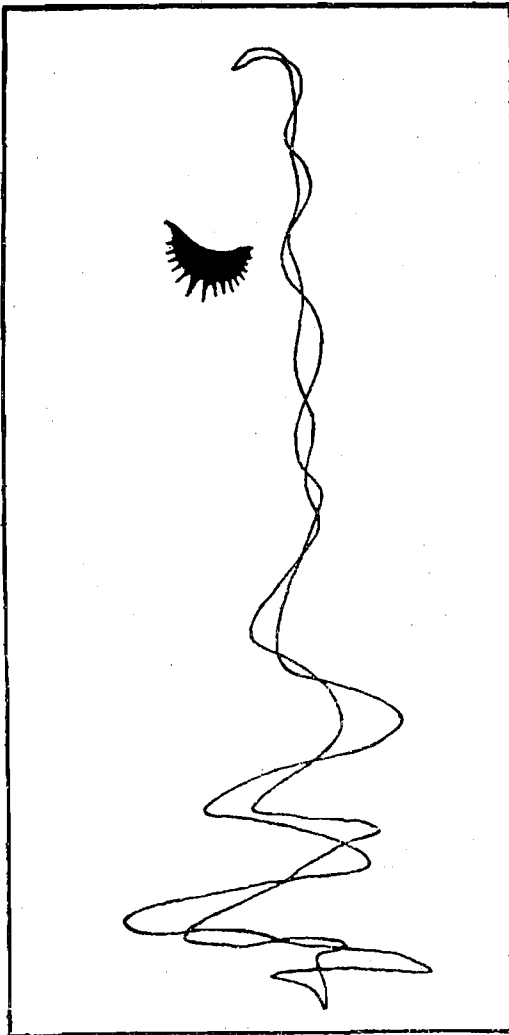


# 趙振開：波動

## Waves

By Zhao Zhenkai

Translated by Susette Cooke



*This translation ('work-in-progress') represents a little over two-thirds of the original story. Condensations of the omitted passages are printed in italics. The complete story will appear in a forthcoming anthology of Zhao Zhenkai's fiction.*

### I

#### 1A *Yang Xun*

PULLING INTO THE station, the buffers screeching. Outside the window the flash of streetlights, shadows of trees, a line of pulsating railings. The train attendant opens the door, lets down the step-ladder, mutters something indistinct. A stream of fresh air hits my face. I breathe in a deep draught of it, and step down from the carriage.

The platform is deserted. In the distance the locomotive spouts jets of steam, a sickly-pale spotlight wavers in the rising fog. From the long shadow of the train comes the clanging ring of small hammers.

Night, flowing gently along the breeze.

The old ticket-collector leans against the railing, napping. On his chest a loose brass button quivers a little. He stretches, pulls a fob-watch from his pocket. "Huh, late again, the loafers." He turns the ticket over and over, then gives a long yawn and hands it back. "I've been to Peking ... Tian Qiao, Dazhala'r, the flower market ... it's nothing, nothing."

I give him a cigarette. "When were you there?"

"In '34." He strikes a match, sheltering it from the wind with his hand, the flare jumping from between his fingers to his forehead. He inhales greedily. "That year I'd just got myself a wife. Went shopping for a bit of printed cotton and stuff."

A sweet, greasy smell of mildew and decay wafts about the little station square. There's a big cart stopped in the light from the waiting-room doorway. The shaft-horse snorts from time to time, sniffing about on the ground. The driver lies sideways across the top of the cart, one foot dangling down. I put down my bag, light a cigarette and throw the match into a pitch-black puddle

nearby.

There are no streetlights, no moon, along the road, only a faint gleam from somewhere reflected on the narrow blades of grass in the ditches by the road side. Suddenly, from behind some rustling sunflowers, a lighted mud-brick house flashes into view. It stands all alone in a vegetable patch. A bunch of red peppers hangs on the door, very distinct in the light.

I change my bag from one hand to the other and walk up.

"Excuse me." I knock on the door. "Could you give me a drink of water?"

Not a sound.

I knock hard. "Excuse me—"

A scratching noise. I sense someone standing behind the door, trying not to breathe. At length the door opens. The outline of a young woman's face is caught in a faint ray of light, surrounded by translucent strands of hair . . . how weird!

"I'm sorry, I've just got off the train, it's a long way to the factory and I'm terribly thirsty . . ." I explain awkwardly. The shadows gradually fade; I see a pair of large, watchful eyes.

She gestures with her hand. "Come in."

The room is furnished very simply, the wall-paper peeling in places. On the table stands a photograph of a little girl mounted in a glass holder, a pen and blue notebook lying carelessly beside it.

"Sit down." She points to a stool beside the door. With one hand held behind her back she retreats a few steps and sits down on the bed opposite. The light falls across her face. I am struck dumb: what a beautiful girl.

"Pour it yourself, the thermos flask and the cup are on the box beside you." She opens the blue notebook, her other hand still held behind her back.

The water is scalding hot. I blow on the steam and ask: "Do you live here by yourself?"

She raises her eyes, stares at me, after a time nods abstractedly.

"Just been sent back from the countryside?"

"What?"

I repeat my question.

"A year ago."

"Which production team were you in before?"

She raises her eyebrows in surprise. "Anything else you'd like to know?"

I am taken aback for a moment, then smile. "Yes. For instance, what's that in your hand?"

"You must have been brought up on the *One Hundred Thousand Whys*." She produces a glinting dagger from behind her back and lays it on the table.

"On the contrary, I wasn't at all studious when I was young."

She betrays a sarcastic little smile. "So you're starting now."

"That's right."

"Hurry up and drink your water." She frowns, waves her hand impatiently, the dagger traces flashing curves in the air.

Silence.

She taps softly on the table with the knife handle, now a fast, now a slow rhythm. She bends her head, as if the sound contains a unique significance. Clearly she is following some habitual train of thought . . . Then, with a bang, she throws the dagger down on the table, goes to the window and opens it: a little poplar stretches its clusters of glistening triangular leaves towards the window, leaping joyfully at her shoulder, as if welcoming its long-awaited mistress.

I watch her figure from behind, the cup in my hand shaking. Perhaps I should say something, break this awkward silence, break the barriers of sex, experience and darkness. Perhaps we are in some way connected by fate; but these relationships are always so fragile, so easily missed.

The little girl on the desk smiles mischievously, calls to me silently.

"Is this a photo of you when you were small?" I cannot help asking.

She seems not to hear, her arms folded as before, staring out the window. What can she see? Night, fields, trees . . . Or is there only the dark, the boundless dark. I ask again. This time I realize how unwelcome my questions are.

Her slender shoulders rise and fall slightly. Suddenly she turns, staring at me coldly, even with a touch of hostility. "You have no tact at all . . . Don't you know how to respect other people's ways? You've finished your water. Now go, I need some peace."

I rise to my feet. "I'm sorry to have bothered you. Thank you."

She nods, and in that instant I see the glistening of tears.

1B *Xiao Ling*

MAMA IS PLAYING the "Moonlight Sonata".

The light in the room is turned out. I sit quietly by the piano like a kitten, my plaits loose, wafting out the scent of soap.

Moonlight falls across the floor, begins to dance, like a girl in a white silk skirt, everything around humming softly in sympathy.

"Mama, Mama—" I suddenly cry out involuntarily.

The moonlight congeals.

"What is it, Lingling?" Mama puts her hand on my forehead. "Don't you feel well?"

"Mama, I'm afraid."

"Afraid of what?"

"I don't know."

That's it, I don't know; is it the dark, is it the moonlight, or is it those mysterious sounds?

I put down my pen. Did the past start from here? Memories are sometimes quite strange, the ones we choose are often insignificant little things. But it is really these little things which contain concealed within them the portents of some irreversible fate. It feels strange to be writing after all this time. And besides, what is this? Autobiography? An outline for a novel? No, neither of these, nothing but a recollection of the past.

The siren shrills in the distance. Sometimes I'm like a weary traveller, flung out at a small station along the way, thinking neither of my starting-point nor of my destination, just thinking of peace, and the chance of some lasting rest.

"Fantasy is an intolerably stupid idea. It merely stuns people, drives them crazy, makes them attempt things beyond their ability." The physics teacher in his creased black uniform-jacket paces up and down the lecture platform, rubbing his blue-shadowed chin. "Class, what is science? Science is reason, as is every other subject . . . ."

I raise my hand.

"Yes, what is it?"

"Teacher, what about poetry?"

"Hm, sit down, what I'm saying includes all subjects. Of course, I'm fond of poetry too. To tell you the truth, I sometimes try my hand and send it off to several magazines; the comrade editors have hailed the rigour of my logic. These lines, for

instance:

*The earth has gravitational force,  
And we have strength;  
We can therefore walk without fear  
Of taking off and bumping into the  
ceiling.'"*

The whole room bursts out laughing.

"How's that, class, not bad, eh?" The teacher pulls modestly at the corners of his jacket. "Any more questions?"

"Hey, you really climb fast."

I turn my head. A boy from another class comes climbing up, leaning on a staff. With his bare arm and sleeve tied round his waist he looks like a Tibetan. Now I remember; last summer holidays I helped him make up lessons.

"I'm afraid this is a long way round," I say.

"No, this is a short cut. Come on, I'll lead the way." He pushes ahead, using his staff to beat back the clumps of thorns. "Hurry up, the top's not far off."

Dark clouds are gathering, pressing down low, and the wind blows into my skirt. Suddenly there's a clap of thunder, which seems to burst right in my ear. My legs are caught up in my skirt and it's quite hard to keep going.

"What's up?" the boy calls, turning his head.

"You go first."

He springs down to me like a mountain goat and hands me his staff. "Take this, it'll be easier, don't be frightened. Look, it's a real storm. When I was small I often came to this hill to pick wild jujube, all by myself. If I ran into rain, hey, that was a real thrill! I'd strip off," he strikes his chest, "just like this. I'd stand on the top of the hill, the clouds under my feet, swirling and rolling, thundering out, and I'd give a big yell, and my voice'd be everywhere. Guess what I'd shout?"

"What?"

He clammers onto a rocky outcrop and lets out a great shout across the valley: "Oohwaa . . . Ooh . . . waa . . . ."

The echo rings in the valley, lingering a long time.

Then comes this stranger, bringing with him a traveller's weariness, a cold and unfamiliar breath.

What's the matter with me? My whole body

feels ill at ease, my thoughts are confused, all because of this wretched fellow. What's the connection between us? Just for water and light he came here. And then? Well, go, on your way, however far and long all roads may be . . . .

Face to face with the black night . . . .

Emptiness, obscurity, purposelessness: do I give them to the night, or does the night give them to me? It's hard to distinguish, which is night, and which is me, as if the two have blended into one. That's often how it is; only when living things are in contact with non-living things, can there be harmony and calm, no conflict, no desire, nothing.

Oh little poplar, what is it you keep saying?

"What are you looking at, Lingling, are you watching a seagull?"

"I'm watching the sun, Mama."

"Don't be naughty, you'll ruin your eyes."

"It doesn't matter."

"Do as I say, Lingling." The drops of water are like diamonds against Mama's tanned skin. "Aren't you coming for a swim?"

"You go, Mama. I'm sunbathing."

I lie on my stomach on the burning sand, watching the sun without blinking; the sun's roar is deafening, it covers the falling of the waves and the noise of the crowd. I shut my eyes then open them again, and the colours shift and change in rapid motion.

The sky becomes so dim, so narrow and small, like a dirty rag carried up into the heights by a seagull. The sun's rich, after all . . . .

High tide . . . .

## II

### 2A *Lin Dongping*

"CIGARETTE—" I ask.

He reaches into the tin box and takes out a cigarette, striking a match unhurriedly. Both of us are used to this kind of awkward silence. Outside the window a dead leaf flutters down, striking against the pane with a light, brittle sound.

"Everyone well at home?"

"Papa's very busy."

"Oh yes, I saw the paper. Foreigners elbowing their way in, what can you do . . . and your mother?"

"She plans to retire this year."

"Retire?" I murmur to myself, my fingers drumming on the glass tabletop.

The door opens with a bang and Yuanyuan rushes in, her face all red; maybe she'd tied her headscarf too tightly or maybe it was because of the wind. "Oh, it's you, Xun, when did you get back? You know, it's really strange, whenever you come, our house goes as quiet as a grave . . . ."

I glare at her reprovingly.

She promptly covers her mouth with her hand, laughing. "It's unlucky to say that, right? I ought to put it this way: 'All is quiet as an unruffled pond. Suddenly, the cock crows, and breaks the . . . .'" Yuanyuan flings her scarf into the air, and it drops like a parachute onto the top of the clothes-stand. "That's what we were reading in class."

"Go and pour us some tea."

"All right. 'Old farmer Zhang shoos the animals out of the yard . . . .'" Yuanyuan pushes open the door and leaves.

The phone rings. I pick up the receiver, winding the cord round my hand. "Yes, it's me. Yes, what time? I'll be there."

Yuanyuan comes in carrying the cups. "Another meeting, Pa? Oh, these Party meetings never end . . . ."

"Yuanyuan!" I call out sharply.

"Everyone says the same . . . ."

"Who is everyone? And who are you?"

She sticks out her tongue, winking at Xun.

"Let Xun stay here for a meal, I'll be back soon."

I wind down the window. At once a cool rustling wind fills the car, the curtains flapping against my face. That's better, that cold, aching feeling. Everything diminishes and rapidly dissolves in the side mirror. "Retire", the word is so unfamiliar, especially for her, even a little frightening. Her face is still there in the memory of our first meeting, still so young and bold. Time is unreal. It will soon be thirty years. What were we arguing about at the District Committee Enlarged

Session? Was it the prospects for co-operation between the Nationalists and Communists or the electrical plant workers' strike? She gripped her cup, twisting it round and round in her hands, but never actually touching the water. When the debate got heated, the water spilt and she hurriedly drank a mouthful. Perhaps it was the excitement, or because the light was too dim, but I didn't see her clearly at the time. After the meeting broke up, we ran into each other on a bend of the stairs. She put out her hand so naturally and gracefully, smiling ironically for a moment . . . . Ah, why do I want to torment myself all over again? Who was it said, pain is a sign of life? Now I remember, it was in our first lecture at medical college, an old American-educated professor told us, then wrote it on the blackboard in English, chalk dust drifting down gently. It was an autumn morning, with the sunlight seeping through the old-fashioned dark and misty windows . . . . What have I got in common with that tousle-haired university student? My hair is white now.

Outside the window, two young workers in greasy clothes, clutching lunchboxes and arguing about something as they walk, look up; a young girl in a red check scarf, nibbling a hot sweet potato, looks up; a woman washing clothes by the tap, wiping her hands on her apron, looks up. What do their glances mean? Perhaps they never wonder who it is sitting in the car; what does it have to do with them? But the police turn on all the green lights, and even raise their white gloves.

*Lin Dongping goes to the office, encountering his bête noire, Wang Defa, a section chief, and Party Secretary Wu Jiezhong, on the way.*

I look up. The sun shines on the huge detailed map of the city. The maze of lines, circles and symbols gradually blurs, and there is only the prominent Municipal Hall standing straight up in silence, looking down over the entire city. The third-storey windows of the east wing burn in the twilight sun, converging like the focus of a concave lens . . . strange, I only need sit down behind this desk to have my confidence restored. As if only now, amidst this pile of shiny stationery, I find my legitimate place . . . .

The door opens, and Miss Zhang noiselessly walks in. "Director Lin, some letters from the

masses . . . ."

"Send them over to the Postal Enquiries Section."

"It's the Postal Enquiries Section that sent them over here." She smiles mysteriously.

"Very well, leave them here."

The envelopes have been stuck down again, and I slit them open with the scissors one by one. Most of them are written by local disaster victims (thinking of the floods this summer makes me shudder), asking for an investigation into where the national disaster relief funds have gone. The position of chief of the flood relief sub-group is held by Wang Defa. At every meeting of the standing committee he holds forth about the concrete figures for each disaster. The sweat-stain on his faded army uniform (which he has never washed) has a foul smell, as if he can thereby give people the impression he's working his guts out. In the pile, unexpectedly, there is this inexplicable letter: ". . . any Wednesday and Saturday evening go to 75 Renmin East Road and catch the adulterers." These people are mad, to send me over a letter like this out of the blue. They're simply playing jokes! I lock the letters in a drawer. There are already a hundred letters lying there, what do a few more matter.

It's time for the meeting. I go downstairs, and open the door to the shop. Su Yumei has her head buried in a book, a strand of hair hanging down.

"A packet of cigarettes," I say.

The instant she looks up, her eyes are very focused. Evidently her concentration just now was merely a pretence. "Director Lin?" She smooths her hair, giving a charming smile.

"What are you reading?"

"*Bitter Herb*. It's really moving."

"Have you got any Qian Men<sup>1</sup> cigarettes?"

"We've got everything. Some top-quality sweets have just come in. The brandname sounds really nice, would you like some?"

"What is it?"

She blinks flirtatiously. "Purity, Purity Brand sweets."

<sup>1</sup>One of the highest quality brands.

2B *Lin Yuanyuan*

*Lin Yuanyuan relates how Yang Xun and Yuanyuan's precocious girlfriend Fafa have a quarrel; Fafa accuses Yuanyuan of being in love with Yang Xun.*

2C *Yang Xun*

I WANDER aimlessly down the street.

Goods in the shop-windows are covered with dust, and there are little signs hanging in front: "For Display only—not for sale"; "Service for valid coupons only". An unruly crowd presses around the grocers. Children banging enamel bowls push in and out through the throng. A young fellow in a greasy white cap sticks his head out the door, shouting something loudly. A row of pedicabs is parked at the corner of the street, under the slogan "We have friends all over the world". The drivers lounge in the back seats smoking, chatting and napping, battered straw hats half-hiding their bronzed faces . . . .

Suddenly a girl blocks my way. Her hands stuck in her coat pockets, she is smiling, her head on one side. "Don't you recognize me?"

I stop, taken aback. "It's you . . . ."

"That's right, trust your own memory. Are you sure you weren't sleep-walking that evening?"

I smile. "For a drink of water, I was thrown out."

"I was in a bad mood that day; it was evening too."

"What does evening have to do with it?"

"People are influenced by their environment. That's a materialist saying."

"Aren't there any other kinds of sayings?"

"You have a bad habit of asking questions." She stops, looking at the people all around. "Look, we can't just keep standing here. Do you have any time? Walk a little way with me, I like walking along the street at this time."

She speaks so frankly and naturally, I cannot help smiling.

"What are you smiling at?"

"Do you often invite people like this?"

"It depends." She frowns, and turns her eyes away. "If you have something else to do, forget it."

I almost shout. "No, nothing, I was just going for a walk too."

We walk on ahead. A kite caught on the overhead lines flutters, like a small white cloud that has fallen down from the sky.

"Let me introduce myself. My name's Yang Xun. And yours?"

Silence.

"Are you afraid I'll pollute your name?"

"Pollute? I haven't heard that word in a long time."

"In this rosy new world, pollution doesn't exist." A lorry thunders past, drowning my voice.

"What?"

I repeat myself.

"Nor does man," she says.

"Are you always in a bad mood?"

"My mood's fine."

"And that evening, why was it bad then?"

She stops, raising her eyebrows in surprise. "So, this is your splendid tradition, you cadres' kids?"

"My father drives a pedicab."

She laughs sarcastically and draws a circle in the air with her finger. "You left out the fourth wheel."

"What's your evidence for saying that?"

"Intuition." She pauses for several seconds, and in that time I sense she is saying something to herself. "The bad habits you people have make me sick."

The paving-stones slide underfoot; blurred, distinct, blurred . . . . I stop. "Since that's how it is . . . ."

"Since what? You promised, you have to finish our walk!" she says almost savagely.

"That's not what I mean."

"Forget it, there's no need to explain."

We pass the dilapidated city gate, walking silently along the moat. The overpowering greenness of the water adrift with black weeds sends out a rich autumnal smell. A bird nesting in the trees twitters and flies off with a rustling sound.

She pushes aside the dangling willow branches, the dancing sunlight filtering down onto her shoulders and arms. "Hey, why don't you say something?" she asks suddenly.

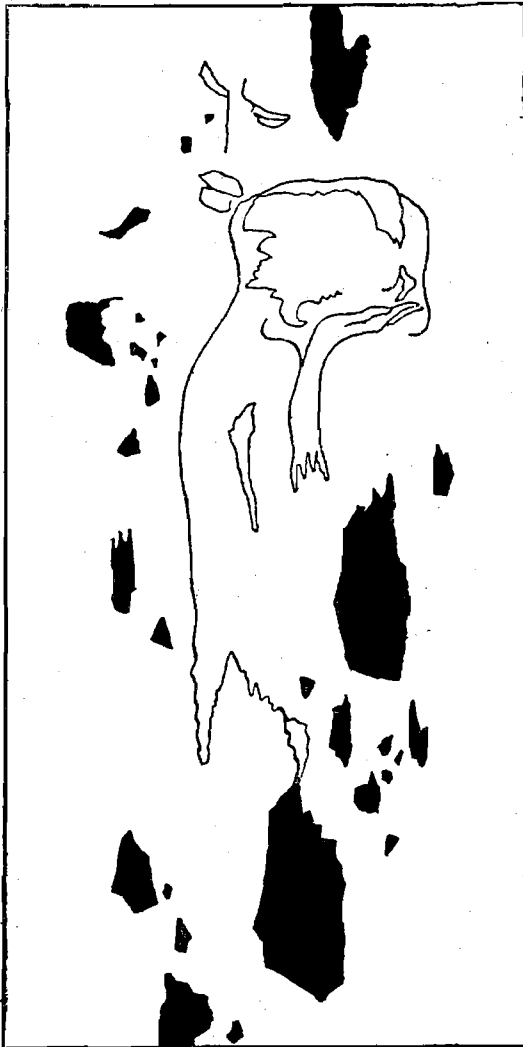
"I'm in bitter exile."

She laughs aloud. "Is it really so bitter? Oh, you're hopeless. Look, this is a wonderful place

for exile.”

“Or a stinking drain.”

“Hey, come and look.” Suddenly she grasps hold of a willow branch and gazes across the river. Six or seven children are skipping stones. The stones stir up rings of ripples and the sunlight is shattered into fragments, a glittering silver coin floating on the crest of each wave. She is completely captivated, counting them excitedly and tearing off the willow leaves beside her. “Four, five, six . . . look, that little dark kid’s really terrific . . . nine, the highest score . . .” She tears off a willow leaf and holds it in her mouth, her voice becoming indistinct. A willow branch beside her sways back and forth, like a green pendulum.



She turns round abruptly, with a slightly sarcastic wink. “Hey, prisoner exiled to a stinking drain, aren’t you interested?”

“I was thinking, adults are unlucky. Even if they have everything, they can’t change their luck . . . .”

“You think children are happy? Don’t forget, these are poor kids,” she says. “People are unlucky as soon as they’re born.”

“So why do you want to go on living?”

“Living, that’s just a fact.”

“Facts can be changed too.”

“The pity of it is, people have enough inertia to keep lingering on, eking out their miserable existence, and that’s what normally passes for life-force.”

“Why are you so pessimistic?”

“Another of your whys.” She looks at me intently, her eyes, almost severe, flashing green stars, a strand of hair dangling over her forehead. “Are you trying to expound some truth?”

I do not answer.

“Tell me, please.” She brushes back the stray hairs, speaking slowly and emphatically. “In your life, is there anything you truly believe in?”

I think it over. “Our country, for example.”

“Hah, an out-dated tune.”

“No, I don’t mean some hackneyed political cliché, I mean our common suffering, our common way of life, our common cultural heritage, our common yearning . . . this indivisible fate that constitutes everything; we have a duty to our country . . . .”

“Duty?” She cuts me off coldly. “What duty are you talking about? The duty to be offered up after having been sacrificed? Or what?”

“If necessary, yes, that kind of duty.”

“Forget it. I’d like to see you sitting in a spacious drawing room discussing the subject like this. What right have you to say ‘we’, what right?” She speaks more and more heatedly, her face growing red, tears filling her eyes. “No thanks, this country’s not mine! I don’t have a country, I don’t have one . . . .” She turns away.

Along the pale green horizon, a few clouds dyed red by the evening light are like unextinguished coals, leaving their last warmth to the earth. The river turns an inky green, breathing out faint, rhythmic sounds.

She turns her head, brushing off the willow

leaves that have fallen on her plaits. Her eyes turning sideways to avoid my glance, she forces a smile. "I shouldn't be like this, let's go back."

We pass a small wine shop.

"Let's go in," I suggest. "Do you drink?"

She nods. "But only white spirits."

At the counter, a drunken creature is flirting with the waitress. "My old woman's a bad egg, you think I haven't been cuckolded enough?"

I shoulder him aside. "Half a *jin* of Fenzhou wine, two cold plates."

At my shoulder, the drunk shouts, "I say it's enough, enough!"

I pay, collect the wine and plates, and stop halfway back. Next to her, a fellow of about my age is sitting, hugging half a bottle of wine, babbling: "... come on, I'll tell your fortune, for free. I'll make an exception for you, cross my heart, I never lie . . . ."

I drop my hand on his shoulder. "Hey, what's going on?"

He casts a sidelong glance at me, his eyes dull, his cheeks flushed red, he's evidently rather drunk. "Guv'nor, you want your fortune told too? Line up, line up, priority to women comrades. Oh, it's very busy today, very busy."

She compresses her lips in a smile, indicating that I should sit down. I sit down.

"You're intelligent, no doubt about it, extremely intelligent, a pity your life's difficult, no boyfriend . . . ."

I bang my fist on the table and stand up. He turns, looking sideways at me, an evil glint flashing in his eyes. "Impatient? It's good, good to be alive. Know who I am? Bai Hua, ask around . . . ."

"I don't care who the bloody hell you are, I'll smash your face in . . . ."

I grab an empty bottle beside me, when a small strong hand presses down on mine. I lower my head to look at her.

"Sit down. Can't you see he's drunk?" Her raised eyelashes cast long shadows across her cheeks.

I sit down.

"Are you really a fortune teller?" she asks.

"That's right."

"You don't look like one to me."

Bai Hua grins, takes a half-smoked cigarette from behind his ear, moulds it straight, and strikes several matches before lighting it, shreds of smoke

curling out from between his teeth. "Where are you two from?"

"Heaven," she says, fanning away the smoke.

Bai Hua gazes intently at the ceiling, and shakes his head. After a while he asks again, "What's with you two?"

"You try and work it out," I say.

"Boyfriend and girlfriend?"

She laughs loudly and clearly. "No, we just get on well."

"Have a drink! Have a drink!" Bai Hua impatiently tosses most of the cigarette onto the floor, sticks the neck of the bottle into his cup, and begins to sing in an affected voice: "Just swallow a mouthful of wine honey-sweet. In your plain, simple days no sorrow you'll meet . . . ."

"Don't have any more," she catches hold of his cup. "Look how drunk you are."

"Who's drunk? Drunk? Me? What a laugh . . . ."

He tears her hand away from around the cup. "Don't dirty your little hand." He is about to drink, when he's arrested by her hand. With a clatter, he places the cup heavily on the table, the wine spills. "You dare to control me?"

"I'd like to try," she says calmly.

"You? Try?" Bai Hua looks her up and down in surprise, then lets out a long sigh. His shoulders droop. "All right, I, I won't drink."

The street is enveloped in moist night-mist, adorned with the brilliant streetlights wavering opposite each other. An alley cat flies like lightning across the street.

Suddenly she stops. "Do you like poetry?"

"Yes."

"If I recite a poem, will you listen?"

"Of course."

She gazes straight ahead, her voice at once gentle and fervent:

*"Green, how much I love you green.*

*Green wind, green branches.*

*The ship upon the sea,*

*The horse in the mountains.*

*Green, how much I love you green.*

*Myriad stars of white frost,*

*Come with the fish of darkness*

*Which opens the road of dawn.*

*The fig-tree scours the wind*



*With the sandpaper of its branches,  
The mountain, like a wildcat,  
Bristles its angry bitter-aloos.  
.....*

A leaf falls under her foot, spins around and flies away again. She shakes her head. "I recited that badly."

"It was good. By Lorca?"

"Somnambule Ballad."<sup>2</sup>

"It's a beautiful dream. What a pity it only lasts an instant before it dies."

"On the contrary, our generation's dream is too painful, and too long; you can never wake up, and even if you do, you'll only find another nightmare waiting for you."

"Why can't there be a happier ending?"

"Oh, you, always forcing yourself to believe in something; your country, duty, hope, these beautiful sweets always dragging you on until you come up against a high wall . . . ."

"But you certainly haven't seen the end either."

"That's right, I'm waiting for the end. I must see it whatever it is, that's the main reason I go on living. There are two kinds of people in the world; one kind adds to the world's glory, and the other kind adds to its wounds. You probably belong to the former kind, I to the latter."

I gaze at her narrowed, unfathomable eyes in silence. "Is your life very unhappy?"

"My life?" She slowly closes her eyes. "In a time like this, that people should still make that distinction, *you* and *the world* . . . ."

"No, I don't mean that, I was only trying to ask . . . ."

Her expression darkens, and she glares at me fiercely. "Lots of questions are not to be asked, do you understand? That's the simplest common sense these days, understand? 'Why? Why?' You behave as if you've just arrived from another planet!"

The one lighted window in the street has darkened, and all is pitch-black. The road is all bumps and hollows. Some women night-shift workers walk towards us, chattering about something in low voices, gradually fading away in the

distance.

"I have a bad temper," she murmurs to herself, sighing.

"That's understandable, it's evening now."

"Oh," she laughs softly, "but one evening's not the same as another. There's a moon tonight."

"And poetry."

"Yes, and poetry. I'm on night-shift, we must say goodbye."

We stand at the crossroads, facing each other. The mist, like a huge iceberg, floats behind her. In the dark, the wave of silence comes rushing in, drowning us in its midst. Silence, a sudden silence. At last it withdraws, unwillingly, silently.

She puts out her hand. "My name is Xiao Ling."

## 2D Xiao Ling

WHAT WAS the meaning of what he was saying? The light is flickering in an old green enamel bowl on the toolbox. Or was it just another kind of deception? Our country, huh, none of these ultimate playthings last, it's just those yes-men pretending to be emotional, they need a kind of cheap conscience to reach some sort of cheap equilibrium . . . but why be so fierce? Surely you don't really detest him? But don't forget, you were with him for a whole evening, such a misty evening; and besides, you're so excited, just like a girl going out for the first time. My head aches, I'm drunk. The little coach in the music box, (when I was little I often broke the wheels), speeds out into the distance, towards the end of the earth, loaded with my anguished dreams. And what is there out there? I'm afraid there's nothing, only a continuation of here . . . .

"Hand me the pliers."

Meaning, why does there have to be meaning? Don't meaningless things last longer? Like stones—where is the meaning in them? Children laughing: let them laugh, let them break this endless stillness . . . . There I go, reciting poetry. Fool, when did you become so emotional? Since when have you been so carefree and romantic? Was it the night mist? Was it the moonlight? I love poetry; in the past I loved it for its beauty, now I love it for castigating life, for piercing the heart; but how did I never realize the value of these two

<sup>2</sup>Federico Garcia Lorca, "Somnambule Ballad", from *Romancero Gitano*, published 1928.

aspects together? Perhaps because everyone only sees life from one angle . . . .

"The spanner, did you hear? Pass me the spanner!"

Autumn has come and the leaves flutter down one by one, like the listless flowers of spring. It's an imitation, a clumsy imitation, full of human vulgarity; just like flames in a mirror, an empty fervour that lacks warmth; it will always lack warmth, but will never fail to set blood-red haunches rocking . . . . Everywhere there are stage props covered in dust, even people become part of the props, the laughers forever laughing, the criers forever crying . . . .

. . . . .

In the sky above the small path along the factory wall, the starlight ripples, the moon rolls along the top of the wall overgrown with weeds. I stop and draw a deep breath. Home, how one yearns for it, for something a little more lasting and peaceful. Better to think of nothing at all. No yesterday and no tomorrow, no pain and no happiness. Let my heart unfold towards the outside world, like a dark-red sponge, quietly soaking up each transparent drop of water . . . .

. . . . .

## 2E *Bai Hua*

I WALK UP to the counter, eyeing the sleek red and green bottles on the shelf. They are almost in convulsions, bouncing and jumping, as if all I need to do is close one damned eye and they'll fly away.

"Look, see this? Credentials, the upper ranks' confidence in me . . . ." The blabber-mouth standing in front of me is pestering the waitresses behind the counter.

I tap the fellow on the arm, "Shh—quieten down."

He turns round, staring at me, baffled. "But what can I do if they won't acknowledge my invention? What can you do? Poor we may be, but that's all part of building our great Socialism. Now these women, they only know how to stand and giggle like idiots; it's a big problem, should be treated as a matter of basic political principle . . . ."

The devil only knows what stuff the old crab's

been knocking back. I give his backside a kick. "Beat it. Back to your hole."

He nods, grinning and smiling at me, then waddles off to the door. Suddenly he turns round and shouts: "It's a political frame-up, I'll go to the provincial authorities and the Central Committee, and complain about you people! Old Marx, if he knew . . . hmph!"

. . . . .

I go out, and limp across the road. In the patch of light at the gate of the city deputies' hostel up ahead, a sleekly shining sedan is parked in the gateway, a dozen policemen marching cockily up and down. Oh boy! Looking for fun as usual.

All at once, two chicks walk out from the side gate, scarcely more than fledglings not yet out of the nest, but very smartly dressed.

"Yuanyuan, what is up with you?" the tall, thin one says. "I was just starting to enjoy myself . . . ."

"I didn't drag you away."

"That is an admirable attitude, comrades." I pinch my cap, squash it down over my forehead, and catch up with them.

They stop, staring at me in surprise.

"Who are you?" the one called Yuanyuan asks timidly.

"Me? Responsible for security work."

"Plainclothes," the tall thin one says hurriedly. "You're under my father."

"Oh, you're Director Liu's little treasure? I know your father very well."

"What a way to talk, huh, don't try to chum up with me. What's your cap doing squashed down like that? And you smell of drink. I'll tell my father when I get back, and make him demote you."

"Ah, I'm nothing," I strike a wounded pose, "but what about the five children?"

They look at each other, and burst out laughing.

I duck down a lane, and stop by a pitch-black doorway with a wooden sign hanging beside it: "Warehouse Site; Workers Only". I reach for a rope behind the sign and pull it hard: one long, two short. In a moment or two someone asks, "Who is it?"

"Stop loafing!"

The door opens a crack, a big forehead appears. "Come in, Guv, there's a show on."

I walk into the room with its boarded-up windows. Number Four's smooth round shoulders are swaying slightly in the choking cigarette smoke. She strums a guitar, singing in a husky voice. The fellows, all drunk as lords, crowd around her.

"Here comes the Guv."

"Sit over here, Guv."

I sit down on a wooden box in the corner and light a cigarette.

When the song comes to an end there is a bit of an uproar, a great burst of shouts and whistles. One bastard with big cheekbones staggers and shoves his way across. He sits down next to Number Four and puts his arm round her waist, whispering something to her. A great cackle all round. Number Four shakes her head, fondles the guitar-strings with a sultry smile.

I feel for a kitchen chopper in the corner, stand up and walk over. The fellows automatically make way for me. I go up close to them and tap Number Four on the shoulder. "She's mine."

The room falls quiet instantly, and you can hear the sound of a cup breaking. Cheekbones is struck dumb, then bends down and pulls out a knife. I duck sideways and the back of the chopper strikes his wrist. The knife falls to the floor with a clatter. The chopper turns in the air and cuts into his shoulder. The blood seeps out of the wound through his fingers as he claps his hand over it.

"Any more bright ideas?" I ask, my eyes sweeping round, and all the young melon-heads turn away. I fish out ten dollars, crumple it into a ball and throw it in Cheekbones' twisted face. "Go and buy some medicine, worm, and then grow bigger eyes . . . . Come on, Number Four, let's go."

### III

#### 3A Yang Xun

SHE IS SITTING on the edge of the bed, leafing through a book, the white reflection of the pages shining on her face. Her name is Xiao Ling, she's

twenty-three this year. Besides that, what else do I know? She's an enigma. Rose, Little Swallow . . . those girls I've known before, they pale before her. They belong in the drawing room, like a painting or a vase of flowers, you don't think of them once you've left. What is she thinking? She certainly has a great many secrets, secrets that don't belong to me, or to anyone. The blue notebook, for instance, lying on the table, it might be packed with secrets, as if her entire life is stored in these secrets, sealed up forever . . . .

"Hey, haven't you looked enough?" she asks suddenly.

I smile. "No."

She snaps the book shut, and raises her head. "All right, look." Our eyes meet. Her chin trembles a little, unable to hold back a smile. She smiles so naturally and openly, it's like a horizontal blue streak flashing out in every direction. "Say something, silence makes me unhappy." "Don't you know how to respect other people's ways? You've finished the water, now go, I want some peace!" I say.

"I'm sorry to have bothered you. Thank you," she says.

We burst out laughing.

"Hey, beggar," she waves her hand, "don't laugh, talk about yourself."

"What is there to say? My *curriculum vitae* is simple: father, mother, sister, school, work in the countryside, factory work . . . about ten words altogether."

"Which is also to say, politically reliable."

"Except that I was in the county gaol for a few days when I was in the countryside."

"For robbery?" Her eyes widen in surprise. "Or for indecent behaviour?"

"You have a rich imagination."

"But there always has to be a charge."

"Another student and I opposed collection of the grain tax; there was a drought that year, and many of the peasants had nothing to eat."

"What a fine champion of idealism. And afterwards, did you bow your head and confess?"

"An old comrade-in-arms of my mother got me out."

"That's how it always ends, that's why people like you always believe in happy endings; at every crossroads there's some protector or other standing, waiting to get you out." She taps on the book

with her fingers. "That day, when you were talking about 'our country', I was wondering, is our country the lifelong protector of you and your kind?"

"You mean our country protects us, or we protect our country?"

"It's all one thing."

"No, suppose the former is true, then in order to achieve the latter we must always pay a higher price in our efforts and endeavours."

"What price?"

"The price of the heart."

"But people like you, when all's said and done, never do have to pay the full price; never have to suffer hunger and cold, be subjected to discrimination and insults, lay down your life for a few words . . . ."

"That depends. During the years of . . . ."

"That was only temporary, like the way we're smiling now is temporary."

I leap to my feet. "You, we . . . . You have an interesting way of dividing things up. Since we're not on the same road, it's pointless for us to see each other. I'm sorry, it's time for me to be leaving."

"Sit down." She blocks my way, defiantly biting her lip. "I tell you, you musn't go just because I talk like that."

We stand at a deadlock. She is so close, her breath blows lightly against my face. The criss-cross of the window is reflected in her eyes. Crickets chirp softly in the corner.

"You are really hospitable," I say.

"Let me ask you something. What is courtesy?"

"Respect for other people."

"No. Courtesy is just a kind of indifference."

"A certain degree of indifference is necessary."

"And is truth necessary? A person can't have everything . . . ." She stops, with a little smile. "Aren't you tired?"

I smile too, and sit down.

She shakes her head. "All right, let's have some courtesy. Would you like some water? Oh yes, and there's some black tea here too . . . ." She puts on an apron, takes a jar out of the box, walks to the corner and lights the kerosene burner on top of the earthen stove. The blue flames flare up, licking the black base of the pot. Sometimes fire doesn't make you think of its untamed violence, or of the way it makes things collapse, sometimes it reveals

instead that other face: beauty, warmth, kindness . . . .

She stirs the pot with a ladle, clear, crisp sounds clinking out from time to time. She has her back to me, and suddenly asks, "Yang Xun, am I strange?"

"How can I put it; I get a different impression every time."

"To tell the truth, I thought that now I was old, I should be relatively stable. Don't laugh . . . . But I'm changing, sometimes I don't recognize myself at all. What are you laughing at?"

"You don't look more than eighteen or nineteen."

"Don't flatter me. Women always like to be thought younger than they are, isn't that so? They live for others. Really, I feel old, like an old grandmother sitting in the doorway in the sun, sizing up each passer-by with cold detachment . . . ."

"Well, I'm a passer-by."

"You're an exception."

"Why?"

"You didn't just pass by, you broke in . . . . Clear the table, the tea's ready." She pours black tea into two cups, and takes a packet of biscuits out of the drawer. "Please, have one."

"Now *that's* courtesy."

"Is it? Then I've progressed a little." She blows gently on the steam in the cup. "Strange, how did we warm up all of a sudden?"

"Yes, we've got very warm."

"You still haven't answered my question."

"No one can answer it. It's a question with a history of thousands of years."

She blushes. After a little while she says, "Yang Xun, have you ever been to the seaside?"

"Yes, I have."

"Between each high tide and low tide, there's a period of relative calm. The fisherman call it slack water. What a pity the time is so short . . . ."

"I don't really understand such things."

"You should understand!" She raises her voice, and in it there's a kind of deep pain. I stare at her, and suddenly I have the feeling that, in the sunlight, her hair has gone gradually white.

Silence.

"Is it sweet enough?" she asks suddenly.

"It's a little bitter."

She pushes over the tin of sugar. "Add more

sugar, if you like.”

“There’s no need, I like it a little bitter,” I reply.

### 3B *Xiao Ling*

I LOVE WALKING alone, walking unrestrained along the street, watching the twilight flood the earth. He left, as suddenly as he came. I didn’t detain him, but how I hope he’ll come again, and talk of the brief full-tide, and why the sea is salty . . . . You speak to him sarcastically, answer him coldly, yet all the time you’re hoping he will stay longer; how do you explain it? I don’t like dropping hints, but a hint can only be answered with a hint, because sometimes the truth is too depressing, frighteningly depressing . . . .

“Don’t press your nose against the window, Lingling, do you hear?”

“Mama, look at the snowflakes, how do they get like this?”

“Because of the cold.”

“But look, they’re so pretty.”

“Lingling, will you have to get your nose frozen before you learn? Why won’t you do as I tell you.”

Crossroads: which way to turn. Choices, choices, yet on I go. A crowd of schoolchildren with schoolbags on their backs runs by making a tremendous racket. A motorized pedicab is parked by the side of the road, a driver in a red singlet leans against the door, smoking, staring at me fixedly. A mother with a basket on her arm, dragging her noisy little boy, saying over and over, “Wanwan, stop fussing, Mama will buy you a sweet . . . .”

I’ve left this world far behind. I’ve walked out in silence. I do not know where home is. Sometimes, when I turn and look back at this world, I feel a kind of happiness in my heart. It is not pleasure in others’ misfortunes, it is not that, still less nostalgia or yearning; it seems that only distance, only the separation and connection of distance, can bring the pleasure of discovery.

Dusk is changing something. The sunlight is being squeezed out, climbing onto the roof of each house. The people hurry by, each one in this instant forming an aspect of your life, that aspect forever changing, and yet you are still yourself.

Things that last, that last . . . those intense eyes again, how many times is it now? Yes, I do crave love and help, even a few considerate words. I once had a father, a mother, and friends . . . .

It’s dark. The streetlights are so dim, like fireflies flying slowly. The moon rises, a new moon, with an artist’s chin. It’s lost in thought. In the distance, under the pale canopy of the streetlights, a swaying figure appears, and quickly vanishes. It’s not long before the light reveals . . . .

“It’s you, Bai Hua.”

“Oh, Xiao Ling . . . .”

“How do you know my name?”

“I always get to know the things I want to know. Believe me?”

“You’ve been drinking again.”

“What of it?” He sways violently, and grabs hold of a telegraph pole. “What of it?”

“Tell me, where do you live?”

He stops, blinking bloodshot eyes with difficulty. “Where do I live? Let’s just say, somewhere underground. Huh, a rat who can dig a hole, a rat . . . .”

I cut him short. “Come on, I’ll see you home.”

“Home? To my place? I mean, you’re not, not scared?” He is rather bewildered, sticks his hands in his trouser pockets and pulls them out again, then rubs his damp hair. “Oh, that’s a good idea, it sure is, I mean, miss . . . walk, walk, take a big step, take a small step, cross the mountain, cross the stream . . . .” he chants haltingly.

Darkness. Brightness. Darkness. We walk along under the streetlamps. I follow his wavering, and the wavering of the streetlamps; the road is not very steady, as if it too is starting to waver a little. What notion prompts me to go and look? Curiosity? Oh no, hasn’t Time played enough tricks? So what is it? Could it be in retaliation for craving warmth just now? That peculiar shadow of his slips under his feet one moment, slants on the roadside the next, then bumps against the wall. Why do I want to see him like this? It’s always easy to hide oneself from one’s own eyes.

In the distance someone is singing, but the song is hard to make out. Bai Hua seems to sober up a little. “Who’s crying? No one’s dead yet, what are you crying for? Like rotten mud paste on a body. Fellas, let me do a verse . . . .”

Sure enough he starts to sing, at first quite hoarsely, then rising to his full strength. It’s as if

he and the song are one, passing through the streetlamps and the curtain of night, flying away towards another world.

*"Oh the wanderer,  
So happy and gay!  
Treading the world's mountains and  
rivers,  
Tramping in thunder and rain,  
Singing beneath the sunlight,  
The earth gives me freedom,  
Freedom makes me happy and gay.  
....."*<sup>3</sup>

We turn into a square behind a block of flats and through a pitch-dark clump of trees. He bends over and pushes open a concrete slab on a pulley, revealing a cavernous flight of stairs. I glance at him, and plunge down. Inside it's damp and cold, so dark you can't see a thing. *'Kacha'*, he strikes a lighter. We follow the stairs down, push open an unlatched steel door, the damp vault spreading out in front of the jumping flare. Utter silence, but for water dripping somewhere.

We turn into a little room, he gropes around, lights a kerosene lamp on an old wooden table. Only then do I discover, on a bed spread with a straw mat in the corner of the room, a woman of indeterminate age sitting, propping herself up with her hands behind her back, her eyes flashing like a wildcat's.

"Where've you been?" she asks.

"Number Four?" Bai Hua scratches his head. "Who let you in?"

"You've been boozing again. Guv, come here." She holds out her arms.

"Get lost," Bai Hua snarls.

"I'm not going, this is my place!"

Bai Hua draws a dagger from his belt, and presses forward a few steps. I leap across to block him. "Aren't you ashamed of yourself?"

At this moment Number Four catches sight of me, and slowly gets to her feet. "Oh, so that explains it, you've found another one now. Ha ha." She laughs sarcastically. Bai Hua pushes me

away and charges over. Number Four slips to the doorway in a flash, makes an obscene gesture, "Look at that, such a delicate little face, eh? Ha ha . . . ." The wild nervous laughter becomes a rumbling cacophony, gradually fading into the distance.

Bai Hua walks up to the table, his shadow growing bigger and bigger, wavering on the walls and ceiling. With a clatter he tosses the dagger onto the table, slowly sits down, cradling his head in his hands.

"Is this the freedom and gaiety of your song?" I ask.

Bai Hua throws himself into a chair. "Shut up." "Answer my question."

"All right. I sang about what I haven't got. Everyone does that!" He brings a bottle of white liquor out from under the table, knocks the top off on a corner of the table, and pours himself a cup.

"Bai Hua, you can't drink any more," I say, going up to him.

"Have one with me." He pours another cup, and pushes it towards me. His eyes gradually fill with tears, then he sighs deeply. "You're a good person, Xiao Ling, I couldn't hurt you, I only wish I could look at you every day, listen to you talk, and if anyone touched you, look, this is what I'd do . . . ."

He draws the dagger fiercely, and stabs his own palm. Blood flows out, drips into the wine cup. He stabs again, and the wine in his cup turns red. I grab his wrist, snatch the dagger away. "You're mad!"

"It doesn't matter." He laughs shrilly. "Our blood isn't worth money. People like us. I swear it, cross my heart."

"That's enough nonsense. Press here, and raise your hand. Press! Did you hear? Have you got a bandage, and something to put on the wound?"

"On the box, genuine knife wound ointment."

When I've finished the dressing, I let out a long sigh and sit down. "Are you always like this?"

He shakes his head. "Huh, it's nothing. Just an old routine."

"Tell me the truth."

The lamp sputters, giving off beautiful arcs of light which immediately turn into wisps of blue smoke.

"Bai Hua, have you seen the stars?"

<sup>3</sup> A song popular amongst the educated youth sent to the countryside.

"Of course."

"Have you ever thought about them? They're old and yet they're new. What we see here is only yesterday's shine, and while we see it they're sending out today's, a new radiance."

"So what?"

"We just accept something as an accomplished fact. We never ask ourselves if these things which have become part of our lives have a value."

"Value? That's money again. That's nothing."

"I have this sudden feeling, about people, life, the pity of it . . . ."

"Yes, the pity of it." He nods in agreement.

Does he understand what I mean? Well, if he understands it's fine, and if he doesn't, that's fine too. What's it got to do with him anyway? It's nothing but my own state of mind. A mood, an endless breakdown touched off by tiny reactions. But this time the breakdown has a different feeling to it, it's strangely still, and within the stillness, sorrow—like an underground river flowing within a mountain, till the landscape slowly starts to subside . . . .

The silence whirrs. Remote at first, gentle, gradually turning into a piercing din, as if this little room can no longer contain it.

He raises the cup. "Come on, have one, my head's bursting."

The cup glistens in the air. Stars. So this feeling is real. They do exist, everywhere. Even in the places where starlight can never reach, there can be another radiance. It all depends on the rays of light connecting: yesterday and tomorrow, life and death, good and evil . . . .

"All right then, I won't drink," he says, hanging his head.

I raise my cup. "Come on, cheers."

### 3C Bai Hua

I'M DREAMING, dreaming of stars.

"Wake up, Guv." Someone's pushing me—oh, it's just Manzi.

"What's up?"

"The one-twenty express will be here soon, Guv."

I pull out my pocket-watch and tap on the glass. "What are you panicking about, there's still another hour to go." A burning stab of pain. I

can't help grinning, glancing at my bandaged left hand. I go over to the bucket, splash my face with cold water with my right hand, wipe it. Then I glance at the chair where she's just been sitting. "Come on, don't forget your gear."

On the street, it's utterly desolate, a cat wailing on a rubbish heap. I look up, stars, sparkling and glittering. Huh, good-for-nothing lumps, isn't that what they are?

"What are you staring at, Guv?" Manzi looks up too.

"Have you ever seen stars?"

"Sure, those are stars, aren't they?"

"They're old and they're new, understand?"

Manzi stares at me baffled. "No, I don't get it."

"You can pity people . . . ." I say.

"Sure, that's right, and you can hate them too." Manzi nods, to show that he understands this time. "Hey, Guv, you've grown learned."

Reaching the West Station, we follow the shadows round the outside wall. Not far ahead, someone's talking in a low voice.

"We only want five dollars, that's not much at all," says a girl with a thin, shrill voice.

"That's the old price." That hoarse voice sounds like Lanzi's.

"Three dollars, that'll keep you in food for a few days," says some bastard with a Manchurian accent.

I give Manzi a wink, and walk up. Lanzi and another girl, no more than thirteen or fourteen, are leaning against the wall, bargaining with a couple of fellows of about forty.

"If I say no, I mean no, our money doesn't grow on trees either," says the bastard with the big chin. Suddenly catching sight of us, he nudges the other with his elbow and turns to sneak away.

"Hold it!" I call in a low voice, as Manzi blocks their way from behind.

"What's up?" Big Chin runs his tongue over his lips, pretending to be calm.

"Fix the price before you go."

"What price? I don't get it."

"Enough bloody play-acting!" I say. "Ten dollars each."

"What's the idea?" snorts Big Chin, unconvinced. "Are you threatening me?"

"You bet we are!" Manzi pulls out his knife and holds it at Big Chin's back. Big Chin starts shaking.

"Brothers, take your hands off and let us go," whines the other one. "We're new, we don't understand the rules here."

"The rules here are simple," I say. "Your cash, or your life."

"We'll pay, we'll pay." The shivering mongrel takes out two ten-dollar bills and hands them to me.

"Now get lost." I wait till they've gone far enough away, then turn to the small white faces of the two girls, and hand over the money. "Go on, take it."

"Guv," Lanzi gives a wry smile. "The last couple of days haven't been too good."

"Manzi, how much have you got on you?" I ask.

"Sixty."

"Give them thirty."

Manzi unwillingly pulls out the money and hands it to Lanzi.

"Thanks, Guv."

We jump the wall, skirt around the piles of goods, reach the dispatch office, check no one's around, and open the door. Old Meng is rocking his head like a chicken, humming a little tune. He nervously walks to the door and takes a look. "Anyone see anything?"

"Don't worry." Manzi claps him on the shoulder. "What've you got for us this time?"

"Whatever you want." He looks at his watch. "She's coming in twenty minutes, on track three, stops ten minutes. First-class goods are in the third section. But be careful, there are guards . . ." His Adam's-apple rolls up and down, like a date he can't swallow.

"Some money for smokes." I give him a few notes. "I'll bring the drinking money next time."

"It's my honour, Guv."

We cross the rails silently, and crouch down in the shadow of a heap of cement. Crickets chirp ceaselessly in the thick clumps of grass.

In the distance a whistle blows, the tracks vibrate, clanking. Damn it, there she is, pulling into the station.

## IV

### 4A *Bai Hua*

THERE'S A BIG plate-glass window, and all kinds of things shining inside: lamps, tablecloths, bottles of wine, guitars, scarves, military uniforms, and what's that . . . a basket of beautiful, bright fresh flowers! Now that's odd, where did fresh flowers come from on a cold day like today? That Yuanyuan rushes busily in and out! Wonder if she'd still recognize me? I heard Yang Xun say, today's her birthday. Good God, when the hell was I born? Xiao Ling's sitting all alone in a corner, well away from that scum. No, Yang Xun's got his filthy eye on her. I'll have to lay things on the line with him.

I press closer to the window, the scene changes completely: a full moon, a cypress bent in the moonlight, like an old man dying. Not a star in sight.

"Quiet, quiet! Who's going to sing first?" someone shouts at the top of his voice. "Bring the guitar . . ."

The guitar crashes out, some people yelling along with it, stamping on the bloody floor. I really can't take this. Damn it, why should I suffer like this?

I step back, the moon and the old man have flown away. She's still sitting there, not moving at all. Black eyes, red mouth, white face, as white as paper. Something sour and aching pierces through me. Ah, that was ten years ago . . .

A morning in early winter, the wind had dropped. The rough pitted surface of the road swept clean by the wind. As usual I step across the creaking ice fragments into the waiting-room, shout hello at Old Jia the cleaner, then go behind the seats and pull out a stick with needles on the end, my cigarette-butt collector. There's a thin little girl sitting there, wrapped in an old coat with the padding falling out, no more than eleven or twelve years old by the look of her. She smiles at me, I grin back too, take my stick and leave.

That evening I slip into the waiting-room as usual, the fire in the stove crackling, reflecting on half a dozen crooked figures. Suddenly I give a start, she's still there crouching behind that seat, listlessly smiling at me.

"You haven't left yet?"



She shakes her head.

"You on your own?" I ask again.

She nods, and smiles again.

"I asked you a question. What are you smiling at like an idiot? Are you dumb?" I'm getting a bit angry.

"I'm not dumb," she says softly, enunciating each syllable.

"So what's the idea, not saying anything?"

She stares at me for some time, and runs her tongue over her dry, cracked lips, "Water, I want a drink of water."

I fetch a bowl of steaming-hot water. She clasps it in both hands, her teeth chattering against the rim. I feel her forehead. "Hey, you're really hot! You've got a fever."

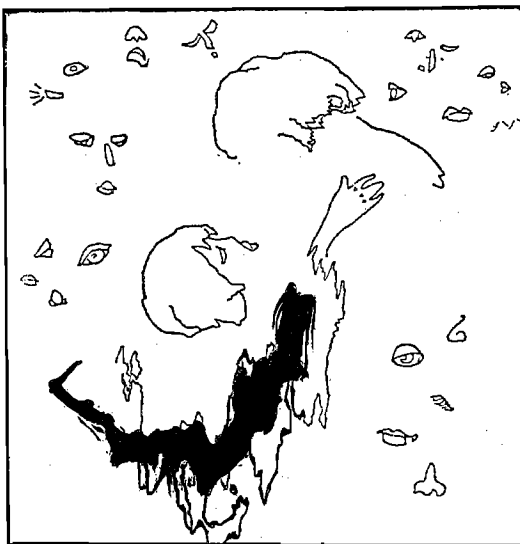
Big teardrops roll down into the bowl.

"What is it? Tell me."

She speaks falteringly, half in tears. "My stepmother, she brought me to see the doctor. We came here on the train. The doctor said, the doctor said I couldn't get better, it would be wasting a lot of money . . . My stepmother, she brought me here, she said she was going to get something nice to eat, and then she didn't come back, she never came . . ."

"The old bitch!" I grind my teeth. "See if I don't beat her flat!"

She stops crying, and blinks at me. "She's not old."



"Old or not, she'll cop it anyway."

"But she's really fat, you couldn't beat her flat."

"Then I'll smash her flat with a brick. Believe me?"

"Yes." She smiles. Round dimples appear in her cheeks.

Early next day, me and my pals pool some money, and I take her a bit of medicine and food. I soak steamed bread in hot water and feed her piece by piece. She's very obedient. Every evening I tell her stories, and she always asks, "And then? And then?"

Once, combing out her plaits, she says to me: "I've got an elder brother, he's great."

"Yes?"

"He's like you, truly."

I catch hold of her little hand. "I'm your elder brother, do you hear?"

She looks startled for a moment, then lowers her eyes shyly. "Yes, elder brother."

Several days go by, and she actually seems to be getting better. I find a "doctor" to look at her. He walks out of the waiting-room with me, rolls the money we've given him into a ball, stuffs it into his cap, thinks for some time, then sighs. "Medicine's too dear, brother, it'll be at least . . ." he holds up several fingers.

"Write out the prescription. I can find the money. Yes, I can."

I wander about in the cold wind for a long time, walking, walking, biting my lips till they bleed. I'll do anything for her, even if it means dying!

Night deepens, and I go back to the waiting-room. She's still awake, waiting for me. "Elder brother, why are you back so late?"

"Oh, I had something to do."

"You're shivering . . ."

"It's cold outside."

"Come on, sit over here, let me warm you up."

The fire-light from the stove lights up her little face. She hugs me tightly. But I shiver even more violently. "Are you still cold?"

"No, I'm not cold."

"As soon as I'm better, I'll sing for you. The people at home in the hills all like listening to me sing, even the calf at home blinks his eyes and listens . . ."

I cannot stop myself from breaking into tears.

"What is it, elder brother?" She is bewildered, and smooths my dishevelled hair with her little hand, the tears streaming down . . . .

When morning comes I sit up quietly, unclasp her hot little hands from my arm and stare fixedly at her for a while. Only when her eyelids flicker do I slip away.

It's all right for the time being, but in my mind something keeps shouting: more, just a bit more, and she'll get well, she'll sing her pretty songs . . . . Suddenly, on the bus, a fat-headed bastard twists my ear and drags me into the local police station. An emaciated cur with his cap stuck crooked on his head jangles a bunch of keys and jabs me in the head with his finger. "Five days inside, that's cheap for you!"

I grab hold of the hem of his coat like a madman, imploring bitterly. "Uncle, I don't care what you do, beat me, break this arm, only let me go. Don't lock me up, Uncle, please, my little sister's sick, she's going to die . . . ."

"She's going to die?" he snorts. "If she's another little beggar like you, a dead one'll be one less!"

With a crash the gaol door is locked. I fling myself at it, beating my head against the door, under my fingernails the wall is covered with blood, I faint.

Five days pass. I run madly down the road, the startled people parting to make way for me. I burst through the door of the waiting-room and rush to the corner. It's empty. "Where's my sister? Where is she?" I shout at the people gathered around. No one utters a sound. Old Jia drags his broom along the foot of the wall and slips away.

On the wall, where she'd been leaning, a fingernail has carved a few spidery words: "Elder brother, I miss you! Elder brother, come back . . . ."

#### 4B *Lin Yuanyuan*

*Lin Yuanyuan, still at her birthday party, challenges Yang Xun over his relationship with Xiao Ling, and reflects on her realization that she is in love with him herself.*

#### 4C *Yang Xun*

"Xiao Ling, aren't you feeling well?"

"The truth is, I shouldn't have come."

"Drink up, Yuanyuan's watching us."

"How old is she?"

"Eighteen, five years younger than you."

"I'm a hundred years older than she is."

"Why not even more?"

"That's the limit, a century only has a hundred years. Oh, the great twentieth century, mad, chaotic, utterly irrational century, century without faith . . . ."

"We used to have faith."

"Those broken fragments, still clinking behind us. Perhaps we are moving forward, but where is the road?"

"Why must there be a road? If vast fields can hold humanity, why crowd along one narrow road?"

"Fields . . . . I was thinking of a place beyond the horizon . . . ."

"Such a place doesn't exist."

"When you think of it, it exists."

"You're evading something."

"Perhaps I am, I'm evading happiness, evading beauty, evading light . . . ."

"You're drinking too fast, Xiao Ling. You'll get drunk."

"I'm also evading being sober, because this world's too clear, and clarity makes me sick, I want to blind myself, even if only for a little while."

"This is not the way."

"I hope the people who have a way also have a little conscience; but I'm afraid all they have is endless ways, ways, ways . . . ."

"Don't drink so much."

"Yang Xun, have you ever noticed the old women in the street who collect waste paper? Actually, they're dead, they died long ago. All that's left is a body, and this body has no connection whatsoever with the original person, it's just keeping up certain basic habits in order to survive, nothing more. That is my situation at present."

"No, you can still think."

"That's a kind of basic habit too, exactly the same as my drinking."

"Look at Bai Hua."

"Why change the subject? Is it disagreeable? Doesn't it suit this elegant atmosphere? Hm?"

"Xiao Ling, we all have times like this, and everything will pass."

"It won't pass, it never will, you needn't console me."

"Talk about it then, I shan't hinder you."

"I don't feel like talking."

*Bai Hua has joined the party and exchanges hostile words with Yang Xun over Xiao Ling. Fafa recognizes him and publicly insults him; he returns the insult, leaves and the party breaks up.*

People drift off, until only Xiao Ling and I are left in the room, she sitting in the same place as before, cheek in hand, staring at the clock on the wall.

"What are you thinking about?" I ask.

She shakes her head. Then she walks over to an old piano in the corner, pulls off the old checked cover thick with dust, and sits down on the piano stool, moving very slowly, like an old invalid.

A clear strong chord breaks the silence, the windows in the room tremble in fervent response. The swift notes stream and flow like a boat on a river . . . she stops, turns and begs, "Turn off the light, do you mind?"

She plays Beethoven's "Moonlight Sonata". The moonlight streams in through the window, falling on her white cheeks and forehead. The seaside under the moon. Surf beating gently against the cliff spits out gold and crimson bubbles. A horn blows in the distance . . . a roar, like a clap of thunder; she leans over the keyboard, a slight spasm seizing her shoulders.

"Xiao Ling—" I go up to her.

She looks as if she's just woken from a dream, slowly straightens her back and tosses her hair. She gazes at me with rapt attention, tears in her eyes. In the moonlight, a kind of deep warmth creeps back into her ice-cold face.

#### 4D Xiao Ling

"However you put it, anyone who's against the work group is against the Party!"

"What's the use of sticking labels on people like that? Work groups obviously stifle the masses, what right have they to represent the Party?"

"Well, anyway, that's, that's . . ." she stammers, her pretty face reddening. "You, what's your class origin?"

The sunlight dances on the red and green wall-poster, dazzling me. I squint painfully. "High intellectual."

"Huh, rotten egg, little bitch, you've got ulterior motives!" She hits me a fierce blow on the ear, her pretty face twisting crookedly. She looks at her reddened palm in surprise.

A door bangs.

"Who is it?" Mother puts down the watering can, wiping her hands on her apron. A crystal drop of water drips from the clusters of violet leaves.

The door opens and about ten people swarm into the room. Leading them is a boy with a baby-face. He wipes his sweating nose with the back of his hand. "Hey, stand still, no messing around . . . let's start."

"Why are you raiding our home?" asks Mama in terror.

Baby Face brandishes his belt and the violet petals flutter to the floor. "Because of this!"

The wall mirror is smashed. Leather boots trample screeching back and forth over the broken glass. Clothes and books are flung all over the floor. A fellow walks up to the piano and kicks it. "American made. Take it away, get some more people . . ."

"You're nothing but bandits!" Mama mutters, her hands clasped together, the knuckles showing white.

Baby Face turns round, smiling. "Are you talking about us, eh?"

I try to stop Mama, but it's too late. "Yes, you, bandits! What of it?" Mama's voice rises to a pitch.

"Nothing." His smile vanishes and he waves his hand. "Come here, teach her how to speak to Red Guards."

I throw myself towards Mama but I am fiercely pushed away. Half a dozen leather belts fly at her.

"Mama!" I cry, struggling.

The belts whistle, the buckles glistening in the air. Suddenly Mama breaks through the tight circle, runs to the balcony and jumps nimbly onto the other side of the rail. "I'm going to die any-



way. If anyone comes near I'll jump!"

Everything stands still. The sky so blue, the motionless wisps of white cloud, the sunlight stroking the wound on Mama's temple.

"Mama—" I cry out.

"Lingling—" Mama's eyes turn to me, her voice is so calm. Mama. Me. Mama. Eyes. Drops of blood. Sunlight. Clouds. The sky . . . .

Baby Face seems to wake up, pokes the brim of his cap with his belt, and steps forward. "Go on, jump, jump!"

I rush forward, kneeling on the ground, desperately clasping his legs, staring up at him with bitterly entreating eyes. Looking down he hesitates, his lips parted slightly, showing his shining teeth. He swallows, and pushes me strongly away.

"Mama—"

The clouds and the sky suddenly turn upside down.

I close the door, and glance sideways. "Papa, take that placard off your neck."

"No, they might come and check. It's no trouble, Lingling."

Dusk filters into the room, Papa and I sitting in the dimness. I feel his gaze fixed on me. "Don't look at me like that, I can't bear it."

"Just this once, Papa doesn't usually look at you enough." Suddenly he asks, "Lingling, if Papa's not here too, what will you do?"

"What nonsense are you talking!" I cut him short indignantly.

In the night, I wake with a start, and tiptoe to Papa's door. In the moonlight, the bed is empty. A note held down on the desk rustles in the breeze. "Lingling, I'm too ashamed. I can't go on living, please forgive my weakness. Don't look for me, I don't want you to see the way I am when I'm dead . . . . This evening, when I was looking at you, my heart broke. You're still so young, what will you do in the future? Goodbye, Lingling . . . ."

Lonely streetlights. Fallen poplar leaves crunching underfoot. I stop, put my hand on the cold stone railing. The river pounds under the bridge, swirling and spinning under the light from the mercury-vapour lamps, spurting out chains of bubbles. Its voice is serene, peaceful, but full of a dignified and irrefutable strength. It's a sound as old as the world.

Far away a train shrills out a long whistle. A wind rises, fallen leaves fly up, and are blown into the sombre river. I turn, and walk back along the lacquer-black road.

## V

### 5A *Lin Yuanyuan*

*Yuanyuan and Fafa have been talking about Bai Hua, teasing each other. Fafa makes suggestive remarks about sleeping with Bai Hua, and Yuanyuan calls her a shameless woman.*

JUST AT THAT moment, Papa opens the door and walks in. Fafa slips out without a word. I fling the folded clothes fiercely onto the bed. This is all so boring; is this life, are these friends? Is this me? It's so aggravating. The window's shut tight, the central heating boiling with a hissing sound. I always feel there's something hiding outside the window; only open the window, and it'll come whistling in. But what is it?

Papa's big heavy hand falls on my shoulder. "Yuanyuan, you should be working, idle people get into trouble."

"You've been idle for years, and you haven't got into trouble," I throw at him.

"How do you know I haven't?" says Papa. "All right, since it's such fine weather, we'll go to the Tomb of the Martyrs Park, how's that?"

Are we in class? Teacher Mu's big melon-face: "This is where we salute the memory of the revolution's martyrs... eyes right!" Drum roll. Recite poems. Lay wreaths.... All right then, we're born to obey.

*On the way to the park in the car, they pass Yang Xun in the street and pick him up.*

"Yuanyuan—Yuanyuan, come over here—" people call out in chorus. Oh, it's just that bunch from the city deputies' compound, dressed in garish colours, cameras slung over their shoulders. They're standing on the steps to the martyrs' memorial and beckoning to me, the girls waving their bright scarves. "Go on," Papa says. "Wait, why don't we go and have a look together?"

We mount the stairs and at once they come crowding over: "Hello, Uncle Lin!"

"Hm, are you putting on a fashion show?" says Papa.

"Are you against it?" says Monkey Xu, pushing forward. Today he's wearing a black leather jacket and a pair of red-brown drainpipe trousers.

"Well, I certainly wouldn't commend you for it."

"Clothes should have individuality, people should wear whatever they like...." As Monkey Xu finishes, he pulls a face.

Papa taps him on the shoulder. "Let me take a look at this individuality of yours. This is an order: squat! Now then, if there's a war, what will you do?"

"What's it got to do with war?" voluble Fatty Wang interjects. "We hate war!"

"What will you do if the enemy comes?"

"Me?" Fatty Wang counts on her fingers. "Number one, it's utterly impossible."

"And number two?"

"If they really do come, we're not cowards. But I don't understand, what's that got to do with wearing a few clothes that look smart?"

Papa smiles. "I'm not against looking smart. But you should try and acquire a little taste."

Monkey Xu sticks his head out again. "And if our ideas of taste happen to differ? Then you'll simply give us an order: change into standard blue uniforms...."

"Actually we dressed up specially today because we feel we're too old," Fatty Wang sighs. "Uncle Lin, what did your generation do when you were young?"

Papa's expression becomes suddenly grave, and he turns towards the martyrs' memorial. "Ask this. Under it are lying one thousand one hundred and...."

"... fifty-seven martyrs. I know, I've known that since I was three. But I don't believe they charged around fighting every minute of their lives. After all, they were human beings as well. And besides, if there had been no love, then there'd be no us!"

They all laugh.

"What a girl!" says Papa.

"As far as I can see, in those days you were more casual than we are. That's as plain as daylight, there's no need to be vague about it. But for us, either there's just no way out, or all the ways have to be arranged by you. So where's the interest in living. Yuanyuan, what do you think?"

I wink secretly.

"Don't exaggerate our role; whether you succeed or not still depends on you. What's your name? Fine, Comrade Fatty Wang, we'll have another chat some time. Stay here and enjoy yourself, Yuanyuan. Xun and I are going for a walk."

I feel utterly empty, chat with the others for a moment or two, then slip into the shadows behind the martyrs' memorial. Looking at the sky from here, it seems even bluer. A few crows fly past cawing. These ugly creatures are quite happy. I've heard that in some countries people even

regard them as holy birds. It seems that even the fates of crows are different, though their cry is about the same: *ka-ka . . . ka-ka . . .*

The two of them vanish into the thick wood.

### 5B *Lin Dongping*

WE FOLLOW the path through the wood, walking towards the hillock. Dry leaves covering the path crunch underfoot. A light breeze springs up, the bright, sparse grey branches swing a little.

I haven't been here for a long time. This memorial park was built in '55. I signed the approval myself. The then Municipal Committee secretary, Old Han, had no inkling that he would one day be the one thousand one hundred and fifty-eighth. Hundreds of the city's teachers and cadres died a violent death at more or less the same time. Their names ought to be carved on the memorial, so that the children will remember them, remember that period of history. Amongst the names of the dead on this long, long list is that of Yuanyuan's mother. She was sent here as a member of the provincial committee work group, and was dead after barely a month. She died in a criticism session, from another heart attack, it was said. I feel guilty towards her, years of disharmony added to the burden on her heart, especially after she knew of my affair with Ruohong. But there's no court of feelings in the world, only conscience. And there are too many kinds of conscience nowadays. For me there's only one, there absolutely cannot be two. And where is my conscience? . . . "They were human beings as well. If there had been no love then there'd be no us!" It's as if Fatty Wang's probing eyes have seen right through what's in my heart, the wretched girl! Yes, we were all human beings. We all have our own history, our own secrets of happiness and pain. Others can never know, except those with whom you have entered into secrets. Why doesn't Xun like to talk? He's not at all like his mother. When the organization sent Ruohong to help me with my work that evening we chatted nearly the whole night. We were afraid of attracting other people's attention and didn't turn the light on in the room. The moonlight poured through the skylight, illuminating the brass knobs of the old-fashioned iron bed she was sitting on. At last she

grew tired, and fell asleep against the bedstead. I covered her with a blanket, then went to the store-room to send the last telegram . . .

The white poplars brush against us, as we pass each of these white memorials. We ought to set up a memorial for each of our unhappy love affairs, and tell the children: we've sacrificed everything for your happiness. Is that really true? Facts are often blown out of proportion. But at least we left the fruit of love, left lasting memories.

Xun has walked on ahead. A few crows caw noisily, flapping their wings in the treetops and flying off. Blasted creatures. You have no scruples about all that people cherish, it would even give you satisfaction to destroy them. Fortunately the world is big enough to contain everything. What is the meaning of this containment? Is it just co-existence? But can I co-exist with a fellow like Wang Defa? He lives with such confidence, he doesn't take account of me in the slightest, speaks in front of me without any restraint. That scene in the office just now . . .

"...this is the basic situation with the problem of co-operation in the engineering work on the Jinying River." Wang Defa shut his notebook, leant over and pushed a packet of cheap cigarettes at me across the table.

"No thanks, I've just put one out."

"And I have another idea." He rubbed his unshaven chin, hesitated for a moment. "The new financial year will begin soon. Our supply situation's always a problem. Can we improve it? I've made a calculation: if everyone's monthly ration for oil, sugar, meat and eggs is reduced to the lowest limit, then we can depend on the surrounding counties to supply us, and we won't have to go begging."

"The lowest limit?"

"Be patient. This is calculated on a scientific basis. Last time I was at the provincial capital for a meeting, I asked a medical authority—you should have seen his big beard." Wang Defa grew excited and pulled a sheet of paper from his pocket. "I've made out a full report; if we achieve some success, who knows, the whole country might learn from us . . ."

I put on my glasses and looked at the report. "Two *liang*<sup>4</sup> of white sugar?"

<sup>4</sup>About 100 grams.

"The human body can get sugar from grain and vegetables high in starch, it's scientific!"

"Hm, it's a good idea." I took off my glasses and blinked. "What about the peasants? There's just been a flood, what revenues can we collect?"

"Ah, as the saying goes, 'there's no blessing you can't enjoy and no suffering you can't stand'. I grew up in the countryside, I understand them better than you. You ink-drinkers, you're too sentimental. How was it in '58? That was done by you lot. That winter I happened to go home from the army to visit relatives. You couldn't count how many people had died from hunger; but we got through somehow, didn't we?" He scratched at a greasy stain on his sleeve with his fingernail. "Tighten your belts a bit, that'll solve the problem."

"Tighten whose? Does that include you and me?" I asked.

He smiled knowingly. "Old Lin, you get more and more confused the older you get! Of course it doesn't include us. Don't worry."

I placed my hands on the table, then slowly clenched them again.

"Come on, Old Lin, sign," he said.

I put on my glasses, looked at the report again, then from over the rim of my glasses I caught sight of his hand holding the cigarette. What was that hand capable of? Pounding the table, making telephone calls, even strangling... what, was I afraid? Just because he has real power, connections at the top? I am an intelligent person, it's simply not worth destroying myself over this small thing. I can still make many contributions to the people... What a lie! Behind this piece of paper, how many pairs of eyes are watching you, watching your every move, watching your conscience. Yet you still boast unblushingly of 'the people' and 'contribution'... for shame!

"I won't sign," I said, taking off my glasses and pushing away the report.

Wang Defa rapped on the table with his knuckles. "Old Lin, you and I are both experienced men... I can't do anything either, it's come down from a higher level."

"So why won't they give a proper order?"

He smiled just a little. "You still don't get the point, do you? From the bottom to the top, that's your glorious tradition from the days of guerilla warfare."

"If that's the case, we should take up the discussion from the Party Committee, and listen to their opinions."

The last trace of a smile vanished from his face. He looked at me expressionlessly. "Very well."

Several tall poplars have been planted on the top of the hillock. The sunshine lights up their pencil-straight trunks; in contrast to the surrounding grey tone, they appear unusually clean, erect and stalwart. The wind blows the dry leaves into hollows. I sit down under a wind-weathered rock, drawing deeply at my cigarette, chewing the bitter shreds of tobacco that have fallen into my mouth. In the quiet net woven by the path, the fallen leaves and the poplars, a light thread of sorrow permeates the air, and is carried away by the wind to the mountain wilderness.

Xun walks over to a poplar and gazes into the distance.

### 5C Yang Xun

*Yang Xun says he is going to see a film and admits to Lin Dongping that his engagement is not with a local girl. He leaves, while Lin Dongping remains behind on the hill alone.*

THE SNOWFLAKES are spinning, the whole sky is dancing with them. Some of the blackness is drained from the night. The two of us stand on the cinema steps, watching the black tide of people, a floating mass of gaily-coloured scarves, flowing past us like waves, parting and converging again, gradually vanishing into the white vastness of the flying snow.

"It's strange; how can so many other people bear to sit through a film like that?" Xiao Ling says.

"Like enduring life, it's not so hard," I say.

"But it's supposed to be art, after all." She takes a red gauze kerchief from her pocket and ties it on her head. "I always think, these people who make films must be sick in the head."

"It's the state apparatus that's sick."

"Shh—" She puts her finger to her lips and looks all around. "Didn't you spend enough time in the county gaol? I mean, don't push all the problems onto the top; even if there were to be a change, how much effect would it really have?"

When the Nazis seized power, the majority of German intellectuals refused to co-operate. The crux of the matter is that the former generation of Chinese intellectuals never formed a strong social stratum, they always submitted to political oppression, and even if they resisted, their resistance was extremely limited."

"And our generation?"

"I can't explain exactly. Still, each generation should be stronger than the last. Really, I can't quite explain." She shakes her head. "Let's change the subject."

"The snowstorm was very sudden," I say.

Xiao Ling greedily drinks in a mouthful of fresh air. "I signed a contract with the snowflakes, to fall when people aren't expecting it."

"Where did you sign?" I ask.

"On the windowpane, with my breath and finger."

"When?"

"When I was four or five."

"Then you were this big." I point at a little girl in a green padded jacket walking by us.

"Then you were that big." She points at a plastic toy dog in the little girl's hand.



We both laugh.

"Haven't they torn up the contract?" I ask again.

"Only once."

"When?"

"This time. Today, I thought it would snow, I thought it would." She sighs, and the snowflakes disappear around her mouth. "Nature has this sort of power, it can reconcile us with ourselves, with others, with life . . . ."

The crowd disperses. The lights at the cinema door go out one by one. The earth, covered with white snow, grows bright, like a dark mirror.

" . . . I'm so tired, how I wish I could have a rest, a home, a nest to go to." She sorrowfully closes her eyes. "So I can lick my wounds, have pleasant dreams."

"A home," I repeat.

She nods. "Yes, a home."

"Xiao Ling," I say, catching hold of her hand.

"What?" She hangs her head, blushing.

"Suppose there were someone willing to help you shoulder everything?"

"Everything," she says softly.

"Yes, everything. Suffering and loneliness, and happiness too."

"Happiness." She answers like an echo.

"That's right, happiness."

She draws her hand away. "Fool."

We are separated by a row of tall white poplars. The snow crunches underfoot. For a long time neither of us speaks.

"Recite a poem, Xiao Ling," I say.

Her expression is a little abstracted. After a while, she bites her lip, and begins to recite in a low voice:

*"The sky is beautiful,  
The sea is serene  
But I see only  
Darkness and blood . . . ."*<sup>5</sup>

"Why did you choose that poem?" I ask.

"The poem chose me." She bites her lip and shakes her head. "I only deserve this kind of fate. What is there I can do?"

<sup>5</sup>From "Un Voyage à Cythère," by Baudelaire, in *Les Fleurs du Mal* (1857).



"You were just talking about resistance."

"That's another matter." She forces a smile. "First I have to resist myself: unfortunately I haven't even that ability."

"So according to what you say, this generation has no hope?"

"Why wander so far from the point? All that can be said is that I have no hope."

"No, there's hope," I say determinedly. "We have hope. Where there's life there's hope."

"Who is 'we'?" She stops by a tree and rests her cheek against the trunk with a captivating smile.

"You and I."

"Oh." She pulls off her headscarf, all wet with snowflakes, gives it a shake and ties it to the trunk of the tree, gliding her finger up and down on it. "Who gave you the right to talk like this?" she asks in a hurried, low voice.

"You and I."

Suddenly she raises her eyes, almost grim. "Do you understand me?"

"Yes, I do."

"Based on what? These few meetings?"

"This isn't something that can be measured in terms of time . . ."

"No, no, don't say it, you'll pay a price." She hastily cuts short my speech, and releases her scarf from the branch. "It's late, let's go."

The snow has stopped. The rays from the mercury-vapour lamps reflect on the snow, shining with a gloomy blue light. She bites her lip, staring straight ahead, her steps hurried then slow, limping along, kicking up puffs of powdered snow. At the last poplar she stops, looking at me silently, in her eyes hesitation and distress.

"Let's say goodbye," she says.

"When shall we meet?"

"We shan't." She averts her gaze. "Never . . ."

"Don't make jokes."

"I'm in no mood for joking."

"What's the matter, Xiao Ling?"

"Don't bear a grudge against me, don't . . ."

Her lip trembles. She turns her head abruptly and walks away with rapid steps, gradually disappearing at the crossroads ahead.

I stand in the snow for a long time. How did this nightmare begin? How has it ended so carelessly? I scoop up some snow and rub it on my face, letting the melted snow soak into my neck drop by drop. The wind whistles in the distance. No,

the wind is over my head, in the treetops, flowing in a firm direction, like an invisible arm, enfolding this miserable world. No, it can't be seen, there's only darkness and blood . . . I walk back past the trees, one after another, brushing each trunk with my hand, perhaps a little of her warmth remains on them—no, her temperature is zero, is snow and ice . . .

I walk haltingly. Narrow streets, crooked houses, they crowd in on me until I can't breathe. I stop beside a telegraph pole. Not far ahead, a man and a woman are talking in low voices. What, is that her with Bai Hua?! Suddenly she catches sight of me here, lowers her voice and says something to Bai Hua. Bai Hua puts his arm round her waist, and walks into the shadows.

Bang! Everything spins round, with a humming sound, in a string of dazzling lights and foul black snow . . . I grab the telegraph pole, swearing savagely.

#### 5D *Xiao Ling*

THE WIND BLOWS the tears out of my eyes, a corner of the scarf flaps against my face. I walk on, never turning my head, never! Ahead lies an abyss, but there is no way I can stretch out an entreating hand. No one can save anyone else, and what's the sense in perishing together? One should always leave behind something, leave a shred of warmth, a scrap of fantasy, a corner of clear sky, even though the boundless darkness and pools of blood like pounding waves cover them over unceasingly. Ah, you drifting stars, pure and beautiful, let me find shelter within your radiance.

*Xiao Ling, having left Yang Xun, and having decided to end their relationship, goes into the park in the middle of the street, where she runs into her foreman at the factory, Firecracker. He is drunk, and makes advances towards her, but she is rescued by Bai Hua, who beats Firecracker up. Suddenly Xiao Ling catches sight of Yang Xun, acts faint, and is helped away by Bai Hua.*

## VI

6A *Lin Dongping*

*Lin Dongping endures another tedious and disturbing Party session. He defends his closure of a coal-mine where there has been an accident on the grounds that the causes of the accident have not been sufficiently investigated. As usual he has a confrontation with Wang Defa, who this time implies that Lin Dongping has misappropriated funds; Lin Dongping then enquires after the flood relief funds, of which Wang Defa is supposed to be in charge. After the meeting he runs into Su Yumei, who flirts with him again.*

I OPEN the car door.

"Finished?" Fat Wu yawns, stretching.

"Turn on the radio. See if there's anything to listen to."

The dial lights up. He flicks it back and forth. It's all dry news and ear-piercing model operas.

"Turn it off," I say.

Streetlights. Shops. Cinema. Streetlights. Restaurant. Rubbish heaps. Little mud-brick huts. Streetlights... I shut my eyes, this is such a broken-down city, even the night can't hide its shabbiness. These creatures living in these mud-brick huts, going back and forth amidst the rubbish, are these our people?

*Arriving home, Lin Dongping finds Yang Xun waiting in the study.*

6B *Yang Xun*

*Yang Xun tells Lin Dongping that he has just received a letter from his mother, saying arrangements are being made for his return to Peking. Lin Dongping urges him to go back on account of his mother, although he does not wish to. Lin Dongping guesses that his reluctance is due to his having a girlfriend, and suggests that arrangements may also be made for her to go back to Peking. During the conversation the old cadre begins to suspect there may be something strange in Yang's girlfriend's past; at the same time Yang Xun suspects that Lin Dongping's past may involve his own mother. As Yang Xun leaves he meets Yuan-*

*yuan, still jealous of his involvement with Xiao Ling, and she angrily tells him not to come to their house so often. On the way to the factory he goes into a wineshop, where he meets Bai Hua. Bai Hua clarifies what really happened that evening when he saw them together. Relieved, Yang Xun then goes back to Xiao Ling's house.*

I KNOCK ON the door, find that it's off the latch, and push it open. She gets up from the table without a word, her face pale, almost expressionless, only her hands fiddling with the top of a fountain pen.

"You've come," she says at length, almost inaudibly.

"I've come."

"Sit down."

I remain standing.

"Apparently neither of us understands courtesy very well." She attempts a smile, only making her lips tremble. She looks away fiercely, turning the window. On her snow-white neck a blue vein twitches.

"Xiao Ling." I step forward and turn her round by the shoulders to face me. "Why are you being like this?"

She lowers her eyelids, a glistening teardrop hangs on her lashes, quivers, and rolls slowly down her cheek.

"Tell me, why?" I ask.

She opens her eyes, shakes her head, and smiles miserably. I stretch out my fingers and brush away the tear from the corner of her mouth.

"Look, the moon's risen," she says softly, as if telling me a long-hidden secret.

I look up. "The moon's red."

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Listen to you, still the same old habits."

"Xiao Ling, do you know how I've spent these last months?"

She seals my mouth with her hand. "Don't pour out woes, all right?"

I nod.

Suddenly she clasps my neck, trustingly presses her lips towards me and without waiting for my response pushes me away, dodges over the other side of the table, and pulls a mischievous face. "Just stand there, I want to look at you like that."

I start to move round the table.

"Don't move!" she commands.  
 "This place has turned into a prison," I say.  
 "How is it compared to the county prison?"  
 "A bit better."  
 "I'll lock you up here," she points at her heart.  
 "How about that?"  
 "That's much better."  
 We both laugh.  
 "What's this?" I pick up the notebook lying on the desk. "May I have a look?"  
 "No!" She leaps across, and clasps it to her breast. "Not now," she adds.  
 "Later?"  
 "I'll let you look for sure."  
 "What have you written? Epigrams and aphorisms?"  
 "No, just some of my thoughts, and recollections of the past."

### 6C *Xiao Ling*

HIGH NOON. Li Tiejun and I walk along the steaming river, followed by two Red Guards from the Red HQ Brigade, automatic rifles slung upside down over their shoulders. Under the burning sun, several young fellows are listlessly digging a trench by the bank.

"Perhaps those bastards will plan an attack for tomorrow." He waves a willow sprig in the air. "Then you people from Peking will see something."

"We haven't come to watch a play. Give me a gun, I'll stay in the forward position," I say.

"You?" His lip curls in a sneer.

"Don't underestimate us. See how we perform on the field of battle." I stop for a moment, then suddenly ask, "Are you one of the 'strong'?"

"What does it mean to be strong? Not to be afraid of death, right?"

"That's not enough."

"What else is there? Killing someone without batting an eyelid?" He says half-jokingly, "You don't believe me?"

I shake my head.

"Let's make a bet," he says.

We reach the head of the bridge on the highway. In the middle of the sandbag defences the gun-metal mouths of heavy machine-guns point straight ahead. At the wire-netting roadblock,

some Red Guards are checking the passers-by.

We lean on the stone balustrade of the bridge, chatting on about this and that. Suddenly, Li Tiejun's eyes turn towards the crowd, he points to a young fellow, beckoning with his finger, and calls him over.

"Where are you going?"

"Into the city to see my aunt, she's sick."

"Not taking anything, eh? Give him another detailed search."

The search produces a girl's photograph and a badge.

"Who's she?" asks Li Tiejun, taking the photograph.

"My girlfriend."

Li Tiejun picks up the badge, looks closely at the back, and laughs grimly. "Taking a Red Cannon Brigade badge to see your aunt? Let's have the truth."

"I really am going to see my aunt," the youth persists.

"Kneel down!" Li Tiejun gives him a kick from behind, and he falls heavily to his knees. "I'll give you one last chance."

"I'm telling the truth."

"Then get ready to say goodbye." Li Tiejun throws the girl's photograph down in front of him, and pulls out his pistol.

The youth picks up the photograph and presses it to his breast, then turns his head, his face deathly white. His beseeching eyes sweep from the muzzle of the gun to me.

"Tiejun, wait a minute . . ." As I'm about to rush forward to hold him back, the gun goes off.

In the burning-hot noon, beside the quiet river, the gun is so loud, the report hovers for a long time. With the sound of each gunshot, the youth's head strikes against the hard concrete road. Blood spurts out, dyeing the girl's photograph, running into the river . . . .

Tiejun gives the body a kick, puts away his gun and turns proudly towards my stunned face. "This time you lose the bet, that's one you owe me."

"You, you butcher, bastard!" I shout myself hoarse, turn and run, tears blurring my vision.

"Hey, get up."

I blink; a little old man wearing a patrol officer's armband is standing in front of me.

"Get up. Come with me," he says.

I fold up the raincoat I've been using as a bed on the ground, step over the people curled up everywhere, and follow him into the station duty office.

"Sit down." He points to a stool beside the desk.

I remain standing.

"From Peking?" he asks.

"You could say so."

"So why do you come here to sleep every evening?"

"This is the first time."

"Do you think I'm an old fool with no eyes, eh?" He starts to cough, holding a big handkerchief to cover his mouth, coughs for a while, then suddenly asks, "Your home?"

"I have no home."

He nods. "And no relatives or friends?"

"Whom would I approach? I'm wanted by the school." I say irritably, "What do you want? Go and report me . . . ."

The old man's Adam's-apple bobs up and down, he reaches into his pocket and brings out a little paper packet. "Here, take this."

I hesitate, then take the packet—it's ten dollars. Something salt and astringent blocks my throat. "Uncle . . . ."

"Take it, child, don't be so proud, get some more clothes or something, it's getting cold. Otherwise I'll just use the money for drink. Go on, take it. I haven't told the missus. She'll be sure to agree. She's not much to look at but she's got a good heart . . . ."

"Uncle," I say.

"Go on, go on."

"Uncle Shen, I just don't believe these lies any more." I shut the book and leave it on my lap. "But this period of history . . . ."

"You young people, you always want to go forward. Remember, whatever the verdict, it's never the final verdict." He walks round the pile of books on the floor, closes the only shutter in the little room, walks back, and sits down in a creaking old cane chair. "Lingling, when I met your parents, I was studying Oriental history at Harvard. Now that may seem rather funny, but in fact it's not." He points to the book in my lap. "Old Hegel says this: 'All forms of existence bind themselves to their own self-created history;

furthermore, history regarded as a kind of objective universalism then determines them and transcends them . . . .'

That is to say, it's very difficult for man to transcend his own body and recognize history, and those on the crest of the historical wave recognize this even less; this, then, is the lamentable position of certain great men."

"It's also the lamentable position of our nation," I say.

"No." Uncle Shen makes a resolute gesture. "The life of one person is limited, but the life of a nation has no limit: the latent energy of our Chinese nation has never shone forth. Perhaps it's got a bit old, and as a result it has become rather slow in the process of self-recognition. But this process is now under way, is being carried through by a chain from one generation to the next. If a country blows a tune on an out-of-tune bugle, that symbolizes the decline of a certain kind of power; it is also the prelude to the rising up of the whole nation . . . ."

The bells ring, the clamour of leave-taking on the platform reaches a pitch, shouts and sobs mingling into one. An accordion plays frenziedly, young fellows arm in arm sing themselves hoarse. I sit by the window, watching it all with cold indifference.

"Xiao Ling," Yun, who has come to see me off, takes my hand gently. "Come back this winter. Stay at our place, my mother's very fond of you."

"No, I'm not coming back."

"So when will you come back?"

"I'll never come back."

"Why? Xiao Ling . . . ."

Suddenly, the whole station shudders, slowly withdraws. Yun's voice is drowned. She stretches out her hand, runs forward a few steps, and is engulfed in the crowd.

Goodbye, Peking! Forget me, Peking!

## VII

### 7A Yang Xun

*Yang Xun and Xiao Ling are walking together in the hills.*

A CLEAR MOUNTAIN spring cuts across the stone path, falling away into a deep valley. On the pool at the bottom of the valley white swirling vapour rises. She stands at the edge and looks down, as if listening to the tumbling roar. A few grey birds cry plaintively in the spray.

"Is it death down there?" She looks up, her mood turned solemn and sad.

I do not answer.

"It's very close to us." Colour drains from her eyes, the sunlight in them shivers a little.

"What's wrong?" I ask.

She leans against me silently, still staring down. "I'm afraid . . ."

"Afraid of what?"

"Afraid of parting," she says in a muffled voice.

"Impossible, nothing can part us."

"Even death?"

"Impossible."

She gazes trustingly at me.

I stroke her shoulder. "Let's not stand here, all right?"

She nods, turns and squats down by the spring, watches her reflection and sighs. She splashes her face and turns her head. "How shall we cross?"

I lift her up and leap across.

"I shouldn't be like this. You must have felt disheartened just now," she says, lying in my arms.

"No."

"Truly? Now, look at me, don't turn away . . . good, now let me go."

A flight of stone stairs weathered by the wind leads down to a carved white marble archway. Beyond, on the dilapidated screen wall, the words 'The Wheel of the Dharma Revolves': the gold lacquer has already peeled away. All is sadness and desolation. The tortoise with the stele on its back is buried deep in mud, revealing only half a head. The rough stone path is covered over with last winter's dry leaves and sheep droppings. Most of the side-hall on the right has collapsed, and from the broken arms of the Eighteen Disciples grow tall weeds, rustling in the passing breeze. We enter the main hall, into a faint odour of mold and decay. In the dimness, a shaft of sunlight falls on the long slender hand of the central Buddha.

"Hello, Guan Yin—" Xiao Ling shouts like a child, and the dark, gloomy hall sends back a low, muffled echo.

"This is Sakyamuni," I say.

"An Indian?"

"That's right."

"Mr. Sakyamuni, welcome to our country. But do you have a passport?"

"He has the scriptures," I say.

"There are more than enough of those here already. If you break one of our commandments, you may get a term of labour reform." Xiao Ling suddenly turns, and asks, "Are you interested in religion?"

"One can't help being interested: these years, we've been living in a kind of religious atmosphere," I say. "And you?"

"Me? I've just become interested," she says, closing her eyes. "I wish that in the darkness there were a god to bless and protect us . . ."

"Why not Buddha, or Old Father Heaven?"

"Anyone will do, as long as it's some sort of divine being."

"Do you really believe in such things?"

"No. I don't know, it's hard to say." She winks, and smiles mischievously. "My religious feeling is pragmatic . . . oh, look, there's a cave."

Sure enough, there in the corner, is the mouth of a cave as tall as a man. Xiao Ling pops her head in. "It's very dark. Did you bring a lighter?"

Holding up the lighter I walk forward. The cave is very deep; after walking a dozen or so steps a flight of narrow stairs appears. Xiao Ling grabs hold of my sleeve. I turn around, and in her wide eyes shine two little dancing flames. The stone stairs rise slowly in the fire-light. Suddenly it becomes light and roomy. We've reached a small attic; inside, eight ferocious-looking monsters stand around the walls.

"Oh! What a weird place. From the top you'd think it was Heaven, but in actual fact it's more like Hell." Xiao Ling looks the monsters up and down one by one. "It's all right, not too scary after all, really rather sad; they must have suffered a lot to turn into things like this."

I go to the window. "Come and see, this is the look-out point."

We look down. The remnants of a wall stand solemnly in the long grass, as if recalling past glory. The flashing stream flows past the courtyard wall, eroding the exposed roots of an old cypress tree. Blue mountains are faintly visible in the distance.

She leans over and gazes at me, in her eyes a

kind of wonder. Sunlight strokes her shoulders and arms, as if it wants to seep right through her body. The red gauze scarf she is wearing is tugged by the wind, one moment blocking out the sun, the next fluttering back, little rainbow-coloured rings leaping before my eyes.

"It would be wonderful if we were like this for ever," she says, resting her hands on my shoulders.

I draw her towards me, and hold her tight. Her head falls back, her lips parted slightly, her breath coming rapidly. Suddenly, big teardrops come rolling down . . .

"Xiao Ling," I call softly.

She just lies on my shoulder and cries. After a long while, she pushes me away, brushes away the tears, and shakes her head in embarrassment, smiling.

"Are you upset?" I ask.

"You're really a fool. You don't know anything," she murmurs, running her fingers through my hair, ruffling it, then slowly smoothing it again.

Two swallows flutter out through a hole in the ceiling.

"We must have disturbed them," Xiao Ling says.

"No, they disturbed us."

"But this is their home."

"It's our home, too."

"Don't talk nonsense." She glares at me fiercely, covering my mouth with her hand. I catch hold of her hand and kiss it. She withdraws it, smooths her hair. "I'm hungry."

I open the bag, spread a sheet of plastic on the floor, then arrange the wine, the food and fruit. I also take out a little aluminium tin, shaking it in my hand. "I'll go and get some water, and collect some firewood while I'm at it."

"I'll go too." On the way she jostles me with her elbow. "You see, I don't know why, but as soon as you leave me I'm afraid. Aren't I a coward?"

"You're a brave girl."

"In these last few days I keep feeling that I'm changing, changing into something I don't quite recognize myself."

"You've become more like yourself."

"Could there be two me's?"

"Perhaps more than two."

"It gets worse and worse. So which me do you actually love?"

"All of them."

"You're being slippery." Her lips curl slyly. "In fact you only love the me in your mind's eye, and that me doesn't exist, right?"

"No, that's the combination of all the you's."

She laughs. "Just turn it directly into a mathematical calculation and come up with the three-headed, six-armed me; could you stand that?"

"Let's try it and see."

"I wonder, how can we go on like this? Walking along this little path, as if nothing's happened, as if all along we live by the rules, birth, school, work, love . . . once in a while getting out to the suburbs, letting our cares drift away, do you understand what I mean?"

"I understand."

"If you could choose your life over again, what sort would you choose?"

"Still the one I've had."

"That's because you haven't paid a high enough price."

"No, it's because otherwise I wouldn't have known you."

"Oh, that reason's quite sufficient," she nods, with satisfaction.

We reach the spring.

"I feel like washing my hair." She stretches out and tests the water with her hand.

I look up anxiously at the darkening sky. "Watch out you don't catch a chill. It looks like rain."

She hums a light-hearted tune, undoes her hairpin, and her hair spills into the water without a sound. "Yang Xun, our treat won't be eaten by rats, will it?"

"If there are rats, they'll probably turn into monsters."

"I'm not that easily scared. Come here, help me squeeze this dry." I roll up my sleeves and give a couple of squeezes. She opens my hand. "You're treating it like a piece of rope, let me do it myself."

The branches crackle into flame, the fire-light flickers over her face. In the dancing shadows of the flames, her appearance is a little eerie.

"You sure the floor won't catch fire?" I ask anxiously.

"What are you talking about? Heat rises,"

she says.

Heat. Why have I never realized it before? Perhaps that's what I'm feeling at this very moment, heat, slowly rising, rising. We always felt cold before, an ice-coldness spreading outwards from the heart, a kind of coldness discharged through the need for heat, through the absorption of heat; finally condensing into dewdrops on the blades of grass, rising as mist in the valleys.

Xiao Ling kneels on the sheet of plastic, opens the wine, pours two full cups and hands one to me. "Come on, drink up."

"First, let's think of some toasts," I say.

"To you, and that allegedly brave girl, happiness to you and her . . . ."

"To the two survivors of these tragic times . . . ."

"May this pair of survivors, like the swallows, still return to the nest together after being so rudely disturbed . . . ."

"May the guns not aim at swallows . . . ."

"To the indestructibility of the swallows . . . ."

"To beautiful fairy-tales . . . ."

"To the health of Mr. Sakyamuni! Cheers!"

We drain our cups.

In the distance a clap of thunder roars. She gets up and goes to the window, her hair blowing in the wind. "It's going to rain," she murmurs.

"We won't be able to get back," I say.

She turns her head and darts a peculiar look at me.

Night, night full of menace, full of thunder and lightning and rustling, whispers, presses down upon us. The lightning flashes, and in that instant her clear silhouette is thrown against the shattered sky.

"The wind's too strong at the window, come over here," I say.

She remains leaning against the window, staring into the distance.

"Xiao Ling," I say.

She turns, looking at me as if just woken from a dream, walks over silently and sits beside me. The flames gradually die down, the last embers reflecting on her calm face, delineating a gentle curve. I draw her over, she yields silently. Her lips are freezing. She is rather thinly clad.

"Are you cold?"

She shakes her head, watching me blankly. I bend down, kissing her forehead. Her snow-white

throat stretches down, swelling a little inside her collar. A row of white buttons glistens in the dimness. My fingers touch the first one, gently unbuttoning it.

"Don't do that," she says in alarm, grabbing my hand.

I touch the second one.

With a thud, she fiercely pulls my hand away, clutching her collar together tightly. "Get away! Didn't you hear me? Get away!" The lightning illuminates her trembling chin.

I get up, and walk angrily to the window. Raindrops drum on the window-lattice, the wind gradually drops, the invisible river thunders . . . ."

Suddenly I am blindfolded. I pull her small hands away, turn round, and she rushes into my arms.

Lightning. The monsters grin savagely over our heads. Darkness.

## 7B Xiao Ling

LOVE STANDS trembling in the quagmire of pain. This liberation is as violent as death, and I keep wanting to open the flood-gates and let the tide of happiness escape with a roar.

Have you gone mad?

Yes, I've gone mad. If I haven't yet been stifled to death by mediocrity, I'd willingly be a lunatic, a cheerful lunatic. Because compared with so-called normality lunacy is a kind of opposite, and any opposite to *that* is beautiful.

Have you forgotten your own duty?

No. In the midst of duty I still think of what lies beyond duty. I think of love, which bathes in a different sunlight.

Enough! I'm getting too abstract!

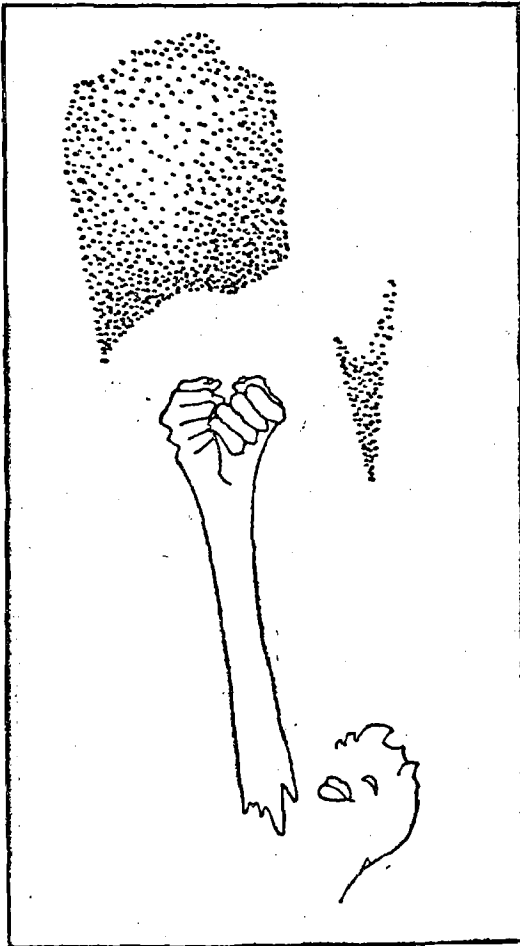
I like the abstract things of life. They have not been confined by callous and dirty reality, and because of that are more true, more lasting.

Tell me, are you happy?

What is happiness? Is it just a kind of contentment? Contentment leads to boredom. Perhaps genuine happiness leaves no after-taste, or else is like a storm that has already passed by; you only see the traces left on the ground.

Could it be the resurrection of hope?

There is always hope; even in the darkest hours, I still set aside a radiant corner for it. This has



significance in itself, a complete significance. Of course, this hope is by no means illusory, it seeks a goal; as now, in the midst of ruin, caught tightly by the hand of a child and raised up high again; may it gain its heart's desire, may it destroy the boundless and impenetrable darkness!

What kind of goal are you seeking?

This is exactly the question our generation has raised, and which it must answer. Perhaps the search itself is what already epitomizes our generation: we will not easily accept death, or silence, or obedience to any fixed judgement. Even though separated by high walls, mountain ranges, and rivers, each person struggles, hesitates, suffers dejection, even wearies of it all; but taken overall, faith and strength are eternal.

What have you been saying? Why haven't you even mentioned him?

I loathe this tone of yours. Stop interrogating me like an old woman. Leave me in peace.

I open my book, read a few lines, then shut it again. As soon as I pick up my sewing, the needle slips and pricks my finger, and a smooth round drop of blood seeps out. I smile, and suck it dry. It's as if I've only just begun to grasp the true meaning of that experience; to feel astonished, to be intoxicated, to be shy. In fact, the reason for excitement like this isn't in love alone, it's also in finding a new starting point; there are so many things I can do, the little piece of sunlight still left in my heart hasn't grown cold, it can warm others . . . .

I shiver, and my gaze rests on the little glass frame on the table. Jingjing, are you teasing me? Yes, I should find a chance to tell him, tell him all this. Will he understand?

*Xiao Ling goes to work at the factory and is summoned by the political work section, where she is reminded of her status as a provisional worker and questioned about her past. When asked whether she had a boyfriend during her years in the countryside, she objects, refusing to say any more. The political officer cautions her about her attitude.*

## VIII

### 8A *Bai Hua*

*Bai Hua is hanging around the market-place looking for lucrative opportunities. He runs into Lin Yuanyuan, but she runs away when they catch sight of Yang Xun and Xiao Ling in the crowd.*

### 8B *Yang Xun*

*Bai Hua meets Yang Xun and Xiao Ling in the market and takes Yang Xun aside, intending to threaten him. Yang Xun, however, shows Bai Hua that he does not fear his threats. Bai Hua then warns him about his relationship with Xiao Ling and tells him he does not understand love; their*



conversation ends inconclusively. Bai Hua buys Xiao Ling an old-fashioned white dress which she has been admiring at a stall, then leaves them. In the evening they sit by the canal and talk; Xiao Ling begins to tell Yang Xun of her fears over the differences between them . . . .

"... I'll ask you again, do you understand me?"

"How else do you want me to understand?"

"For instance, do you understand my past?"

"I imagine our pasts are about the same."

"This 'I imagine' is just it. Why don't you ask?"

"Haven't I run into enough snags?"

"Maybe I'm to blame, but that happened long ago. And another thing, do you understand my frame of mind?"

"You seem very happy to me."

"You're wrong. Until the day I die I can never again be completely happy. One can see that you're very happy; but I, I'm both happy and painfully sad. This is precisely the difference between us."

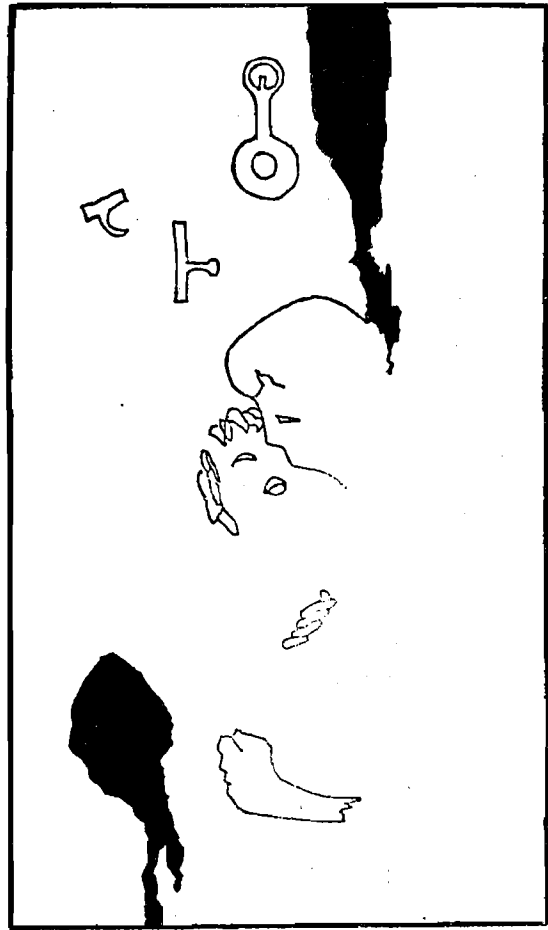
I dispiritedly pick up a stone, and begin tracing lines in the dust.

She grasps my hand, throws away the stone, and presses my palm against her face. "Don't lose heart, please. I really don't mean to dampen your spirits. It's you who changed my life. I'm also willing to believe that happiness belongs to us." She jumps up, brushes herself down, "Fine, as to the question of the right to happiness, who else has an opinion? Now we'll take a vote." She raises her hand, then pulls up mine. "Add this little poplar, that's three votes altogether, carried unanimously. Wait, I'll go and get some wine to celebrate."

Xiao Ling goes into the house and turns on the light, the window lattice fragmenting her slender figure. As she changes her clothes her movements are like a film in slow motion. In a little while the light goes out and she stands in the doorway, wearing that pure white dress, and walks over. The vast night behind her throws her into relief, amidst the black ocean she is a glistening wave, and the stars countless drops of flying foam. She sets the wine bottle and cups to one side, walks up close to me and looks at me, smiling.

"Come, hold me tight," she says.

I continue to gaze at her abstractedly.



"Come." She holds out two shining arms.

I stand up, and draw her tightly to me till her joints creak.

"Gently, Yang Xun," she says, between breaths.

At the bottom of the wine cup, countless fragments of silver settle into a bright moon. "Xiao Ling, I have something to tell you."

"Go on, then."

"My transfer's been arranged. My mother's sent a letter urging me to go back."

She watches me calmly, her face expressionless. A cold silver-grey light rises slowly behind her. The darkness seems to tremble a little in the cold gleam. "Why didn't you mention it earlier?"

"I wasn't going to tell you anything. I don't plan to go back at all."

She turns the cup round and round in her hands. "Because of me?"

"Also because of myself."

"Go back, your mother needs you."

"No."

"You don't understand a mother's heart."

"Do you?"

She smiles desolately. "Of course I do."

"Unless arrangements are made for you to go back too, I refuse to leave."

"That's impossible, I have no family."

"It doesn't matter, nowadays the more impossible a thing, the more possible it is that it can be achieved."

"No, no, I don't want to go back."

"So let's live here together, then."

"Yang Xun," she says fervently, catching hold of my hand, "I've never asked anything of you before, but this time you must do as I say. Go back. Although we'll be apart, our hearts will still be together, that'll be good, won't it?"

"Don't try to persuade me, it's no use."

"You, you're too stubborn." Suddenly her shoulders begin to tremble.

I am alarmed. "What is it, Xiao Ling?"

"Oh, you're so foolish you should be thrashed." She smiles through her tears, brushing them away from the corners of her eyes. "I'm happy you're so stubborn."

"It's the first time my stubbornness has been a virtue."

"Perhaps I'm too selfish... let's talk about something else."

"How about discussing your past?"

"First let's have a drink."

We clink cups and drain them at one go.

"Um—where shall I begin?" She rests her hands behind her, gazing up at the stars. "This evening's so beautiful, isn't it?"

"Yes."

She sighs. "I don't feel like talking about it, we still have tomorrow."

In the distance the rumble of a motor starts up, a shaft of snow-bright light leaps out, lighting up the grove of trees and piles of firewood. Numberless shadows revolve in the fields, like a massive mounted army. All at once the light sweeps towards us, so dazzling we cannot open our eyes. Xiao Ling leans close to me, clasping my arm tightly.

The tractor drives away.

## 8C *Xiao Ling*

MID-AUTUMN Festival night. The smoke swirls about in our girl-students' low squat room. A bunch of us are crowded on the earthen brick-bed drinking wine, chatting idly. Someone plays mournful songs on a mouth-organ, someone stands by the window, declaiming Gorky's 'The Stormy Petrel' in an affected voice, a girl-student rolling drunk dashes into the yard, dances under the moonlight, inviting peels of laughter and applause from peasants and children. I cast a glance in all directions, shrug my shoulders, and press closer under the oil-lamp with my book.

Suddenly, someone bumps into me. It's Xie Liming. "Why aren't you celebrating with the crowd?" he asks.

"Call that celebrating? Looks worse than crying to me."

"You should try to understand other people's moods."

"I'm studying veterinary science, I'm not interested in human beings."

"Why are you always nettling people?"

"Excuse me, you're interrupting my reading."

He walks off in a huff.

The last flame of the kerosene lamp splutters, flashes, and finally goes out. A moment of dead silence in the room. Suddenly, the boy who has just been declaiming 'The Stormy Petrel' starts howling wildly.

I awaken from a coma. The wind is still wailing, the snowflakes patter against the paper of the window with a rustling sound. Parched! It feels as though my lungs are full of red-hot charcoal. I lick my dry, cracked lips, stretch out my hand to the cup. Not a single drop of water. The cup is sealed with a thick block of ice. With a clatter it falls to the ground, and I lose consciousness again.

The next time I open my eyes, there's a face floating in the mist, slowly becoming distinct. It's Xie Liming sitting by my bed.

"Awake at last." He rubs his brow excitedly. "The doctor's just been, said it was acute pneumonia. He gave you an injection...."

"Doctor?" I murmur uncertainly.

"Couldn't get through on the phone, so I went to the commune."

Ten miles of mountain road, wind and rain, I

shudder all over. "Thank you . . . ."

"Oh, there's no need to mention it."

"Why didn't you go home too?"

He smiles wryly, turns round and carries over a bowl of steaming hot noodle soup. "My mother died early, from persecution; the old man's still in prison, the relatives in Peking only avoid me . . . . I wanted to borrow a book from you. I saw the door unbolted, and nothing stirred however much I knocked . . . drink up, drink while it's hot. It's good for you to sweat a lot . . . ."

A faint knock at the door.

"Who is it?"

"It's me, I've come to borrow a book."

I hesitate a moment, then open the door. Xie Liming stands stiffly in the doorway. A sudden gust of wind blows out the kerosene lamp.

"Xiao Ling, is it too late?"

"Come in."

I close the door and strike a match to light the lamp. Suddenly my hand is seized tightly. The match falls to the floor and goes out.

"Xiao Ling." There's a catch in his throat.

"Let go!"

"Xiao Ling, listen, listen to me . . . ." He clutches my hand, speaking in a low murmur. "I, I'm fond of you . . . ."

"Does that also mean, you need me?" I say with a grim smile, withdrawing my hand fiercely.

"Do you mean there can't be affection between people?"

"What you really mean is, I should repay you."

"You're too cold and unfeeling."

"I like to be cold and unfeeling, I like being cold-shouldered by other people, I like death! Why did you go and save me?"

"Both of us are homeless." He mumbles this one sentence, turns and staggers to the door.

"Come back!" I say.

He stops.

"What did you just say?"

"Both of us are homeless."

The long-distance bus station.

" . . . Father says, as soon as I've graduated from university, we'll help you move back. Then we can get properly married," Xie Liming says in a strained voice, swallowing.

"I hope to hear you say it yourself."

"I, of course, that's what I mean." He looks hurriedly at his watch. "As for the child, I still think get rid of it, don't be too stubborn."

"Don't worry about it, that's my own business."

He pulls a coin from his pocket. "Let's toss and see what our luck will be in the future."

"That's how much your luck is worth?" I snatch the coin from him and fling it into the gutter by the side of the road.

He climbs onto the bus step, breathing a sigh of relief. I watch him with no expression at all.

"Wait for me!" he says, raising his hand.

I am silent.

The bus roars, blows up a cloud of dust, and disappears down the road.

## IX

### 9A *Lin Dongping*

*Lin Dongping finds out about Xiao Ling's illegitimate child, but does not take action to ensure she will not be penalized at the factory as a result, telling them instead to handle the matter "according to principle".*

### 9B *Yang Xun*

*Lin Dongping has called Yang Xun to his house, and begins to ask him about Xiao Ling.*

HE SITS UP, turning his gaze out the window.

"Xun, are you in love with a girl?"

"You knew that long ago."

"What's her name?"

"Xiao Ling."

"What's she like?"

"All right."

"What does this 'all right' include? Family, thoughts, appearance . . . ."

"You asked what she's like, you didn't ask whether she conforms to the standards of a party member . . . ."

"People's concepts are not abstract."

"Yes, I agree. Did you ask me to come just for this?"

"For a chat." He gets up and goes to the little table between the bookcases, grasps the neck of the decanter and pours a glass of cold water. "Young people are liable to act on impulse . . . ."

"We have known each other for a year."

"But you have several decades of life ahead of you." He puts down the glass, paces a few steps, his hands behind his back.

"Xun, do you really understand her?"

"Of course I do."

"What do you understand?"

"Her intrinsic value."

He makes a mocking gesture. "It's the first time I've heard that."

"Yes, it's only those clichés about family conditions that get endlessly duplicated."

"I'm opposed to matching people according to family background."

"Only in words?"

"It seems that in today's world it's almost impossible for one person to convince another."

"Perhaps."

He is standing by the window. He stretches out his fingers and runs them over the dust on the windowsill, then sighs. "Very well, then, take a look at the papers on the desk."

I sit at the desk and open the file already placed there. The fan whirrs. I feel my whole body go cold, as if the air in the room is slowly freezing.

"Is that all?" I ask, closing the dossier.

"What more do you want?"

I leap to my feet and turn to face him. "It's not me who wants something, it's you."

"Calm down, Xun."

"Let me ask you, what right have you to do this?"

He continues pacing up and down.

"Your curiosity really makes me laugh."

He stands still. "This is not curiosity."

"What is it?"

"Duty."

"Duty?" I laugh grimly. "An emperor's duty to the people, or a father's duty to a son?"

For a moment his right hand gropes nervously for something behind him, until at last he clutches the arm of the cane chair, and sits down. His gaze is dull, as if all of a sudden he's grown old. "Xun," he calls out, his voice weak.

"What's wrong?" I pour a glass of water and hand it to him. With one hand he grasps the glass, the other tightly clutches my sleeve.

"I'm old, perhaps I shouldn't take secrets to the grave?" He seems to be talking to himself.

"What secrets?"

"She couldn't allow it, she couldn't . . . ."

"Who?"

His whole body trembles violently, and the water spills. He puts down the glass and gently pats my hand. "Child . . . ."

"Yes?"

"Time doesn't spare people, it's too late . . . ."

"What do you mean . . . ."

"Nothing." He pulls out his handkerchief, wipes his hands and brow, and gradually recovers his normal composure. "Go on, I'm rather tired. Think this matter over. I've already booked you a ticket for tomorrow afternoon. Whether you go or not is up to you."

### 9C *Xiao Ling*

YANG XUN stands in the doorway, his expression gloomy, his eyes averted. I put down the little jumper and walk over to him, meaning to brush the dust from his shoulders. He dodges as if he's received an electric shock, slowly goes to the desk, picks up Jingjing's photograph, then puts it down again. "I've come to say goodbye," he says.

"Where are you going?"

"Peking."

"For how long?"

"The rest of my life."

A moment of suffocation. After a while I let out my breath very slowly. "What time's your train?"

"Tomorrow afternoon."

"Fine, I'll see you off."

He crosses to the bed, picks up the little jumper and looks at it, then sits down on the bed holding his head in his hands. I go to him and stroke his hair. This time he doesn't resist, but with each stroke gives a slight shudder.

"I'm leaving," he says.

"You will come back."

"No, men can never turn back."

"The world's round, if you just keep on walk-

ing firmly you'll come back from another direction."

"I'm not Columbus."

"Perhaps. Now is not the age of Columbus."

"Don't get off the subject like this!" He roughly pushes my hands away and grabs hold of the little jumper on the bed. "Whom are you knitting this for?"

"The child."

"I haven't the time to joke."

"It's started."

"What?"

"The tragedy."

"I'm asking you, whose child?"

"Yang Xun, I beg you, don't speak to me in that tone, I can't bear it."

"Do you think I'm enjoying this?"

"Living can never be enjoyable. I'm hoping you'll calm down before you say anything more."

"I haven't got time."

"You used to have so much time."

"That was in the past."

"Tomorrow will become the past too."

"Unfortunately there won't be any tomorrow."

I silently pick up a book, and sit down on the stool beside me.

"Xiao Ling, why didn't you tell me earlier?"

I turn the pages.

"I truly don't blame you."

I turn the pages.

"Say something."

"There's nothing to say."

"So it all ends like this?"

I shut the book with a snap. "You mean to make me repent, wash myself with tears? I'm sorry, my tears dried up long ago."

"I'm just begging you to be honest."

"Honest? The honesty we understood when we were students hasn't existed for ages. How can you beg someone you love to tear the bandage from her own wound? And another type of honesty requires silence, loving in silence, dying in silence!"

"I'm not accustomed to talking of death."

"As you like. People think custom is everything, but they don't know it's a kind of continuous death."

"You should have a duty to me."

"No, I have a duty only to myself."

"Xiao Ling—" he cries out desperately, clutch-

ing his head tightly in his hands.

I go over, release his hands, and press his head tightly to my breast. "Xun, I understand your pain . . . ."

"Forgive me." He raises his eyes full of tears, staring dully.

We hold each other tightly, and kiss. My lips are moistened with his salt tears, and a kind of maternal love wells up, to help him, to protect him.

"Xiao Ling, what are you thinking?"

"Do you remember how we drunk those toasts in the little temple? I'm afraid there can never be any escape for us from those guns."

"Whom do you mean?"

"No one in particular. This gun consists of many parts. What's more dreadful is the mind of the hunter behind the sights, and that mind is made up of the thoughts of many people . . . ."

"Do you mean conventional ideas?"

"They won't let go of us."

"Don't think this way, Xiao Ling."

"Hm."

Suddenly his gaze travels past my shoulder and falls on Jingjing's photograph. "How old is she?"

"Two years and three months."

"Have someone else take care of her."

I let him go, staring at him in silence.

"Really, it would be better if someone else took care of her."

I go to the door and open it. "Please go."

"Xiao Ling . . . ."

"Please go."

"Don't you love me any more?"

"You still talk so easily of love. I see you only love yourself, love your shadow, love your happiness and suffering, and your future! Please go."

He looks at me hesitantly, goes to the doorway, pauses, then strides away without looking back.

I fling myself on the bed, sobbing uncontrollably.

## X

10A *Lin Yuanyuan*

THE PHOTOGRAPH, the lower right-hand corner already yellowed: Mama, holding a thin little girl in her arms, standing amongst the flowers. Is this me? Diary: "Today is Yuanyuan's fifth birthday. Weight 21.5 kilos, height 1.06 metres. With the change in her moneybox she bought a block of chocolate, and got it all over her face." "Yuanyuan didn't pass arithmetic, it's very worrying. Starting today I'll check her homework every day." Hairpin, fountain pen, watch, wallet, letters . . . . I put back Mama's things one by one. Suddenly, from out of a pile of letters floats a sheet of paper, which falls flickering onto the desk.

"Dongping:

There's no need to hide the whole thing, I know about your past affair. I cannot blame you for anything in your past. But I hope that from now on you will have nothing further to do with her (When you went to the convention in Peking last month you still maintained your relationship with her. Everyone was talking about it, I was the only person in the dark). I know you have no feelings for me, but please think of Yuanyuan, that is my only request . . . ."

The blood pounds in my temples, throbbing loudly. I read it over and remember that whenever they quarrelled they shut the door soundly, but it always seemed to be about the same thing. I go to the chest of drawers, watching the jumping gold secondhand of the little Swiss clock. Mama, poor poor Mama, why did you never divorce this sanctimonious hypocrite, was it just for my sake, Mama?

*After this discovery, Yuanyuan decides to run away from home. She hastily packs a bag and leaves, but when she wants to buy something to eat she finds she has not brought her purse with her. By coincidence, Bai Hua comes to her rescue.*

10B *Bai Hua*

*Bai Hua advises her to return home, but seeing she is resolute about running away he agrees (or pretends to agree) to help her. Arranging to meet*

*her at the station late that evening, he goes to see his friend, Manzi, and tells him that he himself is going away too, perhaps forever. At that moment, Lin Dongping's car goes by; Bai Hua is reminded of the score he has to settle with the cadre.*

10C *Yang Xun*

ON THE PLATFORM, Uncle Lin and I smoke in silence.

The wind slowly drags the dark clouds away. Scraps of paper swirl about with the dust, fluttering down the long platform. This city has suddenly become quite unfamiliar, as if the past is being kept at a distance by this high wall. Like a traveller passing through I walk onto the platform, smoke a cigarette, breathe in a mouthful of fresh air, then at the urging of the whistle and the bell climb once again into the carriage.

The loudspeaker crackles with static, blares out that special soporific female broadcaster's voice. A train pulls into the station. With the puffing of the engine, the step-ladders at the carriage doors are let down with a bang one by one. The passengers boarding and alighting clamour and shout, crowd into one mass.

"It's too noisy here, let's sit inside the car for a while," says Uncle Lin.

I scan the platform, nod abstractedly.

"Who are you still waiting for?"

"No one." I do not know if I am answering him or myself.

We sit in the back seat of the car.

"Old Wu," says Uncle Lin, "you go, I'll drive myself back."

Fat Wu grunts a reply, takes off his gloves, picks up his bag, and carrying his tea-mug and whistling a tune waddles off.

"Xun, I understand your feelings." Uncle Lin breaks the silence.

"Understanding carries no obligation, it does not cost you anything."

"Cost."

I turn my gaze out the window.

"Did you send the family a telegram?"

"No."

"You should have let your mother know in advance."

"There's no need."

"You're too unreasonable."

I turn round. "That's right, it's inherited from you people."

"We're not like that at all."

"That's even sadder."

"Why?"

"You're not qualified to be model bureaucrats."

"Xun, now you're taking liberties."

"I'm sorry, I really don't wish to quarrel with you . . . ."

Suddenly, a familiar figure dashes along the platform, peering in at every window. I throw open the car door. "Xiao Ling . . . ."

She stops, slowly turns round, stands there. I hesitate a moment, then rush over. "I'm late," she says.

"No, Xiao Ling . . . ."

She draws the blue notebook from her bag. "Take it, I promised. Wait till the train goes to read it."

I take the book without a word, clutching it tightly, as if afraid the wind might blow it away.

The loudspeaker rings out: ". . . the train will depart immediately, passengers please board . . . ."

"Xiao Ling, I . . . ."

"Don't say anything, all right?"

We hold one another's gaze silently. She frowns, and on the bridge of her nose several faint lines appear. Whatever it is that dissolves in my mind, the process is so sudden it is far more than I can cope with.

"You'd better board," Uncle Lin says behind me.

I step aside. "May I introduce you; Uncle Lin, Xiao Ling . . . ."

Xiao Ling unaffectedly holds out her hand. "How do you do!"

Uncle Lin wipes his hand awkwardly on his trousers and shakes her hand. "Er, we should have met earlier."

"It's not too late now, is it?"

"No, no, it's not too late."

The bell rings.

I climb onto the carriage steps and hold out my hand to her. "I'll be seeing you."

"What did you say?"

"See you, Xiao Ling."

"Say it once more, please."

"See you, I shall come back!"

She sorrowfully closes her eyes. "See you."

Suddenly, with a clang, the train begins to move. Her chin quivers, she turns away fiercely.

"Xiao Ling—"

She turns, her face white, her expression blank. She raises her arm and her sleeve slides down. That slender arm floats before the crowd, floats before the receding city.

### 10D *Lin Dongping*

MY VISION blurs: green signal-lights, dark clouds dyed red in the evening light, the dim black outlines of buildings and that ribbon of never-dispelled smog all kneaded together.

The girl lowers her arm, and stands there dejectedly.

"Miss Xiao, let me give you a lift."

"Please don't worry."

"It's no trouble. I'll take you back to the factory."

"My contract's already been terminated by the factory."

"What? That's impossible," I stammer. "I'll ring them immediately . . . ."

"Reverse your own decision?" She shakes her head. "I know all about it. But why do you still wish to avoid reality at a time like this? Really, from your angle, you did quite the right thing."

"Young people's emotional ups and downs are temporary. They come and go like waves."

"Have you experienced this temporariness, Uncle Lin?"

"We've undergone many painful experiences."

"So you use these experiences to teach young people a lesson, to tell them that they too are doomed to failure, isn't that so?"

"I don't want to see tragedy re-enacted."

"Tragedy can never be re-enacted. Only certain tragic roles are re-enacted. They believe themselves justified within the tragedy."

"Are you referring to me?"

"Then you believe in this kind of justification?"

"Xiao Ling, I have both of your interests at heart."

"When we were small and went to the pictures, adults always told us the difference between good

and bad. But today, I don't know what meaning such words still have?"

I look at my watch.

"I'm sorry, I've delayed you," she says.

"Not at all, I like to chat like this. And now, what do you plan to do?"

"Go back to the village."

"I can arrange other work for you."

"Thank you, your kind of charity is the very last thing I want to accept."

"You're too obstinate."

"We must act out our own roles to the end."

"You believe in your justification too?"

"Yes, I believe the world won't go on like this for ever. Perhaps that's the difference between us."

"You're still young."

She gives a little smile. "So this world seems too old. Goodbye, Uncle Lin."

"Goodbye."

She walks towards the exit, the wind wrapping her clothes tightly round her, blowing her hair. She vanishes into the twilight haze.

What have I gone and done? So the girl's been sacked from the factory; how will she manage now, I wonder? But why should I be held responsible? I'm only responsible for my son; surely that's right. And even if I were to accept any responsibility for her, this was a factory matter. I said nothing, I didn't even drop a hint. No, it's not my responsibility. Where's she going now, I wonder? She won't go and commit suicide, will she? No, it's not my responsibility. These young people, it's so hard to know what's in their minds, what they're thinking, what direction they're going in . . . .

*Lin Dongping leaves the station in his car, and is hailed by Su Yumei, the woman from his department who is always flirting with him. He picks her up, a thunderstorm breaks, and he begins to drive madly.*

Before that thin weak girl I appear so hypocritical and immoral; how did all this begin? And in the instant she disappeared, why did I feel she was so like Ruohong, Ruohong when she was young, especially that reproachful gaze. These waves of emotion may only be temporary, but their aftermath is too devastating to contemplate. That line of scratch marks on Chen Zijian's cheek.

Our underground Party district secretary, why do I always think of him? There was something unforgettable about his appearance; yet it wasn't his appearance, it was his words that drove like nails into my mind: "How dare you have such an improper relationship with Comrade Ruohong? Her husband is a commander in one of the liberated areas . . . . The Party has decided to put you on good behaviour. You are to leave here immediately . . . ." One's memories are sometimes frighteningly clear. In the clump of trees by the riverside a boy appeared suddenly, carrying a tattered sack, a branch in his hand, his surprised face betraying a sly smile. From behind, the moonlight shone on a patch on his shoulder, covered all over with stitches. In fact I hadn't seen his face clearly, it was only from the flash of his white teeth that I felt he smiled, the smile of a child who has spied out a secret for the first time. He guessed what we were doing in this quiet, secluded place. By that time, Ruohong had already got dressed and was leaning very close to me, sobbing soundlessly. Yes, that was our last parting. Although seven years later we met again in Peking, it wasn't the old Ruohong at all, and Xun had grown tall too . . . .

"Stop! Stop!" cries a voice.

With a whoosh, a little tree scrapes the body of the car and flies past. Only then do I discover that the car has just left the road and is bumping violently along a ditch in the fields, the speedometer needle jumping back and forth. I slam on the brake, the car shudders, comes to a halt. What a narrow scrape! There's a deep canal in front of us.

"Have you gone mad!" Su Yumei, her eyes wide and her fists clenched, looks as if she might pounce on me at any moment. "Back the car up!"

The wheels spin in mid-air. At last we manage to reverse, clods of earth are flung up and fall into the waters of the invisible canal. The car slews round, and turns onto the road.

It has stopped raining, and the street is deserted. Under the dim streetlights, a few boys are playing barefoot in the water. They chase after the car for a while, shouting out in queer voices.

"Take me home," says Miss Su, still full of indignation.

"Where do you live?"

"75 Renmin East Road."



Where do I seem to have seen that address before? The workers and staff register, the trade union register . . . I can't remember.

She nudges me with her elbow. "This is it, just at the little gate ahead." The car stops. She breathes a sigh of relief, smooths her hair. "Do come in for a while."

"It's not too late?"

Without a word, she opens the door and jumps out of the car. I hesitate a moment, lock the car. As I get out, I step in a puddle and my shoe fills with water. The lights are out in the courtyard. She pulls a bunch of keys out of her handbag and walks ahead.

"Where have you been?" Suddenly a figure emerges from under the eaves.

"Oh! You gave me a fright." Miss Su takes a step backwards. "I thought you wouldn't come because of the rain."

"Who's that behind you?"

"Oh, I forgot to introduce you. Do meet each other." Miss Su jumps aside, laughing shrilly.

Wang Defa looms close to me, strands of wet hair sticking to his forehead. I shudder and turn back.

### 10E *Xiao Ling*

THE TICKET booth window is shut. A girl with her hair in a bun stands with her back to it, cracking melon seeds and chatting to a young fellow in a red singlet. Her shoulders shake, showing that she is laughing.

I tap on the glass.

The boy points at the window, and the girl turns round. She throws the window open and pulls a face. "What is it?"

"A ticket to Floodwater Valley Village."

"Didn't you see the sign outside?!" she snorts in a huff, banging the window shut.

I look up, the sign says: 'Due to heavy rain, no buses for the next two days.' At the end a squat full stop is drawn, a moist melon seed stuck near it.

In the waiting-room, a few peasants are crowded in a bunch pulling at their pipes, gossiping amongst themselves. Outside the door the rain patters slowly down, like a flapping grey curtain. I walk down the steps and shelter under the

eaves, watching the outlines of the rows of buses in the parking lot. A blinding light flashes behind the buses, lighting up the squares of each window, like a naughty child playing with a torch.

I draw the plastic wallet from my bag, and Jingjing smiles at me sweetly. Suddenly a big teardrop rolls down her face. It's only a splash of rain. I rub it out with my thumb. No, I must go back, go back immediately, even if I have to walk. Oh, my poor child.

Suddenly someone dodges under the eaves, and drops a bag on the ground. There's the rattle of jangling coins. He takes off his coat, wrings it out hard and glances at me. "Hey, what are you gawking at, think I'm a performing monkey?"

I say nothing.

"What's up, sister?"

"Bai Hua . . ."

His mouth falls open in astonishment. He moves closer, dropping his screwed-up coat on the ground like a wet stick.

"What, you don't recognize me?" I ask.

"Xiao Ling, you're a real tease. You here alone?"

"Yes, alone."

"Keeping out of the rain?"

"And the wind, and the thunder."

"Huh, this filthy weather."

"You don't like it?"

"That's how it is in this business: lights out, pitch black, the wind blows and the rain pelts down. It's not a matter of liking it or not."

"Do you like the sunshine?"

"No, we can do without it, it gives you a headache."

"Do you like wind?"

"It's not bad, except in the middle of the winter; otherwise it slides along nicely, nice and easy."

"Do you like this city?"

"You've hit the nail on the head. I'm just about to leave this devilish place where pigs don't eat and dogs don't drink."

"Where are you going?"

"Nowhere particular. The world's a big place."

It's true, it's so large, one person's sorrow and unhappiness count as nothing.

He pulls out his pocket-watch, and taps the face. "Time's up."

"O.K., goodbye."

Bai Hua contemplates me in silence. Suddenly he catches hold of my hands tightly.

"Not so hard, Bai Hua, are you mad?"

"Let me say something."

"All right, say it."

"Xiao Ling, in this life I've met a lot of women, but I've never met one like you . . . say one word, do you like me?"

I think for a while. "It's like what you said about liking the wind: not bad except in the middle of the winter . . ."

"But it's summer now."

"Don't you feel coldness in your heart?"

He swallows, as if he has something more to say. But then he lets go my hands, picks up his bag and coat, turns and staggers away, his shadow lengthening under the lights.

A bat cries sharply, wheeling in the air. The rain stops, I too must be on my way.

paving, climb the stairs. It is very quiet along the verandah, a faint radiance cast by the wall-lamp.

Before Yuanyuan's bedroom door I pause, listening, then knock. "Are you asleep, Yuanyuan?"

No sound. I turn the knob, switch on the light, the bed is empty. The room is in a jumble, the drawers of the chest-of-drawers half-open, a pair of trousers hanging out. On the desk a teacup holds a note in place: "Papa, I've gone away. I may never come back!"

#### 11D *Lin Yuanyuan*

THE STONES crunch underfoot. To the side the goods carriages stand like headless, tail-less tin cans.

## XI

#### 11A *Yang Xun*

I CLOSE THE BLUE notebook, light a cigarette. The trickles of rain on the windowpane draw fine, haphazard lines. Lights float in the distance. Clumps of bushes by the side of the track catch the light from the window, flash, and are gone.

I blow a thick stream of smoke onto the windowpane, open the book again, and go on reading.

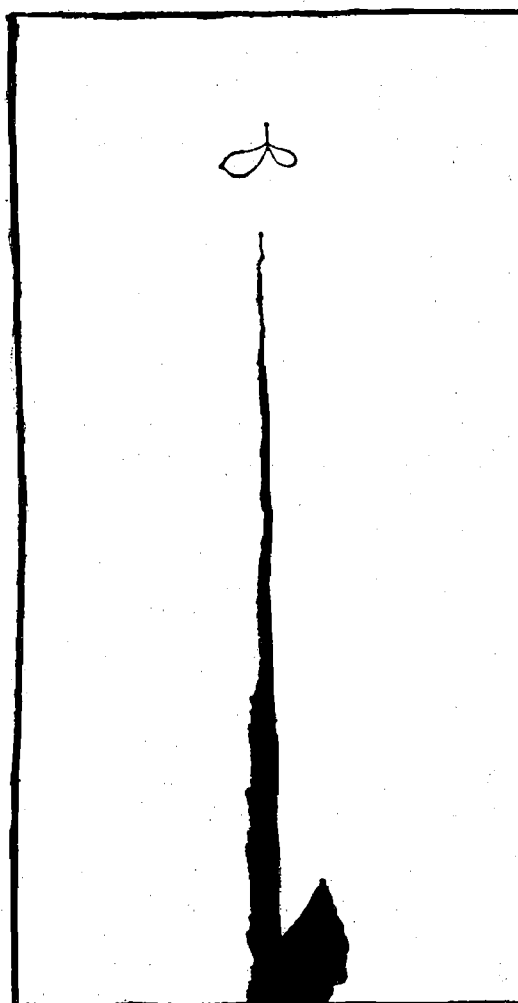
#### 11B *Xiao Ling*

ON THE LEFT is a drop of unfathomable depth. The trees beside it rustle in the rain, the branches rock gently. The lights of the distant city are already hidden by the mountains.

The road, the road.

#### 11C *Lin Dongping*

I WALK OUT of the garage, following the crazy



"When did you leave home?"

"I've never had a home," Bai Hua says.

"So how were you born?"

"Stop jabbering!"

"Why so fierce? Huh, I was just asking."

He stops at an open carriage. "Get up."

I climb up with difficulty. Hey, how warm it is. There are still piles of hay in the corners. I peel off my plastic raincoat. "Do we sleep here?"

"Breathe another word, and I'll throttle you!"

#### 11E *Yang Xun*

I CLOSE the book, pick up my bag and walk to the compartment door. The buffers screech loudly and the train comes to a halt at a little station. I climb down the steps, out into the cool breeze, and approach the lit-up duty-office. In the doorway stands a middle-aged man, all skin and bone.

"When does the next southbound train go through here?" I ask.

"In forty minutes."

#### 11F *Xiao Ling*

A SERIES OF strange rumblings rolls out. I still haven't realized what has happened when the roaring mountain torrent surges over everything. I put out my hand to clutch at a sapling by the edge of the road, tumbling rocks thunder past, strike my ankle and leg, arrows of intense pain.

Suddenly the mud under my feet gives way. My body twists, and falls . . . .

#### 11G *Bai Hua*

WITH A CLANK, the body of the train shudders. A moment later, a long blast of the whistle.

"Get down!" I say.

"Me?"

"Go home, go back to your father's."

"What, what's the idea, cheating me like this?" she says, biting her lip.

"Get down!" I force her to the door.

"Bastard!" she finishes, turns and jumps down.

The train slowly starts to move.

#### 11H *Yang Xun*

I GET OUT of the carriage. The hammers of the train maintenance crew ring out, all the louder on this rainy night. The mercury-vapour lamps are netted by the sheets of rain, transformed into dim haloes.

By the gate at the barrier, the old ticket collector yawns, his rubber raincoat glistening.

#### 11I *Xiao Ling*

I AWAKEN, a little blade of grass lightly brushing my cheek. A dense fog floats across the steep cliffs above my head. Then the sky clears, and the moon rises.

Suddenly, a girl the image of me drifts forward, and vanishes in the tide of golden light . . . .

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