

林海音：城南舊事——惠安館

Memories of Old Peking: Huian Court

By Lin Haiyin

Translated by Cathy Poon

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The author at the age of six

Translator's Introduction

Lin Haiyin 林海音, whose given name is Hanying 含英, or Yingzi as she calls herself in *Chengnan jiushi (Memories of Old Peking)*, was born in 1919 in Osaka where her father was a businessman. When she was three, the Lin family returned to their ancestral home in Taiwan. Two years later, the family moved again, this time to Peking, or Peiping as it was called then, where Lin Haiyin spent the next quarter of a century. After graduating from a local privately-run journalism school, she worked as a journalist and editor until 1948 when she left the mainland and returned to Taiwan with husband and children. There, she continued her writing career, launched her own magazine *Chun wenxue* 純文學, and became the mentor of many fledgling writers.

Memories of Old Peking, written in Taipei in 1959, is Lin Haiyin's reminiscences of her life in old Peking, where people lived in compounds with a big courtyard in the middle and fetched water from communal wells, and where those who could not afford to go to theatres went to see performances given by semi-professionals in the streets. For Lin Haiyin Peking is like a second home. *Memories of Old Peking* is a fictionalized account of Lin's life between the age of six and twelve. "Huian Court", the first episode of the book, takes place when Yingzi is about six.

I

THE SUN filtered through the big glass windows—it shone on the white wallpaper, on the three-drawer desk, and then on my little bed. I was awake, but still lay in bed, watching the countless tiny specks of dust dancing in the beam of sunshine. Nanny Song came over. She dusted the window-sill, then the desk. With the whisking of the duster, more dust appeared in the sunlight, and the specks seemed to hover and dance around like mad. I quickly pulled the quilt up to hide my face in case the dust choked me.

Soon Nanny Song and her duster came over to my little bed. She dusted each and every corner of it, her duster making tapping sounds as the handle hit the bed rails. I was going to complain, but she spoke first.

“Haven’t you slept enough?” she said, pulling away my quilt. My whole body, wrapped in woollen pyjamas, was exposed. Right away I sneezed twice. She forced me to get up and dressed me. The cotton-padded top and pants were new and made of printed twill. The pants looked so funny. They could stand by themselves, so you can imagine how thick the padding was.

Mum was combing her hair by the side of the stove. She was leaning over and her mass of hair was swept forward, flowing down from the nape of her neck, and she was combing it with a fine-tooth comb. On the stove sat a bottle of rose-coloured hair oil which had gone hard because of the cold weather and had to be melted before use.

Outside, it was very bright, and a few little birds were sitting on the bare branches, braving the cold. I wondered: When would the tree be covered with leaves? You see, this was our first winter in Peking.

Mum was still unable to speak the Peking dialect properly. She was telling Nanny Song what to buy in the market. Mum could not say “Go and buy a catty of pork, and make sure it’s not too fatty.” She said “Go and buy a catty of bork, and make sure it’s not too vatty.”

She had already finished combing her hair and, wiping her oily hands on my hair, she went on to do my braids. Seeing that Nanny Song was holding her basket and was ready to go out, I called after her.

“Nanny Song, I want to go to the market with you.”

“Aren’t you afraid of the mad woman at Huinan Court?” she asked.

Nanny Song came from Shunyi County, and she couldn’t speak the Peking dialect properly either. She called the place “Huinan Court”; Mum called it “Huiwa Court”; and Dad called it “Feian Court”. I called it “Huian Court” just like the other children in the alley. But I had no idea which was right.

Why should I be afraid of the mad woman at Huian Court? She even smiled at me yesterday. Her smile was so sweet. I would have walked up and talked to her if Mum had not grabbed me tightly by the hand.

Huian Court was the first building in our alley. Three stone steps led up to a doorway with big doors painted black. Across the doorway was a horizontal signboard. When we were passing by Dad had taught me that the words on the board read “Feian Court”. Dad said that the people living there were students from a place called “Feian” and, like my uncle, were studying in university.

“Also in Peking University?” I had asked.

“Well, there are quite a few universities in Peking. Apart from Peking University, there’s also Qinghua, and Yanjing University.”

“Can I go to Feian, no, Huian Court to play with the uncles there?”

“No, you can’t!” Dad had said, switching to his native Hakka dialect. Whatever my request, Dad always used these Hakka words to say no. I’d been thinking then that one of these days I would walk up those three stone steps and through those black doors.

I’d seen the mad woman at Huian Court several times now. Whenever they saw her standing in the doorway, Nanny Song or Mum would give my hand a quick squeeze and whisper “The mad woman!” and we would hurry past, almost brushing against the wall on the far side. If I turned my head to look, they would stop me by tugging my arm. Actually the mad woman was just a girl who had a shiny, thick plait, like the Zhang or Li girls. She was always leaning against the doorway watching the passers-by.

The day before, I had gone with Mum to

Fozhaolou Store on Luomashi Street to buy some things. Mum needed some face-powder cakes. And me, well, I went because I loved their preserved plums. On our way back from Luomashi Street, we passed through Weiran Alley, then along Xicaochang Street to the well in Chunshu Alley, which stood opposite the alley in which we lived. When we turned into our alley, I saw the mad woman of Huian Court. She was wearing a purplish padded jacket and black flannel padded shoes. She had a fringe and her braid was tied with a piece of bright red yarn. This big braid was swung to the front and she was playing with its tip, but her eyes were fixed on the old acacia tree in the courtyard opposite. There were a few crows on the bare branches of the tree, but no one other than us in the alley.

Mum was walking with her head down and talking to herself. I was quite sure she was counting how much money she had spent that day so that she could account for it to Dad, who concerned himself with everything. Thus she did not realize that we had reached "Huiwa Court". I was walking behind her, and as I kept staring at the mad woman, I simply forgot to move. Just at that moment, the mad woman lowered her eyes from the tree and saw me. As she gazed at my face, she appeared to be searching for something. Her face was pale, almost bluish, and the tip of her nose

was red, probably bitten by the cold wind. She had a pointed chin, and her thin lips pressed tightly against each other. Suddenly her lips moved. Blinking twice, she smiled, and seemed to be about to say something. She stopped playing with her braid and held her hand out towards me, beckoning me over, I thought. Suddenly a quiver went through my whole body. I made a move towards her outstretched hand and smiling face—but, at that moment, Mum turned and gave me a shove.

"What's wrong with you?"

"Uh?" I was a little confused.

"Why are you quivering?" Mum glanced at the mad woman and asked: "Are you afraid—do you want to weewee? Come on," she said, tugging on my hand.

We got home, but my mind was still on the mad woman. Wasn't her smile sweet? I thought to myself: What if I said "Hi" to her? What would she do? I didn't feel like having dinner. Actually I'd eaten too many preserved plums. But after dinner, Mum said to Nanny Song, "Yingzi must have suffered a shock." She then prepared some sugar water, made me drink it, and ordered me off to bed

By this time my braids were done, and I followed Nanny Song to the market. She walked in front and I tagged along. Her disgusting black

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Yingzi is led away by Nanny Song as Xiuzhen looks on.*

*Film stills from "My Memories of Old Peking" courtesy of Shanghai Film Studios.

padded pants looked so thick, so bulky, with the cuffs tied to her ankles. Mum had been told that maid-servants in Peking always stole things. They would steal rice and handful by handful, slip it past their trouser waist and let it drop down into their trousers. As the cuffs were tied around their ankles, the rice wouldn't fall out. I wondered if there was any of our family's rice down Nanny Song's bulky trouser legs.

As we walked past Huian Court, I peeped inside. The black doors were flung wide open. In the doorway, I saw a coal stove and the mad woman's mum and dad were leaning over it, cooking something. Everyone called the mad woman's dad "Old Wang the Caretaker". He was the doorkeeper of Huian Court, and he and his family lived in a room fronting the alley. I knew Nanny Song loved to watch and gossip about the mad woman, even though she didn't allow me to do so. At that moment, she was also looking in the direction of Huian Court. The mad woman's mum looked up, and she and Nanny Song said in unison: "Have you eaten yet?" Dad said people in Peking idle around all day and when they meet somebody, regardless of the time of day, always ask if they've eaten or not.

A little to the south of the alley stood the well. There was water all over the place, and patches of thin ice could be seen here and there. Single-wheeled water carts came and went one after another. The carters, their bottoms twisting, pushed their creaking carts. What a terrible sound! I really had to put my hands over my ears! Two men were drawing water from the deep well and pouring it into a big trough from where the carters drew it for delivery. Next to the well lived a friend of mine—Niur, who was just as big as me! I stopped next to the well and said to Nanny Song. "Nanny, you go to the market. I'll wait here for Niur."

I first met Niur at the grocer's. That day, she was holding two bowls in her hands, having just paid a copper coin for some sauce, vinegar and spring onions. The shopkeepers teased her, saying, "Niur, sing us a song or we won't let you go." Niur had tears in her eyes, and her hands were shaking so much the vinegar almost spilled. I was so angry that I darted to Niur's side and, putting my hands on my hips, demanded of them:

"Who do you think you are?"

That was how I came to know Niur.

Niur wore only a single pigtail, brownish and short, like the tail of the puppy Mum had bought me at the Temple of the Earth God. The second time I saw her, I was at the well watching people fetch water. She came over and quietly stood next to me. We looked at each other and smiled, not knowing what to say. After a moment, I couldn't resist touching her tiny, brown pigtail. Again she smiled.

"Do you live in that alley?" she asked in a low voice, pointing behind us.

"Uh-huh."

"What number?"

I held out my hand and started counting with my fingers. "One, two, three, four. Number four. Let's go back to my house and play."

Shaking her head she said, "There's a mad woman in your alley. Mum told me not to go near her."

"What are you afraid of? She's not going to eat you."

She shook her head, still smiling.

Every time Niur smiled, dimples appeared under her eyes right beside her nose. They looked lovely. But Nanny Song had said to the shopkeeper:

"The girl's pretty, one must admit, but she has a fragile, ill-fated look about her. The eyes are too bright, too watery. Look, there are two tear dimples under her eyes."

But I liked her so much. I liked her for being so sweet and gentle, quite unlike me. Every time I got irritable, Nanny Song would scold me: "Flying into a rage again, you little terror?" That day, after standing with me for a while at the well, Niur whispered. "I have to go. Dad's waiting for me. I have to do my voice practice. See you!"

I had met Niur several times by the side of the well and was so happy every time I saw her sneaking over in her red padded pants. That day, I waited and waited but she didn't show up. I was very disappointed, as in the pocket of my woollen jacket I had a packet of preserved plums which I had been saving for her. They sat there, warm and sticky, because the wrapping paper was torn. I knew I would get a good scolding from Nanny Song when she did the washing.

Feeling dejected, I headed for home. I was thinking that if I'd seen Niur today, I would have told her about my good idea that if we walked home through the side-lane, we could bypass Huian Court and avoid seeing the mad woman.

I walked with my head down, thinking, until I found myself at the front door of Huian Court. "Hi!"

I got such a start. It was the mad woman. Biting her lower lip, she smiled at me. Her eyes were so bright. And, beneath her smiling eyes—why, there were two tear dimples like Nanny Song had described! I wanted to take a better look at her, something I had meant to do for a long time. Drawn by her eyes, I walked up the steps. The sun was shining on her face and her usual paleness had given way to a glow. Extending her hands from under her padded jacket, she took mine. Her hands were so warm, so soft. I looked back towards the alley. No one was passing. How strange it was that at this moment I was not afraid of the mad woman, but of being seen holding her hands.

"How old are you?" she asked.

"Um—six."

"Six!" she exclaimed. She lowered her head and then suddenly pulled up my braids and looked at my neck, as if searching for something. "No," she murmured to herself.

"Have you seen my baby Guizi?" she asked.

"Guizi?" I didn't know who she meant.

At that moment, her mother came out. Frowning and looking rather worried, she said, "Xiuzhen, don't scare the little girl." Turning to me, her mother said, "Don't listen to her. She's just talking nonsense. Go home. Your mum will be worried. Do you hear me?" She waved me away as she spoke.

I lifted my head and looked at the mad woman. So her name was Xiuzhen. She was holding my hands and rocking them gently, and didn't let go. Encouraged by her smile, I said to the older woman, "No!"

"You little southern savage!" said Xiuzhen's mum, smiling and lightly pointing a finger at my temple. These must be swear words, like "those little northern bastards" which Dad often said to Mum in a tone of contempt.

"I don't mind your playing here. But when your folks come to fetch you, don't blame my

girl for keeping you."

"I won't!" Why did she have to tell me that? I knew well enough what I should and shouldn't say. Mum had bought herself a gold bracelet and had it hidden in a little jewellery box, and I never said anything about it to Dad.

"Come!" Xiuzhen led me by the hand and we walked through the doorway. I was thinking that perhaps we were going to the courtyard way in the back to play with those uncles who were attending university. It turned out that she was taking me to the caretaker's quarters where they lived.

The room was not as bright as ours. It had one small glass window and next to it a *kang*.¹ A small table sat in the middle of the *kang*, with some needlework and a needlework box on it. Xiuzhen picked up an unfinished piece of clothing from the table and held it against me to see if it fitted. Then she said happily to her mum who had just walked in, "Mum, look, what did I say—it fits! Now we can see about the neckline." As she was talking, she picked up a piece of string and put it around my neck to measure me. I didn't care what she was doing to me. My attention was taken by the picture on the wall. It was a pinkish, chubby baby with no clothes on, holding a big piece of gold, and riding on the back of a big red fish.

Xiuzhen came round to face me. Seeing me looking up, she followed my eyes and looked at the picture too.

"You may stand on the *kang* if you wish," she said matter-of-factly. "See how chubby our baby Guizi was. And only eight months old then. Riding on the big goldfish, she played all over the house and never ate a thing. She was so naugh—."

"Enough, enough! Shame on you!" Old Wang the Caretaker had just come in, and he gave Xiuzhen an impatient glare as he interrupted her. I had been listening to her cheerful chatter in bewilderment. Ignoring her dad, Xiuzhen took off my shoes and helped me up onto the *kang* next to the picture.

"She never bothered to eat, or get dressed, and often went out just like that," she continued. "She

¹A *kang* is a brick bed warmed by a fire underneath.

was always in such a hurry to find her dad. I told her so many times, she just wouldn't listen. I said wait till I've made you a few more clothes. This year I've finished making the under-gown, and the vest will be ready as soon as I sew the buttons on. This padded jacket will also be finished after I cut out the neckline. Why was she in such a hurry? It's really puzzling. I wonder what—." She broke off, and sat transfixed with her head down, thinking about the "puzzling" matter. I thought: Is she playing house with me? Hadn't her mum said she was talking nonsense? If we're going to play house, I have what we need—a little watch, a little abacus, a little bell, and we can share them.

"It doesn't matter," I said. "I'll give Guizi my watch. If she has a watch, she'll come home on time." But it suddenly occurred to me that Mum might send Nanny Song for me, so I added, "And me too, I must go home now."

When I told her I was leaving, Xiuzhen came out of her daze. She came down from the *kang* with me and said, "Why, that's nice. Thank you. If you see my baby, tell her to come home. It's cold outside. Say I won't scold her, so there's no need to be scared."

I nodded and promised that I would, as if there really was such a person as Guizi and as if I knew her.

As I walked home I thought to myself: It's fun playing with Xiuzhen, pretending there's a Guizi and even making clothes for her. Why do so many people stop their children from playing with her? And why do they call her a mad woman? As I thought about it, I turned and looked back. There she was, leaning against the wall, looking at me. Overjoyed, I hopped and skipped all the way home.

Nanny Song was striking a deal with the old rag-and-bone woman, exchanging all kinds of junk for matches. Under the eaves was a row of baskets full of waste paper, old shoes, and empty bottles.

Back in my room, I headed straight to the bedside table and took out the watch. It was a small, round gold watch studded with sparkling diamonds. The hands no longer moved. Mum had said it needed repairing, but had done nothing about it. I liked this watch very much and often wore it for fun, so it had become mine. I was playing with it in front of the three-drawer desk and over-

heard Nanny Song and the old woman talking outside the window. I listened more closely and heard Nanny Song say, "And what happened after that?"

"After that," the old rag-and-bone woman said, "the student left and has not been back since! Before leaving, he promised to return within a month and marry her properly after selling his house and land back home. Poor thing! So she waited for six years. Such a pretty girl—I've watched her slowly going mad before my very eyes . . ."

"And what else did I hear—that she later gave birth to a child?"

"Yes! When the student left, her mother didn't know she was pregnant. When it became quite obvious, they hurriedly sent her back to the public ground at Haidian to give birth to the baby."

"Public ground?"

"Well, it's the public burial ground of the Huian folks. When people from Huian die in Peking, they're buried there. The Wang family used to tend the graves there. They'd done that since the time of her grandfather. Her father was later sent here to be the caretaker. Who would have thought such a thing would happen!"

"They sure have strong ties with Huinan. How far is Huinan from here? How come he never returned?"

"Oh, it's far enough away!"

"What happened to the baby?"

"Well, they had the baby wrapped up as soon as it was born and left it outside the Qihua Gate before daybreak. It was either eaten by wild dogs or picked up by someone."

"And the girl went mad after that?"

"Sure enough, she went mad right then and there. How sad it was for her mum and dad! She's her parents' only child."

They were silent after this. By this time I'd gone to the door to listen to their conversation. Nanny Song was counting the number of boxes of Phoenix-brand red-tipped matches while the old woman, nose running, busily packed the waste paper into her big basket.

"Bring some hair gel² around next time. Eh—"

² A traditional hair gel made from wood shavings.

are you from the same district as them?" Nanny Song asked.

"Oh yes, we're relatives! The third daughter of my paternal auntie's brother is the mad woman's paternal aunt, and she's still tending the graves. Would my relatives have lied to me?"

Then Nanny Song caught sight of me.

"Snooping again, are you?"

"I know who you're talking about," I said.

"Who?"

"Guizi's mum."

"Guizi's mum?" Nanny Song burst out laughing. "You've gone cuckoo, too, huh? Who's Guizi's mum?"

I giggled, because I knew who Guizi's mum was.

II

The days had become much warmer and the padded jackets had long been packed away. In the mornings and evenings when it was still a bit cool, I would put on a sleeveless jacket, thinly padded, light and soft. That day, I was wearing a new pair of cloth shoes which had pieces of black leather sewn on the toes.

"What a sturdy pair of shoes!" Old Mrs Wang—Xiuzhen's mum—said when she saw my new shoes. "They'll still be in good shape after our threshold gets worn down by your kicking."

I was now a frequent visitor to Huian Court. As one door was always open, I could sneak in at any time. I say sneak because I always came secretly without letting my family know. All they knew was that I often went with Nanny Song to the market and stopped at the well to call on Niur. As soon as Nanny Song entered the grocer's, I would turn and run back to Huian Court.

That day, I had gone to Huian Court but didn't find Xiuzhen in her room. On the small table on her *kang*, I saw a big glass bowl with some tiny goldfish swimming inside.

"Where's Xiuzhen?" I asked Mrs Wang.

"In the side yard."

"I'll go over there then."

"Don't bother. She'll be back soon. Why don't you wait here and watch the goldfish?"

I pressed the tip of my nose against the bowl

and looked in. The goldfish were opening and closing their mouths and drinking as they swam about. Without thinking, I also began opening and closing my mouth like a fish drinking. Sometimes a fish would swim right towards me and, with only a piece of glass between us, I rubbed noses with it. I watched them in this way, kneeling on the edge of the *kang* until my legs went numb, yet Xiuzhen still hadn't come back.

I changed to a sitting position and waited a little longer, but still no Xiuzhen. I was getting impatient, so I slipped out of the room and headed for the side yard to look for her. It seemed that the side yard was always closed off and I had never seen anyone go inside. Gently I pushed the door open and walked in. In the small courtyard was a tree—I don't know the name—with little green leaves on it. Some dry leaves were rotting in the corners of the yard. It seemed that Xiuzhen had been sweeping the place, but when I walked in, she was leaning against the tree holding the broom in one hand and lifting the front of her jacket and wiping her eyes with the other. Quietly I went closer and looked up at her. She probably saw me, but paid no attention. Suddenly she turned and, resting her face on her arm against the tree, started crying.

"Guizi, my baby, don't you love your mummy any more?"

How sad and hurt she sounded! Still sobbing, she continued. "How can you find your way without me? It's such a long way."

Mum once told me that we had come from our native village very, very far away. It was an island completely surrounded by water, and we had to take a big steamer and then ride a long train to get to Peking. I'd asked Mum when we would go back, but she'd said it was too early to talk about it. It was a difficult trip, so we would spend a few more years here. Was Xiuzhen talking about somewhere as far away as our island? How could Guizi get there by herself? I felt sorry for Xiuzhen and, thinking about the girl I had never met, also started to cry. Through the haze of tears, I could make out that chubby baby riding on a big goldfish—she really had nothing on!

Dewy-eyed, I took a deep breath in an effort to stop crying. Tugging at her trouser leg, I murmured her name. "Xiuzhen! Xiuzhen!"

She stopped crying. Her cheeks all wet with tears, she knelt down and hugged me, burying her face in my chest and rubbing it against my soft jacket to dry her tears. Then she looked up and smiled at me. As I put out my hand to straighten her ruffled fringe, I had to say, "I like you, Xiuzhen."

Xiuzhen didn't reply but, sniffing, rose to her feet. As it had turned quite warm, she wasn't wearing her padded pants with the cuffs tied around the ankles any more, but a pair of loose-cuffed pants instead. She had such skinny legs. That was why her pants fluttered so much in the wind. In fact, she was skinny all over. When she knelt down and leaned against me just then, I saw her back and noticed that she was as thin as a piece of cardboard.

"Let's go inside," Xiuzhen said as she took my hand. "You can give me a hand cleaning up."

The house in the side yard had only two small rooms. The door opened with a squeak. It was a very unpleasant sound that made my heart feel as if it were being pricked by a thorn. After the sun, it felt unusually cool walking into this gloomy, shaded room. In the outer room, the desk, chair, and bookshelf were tidy but covered with dust. I thought that I should ask Nanny Song to come and give it a good dusting. That'd sure send the dust dancing all over the place. Dad often said to Mum: Why doesn't Nanny Song use a piece of wet cloth instead of whisking her duster around the way she does? Won't the dust just settle back where it came from? But Mum had always pleaded with Dad not to say any more, because that was the way people in Peking did things.

I walked over to the inner room and found it even smaller. A bed and a side-table were all it contained. On the bed sat a leather suitcase. Xiuzhen opened it and took out a big padded gown. It was a man's gown, just like the one Dad had. Hugging the gown to her chest, she murmured to herself, "Looks like the padding needs turning and another layer added."

She took the gown out to the yard for airing. I followed her out, and as she walked back to the house, I followed closely on her heels. She asked me to give her a hand carrying the suitcase out to the yard so it could get some sun. Inside it, there were only a pair of gloves, a hat and some

worn underwear. She carefully spread out these few items, and picking up a short striped gown, she said, "Looks like this gown's only fit to be used as a lining for Guizi's short jacket."

"You're right," I said, showing her the lining of my jacket. "This was made from my dad's old gown, too."

"So you also used your dad's! How did you know this belonged to Guizi's dad?" Xiuzhen asked with wide smiling eyes. She seemed very happy, and this made me happy too. But how did I know the gown belonged to Guizi's dad? I couldn't answer her. I only smiled, head tilted to one side.

"Come on, tell me!" she said teasingly as she tickled my chin.

We were still kneeling by the side of the suitcase. I could see her face clearly, her fringe blown to one side by the wind. She looked like someone else I knew, but I couldn't work out who.

"I only guessed," I said. Then, changing to a whisper, I asked, "What should I call Guizi's dad?"

"Uncle, of course."

"But I already have an uncle."

"As if you can have too many uncles! Just call him Uncle Sikang. He's the third child in his family, so you may also call him Third Uncle."

"Third Uncle Sikang?" I mumbled. "When's he coming back?"

"Oh, him," said Xiuzhen, suddenly rising. She paused to think, her eyebrows closely knitted and her head tilted to one side. After quite a while, she continued. "Very soon—he's been gone for over a month now."

As she said this, she walked back to the house. I followed her in, helped her with this and that, and then followed her out, carrying things here and there. I was happy being kept so busy following her around like this. Her face was flushed, and the sides of her nose were smeared with dirt. Tiny beads of sweat formed on the tip of her nose and just above her upper lip. Her face looked very nice like this.

Xiuzhen used her sleeve to wipe the sweat off her nose. "Yingzi," she said, "do you think you can fetch me a basin of water? The house needs cleaning."

"Sure," I said eagerly.

The house in the side yard was parallel with the

caretaker's room, but it had an extra door. The water vat and basin were under the eaves of the caretaker's room. I removed the cover of the vat and was scooping up water ladleful by ladleful into the basin when I overheard someone talking to Xiuzhen's mum inside the room.

"How's she doing these days?"

"Please, let's not talk about it. She's been having her fits again lately. It happens around springtime every year. The last couple of days she's been having crying and laughing spells. What shall I do with her! It's really—."

"Yes, people suffering from this do get worse in spring."

I carried the basin back, water spilling and splashing as I walked, until I was wet all over. There was very little water left in it when I got back to the side yard. I was putting the basin on the chair when suddenly the delicious smell of cooking wafted in from somewhere. Sniffing, I remembered something I had to do.

"I have to go home now," I said to Xiuzhen.

Xiuzhen didn't hear me. She was busy fumbling in the drawer for something.

I remembered that I had to go and wait for Niur at the side lane after lunch. We had decided this the day before.

My pants, wet and cold, clung to my legs. The moment I entered the house, Mum scolded me, "So you've spent all morning playing at the well, have you? And I thought you'd fallen in! Look at you, you're all wet!" Mum helped me change as she continued talking. "We should ask people about a good school here in Peking. It's time she attended school. They say the one run by the Teacher's College at Changdian is quite good."

It was only then that I noticed Dad had come back. I was afraid he might yell at me and give me a good whacking, for he was quite strict. I looked at him, squirmed and waited for the hiding. Luckily he wasn't paying much attention, just sitting there smoking a cigarette and reading the newspaper.

"It's still early. What's the rush?" he replied absently.

"If we don't send her to school, she'll run wild all day. I can't always keep an eye on her."

"Give her a whacking if she's naughty," Dad said in a rather fierce tone. But then he turned and

smiled at me. So, he was only teasing! Then he added, "We'll talk it over when her uncle comes over. Let's leave it to him."

After lunch I went to the side lane to pick up Niur. As it was warm now, we went to play in a room along the western corridor which wasn't being used. It was stacked with broken stoves, stove-pipes, and discarded furniture and bedding. In a broken wicker basket, there were some chicks we had bought not long before. It was such fun playing with their soft, yellowish down. Niur and I squatted there and played with the chicks in the basket. We watched them pecking at some rice. They kept eating and eating. Would they ever stop?

The chicks hadn't eaten their fill, but we'd seen enough. Closing the lid of the basket, we stood up and started to play at something else. We took out two copper coins and strung them together with a fine piece of cord. We used this to play a game called kick-the-coins. With each kick, the coins tinkled against our shoes. When Niur took her turn, she kicked the coins with a twist and a turn of her waist. She looked so pretty doing that.

We had so much fun that afternoon. If Niur didn't have her voice practice, we might have gone on playing forever.

That day, Dad brought home some new writing brushes and ink, and also some special paper for tracing Chinese characters. In the evening, he taught me how to write. First, he asked me to copy the red characters on the sheet:

"One walks for two or three *li*,
To a village with four or five houses,
Stops by six or seven pavilions,
And picks eight, nine or ten sprays of
blossoms."

Dad said, "You must trace one sheet a day, or you won't get into primary school when the summer vacation's over."

In the days that followed, I went to Huian Court to see Xiuzhen in the morning, played with Niur in the western corridor in the afternoon, and traced Chinese characters in the evening.

Short feathers were beginning to grow on the wings of the downy yellow chicks. Niur and I fed them rice, water and vegetables. Nanny Song feared that we were overfeeding them and that

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"I know a song, too."

they would get sick. She also worried that they might be snatched away by wild cats. So she placed a big stone on top of the lid and forbade us to open the basket.

Niur was always humming tunes when she played with me. One day, she was so high-spirited that she began singing, twisting her body, swaying her hips, and moving her hands about.

"O-opening the door-r wi—de,

The—er—re stan—ds Zhan—ng Xi—u Cai
—i."

"What are you singing? Is that voice practice?"

"I'm singing a flower-drum song."

She seemed to be enjoying herself, for she kept on singing softly and swaying her hips as I stood to the side, totally captivated. Suddenly she stopped and said, "Come on, follow me, I'll teach you."

"I know a song, too." Without knowing exactly why, I thought it was my turn to show her what I could do. I'd suddenly remembered a song Dad sang with his friends when they came over for a chat, and which he'd later taught me. Mum had

said it wasn't proper for Dad to teach me such a song.

"Come on, sing it! Let's hear you sing." Niur urged. But I was too bashful. She insisted, so I clumsily started to sing in Hakka:

"What are you thinking of, sweetheart?

At the thought of you, sweetheart, I tingle.

You are my heart, my sweetheart!

I have my sweetheart in my heart . . ."

Before I finished my recital, Niur was laughing herself to tears. I began to laugh, too. Those lines were really tongue-twisters.

"Who taught you this? What's this 'heart and sweetheart, sweetheart and heart' thing? Hey! What country is that song from?"

Hugging each other and laughing, we went on shrieking about hearts and sweethearts even though we had no idea what the words really meant.

We had such a good time talking nonsense, singing and playing as we pleased. The western corridor was our fun world and I thought of it

even in my dreams.

Niur must have enjoyed herself, too. As we finished our games, she would suddenly glance outside and cry out, "Oh, I have to run now." And with that, she would dash out so hastily that she hardly had time to say good-bye.

Then, for several days Niur didn't turn up at the side lane. Greatly disappointed, I had waited and waited. One day, I walked to the well, hoping to find her there, but in vain. It was in the afternoon and the place wasn't quite as busy, because the water carts always came in the morning. At that time of the day, only people living in the neighbourhood would go to the well to buy water, bringing their own metal buckets on push-carts.

I saw Old Wang the Caretaker pushing a cart. After making several rounds, and seeing me still standing there he asked curiously, "Yingzi, why are you standing there looking so lost?"

I didn't say anything. What was on my mind was my own business. I only asked, "Where's Xiuzhen?"

I was thinking that if I couldn't see Niur, I might go to see Xiuzhen. The side yard had already been tidied up. But Old Wang wasn't paying any attention to me. He pushed his cart away after filling up his two buckets.

I was still wondering what to do next when a familiar figure suddenly emerged from Xicaochang Street. It was Niur. I was so glad to see her. I raced over and called after her, "Niur, Niur." But she ignored me, as if she didn't know me, or hadn't heard anyone calling her. I found this very strange, so I followed her. But she silently shooed me away with her hand, frowning and winking. She wanted me to go away. I didn't know what was wrong, but a few steps behind her I saw a tall man in a long blue gown. He was carrying a dirty cloth case with the neck of a *huqin*³ poking out.

I guessed it had to be Niur's dad. She was often saying "Dad's going to beat me," "Dad's going to scold me" and things like that. When I saw him, I understood why she said things like that. So I didn't try to talk to Niur. Turning to walk home, I felt very low. I had a piece of chalk in my pocket with which I could write characters

on brick walls, so I took it out and absent-mindedly scratched it against the walls of houses all the way home. How boring it would be without Niur to play with!

I was about to knock on the door of my own house when I heard the sound of clattering feet in the side lane—it was Niur running up breathlessly. She had a nervous look on her face as she blurted out, "I'll see you tomorrow." Before I could reply, she had disappeared into the side lane again.

The next morning, Niur came over and we went to the western corridor where we squatted together to watch the chicks. We lifted the lid of the basket and dug our hands in to feel their feathers. We just stroked the chicks and neither of us said anything. I was going to say something, but kept quiet. In my heart, I was asking, "Niur, why haven't you come to see me for so many days?" "Niur, is your dad so mean that he hasn't been letting you come here?" "Niur, why didn't you let me talk to you yesterday?" "Niur, you're feeling hurt, aren't you?" I only asked these questions in my heart, not aloud. Yet how strange! She seemed to know what I was asking her and was answering me with her tears! She didn't say anything. She didn't even use her sleeve to wipe away her tears. She just let them splash into the wicker basket, where they mixed with the rice being pecked by the chicks.

I didn't know what to do. Looking at her from the side, I noticed her ear. Her pierced ear-lobe had a piece of red string running through it, and I could see that she hadn't washed her ear properly for there was a ring of dirt around the edge. My eyes moved along her shoulders down her arm. There was a bruise on her wrist that looked black and blue. I reached over and lifted her sleeve to take a better look, but this gave her a start and she pulled away. She then turned and smiled sadly at me. The morning sun was shining into the room and onto her not-so-clean face. As her long wet lashes moved, tears ran down her face past her tear dimples into her mouth.

Suddenly, she stood up, rolled up her sleeves and pants and said quietly, "Look what my dad has done to me."

I was squatting, so when I reached over I could feel the many bruises on her legs. Even my tender

³ A *huqin* is a small two-stringed Chinese violin.

touching made her cry out, but she dared not cry too loudly. She only made soft whimpering sounds. Poor girl!

"Why did your dad beat you?" I asked.

She couldn't answer me and only cried and cried. Then she mumbled, "He wouldn't let me come out and play."

"Was it because you stayed here too long?"

She nodded.

She was beaten because she spent too much time playing with me. I felt sorry and frightened at the same time. As I thought of the tall man, I could only say, "Then you'd better go home quickly."

But she just stood there, not moving.

"He went out early this morning and isn't back yet."

"What about your mum?"

"Mum pinches me sometimes, but she doesn't mind me going out. Dad beats her too. Every time that happens, she pinches me and says it's all my fault."

Niur felt better after her cry and was again chattering with me. I said I'd never met her mum, and she told me that because her mum walked with a slight limp, she stayed on the *kang* all day long mending clothes to make money.

I told Niur that we didn't use to live in Peking, that we had come from an island far away.

"We didn't live here before either," she said.

"We used to live near Qihua Gate."

"Qihua Gate?" I then nodded and said, "I know that place."

"How come?" She sounded rather surprised.

I couldn't remember how I learned about it, but I was sure I knew. I had a feeling that someone had taken me there early one morning, and that I had seen it. But that couldn't have been true. What I'd seen was all blurred. It must have been a dream.

"I've dreamt of it," I answered. "Isn't there a city-wall there? One day, early in the morning, a woman carrying a bundle stole towards the city-wall"

"You're telling me a story, aren't you?"

"Maybe." Then, head tilted, I thought for a while and said, "Anyway, I know about Qihua Gate."

Niur giggled and reached over to hug my neck.

I reached over and did the same to her. When I touched her shoulders, she gave a soft cry, "Ouch! That hurts!"

I let go immediately.

"Even that's swollen from the whacking," she said, frowning.

"How did he do that?"

"With a duster." She paused before continuing, "Dad, and Mum too, they—" She stopped and couldn't go on.

"What have they done?"

"I'd rather not talk about it now. I'll tell you some other time."

"I know, your dad taught you to sing so you could earn money for them." This was what I heard Nanny Song tell Mum, and I blurted it out just like that. "They force you to earn money for them and still they beat you. Who do they think they are!" I said the last part rather indignantly.

"Huh! You sound like you know everything. Didn't I say I was going to tell you about my singing? Do you know what I was going to tell you?"

"What were you going to say then? Come on, tell me!"

"Look, if you're impatient, I won't tell you. If you are nice to me, I've got a million things to tell you. But you must promise not to tell anyone, not even your mum."

"I promise. Let's talk softly."

Niur hesitated for a moment, and then leaned over and whispered into my ear, "I'm not Mum's child. And Dad's not my real dad either."

She said that as quickly as a flash of lightning. The words shook me, and my heart beat wildly. She moved her hands away from my ear and looked at me with wide questioning eyes, as if waiting to hear what I had to say. And I—what did I do? I could only stare back at her in silence.

Although I had promised Niur not to tell her secret to anyone, after she had gone I kept thinking about what she said, and felt more and more worried. So, running in to Mum, I asked rather bewilderedly, "Mum, am I your child?"

"What?" Mum looked at me strangely. "What makes you ask such a question?"

"Just answer me yes or no."

"Yes, of course you are." After a short pause, she continued, "If you weren't my own flesh and

blood, would I love you so much? If you weren't my own daughter, wouldn't I have spanked you raw, naughty as you are, a long time ago?"

I nodded in agreement, for Mum was quite right. Just look at Niur.

"Where did I come from?" I'd meant to ask this a long time ago.

"Where? Um—" She thought for a while and smiled. Holding up her arm, she pointed at her armpit and said, "You dropped from here."

At this both she and Nanny Song burst out laughing.

III

With an empty bottle and a pair of bamboo chopsticks in my hands, I walked quietly into Hui'an Court and pushed open the door leading into the side yard. As I expected, there were many green worms hanging on the acacia in the yard. Xiuzhen said they were called "hanging ghosts". Like Xiuzhen's silkworms, they hung from the tree on silk threads spun from their mouths. One by one I would pick the hanging ghosts off the tree, put them into my bottle and take them home for the chickens. I could fill a bottle each day. The hanging ghosts wriggling in the little bottle looked really sickening. I always felt queasy when I held the bottle, as if the worms were creeping up my arm. They weren't, of course.

Just as I was putting a hanging ghost into the bottle, I thought of Niur and felt rather upset. She was beaten again yesterday. So taking some clothes with her, she stole out of the house and came to see me. As soon as she set foot in our house, she said, "I want to find my real parents." One side of her face was red and swollen from the beating.

"Where are they?"

"I don't know. I'll go to Qihua Gate and start from there."

"Where's Qihua Gate?"

"Didn't you say you knew the place?"

"I said I thought I'd been there in my dreams."

Niur hid her clothes in an empty box in the western corridor. She dried her eyes very purposefully and said, gritting her teeth, "I simply must find my real father."

"Do you have any idea what he looks like?" I truly admired her, but thought she was taking on something too big for her.

"If I keep looking, I'll be able to find them. Deep in my heart I know exactly what they look like."

"Then—" I didn't know what to say. I didn't feel that I could offer her any help.

Before leaving, Niur told me she wasn't sure when she would run away, but that before she did she would come to let me know and to pick up her clothes.

All day long I thought about what Niur had said, and felt rather depressed. At dinner time, I couldn't eat. Mum felt my forehead and said, "Looks like you're running a fever. Better that you don't eat and go to bed early."

When I went to bed, I was still depressed and unwilling to talk. I cried instead. Mum found this strange and asked, "Why are you crying? Does it hurt somewhere?"

For no reason, I tearfully blurted out, "Niur's dad—."

"Niur's dad? What about him? Did he do anything to you?"

Nanny Song came over and said, "That good-for-nothing crook! He must have yelled at our Yingzi—or did he hit you?"

"No!" Suddenly realizing that I'd been talking in riddles, I faked a tantrum and screamed, "I want my dad!"

"Oh, you want your dad! You really frightened us!" Nanny Song and Mum laughed.

"Your father has gone to your uncle's and will be home a bit late," Mum said. "Go to sleep now." Then she turned to Nanny Song and said, "Yingzi has been spoiled by her dad ever since she was a baby. Whenever she's not feeling well, she wants to sleep in her daddy's arms."

"Shame, shame," Nanny Song said as she stroked a finger against my cheek. I ignored her, turning my face to the wall, and closed my eyes.

I had woken up feeling much better, less depressed than the day before. But now, as Niur entered my thoughts, I stopped catching worms again. In a daze, I wondered when Niur was going to leave me.

Leaving the bottle under the tree, I stood up, went over to the window and looked in. Xiuzhen

was sitting on a stool in front of the bed. She had her face to the bed, so all I could see was her thin, cardboard-like back. Her braid was not yet done. She was making gestures with her hands, as if shooshing away flies. But there weren't any flies around! I quietly walked into the house and, standing by the side of the table in the outer room, silently watched what she was doing.

"You went to bed without any dinner last night, right? You'll get sick that way!"

That was strange! How did Xiuzhen know I'd gone to bed without any dinner last night? Leaning against the door-frame of the inner room, I asked, "Who told you that?"

"Uh?" She turned, and, seeing the distressed look on my face, said seriously, "As if I needed to be told! This bowl of congee has hardly been touched!" She was pointing to a bowl and a pair of chopsticks on the bed-side table.

Then I knew Xiuzhen wasn't talking to me. Ever since the days had become warm and the doors leading to the side yard, usually closed, had been opened, Xiuzhen had spent most of her time shuffling between the two rooms, muttering things which I only sometimes understood. At first I thought we were playing house, but eventually I got the feeling that things weren't make-believe. They were all too real.

Xiuzhen stared blankly at the empty bed again. Then she turned and quietly led me out of the room.

"He's asleep now. Let's not disturb him," she whispered. "He must have suffered a lot, being sick like that with no one to take care of him. Poor dear!"

In the outer room, the bowl of goldfish which had been bought in the spring was sitting on the desk. A few of the fish had died, but Xiuzhen still changed the water every day and had put some weeds in the bowl. It was fun watching the red fish winding their way through the green weeds. How did I know that the fish were red and the weeds green? Well, Mum taught me. She said I would soon be interviewed for primary school, and would be asked by teachers about colours, where I lived and how many people there were in my family. Xiuzhen was raising silkworms in a box too. She once told me:

"You'll be going to school soon. Our Guizi

should be starting school, too, I think. I'll breed some silkworms and, with the silk they spin, make an ink-box for her."

Some of the silkworms had already begun to spin silk. Xiuzhen put them on top of a cup covered with paper so that they could spin their silk there. The interesting thing was that the silkworms were so well-behaved—they never crept down from the cup. But many of the silkworms were still nibbling mulberry leaves.

Xiuzhen was cleaning away the silkworm poo, putting the little pieces one by one into a metal tin. She'd saved quite a lot of it and was going to use it to stuff a small pillow for Third Uncle Sikang. She said he needed to take good care of his eyes since he read books every day. Silkworm poo is good for the eyes.

Standing by her side, I quietly watched the bowl of fish and the silkworms spinning silk. The tree in the yard was just outside the window, so it was very cool in the room. Neither of us dared speak aloud, as if there really was a sick person resting in the other room.

"Yingzi, do you remember what I told you?" Xiuzhen asked me suddenly.

I didn't know what she meant, because she had told me so many things, both real and make-believe. She'd said that she wanted me to go to school with Guizi, that Guizi was also going to apply to Changdian Primary School. She'd also told me that to get home from the school, all I had to do was to walk down Liulichang Street to Changximen, where a pair of big antlers hung inside the shop-window of Leiwanchun Drug Store on Lujijiao Alley. From there, I was to turn into Chunshu Alley, which would take me home. But she had also said that she wanted to take Guizi and look for Third Uncle Sikang. She had made many clothes and some shoes, and had even packed them away for the trip.

The thing I remembered best was what she'd told me about Guizi's birth. That day, I had slipped out very early and gone to see her. Noticing that I hadn't done my braids yet, she took out her toilette box and selected an ox-horn comb, some bone hair-pins, and a piece of red yarn. Then, she undid my hair and started combing it slowly. She was sitting on the chair while I sat on a small stool between her knees.

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“When I woke up, Guizi was gone.”

My arms rested on top of her legs and I could feel her knee-caps, like two sharp stones. She was so skinny.

“Yingzi, what month were you born in?” she asked from behind me.

“Me? When the green grass starts to grow and the green leaves begin to appear. Mum said I was born in spring when it is neither hot nor cold. What about Guizi?” Xiuzhen always spoke of me and Guizi in the same breath, so I had immediately thought of Guizi, too.

“Oh, Guizi,” Xiuzhen said. “When the green grass begins to turn yellow and the green leaves are about to fall. She was born in autumn when it’s neither hot nor cold. The cassia is really fragrant around that time. Do you know the smell? It’s as nice as the cassia oil I’m putting on your hair.” As she said this, she waved her palm in front of my nose.

“Gui—zi—Cassia.” I breathed deeply to take in the scent of the oil, muttering these words as if I understood what they meant.

Xiuzhen said cheerfully, “Yes, cassia, that’s what she’s named after.”

“How come I don’t see any cassia trees here? Which of the trees here is the cassia?” I asked.

“But she wasn’t born in this house.” Xiuzhen

was doing my braids then. She braided my hair so tightly that it pulled at my scalp and hurt.

“Why are you pulling so hard?” I said.

“She really gave me a hard time. After giving birth to Guizi, I was weak all over and fell sound asleep. When I woke up, Guizi was gone. I heard her cry when I fell asleep, how could she have disappeared by the time I woke up? I asked, ‘Where’s my baby?’ Mum was going to say something, but my aunt gave her a sidelong glance and gently took over. She said, ‘You’re still weak. The baby was crying and making a lot of noise, so I took her to my room.’ I mumbled something and fell asleep again.” She’d finished doing my braids. After a short pause, she continued, “I thought I heard Mum say to Auntie, ‘We can’t let her know.’ It was really puzzling. What was going on? Why can’t I remember what happened after this? Did they send my baby—? Did they throw—? Oh, they couldn’t have! They couldn’t have!”

By then, I had stood up and was facing Xiuzhen. She was frowning and lost in thought. She often talked like this now, breaking off in the middle of a sentence and muttering things like “It was really puzzling” and “What happened?” When she was putting things away in her toilette box, I

saw the watch I gave Guizi lying inside it. She picked it up and held it in her hand.

"Guizi's dad had a big pocket-watch too," she said. "But he pawned it and the redemption period's over. He had to pawn his watch to pay for his trip. You've no idea how poor he was! I didn't tell him I was expecting then. He would be back in a month or so anyway. He told Mum that he would come back to Peking for sure and marry me as soon as he had sold his family's sweet potato plot in the foothills. It's such a long way from here and making the trip isn't easy. If I had told him I was expecting he would have missed me terribly. You've no idea how deeply he loves me. I didn't tell Mum I was expecting, either. I just couldn't bring myself to talk about it. I was his already anyway, so it wouldn't have mattered if I told Mum after we were married . . ."

"What were you expecting?" I didn't understand what she meant.

"Expecting my baby Guizi, of course."

"But didn't you just say something about her disappearing?" I was more confused.

"Expecting—disappearing—expecting—disappearing. Oh, Yingzi, why do you try to confuse me? Let me tell you all about it." She then put away the watch I gave Guizi and told me her story while counting off the events on her fingers.

"He left in spring. The weather was fine that day. He had his suitcase in his hand, and he hardly dared look at me. Some fellow students from his home village were seeing him off at the door, so he couldn't talk to me. Fortunately we had a good talk the night before when I was helping him pack. He said life in Huian was tough and anyone with any means at all had gone overseas to make their living. The soil there was poor and not fit for growing anything other than sweet potatoes. His family lived on sweet potatoes all year round. They had sweet potato cooked with rice, sweet potato congee, dried sweet potatoes, sweet potato chips, and sweet potato slices. People not born and raised there would have found this hard to take and would have cried over every meal. He didn't want me, a northerner, to go there and suffer. And I said, 'You're right. I'm Mum's only daughter and she wouldn't want me to go off with you to live on sweet potatoes.' He said, 'You're a filial daughter, but I'm a dutiful son, too. What if my

mother keeps me at home and doesn't let me return to Peking?" I told him, "Then I'll come to you."

"I saw him to the door and watched him get into the rickshaw. In the sky there was a white cloud shaped like a ship, slowly moving towards the horizon. I seemed to have boarded that ship, for my heart was set adrift as if it had no will of its own.

"After seeing him off, I returned to my room, feeling sick and dizzy. I regretted not telling him about this, and I wanted to go after him, but it was too late.

"The days dragged on, and there was no sign of him. My belly got bigger and I could no longer keep it from Mum. She was anxious for me and kept on questioning me. I couldn't say anything, but in the end I told her about it, even though it was very embarrassing. I said, 'He'll come back one day, and if he doesn't, I'll go to him!' Mum pressed her hand to my lips and said, 'My darling, don't talk like that! It's disgraceful! If he doesn't come back, we mustn't let anyone know.' So they had me sent back to Haidian.

"I had a terrible time giving birth to Guizi. I had hardly any energy, and just lay there breathing in the fragrance of the cassia outside the window. I said to myself, 'If it's a girl, I'll call her Little Guizi—Little Cassia.' The midwife told me to bite hard on my braid and said, 'Push hard, push hard.' And at long last the baby was born. 'Wah—wah—' How loudly she cried!"

Xiuzhen took a deep breath as she said this, and turned pale. She couldn't continue with her story, and asked me off-handedly, "Yingzi, don't you feel sorry for your Third Aunt?"

"Who's my Third Aunt?"

"Me, of course. You call Sikang Third Uncle, so that makes me your Third Aunt. Can't you work that out? Now, call me Aunt."

"Uh—" I giggled, a little embarrassed. But still I said it, "Third Aunt, Xiuzhen."

"If you see Guizi, bring her home."

"How do I know what Guizi looks like?"

"She's—," Xiuzhen closed her eyes and said, "a pink, chubby little thing. I had a glimpse of her when she was born. Just before I fell into a deep sleep, I heard Mum say to the midwife, 'This is really God's punishment! Look, there's a blue

birthmark on the back of her neck. This child shouldn't have been born, but it insisted, so the God of Hell got angry and touched it here with his finger.' So, Yingzi, if you see someone with a blue birthmark on the back of her neck, that's our Guizi. Can you remember?"

"Yes, I'll remember," I replied, though rather confused.

Now was this what she was asking about?

"Yes, I remember," came my reply. "You mean Guizi's blue birthmark, right?"

Xiuzhen nodded.

She put away the box of silkworms and said, "While he's sleeping, let's go and dye our fingernails."

She led me into the yard, where there were a few pots of flowers by the foot of the wall. She pointed them out to me and said, "This is peppermint, and this one's balsam." She picked some red balsam flowers, put them into a small porcelain dish, took them back and sat down on the doorstep. She began crushing the red flowers gently with a piece of rock sugar.

"Can we eat this? With rock sugar?" I asked.

"Silly girl," Xiuzhen burst out laughing. "All you care about is eating. This is alum, not rock sugar! Just watch."

After crushing the red flowers, she asked me to stretch out my hands. Then, with a hairpin, she put little heaps of the crushed mixture on each of my fingernails. She told me to keep my fingers spread out and not to let the mixture fall off, and said that my fingernails would turn red just like hers when they dried. She stretched out her hands to show me her nails.

I kept my hands stretched out for a while, but I became rather impatient.

"I want to go home," I said.

"You're going to spoil them if you go home now. Don't go. I'll tell you a story," she said.

"I want to hear the story about Third Uncle."

"Hush, not so loud." She waved a finger at me and said softly, "Let me go and see if he's woken up yet and whether he wants some water." She walked inside for a while, came back, and sat down. Cupping her chin in her hands and resting her elbows on her legs, she stared at the acacia, transfixed.

"Now talk!" I said.

She stirred and said, "Huh?" as if she hadn't heard what I said. Then tears rolled down her cheeks. "What can I tell you? There's no one there, not a soul. Neither the father, nor the baby!"

I didn't utter a sound. After sobbing for a while, she took a deep breath and smiled at me. Those tear dimples! I had a feeling I had seen Xiuzhen, or someone with a face like hers, somewhere before.

She wiped away the tears with her fingers and put my hands on hers. It was better this way, for I felt less tired than having my fingers stretched out. She leaned sideways and glanced at the side yard doors, as if looking for someone, and then muttered, "He arrived about this time of the year and moved in with his bedding and a suitcase. He was wearing a grey gown with a pen clipped to the lapel. I was still cleaning up the place when Dad led him in and said, 'All the rooms in the main section of the court are occupied. Mr Chen told me to fix up these two little rooms for you.' 'Fine, fine, this will do very well,' he said. Dad helped him unpack and spread out his thin, old cotton quilt. I thought to myself: How is he going to get through the severe Peking winter? Yingzi, you know how poor these students are who stay at our place? The ones with money live in boarding houses. Dad said when Mr Chen first came to Peking to sit for the imperial examination, he had an attendant to serve him. When he passed the examination and became an official in Peking, he had the court renovated. Now all the poor students coming to Peking to study seek him out for help. Mr Chen said Sikang was a poor student from his village and was sure to succeed one day, so he told us to fix up these two rooms for him. We had formerly used them to store coal.

"I was wiping the windows and didn't have a chance to get a good look at him. Dad was saying, 'Look at your quilt, you'll never last through the winter with this!' Dad is so nosy! Sikang must have felt embarrassed, for he just mumbled a few words, unable to reply. Dad asked which school he was going to attend, and he replied, 'Peking University.' 'Ah!' Dad said, 'that's quite a long way from here, well past Shatan, but it's a good school!'

"Dad helped him put away his tattered luggage

and left. Seeing me still wiping the glass, he said, 'That's fine, girl!' And I followed Dad out. When I turned to look at him, he'd also raised his eyes and was looking at me. My heart throbbed so wildly I nearly tripped over the threshold. How penetrating those eyes were! They saw right through you before you could even get a good look at them. Back in my own room, whether eating or sleeping, I saw those eyes of his before me. It must have been Fate. So many students came and went all through the year, why did I— I—."

She coughed and, face flushed, held up my hands to see if my nails were dry. Her eyelids were lowered and her lashes looked like small curtains as she blew lightly on my nails.

"Yingzi, do you know what I mean by Fate?" But she didn't really want me to answer, and I didn't intend to reply. I only thought: someone else has long lashes like hers. My thoughts went to my crying friend of the western corridor.

"I brought him hot water every day," she went on chattering. "This was Dad's job actually. Twice a day, in the morning and in the evening, we boiled a big pot of water and delivered it to the gentlemen in their rooms so they could wash up or make tea. Dad used to make the rounds in the main section of the house, but he often forgot about the side yard. Sometimes Sikang would come to our window and ask for it. 'Mr Caretaker,' he would say softly, 'can I have some hot water?' Dad would remember then and would hurriedly make the delivery. Sometimes Dad remembered it before he came, but he was too lazy to go out again and would ask me to do it. This business of coming and going, of taking hot water to the side yard, almost became my job.

"I didn't say anything to him when I delivered the water. Each time I walked into his room, he was sitting at his desk reading or writing under the lamp. Without any expression on my face, I would lift the lid of the teapot and pour the hot water in. You could hear the gurgling. He was so bashful and wouldn't even glance in my direction. He just sat there looking down. One day, out of curiosity, I moved a bit closer to see what he was writing. He turned his head and asked, 'Can you read?' I shook my head. It was then that we began to speak to each other."

"Where was Guizi at that time?"

"Oh, Guizi," Xiuzhen smiled. "She hadn't come along yet. Oh, yes, where is Guizi? Have you found her? She means everything to the two of us. But I haven't quite finished my story, have I? One day, he held my hands the way I'm holding yours now, and said, 'Stay with me.' He'd just had some wine, and I was also feeling rather dazed. He drank to keep warm, since the two rooms only had a small stove, sometimes not even that. It was so windy that the door-frame was rattling all the time. Dad and Mum had gone back to Haidian to collect the rent on our land and had asked my aunt to come and keep me company. When she'd gone to sleep, I slipped away and went into the side yard. He pressed his burning face against mine and said many things. The wine on his breath made me feel drunk, too.

"He liked drinking wine to drive away the cold. I would secretly buy him some peanuts to go with the wine and take them to his room. The north wind whistled as it blew on the paper round the window frames. Holding hands, we felt warm and snug.

"When he fell sick, I kept going to his room and could no longer keep it from Mum. One day, I was taking some congee to him when Mum said, 'Try to be more discreet, my dear, understand?' I didn't say a word."

In Xiuzhen's eyes, I could see Third Uncle Sikang lying in bed, his hair ruffled, too weak to drink or to eat, just groaning.

"What happened then? Did he get well?" I had to ask.

"Of course he did. How could he have left otherwise? But I collapsed after that. You see, Guizi was coming."

"Where is she?" I turned to look at the side yard gate, but there was nobody there. I imagined a girl standing by the side of the door, dressed in a red printed top and pants, with a brownish plait like a puppy's tail. She had big eyes, long fluttering lashes, and was waving to me. I felt a bit dizzy, as if I was about to fall, and closed my eyes for a second. When I opened them again, why, there was indeed a figure beside the door and it was coming towards us. But it was so big, it was—only Xiuzhen's mum waving to me.

"Xiuzhen, why are you making Yingzi sit out

here in the hot sun?" she asked.

"There wasn't any sun here a minute ago," Xiuzhen said.

"Go sit somewhere else. Isn't there a cool, shady spot over there?" Xiuzhen's mum came and took me by the hand.

The figure in my mind disappeared and I remembered that Xiuzhen hadn't finished her story.

"Where's Niur—no, I mean Guizi?" I asked. "You were just talking about her."

Xiuzhen tittered.

"Here," she said, pointing at her belly. "She hasn't been born yet!"

Xiuzhen's mum had come to the side yard to hang out clothes to dry. There was a rope running between a branch and the far side of the wall, on which she was hanging the washing, piece by piece.

When Xiuzhen saw this, she said, "Mum, hang the pants over there near the wall. It's not proper for Sikang to see them when he walks in and out."

"Oh, cut that out!" Mrs Wang scolded her.

Xiuzhen didn't get upset when her mum scolded her. She went on, "Mum is also very fond of Sikang. She said to Dad, 'Since we have no son and you've never been to school, it might be a good idea to have someone educated around the house.' So Dad gave his consent. Where was I?—Oh, he got well and I fell sick, right? He said it was all his fault. Didn't he say he would marry me and teach me to read? Then came the telegram from home, saying that his mother was ill and that he should hurry back . . ."

"Yingzi," Mrs Wang suddenly interrupted, saying, "why do you enjoy listening to her nonsense so much? It's so strange, the other children are afraid of her and stay away. You are the only one who's not."

"Mum, don't interrupt, I haven't finished yet! I've got things I want Yingzi to do for me."

Old Mrs Wang ignored her and said, "Yingzi, it's time to go home. Just now I heard Nanny Song calling for you in the alley. I didn't dare tell her you were here."

Old Mrs Wang took the empty basin and walked away. Xiuzhen waited till her mum had left the yard before saying, "Sikang has been gone for—" she counted on her fingers and said, "more than one month, or more than six years now. No, he's coming back in a month or so. No, I'm going to

give birth to Guizi in a month."

Whether it was six years, or one month, Xiuzhen was just as muddled as I was. She took my hands, looked at them and removed the dried crushed flowers from my fingernails. They were all red! I was so pleased, and couldn't stop smiling and admiring my fingers.

"Yingzi," she whispered, "there's something I want you to do for me. If you happen to see Guizi, tell her to come home and we'll go and look for her dad together. If we can find him, my illness will go away."

"What illness?" I asked, looking at her face.

"Yingzi, everyone says I'm mad. Do you think I'm mad? Mad people eat off the floor and hit others. How can I be mad? Do you think I'm mad?"

"No," I shook my head. Honestly, I found Xiuzhen so lovable, yet so sad. All she wanted to do was go and find her Sikang and Niur—no, her Guizi.

"Why don't they come back?" I asked.

"Sikang must have been detained by his mother. And Guizi? I found that too very puzzling. She wasn't in Haidian, well, not in my aunt's house anyway. I asked Mum, but she ran out of patience and said, 'I've thrown it away! Why keep the spawn of a southern savage? He's not coming back anyway! That bastard!' I fainted when she said that. When I came to, they started calling me a mad woman. Yingzi, I beg you, if you see Guizi, bring her back. I've got everything ready. Now, go home."

I was in a daze, but I had a picture in my mind, and it was growing bigger and bigger. My head felt a bit funny. "I will, I will," I said as I ran out of the side yard and out of Huian Court. I went home kicking pebbles and looking at my red fingernails all the way.

IV

"Look at you, so sunburnt! Come in and have your lunch." Seeing that I was covered in sweat from rushing home, Mum didn't scold me too much.

But I only wanted to drink, not eat. I gulped down several glasses of cold water and panting,

sat down at the dinner table. I picked up my chopsticks, but amused myself by looking at my fingernails.

"Who dyed them for you?" Mum asked.

"You little witch! Little girls shouldn't dye their fingernails!" Dad also said half-angrily.

"Who dyed them for you?" Mum asked again.

"Uh—" I paused to think before saying, "Third Aunt Sikang." I didn't dare, and wouldn't, call Xiuzhen a mad woman.

"Where do you get all these uncles and aunts?"

Mum put some food on my plate and continued, "Your uncle said you're going to be interviewed for primary school in a month. How high can you count now? Let's see how you're doing. You won't get in if you can't count."

"One, two, three, . . . eighteen, nineteen, twenty, twenty-six, . . ." My mind was a bit muddled, and all I wanted to do was to put down the chopsticks and go and rest. But I didn't, for they would have said I was sick and stopped me from going out.

"You got them all wrong," Mum glared at me.

"Listen to me count: Trenty, twenty-one, twenty-two, twenty-three, twenty-vour, twenty-vive . . ."

Nanny Song, who was waiting at the table, couldn't help giggling. Then Dad and I also burst out laughing. I saw the chance and threw down my chopsticks.

"Mum, your Peking dialect! It's taken away my appetite," I said. "It's twenty, not trenty, twenty-one, not trenty-one, twenty-two, not trenty-two . . ."

Mum also laughed. "Ah, well, don't copy me," she said.

I didn't eat, and neither Mum nor Dad noticed. The cold water had probably done me good, for I no longer felt dizzy. Mum and Dad had gone for their nap, and I walked into the courtyard and sat on a stool under the tree, watching the chicks. They had grown quite big and were pecking rice off the ground. Cicadas were chirping away in the trees and all was very peaceful. I picked up a twig and started drawing on the ground. Seeing a chick pecking at a worm, I remembered the bottle of hanging ghosts I had left at Huian Court.

I thought about it, but was too lazy to get up. Feeling drowsy, I had to close my eyes. I bent forward, and with my hands holding my head

buried my face in my lap.

Somewhere between waking and sleeping, I saw a series of muddled pictures. I was catching silkworms under the tree in the side yard and the hanging ghosts were wriggling in the bottle. In an instant they had turned into the silkworms on Xiuzhen's desk, spinning silk with their heads raised. I felt as if Xiuzhen had put some of her worms on my arm and they were creeping towards my neck. Ticked, I opened my eyes with a start, only to find two flies circling around my arm. I brushed them away and dozed off again. This time a basin of cold water came splashing down my back. It was freezing. I held my head tightly. Then another basin of cold water came pouring down my neck. "It's cold!" I said. Someone giggled beside me. I struggled to my feet and suddenly my head cleared. When I opened my eyes, I had no idea what time it was, as it seemed to have gone dark all of a sudden. I remembered that the sun was still shining when I first sat down! Niur was standing before me, smiling. My back felt cold and wet, but when I touched it with my hand, it wasn't wet at all. I was cold, though. I couldn't help shivering and sneezed a few times. Niur stopped smiling and asked, "What's wrong with you, silly girl? You were talking in your sleep!"

Feeling half-awake and a bit shaky, I sat down. The sound of thunder came rumbling from the distance where the sky had darkened like an ink stain. On the heels of the loud thunder, dark clouds marched in like an army of black monsters across the sky. A gentle breeze had sprung up. No wonder it felt a bit chilly.

"Are you cold?" I asked Niur. "Why do I feel so cold?"

Niur shook her head and looked at me in surprise.

"You look very strange," she said, "like you're frightened or like you've been beaten."

"No, no," I said. "My Dad only slaps me on my palms. He's never as rough as your dad is on you."

"Then what's wrong?" She pointed at my face and said, "You look terrible."

"I must be hungry. I haven't had any lunch."

There were several loud claps of thunder and large drops of rain began to fall. Nanny Song came out to the yard to collect the washing and to shoo

the chicks back into the western corridor. Niur and I followed. After shutting the chicks up in their cage, Nanny Song went out and said, "It's going to come down in sheets. Niur, you won't be able to go home."

And sure enough, it started to pour as soon as Nanny Song left the room. Niur and I leaned against the door and watched the rain. It came drumming down on the tile-covered ground, and more and more water filled the yard. There was a drain at one corner, but it couldn't take all that rain. The water gradually rose and covered the bottom steps, splashing onto the door and the cuffs of our pants. Niur and I watched this fierce downpour in wonder, fixing our eyes on the ground, neither of us saying anything. Suddenly I saw Mum speaking and waving to me through the window in the northern room. I couldn't make out what she was saying, but I knew her waving meant we shouldn't stand in the doorway and get ourselves wet. So, Niur and I did as Mum bid, went into the house and closed the door. We ran to the window and continued to watch the rain.

"Wonder how long it's going to last?" Niur said.

"You won't be able to go back," I said and again sneezed twice. It would have been nice if there was a bed or something to lie down on. There was an old bed in the room, but it was heaped with boxes and flower pots and covered with dust. I couldn't stand up any longer, so I moved towards the bed and leaned against the boxes. I remembered that Niur had put away some clothes in one of the empty boxes. Opening the box, I took them out.

"What are you doing?" Niur came over and asked.

"Help me put them on. I feel cold," I said.

"You're such a softie," Niur said with a smile, "a bit of rain and you start sneezing, and need to put on more clothes."

She helped me put on the coat and wrapped the pants round my legs. We sat squeezed together in a corner on a wash-board. I felt better like this. But Niur was worrying about the pants which were wrapped around my legs.

"These clothes are all I have. Don't rip them!" she said.

"Don't be so mean! Your mum has made you

so many clothes and you won't lend me any." I didn't know why, perhaps I was feeling dizzy again, for when I mentioned Niur's mum I was thinking about the bundle of clothes for Guizi on the table on the *kang* in Xiuzhen's room.

Niur opened her eyes wide. "My Mum?" she said, pointing at her nose. "Made many clothes for me? Are you dreaming?"

"No, no, I didn't mean that." I leaned against the wall with my head tilted up, eyes closed in thought.

"I meant Xiuzhen," I said after a pause.

"Xiuzhen?"

"My third auntie."

"Oh, your third auntie. That sounds more like it. And she's made you a lot of clothes. How nice!"

"No, not for me. They're for Guizi." I turned my head and looked straight at Niur's face. I saw two faces and then the two merged into one. Was it Niur? Or Guizi? I couldn't tell. Sometimes I didn't say what I was thinking. My mind couldn't control my tongue.

"Why are you staring at me?" Niur asked, tilting her head to one side, and looking rather puzzled.

"I was thinking of someone. Oh yes, Niur, tell me about your mum and dad."

"What's there to say!" Niur said, her mouth twitching. "Back in the Qing dynasty when there was still an emperor, Dad didn't have to do any work. He just spent his days wining and dining and fooling around. Later, when the emperor fell, Dad became poor. He didn't have any skills, so after he had used up all his money, he made his living playing the *huqin* and taught me to sing. Oh how he wished I could sing like Bi Yunxia and make lots of money. Yingzi, now I sing in the streets around Tianqiao. People crowd around to listen, but when I finish and put out my little basket to collect money, everyone sneaks off. When we get home afterwards, Dad beats me. Once he said: People who give you money are your lords and masters, the least you can do is to put on a smile! You look like you're in mourning! Then he took out a stick and started beating me."

"Does Bi Yunxia also sing around Tianqiao?"

"Oh no! She sings in a theatre in the Chengnan Amusement Park. The people who go and listen

to Bi Yunxia are all well-off. But Dad often says that most of the people who sing in theatres started off singing in Tianqiao. So he keeps forcing me to learn to sing and perform."

"Don't you enjoy singing? Why do you say he forces you?"

"I want to do things I like, to sing when I like and to whom I like. That's what makes it fun. Like when we're in this room and I sing for you."

Yes, I remembered the day I first met Niur, how the tears brimmed in her eyes when the men at the grocer's tried to force her to sing.

"But you still have to sing! What'll you do if you don't sing and don't make any money?"

"Me?" Niur snorted, "I'm going to look for my real mum and dad."

"Why didn't you stay with your real mum and dad in the first place?" This was something I had never been very clear about.

"Who knows!" Niur hesitated, unsure of whether to continue. Outside it was still raining heavily, as if the sky was caving in. It was as if a big ocean up there was pouring down onto the ground.

"One time, I was lying in bed at night and heard Mum and Dad having a row. Dad said, 'The child's too stubborn. She has a good voice, but when she says she doesn't want to sing, nobody can force her to. What can I do!' To this, my crippled Mum replied, 'The more you beat her, the worse it'll get.' Dad said, 'How can I let off steam if I don't beat her? She was only as big as a winter melon when I picked her up and brought her home. Now she's taller than the table and won't listen to anybody.' My Mum said, 'You did the wrong thing bringing her home to begin with. It's not the same as having one's own flesh and blood. But frankly, you don't really love her like she's your own, that's why she doesn't obey you as she would her real dad.' Dad sighed, 'It's been like that for five or six years now. Come to think of it, that was a weird day for me. I'd just gotten to the wall at Qihua Gate and I had this urge to shit.' Mum said, 'Right, you said if we set out early to collect coal cinders, people wouldn't know how hard-pressed we were. You used to go to the toilet first thing in the morning before washing, didn't you? But that day you were in such a hurry that you didn't even have time for

that. And, instead of collecting coal cinders, you brought a bastard home.' Dad said, 'I was looking for a place to squat when I saw this little bundle lying there next to the wall. At first I thought I'd struck it rich. But when I opened the bundle, there she was, a lively little thing with tiny bright eyes rolling about.' Mum snorted, 'And now you want to make a fortune out of her. You think that some day she'll be as popular as Bi Yunxia. Well, keep dreaming . . .'"

I closed my eyes and listened to Niur's chatter with my head resting against the wall. I seemed to have heard that story before, but from whom? Hadn't whoever it was also said that the baby was bundled up and left near Qihua Gate early one morning? Perhaps I was dreaming. I often dreamed these days. Nanny Song said I was too wild during the day and ate too much at dinner, and that was why I ground my teeth and talked in my sleep. I wondered if that was true?

"Niur, you've told me this story so many times!" I said, my eyes still closed.

"What? I've never told this to anyone, and this is the first time I've told you. Sometimes you're so muddle-headed, and you say you're going to go to school. I don't think you'll get in."

"But I do know the story! When you were born, the green grass was turning yellow and the green leaves were about to fall. It was autumn when it's neither hot nor cold. The scent of cassia drifted in through the window—"

"What are you talking about? You're not talking in your sleep again, are you?"

"What was I saying?" I felt lost. Perhaps I had been dreaming.

Niur felt my forehead and my arm. "You're hot!" she exclaimed. "You've probably got too many clothes on. Take off my clothes."

"I'm not hot, I feel cold inside, so cold I'm shivering." I looked at my legs as I said this and they really were beginning to shake.

Niur looked outside and said, "The rain's stopped. I should go home."

She was about to stand up, but I drew her to me and hung onto her neck.

"I want to see the blue birthmark on the back of your neck, Guizi," I said. "Your mum said you've got a blue birthmark on the back of your neck. Let me take a look . . ."

Niur gently tried to break free. "Why are you talking about Guizi so much today?" she said. "You're just like Dad when he's drunk and talking nonsense!"

"Yes, your dad loves to drink to drive out the cold in winter. It was very windy that day, and your mum bought him some wine and some peanuts to go with it . . ."

I was muttering dreamily as I brushed Niur's pigtail to one side. "Look, there it is! There it is!" In a trance, I saw amidst the brownish hair a blue birthmark the size of a thumb. I started shivering all over.

Niur put her face against mine and said in a startled voice, "What's the matter with you? Your face is burning. It's so red, too. Are you ill?"

"No, I'm not ill," I said. Actually I felt a little better. Niur was holding me in her lap and I could see her pointed chin right before me. When she lowered her head, her big eyes suddenly filled with tears. I felt terrible too, but actually this was because of my head. It was getting heavier and I was finding this hard to bear. With Niur holding and stroking me like that, a feeling of affection overwhelmed me and tears flooded into my eyes.

"Poor Yingzi! So hot all over," Niur said.

"Poor Niur! Your real dad and mum—," I mumbled. "Oh, Niur, let me take you to your real mum, then the two of you can go and find your real dad together."

"Where can I find them? You're scaring me. Go to sleep and don't talk any more nonsense." As she spoke, she hugged me tight and patted me, but I struggled to get up from her lap.

"I'm not talking nonsense!" I said tearfully. "I know where your real mum is. She's not far from here." I hugged her neck and whispered into her ear, "I'm going to take you there. Your real mum said I should take you to her when I find you. Yes, you're Guizi. You have a blue birthmark on the back of your neck."

She looked at me curiously for a long while and then said, "Your breath smells. Must be indigestion from overeating. But, is that true?—Did you say something about my real mum?"

I saw the amazement in her eyes and nodded. Her long lashes were wet, and when I nodded, she smiled and the tears rolled down to her tear dimples. I felt so sorry for her and closed my eyes.

There were flashing stars before me. Opening my eyes again, I found Niur's face had become Xiuzhen's. I wiped away my tears and looked again. It was Niur's face as before. Again, I was unable to control my tongue.

"Niur, come and see me after dinner," I said. "Let's meet in the side lane. I'll take you to see Xiuzhen. Don't bring any clothes. She has a big bundle of them for you. I've also given her a watch for you so that you can tell the time, and I have something else to give Xiuzhen."

Then I heard Mum calling me. The rain had stopped, but it was still very dark.

"Your mum's calling," Niur said. "Let's not talk any more. I'll see you tonight then." As she said this, she stood up, opened the door and hurried out.

Feeling happier now, I had enough energy to stand up. I took off Niur's clothes and threw them onto the chicken cage. When I opened the door and walked into the yard, I was struck by a gust of cool air. There was water all over the place. Mum said I should walk along the corridor, but I waded through the water instead. She took my hand and was about to scold me when she started fumbling all over me. She felt my hands, my body, my forehead. "Why are you so hot?" she cried out in alarm. "You're sick, aren't you? You came back bright red from the scorching sun this afternoon, you got caught in the rain, and now you're wading through the water. Water, water, always playing with water! Now, off to bed."

I felt weak all over, so I let Mum take me to my little bed. She took off my wet shoes, put me into some dry clothes and tucked me in. I felt warm and snug under the cover of the soft quilt and, closing my eyes, went off to sleep.

On waking, I felt very hot and kicked away the quilt. The room was pitch-dark. Through the gap in the curtain, I could see that the outer room was already lit. Remembering something terribly important, I shouted, "Mum, are you having dinner?"

"Naughty child! She still wants dinner in her condition!" It was Dad's voice. Mum came in with an oil lamp and put it down on the table. I saw that her mouth was still moving and her lips looked greasy. Were they having "double-cooked pork"?

Mum walked over to my bed and tried to scare me, "Your dad is going to spank you for wanting to eat after playing all day and making yourself sick."

"No, I don't want to eat," I quickly explained. "In fact, I haven't eaten all day! I was only asking whether you've eaten. I still have things to do."

"Forget about them!" Mum made me lie down again and said, "You're still very hot. I wonder what your temperature is! I'll go out and buy you some medicine after dinner."

"I don't want any medicine. If you do that, I'll run away. Don't blame me if I do."

"What rot! I'll ask Nanny Song to make you some congee after she's eaten."

Mum ignored what I said and went back to the outer room to finish her dinner. Lying in bed, I worried about my meeting with Niur in the side lane after dinner and wondered if she was there already. I listened carefully and noticed that outside it was still raining. But now it was only pitter-pattering, not drumming as it had been during the day. But there was no shelter in the side lane—just a stretch of backyard walls. I was so anxious that my chest hurt. I rubbed it with my hand and coughed. The coughing made my chest hurt more, as if it were being pierced by needles.

Mum had already finished her dinner and came in with Dad. I pressed my hand hard on my lips to stop the cough, but my hand trembled over my mouth. I was shivering, but not because I was afraid of Dad. I'd been shivering continually since the afternoon. My legs were shivering, my arms were shivering, my heart was shivering and even my teeth were chattering. Mum took my hand and said, "You're shivering from fever. I think we should send for Dr Yamamoto!"

"No! I don't want that Jap here."

Dad then said, "We'll see about it tomorrow morning. In the mean time, put a chilled towel over her forehead. I still have to write home and want to catch the morning post."

Nanny Song also came in.

"Let's go to the Xihenian Pharmacy at Caishikou and buy some flu medicine or something," she suggested to Mum. "She'll be all right after she's had some medicine and a good night's sleep."

Mum agreed with her. She always agreed with Dad and Nanny Song.

"Very well then, Nanny," she said. "Let's get the medicine. Yingzi, be a good girl and lie here for a while. You'll get well after you take the medicine, and you'll be all right to go to school. Just wait here, I'll get you some preserved plums from Fozhaolou on the way."

But at that moment not even preserved plums appealed to me. I heard Mum and Nanny Song go out with their umbrellas and Dad enter his study. I kept thinking about my meeting with Niur. Had she got impatient waiting? Had she gone home disappointed?

I crawled out from under my quilt and quietly got out of bed. My head was heavy. I coughed again, but because I was so nervous, I felt no pain in my chest. I walked over to the chest of drawers and hesitated for a while before summoning up enough courage to open the drawer in which Mum kept her clothes. Way in the back under all the clothes was Mum's jewellery box. Mum only looked at her jewellery box when Dad wasn't home, but she didn't hide it from me or Nanny Song.

As I expected, the jewellery box was sitting under the clothes. I took it out, opened it and saw Mum's new gold bracelet inside. My heart started beating faster. Just as I was about to take the bracelet, I stole a glance at the window. It was pitch dark outside and no one was looking in, but I could see my reflection on the glass. I watched myself take out the gold bracelet, and put the jewellery box back under the clothes and shut the drawer. My hands were trembling. I wanted to give the bracelet to Xiuzhen and Niur so they could pay for their journey. Mum had said that two taels of gold were worth a lot of money, enough for a trip to Tianjin, or Shanghai or even Japan. Wouldn't it be sufficient for Xiuzhen and Niur to go to Hui'an to look for Third Uncle Sikang too? I thought that I was doing the right thing and, feeling easier, put the gold bracelet on my arm.

I turned and suddenly noticed that my reflection on the glass was much clearer than before. But no! What a scare it gave me—it was Niur, and she was waving at me! Running outside I found her with her hair and arms all wet.

"I was worried that you were waiting for me in the side lane," she whispered, "so I sneaked

away from home after dinner and waited for you. After a while, I guessed that you probably wouldn't come and decided to go back. Then I heard your mum and Nanny Song talking about buying medicine as they walked past. I was worried, so I came to see you. The front gate wasn't bolted, so I just walked in."

"Let's go then."

"Where are we going? To the girl named Xiuzhen you told me about earlier today?"

I smiled and nodded.

"Look at the way you're smiling! Has your illness gone to your head?"

"Who says I'm ill?" I said, straightening my back. That made me cough again. I bent over at once and felt a little better. Resting my hand on Niur's shoulder, I said, "You'll see when you get there. You know, she misses you very much! She's made you many clothes using my measurements. By the way, Niur, what do you think your mum looks like?"

"Her? I've been thinking that if she really misses me, she must be skinny like me, and her face would be pale—"

"Yes, yes, you're right." We walked to the front door as we talked. It was very dark and I had to feel my way to open it. A gust of wind and rain blew in and swept up my short gown. I felt cold and wet on my tummy, but continued, "Your mum has very thin lips. When she smiles, two tear dimples appear under her eyes. When she cries, her long lashes get all wet. She often says, 'Yingzi, please, I beg you . . .'"

"Uh-huh."

"She said, 'Guizi is our very life . . .'"

"Uh-huh."

"The first time she saw me, she said, 'If you see Guizi, tell her to come back. She rushed out just like that to find her dad without bothering to eat or get dressed first.'"

"Uh-huh."

"She said, 'Tell her to come back so that we can go and look for her dad together. Tell her I won't scold her . . .'"

"Uh-huh."

We had reached Huian Court by then. Niur broke into sobs and mumbled "Uh-huh, uh-huh" from time to time as she listened. I gave her a hug.

"She's the—" I was going to say "mad

woman", but stopped myself because I had long since refused to call her that. I corrected myself, and said, "They all say she misses you like crazy! Niur, don't cry! Let's go in."

Niur didn't seem to be paying much attention to what was going on and left all the decisions to me. She just rested her head on my shoulder and sobbed as she walked. She didn't even know where we were.

We walked up the few steps at Huian Court. The door opened with a slight push. Xiuzhen had said that the doors of Huian Court weren't latched in the early evening because some students came home very late. One side of the door was wedged into place with a carrying pole, but the other was left open.

"Don't make any noise," I said softly to Niur.

We walked in quietly. As we walked past the window of the caretaker's room, I bumped into the lid of the water vat, and it clanked.

"Who's there?" Xiuzhen's mum asked from inside.

"It's me, Yingzi."

"Oh my! It's already dark and here you are looking for Xiuzhen. Well, she's in the side yard. Just don't stay too long, do you hear me?"

"Uh-huh," I answered and walked into the side yard with my arm around Niur.

I'd never come here after dark before. The door to the side yard opened with a creak, like a needle scratching my heart. It was a horrible feeling. I was walking with Niur across the puddles when my foot struck something. I looked down and saw that it was the bottle of hanging ghosts I had caught that morning. I picked it up and walked on, putting it on the window-sill as we walked towards the door.

The room was lit, but not brightly. Pushing open the door, I walked in with Niur and stopped at the threshold. I was holding Niur's hand. She was trembling too.

Xiuzhen didn't turn when we walked in. Once again she was packing the suitcase in front of the bed. With her back to us, she said, "Mum, no need to keep reminding me. I'll go back to my room and sleep in a minute. But first I must pack Sikang's clothes away."

Xiuzhen thought it was her mum. I heard what she said, but made no reply. I didn't know what

to do. I was going to say something, and took a deep breath, but was unable to speak. Dumbly, I stared at her back. Her braid was swung to the front. She often wore it like this, for she had said that that was the way Third Uncle Sikang liked it. He liked the way she twisted the end of her braid round her fingers, and the way she chewed on its end, lost in thought.

Perhaps because there was no reply, she swung round. When she saw me, she cried out, "Oh, it's you, Yingzi! You're all wet!" She ran over as Niur hid herself behind me.

Xiuzhen knelt down and her eyes widened as she caught sight of the figure behind me. Slowly and cautiously, she stretched to see who it was. Niur was standing so close that I could feel her warm breath on the back of my neck. The breathing became faster and faster until finally she burst out crying.

"Guizi! Oh my poor dear Guizi!" Xiuzhen also cried out hoarsely.

Xiuzhen drew Niur from behind my back, and, holding her close, slumped to the floor. She hugged Niur, kissing and caressing her. Dumbfounded, Niur turned and looked at me, still crying. I took two steps backwards and leaned against the door, feeling like I was going to faint.

After some time, Xiuzhen loosened her hold on Niur. She stood up hastily and led Niur to the side of the bed. "You're all wet," she said anxiously. "Come on, get changed. If we hurry, we can still make it. Listen!"

Through the quiet night came the tooting of the train, so shrill that it pierced the ears. Xiuzhen looked up as she listened to it, paused to think, and continued, "There's a train leaving for Tianjin at 8:50. From there we can catch the big steamer. Let's hurry."

Xiuzhen picked up the bundle from the bed and opened it. Inside were Niur's—no, Guizi's—no, Niur's clothes. One by one, Xiuzhen helped her put them on. It was the first time I'd seen her do things so eagerly and so hurriedly. After that, she fetched the watch I had given Guizi from her toilette box, wound it, and put it round Niur's wrist. Niur let Xiuzhen do all this. She said nothing, and just stared straight into Xiuzhen's face, as if stunned. I leaned backwards and, as my arm touched the wall, I remembered the gold

bracelet. Rolling up my sleeve, I slid the bracelet off my arm, walked over to the bed and handed it to Xiuzhen.

"This is to help you pay for the trip." Xiuzhen grabbed it and slipped it on her arm without even saying thank you. Mum always said we should say thank you when people give us things.

Xiuzhen bustled about stuffing this and that into her suitcase. Then she picked it up and took Niur's hand. Suddenly she let go of her hand, and said, "You haven't called me Mummy yet. Go on, say it." She knelt down, and hugged Niur. Then, tilting Niur's head, she brushed her pigtail to one side and looked at the back of her neck. She smiled. "This really is my baby Guizi! Say it, say Mummy."

Niur hadn't said a word since coming into the room. Hugged and urged on by Xiuzhen, she finally stretched out her arms, put them round Xiuzhen's neck and, with her face against Xiuzhen's, said quietly and bashfully, "Mummy."

I saw their two faces merge into one, then separate again. My head was swimming, and only by closing my eyes and holding onto the bedrail could I stay on my feet. For a while I was muddled and didn't hear what they were saying. When I opened my eyes again, Xiuzhen had already picked up her suitcase and was holding Niur's hand.

"Let's go!" she said. Niur was still rather shy. She kept looking at me and held out her hand to me. I took it.

Quietly we walked outside. The rain had subsided. I came out last and, when we walked past the window, I picked up the bottle of hanging ghosts from the window sill.

We came out of the side yard and continued on walking under the eaves of the caretaker's room. Even though we walked carefully, our feet still made a squish-squash sound. Xiuzhen's mum spoke from her room:

"Is that you, Yingzi? You'd better go home. You can come back again tomorrow!"

"All right," I answered.

Outside the doors of Huian Court it was pitch-dark. Although Xiuzhen was carrying her suitcase and holding Niur by the hand, she still moved very fast. And she kept saying, "Let's hurry, we're going to miss our train."

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"In our village, we'd say she's possessed by evil spirits."

By the time we reached the end of Chunshu Alley, I was no longer able to keep up with them. Holding onto the wall, I cried out softly, "Xiu-zhen! Xiu-zhen! Niur! Niur!"

A rickshaw appeared in the distance, and as it passed, the dim yellow light on the carriage cast a shadow behind Xiu-zhen and Niur. They ignored me and kept on walking. Hearing me calling after her, Xiu-zhen turned her head and said, "Yingzi, go home! We'll write you when we get there. Go on, go home"

Her voice grew softer and softer, and then faded away. The rickshaw was gone and the shadows, one large and one small, disappeared into the night. I leaned against the wall, hunched, struggling not to let myself fall. The rain was dripping from the eaves of a house onto my head, my face and my body. Hoarsely, I continued to call after them, "Niur, Niur."

Cold, frightened and sad, I cried.

At this moment, another rickshaw came past and I heard someone exclaim from under the hood, "Yingzi! It's our Yingzi!"

Oh, it was Mum's voice! Tearfully, I cried out, "Mum! Oh Mum!"

Totally exhausted, I collapsed and passed out.

V

Far away in the distance I heard the sparrows chirping and twittering. The sound came closer and closer—No, it wasn't the sound of birds, but that of a person speaking by my side.

" . . . Ma'am, don't worry! You must look after yourself! Didn't the doctor say that she'll definitely come around?"

"But she's been lying there unconscious for the last ten days! How can I not worry?"

I recognized the voices. It was Nanny Song and Mum talking. I wanted to call Mum, but couldn't open my mouth. Nor could I open my eyes. Where had my hands, my legs and my body gone? Why couldn't I move, or see myself?

"In our village, we'd say she's possessed by evil spirits. I've just been to the Guan Di Temple to burn some incense. See, this is the ash I've brought back. We'll mix it with water and pour it down her throat in a minute. When she's recovered, you should go to the temple and burn some incense to thank Guan Di for answering our prayers."

Mum was still crying. Nanny Song continued, "It's really strange, you know. How could she have kidnapped two little girls at the same time?"

If we had come home a minute or two later that day, Yingzi would have caught up with them. The more I think about it, the more horrible it seems. Such a nice little girl, that Niur. Aiya! That train, and the two of them together . . . I'd said that Niur was certainly pretty, but had this fragile, ill-fated look about her."

"Don't talk about it any more, Nanny Song. It scares me every time I hear about it. Where are Niur's clothes?"

"You mean the two pieces on top of the chicken cage? I've burned them."

"Where did you burn them?"

"By the side of the railway track.⁴ Pity! She was such a cute little girl."

"Yes, pity."

They both sighed and fell silent.

After a while, I heard the sound of something being stirred in a cup and then I heard Nanny Song's voice again.

"Should we give this to her now?"

"Let's wait. She's resting now. Wait till she starts turning over and we'll see what we can do then—Is everything packed at home?"

"All packed. The new house is so big, and the electric lights will be ready today. Everything's going to be very convenient from now on."

"Things will go much better once we've moved."

"You should have listened to me. I told you that since the buildings and walls at Huinan Court are so tall, we should have hung an eight-diagram mirror outside our door to keep the evil spirits away. But neither of you believed me."

"Well, well, let's not talk about this any more. We're going to leave that cursed place anyway. When Yingzi recovers, don't repeat any of this to her. When she comes home to the new place, we'll let her forget all that's happened. If she asks about anything, just pretend you don't know. Understand?"

"I know. You don't have to tell me."

I didn't know what they were talking about, and I thought: What's the matter? Has something gone wrong? As I was thinking, I had the feeling that I was slowly rising. I was still lying down, but I felt that I was rising higher and higher until my nose was about to touch the ceiling. "Ouch!" My whole body quivered and down I fell. Frightened, I opened my eyes and heard Nanny Song say:

"Thank goodness, she's come to at last!"

Mum's eyes were red and swollen and Nanny Song was also in tears. I still couldn't say anything and was unable to open my mouth. Mum picked me up, held me in her arms and pinched my nose. I opened my mouth, and a teaspoonful of liquid was poured down my throat. I swallowed it just as I was trying to say "I don't want any medicine."

"Didn't I say it would work?" Nanny Song said to Mum. "Didn't I say Guan Di would answer our prayers? She has just swallowed it, and she's already able to talk."

Mum wiped the water from the corners of my mouth and made me lie down again. I began to wonder: there was a white ceiling, white walls, a white door, and white windows and furniture. What kind of place was I in? But I remembered that I was in a—

"Mum, is it raining outside?" I asked.

"What's this about rain? It's a bright sunny day," Mum said.

Puzzled, I continued to think. I was trying to sort everything out.

Nanny Song leaned over and asked, "Do you recognize me, Yingzi?"

I nodded and said, "Nanny Song."

Nanny Song smiled at Mum.

"You had a fever. You've been sick for the last ten days," Mum said. "Dad and I brought you to the hospital. When you get well again, we'll go back to our new house. We're going to have electric lights there."

"New house?" I asked, surprised.

"Yes, a new house! Our new house is in Xinlianzi Alley. Remember, when you go for your interview and your teacher asks you where you live, you should say 'Xin—lian—zi Alley.'"

"But—" There were things I really couldn't remember, and even though I wanted to say some-

⁴ According to an age-old Chinese custom, a sacrifice is offered to a dead person at the place where he or she died in an accident. This is to pacify the soul of the deceased so that it will rest in peace and not come back to haunt the place.

thing, I couldn't, so I just closed my eyes.

"Sleep will do you good," Mum said. "You still must be tired even though you've come around." As she said this, she stroked my lips, my eyelids and my hair. Suddenly something hit my head, hurting me a little. I opened my eyes and saw what Mum was wearing—the gold bracelet! I cried out, "The bracelet!" Mum said nothing. She just pushed the bracelet up her arm. I fixed my eyes on the bracelet and thought: isn't that bracelet—isn't that the one I'd given to someone? What was the name of that person? I was muddled, but dared not ask because I couldn't remember it clearly. How did I get sick and get sent to this hospital? I had no idea at all.

"Don't be so unhappy," Mum said as she patted me. "While you've been running a fever and sleeping, people have been sending you things to eat and to play with. Look!"

Mum took up a nice-looking box from the small bedside table and put it next to my pillow. Opening it, she said, "The box is from Granny Liu. You can use it to keep things in. Look what's inside! These beads are from Auntie Zhang and this automatic pencil is from your uncle. Go on, play with them." Then she turned and talked to Nanny Song.

I picked up the items from the box one by one as Mum described them. The next thing I fished out was a watch studded with diamonds. Oh, this was mine all right, but as I held the watch and stared at it, I thought: why was it in the box? Hadn't I given it to someone?

"Mum," I couldn't help calling out. I wanted to know. Mum turned and, seeing the watch, took it from me.

"Look, I've fixed it for you," she said with a smile. "Listen to this!"

Mum put the watch next to my ear. Sure enough, it went tick, tick, tick. But then I thought of something else. I thought of one person, then another, and images of them flashed before my eyes.

"Mum," I still wanted to know.

Mum hurriedly picked up some other things from the box to humour me.

"Hey, see what we've got here. It's"

Suddenly I recalled many things, things about one person, and then about another person. But

why did Mum stop me from asking? How I missed the two of them! I really felt terrible and wanted to cry. I turned, and with my face buried in the pillow, burst out crying. "Daddy! Daddy!" I wailed.

Mum and Nanny Song hurried over to comfort me.

"Yingzi misses her dad," Mum said. "Dad will be so glad when he hears about this. He'll come and see you after work."

Nanny Song said, "Our baby has had a hard time, a really hard time."

Mum held me in her arms and hugged me, while Nanny Song patted me. But neither of them knew what was on my mind. I was thinking of those two people! Had I done something wrong? I was so scared! Dad, oh Dad, you're a man, you should be able to help me! That was the reason I cried out for Dad.

After crying for some time, I felt very tired. I closed my eyes and snuggled up in Mum's arms. Mum gently rocked me and softly sang this old song from back home:

"The sky is black as pitch, it's just about to rain;
The old man totes his hoe and goes to check his drains.
On his rounds he sees a carp going to meet its bride,
A turtle bears a lamp while the tortoise drums aside."

Then she sang another song:

"Quick, quick, quick,
Feed the little chick.
The chick grows bigger
And is served as Yingzi's dinner.
When told she can't have any more,
She goes off crying behind the door."

The gentle rocking made me feel so good. When I heard this song, I opened my eyes and smiled. Mum kissed me.

"Yingzi's smiling! Yingzi's smiling!" she said. "Look, Nanny Song has made you some nice soup with the chicks we raised at home."

Nanny Song produced a small pot from under the table. When she removed the lid, it was still steaming. Ladling out some yellowish soup to-

gether with several pieces of meat, she held it out to me. In disgust I turned my face to one side, not wanting to look at it, or eat it. Was it made from the little chicks we had in the western corridor? I had stroked their soft yellowish down and fed them with green hanging ghosts. The tears of someone with big eyes and long lashes had dropped on their feathers . . . I said nothing, just buried my head in Mum's bosom.

"She doesn't feel like eating," Mum said. "Just leave it there. She's just woken up and doesn't have an appetite yet."

I stayed in hospital for more than ten days. When I was well enough to leave my bed and walk to the window to look down into the street, Dad hired a horse and carriage and took me home.

The carriage was open-topped. I sat snugly in the middle, with Mum and Dad on either side. There were two drivers sitting in front, and when Dad urged them to go faster, they whipped the horses. Clip-clop, clip-clop, the horses trotted on. The carriage passed through places I'd never been before. The road we were on was very long, as if it had no end.

Everything was so new. I turned and knelt on the seat, looking silently around. The trees on either side of the road disappeared behind us. Was it the carriage that was moving? Or the trees?

I looked up at the clear blue sky. A white cloud—no, a ship, was floating by. I remembered her words: "I saw a white cloud shaped like a ship, slowly moving towards the horizon. I seemed to have boarded that ship for my heart was set adrift." I wondered: is she on the ship now? Is it sailing towards the horizon?

A breeze parted my fringe. We were passing by a tree when I suddenly smelt something nice. I turned and looked at Mum. I wanted to ask, "Mum, is this the scent of cassia?" I didn't actually say anything, but Mum, also catching the scent, said to Dad, "This lantana has a nice sweet scent." Then, seeing that I was looking at her, Mum said to me, "Yingzi, you'd better sit down. You'll hurt yourself if you sit on your legs like that. The wind's stronger if you face that way too."

So I sat down and watched while the drivers cruelly whipped the horses. Would the whipping

leave blue marks on the horses' bodies? The kind of marks that I saw on someone's arms in our western corridor when I rolled up her sleeves? The morning sun had shone into the room and onto her not-so-clean face. As her long wet lashes moved, tears had run down her face past her tear dimples into her mouth. I didn't want to see the drivers' whips! I closed my eyes and covered my face with my hands, so that all I could hear was the clip-clop of the horses' hooves.

The sun was shining on me and I felt warm. I was about to fall asleep when Dad suddenly stroked my chin with his finger and said, "What's happened to our chatterbox? Our Yingzi hasn't said a word today. Come on, tell Daddy what you're thinking about."

Did these words hurt? Why was it that when I heard Dad speak, I blinked twice and felt that the palms covering my face were wet? How could I put my hands down looking like this?

Mum must have been quietly signalling to Dad at that moment, for she said, "Our Yingzi must be thinking about the future."

"What future?" These were my first words since getting into the carriage.

"The future is that Yingzi is going to have a new house, new friends and a new school . . ."

"What about the past?"

"The past is gone and no longer means anything. Yingzi will forget it by and by."

I didn't reply, but couldn't help remembering: the little chicks in the western corridor; the person in a red padded coat who sneaked out from near the well; the tear dimples on her smiling face; the cover of the water vat under the eaves; the small room in the side yard; the bowl of goldfish on the table on the *kang*; the chubby baby on the wall; running in the rain . . . Did all these things belong to the past? Would I forget them in future?

"Here we are, Yingzi. This is Xinlianzi Alley! This is our new house! Look!"

New house? Mum had just said this was part of "the future". Why was it already here before me?

I guessed it was time to take my hands away from my face.