these were her thoughts.

Then one day, the villagers realized that Leng Two had stopped screaming “Murder” and slapping the kang.

Leng Two slept soundly on the kang, snoring like a pig.

“Is he cured?” someone asked Leng Two’s mother as she fetched water.

“Yes, he’s fine.”

“How did that happen?”

“He’s fine.” Leng Two’s mother walked off in a hurry. Leng Two’s father returned on the manure cart, repor-

ting that their daughter-in-law would give them no money but sent him back with a few burlap bags and some ephedrine. Leng Two's mother did not tell his father that he had gone mad, for she had not told him the time before either. Leng Two's father took no notice of the sorry condition of the *kang* mat, either this time or the time before. He was concerned only with the ephedrine, two crystals of which would take care of his problem.

Leng Two's mother mashed some boiled yams for Leng Two to use as paste to mend the grass mat with the burlap bags.

At least he didn't commit murder. At least he's not possessed, Leng Two's mother was thinking as she stood beside the stove, watching him mend the mat. She raised her arm to wipe her eyes with her sleeve every so often.

4: In the Haystack

Silence all around; the moon goddess casts her light on the ground. On the moonlit side of the haystack, he and she tamp out a nesting spot.

"You first."

"No, you first."

"We'll go in together, then."

He and she climb into the nest, bringing the hay sliding down so that it buries them both. He reaches out with his muscular arms to prop it up again.

"Don't worry, this is fine."

She cuddles up in his arms. "You must hate me, Elder Brother Chou."

"I don't hate you. The coal miners have more money than me."

"I won''t spend any. I'll save it up so you can find a wife."

"No, thanks."

"But I want to."

"I said, 'No, thanks.'"

"And I said, 'I want to.'"

He can tell she is on the verge of tears, so he holds his tongue.

"Elder Brother Chou," she says after a long silent moment.

"Hmmm?"

"Give me a kiss, Elder Brother Chou."

"Don't be like that."

"But I want to."

"I'm not in the mood today."

"But I want to."

Once again, he can tell she is on the verge of tears, so he leans over and pecks her on the cheek, gently, softly.

"Not there, here." She puckers up.

He gives her a peck on the lips, cool and wet.

"How did that taste?"

"Like oats."

"Wrong, you're wrong. Try again." She pulls his head down.

"It still tastes like oats," he says after a thoughtful pause.

"Don't be silly. I ate some hard candy a while ago. Come on, try again." Again she pulls his head down.

"Hard candy, it tastes like hard candy," he hurries to say. Neither of them says anything for a long while.

"Elder Brother Chou."

"Hmmm?"

"Why don't I do this for you tonight?"

"No, no, the goddess of the moon is right outside, so you can't do that. It's not something girls of the Wen clan cave dwellers do."

"Then make it next time, when I come back."

"Um."

Once again, there is a long silence, except for the footsteps and sighs of the moon goddess.

"Elder Brother Chou."

"Hmmm?"

"It's fate."

"Yes, it is."
"Our rotten fate."
"Mine, maybe. Yours is OK."
"No, it isn't."
"Yes, it is."
"No, it isn't."
"Yes, it is."
"I said, 'No, it isn't.'"
He can tell she is crying now. He also feels hot tears rolling down his cheeks and splashing onto her face.

5: Grandpa Pothook

Grandpa Pothook was carried back from the graveyard again. Grandpa Pothook was from another province and had no kin in the village, but everyone still called him Grandpa. When he got drunk, he became everyone's grandpa, young and old. That is exactly what everyone called him.

Pothook was the only individual who drank every day and could afford to do it. His younger brother, Panhook, a ranking official in their native province, sent him twenty or thirty *yuan* every month—he spent it on drink.

Pothook was not one to eat anything with his wine, which he drank warm. He had a unique method for warming his wine: he made a little pocket in the crotch of his pants, where he tucked away the wine bottle after every couple of swigs.

Pothook liked to share his wine.

"Come on, take a fucking swig for your grandpa here." He'd then suck in his breath, making a hollow in his wrinkled belly so he could reach down into his crotch to bring out the bottle. It would be nice and warm. Besides the smell of wine, the bottle carried other odors, rank enough that some refused the offer. But others, less fastidious, hoisted the bottle like a bugle and—*glug glug*—took a healthy swig. Pothook, his eyes crinkled in a smile, would cock his head to watch, his mouth opening and closing as if the liquid were pouring down his own throat.

As soon as Pothook was drunk, he staggered off toward the graveyard, muttering the same two lines from a folk song:

When I think of you in the daytime, I climb the wall to you;
When I think of you late at night, there's nothing I can do.

Once he reached the graveyard, he lay spread-eagled atop a large stone to sleep it off. Weather permitting, he would strip naked, exposing his skin to ants and an assortment of bugs.

"Go on, go down to the graveyard, and carry Grandpa Pothook back. We can't let him catch cold," one of the older generation would say to one of the younger ones, who would take four or five friends along.

When he had sobered up a bit, they would start teasing him:
"Do the tiger hop for us, Grandpa Pothook!" And he'd reply:
"I'm too old for that sort of stuff."
"You're not too old," they would say as they wove a tail out of tall grass.

Pothook would hold the rope in the crack of his ass and begin hopping all over the place. Instead of falling out, the tail would smack loudly against the scrawny thing hanging between his legs. That had everybody in stitches.

Now they were carrying him back once again, but this time Grandpa Pothook uttered only a single comment before passing out for the last time:
"Bury me in Widow Three's grave."
Never expecting him to say something like this, everyone who heard him stared blankly into space.

76.42 A Land Of Wonder And Mystery\fn{by Liang Xiaosheng (1949-)} Harbin, Heilongjiang Province, China (M) 12

It was a deathly silent and boundless swamp, covered the whole year round with dried branches, rotten leaves, and poisonous algae. The surface, dark brown and stagnant, had a deceptively peaceful appearance. Below it was an oozing abyss which contained the decomposing skeletons of bears, hunters' guns and tractors belonging to reclamation teams. It sent out a morbid odor for a hundred *li* and was known as Spirits' Swamp.

When I first arrived in that Great Northern Wilderness, I heard many legends about this Spirits' Swamp: deep in the starless, moonless night one could see across the slumbering wasteland the eerie greenish glow of the will-o'-the-wisps; one could hear bears roar as they were swallowed by the swamp, gunshots fired by hunters for help and the desperate cries of those caught in the mire—sometimes one could hear a strange bird's song which sounded just like a sad woman's wailing, "what a pity, what a pity"—but no one had ever seen what kind of bird it was. The local Oroqen people called it the bird which "summons back the spirits." They thought that it was really an incarnation of the God of the Earth and that deep in the night it came to comfort and call back the spirits of people and animals who had died in Spirits' Swamp. And the will-o'-the-wisps were its lanterns.

Spirits' Swamp, like the ferocious nine-headed dragon of Greek myth, forcibly occupied the land behind it, a fertile land of more than ten thousand hectares, and no one dared cross the swamp to reclaim it. The Oroqen people used to call this land the "Devil's Reach." During winter they occasionally crossed it, but they never killed any animals for fear of inescapable punishment by the "Devil."

It was my third winter in the Great Northern Wilderness. A detachment of a dozen or so educated youths had been sent by our reclamation company to Devil's Reach.

As a result of being wrongly sited at the outset, our company was located in a natural depression with fairly limited arable land. If harvest happened to coincide with a rainy season, the combine harvesters got bogged down in the wheat fields like paralyzed toads. So we had always had bad harvests and that particular year could not even produce enough for the following year's seeds. We couldn't afford to live off the land, much less send grain to the state. That was why the reclamation regiment decided to disband our company and reallocate the more than two hundred young people to other companies.

What more profound humiliation could there be than this decision? Many of us burst into tears as we listened to the old company leader's announcement. Li Xiao-yan, the company's deputy instructor, was the first to stand up and indignantly refute the decision.

"The company should not be broken up! We can reclaim Devil's Reach. We ought to have thought of it earlier. We must rebuild our company there. Let Devil's Reach be covered with our reclaimers' footprints for the first time. We'll guarantee the regiment that we'll get a crop the same year we reclaim the land. The following year we'll have our new company base. Take our word for it!"

Though usually we listened indifferently to her ambitious words, this time her rousing speech actually did encourage us and many of us felt the same way.

Finally the regiment canceled their decision and accepted our guarantee.

Several days later, we set off with two first-rate 54 h.p. tractors decorated with red ribbons and flowers, a newly-made wooden sled trailing behind each for the vast snow-covered wilderness. The whole company had lined up to see us off. Hope, confidence, trust and a silent concern was in their eyes, and each of us felt a strong sense of responsibility. Everyone cried.

The first sled held our food and luggage and we squeezed ourselves into the tent set up on the second. We sat silently shoulder to shoulder. Beside me my younger sister cuddled a wicker cage which contained a small squirrel. She looked pale, her expression dull, her eyes sad and, like a deaf-mute, said nothing the whole journey. I had no other brothers or sisters. Although I had loved her very much since childhood, I felt a mixture of pity and hatred towards her then because she had recently acquired a bad reputation and I was thoroughly ashamed of her.

Li Xiaoyan, the deputy instructor, sat opposite with the blacksmith, Wang Zhigang, a sturdy man with a tanned, rough complexion, who gave the impression of being powerful, strong and determined. It seemed natural for us to compare him with Othello, and we had nicknamed him the "Moor." He liked to be alone, and had a just and ethical character. He didn't seek the limelight, and had a strong influence over the younger people. I rather envied him for that. It was the deputy instructor who had nominated him specifically to join our detachment. Now I stared with jealousy as Li rested her head on the Moor's broad shoulder to take a nap.

I asked myself why I was attracted to her. Was it her beauty? Certainly she was beautiful, a girl from Shanghai, with a lovely face, white, delicate skin, large, shining eyes, and thin, curved eyebrows. Her face always had an expression of wonder. Her slender figure seemed to confirm what we'd heard, that she had been a good ballet student in Shanghai and that many dance troupes had wanted to recruit her but that she'd refused them all. She had come to the Great Northern Wilderness of her own free will. From the first moment I saw her, I couldn't help being aware of her. But I wasn't usually someone who was easily reduced or overwhelmed by pretty girls. On the contrary, whenever I meet a girl, the more beautiful she is, the more aloof I am. It's one of my maxims—never be a slave of love through indiscretion. Was it her seriousness, her solemnity that enticed me? Not really. I rather preferred girls with enthusiastic, frank and open-minded characters. Sometimes I thought Li's solemn bearing was

hypocritical and it disgusted me. It was true she'd sworn not to pay a home visit to Shanghai for three years in order to consolidate her determination to settle in that border area. She also made the suggestion that other girls in the company ought not to wear make-up or colorful clothes. But some of them passed it around that Li still worried about her white, delicate skin and that in summer she stealthily went to the river bank to get a suntan. Unfortunately the sunshine only turned her white skin pink, not the brown she wanted. She also tried to be more masculine, wearing what the boys wore, doing the same manual labor they did. She wanted to change her figure, to adopt the so-called "beauty of the laborer," but she remained slim and graceful. Strong and healthy, she was like a small white birch, erect and tall during those three years in the Great Northern Wilderness. She had not been home once during that time. In the first year she had become the head of the platoon, in the second a Party member, and the third the deputy instructor of the company, a model for the whole regiment, showing others how to strike roots in the frontier reclamation areas.

One summer evening in that third year, right after she was appointed deputy instructor of the company, I suddenly heard someone singing when I was sketching on the river bank.

Under the bright sky of early spring,
My eighteen-year-old lover sits on the river bank.

It was a "decadent" song strictly prohibited at the time. Who was singing it? If our deputy instructor heard about it, an "ideological struggle" would inevitably ensue. Whoever it was sang well. Her voice was very sweet. Burning with curiosity, I picked up my home-made drawing board and went quietly along the bank to find out who the singer was. Suddenly I came upon someone sitting on a large, smooth gray stone beneath a reclining willow tree on the opposite bank of the river. It was none other than our deputy instructor!

She was washing her clothes, dangling her bare feet in the water, her trouser legs rolled up above the ankles and her white calves uncovered.

Under the bright sky of early spring,
My eighteen-year-old lover waits for his sweetheart, Yinglian.

After scrubbing, kneading and wringing out the clothes, she stood up on the large gray stone and tiptoed cautiously across a group of cobblestones to hang them over some branches. Afraid the cobblestones might hurt her feet, she moved gingerly, with quick light steps, just like the dance of the cygnets in *Swan Lake.* Having spread the clothes across the shrubs, she returned to the river bank with the same steps. She collected a few wild flowers, taking in their scent and placing some in her hair, two on the right and three on the left. Then, squatting in front of the river, she stared for a long time at her own reflection in the water. She was admiring her own beauty! After a while she rose slowly. Then suddenly she jumped up on to the gray stone's smooth surface and, her arms outstretched, made an elegant semi-circle and performed a Mexican folk dance with quick steps.

The drawing board slid from my hands and dropped into the water, causing a slight noise. Alarmed, she stopped dancing and saw me watching her from the opposite side of the river. She appeared stunned, like a bewildered fawn or a startled crane about to take flight.

The river between us, we stared at one another in astonishment.

The first to recover my composure, I jumped into the river to retrieve my drawing board. Feigning a casual manner, I waded through the shallow water to the opposite bank. By then, the wild flowers in her hair had disappeared and the trouser legs had been rolled down.

"You … what are you doing here on the river bank?" she asked, intending to gain the upper hand, and with it the psychological initiative. She tried her best to conceal her embarrassment, assuming a relaxed manner as much as she could. She became again a solemn, reserved young woman in the presence of a young man, a deputy instructor with the requisite dignity. But she hadn't had enough time to button up her jacket, faded from many washings, and underneath she wore a pink shirt, short and tight, with a V-neck through which I caught a glimpse of a white neck and bosom, round white shoulders and even the cleavage of her heaving breasts. Immediately I averted my eyes and felt my heart racing with excitement. I flushed, feeling an inexplicable kind of shame, guilty about debasing her and myself as well, though I could swear to heaven that I didn't, even for a moment, desire her. I didn't even feel the instinctive response which ordinarily occurs when a young man meets an attractive girl, the passion which originated with Adam and Eve.

She was so very sensitive. As my eyes took her in, she immediately covered her jacket flap and turned round. When she turned back again I saw the old familiar deputy instructor, jacket buttoned right up, and feet burrowed

deep into the sand to hide the fact that she had no shoes on.

I felt humiliated by her behavior and tried to find words to break the awkward silence, but ended by blurting out something very foolish:

"You're … so beautiful!"

"What!" Her face blushed like a crimson cloud. My sudden appearance had caused her problems, placing her in an impossibly awkward position.

"What I … I meant is that you danced beautifully. If I'm not mistaken, it was a Mexican folk dance, wasn't it?"

"Mexican dance? Don't make fun of me. I was just doing the radio limbering-up exercises for middle school students."

"Does that mean you're going to deny you were singing as well?"

"Singing a song? Why should I deny it? I did sing a song." In addition to her feigned puzzlement, she now added one more thing, an artificial directness. She began singing:

Near the Qinghe River, on Tigerhead Hill,
Is situated Dazhai Production Brigade. . . .

After singing two lines she said to me, "That's the song you heard me singing." The blush had receded and she had completely recovered her normal complexion.

I felt that she had made a fool of me and treated me as though I was blind and deaf. I couldn't stand any more such insults. Suppressing my anger with great effort I said coldly:

"No, that wasn't the song I heard. You sang: "My eighteen-year-old lover waits for his sweetheart, Yinglian!"

"Eighteen-year-old lover? His sweetheart Yinglian? I've never even heard of such a song. Don't talk nonsense!" She raised her slender eyebrows with a surprised and astonished expression, as if I had called her a thief.

So many hypocritical changes of expression had taken place on that lovely face.

I had nothing more to say, and just looked at her in astonishment. To me she looked like the Sphinx, with her lion's body and human face, only the Sphinx was, more honest. As I remember, even the Sphinx said the same thing to everyone: If you fail to solve my riddle, then I will devour you. But the Sphinx was less shameless than this deputy instructor, since ultimately she jumped down from the rocks and died when Oedipus correctly answered the riddle. The deputy instructor wanted me, a normal person of sound mind, to believe myself to be an idiot, a daydreamer, talking in my sleep.

"You hypocrite!" Indignantly I turned around and abruptly strode off.

"Wait!"

I halted without turning around, but I could sense her anxiety.

"You … are you going to report me to the company leader?" she murmured, with an imploring tone.

Still with my back to her, I softened and shook my head. After walking a distance I could not help looking back. She remained standing beside the river like a statue, motionless …

I never told anyone else about the incident. I couldn't be that mean.

But from then on, whenever she made her speeches she would become uneasy when our eyes met. I regretted that and felt sorry for her.

Not long after that I got a telegram saying that my mother was seriously ill, but I was unable to get permission from the company leader to return home. The reason was clear, since I was the combine harvester driver and it was then harvest season. Actually I knew that the company leader didn't believe the telegram was genuine. That was another reason he didn't approve my request. He had been deceived several times by phony telegrams which parents or their children sent in order to arrange a reunion. Some of them even invented the death of a parent. As a consequence, the company leader had become an empiricist. It was no use pleading with him to let me go, nor would any kind of explanation help. But I couldn't remain indifferent to the telegram. My father had died early and my mother, a worker in a small factory, had brought up my younger sister and I through all kinds of difficulties and hardships. It had not been easy for her, and only I understood how she had put her heart and soul into looking after us. Now my younger sister and I had come to this Great Northern Wilderness and left her at home alone. She was a woman of strong character and would never use deceitful measures even though she was yearning to see us.

I decided I had to return immediately to see her.

That day I stealthily left the company.

My mother! This woman who had tasted to the full the bitterness of life! She was so unyielding, so concerned for her children. She knew she was dying but she only cabled us that she was “very sick” instead of “mortally ill.” She didn’t want to alarm us with such frightening words.

During my mother’s last five days I lived with her and gave her as much care and love as I could to thank her for bringing us into this world and helping us to grow up. I did this not only for myself but also for my younger sister who was unable to return.

Five days, only five days! No matter how I expressed my love or took care of my mother during those five days it was only a symbolic compensation. How can a mother’s love and concern for her children ever be compensated? My mother's last words were:

“Look after your sister. You’re all the family she has.”

Numbed by grief, I went back to the company. The day I returned, on the instruction of the company leader, the Youth League branch held a meeting to discuss what disciplinary action should be taken over my desertion. Before the meeting, someone had disclosed that I was certain to be expelled from the League. The meeting itself was purely a formality and I would be used as an example to warn the others.

I myself was totally indifferent to whatever punishment I had to have.

The meeting was conducted by the deputy instructor. I thought she would certainly use the opportunity to take her revenge and I was determined to keep my mouth shut and listen to her long criticism of me. At first she asked me to say something about my mistake. I looked down and muttered:

“My mother … died … three days ago.”

Finishing this sentence, I put my head in my hands and felt everyone’s eyes focused on me. For an instant, it seemed that everyone at the meeting was holding their breath. Suffocated by the sudden silence, even the air seemed unnaturally still. Following this pause, the deputy instructor said in a low but clear voice:

“The meeting is over.”

She was the first to leave. As I passed by the company office, I heard the deputy instructor and the company leader arguing fiercely. I was surprised, since the deputy instructor was used to carrying out the company leader’s instructions. Wondering what they were wrangling over, I stopped to listen.

“I am the head of this company. Don’t I have the right to punish a subordinate?” It was the angry voice of the company leader with his heavy Sichuan accent.

“I am the Youth League branch secretary. Punishing League members is the duty of the League branch.” The deputy instructor’s voice was raised too.

“All you’re doing is making excuses for a deserter!”

“A deserter? Did he desert the battlefield? Did he cross to the other side of the Heilong River? Do you know that his mother died? Three days after her death he came back—”

“Oh, his mother died, did she!?”

“Company leader, I am an educated youth too, with an elderly father and mother. They’re longing to see me. I’d go back home this very minute if I hadn’t taken an oath. But I can’t. I don’t agree that he should be expelled from the League. Company leader, please, put yourself in his position and think it over!”

I heard her start to cry. As I stood outside the company office, tears welled up in my eyes too.
I felt thoroughly grateful to her. Not because she had defended me, but because she had said, ‘I am an educated youth too …’ All of my misconceptions and prejudices about her were erased by this sentence and I felt I would go through hell for her. Hearing this I knew she was a good person with a noble character and a sympathetic heart.

Nevertheless, two days later this same person told me something which hit me like a bolt of lightning. That day, while helping me to turf out the weeds in a long stretch of ground, she asked:

“After work would you mind coming with me?”

It was the second time in three years that she had talked to me. The first had been the encounter by the river not long ago. This time her sullen and serious expression seemed to omen some misfortune. As we shouldered our hoes and lined up to return, she said to me in front of everyone else:

“Please wait. Let’s go together.” The others looked at both of us with curious expressions. After they had moved off a distance, she looked me in the eye, and said:

“Without consulting you, I've arranged to have your younger sister transferred to our company.”

“Why? What’s happened? Tell me!”

“When you were home …”

“Tell me!”

“'She had an abortion.”

Shocked I felt my body swaying and nearly fell. She steadied me with her hands. I roughly pushed her aside, shouting, “You’re lying!”

She staggered backward. Eyes wide with fear, she uttered two words,

“It’s true!”

I felt suddenly as if I was glued to the ground. I wanted to shout out but it was as if there was something stuffed down my throat and I couldn’t. The only sound coming from my voice was a hoarse moan. My vision blurred and she became indistinct. Like someone crazed, I raced towards the tent. I wept through the whole of that night, biting the quilt corner to avoid disturbing my soundly sleeping roommates. I remembered my mother’s last wish, but before I could carry it out, my younger sister had acted scandalously. Now she was to be transferred to my company so she could be under my wing.

Never! With the right of an elder brother, I would punish her severely, on behalf of my dead mother.

The next day I was called to the office by the deputy instructor and there met my younger sister. On seeing her, I sprang at her like a leopard, took her hair and forcefully hit her head against the earthen wall.

“Stop!” I heard the deputy instructor’s shout. She dashed forward trying hard to loosen my frenzied grip.

“Get away!” I roared at her.

I tormented my younger sister as though I was tormenting myself. My hysteria seemed to relieve the pain.

Suddenly, I received a sharp slap on the face. I released my grip.

The second slap was much harder.

The two slaps had sobered me up and unconsciously I stepped back, feeling my burning cheek.

My younger sister didn't utter a single word, nor moan, shout or plead. Her disheveled hair covered a pallid face bathed in tears, and her large eyes were full of humiliation.

Her face drained of color, the deputy instructor held my younger sister tightly and stared at me, determined to fight if necessary.

“You bloody animal!”

That was the first time I ever heard her use bad language.

From that day on I was in love with her.

Now she was sitting opposite. As the covered, tractor-drawn sled slogged on through the whirling snow, we were chilled by the northwesterly wind. It carried snow-flakes into the tent through an open flap which no one wanted to draw. We looked at the white world outside, the white land, the white mountains, the white river, the white forests. The blizzard violently pursued us, like millions of maddened galloping wild oxen.

After silently looking round at everyone, the deputy instructor then said, almost to herself:

“Should we have someone tell a story? Or perhaps sing a song together?”

There was no response to her suggestion. Everyone was exhausted. Her eyes fell on me. I cleared my throat and began to sing *The Reclaimers’ Song*:

Every reclaimer has a sun in his heart,
One hand holds a gun, the other a pickaxe.

No one joined in and so naturally I halted after the first two lines of the song.

Just then, the Moor started to whistle. He wasn’t a good singer, but he could whistle quite tunefully. What surprised me though was that he was whistling the famous Russian folk song *Troika*. He wasn’t at all afraid of the deputy instructor’s interference. His whistling had an enchanting quality, like a clarinet or a trumpet. His lyrical, rhythmic melody produced in us a sense of sadness, of deep melancholy.

Someone started humming quietly, then another and a third, gradually converging into a chorus.

My younger sister looked up, stared uneasily and then, lowering her head again, heaved a long sigh. I felt sorry for her.

I gazed across at the deputy instructor's face, guessing that she would immediately put a stop to this sentimental song. But she remained indifferent. Her head was still resting on the Moor’s shoulder. Her eyes closed, she pretended to be falling asleep, but I noticed her hand covertly beating time.

I felt that my pride was hurt and bit my lower lip. The song continued:

The Volga is covered with ice and snow,
The Troika is driving over the icy river.
Someone is singing a melancholy song,
The singer is …

Night fell unobtrusively and the merciless blizzard stopped its howling. Maybe it surrendered itself or maybe, with our tractors driving at full throttle, we left it behind in that silent wilderness.

Now we were enclosed by the chill darkness, a huge natural tent flap.

*

Traveling like the migrant Oroqen people, we drove swiftly across the vast snowy plateau for two days and two nights. When we looked at the map, we were convinced that we had arrived at the snow-and-ice-covered Spirits' Swamp. A solemn wilderness dawn was just breaking.

Spirits' Swamp! It was not as dreadful as the legends made out. Perhaps it was in hibernation and its true ferocious appearance was hidden deep beneath the snow. It seemed as if the largest lake in the world lay frozen in front of us. Devil's Reach—it looked so flat we could hardly believe that it extended only as far as the remote horizon.

"Hey! Devil King, where are you? Show yourself!" shouted one of our companions.

But the "Devil" did not appear. Suddenly the Moor pointed to something in the distance:

"Look!"

A round wooden stake with a notch cut into it stood at an angle. Curious, we walked over to have a look. The deputy instructor brushed the snow from the stake and we saw a wooden tablet with something carved on its rough surface. Most of the words had been eroded by wind and rain, but some poor handwriting was still faintly visible:

. . . died here. . . .

Each of us shuddered.

"There's another one over there!" My younger sister had discovered a similar evil omen. She was the first to walk back to the tractor. The deputy instructor said softly:

"Let's go back. Don't disturb their rest."

*

If someone asks me what the hardest and bitterest work of all in the Great Northern Wilderness is, I'll answer "Reclamation." And if someone asks me what work in the Great Northern Wilderness I feel most proud of, my answer will also be "Reclamation."

Because we were eager to discover the best sources of water and timber, nearly every part of Devil's Reach was covered with our footprints. We finally discovered a stream—not marked on the map—which was the only clean water source. We named it the "Wanderer" since it had been wandering across the flat wasteland for countless years before we discovered it and set up a tent next to it.

When the snow melted, our gleaming ploughs sank into the bosom of Devil's Reach. Who but a reclaimer could experience the joy of ploughing the first plot of virgin land by tractor? There were many wolves on this flat land. In threes and fours they swaggered along behind the tractors, preying on field rats startled by the ploughing, and at night they would howl around our tent. The hardship of this work had transformed all the young men in the detachment into saints. All of us, including my younger sister and the deputy instructor, lived in the same large tent. Their small "world" was separated from ours by a hanging blanket, behind which existed a sacred, forbidden place.

One night, I suddenly woke and could not hear the usual night shift tractor roaring outside the tent. I immediately sprang to my feet and, without thinking, barged into the "forbidden place" to shake the deputy instructor awake.

"What do you want?"

"The Moor is out ploughing, but the tractor has stopped!"

With the tractor silent for such a long time, there must be something wrong with the Moor. Everyone in the tent got up. Just as we were all about to run out, the Moor suddenly appeared at the entrance, his hands gripping the two front paws of an old wolf which was clinging to his back. The animal was still half alive, its mouth wide open, its two back paws gripping either side of his waist.

"It's still alive! Quick! Hit it!" shouted the Moor. We immediately took up sticks and clubs and beat the large gray animal to death. The Moor flung himself on a pallet, gasping for breath. After a long pause he told us:

"The steel cable on the big plough broke and I was changing it when that damned thing came at me and got me round the shoulders with its claws."

His face and hands were cut and bloodstained, his clothes in tatters. Frowning, he took off his padded jacket. His sweatshirt and skin had also been clawed. The deputy instructor ordered my younger sister:

"Quick, get the first-aid kit!"

Just then we suddenly realized that the deputy instructor, feet bare, was wearing only her underclothes. She had just become aware of it herself and felt uneasy at our stares. But she remained calm, and said coolly:

"What are you looking at? Haven't you got any thing better to do? Go to bed again, all of you!"

Submissively, one after another, people went to bed and buried themselves in their quilts once again. But I remained, holding the lantern above the Moor's head.

It was the first time the deputy instructor had ever given me such a tender look. Without saying a word, she took the first-aid kit from my sister and carefully bandaged the Moor's wounds.

My younger sister was the "Minister of Domestic Affairs" of the detachment and did all our washing and cooking. The frozen vegetables brought from the company had all been eaten and no edible wild herbs could be found in such a cold winter, so she did her best to make different kinds of food for us with the remaining two bags of flour.

If I had joined this reclamation work because of the deputy instructor, then my younger sister had come to Devil's Reach because of me. I was her only family member. If I went to the ends of the earth she would go with me. Although I had treated her cruelly, she still wanted my protection and shelter. On the surface, I still appeared indifferent towards her, but in truth I had already wholeheartedly forgiven her. Only those who are guilty of monstrous crimes do not forgive others. And after all, she was my younger sister, my only sister.

I was duty-bound to take care of her. Both before and after the scandal occurred, had I carried out my responsibilities as an elder brother? No, I hadn't. The first day we arrived in the Great Northern Wilderness, she had become fascinated by deer, and had asked if we could work at the deer farm together. But I had refused. I thought her fragility and willfulness would cause me endless trouble and worry. Instead I had looked after my own affairs and shirked my duties as an elder brother. After her mistake, which had left her open to public censure, my first thought was that she had tarnished my reputation. I had detested her without feeling the slightest ounce of pity or sympathy for her.

Now, in countless sleepless nights on Devil's Reach, I gradually realized my true nature. I had to confess to myself what a selfish brother, what a mean coward I was.

One day, when just the two of us were alone in the tent, I called over to her with a soft voice:

"Sister!"

She was kneading flour on the chopping board. Hearing me calling, she raised her head and looked at me with a frightened expression, tears welling up in her eyes.

"Younger sister, are you still angry with me?" I moved to her side.

Tears, large tears trickled down her pallid face on to the dough she was kneading.

"Younger sister …" My voice was hoarse.

Turning around and throwing herself into my arms, she hugged me with flour-covered hands and sobbed. After a long while she stopped. The first thing she asked me was:

"Is mum better?"

It was as though I had been stabbed in the heart.

Oh, mother! If only you had heard what your daughter was saying, you would cry too. May you not hear, and have no more worries about your children. But I wish that somehow you could know what your daughter had said, because she was the one who loved you most.

I hadn't the courage to tell my sister that our mother was dead. I worried about her delicate feelings and the fragile heart which wouldn't be able to bear such a shock. I answered in a gentle voice:

"She's not sick. She's been missing us terribly. When I told her that we were both all right, she felt better."

A wan smile appeared at the corners of her mouth, a pained and anguished smile. It was the first time she had smiled for several days.

"Tell me who the young man is. I want to teach him a lesson."

My sister firmly shook her head.

"Do you … love … him?"

Silent, she nodded.

"He … How about him? Does he love you?"

Another silent nod.

I stared at her. The angelic expression on her face was obviously a reflection of her true feelings. I felt lost.

Suddenly she asked:
"Elder brother, do you love her?"
"Who?"
"The deputy insuctor!"
"Where have you heard such nonsense?"
"I discovered it for myself. She likes you a lot too."
"Really!?" I grabbed her tightly by the arm.
"Yes!"
"But she likes the Moor!"
"She trusts him and so do I. He's worthy of our trust. Any girl would trust someone Like him. But you're the one she's fond of. She told me that you have an artistic nature. She also knows that you're in love with her."
Suddenly she stopped talking. Almost at the same time, both of us saw the deputy instructor standing by the entrance to the tent. She had obviously overheard our conversation.
"*Ai-ya*! I must go and collect the clothes I left drying by the river."
Finding an excuse, I fled from the tent, racing wildly across the flat land. Devil's Reach seemed to be the most beautiful place in the whole world.
That day after eating our evening meal we all gathered together in the tent to tell stories, something we did quite often to amuse ourselves. We told all sorts of stories: fairy stories, ghost stories, horror stories, humorous stories; each of us, including the deputy instructor, freed of the company's fetters, seemed to have come into our own in Devil's Reach.
The deputy instructor told us a tale from the *Odyesey*, of how the great Odysseus, returning to his homeland of Ithaca after attacking Troy, was detained by a headwind in an isolated island with his companions. She told us how the residents of the island presented them with a magic plant, common on the island, which was so delicious that upon eating it a person would forget all of their troubles. Odysseus and his companions forgot their homeland, their parents, their brothers, sisters, wives and friends when they ate this plant and so they stayed on the island for the rest of their days.
To my surprise, the deputy instructor told this story in such a natural, unexaggerated manner that we were all moved by the depth of feeling she expressed. She finished her story and left us all deep in thought. Only my younger sister heaved a long sigh, and said to herself:
"I'd like to get a lot of those magic plants."
The deputy instructor sat next to the Moor, her head resting against his shoulder as usual. The flames from the big stove cast a red glow across her face. As the light flickered over her pretty features, an expression of longing and sadness appeared before my eyes.
I inevitably felt a deep sympathy for her. Had she not been restrained by the oath she had made three years earlier, she could have visited her family. Three years! She must have missed her parents and friends more than any of us. I opened my board and said:
"Don't move, Moor, I want to draw both of you."
Actually I really only wanted to draw the deputy instructor, so beautiful was she, but I dared not openly say so. However, the Moor thought that I was publicly mocking him, something he could not endure. It was obvious that he had misunderstood. When the deputy instructor subconsciously moved her head away from his shoulder, he clutched her hand and stared at me coldly:
"Don't move! Let him draw. Don't disappoint him!"
There was a hint of challenge in his intonation. The deputy instructor obediently leaned her head against his shoulder again and looked at me with a faint smile.
Without saying anything more I began to sketch. I was determined that the drawing would be meticulous, would really convey her beauty. So I looked up at her and drew several strokes, took another look, and drew several more. Never had I worked so carefully on a sketch. Finally I finished it and intentionally broke my pencil lead on the very last stroke.
"I'm sorry, I haven't done it very well." I handed it over to the deputy instructor.
Everyone gathered around admiring the sketch.
"Not bad! It looks just like her!"
"Ah! That's really quite a talent you've got. Why have you kept it a secret from us? Will you draw me one day?"
"*Ai-ya*, you've only drawn me!" The deputy instructor threw a glance at the Moor.

"I'm sorry. My pencil broke." I flushed slightly. The deputy instructor took the sketch and looked at it carefully for a while and then said, "May I have it?"

"Certainly. You can keep it if you like."

"I'll look after it." She looked down. As she did, the Moor stood up and slipped out of the tent. From that day on he was much more reticent.

Everything in life can be passed on except love. I would persist in my pursuit of her, never give up my love for her, never love another, never …

*

The first spring rain came.

The soil of the reclamation fields, dark and rich, was like a baby greedily sucking Mother Nature's milk.

People often compare spring to a gorgeously dressed young maiden, but it was traveling over Devil's Reach more like a solemn woman, walking slowly and with measured paces. Carrying her uniquely soft dye with her, she turned the world green.

One day the deputy instructor fainted by the banks of the Wanderer. She was ill and did not come to for two days. While in a coma, she kept mumbling, "Wheat seeds, wheat seeds." None of the medicines in our first-aid kit could reduce her temperature. On the third day she came to, called my sister to her bedside and asked:

"How much food is left now?"

"Only a little," answered my sister.

The deputy instructor looked about with an expression of deep concern, and said with a smile:

"My dear friends, on behalf of the company I want to thank all of you. I am going to suggest that the Party branch records your merits. Now, except for one or two of us, everyone should return to the company and give them a hand moving here. This must be finished before the ice on Spirits' Swamp melts!"

She gently took my sister's hand.

"You have to stay with me, otherwise I'll feel lonely."

"I want to."

"I'll stay too," I said. The Moor looked over at the deputy instructor.

"I'd like to stay as well, if you agree."

She nodded her approval.

Now only the four of us remained on Devil's Reach. One day, a second … four days passed. The company still had not arrived. A company of more than two hundred people on the move would inevitably mean many difficulties; but, within those four days, Spirits' Swamp had completely melted. Our trusted friend the Wanderer River had betrayed us and collaborated against us with the Spirits' Swamp. When my sister and I went out on the fourth day, we were stunned by the change in the environment: in one night, the clear, meandering Wanderer had somewhere become a rushing current, turbid and muddy, like a wild galloping horse with hairpin turns and whirlpools, lumps of snow and ice, withered branches and broken trees. The river had overflowed and poured water across the swamp. Spirits' Swamp was now a vast expanse of water. My sister was worried.

"If the company doesn't arrive today, we won't have anything to eat."

The Moor and I shot her a glance but said nothing. What we were most worried about was how the company would cross the swamp.

Without saying anything more, my sister went back into the tent, and the Moor and I followed. She sat on a pallet beside the deputy instructor, who was still in a coma, and tears filled her eyes. Catching sight of us, she quickly wiped them away, picked up a sickle and a small basket and said:

"I'm going out to dig some wild herbs."

It was almost noon when suddenly we heard my sister calling out from a distance:

"Brother, brother, quick, come here!"

The Moor and I immediately jumped to our feet and ran out of the tent where we saw my sister, like a small terrier, chasing after a weak roe deer. Tossing her sickle, she hit its rear leg and it fell. She sprang at it, but failed to hold it. Struggling free, the deer ran towards the swamp. My younger sister was on its heels. At the edge of the swamp it stopped for a moment, as if looking back at her, then jumped and fled, limping.

"Stop!"

"Sister!"

The Moor and I shouted at her. My younger sister was at the very edge of the swamp, pacing up and down. She finally came to a halt and looked at the deer with its mired feet. After a slight hesitation, she made a first cautious step into the Spirits' Swamp.

"Come back! It's dangerous." shouted the Moor as we ran towards her.

She turned round to look at us and then waved her hand as if to say, "Leave me alone."

When the Moor and I reached the edge of the swamp, she had already caught the deer. Struggling with the small animal, she suddenly sank deep into the mire. Before we could even think what to do, all we could see was her small hand repeatedly grasping the air. In an instant, both my sister and the deer had completely disappeared from sight.

"Keep away …" Her last words in this world still echo in my ears.

"Sister!" I shouted and raced recklessly towards the swamp.

With his strong arms the Moor grabbed me from behind. I struggled against him and then lost consciousness.

When I recovered I found myself lying in the tent, the image of my younger sister's tiny hand appearing repeatedly before my eyes. My mother's last wish rang again in my ears and tears welled up. I struggled to get up and saw the Moor standing still outside the tent. His tall figure was silhouetted clearly against the pale moon. The eerie song of a bird rang out over the swamp and sent cold shivers down my spine. Perhaps the bird was calling back my younger sister's soul. I wasn't superstitious, but the thought suddenly flashed across my mind. I stared at the Moor and blazed with hatred towards him. Had he not restrained me, I believed I would certainly have been able to save my younger sister. I was consumed with guilt over her death.

I stood up and staggered out of the tent. When the Moor heard my footsteps, he turned slowly round, his eyes wide open, and stared at me in astonishment. Maybe he knew I was enraged, for he instinctively stepped back. I abruptly raised my fist.

"You …"

Stunned, he stepped back again.

"I hate you!" I growled, clenching my teeth.

He fixed his eyes on me and said in a low, deep voice, "If it's because of your sister, then I have the right to defend myself. Do you think I have the heart of a devil? Don't you think I'm upset about your sister's death? If I could change places with her, I'd willingly be caught in that swamp myself. If it's because of her …"—he threw a glance at the tent—"then go ahead and hit me! So long as I'm still alive, and she's not your wife, I have the right to love her."

His words made me shiver. As though paying condolences to my younger sister, I lowered my head. A silence reigned over the night. The flat wilderness was quiet and sullen, and even the song of the eerie bird who called back lost souls had died away.

The Moor slowly turned and walked away into the darkness. Soon his figure was lost in the hollow black night.

"What are you two quarreling about?"

I looked over my shoulder to see the deputy instructor standing by the tent. In the past four days she had become so weak that, had she let go of her grip on the tent flap, she would most certainly have collapsed. After a long silence two words fell from my lips:

"The wolf …"

"Wolf?" Scrutinizing my expression, she asked:

"You're hiding something from me. Where's the Moor? Where is your sister? Where have they gone? Tell me! What's happened?"

"My sister died in the swamp."

I couldn't hold back my sorrow any longer and covered my face with my hands, sobbing aloud.

On hearing this, she uttered only a short "Oh!" and fainted, as if she'd suddenly received a heavy blow.

The Moor had not returned even though it was now deep into the night. Where could he have gone? Would he come back and share the same tent with me again? Had he met with some mishap? If he had any kind of accident I would be responsible …

I was plunged into confusion, and waited anxiously for his safe return, feeling the dark night move on its long course. I took care of the still-unconscious deputy instructor. It was the first time in the unlimited vastness of that flat wilderness that I experienced such dreadful loneliness. The whole night long I could not fall asleep.

At dawn I heard the hurried clatter of hoofs in the distance and ran out of the tent to find the Moor dismounting from a horse.

"Where did you get the horse?" I said in a friendly manner; trying to put aside all of the unpleasantness between us.

"Several days ago, I found a branch with a trail marker cut into it and knew there must be some Oroqen

hunters nearby. I found them yesterday and borrowed it from them. How is the deputy instructor?"

"Still unconscious."

"The Oroqen hunters told me that maybe she has haemorrhagic fever."

"Haemorrhagic fever?!" I froze. I had once heard of someone dying of that like a leaf ripped down by the autumn wind.

"Take this horse and escort the deputy instructor back to the company right now," ordered the Moor. "You must go back the way we came and you will probably meet up with our company and be able to save her."

"No, I'll stay here and you take her."

"I'm too heavy. If I try and take her, the horse will certainly collapse halfway there. It's already exhausted. The two of you go together. If you head westward fifty *li* you can cut around Spirits' Swamp, and go due west beside it!"

To continue arguing with him would have been hypocritical. The Moor tied the unconscious deputy instructor to my back and then helped me mount.

"Take the gun!"

"You keep it."

"No, you should take it. You need to be prepared for any eventuality." He fastened the gun to the saddle. I reined the horse around and then gave the animal a strong punch on its rump. The horse neighed and raced westward at full gallop. Although the westward route was thirty *li* less than the eastward one, we had to cross a vast grassland. We were fortunate in having a well-bred Oroqen hunter, a short and compact animal, not handsome but able to bear hardships and stand up to grueling work. It really is the hunters' friend, the camel of the wilderness.

Having passed the Spirits' Swamp I continued urging the horse on. It seemed to understand what I wanted, and galloped on without slackening. After traveling nearly thirty *li* I felt my cotton-padded trousers drenched by the animal's sweat. Suddenly it snorted several times and began to stagger. It tried to continue with all its strength, but its forelegs buckled. As soon as I dismounted, it instantly inclined to one side, stretched out its neck, and collapsed.

The horse's belly rose and fell, warm air spurting from its nostrils, its mouth dribbling white foam. Before lying down, the intelligent animal had paused to prevent its full weight crushing down on its rider's leg and had looked at me almost apologetically with its clear eyes.

"Put me down! Put me down! Where are we? What are we doing here? Where are you taking me?"

The deputy instructor had come to, and struggled against the rope tying her to me. I untied the rope and gently put her down on the ground, her head and shoulders leaning against my chest.

"I'm taking you to meet the company. You're seriously ill." She murmured"

"Am I going to die? Is that it?" I felt upset hearing my beloved say such words and replied in a loud voice,

"No, of course not!" She forced a smile.

"I'm not afraid of death. Really. Don't you remember the lines in our oath to settle in the wilderness: 'It's not necessary to be buried in our home village, everywhere in the wilderness is our home.' The only thing I regret is that in a few months I would have been able to visit my parents. I really miss them. They're longing for my visit, nearly going crazy over it. I've written them a letter promising to go after the autumn harvest here, but now …"

I sobbed, my tears falling on her face.

"Don't cry." She gently took my hand. "If I do die, please bury me beside Spirits' Swamp and let me keep your younger sister company. She was a good girl. My only request is that on my grave tablet, I would like the word "reclaimer" carved together with my name …" Large tears gradually filled the corners of her eyes. I held her tightly and sobbed loudly and bitterly.

"Look, what's that? It's like that magic fruit in the legend. Would you break off a branch for me, please?"

Her large, beautiful eyes were fixed on something nearby.

Following her line of vision, I saw a cluster of purplish-red azaleas in bud. I helped her to lean against the saddle and went over to break off the branch.

She was dead when I returned.

She and the Oroqen horse had stopped breathing at the same time.

Beneath me I felt the ground spinning; above, the blue sky turned black. Wiping my eyes and pinning the azalea to her chest, I knelt down and kissed her pale lips for a long time. I think that had she been alive, she would not have blamed me. Carrying her body on my back, I walked on. I saw the company caravan appear on the distant horizon.

The whole company expressed sorrow at the death of the deputy instructor. Everyone cried.

*

When the company caravan, the carts, sleds, tractors and trucks drew near the swamp, it was already dusk. Someone found a cotton-padded hat stuck on a wooden pole temporarily used as a grave marker. I went ahead and removed the hat. It was the Moor's dog-skin hat. A slip of paper inside read:

"I've discovered a way through Spirits' Swamp and have marked it with twigs. A *li* east of here."

That night the whole company passed safely across the swamp leaving behind only the carts which might get stuck. But nowhere could we find the Moor.

The next morning, beside the Wanderer we discovered bloody strips of the Moor's clothing, a big axe and three dead wolves. There had been a fierce fight between him and the wolves. We imagined how he had fallen after having fought with all his might against them.

During those sorrowful days we began to seed Devil's Reach.

In accordance with their last wishes, we buried the deputy instructor by Spirits' Swamp. From Camel Mountain, a hundred miles away, we transported a huge gray stone which the old mason in our company chiseled into a grave tablet and on which he carved the words:

In memory of reclaimers
Li Xiao-yan,
Wang Zhig-ang,
Liang Shan-shan,
our beloved comrades.

On Camel Mountain we felled more than a thousand pine trees to make a road across Spirits' Swamp along the markers placed by the Moor, and named it "Reclaimers' Road." The following year several other companies came to settle on Devil's Reach. At last we conquered Spirits' Swamp.

One silent dusk when I visited the reclaimers' graves I saw a stranger standing there and found a bunch of azaleas on the tablet. Azaleas had been my sister's favorite flower.

In an instant, I understood that the stranger was the young man who had been in love with her. From the expression on his face, I could see that he would never leave Devil's Reach. We exchanged a glance and he turned and walked slowly away. I didn't stop him to ask his name, nor even think to ask where he came from.

He was one of our generation—that was all I needed to know.

*

We had experienced the blizzards of the Great Northern Wilderness, the hardships and the joy of reclaiming this land of wonder and mystery. From then on, no matter what the difficulties were, whether we stayed or whether we left, nothing could produce fear in us or make us surrender The Great Northern Wilderness!

83.53 A Silhouette Of Life\fn{by Ma Shu-li (1949-)} Mihsien, Honan Province, China (M) 8

"Uncle Pi, haircut time," Wei Yu-lan announced with a smile as she approached, holding a white porcelain tray in her hands.

"So soon? My hair is still pretty short," Pi Sung-cheng defended himself, raising one hand to cover the back of his head. The other hand held a transistor radio, playing a Peking opera, up to his ear. "Cut it next week. I'm listening to the most important part right now."

Old Uncle Pi's head was almost completely bald. The only part with some hair left was a triangular patch in the back between the ears pointing downward. From a distance it looked like a beard on a featureless face.

"Short hair is easier to wash," said Wei Yu-Ian, now standing beside the old man. She put the tray on the stone railing of the verandah and picked up a piece of white cloth from it. She tied the cloth, a makeshift barber's apron, around the old man's neck and then adjusted the rattan chair a little so that the side to be cut caught the sunlight. Usually it took forever to coax Old Pi into getting a haircut. Today, he was uncharacteristically agreeable.

"I say, Miss, don't tie it so tight around my neck; I can hardly breathe." Pi preferred to call the Catholic nuns "Miss" rather than "Sister." He didn't think "sister" sounded any better than "nun." Nor could he see why so many nice girls wanted to be nuns. So, he called them "Miss;" "Miss" did not rule out the possibility of their getting married, he reasoned.

"It has to be tight; otherwise your neck will itch something horrible." Wei Yu-Ian spoke slowly but manipulated the scissors deftly. "Raise your head a little. That's right. A little higher. That's better. Now don't move, or your ear will pay for it."

Pi's transistor radio was now on his lap under the apron. The aria being broadcast was sung by a famous actor starring in the role of an ancient warrior in a tragedy. The quality of the transistor radio was poor to begin with and the high-pitched voice of the singer vibrated from under the apron like strange noises from a ventriloquist.

"It sounds funny. What are they singing?" Sister Wei asked.

"Funny?! It's a tragedy. You young people don't know anything about Peking opera. What a pity."

Pi sighed. He pulled one hand out from under the apron, pointed to a spot on his head, and said, "It's itchy over here. Please scratch it for me."

"Don't move. As soon as I finish and clean up it won't itch any more."

"Hey, he doesn't have any sense of humor." Tsai Sung-ling, sitting close by, nudged the glasses on the bridge of his nose as he made this irrelevant remark. He then continued cutting out silhouettes from small pieces of black paper.

"So, you have a sense of humor? Wait till it's your turn to get a cut," Pi countered.

"I'm cutting now, aren't I?" Tsai waved the paper in his hand in front of Pi's face, apparently delighted that he, had gotten in the last word.

"Cutting those devil's shadows all day long. Aren't you afraid of disquieting the evil spirits?"

But Pi swallowed these words before they came out; he really did not want to curse his roommate.

Tsai started to cut the profile of Pi's head, which was stretched forward to accommodate the haircutting. Glancing up, then cutting away, Tsai cut silhouettes from live models the way artists do their sketches. With a few snips of his scissors he had already profiled the hair, the forehead and the nose. The nose was purposely fattened a little to stress a dull personality. He held his finished work up high, showing it to Sister Wei behind Pi's back. Sister Wei, still trimming Pi's hair, laughed silently as she nodded her approval and signaled to Tsai that she wanted the piece. Tsai put the silhouette in the white porcelain tray.

In the past, Tsai had had a booth outside a theater where he earned his living by cutting silhouettes for people. He was very good at it and could cut the profile of an entire bust within one minute. He did this without tearing the piece of paper, so that when a silhouette was cut out, a long strip of scrap paper would be left dangling at one end of it. He kept these strips on a string as a record of his sales for the day.

Old Tsai said he did it because he was deeply concerned about his clients whom he depended on. Upon hearing this, one of his clients, blinking his eyes in sudden enlightenment, asked Old Tsai, "You mean we are like parents raising you?"

After that, he didn't hang the strips of scrap out for people to see.

After his wife died, the childless and aging silhouette cutter fell sick. His kinsfolk sent him to this Home for the Elderly where he shared a corner bedroom on the third floor with Pi Sung-cheng.

*

"Miss, my blood pressure is high. I can't eat all this fat. Please give me a piece of lean meat." Pi Sung-cheng said to Sister Lin Ching-chih as he stood in the cafeteria line. He shoved his plate toward her.

"How about this piece? With high blood pressure you should eat lots of celery." Sister Lin mercilessly tossed another spoonful of celery onto Pi's plate, and continued, "Come to my office tomorrow; and I'll take your blood pressure again." Sister Lin was a graduate from the Medical College of Taiwan University, and was assigned to the Home by a missionary organization.

"It's useless just to take my blood pressure all the time. It won't come down without medication."

"Uncle Pi, you can't just take medicine whenever you feel like it."

"Wouldn't kill me if I did," Pi muttered to himself as he walked into the dining hall carrying his plate. When he saw his roommate Tsai sitting at their usual place, he turned away. He was still sore about Tsai's earlier remark during his haircut.

"Hey, old boy!" Sang Chiung called out when he saw Pi coming his way. He moved over a little to make room and asked, "How did your bean sprouts turn out? I have a bottle of sorghum vinegar. Maybe we can fry the bean sprouts with vinegar some day."

"All dead, damn things!" Pi walked over to Sang.

"How come? You have grown sprouts before."

"What's the use? If you forget to water them for three days, the damn things simply won't grow any more." Pi sat down, adjusted his plate a little, then closed his eyes and crossed himself. Since he'd come to the Home he

made the sign of the cross before every meal the way the Sisters did. He often preached to the other folks that people should show their gratitude to God, and that the Chinese had always been thrifty with food and that they had always reminded themselves not to forget the hard labor put into each grain of rice. So, he reasoned, it was only natural to feel thankful before each meal.

"Bean sprouts depend on water just like human beings depend on food. If a person goes without food for too long, he starves. Last week I got sick so I couldn't take care of the sprouts. Then they all withered," Pi explained.

"What a pity. If you'd told me I would have helped you water them. You had them in the storage room, didn't you? Did the Sisters say anything about that?" Sang Chiung asked.

"What can they say? We are all halfway to the grave anyway. All I have left is this hobby. The Sisters wouldn't say anything. If I'm not allowed to grow sprouts, what else can I do?"

"When you think about it, their job is not easy," the toothless Sang Chiung said after gumming a mouthful of food. "I hear that Sister Liu and Sister Chao often cry in front of the altar of the Holy Mother after they return from their donation collecting trips."

"I've been a bachelor all my life, without any family. But if I had a son I would certainly ask him to marry a nun. Where can you find such nice girls?"

"Nuns don't get married. What have you learned from your Bible classes?"

"I know, I know. But on this point I'm afraid I disagree with God. Why are all these nice girls kept unmarried? Men and women should all get married when they reach the right age. What does God want his sons and daughters around him for anyway? If I—"

"If all the nuns and monks got married, who would take care of us old guys here? It takes all sorts of people to make a world, just like dishes. Well, this is a lousy comparison, but I simply use it as an example. Dishes made with well-chosen ingredients including meat and vegetables are like happily married couples. Ones with the wrong ingredients are like mismatched couples. Besides these, there are vegetarian dishes without meat and meat dishes without vegetables. The nuns are like the vegetarian dishes, and you, old bachelor, you are the steamed meat."

"Rubbish! You are the hellish steamed meat." Pi couldn't help laughing, too, though the comparison sounded a bit offensive to him.

By now the two were among the small number of slow eaters still left in the dining hall. Seeing old man Hu Yao-ting staggering slowly across the hall, Pi said to Sang, "Old Mr. Hu has recovered. A few days ago he was still in bed and had to be fed by the Sisters."

"Yes, he has been up for two days now. Yesterday I saw him taking a walk. He must be over ninety. It's not easy being that old. When we get to that age, I wonder how we will turn out."

"You are looking that far ahead? If I can live another ten years, I'll consider it a special blessing."

"There is no problem with your health. And forget about the other problems, it's your short temper that belongs to people in their forties. If you can control your temper, you'll certainly live longer."

"Nonsense," Pi snapped, but only jokingly. Actually he was pleased to hear these flattering words. "One can bargain with other things, but not with fate. If Death wants someone …" Pi stopped when he saw Old Hu walking toward them. He stood up, stepped forward to hold the nonagenarian's hand and said loudly, "You're looking much better now."

Hu smiled, stretching his wizened lips horizontally. He breathed heavily, as if he were panting. After a few seconds, he asked, "What did you say?"

Pi shouted into Hu's ear, "I said, you're looking much better now."

Hu's eyeballs rolled a little behind the droopy eyelids and responded smilingly, "You two are keeping well, too." His voice was as soft and faint as a whisper; his smile revealed his toothless gums. Then he walked away slowly, half a step at a time. He had never fully recovered from the stroke he'd had ten years ago. Watching Hu walk away, Pi seemed lost in his own thoughts. He muttered to himself, "How can a person bargain with fate?"

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When Pi returned to his room, Sister Wei was there writing a letter for his roommate Old Tsai. Pi turned on the light in the darkening room and asked the Sister, "Is the man with a sense of humor giving you trouble again?"

"You two old fellows always want to outdo each other," Sister Wei said with a smile. Her hair was plaited into two braids, with a part in the back.

"He is a tough arguer. I am no match for him," Tsai said, while handing a cup of tea to the Sister. "Have some jasmine tea. It's not bad."

"Thank you, but I can't drink tea. It keeps me awake at night."

“Just a little. It won’t matter that much. Oh, with his interruption I forget where I was.” Tsai tried to resume his letter.

“Writing to your adopted daughter again?” Pi blurted out as he threw himself down on his bed.

“I’ve got to cut ten sets of paper designs based on folk-tales.”

The sister prompted, “Are you going to tell her the names of the tales?”

“Well, just mention two or three names to give her a general idea. Write these: *The Goddess of Offspring*, *A Wedding of Mice* and *A Dragon-Phoenix Matrimony*. She is young, so I chose happy tales for her embroidery designs.”

“What a talented girl! Besides making pottery, she can also do embroidery. When you finish the designs I would like to have a look at them. Usually you cut silhouettes.”

“Of course, I’ll show you when I finish them. Silhouette cutting has become a petty craft. Nowadays, girls don’t do it any more. In the past—”

“Why don’t you ask your daughter to come here for a visit? Is she having tests at school now?” Pi interjected, turning in his bed.

Tsai pretended he had not heard the question. He turned to Sister Wei and said, “Let’s go on with the letter this way: ‘The paper designs will be ready within a week. Before you come to fetch them, go to Tong-Jen-Tang Drugstore first to get two doses of my prescription.’ You don’t have to write the prescription or the address of the drugstore. She knows them. She does this for me quite often.”

“Have I offended anybody?” Pi asked, annoyed at being ignored. He got up and left the room. Walking around outside, he sang a few lines from *Rowing on a Lake*, an aria belonging to a female role in a Peking opera:

A small fish with rosy gills, swimming
Downstream from the Upper Yangtze River,
Keeps its head swaying and its tail swinging,
Keeps its head swaying and its tail swinging.

At the same time he swung himself, imitating a swinging tail. Just then, Sister Lin Ching-chih carne up behind him with a pile of thin terry cloth blankets balanced across her arms. Seeing Pi swinging himself in such a funny way, she laughed so heartily that she bent forward and the blankets fell to the floor. She said, “Uncle Pi, what - are - you - doing?”

Caught by surprise, Pi laughed, then blushed. He said, “I am re-creating a young woman’s role in a Peking opera.” He helped Sister Un pick up the blankets and asked, “Are you passing out blankets to us?”

“Yes, these were donated by the Lion’s Club for the hot season. These two are for your room.” Sister Lin thinking again how she caught Pi singing, tried to hide a giggle as she handed him two blankets.

“Aren’t you coming in to sit for a while?”

“No, I can’t. I am very busy right now. I’ll come to listen to your singing some other time. It sounds pretty amusing.”

“Oh, I can’t sing at all. I was just fooling around.”

“By the way, please tell Uncle Tsai that if he has no place to store his pottery pieces, I can keep them for him. The director has mentioned twice that he shouldn’t keep them on the floor. We have to do something about that.”

“I don’t dare talk to him about his earthenware. He would go to any length to fight with me if I do. Those pots and jars are his treasures. If I touch the stuff I’ll get the scolding of the century from him. How can I tell him to get rid of them? I’ve tried, but it’s useless.” Pi sighed and went on, “This is not a real home, but we better take it as our home. I’ve never seen anyone like him; he always seems ready to take to the road at a moment’s notice. Right now he is in the room. Perhaps, you. can go in and talk to him. Maybe he’ll listen to you. With a man like him, soft words are more forceful than tough words. I used to be a soldier fed on bullets; I can never be good at talking.”

*

“Old boy, what are you doing?”

It was Old Sang’s voice. Pi recognized the voice but did not answer. He didn’t even turn his head. He kept digging until he heard the steps come up close. “I’m planting hot peppers, son.”

“Why are you growing peppers? We have hot peppers with every meal.”

“You call those peppers? You country bumpkins! What I am planting are called ‘facing-the-sky peppers.’ They’re small but very very hot.” Pi stopped digging to wipe the sweat off his face. “Oh, my. I’ve dug only two

small holes and already I feel tired out. Just goes to show you can't go against your age."

"You shouldn't push yourself too hard. Why don't you take it slow?"

"What the hell do you know?! We have to hurry to plant these while it's not too hot. A hot sun will kill them off."

"They can't take the heat and you still call them hot peppers?"

"Wise guy, you think you know all the answers."

"Hey, old boy, how is your roommate Old Tsai? Is he sick?"

"No, he was fine yesterday. Why?"

"I just went to your room to see if you were interested in a game of chess. Old Tsai was still in bed. Usually he gets up very early; doesn't he?"

"I don't know what is bothering that old mule. Last night he was in a very bad mood. Probably Miss Lin offended him. Come on, give me a hand. I have to stomp the loose earth down." Pi covered the plant with earth, stomped on it a bit, and watered it with water he had carried there in a basin. "I've done everything humanly possible. If you damn things don't grow this time, wait and see what I'll do to you."

"Did you say Sister Lin?" Sang returned to his earlier line of questioning. "How could she have offended Old Tsai? I think something is bothering him. Lately he often looks sad when others are talking and laughing."

"I know. It looks like he can't make peace with himself and he is living in an ever-existing war." Pi straightened his back, took a deep breath, and brushed the dirt from his hands. As they walked away, he continued, "You've seen his treasures on the floor, haven't you? Some of the pottery pieces were made by his wife. Naturally he wants to keep them as momentos now that she's gone. But he shouldn't display them all over the floor; they gather dust. And he doesn't want to store them away or to put them to use. Once I asked him to give me a pot to plant flowers in. He got so mad he wouldn't talk to me for two days. What an odd guy! Actually he is a hundred and twenty percent nice guy, but just too finicky."

"Let's sit down over here." Sang handed the spade and the basin to Pi and dusted off a stone bench.

All the fixtures in the yard were inscribed with the names of the donors. This stone bench, the inscription showed, was donated by a society calling itself "Love the Young."

Sang felt that the donation was somewhat misplaced. He laughed and said, "We are all just old children."

Sitting on the bench, Pi continued talking about his roommate. "Old Tsai must have been a pottery lover in his previous life. A few years ago he adopted a Goddaughter, who was also fond of pottery. Every now and then she sends over a piece she's made. Old Tsai says her work is very much like his wife's. He often holds the pieces in his hands, comparing them over and over again. He likes to talk about the kiln temperature used, the color, the quality of the clay. I don't understand a thing about all that. To me, if he doesn't put the pieces to use, they are worthless."

"Old Tsai is very artistic, even though he can't read. What do you think of his silhouette cutting?"

"What about it? I think it's accursed."

"Uncle Pi, this is for you." Sister Lin stopped to hand Pi a letter. "This is a letter to Uncle Tsai from his Goddaughter. Will you please take it to him? Oh, last night I told him I could keep his earthenware for him. He didn't say anything for a while and then he suddenly shouted at me, 'Over my dead body!' I was scared to death. Then he said he would take his pottery away and wouldn't let anybody touch it. I've never seen him so angry." Even Sister Wei was stunned by his reaction.

"He's just a stubborn old mule." Pi concluded.

*

"Say, Old Pi, why are we going to all this trouble?" Tsai wiped the sweat off his face. The two old men had chosen a quiet corner in the market to set up their selling area on the ground. Yet they felt very uneasy.

"To hell with it. It's so damned hot. All the missiles launched day in and day out have changed the weather," said Pi.. He was spreading a piece of plastic sheet on the ground and weighing down the four corners with stones.

"We could have saved ourselves all this trouble if we had stayed home. It'll be embarrassing if we see somebody we know. You wanted to make money; so you dragged me into this," Tsai complained.

"What's embarrassing? Haven't you been a street-vendor before? How come you're so high-brow now?"

"What I used to sell was my own craftsmanship. But this stuff, look, this is different."

"What's wrong with it? If people from the Home see us, I'll take the responsibility. Coward!" Pi's bold words, however, did not even put himself at ease. Carefully he scanned the customers around them, fearful that something would go wrong. He did think of folding up and going back, but then he thought he shouldn't scare himself with his own timidity. After all, the chances of getting caught should be very slim.

As Pi looked at Tsai squatting there, wordless and motionless, he felt somewhat guilty for dragging his roommate into this. He said softly, “I say, Old Tsai, don’t blame me for being miserly. At our age we may leave this world any time. What do I want money for? I just don’t want to waste these things. We have enough blankets and they are still in pretty good condition. Now new ones have come; it’s gotten out of hand. If we keep them in storage too long, they’ll mildew. That’d be a waste. The blankets were already given to us, so they’re ours. There is nothing wrong with selling our own property. Why should we feel as if we were selling stolen goods? Oh, well, you can’t see the point, just like you can’t let go of those pots and jars of yours.”

As he touched on this topic, Pi glanced at Tsai’s face. Seeing no change in Tsai's expression, Pi went on, “What’s the use of keeping all your earthenware? It won’t hatch to produce more. It’d be better if you put them to good use. For instance, you should use some as flower pots or as gifts to friends. By the way, where did you move them to? The other night you were tidying up for a long time, but I can’t figure out where you stored them. In your black trunk? Where else is possible? There is so little space in our room.”

“Mind your own business. I hide my stuff wherever I like. Don’t you worry about it. If we are not going to sell the blankets, let’s go back.” Tsai finally responded.

Pi was satisfied with this reply, because he felt that as long as Old Tsai still talked back, their relationship was not at a dead end.

“Of course I want to sell the blankets, especially after all the trouble we’ve taken.” Pi said. “Okay, I won’t mind your business. Sooner or later you’ll see my point and will ask me for help. Say, Old Tsai, how much do you think we can sell this for? The material is pretty good—”

“Three hundred at most, in a place like this.”\fn{A note reads: *One US dollar equals forty New Taiwan dollars*. [This story was published in 1981; in 2000, the exchange rate was about 32 to the dollar.]} “Okay, we’ll sell it at that price.” Pi slapped his own thigh decisively while speaking. He wanted to get the blankets sold and go home as soon as possible. He stood up, rubbed his knees, and paced back and forth, his hands clasped behind his back. He sang softly, “I am like a bird in a cage.”

Across from them, a young man was selling watermelons. Cut-up pieces were displayed on the stall and several whole melons sat in a basket on the back of a bicycle nearby. Having no customers at the moment, the young man asked Pi, “Mister, what are you selling?”

Pi was annoyed by the question, thinking to himself, “Can’t he see with his own eyes?” However, he suppressed his temper, hoping the young man to be a prospective customer. He thought of buying two pieces of watermelon to strike up a relationship with him, so he asked, “Is watermelon sweet in this season?”

“Oh, yes, very sweet. Be my guest and have a piece.”

“I won’t take it free. How can you make money by giving away free watermelon?”

“It doesn’t matter. We’re neighbors. Take a piece.”

“I want two pieces, but I insist on paying you.” Pi figured if he accepted the free melon, how could he name a price if the young man asked about his blankets later? So he handed the young man a fifty NT dollar bill.

“You two are from the Elders’ Home, aren’t you?” The young man's question so startled Pi that he forgot about the change. The melon peddler, not noticing, continued, “The people in this area all look familiar to me even if I don’t know them personally. You two—”

“We don’t live here.” Pi did not look at the young man.

“I see your blankets are mostly sold. You did very well.”

“Well,” Pi walked away from the melon peddler and took back a piece of watermelon to Tsai. “Old Tsai, have a piece of melon. It’s pretty sweet.”

Tsai was squatting on the ground and rubbing his temples heavily with both hands. Pi asked, “What’s the matter? You don’t feel well, do you? You were all right just a little while ago.”

“It’s my old trouble, not serious. I’ll be all right.”

“Have a piece of watermelon, then you won’t feel so hot. Where are your pills? Don’t you have any left?”

“No, recently the pain has been coming more often, so I’ve used them up. A couple of days ago I asked Sister Wei to write to Hsiu-chin to send me some more, but they haven’t come yet.”

“Hsiu-chin is really a devoted daughter. How come she hasn’t come to visit you lately?”

“Her school work is heavy, and now she has a boy friend. They met in the pottery workshop. Oh, that’s right, you brought me the letter yesterday. She’ll bring the boy here to see me next Sunday.”

“You should rest up these days and not work so hard on your design cutting. Last night you stayed up very late, didn’t you? I woke up at midnight and the light was still on.”

“Hsiu-chin is graduating soon. I want to make her a gift. She likes to embroider, so I want to cut out some

patterns for her, enough for her to use until she gets married. I chose lucky themes for the designs." Old Tsai took a full mouthful of watermelon.

"Have a look, Ma'am," Pi said to a woman with a shopping basket in one hand who was looking at their display.

"You have only one pattern. Don't you have any others to choose from?" the woman asked.

"This pattern is very good. There is no need to choose," said Pi. He glanced at his partner who stole a silent laugh.

The woman was measuring a blanket with her hand. "It's a bit too large."

"This is the right size for me, so it can't be too large for you. A blanket is better too long than too short."

"It's not for me. I want one for my grandson. My son is coming back from abroad and it'll be the first time the grandson—"

"Well, a larger one is still better. It can be used for many years."

"How much?"

"Only three hundred and fifty. It's cheaper to buy in smaller markets." Pi slyly quoted fifty dollars more than they had planned since the woman was fairly well-dressed. She frowned a little at the price but did not bargain, probably because she felt the peddlers were so old.

Pi took the money; just then he noticed Old Tsai's face suddenly turn pale. He thought Tsai's headache must have come back and asked, "What's the matter?" The woman also I asked, "Is he all right?" Tsai managed to tell them that he was all right, but as soon as the woman left, he grabbed Pi and said, "Old Pi, look! Look who's coming. You got me into this mess."

Confused, Pi turned to look and saw Sister Wei walking within ten yards of them.

At first Sister Wei did not see them, but Tsai was so nervous that he thought the Sister only pretended not to. So he walked up to her with an awkward smile. The Sister, not sensing anything wrong, said cheerfully, "Hey, it's you guys. What are you doing here?" Then she caught sight of the merchandise. Blushing, she did not know what to say.

"Going to Taipei for business?" Pi eeked out a question.

"Yes, yes. The director asked me to go to the Junior Chamber of Commerce. They wrote us a letter saying that they are coming to visit the Home early next month and will bring some donations." She blushed again.

"More donations to come."”Pi regretted his words. Tsai added incoherently, "That's fine. Let's go back and have some rest. It's so hot and tiring here."

"Well, I'm leaving first.\fn{A note reads: *In Chinese societies, old people normally avoid saying "I'm leaving first," which could be taken as an allusion to death*.} You have business to attend to." Sister Wei walked away quickly, feeling relieved but regretting her last sentence, which she uttered so mindlessly out of nervousness.

"Old Pi, you're my enemy!" Tsai shouted angrily at Pi after the Sister left.

"You are the one who caused all the trouble. She didn't even see us, but instead of playing deaf and dumb like you should have, you went up to greet her."

"Playing dumb? She saw us but was too embarrassed to say hello. Do you think she's as blind as you are?"

Pi was not sure, so he did not say anything more.

"You boasted that you would take the responsibility if we ran into people from the Home. Why didn't you say anything when the Sister was standing here?"

"She didn't ask about this. What did you want me to say?"

"Do you have to wait for her to ask? She said, 'You have business to attend to.' Isn't that enough? And you had the nerve to say 'More donations to come!'"

"That was a slip of the tongue. Why are you examining each word like they do during testimony at a Communist liquidation meeting?" Pi's shame turned into anger.

"Examining your testimony? If this sort of thing happened forty years ago, I wouldn't let you get away so easily."

"What are you going to do about it now?" Pi was panting heavily.

"From now on I'll have nothing whatsoever to do with you. Don't you ever involve me in anything again." Tsai said this so forcefully that his upper denture fell loose. Bystanders burst into laughter and he could not help laughing himself. But he immediately took on angry countenance again. The bystanders quieted and soon left one after another. Tsai heard one say, "Strange, his partner just bought him a piece of watermelon, why then is he so angry?"

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Later, when Pi returned to his bedroom there was already a red string strung across the middle, dividing the room into two equal sections. The only door was in Pi's section. Pi thought, "How will Old Tsai use the door? He didn't think of that. He is just causing trouble for himself."

Actually, Pi did feel guilty about involving Tsai in today's incident. He also knew that Tsai would not accept his apology and would not forgive him for a long while. So for the time being, he thought, the only thing to do was to try to avoid his roommate by staying out of the room as much as possible. That day he went out early and came back late, hoping to make it more convenient for Tsai to use the door. At noon, when he saw Tsai was in a corner of the dining hall having his lunch, he felt somewhat relieved.

For the next two days, Tsai said not a word to Pi and ignored him completely. He concentrated on cutting his paper designs. He also appeared very weak.

From a distance Pi could not see the details of the paper designs, but he heard the scissors cutting all the time. The sound sometimes got on his nerves. The atmosphere in the room was quiet and tense, like a suspenseful scene in a silent motion picture. Pi didn't even sing like he used to.

Each time Tsai finished a few designs he pasted them on a large sheet of white paper. He looked so serious as he worked, holding his breath as if he were afraid of scaring the fairy tale characters out of the design in the paper. He worked under the table lamp even in the daytime and kept putting on and taking off his glasses. The cut-off scraps of red paper covered the floor. Some were blown across the line, drawn by the red string, over to Pi's side. Some of the cut-off strips were as fine as threads.

"What delicate pattern could that be?" Pi wondered, but found it difficult to imagine, He stealthily picked up a strip and took it out to the yard to examine it closely. It was a square frame without any contents. He could not tell what details were supposed to be inside this frame. Cutting marks were visible on the edges of the square, giving the examiner a glimpse of the work. However, the discontinuous marks were like broken pieces of a dream that could not be pieced together into a story.

On the afternoon of the third day after their quarrel, when Pi was coming out of Sang's room after a chess game, he saw someone climbing out of the window from his own bedroom on the second floor. A frightening thought flashed across his mind. He felt so weak that he sat down on the stone steps. He muttered, "Old Tsai, you stubborn old mule. What are you trying to do?" Just then he saw Tsai reaching the verandah and then the hallway. Feeling relieved now, Pi mused to himself, "Old mule, you're seventy and still act like a child. You really haven't used the door."

That evening, as he was looking through magazines in bed, Pi had a persistent impulse to talk to Tsai about his window climbing feats. He wanted to say, "Okay, you are tough. You use the window rather than the door. If you want to die, choose a better way; don't try the window. You are the one who put up the string in the room, so it's up to you to take it down." He suppressed the impulse to say these words, but he could not suppress his feeling of sadness and worry.

Tsai did not seem to be angry any more. He was completely absorbed in his paper-cutting and ignored everything else. That night he took out a parcel from his cabinet. The parcel was wrapped with a piece of blue cloth in a white floral pattern. Inside the wrapper was a large album with a red velvet cover. Tsai put the album on the table, opened it and put into it every sheet of the large white fillers with the paper designs pasted on them. He carefully looked at each sheet. Then he closed the album and pressed it tightly. Observing this ritual from a distance, Pi silently counted the sheets: there were nine now; one to go, according to what the cutter himself had said earlier.

Pi sighed deeply. Three days had passed, and he hadn't gone across the red line. If he took down the red string, he thought, Tsai might not mind. But he wouldn't do it.

Though he had shared a bedroom with Tsai for three years, Pi had never given any thought to Tsai's personality. Now feeling somewhat confused, he still did not want to think about it. He could not figure him out anyway. He turned over in his bed and fell asleep. At midnight he woke up and saw Tsai asleep in his chair, his body bent over the table. The table lamp was still on, shedding a dim light on Tsai's thin white hair. Pi toyed with the idea of getting up to turn off the light and put something warm over Tsai, but then he saw the red string and decided to remain in bed. Soon he fell asleep again.

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A stream of people went in and out of Pi's room. The red string had been broken by someone at some point without being noticed; now it was just a casual curving line on the floor. .

Pi felt paralyzed in his chair. He was ignored by the crowd coming in and out. Nobody asked him to go to lunch. He kept repeating, "I know this is real; I know it."

In the afternoon, Sister Wei came in with a shopping bag in her hand. She bent down and said softly to Pi.

"Uncle Tsai's daughter left this bag behind. She has left with a boy for the funeral parlor. Will you please keep it for the time being? I am very busy now and have to go there myself." Her eyes were red.

Pi nodded. Then he recalled something and struggled to stand up and walk to Tsai's desk. He turned the red velvet album over and over again in his hands and then closed it. He picked up the wrapping cloth from the floor and wrapped up the album. He said to Sister Wei, "Hand this to his daughter yourself. Tell her to express her appreciation for it in front of her father's coffin."

Sister Wei covered her nose with one hand and held the album in the other. As she was leaving the room, Pi called her back. He took out the blanket from Tsai's cabinet, his hands shaking, and handed it to the Sister. Pi broke into tears and said to her, "Tell him for me that his blanket is too old. This time he is on a long journey; it is not too much to take a new blanket."

"Yes, I'll tell him. You take care of yourself," she said. Looking for a bag to put the blanket in, she tried to empty the shopping bag she had just brought in. Scattered on the floor were two tins of powdered milk, a bottle of honey, and a package of medicine. These things reminded her of the last letter she wrote for Old Tsai and they unleashed her tears again. Before Pi could see them, she hastily put them back into the bag again.

After Sister Wei left, the room seemed empty. Pi picked up some of the scraps of paper and looked at them. He then put up the red string again and hanged the paper strips from the string.

The red paper frames looked like an inscribed eulogy chop, hanging strip by strip. The story itself had flown away with the crane. That old mule Tsai had left his room with a pile of unfinished work, and it looked like he'd only got nine designs done. He forget to count the designs in the album Pi pondered, just as that thought crossed his mind he stepped on a milk canon the floor. It reminded him that Hsiu-chin had brought it over. Where were the headache pills? Why did she bring milk and honey? Damned girl! Then in a hateful manner he blurted out, "I shouldn't have given her that album! Who would want that kind of daughter anyway?"

Just as Old Pi finished, two caretakers came into the room, and caught him still red in the face. They also saw the red strips of paper hanging in the room and wondered what it all meant. Everyone just stood in the room without saying a word.

"What are you guys here for?" Old Pi finally asked.

"The Sister told us to come here and take away Mr. Tsai's bed."

Old Pi waved his hand at them as if to tell them to get on with it. The two caretakers took up positions on both ends of the bed and then rolled up the bedding and took up the mattress. Suddenly, Pi jumped up from his chair and shouted, "Stop!"

They were all surprised by what they saw under the bed. All the pottery pieces were individually tied with red string under the springs, one next to the other.

The two caretakers began to untie the strings, but they were stopped by Pi. Pi said, "Anybody who wants to remove these pots and jars has to do it over my dead body."

87.72 Street Sketch\fn{by Chu Lin aka Wang Zuling (1949-)} Shanghai, China (F) 5

I go out of my door early to find a crowd of people at the street corner. The Shanghainese are notorious for their curiosity—if one person stoops to look at a dead ant on the road, someone else will join him, then a third and a fourth. Soon, dozens, even hundreds of people will press round. If you didn't know what was going on, you might assume that a space alien had landed in the city!

I decide to walk around them, but my attention is caught by a rasping voice:

"Grandfathers, uncles, tradesmen, young friends, one and all! I am a disciple of Master Haideng, the great exponent of the martial arts! I come here today to this corner of your fair city, not in search of personal gain, but to bring good fortune to all …"

The last few years we have seen a big increase in the number of people peddling quack medicines. They start with a catchy come-on spiel, then they strip to the waist and do stunts, and finally they bring out their elixir and hit you for money. We weren't born yesterday. We're not so easily fooled into buying pills, powders, pastes, and pellets concocted from heaven knows what kinds of greasy filth and foot-washing water. Still, for all that, there's something rather entertaining about watching someone swallow nails or drill a hole through a brick with his finger. So when you see one of these guys starting his sales pitch, you stick around to watch, even though you know how the show is going to end. Then what do you do when the performance is over and the outstretched hand comes your way? Like they say up north: no way, eh? \

But this guy starts a little differently from the others, claiming off the top, truthfully or otherwise, that he's

here to bring us all good fortune. He wears a pair of baggy black trouser, held up by a filthy red sash and is naked from the waist up, with arms as thin as hemp stalks and a chest so scrawny you can count the ribs. His face has a ravenous look, and his stomach caves in like a well. He looks like he hasn't had a decent meal in years.

"I am Sichuanese."

He holds up an envelope with a line of characters printed on it, shaking it in our direction:

"See, here's my address—Ma Family Village, Tianqiao County, Yongli District, Sichuan Province. If you're ever in Sichuan, just ask the first person you meet, 'Where is Longlife Ma of Ma Family Village?' Anyone will tell you …"

Even in the unlikely event of there being another Sichuanese in the crowd to disprove his claim, I'd still be prepared to bet that 99 percent of the people here aren't going to believe a word of it.

Then his sales pitch takes an abrupt turn, as he pulls from his pocket a small paper package. As he walks around the semi-circle of onlookers, he begins to unwrap it, showing everyone a few grains of white powder in their paper wrapping.

"If I told you that this medicine was guaranteed to cure any illness, you certainly wouldn't believe me. Just bragging won't do any good—that would be like trying to build Mount Tai by piling up dirt. But if you don't believe me now, I can make you believe! How? With facts! Facts will show that there is a marvelous power at work in this powder, and this power is *qigong*! You must have heard of *qigong* …"

Now it's obvious—he thinks we're stupid. We Shanghainese have seen a lot; we know more than he realizes. Who is there that hasn't heard fanciful stories about the wonderful powers of *qigong*? And it isn't just *qigong* stories we've heard—there's also stuff about people who can read with their ears or bring things through solid walls by will power, extraterrestrials captured by Soviet scientists, and prehistoric television sets excavated from the Pyramids. To say nothing of *yin* and *yang*, the Eight Trigrams and the Book of Changes!

People sneer at the little Sichuanese. He waves dismissively:

"You should certainly have heard of the great *qigong* master Yan Xin! Who is Yan Xin, you ask? He is a famous professor at Sichuan Medical College! There's an essay all about him in the March issue of *Flower City* magazine, a hundred thousand characters long." His eyes gleam with excitement.

"I want to tell you about Yan Xin's powers. It is plainly stated in that essay that he can remove a mole from someone's face at a distance of fifteen hundred kilometers! If he's giving a lecture and he tells you to laugh, you'll laugh. If he tells you to cry, you'll cry. If he tells you to jump, you'll jump.

"What's the secret behind these great truths? It can't be explained in two or three words, but"—he clears his throat and continues in stentorian tones—"*Qigong* is a higher science, an anatomical science, an advanced technology. I'm not making this up, you know; those are the words of the great scientist Qian Xuesen! And all that advanced technology is in this medicine! This medicine is a special cure for all chronic illnesses! Men and women, old and young, all can have chronic illnesses. Babies suffer malnutrition and roundworm, children get indigestion, old folks have dizzy spells and can't control their bladders, women have irregular periods and menstrual cramps, middle-aged men are impotent or ejaculate prematurely, even youngsters—"

He pauses a moment, then sounds his words out more clearly than ever:

"Young men have a malady known as 'marrying in your dreams.' Why do we call it 'marrying in your dreams?' Because it afflicts a man who has yet to marry but longs for a wife day and night. When evening comes, he has a dream—that he is with a woman! How happy he feels! How wonderful if he could only have this dream every night! But—"

"Friends!" He slaps his thigh, and his voice becomes ferocious:

"If you have that dream every night, you will be ruined forever! When you get up, your head will swim, your back will ache, and your joints will be weak. And when you finally do get married, you're no good for anything! But to those who have such dreams I say that help is at hand. If you take my medicine, you will never again have a wife in your dreams. Instead you will really marry! A beautiful young virgin! I guarantee it!"

Laughter ripples through the crowd. The atmosphere has changed; now everyone feels amused and relaxed. Then he takes out a bundle of envelopes.

"I have twenty envelopes here, which I will give to twenty people. People who get envelopes are getting my medicine free of charge. All I ask is that, once you have taken it, you send me testimonies to its effectiveness. This is so that I can improve it still further. The address is on the envelopes. I have only twenty! Once they're gone, there won't be any more! Okay, who wants one?"

Craning his scrawny neck, he turns his head to scrutinize every individual in the crowd. Nobody says anything, but many of them crane their necks and widen their eyes or else shuffle their feet and hope that the others won't

notice. Some stroke their chins or clear their throats for no apparent reason.

The Sichuanese gives a little cough himself to ease the tension:

"Folks from Shanghai are a bit, well … okay, I'll make it easier for you. If you want one, raise your hand!"

Almost before the words are out, a trendy-looking youngster in Nike running shoes gives a half-mocking laugh and raises his hand in a kind of salute. Then, as if roused by a clarion call, more hands go up, some high, some low; some urgently, others diffidently. The momentum seems to sweep people up. A plump middle-aged woman near me lifts her right arm ever so slightly, then drops it down again. But, to my astonishment, he goes straight over to her and offers her the first envelope!

Many of the onlookers are taken aback, not least the young man in the Nikes, who scowls and begins to grumble. The Sichuanese laughs:

"Don't fret, young fellow. I know this lady believes in me, even if she didn't raise her hand. She needs my medicine!"

The plump woman blushes. With a smile he asks her,

"Are you a Party member, Ma'am?"

Though his voice is scarcely above a whisper, she's obviously extremely embarrassed. But he just smiles:

"It's all right. None of your leaders are here. It's okay for us to have a little chat."

People begin to laugh. The woman's face turns red, then white, but she still reaches out and takes the envelope. In smooth, measured tones, the Sichuanese continues:

"The Party calls on us to serve the people, and that's exactly what I do. As to the question of whether *qigong* is materialism or idealism, well, let's deal with that another time. People from Shanghai are all well informed—I'm sure you all know that American president Ronald Reagan is a firm believer in astrology. What you may not know is that the supreme leaders of our own country also use divination to set state policy and lead the Chinese revolution from one victory to another. This is not superstition! It is an irrefutable truth in Marxist philosophy that spirit is transformed into substance and substance is transformed into spirit. *Qigong* is substance that has been spiritualized."

Swindler he may be, but he's good—you have to give him credit for that!

One by one the envelopes are handed out and carefully held open to catch a few grains of the white powder that he shakes in. You can see from their expressions that the recipients are delighted.

When he has finished doling out the medicine, the Sichuanese unexpectedly taps a thin man on the shoulder:

"Friend, I've talked so much my lips are dry and my mouth is parched. Can you give me fifty cents for an ice cream?"

The thin man is neatly dressed and wears a pair of old-fashioned tortoiseshell-frame glasses. In his string shopping bag are some vegetables and a small white fish. He looks like an average kind of intellectual, struggling to make ends meet, and maybe a bit henpecked too, and he dithers anxiously over the prospect of parting with fifty cents. He doesn't hesitate for long before the rest of the crowd starts to grumble indignantly at the Sichuanese, feeling that he's trying to hoodwink them. The plump woman moves quickest; without a word, she spins round like a girl of eighteen. The youth in Nikes is close behind her, slipping away as though his soles were greased. All at once, everyone wants out of there.

At this, the expression on the face of the Sichuanese changes. Suddenly he bellows,

"Listen! All of you! Who is there, in today's society, who can catch a white tiger?"

I can't understand what he's talking about. In the confusion, an old woman whispers, "What's he mean about catching white tigers?" She shakes her head. An old man, maybe a retired worker, pushes his way back through the crowd to explain: "Catching a white tiger is getting something for nothing." Smugly he adds, "I caught on right away. There's no way you can get something for nothing. Sure this guy's full of fine words, but he still asks for money in the end, doesn't he?"

The old woman nods agreement. Neither of them has received envelopes, so they aren't in any hurry to leave. But I remember that they were craning their necks hopefully with the rest when the medicine was being handed out.

"You! And you!" The Sichuanese jerks his hands up—first the left, then the right—to point at the retreating figures of the plump woman and the youngster in Nikes.

I can't really explain that gesture of his, but everyone understands it instantly. As if compelled by some mysterious force, they are frozen in their tracks. Everyone stops dead. Nobody dares move. And those two, the man and the woman, tremble convulsively, unable to control themselves or take a step.

"I'm not forcing anyone to stay." The voice softens slightly. "But I tell you this—you can go all the way to

America, and you'll still be in my grasp. Makes no difference if you believe me."

He claps his hands twice.

"I can make your head hurt when you read or your stomach ache when you eat. I can make you rush to the bathroom and then find you can't piss. When you're right there on top of a woman I can stop you getting it off."

He points again. The plump woman and the youngster in Nikes come back, step by step.

It's unbelievable. In the bustle of the world, there's suddenly an abyss of silence, like a black hole, like a whirlpool in the Bermuda Triangle … some irresistible force has everyone trapped.

He looks around at us all. There is menace in his laughter now.

"This skill of mine," he asks us, "is it fake, or is it real?"

"It's—real!"

Elegant scholars, grizzled elders, fair women and brave men, workers, students, housewives—probably butchers, barbers, retired officials, and peddlers as well—in this instant all answer in unison like children in a classroom.

"It's a real skill, so …" He spits on the ground. "I asked for some money for an ice cream. Was I right to do that?"

"You—were—right!"

We chorus obediently. Like someone waking from a dream, the thin man in the tortoiseshell glasses gropes all over his body. Finally he pulls a wad of tattered bills out of his pocket, selects a red one, and hands it over.

The Sichuanese smiles slightly. He holds up the red paper and shakes it at the crowd.

"See how generous our friend is! I ask for fifty cents, and he gives me a buck. But"—there is a change in his manner as he continues, slowly and deliberately—"you earned this money with your sweat and blood. I know how it is for people in Shanghai. A university professor doesn't earn enough in a day for a pack of Marlboros—he certainly can't afford fancy neckties or a leather jacket. In the morning he only has rice gruel to eat. And you young ladies—you look so cute in your makeup and bright clothes, but all you eat for lunch is salted vegetable soup. So … how could I take this money? How could I?"

No answer. All these smart people are dumbfounded.

He snaps his fingers. The red banknote flies through the air, loops over, and lands at the feet of the thin man. Hesitant eyes peer through tortoiseshell frames, following the scrap of paper until it settles on the ground.

Hushed whispering begins. People are trying to work out whether they should stay or leave. The plump woman turns away, only to have him shout and point to her again. Her flabby body shakes with terror.

Nobody dares speak. All eyes are riveted on his other hand. He raises it slowly, his finger pointing at the young man in the Nikes. The pitiful youth stands like a statue, red pimples protruding all over his face, frozen in time.

What's he up to, this extraordinary stranger?

Finally his hand is drawn back. He taps another man on the shoulder:

"Young fellow …"

The man doesn't really look young, but then he isn't all that old either. He is dressed in an old blue police uniform and Chinese-made Liberation running shoes. He has a narrow forehead, a long chin, and narrow slits for eyes. He reacts quickly—before the Sichuanese can make his pitch, he has a five-*yuan* bill ready in his hand!

"Well, well! Another generous friend!" Again, he takes the banknote and gives it a shake.

"He gives me five bucks when I ask for fifty cents! I'd say that a man who's just out of jail is more free than anyone with his cash …"

He murmurs to himself and squints at the man in the police uniform, sizing him up.

"A man just out of jail is afraid of the cops. So he does what the hunters do when they want to fool a tiger. They drape tiger skins over themselves, and he puts on a police uniform. We know how it is! However"—his voice becomes slower, the words drawn out—"how could I take your money? I can see your pocket bulging, but all that means is that you've made a bit of money and you don't know what to do with it. But that money wasn't so easy to come by. If you want to get a trader's license, you have to go to the Department of Commerce, the Tax Office, the bank, the Environmental Protection Agency, Public Security … one place after another, to get your forms stamped. You haven't made a cent yet, and the money's flowing like water. When you do finally make a little profit, you think you're in luck. But it's slippery, this luck! It can find you, but you can't find it! All of a sudden there's a new policy, and you find you didn't play your cards right. Screw up once, and you're back in the slammer. How can I take your money?"

Again the bill is tossed back.

Everyone is totally confused. It's like a play, him demanding money then giving it back. Everyone wants to act

their part now, pulling out their money and offering it respectfully to him. And the amount they offer keeps increasing—perhaps because they're afraid of him, or perhaps because they hope he'll give it back. By the plump woman's turn, it's up to ten *yuan*. Frowning slightly, she brings out her money, staring anxiously at the outstretched black hand as if it were grasping her soul.

This time, to everyone's surprise, he doesn't return it. Instead, he stuffs her money into his pocket:

"I won't insist on this dear lady taking her money back. But I won't spend it on myself! It will go to print more envelopes, so I can give more people medicine to cure what ails them. Then even more people will have good fortune! Aah!"

It is a long, drawn-out "Aah," like officials say when they are making speeches.

The plump woman has disapproval written all over her face, but there's not much she can do about it. People glance uneasily at each other, wondering what other tricks he has up his sleeve.

"Let me tell you straight."

He takes off his shabby straw hat, revealing the few sparse hairs on his little head.

"I don't really need an ice-cream bar. You figure out how much you want to give me! I know what you're thinking now! 'Humph! This fellow's just here to cheat us out of our money after all!' You're so cheap, you Shanghainese! All you care about is making money off the other guy. Some tiny amount of money the size of a fly, and it weighs you down like a millstone! Getting you to do something for someone else is harder than climbing up to heaven! As long as you live you'll never believe that someone like me just wants to bring good fortune to others. I'll be honest with you—I'm not expecting miracles. But I will ask you this: What is it that makes you, as humans, different from animals? Does that ever occur to you? Don't you want something more from life than just food and clothing—like doing something for society, for humanity? There's a saying here in Shanghai: 'People need to know their own value.' Right? So, people, where do you find your value? Are you just working for yourselves and your children? I'm sorry to have to tell you this, but even if you're a Party member or an official, you're still no better than a beast! I'm not in the Communist Party myself, but I'm more of a Communist than most Party members. Why? Because I serve the people! That's how I know my value! To my mind, real human value is in doing good deeds for humanity, no matter how small."

His face is earnest now. Hat upturned in his hand, he steps toward us. There is a deathly hush. The greasy black hat is like an open mouth. Somewhere from the depths of that mouth comes a derisive, merciless laugh; the man's voice seems to drift in from far away.

"Today I will use my special powers and restore your power to you. Don't get me wrong! I'm not superstitious, and I'm not religious. I don't believe in any religion. I believe in humanity! Only in humanity! Now, if you please, grandfathers, uncles, tradesmen, and young friends, those of you who have received my medicine, a small contribution for humanity!"

First into the hat is a ten, and the man who puts it in is the released convict in the police uniform. His move acts like an order, as those who have received the envelopes push and shove each other to be first with their donations. In no time the hat is crammed with money, much of it in one-, two-, and five-*yuan* bills. There are very few small bills or coins. Nobody but the man in the police uniform has put in a ten, however—even in the general panic, the others have kept their heads somewhat.

"Master, can we go now?" someone asks timidly.

"Sure. Feel free to go." He becomes expansive. "Just as long as you understand how people ought to live their lives! Do as you please! I have other places to go to cure the sickness of humanity," he says, stressing that final word, *humanity.*

With these words, he clasps his shabby hat to his chest and heads for the road.

Three tall cylindrical trash cans stand at the roadside. The garbage in them has overflowed, and a small mountain of it is piled up on the curb. A woman dressed in rags squats by this pile of trash, picking through the rotting food and vegetable peelings with shaking hands. Whatever she finds, she drops into a worn bamboo basket.

The Sichuanese stands silently at her side. Then, without any warning, he leans forward and dumps the contents of his hat into her basket. Her scraps and peelings are covered with brightly colored paper bills.

The dispersing crowd forms again instantly.

"What's his connection with the old woman? Do they know each other? Are they in this together?"

The old woman stares at him in disbelief and raises a hand toward him. Five blackened fingers stretch wide apart.

He looks down at her hand. A gentle smile lights his small eyes:

"The money's for you." He puts his hat back on his head and walks away.

"Money … don't want …" the old woman mutters. She shakes her head and pulls a banknote out of the basket, holds it up and strokes it, then lets it slip from her fingers onto the pile of trash. Still muttering, she picks the bills out one by one and throws them away.

"A madwoman."

The people feel disappointed. They can't take their eyes off the bank-notes, some stuck to bits of watermelon rind, some tucked under an old box, some teetering on top of the pile, about to flutter away … even in a pile of filth, money still fascinates them. Which one did you put in? Which one was mine?

They turn away from the money and look at the madwoman. Somewhere in their consciousness, a powerful force is holding them. Even if they know which of the bank-notes is theirs, they don't feel it's quite right to be looking at it any more.

The old woman goes on hunting through the garbage, oblivious to everyone around her. Ignoring the money, she picks out the peelings and puts them in her basket, shaking off the dirt and the banknotes that are stuck to them.

Driven as much by pity as by curiosity, I too go over to look at the old woman as the Sichuanese had done. Looking at her untidy white hair, her sallow skin, and her thin lips, I feel the intensity of her hunger and thirst.

Slowly she straightens her back and holds up her hand. I pull out the bean-paste bun I was going to have for breakfast and press it into her hand.

"No! No!"

She jerks her hand away, then stretches it out again, five fingers outstretched. She waves them in my face:

"Five languages! He speaks five languages!"

My bun has fallen onto the pile of garbage. I don't understand her.

"You can't execute him, comrade!"

She seizes my sleeve.

"Not now we have the reform policy. He speaks five languages; he can make a contribution to the country!"

She's grabbing me so tightly I feel uneasy and look around for help. They're laughing at her as they pull her away. Someone says, "Okay, we know now, five languages. Go home and get something to eat. Fat lot of use five languages are."

But the old woman doesn't want to go. She still resists and reaches out her arm to me, staring at me with dulled eyes. My heart is pounding—maybe what disturbs me is those eyes, sunken, opaque, glistening, like two coals glowing in a thick fog.

"Don't worry. She's harmless." A woman selling scallions and ginger by the road tries to comfort me. Seeing my bewilderment, she continues,

"She must have done something terrible in a past life. Her son was executed ten years ago—he was a student at the Normal University. She's here every day, always says he never stole or looted, he was so honest and clever, but … it's politics, isn't it? Who knows what goes on?"

"Wang Shensheng!" I shout. "She must be Wang Shensheng's mother!"

That's right! He was a university student, executed in 1977. I remember how everyone in the city was made to discuss the case. Full of righteous indignation, they all shouted, "Kill! Kill! Kill!" The muffled gunshot cast a dark shadow on the general euphoria that greeted the arrest of the Gang of Four. I had just started working as a junior editor at the Youth Press. When everything was quiet in the night, I would sit alone in the office, wiping away my tears as I wrote eulogies to the spirits of martyrs. At dawn, I would tear the pages into shreds and throw them into the toilet. My secret was discovered, but by someone who sympathized with me. He did not betray me, but jokingly recited a verse—I never knew where it came from—

Nobles strive for wealth and fame,
Heaven helps them all.
But still the anxious man from Qi
Fears the sky will fall!

Ten years have passed. The opinions that doomed Wang Shensheng to execution are now part of the state reform policy, proclaimed in endless propaganda campaigns. The people who were shouting for his death are now climbing the ladder of success, scrambling for official jobs and hustling for money … how absurd it all is!

I don't feel like giving up. I say to the people gathered round,

"Her son was Wang Shensheng!"
People stare at me strangely, then walk off. To them, I am as mad as the old woman.
I can't accept this. I grab hold of a fashionably dressed girl:
"Wang Shensheng—did you hear?"
She giggles nervously:
"Wang what? Is that some kind of disease?"
I hang my head, tell myself not to be so foolish. When I look up, the woman has gone, her bent body engulfed in the mass of humanity. My eyes cloud over, but still I can see a sinewy forearm and five fingers, pointing straight up to the blue of the sky like five stiff lances.

151.33 At The Denunciation Meeting\fn{by Wang Peng (1949-)} Sian, Shanxi Province, China (M) 3

One night, when everyone was fast asleep, the team leader, Deyuan, let Old Man Niu Sheng\fn{His name means "Ox tether."} in on a secret.
"Best be on guard, Elder Uncle! The 'Thunder God' is planning on holding a denunciation meeting just for you!"
Deyuan left Old Man Niu Sheng scared witless. The old man knew that "Thunder God" was the nickname—given by general consensus—to Comrade Lei\fn{Lei means "thunder"} who had come down with the work team.
The man was not old—he looked around thirty at most. But he had an awesome brusque way with him when it came to work. Early in the spring, he just dug in his heels and wouldn't let anyone plant any ginger in their private plots; then when the hot weather came, he rounded up all the team cadres and made them uproot all the tobacco plants the commune members had grown.\fn{Examples of Lei's political extremism, interfering with people's private plots. Tobacco and ginger are cash crops and therefore "smell of capitalism".} In the end, he made all the private plots barren, and everyone felt very frustrated.
Now Old Man Niu Sheng had fallen into the hands of the "Thunder God." He was probably done for. He was so bothered he did not get a wink of sleep all night. All his life, this old man had been respected: he had never squabbled with anyone, or done anythIng to be ashamed of: how could he face a denunciation meeting? Denunciation meetings—this old man had seen plenty of them these last few years; the dunce cap on the skull; bricks hung around the neck; the body blows with the willow, *et cetera*.
When, in the past, the old man had seen these things going on, it had made him tremble all over. Who would have thought it would now be his turn. The old man sighed. Feeling the wrinkly skin on his body under the blanket, he thought to himself: I must shave myself bald—to save having the hair pulled; on my body I'd best wear my padded vest under the shirt—it would be good padding against the stick …
The denunciation meeting was even worse than Old Man Niu Sheng had imagined. The atmosphere was frightening. The great big storeroom—originally used to store grain, only now there was no grain to store—was crammed with people. There were a few tables in the front of the room. Comrade Lei was sitting in the middle. From the beam hung a gas lamp—so bright the old man could scarcely open his eyes.
Comrade Lei announced in a booming, unusually awesome, frightening tone of voice—a tone reeking of gunpowder—the opening of the meeting. It was as though a whole string of firecrackers had been set off right behind the old man. Comrade Lei called upon Old Man Niu-sheng to make a complete confession of his crime of taking the capitalist road.
What was there to confess? Old Man Niu Sheng did have a skill that had been passed down through the generations—the skill of cutting leather cords. But this made him different from other country-folk: besides doing farmwork, they could all do a bit of carpentry, odd construction jobs, and so on. In the slack season, it was a way of covering losses, and getting a little pocket money. In the old days, this job, which involved dealing with dead horses and ox carcasses, was looked upon as a most lowly skill. It was not until cooperativization that Old Man Niu Sheng became renowned far and near for the straps he cut, which were strong, even, and durable. He became known for miles around as "Old Man Ox Tether," and County Commissar Liu even came in person and presented him with a framed glass "certificate of merit," which he received with trembling hands.
But now, Old Man Niu Sheng had become Comrade Lei's "Capitalist Model." It was said that Comrade Lei had made some calculations: three *yuan* to cut up an ox hide. At a hide a day-why, that would bring an astounding ninety *yuan* a month, or one thousand eighty *yuan* a year! That, plus the work points he made, and the grain and firewood and all that they got at the year's end—why, he would have struck it rich!

When Comrade Lei's theoretical article was broadcast over the speaker system and carried in the newspaper, it became known far and wide that in Hu Yang Village someone had "struck it rich." Old Man Niu Sheng had not known whether to laugh or cry. From the time he had inherited his father's set of tools all those decades ago, the most hides he had ever cut in one month was three and often there would not be one in four or five months. He couldn't understand: Comrade Lei had come as part of the work team from on high; how could he wish oxen to die every day in his team?

Of course, Old Man Niu Sheng was ashamed about the three *yuan* per hide. But that was because the peasants insisted. They would look on as he undid his shirt and practically kneel on the stinking hide—which might be days old—spread out in the yard, to scrape away remnants of bloody tissue. Any ordinary person would be unable to eat for three days after a sniff of the smell. After the scraping, he would put his hands in the boiling hot alkaline water to treat the hide. Then he had to cut it into strips, rub the strips, and so on. Why, the one hide would keep him busy right through the night. In order to overcome the horrible smell, he always had to buy a bottle of liquor. And furthermore, those peasants who had come a long way would stay the night at his place. And when the old man ate, how could he let others just look on? With his old friends and acquaintances it went without saying—even strangers on their first visit would be treated like honored guests. When they took their leave the deeply moved peasants might come out with five- or ten-*yuan* notes, but old Niu Sheng would always say,

"That'll be three *yuan*." No wonder Lao Liu the carpenter had worked it out and said,

"All you can show are losses! If it were me, I'd have washed my hands of the business years ago!"

But that Comrade Lei, who was forever going on about his "all-around dictatorship" and his "restricting bourgeois rights," had all but made Old Man Niu Sheng's peasant dwelling out to be a landlord's mansion, and was set on banning this kind of "capitalist activity."

As it turned out, the very day after the ban was announced, Old Man Lu Ziming from Shishu Ling\fn{Persimmon Ridge.} turned up at his door with an ox hide. As whenever old friends meet, there were the usual inquiries made of each other's situation. Lu Ziming was still as forthright as he had been when he was young. Full of gripes, he described how a few years back, when they had harvested their cash crops, every family in Shishu Ling was fairly prosperous. But now, with their struggle meetings and denunciation sessions, the place had gotten so poor that even the devil wouldn't pay a visit there.

"Just imagine! We're so poor we can't afford to buy anymore." Pointing at the ox he had carried over, Lu Ziming continued,

"So I had to come and trouble you."

What can I do? They only proclaimed the ban yesterday! Old Man Niu Sheng thought to himself. But he did not have the heart to tell his friend his problems. Look at that! What a first-rate hide! Big and perfect. There is enough for eight pairs of center harness and six pairs of side harness—enough to last Persimmon Ridge several years, he thought. What the hell! I'll do it.

The old man got busy as he had always done: he worked through the night, and just before dawn he saw his old friend off.

It is said that even a sparrow flying by casts a shadow, and so some "theoretical backbone" reported this "new trend in the class struggle" to Comrade Lei, which is what had led to the denunciation meeting.

" … and that's the whole of it. There's nothing more," Old Man Niu Sheng was saying, his lips trembling a little.

"No! That won't do! You've got to give a thorough account!" Comrade Lei exploded, banging the table.

"What? The rubber tire of the cart?"\fn{Here there is a pun, for *jiao dai* ("to convess") sounds the same as *jiaodai* ("rubber tire").} Old Man Niu Sheng was scared witless by the shouting. He knew that Comrade Lei had just confiscated everyone's handcarts and, to prevent the "sprouts of capitalism" from shooting up again, had demanded that even old tires and wheel rims be surrendered. So he quickly answered,

"But I have no cart! If I did you can be sure I'd give up the tires, wheels and all!"

Immediately all the commune members, regardless of the fact that this was a solemn denunciation meeting, burst out laughing, and order was thrown to the winds in the meeting place.

Comrade Lei got so annoyed he began to gesture with his hands and stamp his feet. He glared at Old Man Niu Sheng, whereupon a few of the jokers among the crowd started whispering.

"This fellow is thoroughly unrepentant! His confession is just a hoax. We mustn't let him spread any more poison!"

This led to more laughter. For these were the words Comrade Lei always used to sum up a confession, regardless of what the accused had said. Sure enough, before the laughter had died from everyone's lips, Comrade Lei announced,

"This fellow's thoroughly unrepentant! His confession is just a hoax … Now let us begin exposing his crimes and denouncing them!"

Old Man Niu Sheng knew that once the denunciation had begun, he should prepare to be beaten. He unthinkingly felt the padded vest he was wearing under the cotton jacket.

At first, Comrade Lei just waited and bore with it; then he started to fix empty stares on the "theoretical backbones" and the team cadres. Those that were stared at either were busy puffing away on their pipes or pretended they were thinking, searching for something. All avoided those eyes that put a certain pressure on them. Finally, when no one could bear the silence any longer, someone got up to denounce. Comrade Lei breathed a sigh of relief. He nodded, saying,

"Good. Let's have Team Leader Deyuan lead off on the denunciation."

"What? My old chum Deyuan whom I've known for decades?" Old Man Niu Sheng practically shook.

"Listen, Old Grandad. You're coming up to sixty you know! Everyone knows you're an old man without kids or anything—a "five guarantees"\fn{Childless and infirm old people in a rural collective aqre guaranteed food, clothing, medical care, housing, and funeral expenses.} recipient. So why do you bother cutting ox hides? You could sit there without moving a muscle and the team would have your white rice and refined flour brought to your door. There! You have it cushy, and you won't just enjoy it! Why go to all that bother to take the "capitalist road?"

Deyuan kept denouncing old Niu Sheng. And the masses at the meeting, feeling sad and surprised, began to exchange meaningful glances. As soon as Deyuan finished speaking, several people raised their hands, all eager to denounce Old Man Niu Sheng. Comrade Lei busily nodded his head. The "theoretical backbone" who was acting as notetaker wrote busily.

It was the turn of Shengcai—the team's well-known joker—to denounce.

"This day, we must thoroughly denounce old Niu Sheng's capitalist thinking. The old fellow hardly ever reads the papers or studies. All he cares about is working with all his might by day; then at night, instead of sleeping, he's got to tan hides and cut harness. What do you want to cut harness for, I ask you? What we want now is revolution, not production, and when it comes to farming, what do you want harness for anyway? Hmph! Why can't you be like Comrade Lei: sleep in the morning, read papers at noon, sort out capitalist roaders at night …"

Hearing Shengcai's "denunciation," everyone in the room had to bite their lips to stop themselves from laughing out loud. A forest of fists were raised by people wanting to "denounce." The speeches went on and on:

"Yes, and we also have to work out how many hides he's cut since Liberation, and just how many work teams are using his 'capitalist wares!'"

"Right! Total up just how many sets of harnesses hitched to how many team of oxen, and just how much grain they have produced—all this is 'evidence' of his capitalist crimes!"

More and more people spoke up, the denunciation became more and more heated.

As for Old Man Niu Sheng, he gradually calmed down. He no longer felt uneasy or frightened. In fact, it occurred to him that the feeling within him at this moment was not unlike what he had felt as he received the framed glass plaque from County Commissar Liu all those years ago.

183.37 The Endangered Ones\fn{by Fang Min (1949-)} Chongqing, Sichuan Province, China (F) 22

In\fn{The brown long-tailed pheasant (*Crossoptilon mantchuricum*) is currently found only in the high altitude ranges of China's Lüliang Mountain (in western Shanxi Province) and adjoining Little Wutai Mountain (western Hebei Province). It has been included in the "International Trade Convention on Endangered Species," and the Chinese government has designated it as a first-class protected species} the month of March, Cloud Crowned Mountain tends to disappear in the impenetrable vapours of its rolling mists, enveloped amorphously as if God himself were holding court there. Then just as suddenly, gusting mountain winds might sweep open a vista of escarpments, snowbound slopes, and naked trees. In the depleting fog of the high-noon burn-off, while the base of the mountain still remains bathed in haze, a hint of colour forgotten by a rainbow might peep through. This spectre entrances the eye as the nebulous screen of mist evaporates to reveal the graceful forms of an elegant bird species.

This is the beautiful brown long-tailed pheasant, whose form in both male and female strikingly resembles that of the peacock. While neither sex possesses the spectacular hues of that more exotic bird, the lustrous black-brown of its long, slender neck and sleek, body-hugging wings enhances its distinguished, vigorous gait.

Resembling continuous snow-white strands like spun silver, its long and gracefully slender tail feathers create the illusion of a gauze skirt when draped downward, mimic flowing streamers when stood upright, and replicate the spectacle of wildly blooming snow asters,\fn{*Saussurea involucrata*, a member of the composite family, with a bluish-purple flower} when fanned out in full glory. A snow-white beard coils upwards toward the back of the head and beyond, sticking up into the air to become two tapered horn-feathers. This complements the tail, the uppermost portion of which is further adorned with a very long brown feather that pulls together the bird's contrasting hues into a striking, harmonious whole. Its rose-like burgundy face, its coral feet, and its long pink jade-like beak provide the finishing touches for a most exquisite example of natural aesthetic design.

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It was very clear that Cock-A-Lock was the undisputed leader of the flock. For as he walked at the head of the ambulatory group, his dominant status manifested itself further in his exceptional size and stalwart presence, in his powerful feet, in the dense solidity of his beak, and, especially, in his long, recalcitrantly rising horn feathers, all of which contributed to effect awe-inspiring majesty. Faced with the stubborn snows of six-month winters, when Cloud Crowned Mountain offered nary a tree in leaf, nor a flower in bloom, nor tender shoots of grass, not even a free-flowing stream, the head rooster by virtue of superior intelligence and courage becomes crucial to the survival of the flock.

Cock-A-Lock, then, bore the responsibility of leading the others in the search for the buckthorn berries or some other such fruit left over from the autumn that would sustain them through the arduous days that stretched interminably ahead. Thus, during this period of remorseless frigidity, several hundred pheasants attached themselves to him as tenaciously as a soul clings to its physical abode. At sunset they followed him up into the trees to pass the night, and at sunrise they followed him all over the mountain in the hunt for food, their feet leaving behind them in the snowy expanse trails of arrow-shaped imprints. All of their hopes they placed on the coming of spring.

But tragedy stalked their never-ending progression, with some falling from starvation and others virtually freezing in their tracks, while the survivors stepped over them in their quest to remain in close proximity to their leader.

Following up the rear of the flock was Skewbill, a lazy, apathetic fellow. In the evening he would always perch in the lowest branch even if the next highest branch was within easy reach. During the day he would always trail the ranks, and when one of his companions would drop dead before his eyes, he would step around the body instead of lifting his feet to step over it. For this reason he was often subject to the alarming whoosh of scavenger crows swooping down upon the carcasses that lay in the wake of the trekking birds. It was only at such times that he would be startled into hastening his pace and catching up with the others.

At this time, when Skewbill was once again frightened into rushing for the back of the ranks, the flock came to a sudden, unexpected standstill. But he, through inertia, kept right on going until he found himself most improbably in that rarified position at the head of the ranks. And there he was stunned to see a truly horrifying sight: the leafless, twisted, steel-gray branches of the buckthorn trees blanketing the southerly slppe before them were totally devoid of their golden fruit.

This had been Cloud Crowned Mountain's largest and most prolific grove of buckthorn trees, the place that the flock had always chosen as their winter feeding grounds. What had happened to the fruit? Could there be another flock of pheasants about? Had the crop been destroyed by punishing winds or a snowburst? Or had the birds' unrelenting consumption of the fruit depleted it to nothing? As the winter wind howled and stomachs growled, Skewbill, exhausted from a long day of tagging after the flock, sank to the gelid snowy ground, and refused to get back up on his feet. Daunted by the bleakness of their prospects, ten or so of the pheasants plunged into despair and also flopped over onto the frozen ground, their eyes helplessly fixed upon the figure of the head rooster.

At this moment, Cock-A-Lock, too, succumbed to the grip of terror, and his eyes clearly revealed a spirit slipping into chaos and confusion. If he could not find a new food source and fmd it quickly, if the impulse to embrace despair spread unchecked, then this flock of pheasants, the largest on Cloud Crowned Mountain, would presently disappear into the vortex of history.

"*Gua*! *Gua*! *Gua*!" Cock-A-Lock cried out three tinies and leaped atop the canopy of a buckthorn tree, where he anxiously scanned the grove even while frenetically skipping from treetop to treetop. But in that boundless territory spread out before him, for as far as the eye could see, not one life-saving nugget of fruit begged for discovery .

"*Gua*! *Gua*! *Gua*!" he cried out again, more piercingly than before, and valiantly pressing on his search, he flew up into a twenty-six foot Sabian crabapple tree.

It was a miracle!

There slyly hiding in the jumbled, snow-covered branches, hung strand after strand of purple-red crabapples. There they radiantly—seductively—glistened, looking for all the world like an angel had dropped them from heaven. Overjoyed, Cock-A-Lock rushed for them, and soon a *rat-a-tat* spate of pecking sent the berries raining down out of the tree and onto the heads of his charges.

Like an unstoppable black *tsunami*, the birds scrambled for the Sabian crabapple tree and swarmed around its base. Jet-black neck after jet-black neck stretched forward, carrying along beak after sharp, hungry beak, as a frenzy of snapping up and snatching away began. Every berry that fell magnetically attracted ten or so birds, who glommed onto it in a grappling huddle. Big balls of birds, they were, and as they rolled about they sent a debris of snow and feathers flying into the air. It was not long before the dark mass of birds had broken up into a multitude of these brown feather glomerations that scattered out over the broad mountainous terrain. All over the expanse of white driven snow clamorous contests played out between brain and brawn. Truly, it epitomized the class divide of the haves and the have-nots, the former protesting their righteousness and the latter clinging to their discontent.

High up in the tree Cock-A-Lock tirelessly seized berries and threw them down. It was only when he had taken hold of the last ruby morsel that he became aware of his own hunger. Irresolute, he reconnoitered the ground below.

There under the tree lay Skewbill, still as death. The cold and hunger he had suffered was the same that had driven everyone else to their extremes, and yet this struggle for one little berry was not cause enough for him to abandon his indolence. Therefore, when Cock-A-Lock in the end tossed Skewbill that very last crabapple, it was just as the saying goes: the idle person has idle luck.

Nonetheless, Skewbill’s lassitude kept him pinned to the ground, and he tried to pick it off from where he lay. He missed once, then missed again. He didn’t get a third chance, for another long beak appeared and snatched the priceless morsel away.

The one who had swiped the prize was another rooster, one who was distinguished by his unusually large head. Like Skewbill, Noggins had declined involvement in the grand crabapple brawl, but laziness had nothing to do with it. His affliction, rather, was faint-heartedness. Since even the slightest rustle in the breeze would trigger in him an attack of the trembles, it was ludicrous to conceive of him leaping into the fray. And now that he had managed to gain something with minimum effort—well, only a fool would altruistically give it up. However, just as he had raised his head and was preparing to gulp it down, he received a violent peck on the top of his skull.

A sharp cry of pain emanated from his throat, and the delicacy in his mouth dropped onto the ground and rolled away.

His attacker was a beautiful hen. Slim and delicate of figure, exceptionally elongated of tail, her two brown tapering tail plumes arched up from the middle and dragged far behind her, phoenix style, effecting the look of a magnificent bridal train. But there was nothing delicate at all about Phoenix’s behaviour, especially when it came to contending for food.

Yet she too soon found herself bereft, for just as she went to stand under the Sabian crabapple tree, that berry she held in her mouth vanished. A gang of ten or so disgruntled birds rushed her from behind, and closing upon her they all fused together into one of those seething whirling feather masses.

Unbeknownst to them was the fact that a rooster with a long, long neck was sitting atop a buckthorn tree savouring that last berry. This intelligent, resourceful rooster had taken advantage of his long neck to reach into the midst of the.squabble, snatch up the object of contention, and escape undetected without a single scratch. Now as he gazed upon his hunger-crazed comrades in their rolling, tumbling tussle over one berry, he stretched out his long neck and burst into a resounding song of triumph.

“*Gua*! *Gua*! *Gua*!”

From atop the Sabian crabapple tree there came the stentorian cry of Cock-A-Lock. Its electrifying authority brought to an abrupt halt the roiling altercations that littered the landscape. With alacrity, each dishevelled, lacerated, traumatized pheasant returned to the base of the crabapple tree. Raising their jet-black necks, they all turned their full attention upon their leader in expectation of some new beneficence.

From his commanding perch high above them, Cock-A-Lock reviewed his troops, twisting his head about and back, about and back, examining them with absorption and intentness. What was very puzzling to him was that the multitude that had started out with him in the autumn—several hundred roosters and hens—now looked to be less than half its original size! But the question that loomed even larger before him was: now that the Sabian crabapple tree had been stripped, where was he to search for the food that would save those of his charges who remained?

Far away, even beyond the broad, misty environs they called home, there was a shadow, an invisible, untouchable yet terrifying shadow, that was at this very moment inexorably closing in upon Cloud Crowned Mountain.

Sixty million years ago, the brown long-tailed pheasant was a flourishing, expanding species. Their elegant, vigorous forms frequently haunted high mountains and dense forests, while layer upon layer of their footprints were left all over the vast expanse of the loess plateau. And even humans, once they appeared on the earth, could not help but regard these birds with respect.

Not long afterwards, the environment became infested with perils, and life degenerated into a procession of hardships, while the habitat of the brown long-tailed pheasant shrank smaller and smaller until it became limited to solitary Cloud Crowned Mountain. The population of these pheasants shrank as well, until today there were only a few thousand left. Nevertheless, that terrifying shadow continues to press in upon them, intent upon pushing this ancient species to the brink of extinction.

"*Gua*! *Gua*! *Gua*!" The indomitable Cock-A-Lock opened his throat and disgorged a clarion call.

"*Gua*! *Gua*! *Gua*!" The dark mass of birds cried out in concert towards the heavens.

"*Gua*! *Gua*! *Gua*!" From mountain ridge to mountain ridge, the sound of pheasants echoing each other's cries filled the air. This was the shout of all survivors everywhere, the primal scream from the ages born in the primordial formation of the earth when the land rived and the heavens split and mountains thrust towards the sky in violent upheavals, then passing along its legacy to the rumble of the mountains and the roar of the sea, the weeping and the wailing, the ranting and the raving that goes on and on forever without end. This was an endangered species which focused all of its being upon its love of life, upon the struggle against extinction, upon the call of Spring, upon the urgent need to be fruitful and multiply!

Then the accumulation of snows melted, the ice of the rivers broke up, gentle winds brought warmth, and the trees and the grasses burst into green. With the calling of the pheasants, lifeless Cloud Crowned Mountain began to revive.

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Amid patches of dingy leftover snow, a carpet of soft, thick grass was already spreading over the languid, sun-drenched mountain slope. A group of pheasants lay like an inky splotch on this "lawn," desultorily pecking at its tender blades and absentmindedly gazing at the head rooster. Cock-A-Lock, reposing on top of a large white rock, had abandoned his usual demeanour of majesty. From his throat there emitted a low glur-glurgling sound, the replication, it seemed, of an ancient principle affirmed and reaffmned over the ages.

Long Neck, the intelligent one, was the first to rise to his feet. He threw up his neck ramrod straight and strutted off briskly, putting distance between himself and the group. Clearly, he was flaunting himself, and his ostentatious stride and insufferable air of arrogance grabbed the attention he sought. At least one hen, herself a bird of gargantuan conceit, found his exhibition enrapturing and set off in pursuit. Catching up to him, she painted her brilliant yellow beak in the air, about and back, about and back, as if to see who could put on the more flamboyant display.

Following them with deliberate, measured paces was a rooster who walked with a limp. This was Lamer, and in the previous year a contest of dominance with Cock-A-Lock had left him with a broken leg, but not a broken spirit. His ambitions remained unfaded, and now at this time when an inevitable change was afoot, he naturally set out to reassert himself. Sticking like a shadow to Lamer was the faint-hearted Noggins, because Lamer was as tough and cool as a Marine and knew what to do when danger was out and stalking about. And that petite, exquisite hen whose black-brown wings were each adorned with a multicoloured plume was following close upon Noggins, because she found his large, prominent head to be irresistibly attractive.

Long Neck and his *cortege* instigated a commotion in the flock, and the black-brown splotch on the grass erupted in pandemonium and began to split apart. Roosters and hens knotted in threes and fours and called out back and forth to each other, then merged and withdrew from the head rooster. Quitting the collective, they moved off to a different hillside. Before long the dark splotch had receded like a retreating tide from the original slope, revealing once again its carpet of green.

Next to the large white rock, however, there still remained ten or so of the birds. A few moments ago they too had spread their wings in an impulse to take off, but they had not gone far. Rather, they had closed ranks again with the head rooster. Now they were lying there—motionless, awaiting Cock-A-Lock's unmistakable resounding song of authority .

After awhile, Cock-A-Lock stood up, and shaking his imposing horn feathers, he unleashed from his throat a dreadful cry of wrath. Those roosters and hens who had remained at his side stood up as well. They stretched out

their necks, glared, and refused to budge an inch. The sound of violently flapping wings ensued, and Cock-A-Lock flew down from atop the rock and savagely thrust his long beak upon the head of one of the roosters. A hen was the next to receive the brunt of his rage. On the "lawn" a fresh tumult broke out as the ten or so loyalists, chased and pecked by their leader, cried out in terror until he fmally succeeded in driving them off the slope. But just when Cock-A-Lock lowered his head to smooth his feathers, those thick-headed numskulls came straggling back one by one. They gazed upon him with eyes that told of their reluctance to depart, and pitifully complained of his abuse. Especially that feckless Skewbill. True to form, he brazenly reclined upon the ground and effected the heavy-lidded look of lassitude.

Without uttering a sound, Cock-A-Lock pounced upon the hapless Skewbill and started working him over with his beak. At fIrst, the lazy bird simply ducked his head under his wing; but the poor protection this tactic provided forced him to shift strategies, and he leaped to his feet and made a run for it. To his consternation, though, Cock-A-Lock did not ratify this retreat but bolted right after him in furious pursuit. With ruthless abandon did he peck at him, and peck at him, until Skewbill, battered and terrified, most uncharacteristically straightened up his neck and drove his crooked beak into counter-offensive.

But how could one so apathetic and ineffective all his life ever hope to match a head rooster? On top of that, his crooked beak was a handicap in itself, not to mention that his eyes were already occluded with his profusely flowing blood. Indeed, each thrusting peck that he directed upon his opponent was no different from knocking an egg upon a rock.

This monumentally mismatched contest swiftly came to its inevitable conclusion. For the first time—and last—Skewbill's prostrate figure on the grass did not get there out of laziness. As the deed had approached its culmination, the sharp, distressed cries of the remaining loyalists had echoed and re-echoed across the grassy expanse until those birds finally fled into the forest and disappeared.

As if glad at having unloaded a burden, Cock-A-Lock started meticulously preening his wings and tail feathers, readying himself to embark upon his new life.

Suddenly, somewhere in the dense wood there erupted the clamorous announcement of something afoot. Its cause was soon made apparent as there emerged upon the smooth green tract a young hen who moved in sublime serenity. Mesmerizingly graceful was her long snow-white tail, enchanting was her glorious queenly comportment. And as she turned her splendidly shining neck to cast amorous glances at the head rooster, the entire grassy expanse, it seemed, fell under the spell of love. She was none other than that incomparable mistress of tenderness, the unrivalled empress of charm, the breathtaking, divine Phoenix.

Who can resist the seductive power of beauty? Surely not even the commanding general of the most powerful of armies. Cock-A-Lock immediately threw out his chest and thrust his head high into the air, and shaking his magnificent horn feathers, he approached her. To her he crooned a springtime serel/ade of love:

"*Coo-coo-kwa-la-chee*; *kwa-la-chee* …"

His song, reminiscent of the babbling of mountain brooks and the undulating of ocean waves, was the spring mating call particular to the brown long-tailed pheasant. To its modulating tones Cock-A-Lock sloughed off his mission as head rooster, and rid of restrictions and worries, he joined up with Phoenix and the two of them went off toge:ther into the forest.

On the green grassy carpet only the solitary crumpled body of Skewbill remained, blood still trickling away. A giant golden eagle circled in silhouette high overhead. Its sharp scream pierced the sky and it plummeted down like an arrow.

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High up in the mountain there is a crystalline cataract fed by the runoff from melting snow. Its waters plunge into a whirlpool below, then shoot out again to carve into the yellow-brown earth a clear, swiftly flowing stream. Upon the fertile banks of this stream, lushly growing wild chives, flowering onions, and dandelions sway greenly in the crisp spring breeze, sending out wafts of delicate fragrances that entice the attentions of rambling pheasants.

Long Neck curved his head and neck downward and pecked up the fat blade of a wild chive. But before he had raised his head again, a long, bright yellow beak flashed over and snatched it away. Fortunately there was no lack of delicacies to eat, so Long Neck dropped his head again and pecked up a tender flowering onion. Instantly, and to his astonishment, that bright yellow beak tossed the chive and grabbed up the onion.

This time Long Neck raised his head and discovered the prodigiously haughty hen that had been following him around. He, however, chose to overlook her effrontery and magnanimously walked away. Who would know it, though, but Goldie would not be put off. She continued to dog him, snatching away whatever he picked and immediately discarding it, as if she were getting back at him for something.

Taking advantage of all this was the clever Plumella, who danced along in their footstes, snapping up the tasty tidbits, revelling in the ease of their acquisition. Thus, before Long Neck had even swallowed a bite, Plumella had already eaten her fill.

With Long Neck's forbearance fimally depleted, a burst of anger surged up from within and erupted into his eyes, which glared wrathfully, and his horn-feathers, which stood formidably erect. He was just about to teach Goldie a lesson when Lamer ambled over and sluggishly plopped himself down right between them. He had been gorging himself on Nature's bounties and, thoroughly sated, he lay there languidly, now aimlessly regarding the sky, now mindlessly contemplating the ground, coo-cooing as if he were laughing at something or talking to himself.

This distracted Long Neck, who, suddenly enraptured at the immense breadth of the heavens, found his ire gradually subsiding. Goldie, meanwhile, had discovered the lusciousness of the yielding vegetation and the sweetness of the clear water and forgot her annoyance at him. Plumella, her stomach already filled to bursting, sauntered over to the edge of the stream. Noggins was there drinking, his extraordinary, large head dipping and rising, dipping and rising in smooth undulant grace, turning the flames of Plumella's infatuation up ever higher.

"*Coo-coo-kwa-la-chee*, *kwa-la-chee*," Cock-A-Lock's spring serenade, rebounded from afar.

"*Coo-coo-kwa-la-chee, kwa-la-chee*." From every quarter echoed the response of innumerable inspired roosters.

The perceptive Long Neck halted his foraging. A primeval impulse suddenly went coursing throughout his body. His two rose-like cheeks became engorged and glowed a more intensive red. He threw out his chest, elevated his head, and hoisted his tail into its upright position, then strode over to Goldie, stood before her and dashingly regaled her with his song of spring.

But; inexplicably, vainglorious Goldie eyed him with indifference, turned heel upon him, and disdainfully walked off. She headed towards Lamer. To Lamer this was a highly unexpected but welcome surprise, and his face swelled vividly ted as he poured out a most mellow and moving rendition of that hallowed pheasant classic. Still, for some reason Goldie found his performance a bore and contemptuously turned her back for a second time, walking away with leisurely steps. She left in her wake a pair of red-faced roosters, who now squared off in irreconcilable wrath.

Two jet-black necks curved into hooks, four glaring eyes flashed their enmity, two pairs of horn-feathers stood on edge, as each rooster cried out his challenge to the other:

"Gua! Gua! Gua!"

Three deafening cries, and they clashed together ferociously. Long Neck was agile and quick, hitting his mark with deadly accuracy every time, promptly bloodying Lamer's face. Lamer, though, was bold, powerful, and tenacious, and with every attempt he came away with a feather until Long Neck was screeching in pain. Alternately charging and retreating, the two roosters described a circle on the grass. After several rounds, the battleground was covered with feathers and blood, and still neither was able to defeat the other.

From the sidelines Goldie watched the duel that she had instigated, her long yellow beak following the movements of the jet-back necks, back and forth, back and forth, up and down and up and down, as if she were a scrupulously conscientious referee. Her frequent cries of encouragement further added to the din.

And then the struggle escalated. Glaring at each other, the two roosters circled, thickset wings outstretched, snow-white tails flared. With the noise of drumming, ruffling, flapping wing-feathers, two brown clouds rose into the air, clashed against each other, fell back to the ground, and separated. Again they rose up, again they clashed, again they descended, and again they separated... From the grassy clearing to the thicket of bushes to the bank of the stream, they remained locked in battle, and still it was not decided.

Finally, with a ghastly shriek one of the brown clouds flumped inert to the ground, while through the momentum of his re-ascent the other dropped down upon the motionless mass to rain a succession of pecks upon it. It would have been the end of the downed contender if Goldie had not intervened. With three sharp cries that sounded just in the nick of time, she brought the bloody drama to an end.

Although his feathers stood scrappily awry, with gory, seeping patches of flesh malignantly peering out of their disjunctures, Long Neck radiated a spirit of undiminished vitality. This time when he approached Goldie resplendent in the pride of the victor and loudly declaiming his springtime aria, she did not walk off. Indeed, she advanced to meet him, cooing in response, as if she were proclaiming her praise and approval of his mighty masculinity.

Lamer rose with difficulty. His bum leg had betrayed his valour and his strength. Through blood-occluded eyes he watched the indistinct figures of Long Neck and Goldie as they retreated together into the thickets. Silently he

accepted this outcome, neither pursuing nor crying out after them. Nor was this the time for indulging rancour or raging in passion, for females always did and always would choose the victor, in accordance with an unalterable principle that befittingly guided the pheasant species.

Slowly he made his way to the edge of the stream, where he plunged his battered, bloodied head into the icy waters. He pulled it out and shook it, then repeated the action, over and over, as if he wanted to cleanse himself thoroughly of his new injuries and his old pains. When Lamer finally raised his head, one glance revealed to him Noggins serenading Plumella.

Succumbing to a surge of instinct, he instantly hurtled toward the offender. For the first time in his life, timorous Noggins stood his ground in the face of an oncoming force. Was it because Plumella held him dearly in her heart? Or was it because the injured Lamer would surely collapse at the first blow? Thus once again the grassy clearing by the side of the stream erupted into mortal combat. Lamer, of course, was restricted in his movements, but this did not diminish his ferocity. And though Noggins was naturally predisposed to cowardice, he had to his advantage an unhampered, powerfully built body.

Ultimately, Lamer could not sustain the fight as his strength gradually failed him, and Noggins was in the position to claim victory. For her part, Plumella was ready to make her fair and impartial choice.

But then suddenly a black shadow swept over them and from on high the sharp cry of the golden eagle split the air. In the wink of an eye, skittish Noggins had scuttled into the underbrush, vanishing even faster than Plumella. Only the physically inconvenienced Lamer remained explosed by the side of the stream.. Raising his head Lamer gazed at the sky, gave out two loud cries, and prepared for the fight of his life.

As luck would have it, though, that golden eagle had just feasted upon Skewbill and was now merely up there asserting his supremacy. Before long, he disappeared into the firmament. But in these few very short minutes, Lamer had been dramatically transformed into a hero. When lovely Plumella cast aside her extraordinary Noggins, who had always excited her to the very core of her being, and ran straight to Lamer, that rooster she left behind in the underbrush drooped his head in untold grief.

"*Coo-coo-kwa-la-chee*, *kwa-la-chee* …"

Desolately did Noggins intone these notes as he walked in solitary mournfulness. His timidity notwithstanding, this rooster possessed strength and power as well as all the surging emotions of spring, and yet where could he go now in search of a mate? As pairs of roosters and hens in affectionate communion strolled past him, he was reduced to repeating that time-honoured song in endless refrain, until it gradually transformed into an elegy of despair. He tramped on far and abroad, over hill and dale, on and on, and it became his only companion.

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Under the blazing sun of May, the highland bursts forth in magnificence. The dragon spruce dangles its purple bells, the larch shakes its embroidered balls, the snow-white rattail peeks out from the thick grass, and the flame-red blossoms of the hairy hazelnut glisten on the ends of their branches. From mountain to mountain extends the riotous efflorescence of wild peaches, apricots, cherries, and morningstar lilies, while shining, crystal-clear spring water tinkles along its pathway. Awash in the exuberance of spring, Cloud Crowned Mountain unleashed the energy of life.

It was here within this superb incarnation of springtime resplendence that the pheasants passed their honeymoon. Their days of coupledom, intimacy and inseparability found the roosters turned out in especially fine form. As the sun shone its rays upon them, they searched tirelessly—joyously—for the tastiest, plumpest tidbits to present to the hens. At dusk they scoffed at every difficulty and danger to pursue their elaborate selection of the safest and most comfortable branches for the hens to perch upon. Their solicitousness even spanned the night, when the hens were fast asleep, as they themselves napped and woke in fits and starts for the sake of maintaining vigilance: the discovery of a lurking enemy would set off their cries and they would scurry away to draw off the evildoer and protect the hens.

During these days of newly wedded bliss, when loving pairs strolled leisurely about the forest, one couple happening upon another would occasion a rooster duet as the two males urbanely harmonized their spring wedding songs. And then the couples would each go along their own way. As decreed in pheasant law, one family would claim as its territory a section of the mountain slope, and whoever would dare to intrude upon the territory of another would be subject to savage attack and might even lose his life. Of course, immersed in the paradisical atmosphere of this sweetest time of year, who would deliberately commit such a provocation?

The romantic honeymoon period swiftly drew to its end; and the hens grew voluptuously fat and started building nests and laying eggs. The roosters were leaner, meaner, keener, and they intensified their vigilance as they started going out on patrol. Just as the Ruler of Heaven and Mother Nature, each in their own domains, work

in full cooperation to run the world, the roosters and the hens, in accordance with God's plan, joined in partnership to build their families.

Every year at this time, as inevitable as the seasons, would arrive hordes of coal-black crows so numerous they would blot out the sky and smother the earth. These inauspicious birds would glut the air with their raucous weird cawing, or they would go about in throngs blatantly flaunting their might in numbers, spreading an ink canopy in flight and transforming the colour of the trees upon landing. Or they would gad about individually, randomly terrorizing whomever they met, whizzing back and forth like stray bullets in an urban gun battle.

Thus, wherever the crows invaded was also to be heard the loud "*Gua*! *Gua*! *Gua*!" of pheasant roosters. Especially at those times when a mobbish cacophony ripped through the forest, Cloud Crowned Mountain would resound as well with the concerted cries of roosters united in harmony. But this was no longer their tender, undulating song of spring, but rather a sharp, ear-splitting alarm, the signal for concealed hens to protect their nests and their eggs.

When Cock-A-Lock sounded his alarm, by the side of a spring was Phoenix, thirstily partaking of its cool, refreshing waters. Her body that had become so full and voluptuous was now quite gaunt, making her beautiful tail look even longer. The wear and tear of producing eggs and the rigours of brooding had very quickly sapped her strength. The brief frenetic feeding excursions she could afford to indulge in only once a day were not nearly sufficient to make up for the toll exacted upon her. And now these incessant warning signals constantly cut short even these hasty ventures.

Phoenix did not dare to ignore the alarm. She rushed back to her haven of larches and oaks and scampered in under the canopy of lespedeza and Japanese spiraea where her nest lay hidden. But it was too late: her four pale turquoise eggs had disappeared. Instantly her eye fell upon the thick green grass, where several little piles of empty broken shells winked appallingly at her. On the corpulent branch of a larch sat two crows lustily cawing away, the corners of their black beaks adorned with strands of yellow yolk that gave them the appearance of wearing gloating smiles.

Enraged, Phoenix flung herself up into the air after them, but the drag of her long tail hindered her ascent. By the time she attained their perch, the two crafty thieves had long absconded, leaving her in dead silence.

"Gua! Gua! Gua!" Phoenix cried out in agonized grief. She flew down from the tree and slipped once more into her canopied abode, where with her sharp, long beak she meticulously combed through the nest and the grass around it. When it became excruciatingly clear that none of her unborn progeny had somehow miraculously escaped, this beautiful, ordinarily submissive hen fell into a mad frenzy and ripped to shreds the nest still warm with her own body heat. And then she fainted dead away.

A spring rain began to fall and its pitter-pattering drops soothed an afflicted soul. A wind began to blow discreetly, and its softening breeze caressed a body racked with pain.

When Phoenix regained consciousness, Cock-A-Lock was standing beside her cooing gently as if he were solicitously comforting her.

And how could he not? The mountains still stood as solidly as usual, and so did the trees, and spring had not yet flown. What was to prevent them from building another nest and starting their family anew? And so, unflinchingly facing the elements, the two grief-stricken pheasants, one flinging his long, intractable horn-feathers up into the air, the other trailing her ravishing, complaisant phoenix-tail, plunged together into a deeper, denser part of the forest.

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Under the spreading branches of an ancient tree, tucked away in a shallow, gapping cave carved into the rock, sat a pheasant's nest replete with eight eggs. A helter-skelter pile of dead branches concealed the entrance and protected it from the wind and the rain. In the cave Plurnella sat aboard her nest, relishing the sense of security that its strategic design offered. Indeed, its exceptionally advantageous arrangement allowed Plumella vastly more freedom of movement than was afforded to those such as Phoenix. She could venture outside twice a day to replenish herself and she could do so with relative leisure.

Now at this moment when Lamer sounded the alarm, she was stretching herself on a nearby patch of grass. Instantly she sighted a crow dropping down like a black arrow upon the dead branches in front of the cave. There he furtively snooped around, looking every inch the thief. Clever Plurnella, taking care not to disclose her presence, quietly sneaked up upon him, and just when he thrust his black head into the mass of dead branches, she delivered an aggressive peck to his backside.

With a screech of pain, the crow thrashed around in the branches before making his panicky, flurried getaway. Plurnella spat out the black feather he had so generously given up and dispassionately hopped up onto the pile of

deadwood. With her red jade-like beak she rotated her turquoise eggs one by one, satisfying herself that none was missing or broken. In cooing contentment she gathered all eight of them up under her soft, warm belly and sat in heavy-lidded euphoria.

Just at this time, the forest rang out once again with Lamer's warning cry. Plurnella, eyes popping and hackles raised, geared into full alert. Up ahead there appeared the tremulous movement of a dark brown, furry round thing amongst the thicket of yellow roses. Then two downy ears came into view, and a pair of beady eyes, and a long, slobbering mouth. It was a fox!

Plumella shuddered. Clearly, it would be futile for her to throw her slight body up against the strength and bulk of a fox. Could she draw him away from her eggs by fleeing? But that would be too obvious. How about hiding? But the three walls of the cave offered no retreat. In despair Plumella clutched her eight eggs ever closer to herself and awaited the fate that doomed them all.

But then just at that moment, like the cavalry riding to the rescue, a big brown cloud landed at the mouth of the caye. With a resounding "*Gua*! *Gua*! *Gua*!" Lamer stood there in a proud, terrible praetorian pose, blocking the fox's retreat. Unintimidated, the rapacious fox cut short his hunt and rushed at Lamer. Again the rooster rent the air with his cries and darted away. Keeping ahead of the fox, now he would skim along the ground, now he would soar up into the air, in this way enticing the fox away from the cave and into the wood.

Under the lingering fright of this close call, Plumella stood up with utmost caution. Again she applied her red beak to the task of rotating the eggs. Not one was missing, not one was broken. She resumed her cooing and her sitting, and waited for Lamer to return.

The moon rose and shed its cold light upon the lofty larches, transforming them into thousands of gruesome steel swords, and upon the dead wood in front of the cave and Plumella in the cave, freezing them into ice sculptures. And still there was no trace of Lamer.

The sun rose and shed its warm rays upon the hundreds of song birds, upon the mobs of raucous crows, and upon slope after mountain slope where the patrolling roosters let out their frequent warning cries. But the area around Plumella's cave remained silent, devoid of the voice of Lamer.

By the time the sun was arcing down toward the mountains, Plumella could no longer quietly wait. Agilely she hopped atop the dead wood pile, where she used her sharp beak to select long, slender twigs and take them back one by one to cover her eggs until the nest and the deadwood pile looked as one. Then she flew down from the deadwood pile and headed swiftly in the direction where she had last seen Lamer.

Plumella covered the distance rapidly because Lamer had left the path he had taken strewn with clues. At first there were only brown and white feathers, singly and in little clumps; and then there were also spots of deep purplish blood. Finally, Plumella drew to a stop under a dark green dragon spruce, where in a pool of blood every manner of rooster feather lay stickily amassed. And nearby lay a rooster head, eyes staring widely, beak clamped resolutely upon a wad of dark brown fox fur. And two coral-coloured feet that had planted countless backward arrows in the dust also lay there, clenched. One of them still held in its grasp the bloody eyeball of the fox.

Plaintively did Plumella cry out. Then with her beak she gathered up the feathers one by one and formed them into a neat pile, and atop the pile she placed the head and two feet. Then she sat herself quietly down beside the remains and watched them expectantly, as if she were waiting for Lamer to come back to life.

A considerable amount of time passed, but the miracle was not forthcoming. Instead crowds of crows converged overhead, inexorably drawn to the spot, cawing noisily in anticipation. Their cries jolted Plumella into wakefulness; she leaped to her feet and sped like the wind back to her nest.

Two broken eggshells already lay upon the grass in front of the cave. Next to the cave stood two of the black birds in the act of plundering their third trophy. Incensed, Plumella spread her wings, unleashed an awful, enraged cry, and charged furiously across the thirty or so yards that still separated them. One of the crows hastily pinched up an egg with his beak and took off with a flurry, but the fragile shell disintegrated, leaving him nothing for his trouble. The other crow quick-wittedly decamped with an egg impaled on his beak, drinking its contents in flight.

The futility of paying further heed to the crows drove .Plumella headlong into the cave, where, clinging desperately to hope, she urgently rummaged through her nest. Every inch of its she subjected to her agitated probing, even to the bottom-most layer, but the cold, hard fact was that, of those pitiful eight little eggs, only half were left.

"*Gua*! *Gua*! *Gua*!"

Just as did Phoenix, Plumella sobbed her maternal lamentation. But for her, no caressing breeze arose, no soothing rain fell, and above all, no rooster's consolation responded to her grief. For her, there was only the thickening dusk that settled heavily over the deadwood pile, mute in its macabre stillness—that, and the turquoise

eggs that lay in the nest, their fate consigned to the will of Heaven.

And so it was that the forlorn Plumella ceased her mourning and quit her waiting. Silently she gathered the eggs up under her and resumed brooding them with all the propriety that was the given of her species.

As the night faded into day, and as the day again relinquished its authority to night, she remained astride her eggs, unwilling to risk her progeny for even a second. Three days passed, and then five, and still she did not set foot on the ground, though thirst and hunger connived to ravage her will. Under their assault, she inserted her beak into the cracks of the rock, sucking in the moisture of the earth; and she stuck the tip of her short little tongue onto the rock wall and licked at the cool lichens. Scratches and scars fanned out across her red jade-like beak, bloody lacerations multiplied upon her delicate tongue. Yet the instinct for self-preservation prevailed over the pain.

A week passed, ten days, and spring slipped into summer. Still Plumella did not budge from the nest. In the extremity of her deprivation she pecked at the white mould growing on the dead branches, and when the mould was gone she tore the bark off and ate that. Though the mould nauseated her and the hard, dry bark stuck in her throat, she gulped them down under the dictate of hunger.

The ten days stretched out into an excruciating twenty. Many times did she simply faint dead away upon her nest, but with each revival her overwhelming impulse was to confirm the well-being of her eggs. For Plumella at this time, nothing existed except her developing progeny, not the sky, not the earth, not even herself.

At long last there emerged from underneath her wing a fluffy little thing. Another followed upon its heels, and then a third, and a fourth. These homely little balls of life didn't look anything like their parents: they had no long graceful tails, they had no impressive horn-feathers, their beaks were short, their feet were blunt, and their down was a mottled jumble of yellow and white. Nevertheless, these shortcomings did not detract from their cleverness. Together the four little chicks stood on the edge of the nest in front of Plumella, bouncing up and down vivaciously and "cheep-cheep-cheeping" their high-pitched little songs.

Plumella had once more fallen into a swoon, and now this wonderful sound of newborn little innocents restored her to consciousness. She blinked her eyes, uttered a couple of notes, then totteringly climbed out of the nest and numbly rolled down from atop the pile of deadwood. There, plenty of delectable, tender grass lay spread out at her feet, while only a few steps away tinkled the refreshing spring waters, all hers for the taking. She fell to without delay, tearing up mouthfuls of the grass with her dilapidated beak, gorging on it until her craw bulged. Then she walked over to the side of the spring where, lowering and raising her thin, fragile neck for a seemingly interminable period, she drank her fill, literally until the water audibly gurgled back up into her throat.

Then, completely satisfied, Plumella shook her neck, flapped her wings, and called out for her children. The little fluffy balls came running and, bouncing and chirping joyously, they gathered round their mother. Under the gloriously blue sky, on the edge of the dense dark forest, a chorus of *cheeps* and *coos* animated the air as the hen and her four chicks sang and danced in the celebration of the birth of a new pheasant family.

Suddenly there sounded from among the revellers a sharp, discordant note, like the "sproing" of a snapping violin string, and Plumella flumped onto the ground like a tossed bale of straw. Her bulging, overstuffed craw had burst. From the split-open cavity there slowly spilled out a mass of undigested grass mixed with water still cool from the spring. So recently ingested, they now returned to the places of their origin. And the four little chicks who had just made their entry into the world had become orphans.

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An overcast sky steadily blackened, throwing the earth into darkness, punishing it with pelting rain, riving the atmosphere with slashes of crackling voltage—announcing with symbolic aptness the arrival of a remorselessly aggressive summer. The riotous blooms of spring were ripped from their moorings, dashed upon the earth and mashed into a sodden, muddy pulp. The waters of the spring rose up in rage and roared forward, scouring up mud and sand, rampaging down the mountain, uprooting the bushes and grasses lining their banks and carrying them unceremoniously away. Huge trees cleaved by lightning littered the ground like corpses, their trunks left standing, smoking like joss sticks delivering a believer's prayers to Heaven. When the sun re-emerged, it had become a fireball that relentlessly spewed sweltering heat. Its intense ultraviolet rays rapidly transformed Cloud Crowned Mountain into a lush and verdant domain.

In a quest to escape the oppressive heat, each pheasant family began its move toward the mountaintop, 6,500 feet above sea level. As the pilgrimage got underway, the ceaseless chain reaction of roosters' cries and hens' cooing was further infused with the *cheep-cheep* of the new chicks, whose joyous sound greatly alleviated the mugginess of the forest.

In a shade-mottled glade, Goldie came upon an awesomely erect, red earthen mound that stood about three feet

tall. Like a giant up-ended sesame seed bun, it was embellished profusely with the white larvae of ants, truly a feast bestowed by the gods. Goldie, a diligent hen of prodigious accomplishment, had brought into the world eight chicks, making hers the largest family among all the pheasants. It was no wonder then that she stood with even greater pride than before, that her neck stretched out even longer, and that her brilliant yellow beak glistened with an even brighter sheen.

Under Goldie's guidance, the eight little chicks converged upon the anthill and fell greedily upon the larvae. This sudden attack triggered a commotion in the colony, and large black ants came swarming out of the hill. Oddly, however, they did not try to protect their progeny, but simply ran about in what appeared to be panic-stricken confusion, their eight tiny legs carrying them nowhere fast. The lively, *naïve* little chicks naturally got bored with the motionless larvae and went instead for the ants. Here and there they ran about, chasing the scurrying black creatures. Whenever a chick caught one, it would *cheep cheep cheep* in victory and flap its short, little wings in exultation.

Goldie devoted herself fully to the little creatures and kept a constant eye on them, loudly calling the foolhardy back to within safe perimeters and murmuring encouragement to the executers of particularly quick and accurate pecks. In front of the littlest one, who scampered vainly after the others, she set a half-dead ant for him to practice upon. And those two who already sported lengthened beaks and real feathers found themselves forcibly separated a number of times, punished for fighting over the food.

There was only one element missing from this ebullient family scene, and that was Long Neck. For the past several days, ever since the trek north had begun, Long Neck had been taking himself off somewhere, alone. At the crack of dawn he would swoop down wraith-like out of the tree, call out softly several times, and disappear. At dusk he would suddenly reappear wherever his family happened to be, guggle softly as before, and fly up to his perch for the night.

That he had embraced the lifestyle of the libertine was not something that Goldie chose to be concerned about. She was too preoccupied with the welfare of her chicks. From time to time in the distance she would hear his voice inexplicably lifted with the strains of the spring mating call, but she just twisted her head and waved her beak, disdaining to pay it any heed.

As the blazing sun heated the glade to temperatures worthy of an oven, the zealous, hustling chicks finally came running with their protruding craws, and on an apparent whimsy scurried in under Goldie's wing. In their minds that cozy spot afforded all the safety, comfort, and protection from the elements they would ever need. Goldie earnestly opened her wings to gather in the eight little things, only to discover they were actually not so little any more. She could feel a growing ferment underneath as the ones whose behinds stuck out frantically pressed inward while those stifled for air strained outward. Sixteen wings pushed and shoved, sixteen feet trampled and were trampled, older chicks and younger chicks jockeyed and vied for position, churning and hopping like a pot of bubbling porridge.

Goldie stood stock still as their sharp feet scratched upon her underbelly, her eyes closed as if she were fast asleep and her throat emitting small sounds of comfort and contentment.

Meanwhile a three-foot Pallas pit viper came silently slithering like a turbid stream through the grass, its black and white spots gleaming through its translucent grayish brown skin. It circled round to the back of the anthill, paused a moment, then lifted its triangular head and tested the air with its long slender tongue. Conditions were ripe for a sneak attack.

Just at this moment, Goldie jerked to wakefulness and shrieked out her warning cry. The eight scatterbrained, unruly chicks charged out from their feathery sanctuary and careened into the bushes behind them. The serpent, naturally, had no intention of relinquishing his meal to the underbrush. But as he slithered toward the concealed delicacies, a sudden stab of pain racked his hinder part. Under its dolorous effect he snapped into a coil, whipped his head round, and lunged with split-second timing at Goldie.

The ensuing struggle pushed to the brink all the resources, stamina, and strength that both parties could ever hope to muster. In the beginning Goldie held the advantage with her forceful, lightning strikes at the serpent's neck. Fortunes shifted, though, when the snake swayed evasively before her, manoeuvring a position from whence he threw himself upon her neck and wrapped himself around twice like a rope. With stubborn determination, the two locked into a rapid crescendo of violence: the tighter the snake's stranglehold on Goldie, the more viciously did she tear at his hide; and the greater the pain she inflicted, the more intensely did the snake squeeze her throat.

It wasn't long before Goldie fell to the ground, but her brilliant yellow beak continued to rend the flesh of her opponent until at long last the snake relaxed his grip and dropped away like a length of limp twine.

Three crows alit upon a nearby branch and eyed the carcasses. Eight forlorn chicks huddled together in the

underbrush and wailed in anguish.

Suddenly Goldie's body twitched, arid then twitched again, and then she clambered to her feet. There she stood, breast held high, neck extended loftily, head elevated with pride, the haughty attitude that had always marked her presence restored in full. Only her elegant neck was swollen, as if pumped up with air; and from it dangled the dead, taupe-coloured snake. And her white and brown feathers were scrambled together, sticking out in ghastly confusion. From a distance she appeared a fiendish monstrosity.

Startled at the apparition, the three crows flapped off to the accompaniment of their piercing, frightened caws. The eight chicks dashed out from underneath the bushes and crowded once again around their mother's warm belly. Finally Long Neck showed up on the heels of dusk. *Glur-glurring* in puzzlement, he circled the monstrosity. Then reaching out with his beak he grabbed hold of the snake and gave it a yank.

To his shock and amazement, the monstrosity toppled over onto the ground, stiff and dead, and turned out to be none other than his Goldie. A crowd of cheeping chicks suddenly bereft of their sanctuary scrambled for refuge under Long Neck's belly. Totally unprepared for this turn of events, Long Neck simply stood there, thunderstruck. Then as reality sunk in, he, in emulation of Goldie, spread out his wings to receive them. From this moment, Long Neck's carefree days of libertine wandering were over.

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On this fine, sunny summer day, the little spring flowed in gentle tranquility, its crystal-clear waters kissing out strings of dimples as it passed over the silky smooth pebbles that lined its bed. Here and there a fallen leaf or two sported gleefully in the current, rising and diving with joyous abandon.

Lined up alongside the spring partaking of its waters were Plumella's four orphans. No longer were they little balls of down, Their legs had lengthened, their bodies had elongated, and their short little mouths had become long, sharp beaks that could produce the sound of preening feathers. However, long tails and stately horn-feathers still eluded them, nor had they yet developed the harmonious snow-white and coffee-brown coloration that was the hallmark of their species. They were still ugly, splotchy, yellow and coconut-brown chicks. Furthermore, it was as if they were doubly afflicted, for their comportment wholly resembled their appearance.

Especially did their image suffer in comparison with the chicks of other families, for then their graceless manner took on a positively oafish quality. The simple act of drinking became a shameful spectacle as they lifted their heads to swallow the sweet spring water filling their mouths only to have most of it dribble out disgustingly from both corners of their beaks. Other chicks could drink their fill with only eight or nine mouthfuls, while the heads of these four might dip and rise twenty times—thirty times—before they could even wet their throats.

Their feeding practices equally deserved ridicule. They limited their gleaning to grassy vegetation, thoroughly ignorant of the fact that ant larvae were the most delectable of foods. Even their vegetarian diet, though, displayed their benightedness. Naturally enough they would scoff down the succulent leaves of wild garlic, long-root onion, and wild leeks, as would anyone with half a brain; but they also browsed indiscriminately and happily among the insipid-tasting fare offered by flowering onion, Chinese pamassia, and Japanese spiraea.

For the past several days, they too, like all the other pheasant families, had been making their way gradually up the mountain, but it wasn't because they knew that the higher environs were cooler and more comfortable than those below. It was because they were following the current of the spring upstream in pursuit of its end—so they could walk around it and get to the other side. For they longed desperately to reach the adult pheasants whom they could hear calling and cooing over there.

Now the four chicks had stopped to get a drink, and as they occupied themselves with that endless dipping and raising of their heads, the sound of cooing again wafted over from the woods on the other side of the spring. Their attentions instantly consumed, the little Plumellas ceased their drinking and strained their widened round eyes upon the spot from where the sound emanated. When they caught a glimpse of a long, elegant, snow-white tail amid the deep green bushes, they all erupted into the frantic *cheep-cheep-cheeping* of desperate aspiration.

It may have been the noise of the flowing spring water, or perhaps the distance between them and the object of their desire, but the tail became smaller and smaller and the cooing fainter and fainter, until fmally one of the Plumellas impulsively thrust his long, slender legs into the spring. The current promptly pulled his feet out from under him, sending him head over heels into the water. He scrambled to his feet, shook the water from his body, spread out his short little wings, and plunged intrepidly ahead.

In the wink of an eye he landed on a protruding rock in the middle of the spring. On the bank the three other Plumellas watched in horrified fascination, cheeping away at the top of their lungs. The little valiant atop the rock showed off {or them, waving his head in a posture of cocksure pride before boldly diving headlong for the next rock. The waters between the two rocks treacherously chose that very moment to swirl into clutching curls, and he

was at once hopelessly caught up in it: From the bank his siblings saw only a brownish-yellow whirlpool spiraling its way downstream and out of sight, leaving in its wake the thin lingering resonance of his cheeping, mordantly hovering over innocent, tranquil waters.

On the bank the remaining little Plumellas stood momentarily in stunned silence. Then they turned and lit out in pursuit of the brownish-yellow whirlpool, retracing their steps downstream. It was nightfall before disappointment and exhaustion finally drove them into the underbrush for shelter. But the rest and renewal they sought became hostage to the terror of the night. The moaning of the wind, the cry of a nocturnal creature, even the rustle of a falling leaf, all posed in the darkness as the handmaids of dread. These black hours they passed in merciless wakefulness, clotted together in a shivering wad.

The light of the new day arrived accompanied by the tantalizing cooing that beckoned as before from across the way. With its reaffirmation the three little Plumellas forgot their grief, and the terror surviving the deposed darkness evaporated as well. They skipped out from underneath the bushes, shook the dew from their immature feathers, and headed back upstream in the resumption of their original quest.

Perhaps it was in answer to their prayers that the stream suddenly narrowed to inviting proportions and offered in addition the convenience of a traversing rock, long and narrow like a bridge. Crying with joy the three Plumellas beat their short, little wings and fairly flew across. Once on the other side they headed straight away toward the place from where the cooing sound emanated.

It happened that at that very moment on the very path they had taken, there was proceeding with his stately, measured strides a tiger on his way to the spring for a drink. Suddenly a fleeting movement on the forest floor arrested his steps. He was certain he had seen something running sprightly—indeed three somethings—but now, strangely enough, they had transformed into a pile of decomposing coconut-brown leaves. He approached the pile with inquisitiveness, huge feet firmly, deliberately, treading circles round it. But not the slightest stir could he detect. Before the king of the mountain, all pledged their allegiance with total silence. His supremacy reaffirmed, the tiger roared in gratification and continued on his regal way to the spring.

Very gradually, very slowly, the forest came back to life. After the song birds resumed their twittering, and the cooing of the pheasants once more resounded through the trees, that pile of coconut-brown leaves moved ever so slightly. Then out from it emerged, very cautiously, very gingerly, a little Plumella. A moment later, from a spot about twenty inches away, a second Plumella poked his head out and looked around. All was peaceful. Not even a crow was in sight. The two little Plumellas cheeped elatedly, rejoicing at their narrow escape. But what about their nestmate? The two of them began digging into the leaves, tearing up mouthfuls with their beaks until, fmally, they found him.

But whether they had found a dead sibling or a live one was not at all clear. There he was lying in the damp dirt, ominously on his side, his soft feathers faded and dull, his thin legs straight and stiff. From his anus there protruded a mass of red and white and yellow and black intestines, covered with bits of leaves and earth. His eyes, though, were glittering, and his beak was twitching, as if he were making a mighty effort to swallow his pain. Now that he received notice that the danger had passed, he unleashed from, his throat a terrible scream of agony. It was a sound worthy of triggering temblors and sending leaves rustling to the ground, had he not been so small, and his two siblings could not help but shudder at the effort it must have cost him to maintain silence when that tiger stepped on him.

The injured Plumella worked his legs and twisted his body in an effort to get up, but the attempt sent him into convulsions. Grittily, he renewed the effort, not once but numerous times, until at last he overcame his infirmity and pulled himself to his feet. With the mass of intestines dragging behind him, he followed the two other Plumellas as they gravitated toward that cooing sound.

It wasn't long before they caught sight of a long, elegant snow-white tail swaying gracefully just up ahead. Augmented with notes of hope and elation, the pain-ridden cries of the injured chick grew louder. It caught the attention of two crows who had just alit upon a nearby branch to scout for some likely prey. Two Plumellas dove for cover under a clump of bushes, leaving not a trace of their presence. Burdened with his encumbrance, though, the injured one could not execute such a fleet manoeuvre, try as he might. When two sharp inky-black beaks pulled the mass of intestines out into a long bloody rope, that little entity who had so tenaciously clung to life disappeared with a heart-rending wail into the summer sky.

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Autumn comes bearing its cornucopia of fruit. The wild David rose sets forth a profusion of little red calabashes. The wild hawthorn bends canopy-like under the weight of its ripening produce. The indigo berries of the cotoneaster mass into billowing lakes, while the purple-red Sabian crabapples mound up into ruby hills. Then,

too, there are the sprawls and the heaps of gleaming golden buckthorn fruit that blanket the sunny slopes. Indeed Autumn comes bearing its cornucopia and pours into the emerald luxuriousness of Cloud Crowned Mountain the joy of the bounteous harvest and the felicity of “mellow fruitfulness.”

It was in this season of full-blown ripeness that the chicks finally matured into young adults. Their unsightly garb had fallen away, replaced by sartorial splendour. Their ungainly toddle had evolved into poised sedateness. No longer did their throats emit juvenile cheeps but instead produced the coos and calls of full-fledged roosters and hens. All the hours of their days they spent wandering in the company of their elders, infinitely proud of their accomplishments.

Among all of the pheasant families, it was likely Cock-A-Lock’s that had come closest to achieving perfect happiness. Cock-A-Lock with his powerful charisma and Phoenix with her commanding elegance had passed on to their children an eloquent fusion of their most desirable traits. All four of them possessed the long, intractable horn-feathers of their father and the long, sublimely glorious tail of their mother in a combination that truly reflected the ingeniousness of the Creator.

Underneath a short, pendulously weighted David rose tree, Cock-A-Lock was teaching three of the little Phoenixes how to leap up and pluck a fruit with their beaks. With head raised, neck arched, and eyes fixed intently upon the target, he bent his knees, stretched out his legs, spread his wings, and leaped. When he returned to the ground, his beak was holding a bright, shiny red fruit. Thoroughly engaged by this performance, the three Phoenixes eagerly flung themselves at the tree’s enticing bounty.

Their impatience and lack of discipline, however, only reaped them exhaustion. Up they would leap and down they would drop, over and over, until they flopped scattered and panting on the ground with nothing to show for it. Cock-A-Lock demonstrated again. He leaped up three consecutive times, enthralling the three Phoenixes once more with his powerful agility, with the exquisitely arcing curve of his soaring ascent, and, especially, with those spiny rose fruits that he rolled over to them, one to each.

Finally, one of the little Phoenixes succeeded in capturing one of the red dollops, inciting thereby a flurried onrush from the other two, who were intent upon proving their own deservedness. The three of them wadded up into a squabbling ball every bit as dynamically indecorous as those of their elders before them. The object of their contention rolled about elusively in the melee, escaping here, dodging there, until it rolled right up to the impassively observing Cock-A-Lock. .

As the three little Phoenixes watched in dismay, Cock-A-Lock made it disappear down his throat. Their disappointment was palpable. And yet when Cock-A-Lock sprang up once more to pluck another mouthful for himself, it finally dawned on them that squabbling was unnecessary, for more than enough for everybody hung right overhead, free for the taking. And so, underneath the red rose tree, four vibrant, resplendently endowed pheasants bounded successively, unceasingly, into the air, performing the joyous dance of the bountiful harvest.

Under the verdant shade of a nearby dragon spruce, two other Phoenixes, an elder and a younger, lay in a serene tableau. The elder, who had become painfully scrawny under the rigours of reproduction and brooding, was now completely restored to her former glory, having eaten fully of Autumn’s nutritious opulence. Her feathers glowed vividly, and from every angle her bearing displayed the highest standards of grace.

But her beauty paled next to the offspring beside her. This youngest of the little Phoenixes scintillated in even richer, more vibrant tones, her carriage surpassed that of her mother in noblesse and delicate refinement, and those two high, inset tail feathers resembled flowing silk streamers upon which had been fastened dark chocolate-brown plumes, dragging lengthily behind her in serpentine sumptuousness.

While this magnificently trailing tail was an endowment that justified exceptional pride, it also inflicted upon the littlest Phoenix unanticipated aggravation. The three other little Phoenixes had been passing their nights perched in a tree for a week now. She, though, always found her ascent sabotaged by her ponderous tail, which would invariably drag her down before she could reach the lowest branch. This meant that she had to continue spending her nights on the ground, where the dangers were infmitely greater.

Thus it was that, while her siblings were revelling in their newly acquired talent to relieve a tree of its fruit, she was brooding over her miserable failure.

Perhaps it was because she doted on this most beautiful of her children, or perhaps it was just in her nature as a mother, Phoenix always exercised greater patience with this, her youngest. Now she stood up, signalling to her softly, and she stretched her neck high, pressed her tail down, and leaped into the air with beating wings. Airily as a cloud, it seemed, she landed with perfect balance on a horizontal branch suspended six feet above the ground. Then, with her long tail in tow, she leaped with flapping wings from branch to branch, spiraling her way upward, until she appeared at the very top, thirty feet in the air.

The little Phoenix watching from below gaped in awe at her mother's cool, wind-blown poise, her lovely, lyrical body language, her lofty, commanding air of supremacy. Then mustering every nerve and sinew she sprang up in emulation toward the branch.

Again the tail dragged her down before she achieved half the distance.

Dejected, the little Phoenix lay slumped on the ground, showing no desire to ever again rise to her feet. Soon, the other three Phoenixes, fruit-filled and satisfied, came trooping back and espied their sister in her state of gloom. Deliberately, they held their bulging craws high and circled round their stunningly beautiful but exceedingly clumsy sister, and they shouted and sang and hopped and pranced, as if gleefully celebrating her misfortune. Then one of them rose up into the air and alit upon the dragon spruce, from where she engaged the other two in a polyphonic capriccio. With modulating tones and shifting speeds, the trio exuberantly performed their concert, as if to taunt their sister with their success.

Finally provoked, the littlest Phoenix rose with a jerk and lashed out at the two on the ground. At first the two simply dodged and parried, teasingly hedging circles around her. Then out of boredom, or perhaps because dusk was approaching, they fanned their wings and flew up into the tree. With an air of triumph the three young bullies spiraled their way to the top and snuggled on perches next to Mother Phoenix.

She whom they left on the ground all badgered and bothered just stood there, confounded. Then suddenly she sprang to life, and in an explosion of flapping wings she propelled her body upward, reaching, stretching with all her might, and landed squarely upon that elusive six-foot high branch. Her unexpected success elicited excited cries of congratulation from both Big Phoenix, high on her perch, and Cock-A-Lock down below. Little Phoenix, however, had not yet stabilized her perch, and she teetered tentatively, breathlessly in the air, before tumbling headlong back to the ground.

It was that tail of hers again, so beautiful but way too long, so long that it robbed her of balance. However, there was no doubt about it, she had achieved something this evening: Heartened by her progress, Cock-A-Lock levitated into the tree, demonstrating for her the epitome of correct form and the technique of guaranteed success. Little Phoenix's self-confidence soared and she threw herself into the task with renewed energy. Upward she strived for the branch, and back she flopped, but undaunted she tried again, and again—and again, until it was all too clear that defeat would not unleash her this night. For the evening mist had enveloped the jade green tree in a foggy bluish screen, transforming the branch she sought into a phantom limb. Unable to retain its image, she could not achieve it, tail or no tail. The unlucky little Phoenix would be obliged to spend another night on the ground.

And so it was that Big Phoenix in a flap of wings came fluttering down from her lofty perch to accompany her daughter through the hours of the night. For the pheasant forebears had decreed that a mother was to stay on the ground until the last of her chicks had made it into the tree. With the grace of Heaven, this, she hoped, would be the last such night.

A curtain of darkness fell and extinguished the forms of all that surrounded them. Nothing existed, not the stars nor the moon, not the heavens nor the earth, not the tree nor the spring. The entire universe, it seemed, had reverted to the ultimate, inky void of Chaos. In this boundless precinct of black-shrouded silence crept the evils pervading the cosmos: death, pestilence, unabating cold, all the terrors of Nature and all the hair-raising demons slipped out of their supernatural realm.

Finally a wisp of fog became discernable in the wood, and the horizon disclosed a smudge of morning light; the sky and the earth reappeared, and the forest came back to life. At the top of the dragon spruce, Cock-A-Lock awoke and murmured to the three little Phoenixes. Softly they replied and soon four feather clouds flapped their way down from the tree.

"Gua! Gua! Gua!" Cock-A-Lock resonantly announced the arrival of a new day. This was the day that the littlest Phoenix would achieve her perch in the tree. From this day forward the Cock-A-Lock family could be gether all the time and never have to be separated at night again.

But the answer to Cock-A-Lock's hope-imbued greeting was silence. There was nothing to do but lead the three little Phoenixes on a search for those lazy sleeping beauties.

Next to a dense clump of bushes enveloped in a thick, marbled fog lay sprawled on their sides two unsurpassingly beautiful pheasants. Their long tail plumes spread their splendour on the ground like misty clouds. Their red coral feet stretched out straight as if employed in a painstaking search for something. Their black-brown wings were spread open in a posture of deep, dreamless slumber. Their red jade-like beaks were slightly ajar in the manner of one talking in her sleep. Through the floating, curling layers of fog they appeared ethereal and otherworldly, especially around the neck, where the snow-white horn-feathers that originated under their chins

now gleamed like crimson necklaces.

The worldly, experienced Cock-A-Lock was immediately seized with alarm and rushed to examine those crimson necklaces. Just as he feared, the ground underneath them was encrusted with drops of coagulated blood. How well he knew he was looking at the victims of a leopard cat, who had stolen up to them under cover of night and sucked dry their arteries.

Overwhelmed by this sudden loss, Cock-A-Lock stretched out his long neck and wailed his grief to the heavens. It was a silent wail, though, for while his mouth opened and closed over and over again, no sound came from his throat. This head rooster whose commanding calls had resounded throughout the territory had become, in the flash of a tragic instant, a mute.

The three little Phoenixes gently nuzzled the body of their sister, as if they had completely forgotten the hard time they had given her the evening before. It took a long time for them to be convinced that their poor little nestmate would never rise nor ever vent her anger upon them again. With this realization they whimpered and drew close to Cock-A-Lock, pouring out to him their grief and seeking from him reassurance against the dread that had crept into their hearts.

All this time Cock-A-Lock stood silently next to Phoenix. Only when the little Phoenixes gathered round him did he finally awaken from his grief-stricken reverie. At the moment he turned his head to face them, his intractable horn-feathers suddenly drooped to either side of his head, like the blades of broken swords. And from that time they never stood on end again.

*

The air became brisk and cool. An incandescent sky soared to new-found heights. The alpine wind blew chilly and biting. The oak trees flamed red, the birches turned purple, poplars melted into golden yellow, and larches shimmered in chartreuse. Their leaves came fluttering down, mixing together into rainbow whirlpools as they sought new niches to call home. Black storks, kingfishers, nightingales, and red-tailed water mynahs flocked off to seek warmth in the south. Hawks, falcons, red-necked flycatchers, and white-capped buntings moved in, coveting the invigorating environment Cloud Crowned Mountain offered them. In anticipation of the rigorous winter to come, all living things were resetting their rhythms of life.

The pheasants, too, were engaged in this seasonal adjustment as they began departing from their high-altitude summer home to head for their sunny slope below. The forest rang out with the calls of pheasant families signalling to other pheasant families. The thickets lining their route teemed with figures rushing along their way. Along the banks of the spring that the four Plumells had once followed upstream, there now trooped a long procession of pheasants headed downstream.. The old rooster walking tall before them had an exceptionally long and lustrous black neck. Following close behind him clustered ten vigorous, spirited youngsters, eight of them with brilliant yellow beaks, and two whose wings were adorned with multicoloured plumes. Of course, this was none other than Long Neck' enormous family. That libertine Long Neck—no-one would have believed that he would raise a family of ten!

It had not been easy for him. The amounts of time, effort and mental energy required for the undertaking had taxed him enormously. The daylight hours mandated surpassing discrimination in choosing a playground for the little Goldies: a water supply, a copious variety of victuals, and a ready place to take cover were all imperative to an appropriate site. Even then, letting his guard down for even a moment could prove to be fatal, so he stood in constant vigilance against landbound and airborne dangers alike.

No less exacting was the task of ferreting out a secure nighttime retreat. The measure of his effort lay in the evidence of his success, for his choices proved impregnable: the underside of a precipice tucked behind a roaring waterfall, for instance, or a tree hole camouflaged under an artful arrangement of dead branches.

But the toughest job of all was the one that came with the arrival of the little Plumellas. One can easily imagine the ebullience and joy with which those two poor little beleaguered orphans flung themselves at him. Yet eight sharp yellow beaks lined up belligerently, like a breast-work of razor-edged knives, to block their way. The eight little Goldies had unsurprisingly inherited their mother's conceit, so in their minds it was simply impossible to allow just any riffraff into their exclusive circle. Eyes aglare, eight surrounded two with malignant intent, while two faced eight, united back to back in a brave but hopeless stance of self-defence.

Into this tense encirclement Long Neck suddenly thrust his beak and gave a firm if harmless peck to the biggest of the eight. With that the offense disintegrated and the eight congregated to one side, cheeping querulously. And so it was that the two Plumellas were saved, and with a mixture of anguish and relief they rushed under Long Neck's wings.

Long Neck's family, of course, had already been the largest on Cloud Crowned Mountain, and this expansion

only increased the rigours of his responsibilities. The little Goldies, always and ever the object of his protective instincts, now became the subjects of vigilance as well, for they constantly sought to harass the newcomers, and one never knew what they might be capable of.

As if that were I not enough additional burden, he discovered that the two pitiful little creatures were sorely in need of remedial education. Their drinking habits were atrocious (not to mention inefficient); they had no idea how to properly feed themselves; and ants were things they ran away from. Patiently he back-tracked to the first stages of infancy and taught them the rudiments.

The eight little Goldies, of course, having learned all these things long ago from their mother, would cluster nearby and cheep uproariously in derision, or they would rush up and muscle them out of the spot where they were eating or drinking. But this very behaviour proved a favourable stimulus to the two little Plumellas, and they learned all the more quickly. Their innate intelligence indeed served them well here. As the days slipped by, the chicks shed their unsightly down and donned their splendid raiment. And through the clashes and squabbles of childhood and the mounting days and nights of togetherness, their relationship eventually evolved into one of endearment and close-knit familial harmony.

Now as Long Neck's brigade approached a bend in the spring, they found Cock-A-Lock and the three Phoenixes refreshing themselves on the opposite bank. With much excitement the two families hailed each other, confirming their delight in a performance of leaps and bounds. The new generation had matured at a time when malevolent winter sat poised at the edge of the equinox, reviving the imperative of alliances.

The three Phoenixes spread their ample wings, and with their long tail plumes floating behind, they fluttered across the spring to Long Neck's side. Their extravagantly fit and vigorous forms, the subtly curving contours of their bodies, enthralled all those watching them, young and old alike. Especially the two Plumellas, who walked together to the edge of the water with wide and wondering eyes.

How strange it was: that impassable chasm seething with turbulent waters had shrunk to little more than a shallow, narrow ribbon! They turned their heads to look at the three exuberant Phoenixes, then turned again to look at the spring with its tiny, lapping ripples. Suddenly, in near-perfect sync, the Plumellas 6pened their wings, pressed down their tails, and with an effervescent flutter crossed to the other side, landing with smooth precision next to Cock-A-Lock. This was a great discovery for the Plumellas, and they congratulated themselves with excited cries and kissing pecks to each other's beaks. Then they lifted off once more to celebrate their new-found skill, back and forth, back and forth, tirelessly.

Long Neck's black neck snapped up straight in surprise and wonder at this sudden, uncharacteristic behaviour on the part of the Plumellas, while the Goldies turned nonchalantly away, disdaining to even watch. Only the spring understood them as its waters flowed along softly in a rhapsody of colour reflected from their bodies flying overhead.

Only after the Plumellas finally settled down did Cock-A-Lock himself leap to the other side. He stretched his neck toward Long Neck and opened his mouth, but did not utter a sound. Ever since Phoenix and their child met their tragic deaths, neither had his horn-feathers stood back up, nor had he regained his sonorous voice.

The two families joined forces and continued on downstream with the two old roosters in the lead. As they proceeded, other pheasant families joined them, and their ranks rapidly and steadily swelled to exodus proportion. By the time they arrived at that slope where Cock-A-Lock had guided—even forced—the collective into dispersal, there were enough of them to turn its grassy surface once again into a black-brown sea.

The white rock in the centre upon which Cock-A-Lock had lain still remained vacant. Needless to say, his sadly diminished condition meant he would not mount it again. So the question now was, who would transfonn this motley assemblage into an effectively functioning collective body? The black-brown sea began to churn and a disorderly clamour rose from it as malcontent bubbled to the surface and conflicts erupted among rival families. With post on the rock left unfilled—with this vacuum in leadership—a free-for-all was clearly in the making, that could only end with the decimation of the flock.

"*Gua*! *Gua*! *Gua*!"

Three resounding cries commandeered the air, and Long Neck flew resolutely onto the rock. There he stood tall, wrapped in an aura of sleek, serious majesty, as if proclaiming the birth of a new dynasty .

The dark mass below fell into a stunned silence, but only momentarily before bursting into a fit of savagery and swarming toward the rock as if intent upon taking out Long Neck in an inundation of pheasant flesh. In the midst of the paroxysm, several exceptionally sturdy-looking roosters squeezed to the foot of the rock, long sharp beaks menacingly poised for an attack.

Atop the rock, Long Neck stood dispassionately, awesome in his authoritative righteousness. Since he had

dared to take the head rooster's throne, there was no sense in relinquishing it now. The materializing battle was at the brink of its outbreak when ten brash, quick-witted Goldies and Plumellas threw up a tight cordon around Long Neck's throne. Fanned around the rock and facing outward, they stood in nerveless bravery, like a contingent of loyal palace guards, and glared daggers at the insurgents.

With that the latter backed down, their gambit over, and the crowd with its awful surging power settled down into a model of docility.

"*Gua*! *Gua*! *Gua*!" Head Rooster Long Neck thundered out his command.

"*Gua*! *Gua*! *Gua*!" The flock gathered round the rock. Faced with the cruelties of the impending winter, faced with the prospect of extinction, these vulnerable pheasants could only rely upon their own unity to see them through.

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The snow arrived with the dawn. Flakes as soft. and fluffy as eiderdown glinted in the auroral light as they descended thickly and languorously. By the time the landscape was bathed in the full, cloud-filtered light of day, the trees, the slope, the spring—all of Cloud Crowned Mountain—had wrapped itself in a thick snowy coat.

In a towering, needle less larch, Head Rooster Long Neck awoke. In ordinary times, he would at once lead the flock down out of the tree. Today, though, confronted with the unusual weather, he hesitated. The pheasants all around him were barely discernible, the only indication of their existence being the presence of all the strange, snowy, roly-poly entities that the tree seemed to have sprouted overnight.

The snow was still falling thickly, incorrigibly blocking out the sun, though the sky managed to gradually brighten. Long Neck shook himself free of his new white blanket and called out gently to his flock. The pudgy snowballs trembled, the long, slender popsicles on which they sat began to shiver and creak, and the entire tree erupted lingeringly into rustling, billowing, alabaster clouds. When the clouds dispersed, the popsicles had been miraculously transformed into brown branches, and the pudgy snowballs had become elegant, gorgeous long-tailed pheasants.

Spreading his tail, Long Neck launched himself into the air and glided down to a patch of open ground about two hundred yards away. As he alit, there arced into the sky out of the sixty-foot larch a torrential swath of brown that crackled and ruffled and whooshed deafeningly with the tumult of flapping wings, emblazoning the ghostly canopy of heaven with a magnificent chocolate rainbow. Like a tempestuous arching waterfall, it cascaded to the ground as if vying with the descending snow for the extravaganza of the year. The floating eiderdown flakes wavered in its wake, while upon the landscape awash in white it added the delicate touch that turned Nature's canvas into a masterpiece.

"*Gua*! *Gua*! *Gua*!"

Long Neck signalled for the foraging expedition to begin. Former leader Cock-A-Lock walked at his side, as vigorous and proud as ever despite his truncated horn-feathers and expired voice.

During its circuitous wandering over the wild, white landscape, the army of foragers came upon a southerly slope, where it halted in . uncertainty; for in its path there lay countless little piles of snow that so discomfitingly resembled graves that the youngest members spread their wings in an impulse to flee.

Worldly wise Cock-A-Lock, however, continued to advance, and Long Neck, remembering something from the autumn, accompanied him. Almost simultaneously they flew up onto two of the graves, where with much violent gyration and shaking and flapping, they sent clouds of snow surging and spiraling into the air. When the swirling crystalline nebula they stirred up subsided, a miraculous sight greeted the eyes of the flock: two dashing roosters standing atop two heavily laden, gleaming, golden buckthorn trees. This metamorphosis of graves into mounds of food sent an electrifying wave of exhilaration through the exhausted flock.

When the subsequent raucous, billowing cloud of snow disappeared, the expanse of white graves had been replaced by a scene of a hundred or so elegant pheasants sitting upon as many brilliant yellow buckthorns, extending their black necks desultorily about them and plucking golden balls with their red jade-like beaks. As the resilient canopies upon which they lay quavered with their movement. bits of leftover snow slipped idyllically to the ground, while wispy tail plumes fluttered languidly in aceompaniment. Framed against the vast sky and the sweeping snowy slopes, the scene coalesced into a composition worthy of an artist's attention.

On the banquet's borders strolled Long Neck, Cock-A-Lock, and several other sturdily built roosters, carrying out another anciently decreed duty, that of applying the skills gained in guarding one's family to the good of the entire flock. Barred from joining the banquet scene themselves, they were limited to savouring it from afar. Even during the process of foraging, they had had to focus their attention upon the surroundings, the ground as well as the sky, for the approach of an enemy could be sudden, swift and deadly for those caught off their guard. Such

was the price of taking the throne and of being endowed with superior physical strength.

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In the afternoon, the sky suddenly split into two. On one side it glowered blackly, on the other side it gleamed in yellow. The wind died, the clouds hung motionless, the snowy expanses dulled to a gloomy gray, the bushes and trees stood as still as death. Pitch-black crows brushed past the tree branches like spectres, long-tailed squirrels scurried into tree holes, and across the snowy ground there fled leopards, tigers, leopard cats. As the black and yellow halves maintained a stalemate, the myriad creatures of earth and sky panicked at their premonition of disaster.

Long Neck, too, felt the urgency of these ominous signs and led his charges back up into the giant larch. But how much protection could its sparse branches afford them? Those branches were now continuously shedding globules of snow dislodged by the hundred or so pheasants who perched upon them, whimpering and shifting their feet in anxiety-laden suspense.

Finally, a darkening cyclone appeared out of the umbrageous sky, assaulting all in its path with its arsenal of blinding snow and stinging sleet. For three days and three nights it rampaged through the trees, dumped mountains upon the slopes, and hammered brutally at the imprudent creatures that dared to exist on the face of the earth. On it raged, unmitigated, until it had snuffed out all signs of life and silenced the cries of the pheasants—until the only living things that seemed to remain in the universe were inorganic objects made of congealed water droplets.

Can such things be? Is it really possible for violent forces to destroy that which lives while breathing life into that which is inanimate?

The fourth day, at last, belonged to the glorious, blazing sun. Pale, puffy clouds scudded across the sky, while a delicate breeze wafted over the newborn landscape below. The sleet that had run rampant during the dark stormy days now sat in deathly silence waiting to be melted back into water. Here and there on the mountain slope, crows, squirrels, leopard cats, tigers re-emerged into the open. The radiance of the sun was giving back to the myriad creatures the original aspects of their lives.

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Up in the larch, Long Neck started to move, but his feet seemed to be stuck to his branch, while his wings felt as if they had been trussed up. He sounded the wake-up call to the members of the flock anyway, then began to twist about in an ungainly fashion until he had limbered up his cold, stiff body and was able to make his fluttering trip down out of the tree. This time, however, no cascading rainbow followed upon his descent. Indeed, it was not until the sun had reached its zenith that the pheasants began trickling in twos and threes down to his side. Then they started crying in hunger.

Surely Long Neck, too, was suffering .from hunger and cold. And yet when he had taken inventory of the ranks, he did not lead them out on their foraging expedition. Rather, he called out loudly and headed back to the larch in which they had ridden out the storm. The flock followed reluctantly behind. There they discovered twenty or so pheasants still scattered through the branches, fast asleep, two in tight embrace.

Furiously, the pheasants on the ground called out to them. Long Neck flew up into the tree and gave a fierce peck to those two old ones sleeping in embrace. To his consternation, they plummeted to the ground like a rock and split into two upon impact. They hadn’t been embracing after all, but rather had been frozen together by ice and snow. It was then that it became apparent that although all the other pheasants in the tree looked very much alive, in actuality their souls had long ago fled to Heaven.

Those who were still alive hung their heads in sorrow. In the act of bowing their heads, they discovered yet another horror. Here and there in the thick crust of snow were grotesque heads stretching upward, broken and battered feet sticking up, and bloody mangled wings spread open. It was as if countless suffering souls in hell were struggling to crawl out of their icy pits to grab the souls of those still living on earth. Pandemonium broke loose among the living flock as pheasants cried out in terror, leaped about in agitation, and fled back to the open ground. There they crowded close together in a shivering mass.

Long Neck was still up in the tree, contemplating the bodies, and then he studied those on the ground as well, as if he were making a body count. After he flew back down out of the tree and was walking toward the flock, he was arrested by the sight of a particular head sticking up out of the snow. Although it was disfigured beyond recognition, its bright yellow beak made it clear that this was one of Goldie’s progeny.

Long Neck stopped and very carefully began to dig the body out. The snow crust was frozen hard as a rock, and even when he attacked it violently, he only managed to chip up a few flakes of ice. But he was patient, very patient, and he continued pecking away at it, unremittingly.

Just when the pitiful little Goldie was nearly freed, Long Neck received a ruthless peck on his wing. He jerked his head around and discovered Cock-A-Lock's bright piercing eyes fixed upon him. Long Neck returned to his toil, only to receive another peck on his neck. This time he flared in anger and lashed fiercely back at Cock-A-Lock. To his surprise Cock-A-Lock did not respond in kind, but rather sped off back to the flock.

When Long Neck pursued him to the open ground where the flock was waiting, he at once came to his senses. For his charges, who had received a shocking fright and had suffered a long period of cold and hunger as well, had already collapsed *en masse* on the ground. They had not even the strength to stand up anymore. Indeed, some were already dead.

But the others still strove for life, and this being the case, could Long Neck afford the luxury of immersing himself in personal grief?.

"Gua! Gua! Gua!"

Long Neck uttered three cries of encouragement to his enfeebled flock. What he had to do most urgently was to get them straight to that buckthorn grove where its profusion of sweet golden fruit was the only thing that could save them.

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The cruelty of the Ruler of Heaven is that he often does not provide enough for his creatures on earth. Filled with confidence and hope, Long Neck led his cold and hungry ranks to the buckthorn grove, and although the pheasants physically languished in the grip of exhaustion, they followed him with energetic spirits. Upon their arrival at the site of their yearnings, however, they stopped dead in their tracks, dismayed at what assaulted their eyes.

On the vast expanse of whiteness there gaped an open wound infested with a taunting jumble of stark, steel-gray branches. Nowhere was there any sign that those branches had ever borne a single fruit.

A disheartened mutter rose from the ranks as the pheasants voiced their crushed disappointment. Long Neck himself looked about in puzzlement, wondering if he had led his group to the wrong place. But no, there was their old friend, the Sabian crabapple tree, standing as ever alongside the buckthorn grove.

Having retrieved his bearings, Long Neck threw himself into the next course of action. Over to the base of a buckthorn tree he went and proceeded to dig aggressively in the snow. At first his efforts seemed futile, for all that his beak flung off to the side was snow and more snow. Undeterred, he continued uprooting the white stuff until, at last, at a depth of over a foot, he struck gold.

The starving flock swarmed upon the site, and the space between the mute expanse of white and the grim welter of steel-gray, became animated with a seething black-brown swath. Black necks rose and fell, long beaks furiously assailed the snow. Clearly, digging for treasure was much more taxing than sitting atop a canopy and plucking the tree's willing fruit. Fortune now played her impartial game, distributing her treasures ruthlessly at random. The strong ones who hit bottom with nothing to show for it could draw upon their reserves of energy to try again.

But for the weak, unable to sustain the strenuous effort required, an empty hand on the first try would likely spell their doom. Those fatigued to the edge of prostration could not even hedge their bets, for after a short spate of digging, they would sink limply to the ground and look lamely upon the snow, sighing in exhausted resignation. Still others would risk everything on a single throw, pouring out all their reserves in the pursuit of the timely morsel, only to keel over stone dead before having the chance to savour it.

The rate at which those black necks rose and fell soon began to diminish, while the numbers of those sitting listlessly upon the snow waiting to die increased steadily. Alarmed at the rapidly deteriorating situation, Long Neck raised his head and twisted his long, long neck about, as if seeking a divinity to alleviate the crisis. Then his eye fell upon the Sabian crabapple tree. And he remembered how that spring Cock-A-Lock had saved the panicky flock with the ruby fruit of this very tree.

Long Neck wasted no more time. He spread his wings and launched himself into flight, ascending like a cloud to the branches of the tree. It was just as he thought. Among its burly branches hung string upon string of lustrous purple-red berries.

Without a moment to lose, Long Neck plucked the longest, reddest string and threw it down to the flock below. It was like tossing a lighted match into a pool of gasoline. Those who had resigned themselves to death were the first to react. As if absent spirits had leaped back into their bodies, they sprang to their feet, sprinted for the tree, and fell rapacious upon the string of berries, ravenously tearing it apart. Then those who were deeply immersed in their digging discovered that easier pickings were to be had, and they too thronged toward the tree. Up in the branches Long Neck worked feverishly to satisfy them, but their voraciousness overwhelmed his capability.

The result was a re-enactment of last spring's free-for-all as each string he tossed to them elicited a knock-down, drag-out struggle over the fruit. All the brawling mini-mobs sent snowflakes and feathers dancing and fluttering into the air in a scene that moved the mountains with its perverse beauty. Here the flames of life that had been nearly snuffed out roared up again in dazzling radiance, and all the potential of that life, retrieved from the brink of annihilation, set forth once more upon the path of realization.

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It's hard to say whether it was a test devised by God, or whether it was simply the uncanny tendency of misfortune to come in droves.

Appearing in the sky like a bank of black clouds was a giant golden eagle, who cast its terrifying shadow over the pheasants.

The first to notice its approach was Long Neck. As he scrambled to descend from the Sabian crabapple tree, he cried out to his charges. The flock of squabbling pheasants froze in the midst of their engagements, then gravitated into one large contingent and headed apace for a dense stand of wild willows. Simultaneously, Cock-A-Lock and seven light-footed roosters of martial appearance, who had been standing guard duty, closely followed upon Long Neck's heels as he sped toward a swath of high open ground. They raced along, necks craned towards the sky, screaming out their brazen defiance.

The eagle began his circling descent, scouting out his prey. Against the driven whiteness of an open tract of land, the brown forms of eight swiftly moving creatures dragging long tails stood out in striking contrast, as bold and incautious as disembodied spirits. Their proud, tall postures and their loud, concerted cries looked very much like an insolent challenge to combat. The eagle abandoned the flock of pheasants retreating towards the stand of wild willows, and veered abruptly upon the open tract, swooped into attack position, and plummeted toward the one with the most obnoxiously piercing voice and the most powerful gait, Head Rooster Long Neck.

But by the time the eagle discovered that he had come away with only snow in his talons, Long Neck had dropped out of sight. About fifteen feet away from the original spot a black-footed rooster was craning his neck toward the heavens bellowing out his war song as if ridiculing the foolishness of the raptor in the sky.

The eagle flapped its wings and climbed back up into the blue zenith, then plunged back down toward Black Foot. Again he ended up with only the debris of the frozen landscape, while Black Foot, too, had disappeared. Again at a distance of fifteen feet, another rooster, one with broken horn feathers, was standing motionless. Twice the eagle had botched it, and to make things worse that rooster with the broken horn-feathers looked like such a weakling.

Impetuousness conceived in anger took over, and instead of remounting into the sky, the eagle pumped his gigantic wings and lit out after Cock-A-Lock in snowy landbound pursuit. Unfortunately, while this giant bird of prey was capable of covering hundreds of miles a day in the air, it was no match for the swiftness and agility of a pheasant on the ground. When Cock-A-Lock transformed into yet another aggressive-looking rooster, the eagle's confidence in his powers of perception evaporated and he agitatedly vaulted into the air and lunged out and charged about in blind, chaotic confusion. Cock-A-Lock and his seven underling's, meanwhile, became ever adept at their nimble manoeuvres as they taunted him with their elusiveness.

After about twenty rounds like this, the eagle tired and had no choice but to retreat to his lofty realm. There he glided in circles on the wind currents, looking down in exasperation at the fragile little creatures below. In his right talon he clutched the only booty he had gained in the skirmish: an elegant, snow-white tail plume.

Though the eagle had risen high into the sky, the eight roosters regarded their victory as far from unconditional. Tail to tail they formed a circle, craned their necks to face upwards, and in unison howled at their aggressor. Only when they had hooted him off to distant realms would the flock be able to retrieve some peace in their lives.

The eagle, though, was not the least bit moved by all their strenuous clamour. The blizzard that had raged for three days and three nights had left him as bad off as the pheasants, and it wasn't any easier for him to allay his hunger pains in the vast wasteland of snow than it was for them. So up in the vault of heaven he hovered quiescently on the air currents, recuperating and gathering his strength for a renewed attack. Not until he had stuffed one of those bouncing jouncing delicacies into his stomach would he be satisfied.

By this time the flock of pheasants lay hidden in the willow grove, where the dark brown of the branches blended with their coloration to make them nearly invisible. Their presence, though, was clearly manifested in the occasional fluttering motion of a long tail plume. Still, to drop out of the sky and into the grove to pick one off without getting tangled in the jumble of branches was an unlikely scenario. That is to say, within the eagle's field of vision, the only possibility of a meal lay with those eight roosters maintaining their circular defence in the

middle of that open tract.

And now it was clear that those eight roosters were sneakily making their way toward the willow grove. If he didn't make his move soon, his opportunity would be lost.

Though he hadn't yet completely recovered his strength, the eagle prepared to chance it. From down below, all that was apparent had been his precipitous ascent and subsequent disappearance into the firmament. But then, just when the pheasants, convinced of their success, had broken up their formation and were heading like demobilized soldiers toward the willow grove, thatcrafiy eagle suddenly re-emerged from a bank of clouds and dove straight for them, with the speed of lightning it seemed.

He had caught the roosters off their guard. Their former unified chorus of cries now became squawking screams of terror, and there was no way that they could redeploy their tactic of methodical serial harassment. With this sudden crisis on their heads, in which each rooster was equally vulnerable, Cock-A-Lock banked on the wisdom of his vast experience and resolutely stood his ground. Like a fine sword suddenly unsheathed, his faded horn-feathers shot up into the air once more. And with a surge of energy, his long muted voice burst into a piercing, resounding cry. With his neck outstretched and his feathers bristling, he leaped abruptly ahead, and in the second before the eagle reached him, he vaulted into the air and delivered a ruthless peck to his left eye.

This time it was the eagle who was caught off guard. He shrieked with agony, and a viscous purplish-black liquid ran out of his left eye socket. Maddened by the excruciating pain, he raised his huge talons and struck the old rooster on the back with the force of all his might. Cock-A-Lock thudded to the ground. As he struggled to raise himself up in flight once more, the eagle dropped right on top of him, pressing him down with the weight of the mountains, and prepared to eat him alive.

At the moment his sharp, hooked talons were poised to clamp upon Cock-A-Lock's body, though, his right eye suddenly went black, and his neck was clinched from the side by a long, red jade-like beak.

It was the beak of Long Neck.

This forced the eagle to abandon the prey already in his clutches and devote his attention to Long Neck. With his sharp claws he seized Long Neck by the breast and held him with grim resolve, but that beak clamped upon his neck did not relax its grip one iota. Thus it was that a ferocious raptor and a fragile pheasant became entangled together as hopelessly as if someone had dipped them in a pot of glue.

On that open snowy tract a brown ball trundled about, attended by an entourage of dancing feathers. From it there emitted no cries, while the parties that made it up strained one against the other in steely determination. The strong and the weak, the attacker and the attacked, had melded into one, no longer distinguishable to the eye of the observer. Their life and death struggle flaunted its incongruity against the dignity and serenity of the snow-white mountains. The flock of pheasants emerged from its cover in the willow grove and gathered round to watch the drama, uniformedly impotent to affect its outcome.

On that smooth, uninterrupted snow tract the brown feather ball proceeded to roll along, and the more it rolled the tighter it became, and the more it rolled the farther it went, as if it would roll right on to the ends of the earth. And so when it rolled to the top of a cliff, just like that, without further ado, it rolled right over the edge.

As it descended toward the rocks far below, the huge feather ball whipped up whirlwinds, and the whirlwinds in turn slammed it against the sharp, projecting rocks of the escarpment wall. Time and again it collided, and time and again it bounced back out, each concussion eliciting sharp cries and sending feathers flying in profusion. Still loathe to loosen their grip for the slightest of seconds, the two tightly maintained their ball, locked together like implacable avenging ghosts, all the way to the bottom, when the force of the impact finally split them apart.

The eagle was impaled on a sharp rock, his neck perversely twisted to one side. His left eye was a bloody mass while his right eye was wide open and staring, as if he could neither believe nor accept his defeat. About six feet away lay Long Neck, the white flesh of his breast exposed, most of his feathers torn away by the jagged rocks. His red beak was ajar and quivering. His eyes fluttered open and he saw the eagle, frozen in the rage of his unacceptance, and he murmured a nearly inaudible *glur-glurring* response. He wriggled his feet and tried to stand up, but his body failed to obey. He moved his head, looked at the sky and stretched out his neck.

"*Gua*! *Gua*! *Gua*!"

Long Neck's final, and most resounding, cry finally burst forth from his throat. It reverberated to the top of the cliff, carrying to his charges the spirit of invincibility and the sympathy of the dying for those left behind.

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The pheasants, amassed in a dark patch at the edge of the cliff, had at last attained a vestige of peace. Now they stood there as silent and still as statues. Was it shock, or was it grief that held them there in mute abeyance? Or had the head rooster's death left them paralyzed with uncertainty?

It started to snow. The fluttering flakes imparted to this world of dead repose an element of animation. Penetrating the atmosphere laden with snow and silence came the distant echoing roars of big cats and the cawing of crows.

A tremour of restlessness rippled through the flock. It soon escalated into a turmoil, with pheasants milling about, calling out gratuitously, pointlessly beating their wings. It was then that that fine specimen of martial magnificence, Black Foot, flew onto a nearby rock and sounded a demand for attention:

"*Gua*! *Gua*! *Gua*!"

The dispassion of Nature had ushered in a new era of leadership, and the flock settled down and submitted to Black Foot's sovereignty. Weary but re-inspired, the pheasants resumed their nomadic quest—for food, and for survival. On the verge of entering a mountain pass that would lead to new horizons, they were arrested by a desolate cry coming from the snowy expanse that spilled over the cliff.

It was the cry of Cock-A-Lock, whose back had been broken during his encounter with the eagle. The flock had departed from the scene, leaving him struggling vainly in the snow. And now that they were about to disappear into the pass, he wailed out his wretched despair.

The pheasants came to a standstill and turned their heads in the direction of the appalling sound. Again they fell into an attitude of immobility suspended like statues, as the agonizing lamentation echoed again and again across the way, striking their hearts with palpable dread. But no one could save the luckless old rooster, just as no one could change the bitter destiny of the pheasant species.

Once again the roars of tigers and leopards and the cawing of crows drifted across the distance, rousing the flock from its state of suspended animation. The pheasants re-launched their steps into the pass, moving onward like a nimbus, planting their backward arrows in the snow. To the fading sound of that plaintive cry, they gradually disappeared into the clouds and mist.

183.91 Scatterbrain\fn{by Su Ye (1949-)} Hunan Province, China (F) 10

"Brother Yu, did you know, Scatterbrain's got married?"

Asan, who'd just arrived from my hometown, announced this suddenly after tossing out the water in which he'd just washed his feet, and putting out the light.

"Last January," he went on.

"So, she's been married off at long last. Her husband keeps a beancurd shop, and is a son of a distant relative of Tang Number Four.\fn{The fourth son of his father:H} They moved into town only a year ago. Do you remember that half-withered willow tree west of town? The two started a business under it. Every day they earn more than …" He kept chattering on, but my heart sank, tormented by a sense of loss.

"But was the man willing to take her?" I asked.

"Why shouldn't he be?" He sounded annoyed. "She's not a deaf-mute or a cripple. She's a bit plain but she's got a good heart. That young Tang's not bad-looking, but he can't have children. Everybody in town says so. They're going to build a new house. They've got about ten different kinds of bean products, so their business is quite brisk. The smoke from their chimney proves that. It's brought the withered part of that willow tree back to life. Isn't that strange? This spring the dead branches got damp and then sprouted leaves. The branches were three to four feet long when I left home, really green and lush, swaying in the wind."

"Sounds like Scatterbrain's doing well." An I indescribable feeling welled up within me.

"And how! She's eaten a lot of bean curd and got rosy-cheeked and a lot sharper, quite a change from when you last saw her. By the way, she kicked up a fuss just before her marriage. Didn't people use to tease her saying you would marry her? Who'd have thought she would have taken it so seriously!"

"What do you mean?" I asked with a forced calm.

"She cried for several nights, holding the books you'd left. Her mother was furious. She finally grabbed them and threw them into the stove. 'You're haunted by him!' she told her. 'He's an educated man. Are you fit to be his wife?' She scolded her daughter like that until finally she started to cry."

"Then what happened?"

"Then? She had no choice but to agree." Asan yawned several times, gradually relaxing into sleep. :

Moonlight found its way into the room through the window, glinting on the clasp of my wife's hand-bag. A moment ago she had given me a sulky look before putting up for the night at a neighbour's. The bag seemed to be mirroring its owner's meaningful glance …

I propped myself up and draped a coat round my shoulders. The red light of the cigarette glowed between my

fingers.

Oh, Willow Town, it's been a long time since I thought about you.

*

Late spring of that year I returned to my hometown for the first time in ages.

In my memories it was a small place nestling in the hills, with a yellow dirt path leading to the county seat. The name Willow naturally indicated that it was a world of willow trees—a poplar every three feet, and a willow every four. The several hundred households were screened by misty poplars and willows. However, apprehensive and uneasy, like a stray mongrel returning to seek refuge, I was in no mood to resurrect the dreams of my childhood.

In 1976, on the eve of the Qingming Festival, people in Nanjing had held an assembly to mourn the late Premier Zhou Enlai. Gripped by powerful emotions I wrote several elegiac verses and slogans. When the evening broadcast on April 6 started,\fn{From the end of March to April 5, 1976, people in all parts of the country held rallies to mourn the late Premier Zhou Enlai and denounce the "Gang of Four" On the evening of April 5, the Gang suppressed the mass rally at Tian An Men Square, and on the following day proclaimed the mourning movement a "counter-revolutionary event" and began to search out "counter-revolutionaries"} the sky in Nanjing became overcast. Some students, their mouths sealed, an unfathomable expression in their eyes, walked by me like strangers. The face of that character Ma in the school's political office grew darker every minute, as though he scented blood. It is said that a man is at his prime around thirty but the capriciousness of life had made me timid and weak. A "purging" wind was blowing towards us from the north and, unable to resist my mother's urgings and my own panic, I deserted.

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Several days after writing to my second aunt, I finally stood beneath night's pitch-black canopy in my hometown.

Although it was hardly nine, not a single sliver of light could be seen in the surrounding windows. On the cool fresh breeze, fragrant with the smell of sweet dry hay, came the yapping of a puppy somewhere near by. I gently tapped twice with the rusty knocker at my second aunt's door, then twice again.

"Oh, is that you, Deyu? I've been waiting for you for the last few days!"

In the wake of her senile chatter, a light was turned on. Coughing could be heard from some of the neighbours' houses and lights appeared in windows. The door opened with a creak. Smiling, Second Aunt hurriedly buttoned her tunic and stroked her dishevelled gray hair. She quickly took my bags from my shoulder, as though she had an extra pair of hands.

"Scatterbrain! Scatterbrain!" she called out to get some water boiled as she asked me in detail about my situation. A ladle of water was scooped from a huge jar and poured into a dented aluminium basin for me to wash with, and three eggs were fished out of an earthenware pot.

"Scatterbrain!" She raised her head and shouted upstairs again. Receiving no reply, she sighed and went to the kitchen to light the stove herself.

"Your second aunt has three daughters," my mother used to say. "The eldest is a glutinous rice cake, the second a flower and the third is a nitwit."

It was obvious that this Scatterbrain must be the so-called nitwit. The electric light, as dim as a kerosene lamp, emphasized the old, slightly lopsided, liver-coloured chest and cabinet by my side. On a soot-stained wooden wall hung a dusty photograph of my late second uncle wearing a Chinese-style jacket with buttons down the front.

He had died two years earlier. When I was young I often used to see him pick flowers for Second Aunt. He was proud of having married a woman who knew a little about the basics of writing. My mother often pointed at their windows and whispered to us that Second Aunt was shrewd and that we must be alert.

However, the window frames were now covered in cobwebs, the carved pomegranates, peaches and flower buds were crumbling, and the hostess was elderly. She lived on a pension from the grain supply station, maintaining her family like a setting sun doing its utmost to illuminate the dusk.

My head was spinning slightly as I whisked the eggs with the chopped scallion. Meanwhile, Second Aunt pulled back the shabby yellow coverlet on the old Nanjing-style bed to reveal three small heads with large shining eyes, shy and excited, like a litter of rats. That explained the giggling I heard from time to time. Second Aunt patted their bottoms and then tucked them back under their quilts, telling me that one was her elder daughter Dafeng's son and the other two boys belonged to Erfeng. I quickly scooped out a large handful of sweets and cake to divide among them. The children thanked me affectionately and whooped about.

"What about third sister?" I asked. She shouted at the boys to stop behaving so wildly just because there was a visitor, then sat by the table and blew on the hot tea for me.

"I'm glad you brought her up," she replied, sighing. "She's a good-for-nothing, has never been to school, so getting a job is out of the question. It's not right to keep her at home or to let her go. She's already twenty-six! She helps me get. the firewood, carry water and do some of the other chores. To be frank, I would have gone with your uncle long ago without her."

She seemed to be on the verge of tears, deepening the lines on her face. Checking herself she continued,

"I don't know what I did to deserve it. That girl was born too thick to learn anything. The doctors say there's nothing wrong with her health, but she seems to me as dumb as a piece of rock. Now, don't laugh at us. While you're here just pretend she doesn't exist."

Finding it difficult to think of what to say, I rummaged out the pieces of fabric, sausages and other presents I'd brought and put them on the table one by one. She courteously murmured her thanks to my mother. Then, accompanied by the children's intense stares, I followed her, my bag under my arm, through the kitchen and up a narrow steep ladder to the attic where she showed me my bed. Crossing the wooden floor, which creaked and swayed under our weight, she pointed to an old-fashioned dressing table and told me I could use it as my desk.

"Go to bed early. You're tired."

Overhead, I saw a board the size of the bed and about an inch thick suspended from the ceiling beams by ropes as thick as a person's thumb, on which timber of various lengths, broken furniture, pottery jars and various unrecognizable utensils were piled.

"It won't fall down," she said, smiling gently as though she'd read my mind. "I don't mean to offend you, but I could see you hesitating! It's been there for a dozen years. The ropes are very strong. If there was any danger, I wouldn't make you take the risk,"

Her reassurance was given readily and I really didn't know what to reply.

"Or, you can swap your bed with Scatterbrain, but the other room is smaller."

"No, no, not necessary."

I was at a loss for words. She laughed aloud, but immediately stopped herself and said,

"Go to sleep, and don't worry! What did the doctor say about your sickness?"

She narrowed her eyes and listened to my explanation, kidney trouble, and immediately offered to buy some liver, which she said would be good for me. Finally she went back downstairs.

I heaved a sigh of relief and lay down, but sleep did not come. I wondered what was happening in Nanjing. Why should my relatives here keep me at arms' length? My eyes shut tight, I tried in vain to recall the murmuring of the wind in the willows that I used to hear in my childhood. The whole town was still

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Early the next morning I still did not see Scatterbrain, only a vatful of clear water, empty pails and a shoulder-pole set next to a rake in the shade in the small yard. Not a single straw could be found on the cleanly-swept floor. Chickens strolled on the flagstones; there were finely chopped vegetable leaves in an earthenware basin. Second Aunt told me that Scatterbrain had gone to carry coal and to build a new cooking stove for Erfeng, ber second sister, who lived in the county town. It seemed that apart from the household chores, Scatterbrain was also bossed about by her sisters whenever they had heavy work to do.

That evening Dafeng, who taught locally, and Erfeng, a salesgirl at a grocery store in the county town, came riding on the backs of their husbands' Forever 18 bikes for the family feast to welcome me. While Second Aunt was busy preparing special dishes, Dafeng leaned back in her chair knitting incessantly as I chatted with her husband. Unlike her sister, Erfeng greeted me with a smile as soon as she stepped into the house. Then she swept her eyes over the dishes on the table.

"Oh, mum, look at the sweat running down your face! Let me do it."

The moment she entered it, the kitchen was alive with laughter and excitement. I heard the clanking sound of the meat slicer as she issued instructions to her mother.

"Put it there, mum. Just leave it. I need garlic not scallion. Mum, would you please open my bag and check to see if I got the right things: a scrubber, two brushes, a bundle of chopsticks from Hangzhou and two toilet rolls. The medicinal herb brewer you wanted is out of stock, so I brought you a very small pot to use for the time being. In the other pocket there's a stainless steel radish-peeler, better than the one I brought you last time " Still knitting, Dafeng came into the kitchen and demanded,

"What about the doormat I asked you for? You promised to get it for me a long time ago."

"We don't have any."

"I don't believe it. Your shop gets everything."

"Oh, listen to that, mum! I'm not telling lies. Besides, big things like that can't be taken out in broad daylight.

Every time I—"

She suddenly broke off. After a pause Second Aunt asked about Scatterbrain.

"I don't know where she is," replied Erfeng. "Perhaps she's out collecting firewood."

Beaming, she brought in a tray of braised fish, the children shouting and jumping behind her. The feast was ready. The light was on and we'd had a glass of wine but there was still no sign of Scatterbrain, After a little while the door was thrown open and in strode a robust figure carrying a bundle of firewood taller than herself. Her massive shadow seemed to take up most of the wall. Was this Scatterbrain?

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All of her family, barring her mother, kept on eating, drinking and chattering, paying no attention to her. She put the bundle down, grabbed a towel to wipe her neck and then sat down on the threshold. With her wild cropped hair, broad neck and shoulders, she seemed just like a man were it not for the firm breasts beneath her faded old tunic. Her Chinese-style trousers hung six inches above her worn sneakers and there were several fresh cuts on the rough skin of her legs She stared at me, a *naïve* expression on her face. Her eyes were gentle and extraordinarily large.

Second Aunt filled a big flower-patterned bowl with rice, piled it high with food from the table and handed it to her. She didn't even look at it, and continued sizing me up.

"Scatterbrain!" Second Aunt shouted at her.

Startled, she blushed and jumped to her feet, shot a sullen glance at her mother, then threw the towel down and rushed into the kitchen. The room rang with laughter. Second Aunt banged the bowl on to the table and ranted,

"Do you want to eat or not?"

Dafeng pulled her mother's sleeve, and the latter shook her head and sat down with a sigh. Pressing her thin, rosy lips into a smile, Erfeng said,

"You've asked for trouble now. Mind you, she hates to be called by that beautiful name of hers in front of outsiders!"

"Nonsense!" Second Aunt glared at her. "Is your Brother Yu an outsider?"

"Of course not." Erfeng patted her on the head and added,

"Don't get angry, mum. Starve her for a bit and she'll pull her claws back in." Then she leaned over to refill my cup, telling me that Scatterbrain's real name was Fengzhu but that nobody called her that.

"She doesn't seem a scatterbrain to me," I thought. "She's got a lot of self-respect!"

After the feast, I handed out some more sweets and cakes while racking my brains for stories about Nanjing to tell them. Flushed with drink, we all sat round the room, the men smoking, Dafeng swiftly shuttling her bamboo needles back and forth and Erfeng, her newly-permed hair loosened, cracking melon seeds between her fine teeth while directing the children to sing, recite texts and even the Roman alphabet to entertain me.

I snatched a moment and went into the kitchen. Scatterbrain sat by the stove, the light from the flames gently caressing her face. I put two handfuls of sweets in her lap. She raised her head and was about to say something when the children flew in, chirping and giggling, put their arms round her nock or jumped on her legs and in an instant made a clean sweep of her sweets. She just threw me an apologetic smile, and didn't show the slightest sign of annoyance. The next moment she laughed and shouted with the children, tickling them, imitating a tiger to frighten them. Then she held them under her arms and smacked them hard until they were fed up and boxed and kicked her. Just then Second Aunt came in to fetch me for dessert.

Before it got too late, the evening came to an end, everyone in high spirits. Erfeng's husband rang his bicycle bell to hurrfy up his wife, who was standing by the ladder whispering to her mother, picking strands of hair from the old woman's shoulders. She told her mother she had to put off paying for her children's keep because she was hard up that month.

"If you can't make ends meet, let me know and I'll borrow some," she told her weary mother. And if the boys didn't behave themselves she mustn't hesitate to beat them with the bamboo broom.

I went to the attic and emptied the remaining sweets from my bag onto Scatterbrain's bed, which was covered only by a worn-out patterned sheet with holes in it. A cluster of colourful cones made of silk threads trailed from the bamboo mosquito-net pole.

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It's not easy to malinger in a small town. Worried about the situation in Nanjing, I felt as though my soul had been separated from my body. My clever second aunt seemed to realize what was up, as though she had another pair of searching eyes behind her slightly upturned eyebrows. Our talks about the old days had finished and I had no more to tell her about the world. Being too formal was inappropriate and offering a hand seemed to be getting

in her way.

We became more and more estranged from one another. I made one mistake after another. When I poured out too much water for washing and was about to throw it out she stopped me, smiling, let the children wash with it, and then rinsed out a rag before sprinkling it on the floor to keep down the dust. When we had meat, I unthinkingly left some fatty scraps on the table, but I discovered afterwards that she had scooped them up when I wasn't looking, fried them and shared them between the three gleeful little mouths. So I had to keep reminding myself not to make too many blunders. However, the harder I tried, the clumsier I became.

To try to dispel my depression I went out for a walk. Willow Town was unworthy of its name now. Some of the trees were old, some had died and others had been felled. New flat-roofed concrete buildings had been erected next to shabby old houses. Every now and then a brand-new Phoenix bike could be seen in a narrow gray flagstoned alley. There was a red poster on the wall by the bakery on which the slogan "Smash the Tiananinen Counter-revolutionary Incident!" was written. It had been washed white and then gray by rain and most of it .had been torn away. The stream in front of the town flowed as gently as ever and people walked as slowly as they had always done. Like a listless old man, the town plodded on beside the powerful current of the times.

Only the traditional customs remained unchanged. There was no room for secrets in the town. My return for convalescence was already known to every household. My perturbed, pale, thin face aroused suspicion in people's eyes. Even if I just stayed at home, somebody would drop by on the pretext of borrowing something, scan my features to make a concrete diagnosis of my disease and then go to this and that doorway to gather a few mouths together.

Of course there were livelier times too. Knowing that I had come from Nanjing, some of the young workers came and sat beneath the lamp and asked me to describe again and again what it was like at Qingming Festival. How far had the line of demonstrators stretched? How had they blocked the traffic? How many people had carried that giant wreath?

Looking at the listeners' knitted brows and moist eyes, I seemed to relive the event and was unable to conceal my excitement.. However, each time I reached the climax of my story, Second Aunt would urge the guests to rest, a smile on her face as always, but with an element of censure in those searching eyes. =

The workers didn't come again and life became duller and duller. Idlers are often absent-minded and make the same blunders again and again. Fond of tea, I had already reduced myself to three cups a day but the children still asked curiously,

"Don't you feel bloated?"

Embarrassed, I raised my head, but Second Aunt carried on her own business as if she hadn't heard a thing. When I tried to pay her something for room and board, perhaps in a rather clumsy way, she not only refused to accept it but seemed to take offence, saying that I looked down on her. For the next two days she served me fish and meat. How could I stay on?

But my mother wrote that under no circumstances should I go back just then. She also wrote a letter to Second Aunt talking about the old days and sent her a large package of groceries.

The attic became intolerably desolate, as the children's interest in me flagged. Only then did I become more aware of the existence of Scatterbrain.

*

"You're back?"

"Yes."

"Your mother's calling you!"

"She's always doing that."

"Then go quickly or she'll blame me."

"No, she won't."

"Honestly, you really don't understand!"

"What don't I understand? Don't worry, Brother Yu. in a minute I'll—"

"That'll be too late!"

"No, it won't. Work doesn't fly away. It's always there for me to do. I'll.pile it up and do it in one fell swoop. Wouldn't that—"

"Well, if you don't go, I will."

Bewildered, she stepped back, put down my pocket transistor radio and went downstairs feeling hurt.

She usually came to visit me after gathering firewood and having had her breakfast, smelling of sweat and grass. At first she was too shy to come inside and just stood giggling by the doorway. Seeing that I didn't totally

ignore her, her trust in me quickly grew. She watched tongue-tied as I used my buzzing electric razor and a comb and face cream.

On my part, I deliberately turned simple things into mysteries, and cooked up all sorts of stories. I enjoyed the curiosity and enthusiasm sparkling in her eyes. To be frank, in that old house it was only when I was alone with her that I could relax a bit, since with her you didn't have to watch your step all the time. On the contrary, I could even tease her from a position of some authority, although when I thought about it I realized that what I was doing was behaving ruthlessly, like a bully. Because I thought she couldn't harm me, I treated her as a wooden dummy on which to take out my own anxieties.

But she was such a ninny that even if I ignored her she would hang around staring at the book in my hands. Sometimes I would look up and grin and then she would do the same.

"Why are you staring at me like that?" I would asked.

"You're staring too!"

"I think you're silly."

"So are you!"

Once I gave her a pencil and a piece of paper and taught her how to draw the sun, trees, dolls and dogs. She was fascinated, as the pencil wobbled disobediently between her thick-jointed fingers. She drew everything she saw: bowls and chopsticks, stools, sickles, chickens, even mountains and streams. The drawings of course were quite artless but had an original sort of simplicity, making the landscapes and the household utensils seem exceptionally benevolent. She would draw a stove that was unusually spacious, with blazing tongues of fire cheerfully licking at a small iron pot, perhaps because she wanted to speed up the boiling of the water.

Her mechanical daily work routine was thoroughly disrupted. She would collect empty cigarette packs to do "exercises" on. Sometimes she would leave half her household chores undone.

"What horrible scrawls! Why don't you wash the bowls, you idiot!"

A chill ran down my spine every time I heard Second Aunt's shouting, as terrifying as the ominous creaks I heard from the board over my bed in the middle of the night. One day, when Second Aunt had shepherded her grandchildren off to see Erfeng, Scatterbrain came limping up the ladder. I walked over and found she had a deep cut in her foot.

"Ouch, I got jabbed by a bamboo stake!" she explained, grimacing in pain as she picked up a piece of old cotton wadding to wipe the wound. With an exclamation, I grabbed it from her and rushed to the marketing cooperative to buy some bandages, cotton wool and antiseptic powder. Then squatting down, I took her foot and dressed the wound for her. This done, I took out a pair of used nylon socks and helped her to put them on.

At first she was stubborn, hiding her fret while breathing heavily in pain. When finally I stood up, I found her crying. She suddenly clasped my arm and kept calling my name between sobs. Somehow or other it seemed to make the distress in my own heart well up inside me.

"You should thank me," I said, trying to hide my emotion. "Just boil me a few more kettles of water and that'll be enough!"

She didn't believe me at first but then, realizing I meant what I said, she jumped to her feet, and, ignoring the pain, darted across the attic with the wooden floor creaking under her heavy footsteps.

Before long the kitchen became raucous: green bamboo branches exploded in the stove, flames danced and the water in the pot whistled merrily. Suddenly, unexpectedly, she began to sing in a hoarse voice:

Sometimes sunny, sometimes cloudy,
A spring breeze rnstles through the trees.
March breezes are still chilly,
A folksong warms my heart …

How nice it was to hear that! When I was little I'd heard a woodcutter sing it rather mournfully as I was tagging along behind the adults to visit a grave in the mountains. But now Scatterbrain sang it with an entirely different emphasis, vigorous, unrestrained and full of life, igniting a flame in my heart. Oh, poor girl, how hard your life was. And why did I have to hide away in the fare of a turbulent current? Why did people have to have tortuous, suffocating lives?

"Hey, Scatterbrain!" I shouted.

"Yes?"

"Fengzhu!"

"Yes?"
"Sing it again!"
"Okay!"
Sinre there was nobody else home, I just shouted away. She sang even louder and more happily, her tongs and my hands beating time. The wizened granny from next door popped her head in, looked around and then withdrew, eyes wide. Without the slightest misgiving, Scatterbrain swayed as she sang, her large moist eyes gazing brightly at the sky …

*

"Have some tea, Brother Yu!"
From then on Scatterbrain, usually perspiring profusely, came with an earthenware pot at least five times a day.
"You're crazy! Are you running a water shop?"
Finally losing her patience, her mother exploded. I pricked up my ears in my room but could not overhear everything in detail. At lunch Second Aunt was less than usually hospitable and after the meal scolded her daughter again. All of a sudden Scatterbrain kicked over a stool and lunged out of the door. Uneasy, I climbed gingerly up and down the small ladder three or four times but the ground floor was quiet, with no sign of Scatterbrain.
That evening, when the family sat round the table to eat, the door was kicked open. Scatterbrain appeared before us like some primitive giant or a warrior returning from a great war. As well as the bundle on her back, she had an armull of grass. Covered in blades of grass and bamboo leaves, she crossed the hallway with heavy steps and threw the firewood violently on the kitchen floor.
I felt as though my blood had congealed. She bounced out, towel in hand, and lost her temper with her mother,
"Look at how much I get every day! Don't you think it's enough?" Her mother, ashen-faced, abruptly covered her eyes with her hands.
"I'm to blame, I'm—" I stuttered.
"No, I am!" Scatterbrain intetjected. "I want to light the stove! I do! I like doing it!"
She stood with crossed arms in the middle of the room, her blouse torn, chest heaving. The children stared. Wiping her eyes and without uttering a word, Second Aunt filled the bowl with rice and food as usual and got one of the boys to take it into the kitchen, since Scatterbrain never ate her meals at the table.
I knew I had ofiended Socond Aunt and felt that the searching eyes, flashing now with suspicion and increasing reproach, were about to move to the surface. Dafeng's demeanour remained slack and apathetic. Erfeng, cackling as before, was less polite to me and spent most of the time in the kitchen with her mother .
After supper that evening,. in front of the wizened granny and their relative Asan, Erfeng, chuckling while cracking melon seeds, asked Scatterbrain to .show them her coloured socks.
"Why, they're just like a pair of butterflies flying side by side! Scatterbrain, did you know that coloured socks are for brides?" Failing to see the jibe, she blushed.
"Brother Yu gave them to me."
"Exactly! He washed your feet for you, helped you put on your shoes and gave you these socks. Isn't that good enough?"
"Stop that nonsense, Erfeng!" her mother shouted.
"Nobody's better than Brother Yu," Scatterbrain said candidly. The others in the room snickered, waiting to watch the fun. The little ones sprang over to her and put their arms round her neck. Trying to keep herself from laughing, Socond Aunt turned to Erfeng,
"Watch your tongue. Don't make fun of the poor girl any more. Your Brother Yu will get angry with you."
"Really? Brother Yu?" Sweeping her eyes &om left to right, Erfeng giggled,
"I only meant it as a joke. If it bothers you I'll box my own ears and swallow my words."
All I could say, tongue-in-cheek, was that I didn't mind.
"See!" Smugly Erfeng glanced at her mother. Then, stretching out her hand, she turned to Scatterbrain in mock seriousness,
"Give them to me. I don't have a pair of nylon socks like that."
"No, I won't!" Scatterbrain shrank back with the socks so decisively that she narrowly escaped bumping her head against a corner of the table. Erfeng quickly pulled her back and shouted at her,
"I was just sounding you out! Now go quickly and wash and change your clothes. Brother Yu wants to marry you and take you to town. You can ride on buses, live in foreign-style building, draw pictures every day and drink boiled water."

Before she had finished, the whole room rocked with laughter. Erfeng was bent double, the old granny gasped for breath and Asan spewed a mouthful of tea on the table. Dafeng kept patting her chest and her primary school teacher husband laughed so hard that the cigarette end trembled in his fingers.

Amidst the laughter Second Aunt suddenly broke into tears. Erfeng grimaced, stopped cracking melon seeds and took the shoe sole ftom her mother's hands. Stitching the sole she whispered to her mother,

"I mean well, mum. If we got a brother-in-law as good as Brother Yu, why, even thunderbolts would sound like fire-crackers!"

That started her mother laughing again. Scatterbrain chuckled, looking now at me, now at her mother, and then blushed scarlet and lowered her eyes. Keeping my temper with a great effort, I withdrew to the attic and decided to leave the next day or at the latest the day after. After another peal of coarse laughter, Scatterbrain mounted the ladder with a pot of boiling water. Her face was still bright red!

"When … when will we go?" she asked, her head lowered.

One of the little monsters retreated from the doorway and stomped down the ladder.

"They're holding hands! They're holding hands!" he screeched fraudulently. After all the humiliation and petty annoyances I could no longer tolerate being pestered by such a half wit.

"Get out of here, you idiot!" I burst out angrily and pulled the quilt over my head. As I did so, a corner swept across the dressing table and I heard the pot lid drop to the floor and smash.

After a long while I felt something hit me and groped around for it. It was that damned pair of socks rolled into a ball. Without saying a word, Scatterbrain walked slowly back to her room. There was no snoring that night and, strangely, no rustling sounds from overhead either.

*

Outside the window the sheet of rain hung like a screen of pearls.

I was in two minds about leaving. A look of relief flashed across Second Aunt's face although she still urged me to stay. I compromised and postponed my departure for one more day.

Scatterbrain ignored me, sitting apathetically on her usual seat in front of the stove. I walked over to say goodbye to her, but before I could, she started yelling and flew out into the wet alley.

Erfeng arrived unexpectedly that evening.as soon as she'd put down her umbrella, she pulled her mother into another room and mumbled animatedly. Just then I walked into the room, and saw that it was too late to slip out again. They stared at me in panic as though I were a smoking grenade.

"Mum, I'm off now." Erfeng, flustered, rose to her feet and moved to one side.

"He Deyu! He Deyu!" A man with a raincoat draped around his shoulders was standing outside in the rain.

"You're wanted by the town revolutionary committee!"

"What's the matter, Huang?" Second Aunt asked cautiously, after exchanging a look with Erfeng.

"Someone's come from Nanjing, but I don't know what for."

The house was so silent, I heard my heart throbbing. I took a bamboo hat from the wall and walked out into the rain. Erfeng, who had been rooted to the spot, threw down her red umbrella and slumped into a chair. Looking as though she was ready to face anything, she declared to her mother,

"I'm not leaving tonight. As the thankless manager of your affairs, I'll take care of it!"

Two colleagues from the school, assisted by a local public security man, made an investigation. There was no way out except to make a confession. Since I had not disguised my activities there was no point in withholding the facts. Now that hundreds and even thousands of people had already confessed that they were participants in the "counter-revolutionary event," what was the point of offering any resistance? Some of them had sacrificed their lives, some had shed blood. Those who "deserved imprisonment" had already been shackled and those without shame had sold their souls.

As for me, I was no bolder than an ostrich sticking its head in the sand when the storm arrived! After my confession I wandered about the streets, my heart sinking. The leaden sky and the incessant rain merged into a vast, hazy sheet.

When I got back the street lamps had still not been turned on, although the rain had darkened the sky. In the distance, some of the neighbours stood in a group by a doorway with panic-stricken expressions. Seeing me, they scattered, looking over their shoulders as though fleeing from a monster.

The moment I entered the house Erfeng slipped into the inner room like a shadow. She must have got wind of something in advance and hurried here to warn her mother. All the rooms were pitch black. Erfeng's voice drawled out from behind the wall saying that her mother had gone to bed and my food was in the pot.

The stove and the pot were cold, the food was lukewarm and there was of course no boiling water. Scatterbrain

remained sitting motionless as if in a trance, a perfect replica of a stone statue in the dark.

I had to go the following day. It was the only way out. I said goodbye to them from the other side of the wall, having made sure that there were at least two pairs of attentive ears listening. Then I climbed the ladder and lay down At midnight the board hanging overhead fell down with a bang.

*

There's no particular need to recount in detail the thrilling scene that night. It is all ancient history now. There was no coiled python up on the board, although the mice had perhaps turned into "spirits," living there year in and year out. The rustling sounds had been made by their gnawing at the rotten wood or the ropes when they were hungry. Constant effort leads to sure success.

That night they achieved splendid results—everything fell down with a thunderous sound and choking dust. I almost fainted in fright. But I was in luck, for my bed was made of coir ropes. When the first board fell down it hit the head of the bed and made a sort of slide. Other falling objects bounced off the bed frame.

When I came to I felt my head was still on my shoulders but my waist and legs were under a heavy weight. When I moved there was a sharp pain. Second Aunt must have been frightened out of her wits. She kept shouting nervously,

"Erfeng, Erfeng!"

Some of the neighbours, and Oafeng and her husband, who rushed to the scene, stood around clucking while Erfeng shrieked. Only Scatterbrain dashed into my room, turned on the light and, letting out a loud roar of despair like a tigress seeing its dead cub, desperately propped up the weight pressing down on me. My eyes abruptly filled with tears.

Eieng now came in, a sheet round her shoulders, her hands holding it tightly in front of her chest. Through the jumbled pile on top of me I saw her retreat into a corner, stamp her foot and start telling others to give a hand. Not lifting a finger herself, she just shouted orders to Scatterbrain, directing her to do this and that and be quick and careful, as if it was her sister who had caused the disaster. I inwardly cursed her vicious face, pale with fright, and her monstrous yelling.

Covered with sweat and dust, Scatterbrain, panting hard, picked up the fallen things and took them away. Whenever she heard me groan she shoved the others aside and propped up the weight on top of me. Finally she leaned over and picked me up in her strong, trembling arms.

My left leg was fractured and I had to be rushed to the hospital immediately. Before going, they had a discussion as to how to get me there. On a stretcher? On the back of a bike? Dafeng said she couldn't go out at night and her husband declared that he couldn't stand the sight of blood. Second Aunt was ashen with fear and worry. Erfeng gave her a pinch to perk her up a little. Some of the neighbours said they would help carry me but Erfeng mumbled to them that they should think about reporting the matter to the men from Nanjing.

Carrying me on her back, Scatterbrain descended the ladder, quietly shouldered her way through the packed hallway and strode along the damp, gray flagstoned alley. Asan caught up with her, riding a pedi-trailer. She placed me on it and they pushed me a dozen *li*.

*

I remembered clearly that when we left the hospital it was not.vet dawn. Seeing that I was out of danger, Asan excused himself to go to the county market and let Scatterbrain push me back alone.

A golden full moon still hung in the pale blue sky. Several stars were twinkling especially brightly after the rain, like the mischievous, artless eyes of children. All was still except for the sound of the tricycle creaking along the muddy road. It moved forward, slowly and steadily, since Scatterbrain was afraid that the jostling would hurt me. My fractured leg had been put in plaster and then bandaged, and dazzled in the twilight.

"Fengzhu!" I called out weakly.

There was no answer. All I could hear was the creaking of the wheels mingled with the sound of her footsteps. I knew she was still angry with me.

"I'm going very soon," I said emphatically.

Still no reply. Only her panting and the gurgling of water in the roadside ditch. A milky white mist floated over the fields leaving dewdrops on the wheat seedlings shimmering in the morning rays. The fragrance of late broad beans wafted in the air It was a beautiful, tranquil, pure scene but somehow I felt like crying.

"Fengzhu! Fengzhu!" I called in a louder voice, but she stubbornly kept silent. Surrounded by sparse trees, Willow Town could now be seen in the distance, as pale as a wash painting in the morning rays. A rooster in a nearby cottage began to crow.

"I can only stay for a few more days, Fengzhu," I continued sadly. "Do you hate me?"

I felt a cold drop of water fall on me. Raising my head, I saw two trickles of tears on her dust-covered face.
"But you, you don't want to take me."
A vast sadness came &om her husky throat.
I didn't know what to say.
"They, they say you don't like me because I'm ugly and stupid." Her shoulders shook like a weeping child's and her head tilted to one side.
I felt a dull inner pain, a feeling that I owed her something although I didn't know what.
"Come here," I said. "Come to me."
The tricyc1e halted near a small willow tree. She timidly stood under its swaying branches, her milky, mournful eyes full of tears, her face gentle in the moonlight, radiant with a simplicity, grief, sincerity and compliance that I never again beheld on a woman's face.
I spontaneously grasped her large hands, which smelled of sweat and earth, and kissed them again and again. A feeling of gratitude mingled with a kind of gallantry ran through me, and I said passionately,
"Let's go. I'll take you with me!"
In that moment I felt that I still had a little heroism left in me. But she whimpered and struggled free. Then, squatting down, she wept bitterly, her head buried in her hands.
"You're fooling me! I don't believe you! I know that in your eyes I'm only good enough to gather wood or carry water—useless. When necessary you'd make me work and then after that throw me out! Good things always happen to others, but never to me! Brother Yu, I'm no fool, no."

*

What is the most precious thing in this world? How can we measure human feelings? How can you determine a person's worth? Why should hypocrisy so frequently overwhelm sincerity and why do those versed in the ways of the world always bully those who are upright?

*

On the third day after the accident I said farewell to a weary and vexed Second Aunt and to Willow Town, that had bred me and was now driving me out, and started off. Apart from the fact that they had a tractor, my colleagues were like two *yamen* runners escorting a criminal. They rode with me to the county seat to catch a train for Nanjing.
On our way to the county seat Scatterbrain suddenly rushed out carrying that same earthenware pot, filled with tea. Was it to quench my thirst or to send me off! How long had she been waiting there? The tractor braked and she ran over, lowering her red, swollen eyes.
"Please have some tea, Brother Yu," she said in a hoarse voice.
I held back my tears, drained a bowlful and reached out for more. Trembling, she poured me half a bowl and suddenly turned her face to one side, wiping away her tears. Oh, my dear Scatterbrain, turn around, I said to myself, feeling a pain in my heart. Is this the only way we can part?
With a roar the tractor chugged off, but she still stood holding the pot under the sparsely-leaved willow tree. I didn't know whether she turned round or not, for all I could see was her back against a slice of gloomy sky and that soon was hidden from my view by a row of haystacks

*

Six years have passed since I left Willow Town and my leg has long since healed. Aocording to Asan, she still thinks about me, perhaps still longs for me.
It is another bright moonlit night. Where are you, Scatterbrain? I whole-heartedly wish you warmth and happiness in your new beancurd shop and hope that you regain your trust in people! That is all I can do. Forget me, Scatterbrain! I am unworthy of being preserved in your memory. You have a rare, pure heart; you never begrudged your love, even your life. But what can I give you in return?

187.129 Excerpt from **Morning Breeze: A True Story Of China's Cultural Revolution**\fn{by Fulang Lo (1949-)}
Neijiang, Sichuan Province, China (F) 12

Stretching along the banks of a river, my native city is surrounded by green mountains covered with sugar cane and corn plants. Neijiang, a medium-sized city, lies between Chengdu and Chongqing in the southwest province of Sichuan. The river that winds through the city and the valley is a branch of the Yangtze, called the Snake. It shimmers with white clouds and blue sky. Large ferry boats on the river sometimes join together forming a bridge,

and I often walked across this bridge to my school. Here is where I spent my happiest years, with my two best friends Meimei and Suansuan.

I met Meimei on my first day at the Neijiang Dragon Gate High School, where she was standing on the playground holding two ping-pong paddles.

"Play ping-pong?" she asked. Before I could say yes, she handed me a paddle, and we played all morning and became friends. I asked,

"How old are you?"

"Fourteen," she said. "How old are you?"

"Fourteen, too."

Meimei was a very good ping-pong player. Her paddles never left her hands, and wherever she went she bounced on her toes ready to play.

Meimei was tall and thin. She always wore a purple T-shirt, white pants, and white sneakers. Her hair was cut short above her ears, and her skin was honey-colored. Her eyes were round and dark, with long curved eyelashes. Meimei was beautiful.

Meimei had a flute, which she played on her way to school in the morning and on the way home. Sometimes I met her, and asked,

"What is the song you are playing?" She always answered,

"Birds singing."

Suansuan, my other friend, was aloof. Her habit was to sit alone in a corner of the classroom and write poems. She wore thick glasses, and was the only student in our class to wear them. Suansuan was short and a bit chubby. She never cared about her dresses, and many times she wore her socks inside out. She didn't take me as her friend until the first exam scores were posted and I scored highest in English. She spoke to me quickly in a flat voice:

"Will you go with me to the Small Town Inn to have rice wine and cold beans? We can take a boat."

The green mountains seemed to move as the boat glided between them. At the foot of the mountains straw cottages were scattered, large and small. Around the cottages bamboo trees rose up like walls.

The inn, a large sky-blue pavilion, was old and as quiet as a Buddhist temple. The only waiter, an old man with a long white beard, served us bowls of wine and seven small dishes of cold beans. Suansuan said,

"Two plus seven is nine. The number nine symbolizes good luck. In ancient times people believed the sky was formed by nine layers and over the ninth layer was Heaven." Suansuan pointed out the window at the mountain and said,

"That mountain by the Snake River is called the Tortoise. Because the tortoise and the snake are symbols of longevity, the inn was named 'Longevity.'"

The rice wine was sweet, more like a dessert than wine, and fragrant too, like jasmine. Counting the beans in the dishes, I found that each had exactly twenty-seven beans.

"Twenty-seven is three times the number nine. This means good luck, too," I thought and smiled. No wonder the boatman had charged us exactly nine cents to get here.

"I come here to write my poems," Suansuan said and stood up. Lifting her small bowl, she made a toast:

Drink up, life is wine.
Do not wait, it's time.
Drink, drink, life is fine!

Meimei lived near the school in a large brick house. She liked the Small Town Inn too. She often flew kites around Tortoise Mountain and went fishing in the Snake River. I spent a summer vacation at her home. She and her mother lived alone. I didn't see her father, who worked far away in the south of China.

Meimei's mother was kind. She cooked for us and washed our laundry. She enjoyed watching us play ping-pong in the yard, and when she found time she made us big dragon kites. I loved her, and always wished she were my mother.

Meimei played ping-pong two-handed. She taught me how to use my left hand also.

"First, learn to swing your left arm," she directed.""Second, handle chopsticks left-handed at meals."

Gradually, my left hand became skillful, and we played double games with four paddles. That was great fun!

We fished in the cool early morning. Sitting by the river, we waited patiently and caught fish. Meimei said,

"To fish is an excellent way to teach yourself to be patient. Patience is important for everyone." Sometimes we went quite far and fished in a mountain pond. Meimei told me she had once caught a little yellow fish there with four legs.

"But I returned it to the pond," she said. "A strange fish is usually poisonous."

Suansuan liked to invite me for dinner at her home, an apartment with four rooms, very much like mine. Her parents were professors at the University of Agriculture. At their dinners the table was set in a festive way with white silk napkins, silver spoons, and ivory chopsticks. We were not allowed to talk while we ate. Instead, we listened to light music. After dinner we all went out for an evening stroll. Her parents were familiar with all our school books and asked me what subject I liked the best. They told me I was welcome to read in their library, which contained many novels.

Suansuan's parents called her *Erzi*, which means "Son." They called Suansuan's younger sisters, "Number Two Son" and "Number Three Son." They must have wanted sons, I thought.

My mother did not like me to invite my classmates home unless they were poor.

"Don't show flowers to the rich, but send charcoal to the poor," she always said.

She was my stepmother. My own mother died when I was four. My father met my second mother at his office when he worked as a statistician and she, as an accountant. Later, my father got a new job as a supervisor for the largest industrial equipment manufacturer in our region. Then, my mother got a job in a shipping company on the same street. They both got higher wages. My father was a good humored man and he loved her very much. She loved him too. They never quarrelled. They didn't pay much attention to me, but they never spanked me either; I was their "good child."

Our teachers were fond of Meimei. She was a wonderful athlete and good at mathematics. In everything, she was quick and precise. They also had a very high opinion of Suansuan, our class scholar. They said,

"Suansuan is the most talented student we have ever had since the school was established in 1955. She is at the top in all subjects. Her literary writing is the best."

My teachers liked me because I was good at language, art, and history. And I had the ability to organize the students. Shortly after I entered the high school, I became a leader in the Student Union. Our teachers said they were sure that we three would be accepted into the finest universities in China, Qinghua or Peking University.

Three years passed quickly. Both Meimei and I were seventeen and Suansuan was eighteen. Meimei wanted to become an engineer, Suansuan, a writer, and I, an artist.

*

On May 16, 1966, I arrived at school and found all the students and teachers gathered in groups here and there on the campus, writing big signs. They wrote,

LONG LIVE THE PROLETARIAN CULTURAL REVOLUTION!

"What's going on?" I asked the class monitor.

"The Cultural Revolution has begun, and it's going to destroy the old educational system."

"Why is that?"

"The old methods have been producing bourgeois intellectuals. Read today's newspaper! Today the great Cultural Revolution begins!"

I picked up the newspaper from the ground and saw the first page splashed with headlines. One said:

COMRADES, JOIN THE GREAT CULTURAL REVOLUTION LAUNCHED BY OUR GREATEST LEADER CHAIRMAN MAO HIMSELF!

As I was wondering why the headlines emphasized the words "Chairman Mao himself," the school emergency bell rang and we all proceeded to the playground, where the teachers stood on the stage. Their expressions were particularly serious. The school principal began the meeting by announcing:

The great Proletarian Cultural Revolution is an unprecedented revolution in Chinese history, launched by our great leader Chairman Mao himself. This revolution has far-reaching significance, which will be corroborated by Chinese history. From now on, teachers will stop teaching and students will stop studying. All must devote themselves to the revolution. The National Examination for College Entrance scheduled for early July has been postponed.

The Communist Party Secretary of the school walked to the microphone and announced in a loud voice.

"The Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution is a test for everyone. It will distinguish stone from gold and separate the fish eyes from the pearls."

I felt disappointed that the examination was postponed. I looked over at Meimei. She lowered her head. I looked at Suansuan. She gave me a spunky smile, as if nothing had happened.

After the meeting we were told to go to our classrooms to make big signs expressing our attitude towards the Cultural Revolution. We found all the benches in the room piled up, and the tables joined together, creating one big table. Our master teacher came in. He carried a thick roll of white paper, ink bottles, and writing brushes. In a meek voice he said,

"Write, I will get you more paper."

Before noon, our classroom was covered with posters. I looked at the newspaper headlines and copied one in ancient Chinese calligraphy. I signed my name and went home for lunch.

*

The next day most of the teachers seemed to have disappeared. A rumor spread that they had gone to Number 2 High School to study new policies. For the next twenty days we came to school and had nothing to do but make big posters and read the newspapers. One day the newspapers printed this from Chairman Mao:

"All Chinese must criticize the old play, *Magistrate Hairui Loses His Position.*"

None of us had seen the play, so we didn't know what to say about it. Suansuan, however, had read it, and she whispered to me,

"Hairui was a well-known magistrate in the Ming Dynasty four hundred years ago. According to the play, he loved the people and tried again and agai.n to persuade the emperor to be merciful, and for this reason Hairui was considered a troublemaker, a disobedient magistrate. He lost his position."

We didn't understand the reason for Chairman Mao's directive, but we had always been taught to follow any directive by our government leaders and had never questioned this. So we all designed big posters with quotations from the newspapers attacking the play.

Meimei became silent. She didn't play ping-pong anymore. Instead of her purple T-shirt, she wore a black blouse. One afternoon I suggested we go fishing together, but she said sadly,

"I'm afraid I can't be your friend anymore because I am from a capitalist family. It would get you in trouble."

Before I could stop her, she ran off.

I didn't believe Meimei was from a capitalist family. A capitalist child would be spoiled. Meimei was not spoiled. A capitalist home would have many servants. Meimei's home had none. Meimei's mother had washed my clothes and cooked for me when I stayed with them. I couldn' believe her mother was a capitalist. She was a good woman, a kind woman. She was the best mother in the world!

I went to see Meimei later that day. She was not home. Her mother explained to me why they were labeled a capitalist family.

"When Meimei's father was a child he worked in a tobacco factory. He worked for his boss for nineteen years. The boss was an old man who had no children. Before the old man died, he adopted Meimei's father. He left a will that said, 'I give my house and factory to this young man. In return he must take care of his adoptive mother and support her until she dies.' Because of the house and the factory, my family has been listed as a capitalist family. But we don't own the factory. It was taken over by the government many years ago."

*

At a school meeting on another day, a student from a poor peasant's family made the following speech:

The first goal of the revolution is to clarify class lines. Those who are from the poorest peasant families or the poor factory workers' families are the Red Sort. They are revolutionaries. Those who come from a capitalist family or a landlord family or a well-off peasant family are the Black Sort. They are enemies. The rest are the Gray Sort, who will either be revolutionaries or enemies-depending on their attitude towards the revolution. If they stand on the side of the revolution, they will become revolutionaries. Otherwise they will be enemies.

From now on, the Black Sort are not allowed to smile or to cry. Their smiles mean they are laughing at the revolution; their tears are shed for their lost past. The Black Sort are not allowed to sing songs because their voices are poison arrows directed towards the revolution.

Suansuan and I both were considered the Gray Sort, although my family background was regarded as less dangerous than hers. My parents were not professors—who were called Reactionary Academic Authorities—and they had no religious beliefs. All religious groups were labelled “Reactionary Guilds.” Suansuan’s grandfather was religious; he believed in Buddha.

Suansuan ignored the Cultural Revolution as much as possible. It didn’t matter to her who the Red Sort or the Black Sort were. She still went often to the Small Town Inn and wrote poems.

*

One evening Suansuan came to my house to tell me that the libraries of the University of Agriculture were going to burn books. Literature books, art books, and music books—all were called “Poisonous Grasses” and were being thrown out of the library! She said the pile of books was as high as a mountain.

“Why don’t we go take them when no one is watching?” she said. It seemed like a good idea, and, when I agreed, she smiled and quoted an old saying:

“A scholar who steals books should not be called a thief.”

That evening we went to see the mountain of books. There was no guard there, so each of us filled a schoolbag with books. On the road near our homes, we laid out all the books in the moonlight and divided them evenly. One of the best books I got was *Art Philosophy.* It was filled with nearly a hundred pictures of oil paintings neither of us had ever seen before. Suansuan found a most wonderful novel, *Marx’s Youth.* It described the romantic love between Marx and his fiancée. We could hardly believe the great founder of Communism had had such a private life.

There were only four students in our class qualified as the Red Sort. They established a revolutionary organization called the Red Guard, just as students in the cities of Peking and Shanghai had done earlier. The government newspaper reported,

> The Red Guard Organization is new and vital. The Red Guards are iron fists. The Red Guards are Generals of Heaven. The Red Guards will defend our great leader, Chairman Mao. The Red Guards will sweep dirty old water from the earth. The Red Guards will destroy the old world and create a new world.

The four Red Guards at our school wore red arm bands, and painted new slogans everywhere on the campus:

THE DRAGON’S SON IS A DRAGON,
A PHOENIX’S SON IS A PHOENIX,
BUT A RAT’S SON CAN ONLY DESTROY THE GROUND
BY MAKING HOLES IN IT!

*

MY FATHER IS A HERO, SO I AM A HERO;
YOUR FATHER IS A BAD EGG, SO YOU ARE A BAD EGG!

*

BLACK SORTS, RAISE YOUR HANDS!
IF YOU DON’T OBEY, I WILL SLAUGHTER YOU!

The Red Guards in my class had actually been dull students who got the worst marks. I felt they welcomed the Cultural Revolution because it abolished the university entrance examination, which they probably could not have passed. The Red Guards began holding political meetings at the school, and everyone was required to attend. Their first lecture was called “Revolutionary Family History Education.”

They preached to us about their own bitter family backgrounds. A female Red Guard appeared first on stage. She said,

“My father was a rickshaw-puller. One summer noon, he pulled a rich couple uphill. It was hot, and the sun was like fire. He was tired. He strained to pull the rickshaw. Suddenly his bladder dropped out. The urine wet his pants.”

When she sat down the other guards cheered. A male Red Guard then spoke,

"My father lived in a shabby straw hut. One night it caught fire. My father fought against it. He fought all night. The next morning his tooth ached. He had lost the ability to bite a pickled cucumber."

Suansuan burst out laughing. I knew she was laughing at the two stupid speakers and their fathers. I bit my lip to control myself, or I would have laughed out loud too. Meimei lowered her head. She was not allowed to express emotion. All the Black Sort lowered their heads like Meimei. There were seven. Most of my class were Gray Sorts—there were forty-five of us.

The school Communist Youth League secretary was a Gray Sort, too. Her father was a wine-seller and her mother a butcher. She followed the Red Guards around, flattered them and parroted their words. One day she created a huge poster. It read,

I would rather have my head cut off
than not defend
the great Mao Tse-tung's thought!

To show her determination, she bit her index finger and smeared blood on the poster. Overnight, her action earned her the title "Woman Hero," and made her a favorite of the Red Guards. To memorialize the occasion Suansuan wrote a poem dedicated to her:

Daughter of a wine seller,
Daughter of a butcher,
A grin on your face,
A knife in your hands.

Meimei kept her head lowered all day long. She refused to talk to me. One afternoon I found her alone in the school bathroom. She tried to run out. I grabbed her. I saw that her eyes were red and tearful. Again she ran off, and I could not stop her. Walking home alone, I stopped at the river and took a boat to the Small Town Inn. I sat by the window, thinking of Suansuan's poem for Meimei:

Lift your head high like a stallion,
Young one.
Do not bow down under your burden.

"Burden?" I said. "It's not a burden. It's a mountain. Meimei carries a mountain which I can see but cannot help remove."

Out the window the sunset was dim and red and made the river look like blood.

*

In July, the school principal announced a new order from the local government:

"Two-thirds of the high school graduates are to go to isolated mountain villages to lead the Socialist Education Movement, to 'spread revolutionary seeds.' One-third of the students are needed to stay at the school."

Suansuan and I were listed in the group that was leaving. But Meimei was not going. All the Black Sorts like Meimei were put in small groups, which had four Red Guards, Black Sorts, and eight Gray Sorts. The Gray Sorts in Meimei's group were of a special type, like the Woman Hero, whose name headed the list.

The night before we left for the mountain villages, Suansuan and I decided to say goodbye to Meimei. We wanted to promise that we would be her true friends. We wanted to give her half of the university books we had saved from the burning. We wrapped them in newspapers that were filled with revolutionary headlines so that they wouldn't cause her trouble.

Her house was dark; nobody was there. We waited for nearly two hours. Finally we knocked on the neighbor's door. The neighbor told us that Meimei and her mother had moved away and had left no address. The commune officials had ordered them to leave, and the house was going to become the commune office the next day.

We left early in the morning. It was raining. A muddy truck took Suansuan and me and another thirty-six students away. Suansuan sat beside me. We didn't talk. The truck passed by the Small Town Inn, the Snake River, and Meimei's house, which grew smaller and smaller and then faded away.

*

It was two o’clock in the afternoon when the truck stopped in Ganyang city, 100 miles to the west. We had been in the truck for six hours. A short, middle-aged man received us, an intellectual.

“I am the Mayor’s secretary. Welcome. You will stay here for nine days of training, then proceed to mountain villages to spread revolutionary seeds. This is the way for you to carry out the Socialist Education Movement.”

He spoke with a smile and pointed out two classrooms for us to stay in, one for the boys and one for the girls. He distributed food coupons to us, and instructed us to be in the auditorium at eight next morning.

As we opened our bedrolls and spread them on the floor, we saw other groups of students arriving and heard the secretary repeating his welcome. The students were from other cities far away. .

It was too early for supper, so after a shower, Suansuan and I decided to go for a walk. The town was small. It had only one street. At the end of the street, stood a white tower, narrow and very high. Beside the tower we noticed a sign that read **WHITE TOWER TEMPLE**. Under these characters was a line of smaller characters:

“The White Tower Temple has controlled the River Spirit for a thousand years.”

We both laughed. The river behind the tower was wide and strong, a branch of the mighty Yangtze. How could the little tower control it? Suddenly I felt sad. The river reminded me of Snake River, of Meimei.

*

The next morning, in the auditorium, the Mayor’s secretary announced who the student leaders would be. Each school had one, and I was declared the student leader for our school. After that, he asked us to go to an adjacent room for a meeting.

Two men sat in there, young and energetic-looking. They wore starched military uniforms. They stood up when we entered, shook hands with us, and told us they were Deng He, and Yong Tian, students of the Radar Military Academy in Chongqing. And they had been assigned to the He Feng commune to carry out the revolution fifty miles away.

“We have been assigned to train you,” Deng He said, “and teach you the four military principles: be united, alert, serious, and strong. We ask you, the student leaders, to wake up your students every morning at six so they can do exercises. There will be ten minutes for breakfast, and then bring them to the auditorium at eight. We’ll teach you how to lead the revolution in the countryside. The class struggle is complex, and so you must be very careful.”

Before the meeting was dismissed, Deng He opened his notebook and read off our names. As he called mine, he looked up at me. We walked back to the auditorium. Just before I entered, Deng He stopped me and asked,

“Could you tell me, what is the meaning of your name?”

“Morning Breeze,” I said, and hurried in. At the meeting the Mayor’s secretary addressed us:

“Your task is to wash hands and wash feet. You will find these hands and feet in the capitalist fortresses dirtied by thick capitalist dust. You must use the hot water of the revolution to wash them. Your water must be very hot. It must be over a hundred degrees. The revolutionary water is Mao Tsetung’s thoughts. They will be found in the documents that you are going to study during the next nine days. You must consume the spirit of the documents. That is your spiritual food. Nourished by them, you will be strong enough to go into the capitalist fortresses to wash hands and wash feet. Then you will draw the capitalists out of the fortresses and force them to walk the Socialist Road.”

In the afternoon we were asked to discuss the significance of the “Wash Hands and Wash Feet Campaign.” Some boy students joked,

“We must use boiling water to wash them. It must be a thousand degrees. If they will not permit us to wash them, we will pour the boiling water all over them and scald them to death.”

In the evening we studied by ourselves. The first document we were asked to study was entitled “Wash Hands and Wash Feet.” It consisted of twenty-three points that formed the policies for the Socialist Education Movement. We had to study together in designated rooms so that the Mayor’s secretary could easily check up on us. While we studied, Deng He and Yong Tian came to deliver red badges on which were written “Socialist Education Work Team” in yellow characters.

Deng He sat down beside me and asked what my father did and how he had selected such a good name for me. He also asked how old I was. I told him my father was a statistician, and that he had given me this name because I was born in the early morning in summer. I told him I was seventeen.

*

The next morning I woke up my schoolmates at six o’clock. We all ran down to the playground where Deng He and Yong Tian were waiting. They taught us military morning exercises in which we had to jump a lot. Then

they ran us in formation around the town. Breakfast was a bread roll, a boiled egg, and rice porridge. I ate less than half the bowl of the rice porridge because I was not used to eating in such a hurry.

At eight, we filled the auditorium. Deng He was on the stage. He led us in a revolutionary song, *We Are a Family of Poor Peasants*. After we sang for about twenty minutes, the Mayor's secretary brought a young skinny man in dirty black work clothes onto the stage.

"Comrades!" the skinny man shrieked in a strong northern accent. "I come here to teach you how to use hot water to wash the newly-born capitalists in the countryside." His first sentence made all of us laugh because, with his accent, the words "hot water" sounded more like the words for "fresh excrement," and the word "capitalists" sounded more like "myself."

He pounded his fist on the table. This stopped our laughter. He went on to say,

"Thus, we can make the water hotter. They are afraid of our proletarian iron fists. We musn't be polite!"

The words made us laugh again because, with his accent, he seemed to be saying,

"They are afraid of our proletarian iron heads. We musn't cough at them. Just at that moment he accidently sneezed a big sneeze.

*

The next morning we were taken out by the Mayor's sec- retary to see a "Class Struggle Exhibition." The exhibits contained many old coins, old silk robes, and gold basins. The guide told us that all the old things had been confiscated from landlords and capitalists.

"They keep these things because they have nostalgia for their lost past," he said. "They will never stop trying to restore their lost paradise."

On the fourth morning we were asked to watch a political movie titled, "The Vietnamese Are Our Lip and Tooth Friends." It showed how the North Vietnamese were resisting the imperialists. As the movie started, these lines appeared on the screen:

"Now the imperialists are invading Vietnam. At the same time they are cooperating with the class enemies in our country. The class enemies who daydream of taking advantage of the Cultural Revolution to overthrow our government. We must watch out." Suansuan nudged me and whispered in my ear,

"What nonsense."

The fifth day we listened to "poor family histories." Two peasant women were on the stage. One carried a baby in her arms. When she moved the microphone close to begin speaking, the baby cried. She quickly unbuttoned her blouse and pulled out her breast. We bent our heads as low as we could, embarrassed to see her nakedness. The woman told us that her father and grandfather had worked all their lives for a landlord. The landlord was cruel, and he made them eat leftovers.

The other woman said her mother had been a capitalist's housekeeper for twenty years, but was fired because she accidentally lost one of the family's socks. She lost it in the river where she washed the laundry. Both women ended their speeches with the same shouts:

"Down with the landlord class! Down with the capitalists! Never forget class bitterness! Never forget to take revenge on the class enemies!"

*

The remaining days we made hundreds of posters of Chairman Mao's sayings.

"Choose the saying from Chairman Mao that can solve your problem," the Mayor's secretary said. "Chairman Mao is truth. His thoughts can solve all of your problems. Chairman Mao's quotations are the doctor's prescriptions that can cure diseases of the mind. Set the doctor beside your pillow so you can see him every morning and every evening. In this way you will never be sick with *bourgeois* diseases."

For our posters, most of us chose the quotation, "We are friends, we come from different provinces, we must help each other." Suansuan wrote a quotation from the ancient Chinese philosopher, Lao Zi:

"The Heavenly Father sends everyone to earth as king, so long as he is diligent in learning, thinking and acting." I asked her:

"Why do you write Lao Zi's quotation in- stead of Chairman Mao's?" She grinned and said:

"Chairman Mao once quoted this in his speech. Now I am quoting from his speech."

I usually stayed up late at night to read and think. Before I went to bed, I always took a shower in the public bathroom outside the building. Many nights I met Deng He, who was walking alone. He always greeted me,

"Hello, Little Devil. How are you this evening?"

"I'm fine, thank you," I would answer.

*

On the ninth evening Deng He organized a farewell party for us. He asked each school to perform one or two skits at the party. Our school comedian, Xian Hui, offered to represent our school.

The auditorium now became our theater with green curtains hung on the stage. Deng He performed first, singing a revolutionary song, *A Lamp Shines in Chairman Mao's Window*. He had a good voice and stage presence, and he was handsome.

Comrade Yong was next. He demonstrated military boxing.

Then it was our school's turn. When the curtain opened, Xian Hui was standing with her back to us. There was no music. She wore a deep brown robe. Her hair was in a bun tied with a large red ribbon. Before we realized what was going to happen, she spun around and gave a big smile. Her almond eyes and two protruding front teeth made her smile great fun, and all the audience laughed. She then quit smiling and bowed, announcing her show. Her voice was a high-pitched falsetto.

"An Egg," she said.

Stepping this way and that with small light steps, she opened and closed her hands like flowers. A delicate wail arose from her hands, from small pieces of bamboo that she pressed together and then released. She sang to the accompaniment of music:

"In Village Wang lives Fortune Wang. He is famous for being lazy. And famous for good luck. One day he strolls out and finds an egg on the road. 'Thank the Fortune Buddha,' he says, and picks it up. He sets the egg in his palm and gazes at it. He gazes hard at it, and sees a wonder. The egg can be hatched into a chicken, a chicken will lay more eggs. The eggs can be hatched into more chickens, the chickens will lay still more eggs. He says, 'I will sell the eggs to buy a little lamb. The little lamb will grow into a big lamb. I will sell the big lamb to buy a little cow. The little cow will grow into a big cow. I will sell the big cow to buy a little horse. The little horse will grow into a big horse. I will ride the big horse to visit a rich woman. I will ask her to marry me, and then, I Fortune Wang, will be Rich Wang.' Suddenly he tripped and slipped. His egg fell and broke."

Xi an Hui stopped singing. The music stopped. She faked a big cry, and threw herself to the ground. The curtain dropped. Our Xian Hui earned a storm of applause.

*

It was late in the evening after I took a shower and started back. Deng He met me on the way.

"How nice to see you, Little Devil," he said, and took my hand.

"Xian Hui from your school is a fine actress. But remember, never give that performance again. It was written by a rightist who used *An Egg* to attack The People's Commune established by Chairman Mao in 1958. The author meant to say that The People's Commune is an empty dream that ends up as a broken egg."

I was upset to hear that. I looked at the moon. It was a full moon, reminding me that this was the middle of July, the time I should have been taking the National Examination for College Entrance. Two months had passed since the Cultural Revolution began, two months that would never come to me again. Did the moon know what had happened here on earth?

"Little Devil, I feel sad because you are leaving. When can I see you again?"

His voice was soft. I turned to look at him, trying to make sure what he said.

"See my white shirt. There are so many spots here and there that make it a black shirt."

I turned to watch the moon again. A breeze stirred; it was gentle and cool.

"Breeze," he exclaimed. "Morning Breeze. Beautiful! You are beautiful. You are the most beautiful girl I've ever known. Will you write to me? Please write to me."

I was so surprised that I rushed to my room without answering.

Lying on my bed, I couldn't sleep, my heart beat very fast. I heard the clock chime one. I tried harder to sleep. Then I heard the clock chime two, then three, then four, and then I got up to pack. A steamboat would carry us across the river at five o'clock, and trucks would take us to the mountain villages, to the communes. My commune was to be the Three Stars Commune, thirty miles away.

At the pier I saw Deng He. I pretended I didn't notice him, and walked onto the boat. When the boat started off, all the students waved to him and called goodbye. I covered my face wth my straw hat.

*

The young peasant guide and I walked silently from one bare field to another in the late, hot afternoon. The sun was scorching, the fields of wheat stubble looked extremely vast, and I felt very small. The guide had met me at the Three Stars Commune office, and told me I was being sent to a bandit village, the Three Stars Village. After we crossed the fifth field the Three Stars Village came into view—thatched-roof houses scattered randomly about, shabby and low. We entered the village, where an old lady of about seventy was standing by a door.

“She is your hostess,” the guide told me. “She is Grandma Li.”

I entered Grandma Li's house where two older men politely received me. These were Monitor Ding and the Political Commissar.

“Welcome to our Educational Work Team,” they said and shook my hand.

“Our work team has now grown to twelve members,”the Political Commissar told me with a smile. Monitor Ding was a skinny man with a serious face. He wore a clean, faded blue shirt, like any peasant leader. The Political Commissar was short, round and smiling. Like an intellectual, he wore two pens in his white shirt pocket. As we drank tea, Monitor Ding told me that ninety-five percent of the villagers were bandits before the revolution. They had led the Three Stars Bandit Uprising in 1950, in an attempt to drive out the Communists. That was why this commune was called the Three Stars. The Political Commissar tried to encourage me:

“Don’t be afraid,” he said, “you will do a good job. We will support you. All the comrades in this work team will support you.”

“Where are they?” I asked.

“They are in different villages, just miles away,” Monitor Ding said.

“Are there any students in the team?” I asked the Political Commissar.

“No,” he said. “They are factory workers, retired soldiers, and clerks, but they are very nice. They have been in this commune for over a month. They have experience in how to wash hands and wash feet. They will help you.”

*

Grandma Li’s house had two rooms, and mine was a small, neat one at the back. The earthen floor was clean. There was a double bed, a desk and a new wooden bucket—my toilet. In the mud wall behind the bed I saw a little bamboo door. I opened it: a huge black mountain started almost from the doorstep, blocking the sky. Frightened, I slammed the door shut. Just then, Grandma Li called me to dinner.

There were bowls of wheat porridge and pickled cucumbers on the table by her bed. We sat down and ate. Grandma Li seemed not to want to talk to me. After dinner, she brought me a basin of warm water and a fresh towel. I washed my dusty face, which made the water muddy. She took the same water and began to wash herself with it.

“Oh, no, Grandma Li!” I said; “Don’t use it, I will warm you some clean water.”

She ignored me. And then when she finished, she said,

“We have only one well. It’s far behind the mountain, and we don’t have enough firewood for cooking, so we don’t often have warm water.” I was touched by this and I offered,

“Grandma Li, I will carry water for you every day.”

I took five *yuan* from my pocket and insisted she use it to buy some firewood. Grandma Li refused, saying she was paid by the Commune for taking care of me. But she gradually grew talkative and friendly, and she saw me to bed that night.

*

The next morning I got up early, went to the well, and carried water home. After breakfast, Monitor Ding and the Political Commissar arrived.

“We have come here to hold a village meeting,” they said, “to show you how to wash hands and wash feet. This village remains a closed bottle because its former team leader, Liu Zhenwen, is a stubborn element. We must start political surgery on him. Chairman Mao teaches us: ‘Use scissors to cut a sparrow, beginning with the head.’”

When Monitor Ding blew his whistle, all the villagers dragged themselves into the yard—old and young, men and women, children and babies. They found space and sat down on the grass. Monitor Ding stood before them and declared in a loud voice,

“Comrades, it is high time for you to confess your crimes. We have checked on every one of you and discovered the serious crimes you have committed. There is no way for you to escape. I urge you to confess right now, to wash hands and wash feet by yourselves. If you fail to confess, we will wash them for you. But by then, don’t complain if the water is too hot. Revolution accepts no excuse and has no mercy. Believe it!”

The villagers were silent. A man finally stood up, walked towards me, and said,

“I want to confess my crime to you.”

I quickly stood up and looked at Monitor Ding. He nodded permission. I went with the man out of the yard. Sitting in a field, he said:

“My name is Liu Zhenwen.”

“Liu Zhenwen, the former leader?” I asked.

"Yes, I used to be."

"What are you going to tell me about?" I opened my notebook.

"I am a criminal. In 1958 I helped carry out the Deep-Plough-Land Movement. It brought death to my people. Half of them died of hunger. This movement called for digging the fields two meters deep, and burying seeds there. The following year nothing grew. My people had to eat grass, tree bark, leaves, and mud." He paused.

"Grandma Li's three children died in one day. They were buried in one grave. Blind Grandpa Zhou's two sons died too." He paused again.

"Peasants called me father, because I was a village leader, but I could only watch them die at my feet." He looked away.

"Mr. Liu is a good man, I'm sure," I immediately decided, and put my notebook aside.

I remembered the Deep-Plough-Land campaign. It was part of the People's Commune movement launched in 1958 by Chairman Mao. The goal was to bring more crops from the land. I was ten years old then, in grade school. All the teachers talked about the campaign, telling us "the two-meter-deep land will grow peanuts as big as potatoes, and cotton bolls as big.as a baby's round face." And there was a Saturday afternoon.

After the music teacher taught us a song, *The Deep-Plough-Land Movement Is Excellent*, we hurried to have supper, then followed him to a village to "entertain" the villagers.

"They are carrying out Chairman Mao's campaign," the teacher instructed us.

That was a cold winter night. The mountain wind blew, making a sound like animals screaming. In the fields I saw a great many political slogans on paper flags hanging in the trees. And under the kerosene lamps I saw the villagers digging into the ground. The holes were so deep I was worried I might fall in.

The next year one-third of my classmates died of hunger. As a boarding student then, I remembered how for many months each of my meals had been just three little boiled yams.

Mr. Liu began to puff on his pipe.

"Did any village leader reject the Deep-Plough-Land Movement?" I asked.

"Yes, but they were beaten to death. The village leader of the No. Two Team Village was beaten for three days."

"Who beat them?"

"People from other villages."

I had heard of that, too, when I was ten. Mr. Liu was telling the truth. Then I asked him,

"Are ninety-five percent of the villagers here bandits?"

"No," he was sure.

"Then how did the commune get the name, the Three Stars?"

"It is because of a pavilion not far from here. It is shaped like a triangle. Our people call a triangle 'three stars.'"

"But I heard that there'd been a reactionary uprising called the 'Three Stars.'" He shook his head and told me that it was a made-up story.

The next morning I reported to Monitor Ding and the Political Commissar that Mr. Liu was innocent. But the monitor said,

"He is a blatant class enemy! He seized on the small shortcomings in the Deep-Plough-Land Movement to attack the People's Commune Movement launched by Chairman Mao." They both said,

"You mustn't be so naïve."

*

Two weeks passed. Monitor Ding and the Political Commissar assigned me many documents to study and constantly reminded me that I must try to raise my political consciousness. I read them during the day at Grandma Li's house. Sometimes I held a meeting to read aloud the documents to the villagers. But I spent most of my evenings visiting the peasants after they returned from the fields. They seemed friendly to me, and called me Little Comrade. They came to visit me too, at Li's house, to "confess" their "crimes." One villager "confessed" that he had taken home an old broom that belonged to the village. A woman confessed that she had taken some dry peas from the fields and put them into her own pockets. A young boy confessed that he had said that Marshal Lin Piao's eyebrows looked like two worms.

"My crime is most serious because I said such a bad thing about a government leader," he said.

Blind Grandpa Zhou lived at the end of the village with his aged wife. When I learned the villagers carried water for the couple by turn, I joined in. Besides, I often helped them with sewing and mending.

At night, at Grandma Li's there were many mosquitoes. While reading, I had to wear long-sleeved shirts and thick pants to protect myself. This made me sweat. To save firewood, I washed myself with cold water, and discovered that the water from the well was icy cold even in summer.

Monitor Ding and the Political Commissar often dropped in to see me. They seemed satisfied with my work, saying I had opened the "closed bottle" since so many villagers had confessed. The Political Commissar once joked with me,

"Your water is really hot." They also told me they had moved into a nearby village office three *li* away, and asked me to report my work to them at any time.

The villagers seemed to enjoy chatting with me while I was eating supper. They sat on the floor or on Grandma Li's bed. They told me they seldom went to see a doctor. When they got sick, they warmed their feet in hot water, and, if very ill, fasted for a whole day.

"It really works," they declared. When one of their children got sick, they would say "the child is not pretty."

I liked the village girls very much. They were simple, honest and sweet. They were curious about my clothes. I let them open my suitcase to look through my clothes and try them on. One day they saw my sanitary napkins, and asked what they were for.

"For my period," I said.

"What? You also have a period? We thought only country girls had that thing."

Red was their favorite color.

"Why do all of you like the same color?" I asked one day.

"It chases ghosts away."

"Where are the ghosts?"

"Everywhere." Then they showed their red paper wallets to me.

"You see, we use red paper to make wallets so we won't meet thieves and never lose money." They opened their wallets and I found none had more than a few coins.

*

One day a letter came from Deng He. My heart beat fast. He wrote:

> Dear Little Devil,
>
> I have been wondering how things are going with you. You must be busy getting yourself adjusted to new conditions, just as I did when I came to the commune. It took me three weeks to adjust.
>
> May I tell you something more about myself? I was born in 1946, in Yi Bing. It is a handsome city, where three rivers meet, the Lin Jiang, Min Jiang, and Jialing Jiang. The waters of the Lin Jiang and Jialing Jiang are so clear you can see the sand on the bottom, and from far away they look like emerald-colored silk ribbons. Min Jiang flows from the Yellow River so it is always yellow. My home is on the banks of the river. Day and night I can hear the roaring of the waters. I like watching the many white-sailed boats that pass by and I often hear the chanting of the trackers. My father, who died many years ago, was a writer. My mother is a painter in water colors. As a child I often sat with mother in front of the house, under the willows, and painted the scenery. I have three brothers, all of whom are now military commanders. I am the youngest in the family, and my mother loves me best.
>
> The day I left home for the military academy was my eighteenth birthday. Mother walked with me all the way to the door of the train. As the train started to move she stood there alone on the platform for a long long time. I knew she was crying. Ever since, I've come to feel that the most painful thing in life is to have to say goodbye. So, now when I return home I always tell mother not to give me any kind of send-off when I leave again. I myself never give anyone a send-off either. I'm afraid to say goodbye.
>
> But that day you went away I did want to see you off. That morning I walked back and forth along the dock, hoping I'd be able to see you again. . .
>
> My home is only 200 *li* away from yours. I wish so much you could come to visit me there someday.
>
> Today I am writing to you, alone in my room. It is late in the evening. Today is my twentieth birthday. I am so happy to be able to write you. I miss you very much. The first time I saw you, I had an unexplainable feeling about you. Please be kind enough to write to me. I am waiting for your letter.
>
> Deng He

In the envelope I found a few stamps. He must have thought that I had no money to buy stamps. I wrote to him:

> Dear Comrade Deng,
>
> Thank you very much for your letter. My village is in the mountains and has ninety-six villagers. They are kind to me, although they know I am a student. I have no idea how they found out I am a student. Maybe it is because of something that happened on the third day after my arrival. I was walking along a narrow road by a flooded rice paddy. The road was wet and slippery, and several times I nearly slid into the water. It amused me and made me laugh out

loud. When I reported this incident to my monitor and the Political Commissar, they instructed me not to laugh in front of the villagers, because I am not a student any more but in the ranks of revolutionary cadres. And a revolutionary cadre must be very serious.

I will say goodbye to you now.

Little Devil

He wrote me again in a week, and gave more details about his family. His grandfather had been a magistrate during the Qing Dynasty and had left a great many valuable books, including sets and sets of original Tang Dynasty and Song Dynasty poems, some Yuan Dynasty plays, and some Qing Dynasty novels. Deng He's father had started writing at seven. He had won recognition for his poetry and short stories.

After reading this second letter, I thought about his family, an intellectual family, and wondered how they had managed to get positions in the military for all their children. Such positions led to a comfortable life, political preference, and other special treatment. He must have been born into a high-ranking official's family, I concluded, and put his letter at the bottom of my valise.

I did not like the children of high-ranking officials. Too often they were spoiled.

After supper, I decided to visit Mr. Liu's home. I was determined to prove that Mr. Liu was not a class enemy but a good man. Standing outside his window, I saw both he and his wife reading a small book by the light of an oil lamp. The book cover was red, a certain sign that it was one of Chairman Mao's works. They were reading intently. I decided not to disturb them and went on to visit neighbor Zhen's home.

I was shocked to find Mr. and Mrs. Zhen, his mother, and their five sons sitting on the earthen floor naked except for undershorts. Mrs. Zhen explained to me that they didn't have enough clothes to wear. They saved the few they had for going into the village. She also told me that they didn't have enough rice bowls for all to eat at the same time, and so she and her mother-in-law had to eat after the others had finished.

*

That night I tossed in my bed, feeling guilty. For seventeen years I had never given the peasants a thought. Those who produced food for me had to struggle for their own survival. At about one o'clock I heard raindrops, then a downpour. Our house was leaking. Grandma Li and I got up to hunt for basins, buckets, and pots to catch the rain.

I thought of blind Grandpa Zhou and rushed to his house. His door was open and I saw Mr. Liu inside, helping Mrs. Zhou sweep the rain water from the floor. In one corner stood blind Grandpa Zhou on crutches. The water seemed under control.

On my way back in the dim light I saw almost every family fighting the rain. I rushed to the village office to get Monitor Ding and the Political Commissar. I banged and kicked at the door, and called,

"Get up, get up!" When they opened the door I pulled them out, shouting,

"Come quick! It's a tragedy! We must do something!"

They finally understood what I wanted and they smiled. Monitor Ding asked,

"You walked all this way in the rain? It is already two o'clock in the morning!" Then they accompanied me home. The Political Commissar warned,

"Don't walk alone at night anymore. This is a bandit area."

When morning came, I called an emergency meeting and organized a group of young peasants to repair the leaking houses. Many families donated bamboo, wood, and wheat stalks. We worked hard, and before evening, had repaired all the roofs. Monitor Ding and the Political Commissar praised me highly. They recommended me to the Ganyang city government as an "Advanced Revolutionary Cadre," and nominated me for membership in the Communist Party.

"You are a qualified Communist because you do things according to our great leader Chairman Mao's teaching: 'Serve the people with your heart and soul.'"

As a result, the Ganyang city government held a meeting of four hundred people to honor me. Every student who was a work team member was present, and, as an award, the Mayor gave me a handsome notebook. I did not understand, though, why they should nominate me to become a Communist Party member. After all, the houses I'd helped repair belonged to "bandits." Or, didn't they really believe they were bandits either?

On the sixth week a new policy came down from Peking—from Chairman Mao. It was announced that all students must immediately return to school. Monitor Ding and the Political Commissar came to see me. They looked sad. They held my hands in theirs, and silently sat beside me for a long time.

"Why does Chairman Mao send us back to school in such a hurry?" I asked.

"There is something urgent," the Political Commissar answered. "Chairman Mao announced the policy in Shanghai last night. The policy states that to send the Educational Work Teams to the countryside is wrong."

"You mean to wash hands and wash feet is not correct?" I asked. They didn't answer. Monitor Ding merely said,

"Our work team is going to be dismissed next week."

That night I wrote to Deng He, giving him my school address. Then I packed. I was to leave early next morning. Grandma Li shed tears as she saw me to bed. After an early breakfast I left two cakes of scented soap I had brought with me on Grandmother Li's bed, and I opened the door.

To my great surprise, I saw the yard was packed solidly with villagers. They were standing in complete silence, waiting to see me. Emotion overcame me. Many were crying. Grandpa Zhou touched my face with his hand and said,

"I hate that my eyes can't see you."

The villagers walked with me down to the river. No one talked. Grandpa Zhou, on his crutch, walked shoulder to shoulder with me. Mr. Liu carried my bags onto the boat. Holding my hands in his own, he said,

"My people will remember you."

The ferryman lifted his oar and began paddling. As the boat slid away from the riverbank, a long, low cry rose from the villagers. I caught my breah and waved to them. I waved until I couldn't see them anymore. …

191.146 Excerpt from **A Memoir Of Misfortune**\fn{by Su Xiaokang (1949-)} Zhejiang Province, China (M) 12

Fu Li and I, with our son Su Dan squeezed between us, were in the backseat of a '93 Dodge rental. I was dozing, thanks to a bunch of Chinese students in Buffalo who had kept me up the night before. It was my own damn fault, of course, with my "elegy" of the "yellow civilization" and all the rest of it. I had been badgered with questions on the subject all the way from one end of the world to the other, and in Buffalo, the night before, the discussion had lasted into the small hours. Mind you, to bemoan the fate of the "yellow civilization" under the night skies of North America—that in itself was a form of self-indulgence, an exercise in words—at least until Fu Li walked into the room.

"Su Xiaokang, you are driving tomorrow. Time to break it up."

That was Fu Li's style: no mincing of words, no room for saving face. Her goal in life had always been clear-cut—to be a doctor. But in China even the unenviable job of seeing a hundred patients every day had been taken away from her as one of the side effects of my being on the wanted list. In the United States, she had struggled through the exams needed to qualify as a registered nurse. The exams were now over, and I was dragging her off to see the country.

Fu Li was dressed in a loose-fitting cotton top and shorts, but she was not relaxed. Even half asleep, I could feel the tension in her as she sat on the other side of Su Dan. She had always lived life as if it were filled with pitfalls, while I was perfectly relaxed. For a period of several years I had actually let fame and fortune go to my head, which Fu Li had found intolerable. Fu Li is the sort of person that folks in her home province of Henan refer to as "women with heads held high and men with downcast eyes"—that is, people who do not conform to their prescribed roles. Fu Li always held herself upright, the expression on her face calm and collected. My own infantile attempts at sophistication, added to my general inability to say no—what is called the "amiable ear"—had always roused in her a kind of loving resentment, and she would call me a good-for-nothing.

I had taken my wife and son on this kind of aimless roving several times before. Once, with a group of five or six people, we drove down to Virginia to see where the early English colonists first landed. When we stopped at a restaurant on our way, I picked up my courage and tried to order in English. One young woman giggled, and Fu Li exploded.

"What's so funny? His English is not as good as yours? So what? Isn't it just a matter of your being a few years younger?" She got up and walked out, leaving the girl, Chai Ling, with a flea in her ear.

On another occasion, we went up north to Montreal and then to Toronto and saw Niagara Falls from the Canadian side. Now we had been to see Niagara Falls again, but from the American side, as if there were some strange affinity between its raging turbulence and something in ourselves.

Within the Falls area, Route 90 on the U.S.-Canadian border, though not wide, is neatly divided down the middle by grass dividers. It has an air of tranquillity typical of the East Coast, nothing like the superhighways of the West Coast, where, rather than driving, one seems helplessly propelled forward by a frenzy of speed. Anyway,

there we were. It was three or four o'clock in the afternoon and there was very little traffic on the road. The sky was a wash of blue and I dozed off and on, oblivious to Fu Li's tenseness.

I knew Fu Li had doubts about the driver. This was one of the differences between us. Ever since landing in this nation of cars, I had never hesitated to entrust this hundred-plus pounds of whatever I'm made of to whom-ever it might be at the wheel, driving at whatever chosen speed. I was like one of the eight hundred million Chinese who put themselves into the hands of Mao Tsetung to be experimented with during the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution, without bothering their heads about possible disastrous consequences.

My trust had always been given cheaply: I would gladly entrust my safety, my reputation, and my honor to my friends to do with what they liked, as if they were honoring me and giving me "face." Fu Li could never stand this side of me, and we had had many rows about it after we got married. She had never stayed in the West before, but she was by nature a very private person and always drew a line between herself and the rest of the world. During our aimless driving about after her arrival here, she always avoided riding in other people's cars. She did not trust other people's driving, just as she did not trust other people's morals or other people's consciences. But on this occasion she had no choice. I had spent the previous night holding forth and had driven all morning; in the afternoon I was burnt out and had given the wheel to someone else. Fu Li probably had been worrying about this since the night before.

Route 90 was so smooth and the traffic so light, it seemed the Dodge had the road to itself. The Falls area was immersed in the serenity of the summer afternoon. The world had never been so genial. On these open roads, driving was child's play. What was there to worry about? I finally fell sound asleep. The last thing I felt before I departed into slumberland was eleven-year-old Su Dan's little head resting on my shoulder. I now say "departed" because at the time I did not realize that this interval in slumberland (I am not even sure for how long) was a threshold, an entry into another world. Fu Li took leave of me across this threshold, and I did not even give her a parting glance. She had not slept and had not gotten over her tension. Later I realized that people who can sleep through a high-speed car trip must be people like me who are incorrigibly credulous and trusting. So far, the world had treated me well. 1 do not understand why suddenly, on a quiet highway near Niagara Falls, it changed face without warning.

*

Seven days and seven nights later, 1 woke up to a gray misty world similar to one 1 had woken up in after a raging fever during my early childhood in the city of Hangzhou: a gray mist accompanied by the smell of antiseptic. Shadowy human shapes flitted before me. They said,

"You were in a coma for three days, and then you were raving for three days."

Their voices seemed to come from some cavernous depth and made a buzzing sound. Could 1 walk? I couldn't feel my right leg, and my hipbone hurt excruciatingly.

What happened? Where were Fu Li and Su Dan? The car had flipped over a short distance west of Buffalo, and all three of us were found unconscious. Fu Li and I were taken to Lake Erie County Hospital, while Su Dan was taken to Children's Hospital in Buffalo. He had regained consciousness the next day and was safe in Princeton with a friend.

Somebody came for me and put a pair of crutches in my hands, and I hobbled after him into another room. There was a single bed in the room, surrounded by a network of colorful tubes and gadgets. A figure lay on the bed, hair spread untidily on the pillow, mouth covered by a strange-looking mask. This was not an apparition. The shape under the white cotton sheet was unmistakable. I would know it if it were burnt to ashes: Fu Li. I had a dim memory of her all tensed up in the car when my world was still intact. Now she was lying here, not only totally relaxed but not knowing where her soul was hovering.

I realized that something bad had happened to my beloved. It is a dreadful thing, this unbearable shock of realization that flashes through the brain and drains it. The brain breathes, and it can asphyxiate. The world had given me three such shocks during my life thus far.

First, when I was sixteen years old, Father stood with his back against the light of the window. I could not see his face. I only heard his voice tell me,

"Your maternal grandfather has been executed by the government." This meant I was a "damned cur" one generation removed, not one of the five categories of "red offspring."

The second time, I was forty years old. In a darkened room, poring over a pencil scrawl on a piece of paper, I made out the words saying that I was fifth on the government's most-wanted list.

The third shock came when I was overseas. My cousin called and sobbed over the phone,

"Second Aunt has passed away." Her second aunt was my mother.

Always during those moments my mind would at first go blank and then realize in a flash that my world had changed. But July 19, 1993, was different. This time my world collapsed.

*

I had fallen asleep and, asleep, had passed through a disaster, the details of which I will never know. It was a dream without memory, blacking out the most fateful moment of my life, leaving me nothing with which to go on. I had no choice but to accept other people's versions of what happened. The car flipped over because the driver, a woman, was fumbling for the windshield wiper. Did it rain? How can one be thrown off the highway for lack of a windshield wiper? The police report stated that when the car went off the highway and flipped over, it landed on its right side, where Fu Li was sitting. Another version had it that both Fu Li and I were thrown out of the car and knocked unconscious. I was sleeping and did not wake up even when my world crashed. Yet a third version held that Fu Li, awake, stretched over from the backseat to help the driver control the car, which had gone insane; that she was struggling in an upright position, and when the crash came her head hit the windshield. This was the cruelest version, and I could not bear to hear it.

Lying in my hospital bed, I tried but could not piece together anything that had occurred in the hours after the crash. I felt frustrated, having my life described to me by others. I felt as if the day of my birth as told by my mother was the only kind of information that was trustworthy.

Come to think of it, however, isn't it true that the Chinese are always having the "unexpected" in their lives interpreted for them by others, and isn't this especially true of my generation, which seems to have grown up through a series of "unexpected" events?

For instance, in 1971 Lin Biao tried to "defect" and his plane crashed in the desert.\fn{A reference to the September 13 incident of 1971, whereby Lin Biao, Mao Tsetung's designated heir, was said to have plotted the "571 Project" to assassinate Mao and seize power. When the plan went wrong, Lin Biao left hastily with his wife, son, and close follow- ers in a Trident jet but crashed in Mongolia. All aboard were repotted dead} At the time the whole country seemed to have gone into a state of shock, and everyone waited for Premier Zhou Enlai and company to offer a proper version of what had happened. At the same time, we did not trust this official version and were always hungry for alternate ones.

Again, in 1989 in Tiananmen, there was another crash. How many died? Who gave the orders to shoot? The world would not accept the version offered by the Chinese leadership but could not come up with a version of its own. Why didn't the students retreat? one might ask. The so-called student leaders at Tiananmen Square each have their own versions. Whom should we believe?

About the car crash of July 19, I accepted only two facts. One was that Fu Li was in a coma. The other was that the police report stated the driver could not drive. By then I had lost even the capacity for anger. From that day onward, the world turned upside down and swallowed me up.

*

On August 12, 1993, Fu Ii opened her eyes. From then on, she stared silently at nothing for days on end.

Had she lost the power of speech? Was she brain-damaged? Paralyzed? Would she become a vegetable? The moment she opened her eyes, she had to fit into one or another of these categories. It seemed there is a wide range of definitions for the state of existence between non-living and non-dying.

She did not appear to notice the people who came to see her. However, when our son was brought to the hospital from Princeton one afternoon, the minute his loud voice was heard from the corridor, a shiver went through her whole body and her eyes turned this way and that, trying to locate the sound. Yet when our son entered the room and bent over her, calling "Mummy!" she looked at him dumbly, without uttering a word. I marked this day as the day of her awakening and wrote in my diary,

"Fu Li has regained consciousness."

I wondered if she recognized me. My one way of checking was to hold her tremulous right hand every day and try to register its every squeeze, as well as each twitch of her leg. I firmly believe that it was her way of responding to me, the only way she could.

Suddenly one day, a tear welled up in her right eye and lingered over her cheek. I wiped her cheek and cried uncontrollably, turning to the window to hide my tears. Suddenly I felt a tapping of her right hand on my left. I turned around and saw her face contorted intensely. In desperation she tried to tap me again. I suddenly understood what she was saying:

"You mustn't cry, mustn't cry."

Only when vocal communication failed did I realize the importance of speech. I tried another kind of language and whispered a song into her ear. I remembered a lullaby, *Little Swallow*, that she used to sing our son to sleep. Now I was singing it to wake her up.

Here is a woman with whom I shared life for more than a decade, and now I have to see her reduced to this. Was this kind of life worth living? I had thrust this life upon her. These days, during changing time, when I saw her limp body being turned this way and that by the nurse, all I could do was stand aside and weep.

"I am a good-for-nothing," I would tell her, over and over again. This was the first time I ever saw myself in this way.

It was impossible even.to "hold hands and shed silent tears,"\fn{A stock phrase in classical Chinese romances} for her face was totally devoid of expression. She had never been the expressive type, never put on feminine airs. Now out of her coma, she remained gazing in front of her, her face placid and detached as it had always been. It held the essence of the look of hers that I had always loved best. When I first saw her with that expression on her face, on the bare yellow plains at the other end of the world, my heart had told me, She is the one. We both belonged to that generation when the aging leaders sowed wild oats while we in the bloom of youth were repressed. We first had our hormones diluted with cheap idealism; following that, in the years of "opening up," we were poisoned by greed and driven by brute appetite.

Love had always eluded us; without a miracle one would never encounter the real thing. But our miracle came in her hometown in Henan province in 1979. At the time I was on the editorial staff of a daily paper; Fu Li was a medical student at a local professional school of medicine. It seemed she was determined not to go with the tide. Already twenty-six years old, she still refused to date the young men hovering around her. Her mother, onetime editor-in-chief of a daily paper, was anxious for her to marry and mentioned the matter to an old acquaintance—who happened to be my boss. Thus, she and I met.

To this day, I do not know why she bothered to show up. She walked in, tall and slender in a light blue skirt, gave me a look, and sat down. My boss and I did most of the talking; demurely, she put in a word now and then. She had a mole on the left side of her chin, similar to the one on Mao Tsetung's chin, supposedly a mark of greatness, not a beauty spot, which traditionally should be above the lips. Later I asked her about it. She smiled and told me a mole was just an abnormal growth on the skin and, if hers had not been on her face, she would have had it surgically removed.

At the time I was thirty and had just emerged from a disastrous love affair into which I had thrown myself recklessly with a youthful ardor akin to religious fervor. I felt drained and defeated, with no hope of finding anyone else. But the day I met her, I felt as if I had walked into a refreshingly cool morning. It must be the kind of feeling described by Eileen Chang:\fn{A Chinese writer (1920-1995) born in Shanghai}

"To meet the one among ten thousand, to meet in ten thousand years, not a moment too early nor a moment too late, right on the dot of time. It is beyond words."

After marrying me after a minimum of romance, she later told me that the minute she saw me, she knew I was the one.

She also told me that once she had made up her mind she invited her close friends to meet me, her peers who were already married and had children. She lured me to her place under some pretext and put me on display. Her friends looked me over and unanimously voted against me. They said I was a worthless scribbler and barely matched her in height. (Among the people of Henan, tallness is one of the basic requirements of the eligible bachelor.) But Fu Li said she liked me for my temperament and air of a literary man. So she married the worthless scribbler.

*

From the hospital window I could see the housing projects of Buffalo's inner-city. The Lake Erie County Hospital, over ten stories high, stands right in the middle of them. I often pushed Fu Li's wheelchair down the corridor of the hospital ward; through the window at the end of the hall, we would gaze beneath us at the the dumb desolation of the projects in the stillness of the setting sun. Life suddenly stood still, frozen, in the summer dusk. Even the lushness of North America would wither before our eyes. How did the two of us find ourselves here? Where are we, anyway?

On another occasion, a familiar melody suddenly broke the silence of her room, sending a thrill through me. It came from the tape recorder at Fu Li's bedside, singing a song: "In a land far far away, there's a sweet sweet girl." The glow of the setting sun settled itself on Fu Li, now tied to her wheelchair, her head secured between two supports, the head once held high now drooping if unsupported. Thus we let time slip by, as the strains of the song drifted around us. The tape was a gift from Kang Hua, a Ph.D candidate in physics at Buffalo University. It was at his place that we had talked away half the night on the eve of the accident.

I do not know whether Fu Li could hear the once-familiar song or whether she could hear me when I sang *Little Swallow* between sobs. But I found myself lost in the melody, hearing in it a primitive beat, a universal

appeal. It reminded me of the forlorn situation of Fu Li and myself, and our helplessness as human creatures cast on this earth. I said to her,

"I escaped in the late spring of 1989, and we were torn apart for two whole years. Now, in the blazing summer of 1993, we were only parted for a week, but it is like a parting for life."

This is how the song moves me, making it my own particular song of *Far Far Away*, and brings tears to my eyes every time I hear it.

I am not talking about music, I am concerned only with how the song affected me. Actually, *In a Land Far Far Away* was originally a folk song of love from rural northwest China\fn{Here referring to the base area centered around Ydan'an, Shaanxi Province, where Mao Tsetung set up his power base in the mid-1930s; the folk culture of this area had a deep invluence in forming Communist literary tradition} recovered by the musician Wang Luobin. During the fifties, it was on everyone's lips, virtually becoming our national anthem, a political symbol of "national solidarity." In fact it had been so politicized that, during the dark period of the sixties,\fn{A reference to the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976)} the genuine ring of the song was totally lost. I had always disliked politicized love songs, the most repulsive being *The East Is Red*,\fn{"The East is red | the sun rises | Mao Tsetung appears in China | he seeks the good of the people, | he is the savior of the people"} which was originally a love song from Northwest China. Our thoughts have been so inured to these fakes, we have lost the capacity to enjoy the flavor of genuine love songs.

But that evening my soul was transported by the strains of the song, as if I had had a glimpse of heaven. Only in the depths of pain, perhaps, can one be so blessed. Without being conscious of it at the time, I was able to hear that song in its pristine rhapsody; it gripped my heart and flooded my soul. For a moment, I felt that Fu Li and I were back in the misty heights of Mount Lu during our honeymoon trip in 1979.

We took the boat from Wuhan to Jiujiang city and from there headed up the mountain to find ourselves the only occupants of a little guest house wreathed in mists at the peak. We were in raptures. After leaving Mount Lu, we took the train and at dusk found ourselves in the town of Tai'an on the outskirts of Mount Tai, right on time to celebrate the Moon Festival. Fu Li said, "Come on, let's climb the mountain!" and off we went. In the darkness of the night, we set out from the north gate of Daiyue Temple, the temple guarding Mount Tai, and started up.

The first leg of the climb, from the Daizong Gate to the Dai tip, was reputedly composed of seven thousand stone steps. Her ponytail swinging behind her back, Fu Li charged ahead, never stopping to rest, and arrived at the Double-Pine Pavilion before daybreak. Obviously impressed, a group of young Latino men at the other side of the Heavenly Ladder decided to race us. Thus as we climbed the dangerously steep stairs, sometimes Fu Li and I left the tourist group behind and sometimes they outstripped us. Racing each other from either side of the Heavenly Ladder, we reached the Southern Gate of Heaven, covering another 1,594 steps for this last leg of the climb. This was the proverbial Eighteen Steep Windings, Eighteen Slow Windings, and Eighteen Windings neither Steep nor Slow.

On the last stages of the Eighteen Steep Windings, one of the young Latinos flopped down on the ground from exhaustion and started throwing up. I stopped to catch my breath for a moment and went over to see whether he was okay. Panting for breath, he pointed to Fu Li and said to me in broken Chinese,

"Your … girlfriend … is beautiful!"

I was off guard and didn't catch his words at first, then realized that he was smitten by Fu Li. What he did not know was that she was already twenty-eight years old. As I turned back, I regretted not telling him that she was my wife. We waited for sunrise at the peak. It was cloudy and the sun did not show herself, but we were blissfully happy anyway.

*

During the Moon Festival of 1991, Fu Li had been in the United States barely a month. One night after a party, she wrote this in her diary. I came across it by chance after the car accident.

> It is the Moon Festival, and the first time in three years that we celebrated it together. Twelve years ago today, Xiaokang and I got married and went to Mount Lu and Mount Tai. I can't believe that time has passed so quickly. Just now Xiaokang said to me, "Look, you are getting old. Remember how that young foreigner admired you at Mount Tai?" I replied, "It's so depressing to hear you say so." But it's true, I am getting old, with nothing to my name. It breaks my heart.

When I am with Fu Li, I am lifted into heaven; away from her all I have is worldliness, but I never realized it at the time when I was catapulted into celebrity. And now, I am again able to have a glimpse of heaven because "in a land far far away," there are only the two of us together, she seriously wounded, and that land far away is a new stage in our lives.

I watch helplessly as our son grows up on his own. He is no longer what we conventionally consider a Chinese and will not be moved by a song like *In a Land Far Far Away*. After that evening, I often played that song, repeating it again and again, ruminating through its melody on what I have lost and what I have gained—making a set of accounts one might say. I will never forgive my own recklessness. Recklessness seems to be the most destructive factor in my makeup. Fu Li fought against my recklessness all through our married life, but she lost the battle, in a series of grave misfortunes.

Take this last calamity, for instance, which was outrageous beyond belief. After Fu Li's accident, the driver admitted that she had never driven on a main highway before. Yet I had given the car over to her without a thought and dived into the back seat to catch some sleep.

For the last ten years, I myself was like a crazy old car, careening recklessly among the potholes of China's dangerous political highway, on more than one occasion almost running out of control. Back then Fu Li was at my side, desperately trying to hold me in check, until the spring of 1989, when the car of my fortunes turned upside down. Here in the United States, it was Fu Li who was hurt most seriously, with a cerebral hemorrhage, broken ribs, and punctured lungs.

The pattern of our lives seemed to be that Fu Li would first try to keep me in check and, failing that, would fall into the trap that I had laid.

For instance, I always picked sensitive subjects on which to report, making myself a thorn in the side of the people at the C.C.C.P.\fn{Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party} Propaganda Department and the Ministry of Security. Fu Li would give me a mild rap on the shoulder.

"Take it easy, our son Su Dan is still a baby."

When *River Elegy* was caught up in controversy, she reminded me not to jump into the fray. But she began to dislike my literary buddies and gave them the cold shoulder whenever they crashed in without warning. She had no trust in the kind of things they were dabbling in.

When the students started their actions in Tiananmen, Fu Li watched me closely. She asked for leave at the hospital where she was working and followed me wherever I went. One day Yan Jiaqi\fn{At the time, head of the Institute of Political Studies at the Chinese Academy of Social Science, Peking, and an advocate for political reform. On the wanted list after June 4th, he is now in the United States} came over and asked me to join him in Tiananmen Square for a declaration. Fu Li held my sleeve and followed me all the way to the square. Carried here and there in the swirling crowd, she would give the sleeve a tug now and then, reminding me to keep a check on my tongue.

Suddenly there was a call for a march and demonstration. The few so-called intellectual elites were caught unprepared, at a loss over how to introduce themselves to the crowd. After all, they couldn't very well repeat the antics of the Cultural Revolution and parade themselves in dunce caps with a board hanging down their necks, could they? In the midst of our perplexity, Huang Shunxing of Taiwan showed up wearing a cloth band slantwise from shoulder to waist with his name and title—**HUANG SHUN XING REPRESENTATIVE TO THE NATIONAL PEOPLE'S CONGRESS**—written for all the world to see. It was the answer to our prayers, but where were we to find cloth bands in the square? Huang's was probably brought over from Taiwan where it had seen long service, and obviously he had kept it around, foreseeing that sooner or later it would come in handy. For lack of cloth bands we had to make do with paper.

"Fine doings!" Fu Li snorted when she saw me sporting a paper band advertising **SU XIAOKANG, AUTHOR OF RIVER ELEGY**. However, she followed me up onto a truck, and thus we paraded up and down the Avenue of Eternal Peace. When we got home, she spat out,

"Very nice, you got your moment of glory. All videotaped by the security. From now on you're not going anywhere!"

She meant exactly what she said: She stayed home, guarding the door, in case I was dragged out agaIn. Some individuals would not take no for an answer, my writer friend Zheng Yi being one. He came for the "May 16 Declaration" that I was supposed to have drafted. It was a declaration on behalf of the intellectuals of Peking in support of the students. But I had barely written a word *before* I dropped it to take part in a new TV program. Zheng Yi was baffled and exploded.

"Fuck! Doing TV *now*, in these times?"

"That's his job," Fu Li countered.

"Job! Anyone can write a fucking TV script! This is the turning point of history! Everyone has to account for his performance!" Fu Li exploded in turn.

"You go ahead and make history. Leave Xiaokang alone, he hasn't got the makings."

Following that sparring, Dai Qing came over to ask me to join her in Tiananmen Square to advise the students. Fu Li wouldn't allow me to budge. Dai Qing started begging.

"Dear little sister"—Dai Qing's family name was also Fu and she was older than Fu Li—"please give me face just this once."

Fu Li wouldn't let go; she held me tightly by the hand all the way to the door.

Then she gave up. As a result, I went to the square. As a result, I was accused of "counterrevolutionary incendiarism" by the Communist Party.

I ran off to save my own skin, leaving Fu Li behind. By then everyone was heading south, so she also headed south and reached Guangzhou (Canton), on the southernmost tip of the mainland. But she couldn't bear to leave our son, so she turned around and returned to Peking. By then, she was prepared to join me in the trap I had set for myself.

As a result, she is lying here, with a cerebral hemorrhage, punctured lungs, an incision in her throat for oxygen, and two tubes down her nostrils for medication and nutritional fluids.

These alien objects were intrusions in the sensitive parts of her being. The minute she returned to consciousness, she fought them. So her right hand, which was not paralyzed, was tied to the bedpost. Within a few minutes, she freed her hand and again started tugging at the gadgets. So the nurse tied her fingers together one by one before tying the hand to the bedpost.

What followed was a repeated pattern of her fingers struggling through the layers of gauze to pull out the tubes in her nose. The nurse was furious and shouted at me,

"She's making it worse for herself. Do you know how painful it is to insert the esophagus tube?"

I could not bear to watch every time her tube was reinserted. That combination of courage and mad determination on her part, that stubborn resistance to any forced manipulation, was a quintessential expression of her innermost character. I had never before realized what kind of a woman I had married.

Every morning as I rushed to the hospital, what first met my eye was invariably the sight of bloody marks where she had chewed her mouth in frustration. I would see her sitting in her wheelchair as she let the nurse fix her hair, twisting it into whatever shape she liked.

*

The first letter; which someone carried by hand to Paris, was not dated. It was probably the spring of 1990. At the time I was shuttling between Paris, Taipei, and the United States, feeling very good about myself, while she was trapped and miserable.

> Someone is leaving, and will bring this letter to you, though I am not sure whether you will see it. Your letter made me full of anxiety. I worry about your health. A few days ago, a friend who had seen you in Paris stopped by and described your situation abroad, which made me worry all the more. I cannot imagine how you manage day by day.
>
> As to the folks at home, there is nothing to worry about. Your parents are not affected, they are in good health, and your father goes to work every day, though I do not know where. Neither are your sister or brother affected. In July [I989] the local security asked your brother for your whereabouts, and they were very civil. During the summer when your whereabouts were unknown, our home was searched, but the people were also very civil. My mother's life has not been affected, either.

One chilly morning on May 20, 1989, almost on the eve of the bloody onslaught, Li Peng\fn{Prime Minister of Chine on June 4, 1989} proclaimed martial law. I feared the worst and hastily left the group working on the sequel to *River Elegy*. I scuttled here and there, not daring to go home, not knowing where to hide. Fu Li searched for me far and wide. When she finally found me, she did not waste words. She entrusted Su Dan to her younger sister and, holding me by the hand; dragged me to the Peking railway station. We left for Zhengzhou city in her native Henan province, to take refuge with her mothet: The train was crowded with students who had been to Peking to take part in the hunger strike. Some of them actually recognized me, but Fu Li avoided them, giving me no chance to show off. She left me in Zhengzhou and headed straight back to Peking, an eight-hour train ride, first laying down the law about my seeing anybody. Two weeks late, she held our son in her arms through a night of terror as the Avenue of Eternal Peace was strewn with bloody corpses. But at the break of dawn she still went to work at the hospital. Her hospital was located on Chongwenmen Avenue, running parallel to the Avenue of Eternal Peace. One side of the high-rise in-patients' ward had been splattered with bullets the night before. The military police started looking for the "wanted" from door to door: Fu Li figured I might not be safe in her mother's place. For the second time, she left our son with her sister and went south, trying to negotiate a safe hiding place for me. So engrossed was she that she did not even know of the secret directive for my arrest. When she first heard of the

“wanted” list, she still did not imagine that I was among the wanted, though by then she had figured out that no one would risk helping het: she worried about me and she worried about our son. On her return, she dared not stop midway in Zhengzhou but flew right back to Peking.

> My mother’s health is okay. She worries about me and came to Peking last November. Seeing that I was all right, she was relieved and headed back.
>
> Things are okay here with me and Su Dan. The child is somewhat affected by the event, but not too darkly. I approach things from the positive side, telling him that his father is a good man, that sometimes good people are wrongly blamed, but that everything will be cleared up eventually. He does not doubt this for a minute and thus has no sense of inferiority. He will be fine.

The police showed up at the hospital where Fu Li was working. They brought her to the security office. Then they made her sit in the middle of a circle while seven or eight men questioned her on her movements after June Fourth. In July they came again, this time to notify her of a search of our apartment. She said,

“Fine. But it must be during my son’s absence.”

The whole hospital, doctors and nurses and staff, all witnessed the scene as Fu Li was taken away by the police.

> Su Dan’s grades are okay. He doesn’t put enough effort into his studies, always looking for fun, but he has no serious problems. I often criticize him, but never because I am in a bad mood myself and want to take it out on somebody. He has an enormous appetite and is a bit overweight, I am helping him reduce. As for myself, everything is fine. Swings in mood are inevitable, but it all depends on the situation at your end. If your situation remains stable, so will my mood. Physically I am also holding up; nowadays I am really careful about preserving my health. In the daytime I study English, and every Wednesday night I attend classes in Chinese medicine, learning basic skills such as massage and acupuncture. Who knows, someday they may come in handy.
>
> My own assessment of the situation is this: first, the possibility of your returning in the near future is nil, so the only way to reunite is for us to exit; second, my chance of leaving the country through regular channels is very slim, but it is worth a try, as only through regular channels can I take Su Dan with me; third, I have no hope of applying for study abroad, so I do not let this fact affect my spirits and do not suffer any disappointment on that count; fourth, I am prepared to be denied the right to join you for many many years. I will carry on as usual and bring up our son. Let your heart rest at ease on that count.
>
> What worries me is your situation. I think that in the first place you should let go of your sense of mission; just sit back and be content to survive as an ordinary man. Only by surviving can you achieve something or write something. Put aside other people’s hopes in you, ignore their expectations. Just be yourself, live according to your own wishes. Perhaps your life will be better. A man cannot sail through life having everything his way, so it is important to keep up your spirits when things do not go as you would like. I can understand you. Try not to drink too much. Take care of yourself and live regularly on a daily basis. If you find it too hard to be on your own, find someone; I won’t blame you. But whatever you do, the most important thing is to create an environment wherein you can lead a normal life. Also, don’t go on buying toys for Su Dan. I have money, enough to last me and our son for many years. Don’t worry. As to your own income, I advise you to make some long-term plans. A good friend will be leaving in a few days and I will send you some supplies.

The second letter is also undated. By then I had settled down in Princeton. A good friend of hers was coming out as a spouse, and through her Fu Li sent me clothes and medicine. There was a stack of photographs in the envelope, one of Fu Li standing in front of the bookcase in our Peking home. Dressed in a red woolen sweatet; she stood with her arms crossed, looking very composed, but the expression on her face was forlorn.

> I really do not know the particulars of your circumstances, cannot put myself in your shoes, and do not have much advice to give you. But somehow I sense that you are under extreme psychological pressure. I feel that in the first place you should just be yourself and try to live according to your own inclinations.
>
> With too much sense of your responsibilities and no ability to fulfill them, life will be very burdensome. In your literary circles, wasn’t there a saying about how everyone has his turn in the spotlight? That is a perfect description of your situation. A man cannot be on a pinnacle all his life, nor can his writings. If every composition is a work of genius, then the world will be exploding with works of genius and writers of genius, as a result of which there will be no more writers and no more works of genius. If every hill is the highest peak, there will be no more peaks. I never expected you to be a celebrity, and I don’t care one whit what others expect of you. Relax, use this chance abroad to learn something, read what interests you. The situation at home is still pretty tense; attacks have increased. I really think there is not much hope for this country; nobody can fix it. The population is too big, too uneducated, and now everything is at a standstill. Who can tell what the future holds?
>
> As to the problem hanging over those of you out there, I’m afraid we won’t see an early solution. Don’t be fooled by the release of several individuals. They’re far from thoroughly cleared, just out on bail and living in pure misery. They say that even though you people out there are suffering in exile, you’re better off than they are. As for yourself, I don’t

think you'd be released, even on bail, if you were caught. The police are pursuing your case on two counts: the first is the connection between *River Elegy* and Zhao Ziyang,\fn{Secretary-General of the Communist Party, generally regarded as sympathetic to political reform, who had to step down in the aftermath of June Fourth} the second is your going to Tiananmen to speak to the students. As to the first, they have ended up with nothing substantial. On the second issue, the organizer, Dai Qing, has not yet been released, but from the material I have been able to get hold of, it seems they can't build up a major case against her. From the way the people who are handling her case are talking, you can tell that the episode of going to Tiananmen is not a major issue. Which means to say they know you have nothing to do with politics, but they still won't let you off the hook. Do not delude yourself with false hopes.

Of course I am not saying that you should throw yourself into politics just because of the hopeless situation. I think you should consider the roads open to you. Above all, never become a "professional revolutionary." Learn English, find a job, and cut your links with the clique you are currently involved in. Your strength is still in your pen, but do not rush things. The day will come when we can all settle down. Most people feel that it will be decades before our country can enjoy real stability. So in terms of the future, you must be prepared to settle abroad. Even if you need to come back for the sake of your "identity," our family still needs a place abroad as a last refuge. I hope that you will be able to hold out under any circumstances and face life and the future in a spirit of optimism. Our day will come.

Fu Li left home and came to a foreign land to join me. What's the point of babbling about "concern for the nation and concern for the people" if I cannot even protect a woman who has given up everything for my sake? That the Almighty decided to punish me by hurting her is more than I can bear; I beg the Almighty on my knees to kill me instead. I was never a man destined for good fortune, but it turned out that I married the best wife in the world. What is the meaning of all this?

There is a destiny in men's lives. Apart from us mainlanders who have been brainwashed into a ruthless atheism, is there anyone in the world who does not harbor a fearful respect for a power beyond themselves? Since 1985, I had been basking in wotldly gain and glory. In the years 1988 and 1989, so-called mediums had sent me warning signals, not to mention Fu Li's anxiety on my account. I ignored them all, being totally wrapped up in myself, but in her eyes I was more immature than the students.

When I luckily escaped the pursuit and arrests following June Fourth, I actually wallowed in self- congratulation, deluded fool that I was. As the shots rang out in Tiananmen, I left my mother-in-law's home in Zhengzhou and started on my hundred-day life on the run. A group of people whom I had never met came to my rescue. Casually, they walked me out of a city where the **WANTED** list was posted on every street corner and where the police had conducted a meticulous door-to-door search. Equally cool, these people escorted me onto an island in the sea, an island where every incoming ferry was searched and questioned. Following that, we crossed a bay that was crisscrossed by patrol boats and the opposite shore sealed off with gun emplacements. Finally, late one night I stood in Shatin under the windows of a high-rise building, gazing at the glittering lights of the Hong Kong racetrack, and my heart was actually filled with self-glory. How could this be other than the hand of Heaven steering me?

But the same hand that steered me to safety thrust me in deeper trouble. As in the previous case, I had been warned but had ignored the signals. Was this not fate? The sweet was followed by the bitter, giving me a taste of the whole range of human emotions.

I am looking again at the picture of Fu Li in her red woolen sweater; arms crossed, the expression on her face forlorn, as I continue the letter that was brought me by hand

My life here is very smooth, believe me. Colleagues at the hospital are friendly, no one picks on me, and I have enough to live on. Don't worry. I feel low now and then, but how can I help it? However, these moods come.. and go. A while ago, you told me to apply for permission to go abroad, and I started the proceedings. But to this day I have not received your affidavit of financial sponsorship or acceptance into a school for Su Dan. Have I been misinformed, or have you run into difficulties? There's no way to discuss this over the phone. But I want you to know where I stand: Su Dan and I have no problems staying here on our own. The reason for trying to leave is to join you, because in such adversity it is better to have family with you than to cope on your own. Whether we should try to leave earlier or otherwise is up to you, depending on circumstances on your side. Think it over carefully and give me an answer as soon as you can, so that I will be prepared. As to the methods of exit, I insist on leaving through legal channels; I will start the application process only when everything for a legal exit is in place, because only then can I take our son with me. I do not consider for a moment other, irregular, ways of exit. Also, if it is within your means, try to lodge an appeal for family reunion through "humane" channels. You have got yourself entangled in this mess; it's hard to get out of it. Face the fact that this society of ours does not respect the individual, so don't indulge in wishful thinking. Actually, you have always held illusions regarding China.

I have no illusions whatever. My letters to you were mostly written for police inspection. After you left, many former friends were afraid to contact me. Some, however, offered to use contacts with the higher-ups to get me out. I refused. I also warn you to be careful when speaking to people you don't know. Never mention anything you heard from me; that's dangerous. During this past year since you have been abroad, you have gradually lost your vigilance

toward the situation here. Actually we are still in danger. Any hints in your letters, if detected, mean trouble for me. People change, you know; you can never tell what they are capable of. How I wish you could go back to writing freely on any subject you liked! But above all, extricate yourself from politics. Even if it is not possible, still you must keep a grip on yourself. Another thing is, don't let whatever steps you take hinge on my situation. If in our telephone conversations you keep talking like that, it will just encourage them to keep me here to control your movements abroad. It will actually hurt my cause. Remember, they can't really do anything to me. In a word, let your decisions rest on your judgment of your own situation. This letter has been dragging on for three days. Such an opportunity! I just put down whatever pops up in my head.

I have been thinking and thinking since you left, and I decided that just sitting around and waiting is not the solution. I want to be self-supporting under any circumstances; perhaps this is one of the differences between me and the other "fugitive" wives left behind. I think it is better for my spirits too to be trying to do something instead of just sitting back and waiting. Of course separation is painful, how can it not be, unless our marriage is on the rocks? Your letter tells me to just wait patiently. I do not understand what you mean. Do you mean I should not do anything, but just live day by day? Do explain what you mean when you write next.

I asked a cousin to issue Fu Li an invitation, and 1 also sent her an I-20 form. She followed the application procedures step by step, and soon sent me another letter:

After my trip to my mother's place for the Spring Festival, I returned and went straight to the Public Security for my application. The answer was speedy: I am classified as one who would "constitute a danger to national security" if allowed to leave the country, and I was told to forget it. Besides, there are documents, I was told, specifying that family members of "traitors" and people on the **WANTED** list cannot be allowed to leave the country. I asked which organization had issued the documents. Were they for internal circulation or open to the public? I was told that they are internal documents from the State Council. I further asked whether this conforms to civil rights ensured by the Constitution, and whether this is in keeping with Party policy. The answer is, This is necessary for national security. From then on, they stopped talking any sense. We always overestimate these people, making them out as better than they are.

Finally I made two requests. I said, I cannot do anything to counter your documents, but for my own sake and that of the child, can I leave the country with my child if I annul my marriage? The answer: "Your marriage does not look like it's being annulled, is it? And even if it is, the answer is still no." Then I said, Okay, if I am to be tied down to the marriage all my life, so be it, but my child is innocent. He is not yet of age, he would not be a threat to national security. But the answer was still no.

*

I appealed to an international human rights organization, and luckily Fu Li was included in a list of people that the U.S. government negotiated with China to have released. And so at the end of the summer of 1991, Fu Li was allowed to leave the country with our son. Child in hand, she crossed thousands of miles to be with me, and I was blessed with the joy of family life for two years. And then, things were so ordered that I was made to fall asleep in a car on a highway so I would wake up to see my wife lying in an emergency room like a vegetable, and to hear the doctor tell me that she is hemorrhaging into the brain.

Is this fate? I asked myself as I stood in the huge hospital building. It looked like a factory where patients were parts and pieces of the machinery. People like me who write "uplifting" prose use the word "fate" with the highest frequency, but we always use the word to question the country or the nation, uttering it so grandiloquently and so glibly. There was even a section on "fate" in my TV series *River Elegy.* But when it is my turn to ask about my own fate, the heavens have already collapsed around me.

I suddenly remembered the first calamity that had struck Fu Li and me. She had conceived a pair of twins but had only been able to keep one. Twelve years later the second calamity; she was allowed to travel thousands of miles to reunite with me in the United States, only to be struck down. It is senseless. Aside from the punishment of heaven, there is no other explanation. Fu Li was a naturally cautious person, always weighing pros and cons before taking a step. After losing that other son, she was even more fearful of some unforeseen disaster, but it happened anyway.

It occurred to me for the first time that Fu Li was most unfortunate in marrying me. There seem to be unforeseen calamities in my life, but, my fate being "tough," my calamities were transferred to this woman who is my wife. Why are things ordered like this?

I was always running into scrapes, but I never gave them a thought, never learned caution. Not even Fu Li could deal with my recklessness. That day in the lounge of the hospital, I suddenly remembered I had been warned of this calamity.

*

It was the summer of 1991. I was working on a TV movie in Taipei and at night was often dragged by friends to the Yinlu Teahouse, where we drank wine and listened to music and songs sung in the local dialect. After

several visits, I learned that the owner was actually a fortune-teller. There were some among our group who dabbled in stocks and would consult him on their luck. One day they egged him on to tell my fortune. I can't tell whether he knew anything about my background. He asked my date and hour of birth and said,

"The gentleman has just passed through a great calamity, is that right? Well, not to mince words, there is another one coming."

"When?"

"When you are around forty-five. It is probably something like a traffic accident."

Nobody took this warning seriously, treating it as a joke. I didn't give it a thought myself. The fortune-teller was probably the only one who was in earnest. But when the accident happened, I was forty-five by the lunar calendar.

*

If I used a wet napkin to wipe the dead skin and dried blood clots off her lips, Fu Li stretched her mouth to meet the wetness of the tissue. Her throat gurgled dryly. Sometimes she coughed or sighed or even made a sound like "ouch." Her punctured lungs had become infected, and she had lost the ability to swallow. Giving her water through a feeding tube was out of the question. It was equally impossible to quench her thirst through the nose tubes. She was being tormented by thirst and could not say it; she could not even make a gesture because her hands were tied.

As I wiped her with the wet napkin, I kept saying to her, We shouldn't have left your hometown of Zhengzhou. If we hadn't moved to Peking, I wouldn't have earned that bit of fame and wouldn't have gotten into so much trouble. Today we would be sitting with your mother and sister and brother, leading our quiet lives, making hot dumplings for the Spring Festival.

"Or," I said, "I should have waited for you in Paris, we wouldn't have driven anywhere, in someone else's car; the metro is superb, and you would have loved the rich cultural heritage of Paris and the ease of living."

She opened her eyes, her face placid and relaxed, just listening. Sometimes she would be restless, trying to turn her body this way and that; we turned her over—ah, her buttocks were red and infected. Once when we did this and our faces were close against each other, her right hand clung to my head, trying to press it against her face in a show of endearment, while her bandaged hand patted my face softly as if saying, Don't be sad.

In the afternoon, I would sit in the ground-floor lounge, waiting to take her to her physical therapy session. One day in the middle of September, the news broadcast suddenly announced that Wei Jingsheng, after fifteen years in prison, was being released. It was part of China's bid for the Olympic Games. I should have gone to prison, I thought to myself. Avoiding the calamity of prison only called up another calamity. If I were in prison in Peking, Fu Li would come for jail visits with Su Dan. But now our roles are changed; she is in prison, while I bring Su Dan to see her, though he cannot understand the nuances of the situation. As my thoughts wandered here and there, I seemed to understand for the first time that I was but a mediocre creature, mistaken by the world for what I was not, and only with the collapse of my world could I be freed from that imposture. But I have never acted with evil intent; why was I being punished thus? I was scared out of my wits by the prospect of prison. Was I being punished for that by having my wife turned into a wreck?

*

As I wake up this morning, I see a naked back protruding out of the other sleeping bag, lying exposed on the floor. It's Su Dan, turned virtually motherless in the blink of an eye. Only then am I aware, with a wisp of sadness, of the existence of my son.

When Children's Hospital found that both parents of this Chinese boy were still unconscious, they planned to follow regulations and take him to an orphanage. Fortunately a friend, Su Wei, rushed over from Princeton to keep him for us, pretending to be his uncle. At the time, Fu Li was still unconscious, and for seven days I was stuck in a hospital bed, unable to walk. I drifted in and out of consciousness, hallucinating that I had taken Su Dan with me back to the apartment of Kang Hua, the man with whom we spent the evening before the accident, and that I had been lying on the floor at his place for a whole month.

Su Dan was still asleep. I crawled over and said to him softly,

"Daddy is leaving." He turned over, raised his head, and asked,

"When are you coming back?"

"Seven tonight."

"Try to come back early, Daddy."

Every morning I left him lying on the floor. Kang Hua would come pick me up at a fixed hour and drive me to the hospital, and I would always ask him to stop by a Bower shop to get Fu Li a rose. In all our dozen years of

marriage, I had never given Fu Li roses. At the time in China, it was not the thing to do. But now I wanted to give her a rose every day.

That morning, I got up exceptionally early and walked out in a daze. Buffalo, bordering Canada, was wrapped in the shadow of autumn, especially bleak on a deserted morning like this. All alone, I walked aimlessly about in the woods, until I found myself at the edge of a shimmering lake. As I stood by the water, my heart was filled with tender sweetness. I felt uplifted, as if I had reached a wonderful fulfillment. But immediately I was seized by a fearful shivering and rushed off. I don't know how long I had been walking about until I reached a highway. There was no traffic and I stood there on the highway all alone, with one thought only—how to end it all.

I don't know how I left the highway. Perhaps it was the memory of Fu Li lying unconscious in the emergency room, perhaps it was the vision of Su Dan's naked shoulders on the floor that pulled me back. All I remember is the thought that flashed through my mind, but I did not know how to describe it. Only later, while reading an interpretation of Dostoyevsky, did I accidentally come across the perfect description of my state of mind at the time, of "hope forever gone, only life left behind, and there is a long life to go through. You cannot die, even though you do not want to live."\fn{From Liu Xiaofeng, Truth Crucified (Peking, Sanlian Joint Publishing, 1991)}

I had loved Dostoyevsky ever since I was young and had enjoyed reading *The Idiot.* I was quite dejected when I could not find volume II after finishing volume I. My father told me to read *The Brothers Karamazov,* but I couldn't finish it. Later I realized it was because I could not understand the soul-searching nature of Dostoyevsky's prose. But now a few words on Dostoyevsky could light up my soul. I wrote in my diary:

> In all my readings of the last ten months, this passage is closest to my heart: unprecedented despair and devastation with no words of comfort, no ways of displacement nor means of release. Everything gained in life irretrievably lost, with not a single straw to hold on to; this is probably what I had never realized before—the rootlessness of the individual soul.

All I can remember of that time by the lake was that it was a day in early September, 1993. But on that morning I suddenly saw the abyss of existence, the bottomless black hole extending under my feet. The experience of that morning cut my life into two. The first half, carrying with it the burden of my youthful strivings and worldly gains, had drifted away into meaninglessness. What was left was the second half, an empty mortal coil, a wandering ghost in a huge black hole.

Hitherto I had never had an impulse toward death but only a desire for life. Often, the more terror life held, the more I wanted to live. In my fugitive life following June Fourth, I had once hidden for nearly fifty days in a darkened room. I felt I was going mad, but I still clung to life. Only when living means unbroken fear does one have the impulse to give up. I suppose that is the black hole. Perhaps it is only when man faces this black hole that he can begin to question what existence is about and realize that living needs courage, ask himself whether his life is a failure and question whether it was worthwhile.

Lost forever was the tender sweetness that wrapped itself around me by the lake that morning. I have faced this black hole, faced a broken-down existence that was mine alone. The fact of Fu Li lying there unconscious condemned me to utter defeat and reduced my life to absolute meaninglessness. Saying that man can control his own destiny sounds to me like a hideous joke. My friends and I had thought of ourselves as somebodies, had been so cocky about fixing our country, our nation, our society, our civilization, all sick to the core, yet when we have to face alone the calamity of an individual or a family, our world collapses beneath us and we have nothing to hold on to.

One of the co-writers of the script for *River Elegy,* Yuan Zhiming, was quoted as saying that we have been chased out of China at the risk of our lives; he meant that "we have gained the freedom of a heaven, but lost the earth beneath our feet." I myself, however, beg to disagree. His saying about losing the earth seems to echo the concept of "earth fixation" that he himself had condemned in his script. When I myself was reduced to crying to heaven and earth in absolute despair, there was nothing to gain or lose; there was no distinction between sky and earth.

*

Soon after the accident, Chen Shuping with her husband, Professor Yingshih Yu, took the train from Princeton to Buffalo. As she entered the hospital room, Chen carried a soft toy rabbit, holding a baby rabbit to its breast, which she laid softly at the top of Fu Li's bed. Fu Li was still bound to her wheelchair, unable to raise her head, and could only tap her friend with her right foot.

"She was greeting me," Chen told me later.

I followed Professor Yu to the second-floor cafeteria and started crying the minute we sat down.

"I want to take her home to China," I said. He took out cigarettes, handed me one, and, seeing that I refused, lighted one himself as he answered,

"You think they will be so kind as to let you in?"

*

I had made a brief stop in Paris in the early spring of 1993. Mlle. Tan Xuemei, a professor of Chinese literature at the Seventh University of France and a good friend of ours, had mentioned a new book by Garcia Marquez: *Strange Pilgrims: Twelve Stories*. She had translated an article on the book, but by the time her translation reached me by post, Fu Li's accident had happened. Her translation reads:

> It is quite obvious even from the theme that *Twelve Stories* hovers between the fantastic and the cryptic. Known for his *Hundred Years of Solitude* and *The Autumn of the Patriarch*, Garda Marquez in this new work again incorporates the Latin-American tradition into his own unique style. Marquez's own writing life began with legends, but he is now drawing inspiration from reminiscences of his exile in France, Barcelona, and Italy. Yet his own distinctive style remains.
>
> In his introduction to *Twelve Stories*, Garcia Marquez mentions that these stories acquired form twenty years ago and then were left to brew. They were gradually forgotten and sprang to life again during his exile in Europe. The "geological" method of composition, typical of his style, highlights one outstanding incident and piles over it layers and layers of memory, achieving a final effect with the realistic precision of the earth's crust. One of the stories involves a figure who haunts the halls of the Vatican, dragging the corpse of his daughter. Another describes a young Colombian woman honeymooning in Europe, and how she dies from loss of blood from a prick on her finger. In a third story, a group of children on holiday in Sicily plot to kill their obnoxious housekeeper. The stories seem unearthly and yet earthy. They are uniformly about rootless people trying to break out of their stifling "continental rationalism" but only able to escape through absurdity, magic, insanity, or death itself. …

192.82 The Festival Of Graves\fn{by Zhu Lin (1949-)} Shanghai, China (F) 9

Rain beat down, relentless and slate-gray in the howling wind. It poured through the bare branches of the trees and battered the stunted shoots of winter wheat. Only the shallow river rejoiced, as it swallowed up the rain and the turbid streams that swept along the ditches between the fields. Then the wind died down, and the rain stopped. Sunlight pierced the clouds like a magic sword, and the land shone. The river waters rushed on in shining torrents, sweeping away the waterweeds left behind from the year before.

The trill of a bird wafted from the depths of the bamboo grove, breaking the silence of winter. But people seemed unconvinced by this harbinger of spring, until they looked up at the soft blue of the sky or noticed pale yellow buds of forsythia on the sunlit slopes and shepherd's purse spreading its carpet of fresh white flowers over the fields.

Wind followed, then more rain and a rumble of thunder. After the storm subsided, the sun broke through again, and a profusion of lilac wolfberries, yellow dandelions, and blue wildflowers dotted the meadows like stars. An emerald curtain of weeping willow fronds adorned with tiny catkins of pastel yellow billowed to the surface of the water.

She surveyed it all coldly, and the stirring of new life filled her with an irrational dread. Each day the earth became more bountiful, and each day she felt more empty and alone. Here it was again, April Fifth, the Festival of Graves. Withered branches along the riverside thrust forth buds of white and red, peach and plum trees burst into bloom, and in the vegetable plots the rape plants flowered golden yellow. Bamboo shoots pushed like steer horns through the soil, and the leaves on the willow trees burst forth like blossoms. The waterweeds revived and embellished the waters with their vivid color. When she opened the door, a dazzling haze of green confronted her.

As she brushed her hair, she examined herself in the mirror. She saw a gray, lined face, eyes like dry wells, a sharp nose, and a puckered mouth. Worst of all was her chin, which looked as if it had been gouged away by a shovel. Her few remaining teeth protruded between thin lips. It was the face of an old woman ready for the coffin.

Try as she might, she couldn't understand how age had crept up on her. Other women could watch their children grow and sigh at the passage of time:

"They're so big now, it's no wonder I'm getting on."

But there was none of this for Huang Huizhen, she who had handled women's affairs and served as the commune's Party secretary. She had not endured the pain of childbirth or known the joy and pride of being a mother and grandmother. Her life seemed to have jumped from childhood to old age; the fantasies of young womanhood had hardly existed. The past was reduced to a dim vision: the setting sun burning out like a last

ember in the ashes, the moon's pale crescent high in an inky sky. An old graybeard emerged from the gloom, singing a senseless riddle:

From times gone by, who knows when,
few survive three score and ten.
Childhood slips by in a haze,
dotage passes in a daze.
Inbetween is haste and hurry,
days of toil and nights of worry.
Once mid-autumn's come and gone,
see the moon grow pale and wan.
Past the Festival of Graves,
flowers wither, blossoms fade. …

She must have been six years old, squatting by a stream playing in the mud, kneading crumbs of soil into the shape of rolls, then crumbling them and starting again. The strange song had delighted her then. She looked up to catch a glimpse of the old man's face, but just then the last dim light of dusk died. Disembodied, the gruff voice sang on:

Round and round the seasom go,
the curfew tolls, the roosters crow. …

There had been more besides, but she couldn't remember what. Something about grave mounds, perhaps. Nor could she remember who the old graybeard was. An uncle, maybe a great-uncle—at any rate someone from her family. It embarrassed her that not all her ancestors had been the simple commoners she would have liked them to be.

Huang Huizhen couldn't understand why this vision had been haunting her since the beginning of spring. Why should she be remembering the events of childhood so late in life? At times she felt she had dreamed it all. The graybeard couldn't possibly be any relation of hers. How could she, a Communist, a revolutionary, and a materialist, indulge in such delusions? Why could she not recall the deeds from her past that merited praise and brought her glory? Was this some ill omen, warning her that she was not long for the world?

She was a little afraid of dying. She was already sixty-six years old, and as the local saying goes,

"Sixty-six, sixes doubling, bean curd boiling hot and bubbling."

This means that when you get to this age, the traditional funeral dish of bean curd is ready for your death. So the custom of the region was for all daughters to give their parents sixty-six cubes of pork on the Festival of Graves in the year they reached sixty-six. It was said that by eating the sixty-six cubes of meat the old folks could avoid illness. Then, once this milestone had been passed, the parents could live on for many more years. So, on this morning, people who had survived into their sixty-sixth year would all wait anxiously for their daughters to come by. Those who had no daughter of their own would make arrangements for a stand-in, who would carefully prepare a bowl of diced pork and carry it ostentatiously through the village.

Huang Huizhen would not copy the practices of ignorant peasants. She was a woman of status and high revolutionary consciousness and had always despised such customs as adopting stand-in daughters and eating sixty-six pieces of pork. She also knew something about science and realized that for older people to eat so much meat at a single sitting could be hard on their systems and cenainly would not prolong their lives. Besides, there was the expense to be considered! Such cogent reasoning should have been enough to reassure her, but somehow it did not. How unfathomable people can be—sometimes we can see into everyone's heart but our own.

On the morning of the Festival of Graves, she was ill at ease. Outside, spring was bright and fecund, so much so that the festival to honor the dead became a celebration of life. The villagers were making the sticky-rice dumplings that are always eaten at the festival, kneading them into all sorts of shapes, round, elongated, and pointed. Pampered children took bites out of each kind. If they did not like what they tasted, they would spit it out, or else they would eat the filling and discard the slippery outer shells. Grandmothers would grumble at their antics, but even when the little darlings tossed their leftovers to the chickens and ducks or played with them like mud pies, it didn't seem to affect the general good mood.

In Huang Huizhen's eyes, these unlettered rustics were no better than mother hens sitting on their eggs. All they cared about was raising sons and carrying on the family line. All these years after the revolution, their consciousness was still so low that they were more concerned about the yield from their beans or the fact that

their latest grandchild had a dick than they were about the great affairs of the Party and the state. She found this vexing and painful. Huang Huizhen would not pander to their primitive beliefs or join in their merriment.

She looked silently round at her four walls, hung with the pictures of her past. There had been a time when she had liked to open the windows and flood the room with light, letting the sun's crimson rays shine on her photographs and warm her heart. But later she had become nervous about drafts, and the windows had remained shut tight from that time on. Now the photographs before her were yellowing and faded with age.

The damp cold chilled her to the bone. She had lived alone since her husband's death, without even a dog or a chicken to keep her company. Now the place seemed uninhabited, a wasteland, with no babies crying, children toddling, and toys scattered about.

There was a measured knocking at the door. Startled, she sat bolt upright. Then, after a moment, the knocking came again, still firm, and courteously insistent. She hurried to her feet, her heart fluttering with hope. Could it possibly be … had her daughter come?

For she had a daughter. Not her own flesh and blood, but the child of her husband's first wife. Even though she was a stepmother, she had truly loved the child and cared for her. When the girl was young, she had taught her to sing, "The sky in the liberated areas is the brightest sky of all," and told her tales of the Red Army's final surge to victory in the civil war. She wasn't one to coddle a child, but she certainly never treated her poorly. There had always been food on the table and clothes to wear. Not too many clothes, of course, and not much in the way of treats and toys, but what harm was there in raising the child in the tradition of revolutionary austerity? When her daughter married, she gave her two chests and some quilts as her dowry. What the girl actually wanted was a dressing table, but Huang Huizhen drew the line at that. Dressing tables were for the pampered young daughters of the *bourgeoisie*. How could a Communist Party cadre provide such a gift? When she saw how disappointed her daughter was, she spent a little extra on books; but the young couple seemed uninterested in the kind of books she gave them and behaved most ungratefully. They did maintain appearances, however, and visited her at New Year and on festivals.

Her daughter became pregnant soon after the wedding and gave birth to a little girl. The young woman, her husband, and his parents all wanted to try again for a boy. By then, however, the one-child policy was in effect, and Huang Huizhen was the official responsible for women's matters. She tried several times to persuade her daughter to volunteer for sterilization, but the young woman would not consent and began to avoid her. So Huang Huizhen went to the factory where her daughter worked and impressed on them that they were not to make any concessions in this case because of connections with officialdom. Her daughter's response was to stop going in to work. Six months later there was a general inspection by the birth control authorities, and all the women of the commune were ordered to present themselves for examination. Huang Huizhen's daughter was brought in, already heavily pregnant. The mother's face darkened with fury:

"Take her away, and abort it!" Guards stepped forward to drag her away, but the young woman slumped to the ground and wailed,

"Mother, Mother, I beg you, let me have my baby!"

Huang Huizhen remembered her daughter as a headstrong child, too proud to beg, who had seldom called her Mother. So she was quite taken aback at such desperate pleading. Still, birth control was Party work, and how could she let personal feelings interfere with that? If she let her daughter off, how could she enforce the policy on other women?

When they heard that Huang Huizhen had refused to give permission for the baby to be born, her son-in-law and his parents, both of them in their sixties, came in and knelt before her.

"Chief Huang," begged the old grandfather, "if you'll only let her give birth, the whole family will kowtow and burn incense for you, and the child will remember your kindness all his life …" Huang Huizhen was exasperated at their pigheadedness and hissed through clenched teeth,

"All right, if you want the child so much, pay the fine. It's a thousand *yuan*!"

In fact, the regulations stipulated half that. She had spoken as she had only to get rid of them since she was sure they couldn't raise the cash. But, instead, her words seemed to galvanize them all like a shot of ginseng. They dashed off to borrow what they needed, and within twelve hours they were back to her with the thousand *yuan*. Not that it did them any good.

Huang Huizhen was the kind of official who always has to take the lead in implementing Party policy and never invites the disapproval of her superiors. She refused the money, and her daughter was hauled off to the clinic. An examination confirmed that she was seven months pregnant, and an abortion was ordered. But then—and nobody quite knew how it could have been done with so many watching eyes—someone slipped her a note,

and she announced that she had to go to the bathroom. Guards were sent with her, of course, and posted at the door. But when after several minutes she had still not emerged, they went in to find the room empty! Incredibly she had managed, as heavily pregnant as she was, to escape through a high and narrow window.

There must have been accomplices! It was a conspiracy! Huang Huizhen was livid. Her husband attempted to talk her around as they lay in bed that night: the girl was his only family, and besides she was seven months gone; why not just let her have the child? Such talk only made her more determined, and after a sleepless night she sent people out at daybreak to tie her daughter up and bring her in.

They strapped her to the birthing table and induced labor. To the astonishment of all, the seven-month fetus was alive—and a boy! The doctor had no choice but to put the baby in an incubator. The daughter's whole family was overjoyed: they lit incense, recited the name of the Buddha, and then came happily along to pay the fine. The hospital officials were at a loss to know what they should do, so they went to Huang Huizhen to ask for directions.

Huang Huizhen ordered them to remove the baby from the incubator immediately. Shortly after, his little life ebbed away.

Her daughter's family wailed in anguish. Mad with rage, the old father-in-law seized a knife and vowed to have it out with Huang Huizhen. If the authorities hadn't intervened, locking the old man up for a few months on a charge of intended homicide, her life might have been at risk.

The ill will that this incident had generated between her daughter and herself had endured for over ten years. Her daughter had never visited her since then. The consensus of the village gossips was that Huang had gone too far. People felt that she had only been so mean because the girl wasn't her own flesh and blood. But that just wasn't so! It wasn't that there was any bad blood between her and her daughter. She was acting for the Party and the state, for the public good!

Time and time again she had considered going to see her daughter to explain, but the girl had become a stranger to her. Only today did she realize how much she longed to see her again. She shook convulsively as she reached for the doorknob. Today is the festival, she thought. Perhaps *my* daughter will bring me sixty-six pieces of pork like the village bumpkinsdo …

But when she opened the door, it was to a messenger to tell her that she should go to county headquarters for a Party meeting.

Despite her disappointment, she felt some slight comfort. At least officialdom hadn't forgotten her. Even if her daughter didn't bring her anything, the county would treat her to a meal—and a few pieces of pork would be nothing compared to the banquet that was certain to follow the meeting.

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It was mild outside, the warm breeze redolent with pollen and honey. On this day, the Festival of Graves, there was an unaccustomed bustle of activity by the bend in the river where the commune's dead rested. For many years, the graves had been neglected and allowed to become overgrown, their only visitors passing birds pecking at the nut bush. The dead had passed lonely years in the shadows of solemn evergreens, secure in their coffins, spared the atrocities that the living committed against each other.

Now, however, times were changing. In a period of affiuence, people were more inclined to feel concern for their ancestors, and on this festival day they brought offerings of fish and meat, wine and vegetables, to the gravesides. Now that they had more to spend on themselves, they worried that the dead might still be poor, so they burned silver ingots made of tinfoil. Strings of paper money, yellow, white, and green, hung from the trees by the graves, spinning in the breeze like colored lights revolving over a dance floor. Huang Huizhen had always turned up her nose at such superstition, but today she was a little less inclined to find fault.

She was quite warm by the time she arrived at the government office compound. Sweat beaded on the tip of her nose, and her cheeks were flushed as if she had been drinking. Other old comrades were streaming in to attend the meeting. Some were being led along by their grandchildren, some were perched on the backs of bicycles pedaled by their sons, still others hobbled in leaning on their canes. In this company, Huang Huizhen seemed very sprightly to have come along under her own steam.

She had every reason to feel proud of herself. She had served a three-year term as Party secretary of the commune (or county, as it was now called). The two pines at the gate of the compound had been planted in those years on her orders. Since then, an orchard had been added, which shimmered with the pink petals of flowering cherries—trees that to her eyes were eminently lacking in the resolute spirit of the pines. In her days … but enough of that. Her back was straight and her head held high as she strode into the meeting hall.

Through force of habit, she surveyed the room as she entered. Nobody jumped up and exclaimed,

"Here's Secretary Huang!"

Nobody ran over with a stool or poured her a cup of tea. It was as if she, their former Party secretary, were invisible to them, like a bubble, like thin air. They just sat there chattering merrily away, gossiping or complaining about their sons and daughters-in-law. Irritated at their rudeness, she cleared her throat. At last some of them looked around at her, nodded briefly, forced a smile, and then went back to discussing all the things they had to do at home and comparing their various aches and pains.

She stalked angrily over to a seat by the window, sat down, and did her best to ignore them. Of course she wouldn't join in—here they were, old Party members, hardly out of office, and they had turned into a pack of gossips. What a disgrace! She wouldn't have tolerated this kind of sloppiness when she was Party secretary. But the new deputy county head didn't seem bothered by it at all. He read through a Party document about carrying out rectification at the local level with a smug grin on his face and then remarked to the chattering crowd in front of him,

"Well, now I've put you in the know about the spirit of the document from Party Central. Considering the fact that you're all getting on, and it's been quite an effort for you to make it to county headquaners today, I suggest that you have your lunch and then head home."

Huang Huizhen had understood perfectly well when she was summoned to county headquarters that the meeting would be only a formality. Still, she was most displeased at what this wet-behind-the-ears official had to say. In her day, whenever Party Central had announced a new initiative or set forth key duties, she never failed to organize discussion groups and send feedback to her superiors. Then she would select model peasants for everyone else to emulate, identify pacesetters in carrying out the new policy, and publicize their experience with the campaign. And what did you get these days?

"Put you in the know," indeed!

"Have some lunch!"

What do you take us old comrades for? Are we just windbags, lunch buckets? Others might be willing to accept it, but not Huang Huizhen. She had joined the Party in 1948, before this new deputy county head had been born.

Not that she didn't want the meal, of course. After the exertions of the morning, she had started to feel hungry some time ago. Besides, one of her reasons for coming was that she wanted to eat meat, to make up for her disappointment over the sixty-six cubes of pork.

The meeting hall was transformed into a dining hall, and young Butch, the chef from the county government offices, came in with some other youngsters to lay out the bowls and chopsticks. She couldn't abide Butch. His class origins weren't anything to be proud of, and to make matters worse, he followed current fashions, growing his hair long like a girl, wearing jeans that hugged his backside, and talking in slang that didn't sound at all proper. He also took advantage of the fact that he and the new chief had gone to school together and had been roommates when they had returned to the village. Now he addressed the deputy county head unceremoniously as "Little Li." And not only did the official allow this, but he even slapped the other on the back:

"Hey, buddy, mind how you do your work today. Cook the meat as tender as you can; these old comrades don't chew so well."

Butch was downright rude. Staring maliciously right at Huang Huizhen, he snorted:

"Huh, they've eaten well so long they've all rotted their teeth." Little Li merely slapped him on the back to shut him up:

"Cut the crap, eh?"

Butch pulled a face and went off to another table. The deputy county head didn't pursue the matter, just turned to address the gathering:

"Since the meal isn't ready yet, why don't you old comrades make some suggestions about how the county administration should do its work in the future?"

This lackadaisical attitude made Huang Huizhen's blood boil. What kind of a Party leader was he? Consorting with hooligans, even putting the children of landlords and rich peasants in positions of responsibility! Where were the prestige and principles of a Communist Party member? She couldn't stand it any longer. Her face puffed, and purple with rage, she rose abruptly.

"Since we're in a Party rectification," she snapped, "I'll be blunt. Our present leadership is short on Party spirit, it lacks principles, and its political standards are low."

The listeners looked at each other nervously, unsure of how to react. Working herself up even more, she picked a newspaper up off the table, rolled it up, and slapped the table with it:

“When I was doing underground work, I was under the leadership of the comrades who had come south to fight the civil war, and in those days …”

Everyone was silent. They had heard this line from Huang Huizhen almost daily when she had been Party secretary. She had only to mention coming south, and you knew a lecture would follow; like it or not, you had to pay attention, or you were in big trouble! This time, however, after a few seconds of bemused silence, there were snorts of laughter. Amid the laughter someone muttered,

“Huh, coming south with the leaders of the Red Army! I’ve heard that some of those women were sold into whorehouses and they haven’t come out yet!” Someone else added,

“What do the old whores think they have to brag about?”

It was just as well the laughter was so loud and that Huang Huizhen didn’t hear the last few words, or she might really have had a fit. As it was, she was so furious her mind was a blur. If it had just been the common people being so impudent, she could have borne it, but these were Party cadres! All of them had always been subservient and attentive to her, and now they were mocking her brazenly. Could the inconceivable be true—that their behavior toward her in the past was all a sham? At a momentary loss for words, she opened the newspaper in her hand and saw the bold print of a headline:

PARTY GENERAL SECRETARY VISITS EUROPE

There was a photograph beside the report. As she looked at it, the blood rushed to her head. She gesticulated and shouted,

“Don’t you laugh! I’ve got criticisms of the general secretary as well! He’s leader of the Party, but instead of doing rectification work, he’s off on a trip overseas. That’s the job of the foreign minister—”

Before she could finish, the tension broke, and the listeners began to howl with laughter. Butch called out for someone to rub his stomach and ease the pain of laughing. The laughter was so loud it threatened to blow the roof off. The new deputy county head hurriedly gestured them all to lay off:

“Don’t laugh, folks. A Party member has a right to air her opinions about the leadership.”

He was trying to keep a straight face, but everyone could tell from the twinkle in his eye and the catch in his voice that he couldn’t completely suppress his mirth. Butch found it hard to contain himself as well, but muttering “crazy bitch!” and rubbing his belly, he headed back into the kitchen:

“Hey guys, here’s a newsflash, April fifth, New China News Agency! They’ve dug up a mummy from the tombs at Mawangdui who wants to take a potshot at the Central Committee!” His young fellow workers clustered round:

“What do you mean?”

Butch couldn’t resist the opportunity to do an imperson- ation. By the time he was through, everyone else was holding their sides as well. Then Butch shook his head and said more soberly,

“It’s hard to understand why, but they get old, and the brain starts to go. Oh, yes, I almost forgot—Little Li said to cook the stuff soft or the old monkeys won’t be able to chew it.” An old cook who was chopping meat on the table broke in:

“What’s so hard to understand? You shouldn’t make fun of her. In the old days, you’d have been called a rightist or a counterrevolutionary for less than that!”

There was menace in his voice, but Butch’s assistants were just a bunch of kids, without any understanding of what the words *rightist* and *counterrevolutionary* meant. They just laughed at the old cook as if he, too, were some ancient relic. The old man saw how little they respected his experience, so he pointed to Butch:

“You don’t believe me? His father talked too much, and that was the end of him!”

That wiped the smile from Butch's face. His father had been framed and sentenced to labor reform in a coal mine, where he had been killed when a mine shaft had caved in. The case had been determined by Huang Huizhen, which was why Butch had always loathed her. He had been a child when his father died, and his mother had not had the education to explain the whys and wherefores of the case to her son. Thus it was still a mystery to him why Huang Huizhen had taken it on herself to brand his father a counterrevolutionary. Now that the old cook had raised the subject, Butch asked him what had happened.

“It’s a long story,” said the old man. “It was during the Great Leap Forward in 1958, and Huang Huizhen’s husband—he was the boss of the co-op in those days—told everyone to plant five hundred *catties* of seed on every *mu* of land and harvest a hundred thousand *catties* of grain from it. If you try to spread that many seeds onto

a single *mu*, they'll rot, and most won't sprout. Huang Huizhen was pretty ingenious, though. She mobilized the entire village to paint old newspapers with paste, then stick the seeds onto it standing on their ends. When the newspapers were loaded with seeds, they laid them down in the fields and covered them with soil."

This had them all baffled. Someone asked,

"Did they really plant their fields that way? Did the seeds grow?"

"Sure," the old cook nodded, "a couple of shoots here and there, nothing more."

Butch was beginning to understand where the story was leading, but the other youngsters still hadn't a clue. In their innocence they asked,

"So what's this all got to do with Butch's dad?" The old cook pushed cubes of meat to the side of the chopping block and continued slowly,

"Butch's father was teacher at the primary school at the time, and when there was something nobody else could understand, we would always go to him for an explanation. He said that what Huang Huizhen was doing was against the laws of nature, and he wrote a letter saying so to the authorities. He even sent an article to the newspaper, which was how he came to be dragged away as a counterrevolutionary. Nobody doubted his scientific knowledge." The old cook sighed and changed his tone abruptly:

"That's all in the past now. Don't let it get you down, Butch. Just try and mind your manners a bit; don't shoot your mouth off all the time. You meddle in things that don't concern you and say things that shouldn't be spoken. Take that business about criticizing the Party general secretary. It's all very well for Huang Huizhen to talk like that, but if you'd breathed a word of it when she was in power, she would have had you tied up and dragged of[Face the facts, we're not all equal, you have to give way … Butch, hey Butch?"

The old man looked around, but Butch was gone. Then he saw him going into the hall bearing a tray loaded with food.

It was a splendid lunch. The pork was as tender as the deputy county head had said it should be, and the chicken was falling from the bone. Butch had divided the food into individual ponions and placed the same selection before each of the diners.

Only Huang Huizhen had an extra dish at her place, a bowl decorated with a blue floral design, full to the brim with bubbling white bean curd, fragrant with the tang of green onions, a rich sauce dripping down the side onto the table.

"How come she gets bean curd, and I don't?" complained the person sitting beside her.

Butch sniggered:

"Take it easy. Just let her have what she deserves."

Huang Huizhen was starting to feel a little better. The spread before her was eminently superior to sixty-six cubes of pork, and it looked as if she were finally getting some preferential treatment. But when she heard what Butch said, she realized the intent behind the bowl of "bean curd boiling hot and bubbling," and she trembled with rage.

"Butch … how dare you!"

Butch stood to one side watching her, the tray still in his hands, the corners of his mouth curled in a half smile of malice that made her shiver. Huang Huizhen's face turned from sallow to crimson, then from crimson to white. She slammed down her bowl and stormed out.

How unfair it was! She had lived long enough, she should die now that she was sixty-six, she couldn't take any more of this aggravation! What kind of monster was Butch? How could he humiliate her like that? Just because he was friends with the deputy county head … or maybe the deputy county head was behind it all! When the higher-ups had decided a few years ago that he should take over from her, she had put up a stubborn fight—why should they take her power away when she was in good health and prepared to redouble her efforts for the revolution? Besides, how could she relax if her power were handed over to someone like that? A young guy in his thirties, born after she joined the Party! So cocksure of himself because he'd been to college! Always on about incentives and efficiency! Dancing around with a bunch of delinquents! Where would his dance lead them all?

He got the position anyway. Still, as a result of her efforts, he was given only the rank of deputy rather than full county head, as the original plan had been. He must have set up today's scene to get revenge on her.

But Huang Huizhen was still Huang Huizhen. Rattled as she was, she didn't lose control altogether. From her jumble of thoughts, a course of action emerged. She decided she would pay a visit to County Head Zhu.

He wasn't like Little Li. County Head Zhu was a solid cadre of the old school. In years past he had served under Huang Huizhen as office manager for the Party branch office, and she had seen to it that he was designated as one of the next generation of leaders. In her campaign to stop opponunists like Little Li from getting power, she

and Office Manager Zhu had busied themselves day and night with their investigations, collected incriminating evidence, called all kinds of meetings, busied themselves till their hair turned gray, and suffered who knows how many sleepless nights!

In the end it had been Zhu who had composed the letter denouncing Little Li. They decided that their letter would have to be anonymous for the time being. This was because Little Li was the cunning type: he knew how to suck up to people, and he always managed to get the credit when things went right and to avoid criticism for disasters.

Naturally the district authorities took the letter very seriously and spent over a year investigating the Little Li affair. But then they ruled that the accusations were largely hearsay and slander. Huang Huizhen was appalled at the decision and upset to think of all the wasted effort. Little Li was delighted and ready to celebrate his promotion.

Then, all of a sudden, the policy changed. The top leadership stopped promoting people several grades at once and went back to a system of letting them go up a step at a time. So Little Li rose only to deputy head, while the higher rank—county head and county party secretary—went to the author of the anonymous letter, Office Manager Zhu. Even the darkest of clouds have silver linings after all.

She walked out of county headquarters and followed the road east. In a while she saw the birdcages hanging above the balcony of County Head Zhu's home. Her spirits revived. Zhu was the forthright and generous sort. He would always let her have her pick of his birds. Once he had bought a talking parrot at considerable expense, and, simply because she had admired it, he had sent his wife around with the bird as a gift that very evening.

She should have a good talk with County Head Zhu. Not only did she plan to tell him what she thought of Little Li and offer advice on how he should proceed; she also intended to discuss the great affairs of Party and state. The land in the village was now being contracted out to families, and individuals were being allowed to hire laborers and exploit them. In the cities, foreign capitalists were being invited over to manage factories, entrepreneurs were opening businesses, and there were merchants and peddlers all over the place. The only thing missing from the 1940s were the foreign concessions! No, they even had them, too, though they gave them a slightly nicer name: *special economic zones.* What did all this have to do with socialism? It wasn't just some fit of pique that had made her say she was going to protest about the Party general secretary. \

But those people … they were all cadres who had been nurtured by the Party, yet they were so unfeeling, they had mocked her.

Huh, you can laugh! Just remember, she who laughs last laughs longest! Some day the Central Committee would come back to its senses. Her only regret was that since she was getting on in years, sixty-six already, she might not live to see the day. County Head Zhu was younger, though—he'd be around when the time came. But, then again, even he was fifty-eight and unlikely to oudast Little Li. In three years' time, County Head Zhu would be forced into retirement as she had been, and Little Li would take over. That prospect worried her dreadfully. She would have to suggest ways Zhu could make his position more secure.

She hurried on toward County Head Zhu's house. She didn't know whether he would be in, so she peeped in through the high window that faced the road. He was there, so she went up to the door and knocked. Nobody answered at first, so she rapped a litde harder and called out,

"County Head Zhu, Little Zhu!"

It wasn't Zhu who opened the door but his wife, a forced smile on her face:

"Oh, it's you … I'm so sorry, he's … he's not at home just now."

Not at home? But she'd just seen him at the table!

At a loss for words, she stared dumbly at the wrinkles etched into the woman's fat face, as if seeking an explanation in the pattern of their lines.

*

The river flowed quickly that spring. Broken twigs from the past year were whisked around in little whirlpools or swept along by the current. Huang Huizhen realized that fate had been as relendess and unfeeling to her as those cold waters, sweeping away everything that she had been. What had it all been for, her life of struggle? She wasn't so sure anymore. Everyone had forsaken her, her colleagues had humiliated her … no need to dwell on that now.

But County Head Zhu, Little Zhu, her *protege*, her successor! She had cared for him, guided him along like a younger brother, and now he treated her like a stranger! He was there, she knew he was, but his wife said,

"He's not at home!"

Just like that—as if she'd been a beggar at his door.

She trudged along in a dream. Or perhaps it was the past that was the dream from which she was now waking. The wind blew chill against her, its cold cutting her heart, and she began to shiver in spite of herself. Yet, oddly enough, the flowers, grasses, and trees seemed to be absorbing warmth from the sun despite the cold and flourished vigorously, growing strong and spirited. Young women stepped out, dressed in their brightest and newest clothes, bearing woven baskets containing sixty-six cubes of pork for their parents. Courting couples strolled along arm in arm, the men in Western suits and leather shoes, the women with their hair flowing free over their shoulders.

Huang Huizhen disapproved of all this. It was a scene from another planet to her. And so confusing—had she woken from a dream or returned to one?

Huang Huizhen wavered, not knowing where she should go next. Everything before her was a blur, fields stretching as far as the eye could see, the setting sun fading like a last crimson ember dying in the ashes. High in the blue-black sky, the slender crescent of the pale new moon was rising. Out of the gloom came the old graybeard, singing his senseless riddle:

From times gone by, who knows when,
few survive three score and ten.
Childhood slips by in a haze,
dotage passes in a daze.
Inbetween is haste and hurry,
days of toil and nights of worry.
Once mid-autumn's come and gone,
see the moon go pale and wan.
Past the Festival of Graves,
flowers wither, blossoms fade …

She was six again, playing in the mud by the stream, kneading tiny fragments into the shape of rolls, then crumbling them and repeating the process. The strange song enchanted her. She looked up to see the old man's face, but in that instant the last glimmerings of dusk were covered by the curtain of blackness. The desolate sound of the gruff voice continued:

Round and round the seasons go,
the curfew tolls, the roosters crow.
See your dead before your eyes,
weeds grow yearly where they lie,
Unattended; overgrown,
hosts of grave mounds high and low. …

Now that she had remembered the last couple of lines, she felt a marvelous sense of relief. She saw that she had come to the bend in the river where the graves lay.

How could she be here? This wasn't the road home. She was about to turn back when her eye lit on a familiar figure, a woman in a purple jacket, her hair permed, kneeling by a grave with a wicker basket in her hand. It was her daughter. She was lifting dishes out of the basket, making offerings to her father.

As Huang Huizhen watched, a sudden ray of hope shone through her depression. If her daughter cared enough to make offerings to her father, perhaps she would pay a call on her as well. Why couldn't she get on with her daughter as the peasant women did with theirs and live out her life in contentment?

She almost called out, but she couldn't drop her defenses that far. Then it occurred to her that her daughter would have to pass right by her house on her way home, so she decided to go first and make her a special meal.

Back at home, she rolled up her sleeves and got busy. Time was tight—she couldn't go out and buy fresh ingredients or grind glutinous rice into flour for the traditional dumplings. Fortunately, she had a well-stocked larder—cans of luxury food not available to mere peasants: sausage, dried shredded meat, pressed chicken … she soon had a dozen plates of food and a bottle of red wine laid out on the table. In case that wasn't enough, she filled bowls with melon seeds and candies and even measured some malted milk powder into a glass, with hot water ready to add when her daughter arrived.

She would put on airs no longer. If her daughter would only come, she would give her anything; the dressing table of course, even a television. Her daughter might not agree to it all straight away, so perhaps she would start off with some new clothes for her granddaughter. Huang Huizhen resolved that she would not even oppose her daughter if she said she wanted another child; why, she would even make a contribution to help pay the fine. She

had money, and what she would really like was a chubby little grandson making little messes on the floor and wetting the sheets …

She waited until the dishes on the table were all cold, but still there was no sign of her daughter. Impatient, she went back to look for her. She rushed in a panic to the bamboo grove across the river from the graves. All she could see were the green grave mounds and the strings of paper cash fluttering like butterflies in the breeze. The pines, still without new growth, stood somber and dark, grief-stricken as a widow.

There was nobody there. Her daughter was gone.

Huang Huizhen felt dizzy. The bamboo grove whirled around, the river flowing above her, dark yellow waves rushing toward her … the world was turning upside down. She groaned and grasped hold of a slim bamboo. But it wouldn't hold her up, and she slumped to the ground.

Beyond the shade of the bamboo grove, there was the red of peach blossoms and the green of willows. Shafts of sunset red as tulip petals caressed the fields. And in the fields, the golden rape, the snow-white magnolia, the pink flowers of the broad beans … however fierce the wind might be, however hard the rain, the earth would come to life, the flowers would bloom again.

194.181 They Don't Mean It\fn{by Lensey Namioka (1949-)} Peking, China (F) 4

Our family moved here from China two years ago, and we thought we were pretty well adjusted to American ways. So my parents decided to give a party on Chinese New Year and invite some of our American friends.

When we first came to the United States, we had a hard time getting used to the different customs, but we gradually learned how things were done. We learned American table manners, for instance. We stopped slurping when we ate soup or ramen noodles. (At least we didn't slurp when we were with other Americans. When we ate by ourselves at home, we still sneaked in a juicy slurp every now and then.)

Mother stopped complimenting people here on how old and fat they looked. She learned that Americans thought being old was pitiful, and that being slender was beautiful.

Father's English pronunciation was improving. He used to have trouble with the consonant *r*, so instead of "left" and "right," he would say "reft" and "light." Since he's a professional musician, making a correct sound is important to him, and he practiced until he mastered his *r*. Now he can tell me to pass him the Rice Krispies crisply.

I worked harder than anybody at doing the right thing, and I even kept a little notebook with a list of English expressions (one of my favorites was "It's raining cats and dogs"). I even adopted an American name: Mary. I knew my friends in school would have a hard time with my Chinese name, Yingmei,. so now I'm Mary Yang.

I really believed that our family had adjusted completely. We had even joined in celebrating American holidays, such as Independence Day, Labor Day, Thanksgiving, Easter, Christmas, and New Year—Western New Year, that is. My parents decided to show our American friends what Chinese New Year was like.

*

Chinese New Year, which falls in late January or early February, is sometimes called the Lunar New Year because it's based on the phases of the moon. It doesn't always fall on the same day in the solar calendar, but depends on when the first new moon occurs after the winter solstice, or the shortest day of the year. Anyway, in China it's also called the Spring Festival, because by that time you're pretty tired of winter and you're looking forward eagerly to spring.

In China we celebrate the New Year by setting off firecrackers, and we were delighted when we learned that firecrackers were also set off here in Seattle's Chinatown at New Year. But eating special foods is the most important part of the celebration.

So a week before the party, we helped Mother to shop and cook the special New Year dishes. We had to serve fish, since the Chinese word for fish is *yu*, which sounds the same as the word for "surplus." It's good to have a surplus of money and other valuables.

Mother admitted that living in America for two years had made her soft, and she no longer felt like killing a fish with her own hands. These days, she bought dead fish, but she always apologized when she served it to our Chinese guests. When we first came to America, Mother used to keep live fish in the bathtub because that way she knew the fish would be fresh when it came time to cook it. Even for the New Year party, she bought a dead fish, but at least she went to a special store in Chinatown where they had live fish and killed it for you on the spot.

For our New Year dinner we also had to have noodles. We normally eat noodles on birthdays, because the long strands stand for a long life. Why noodles on New Year, then? Because in the old days, instead of having your

own special birthday, everybody's birthday was on New Year's Day, no matter what day you were actually born on.

The New Year dish that involves the most work is the ten-vegetable salad. Mother tells us that each of the ten vegetables is supposed to promote health, and eating it on New Year makes you healthy for the whole year. I can understand why some of the vegetables are healthy—things like carrots, bean sprouts, and cabbage, which have lots of vitamins. But the salad also includes things like dried mushrooms and a kind of lichen. When I asked Mother why they were supposed to be healthy, she thought a bit and then admitted that she always included those ingredients because *her* mother and grandmother always included them.

So we got to work. We had to soak the dried ingredients. We had to wash the fresh vegetables and slice them up into thin strips. In addition to all the cooking, we vacuumed every room thoroughly, since we wanted to start the New Year with a really clean house. Mother said that we had to do the cleaning before New Year, because doing it on the day itself was bad luck. It was believed that you'd sweep out good fortune together with the dirt.

With all the cooking and the cleaning, I was exhausted by the time our guests arrived at our house for the New Year party.

*

The first of our guests to arrive were the Engs, a Chinese-American family. Paul Eng, their son, was in Eldest Brother's class. Paul and Second Sister were beginning to be interested in each other, although we pretended we didn't notice. I was glad that Second Sister had finally thrown away her Chinese cloth shoes. They had developed big holes, and we could see her toes wiggling around inside. Tonight she was wearing a new pair of sneakers she'd bought with her baby-sitting money.

The O'Mearas arrived next. Kim O'Meara was my best friend in school, and we'd been at each other's house lots of times. The last to arrive were the Conners. My youngest brother's best friend was Matthew Conner, who was a really good violinist and took lessons from my father.

"Happy New Year, Sprout!" Matthew said to Fourth Brother.

"Sprout" was my brother's nickname, because for school lunch he used to eat sandwiches filled with stir-fried bean sprouts. Now he eats peanut butter and jelly sandwiches just like his &iends, but the nickname stuck.

Because we had too many people to seat around the dining table, we served dinner buffet style, and the guests helped themselves to the food. When they saw all the dishes arranged on the dining table, they exclaimed at how beautiful everything looked.

"Oh, no, it's really plain, simple food," said Mother. "I've only added a few small things for the New Year."

The guests paid no attention to her and began to help themselves. Mrs. Conner wanted to know how Mother had cooked the fish. Mrs. Eng said that she also cooked fish and served noodles on New Year, but she didn't do the ten-vegetable salad. Maybe it wasn't served in the part of China where her family originally came from.

Nobody had complaints about the food, from the way they devoured it and came back for seconds. The kids even ate up the salad. Kim O'Meara laughed when she saw her brother Jason taking a second helping.

"Hey, Jason, I thought you hate vegetables!"

Jason's mouth was full, so he just mumbled an answer. Mrs. O'Meara looked at me and smiled.

"I bet you and your mom put a lot of work into making that salad, Mary. Doesn't it hurt to see it disappear in a matter of minutes?"

It *was* a lot of work to make the ten-vegetable salad. I got a blister on my finger from slicing all those celery and carrot sticks.

"I'm glad to see how much you people like it," I said. "You'll all be very healthy this coming year!"

Looking at the platters of food getting emptied, I began to worry.

"We'd better do something about dessert!" I whispered to Mother. At this rate, our guests would still be hungry after the main courses were finished.

"But I never make dessert!" Mother whispered back. Dessert isn't something Chinese normally eat at the end of a dinner.

So I ran into the kitchen, found a carton of almond cookies, and hurriedly dumped them on a platter. When I put the platter on the dining table, the cookies disappeared before I could say *abracadabra* (*abracadabra* was one of the words in my little notebook). Since it was a weekday night, people didn't stay long after the last cookie crumb was eaten. There was a congestion at the front door as the guests thanked us for inviting them and showing them what a real, Chinese New Year dinner was like.

"The fish was delicious!" Mrs. Eng said to Father. "I'll have to get the recipe from your wife one of these days. She's a wonderful cook, isn't she?"

“Oh, no, she’s not a good cook at all,” said Father. “You’re just being polite.”

I heard a little gasp from my friend Kim. She stared wide-eyed at Father.

“What’s the matter, Kim?” I asked. Instead of answering, Kim turned to look at Mrs. O’Meara, who was saying to my mother,

“I *loved* your ten-vegetable salad. Even the kids loved it, and they don’t usually eat their vegetables. You and the girls must have spent *hours* doing all that fine dicing and slicing!”

“The girls did the cutting, and I’m sorry they did such a terrible job,” said Mother. “I’m embarrassed at how thick those pieces of celery were!”

I heard another little gasp from Kim, who was now staring at Mother. But I didn’t get a chance to ask her what the problem was. The O’Mearas were going out the front door, and the rest of the guests followed.

*

“How come your father and your mother were so nasty last night?” asked Kim when we were walking to the school bus stop the next morning.

“What do you mean?” I asked. I didn’t remember Father or Mother acting nasty.

“It was when Mrs. Eng was telling your dad what a good cook your mom is,” replied Kim. That’s right. Mrs. Eng did say something about Mother being a good cook.

“So what’s bothering you?” I asked. Kim stopped dead.

“Didn’t you hear your dad?” she demanded. “He said that your mom wasn’t a good cook at all, and that Mrs. Eng was just being polite!”

I still didn’t understand why Kim was bothered.

“So what? People are always saying things like that.” But Kim wasn't finished.

“And then when my mom said how hard you worked to cut up the vegetables, your mom said she was embarrassed by what a terrible job you did in slicing!” I had to laugh.

“She doesn’t mean it! It’s just the way she talks.” When the school bus arrived and we got on, Kim began again.

“Then why do your parents keep saying these bad things if they don’t mean it? I’d be really hurt if my mom said I did a terrible job—after I worked so hard, too.”

*

What Kim said made me thoughtful. I suddenly realized that whenever people said good things about us, my parents always contradicted them and said how bad we really were. We kids knew perfectly well that our parents didn’t mean it, so our feelings weren’t hurt in the least. It was just the way Chinese parents were supposed to talk. Finally I said to Kim,

“I think that if my parents agreed with the compliments, then that would be the same as bragging. It’s good manners to contradict people when they compliment your children.”

“It’s bragging only if you say good things about *yourself*,” protested Kim. “It’s different when your parents are talking about *you*.” I shook my head.

“We Chinese feel it’s the same thing. Boasting about our children, or husband, or wife, is the same as boasting about ourselves. People even think it’s bad luck.”

It was Kim’s turn to be thoughtful.

“So that’s why your parents never said what good musicians you were. That would be bragging, right?”

Music is the most important thing in our family. My elder brother plays the violin, my second sister plays the viola, and I play the cello. We all practice very hard, and I know Father thinks we are all doing well—only he has never said so to other people.

“The funny thing is,” continued Kim, “your kid brother is the only one in your family who isn’t a good musician. But I’ve never heard your parents say anything about how badly he plays.”

I thought over what Kim said about Fourth Brother. He is the only one in our family who is no good at all with music. But we don’t talk about his terrible ear. Finally I said,

“It’s like this: We’re not hurt when we hear our parents say bad things about *us*, since we know they’re only doing it because it’s good manners. We know perfectly well that they don’t mean it. But if they say my younger brother has a terrible ear, they’d really be telling the truth. So they don’t say anything, because that would hurt his feelings.”

Kim rolled her eyes.

“Boy, this is confusing! Your parents can’t tell the truth about your playing because it would be bragging. And they can’t say anything about your brother’s playing because that would be telling the truth.” I grinned.

"Right! You got it!"

*

I think Kim understood what I was driving at. She didn't make a face when she heard my mother saying that the cookies Second Sister baked for the PTA bake sale were terrible.

After our Spring Festival party, the days became longer, and cherry trees burst into bloom. The baseball season began, and Fourth Brother's team played an opening game against another school. My brother might have a terrible ear for music, but he was turning out to be a really good baseball player.

In the seventh inning Fourth Brother hit a home run, something he had wanted to do for a long time but had never managed before. All his teammates crowded around to congratulate him.

"You did it, Sprout! You did it!" shouted Matthew Conner, his best friend. Mr. Conner turned to Father.

"I bet you're proud of the boy!"

"He was just lucky when he hit that home run," said Father.

Overhearing the exchange, Kim turned to me and smiled.

"I see what you mean," she whispered.

*

That Easter, the O'Mearas invited our family for dinner. I knew that Easter was a solemn religious holiday, but what I noticed most was that the stores were full of stuffed rabbits and fuzzy baby chicks. Chocolate eggs were everywhere.

For the dinner, Mrs. O'Meara cooked a huge ham. She had also made roast potatoes, vegetables, salad, and the biggest chocolate cake I had ever seen. I had eaten a lot at Thanksgiving dinners, but this time I stuffed myself until I was bursting. The rest of my family did pretty well, too. We all loved ham. As Mrs. O'Meara started cutting up the take for dessert, Mother said,

"I'm not sure if I can eat one more bite. That was the best ham I've ever tasted!"

"Aw, that ham was terrible," said Kim. "I bet you could do a lot better, Mrs. Yang."

There was a stunned silence around the table. Mrs. O'Meara stared at Kim, and her face slowly turned dark red. I heard a low growl from Mr. O'Meara.

"You and I are going to have a little talk later this evening, young lady," he said to Kim.

Our family was speechless with surprise. My parents, my brothers, and sister all stared at Kim. I was the most shocked, because Kim was my best friend, and in the two years since I've known her, I'd never seen her do or say anything mean. How could she say something so cruel about her own mother?

The rest of the evening was pretty uncomfortable. Our family left early, because we could all see that Mr. and Mrs. O'Meara were waiting impatiently to have their "little talk" with Kim as soon as we were gone.

Next morning at the school bus stop, Kim wouldn't even look at me. Finally I cleared my throat.

"What made you talk like that to your mother, Kim?" I asked.

Kim whirled around. She looked furious.

"B-but you were the one who t-told me that saying nice things about your own family was the s-same as bragging!" she stuttered. "Last night I was just trying to act modest!"

I finally saw the light. I saw how Kim had misunderstood what I had said.

"Listen, Kim," I said, "Chinese *parents* are supposed to say critical things about their own *children*, and husbands and wives can say bad things about each other. But *young people* must always be respectful to their *elders*."

The school bus came.

"I guess I'll never understand the Chinese," sighed Kim as we sat down. At least we still sat together.

After school I went over to Kim's house and explained to Mrs. O'Meara about how the Chinese were supposed to sound modest about their own children. I told her that Kim had thought I meant children also had to sound modest about their parents. Mrs. O'Me.ara laughed. Although her laugh sounded a little forced, it was a good sign.

*

I soon forgot about Kim's misunderstanding, because I had other things to worry about. Our school orchestra was giving its spring concert, and the conductor asked me to play a cello solo as one of the numbers. Father said I should play a dance movement from one of Bach's unaccompanied cello suites. It was a very hard piece, and I was really scared to play it in public. But Father said we should always try to meet challenges.

I practiced like mad. On the day of the concert, I was so nervous that I was sitting on pins and needles waiting for my turn to play ("sitting on pins and needles" was another expression in my little notebook). My legs were

wobbly when it came time for me to walk to the front of the stage. But as I sat down with my cello and actually started playing, I became so wrapped up in the music that I forgot to be nervous.

After the concert, my friends came up to congratulate me. It was the proudest moment of my life.

"You were great, Mary, simply great!" said Kim. Her eyes were shining.

Mother's eyes were shining, too.

"Yes, she *was* good," she blurted out. Then she covered her mouth and looked embarrassed.

Kim turned to me and winked.

"That's all right, Mrs. Yang. We all know you didn't mean it!"

The photogaph above is of a portrait statue of young Mao Tse-tung (1893-1976), located on Orange Isle, Changsha, the capital of Hunan province, China. It was unveiled on December 2009, which would have been Mao's 116th birthday. Thirty-two meters tall, it took two years to build and cost about 35 million US dollars (300 million RMB). In all, some 8,000 giant granite bricks were mined from Fujian and broght to Changsha.

*****

Both the statue's location and its youthful cast were chosen due to a poem Mao Zedong wrote as a young man in 1925. Entitled *Changsha*, it is one of his most well-known poems.

Alone I stand in the autumn cold
On the tip of Orange Island,
The Hsiang flowing northward;
I see a thousand hills crimsoned through
By their serried woods deep-dyed,
And a hundred barges vying
Over crystal blue waters.
Eagles cleave the air,
Fish glide in the limpid deep;
Under freezing skies a million creatures contend in freedom.
Brooding over this immensity,
I ask, on this boundless land
Who rules over man's destiny?

*

I was here with a throng of companions,
Vivid yet those crowded months and years.
Young we were, schoolmates,
At life's full flowering;
Filled with student enthusiasm
Boldly we cast all restraints aside.
Pointing to our mountains and rivers,
Setting people afire with our words,
We counted the mighty no more than muck.
Remember still
How, venturing midstream, we struck the waters
And waves stayed the speeding boats?

† Dragon-boat racing, a sport for over 2000 years, by strong young men—as Mao and his friends were in their twenties, long ago now … †

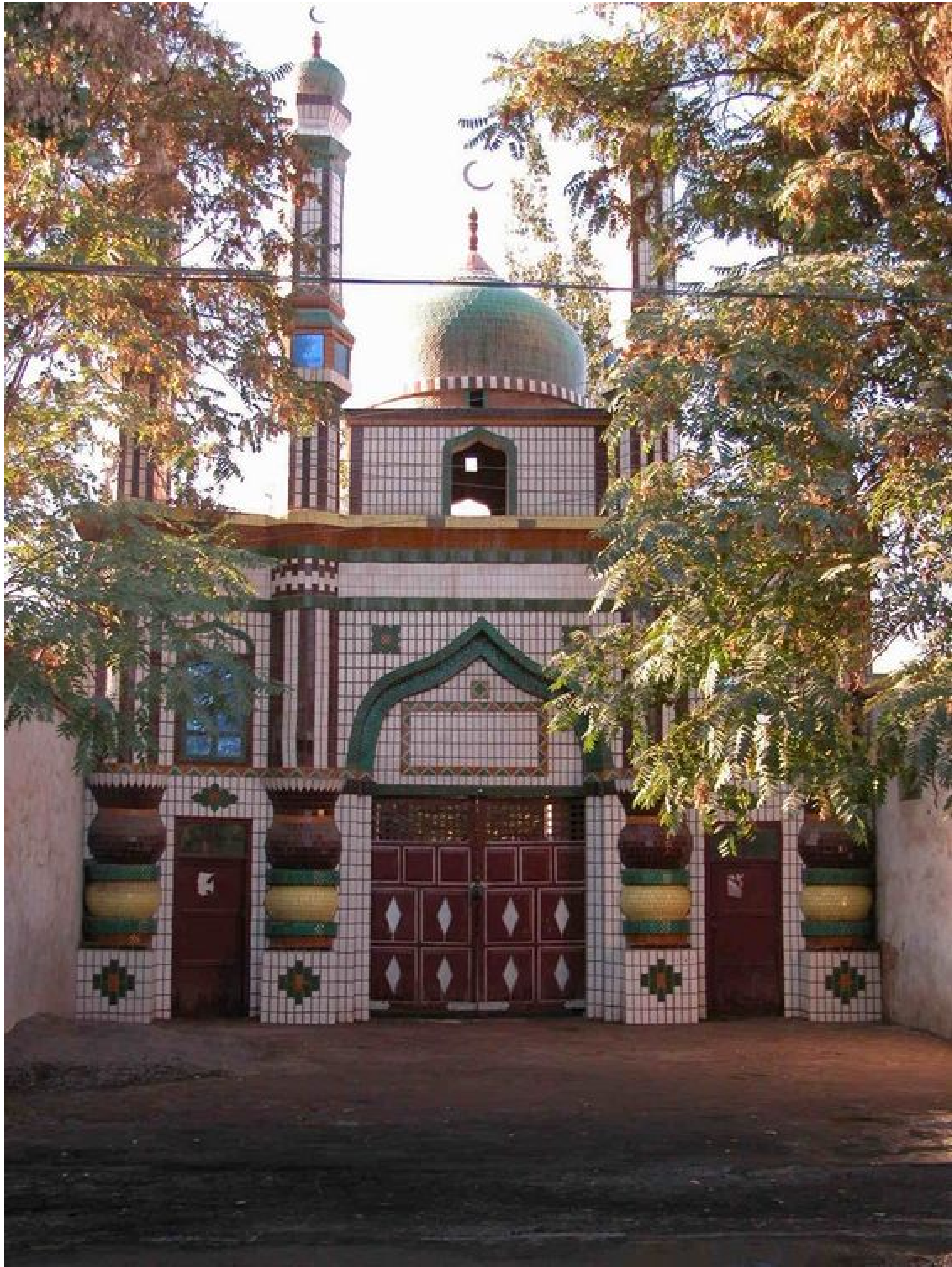
Id Kah Mosque in Kashgar, Xinjiang is the largest mosque in China

Taizi Mosque in Yinchuan, China

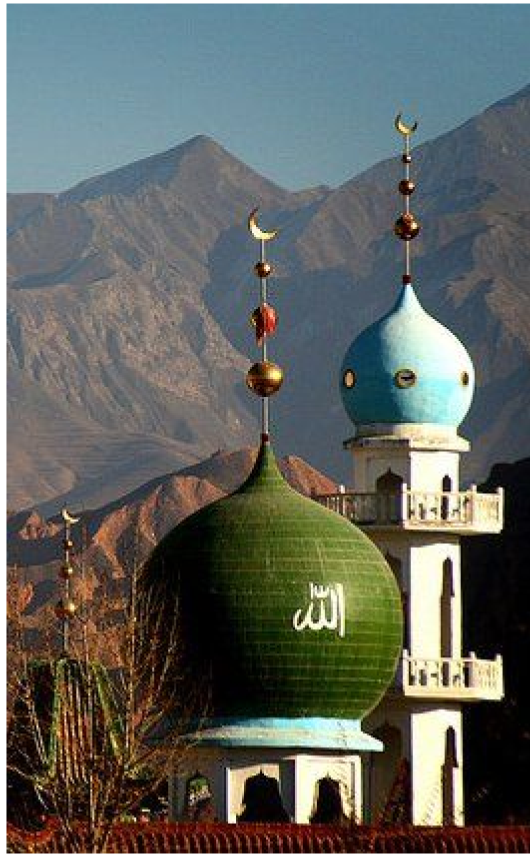
Nanjing Jingjue Mosque

Mosque with Chinese Characteristics at Langmusi, Gansu, China

Khantegri Mosque in Urumqi, Xinjiang, China. The mosque was originally built in 1919 but completed refurbishment in 2014



Uighur mosque in old Turpan, Xinjiang, China



Dongguan, China.

Islamic Centre in Harbin - China