

李昂：殺夫

Butcher: excerpts

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Press Release

I

X X News Agency, __. __.19 __, Chen Jiangshui, a forty-year-old butcher from Chen Village, North Point, Deer Town, has been murdered by his wife, Chen Linshi, a woman in her twenties. On __. __., she suddenly attacked him with his butcher's knife and killed him. She then hacked the body into eight pieces, and was attempting to dispose of it in a rattan case, when fortunately her neighbour became suspicious and contacted the police.

When asked why she had committed the murder, Chen's wife pleaded her husband's habitual violence and cruelty. He used to drink and gamble all day long, she claimed, and then came home and took delight in beating her. He knew she loathed the sight of animals being killed, and yet he dragged her to the slaughterhouse to watch him at work. On the day in question, he had brought home one of his butcher's knives. She could see he was in a particularly vicious mood, and feared he would do her some serious harm: so she stayed awake until daybreak when he finally fell asleep, and then proceeded to butcher him as she had seen him do it at the slaughterhouse. She also thought of her act as a form of vengeance for the countless pigs whose lives he had taken.

Mrs Chen's confession is totally unconvincing. Adultery of one sort or another lurks behind every murder of this kind. It always has. Chen's wife was no doubt secretly put up to this by her lover. It is the duty of the authorities concerned to conduct a careful investigation into the case. It has also been suggested that Mrs Chen may have been suffering from psychological problems, and that she killed her husband in a fit of paranoia brought on by constant exposure to his professional activities at the slaughterhouse. But her action is nonetheless socially unacceptable and ethically repugnant. She should certainly not be acquitted on psychiatric grounds. On the contrary, the authorities should take stern measures in this case in order to appease the widespread feeling of outrage and provide an edifying public example.

II

In the sensational Chen murder case, though no secret lover was ever identified, the woman was convicted and sentenced to death, the only fit punishment for her heinous crime. She was yesterday transferred to Tainan Prison. In response to public sentiment and in accordance with national custom and tradition, she was first bound and placed on the back of a lorry, and driven through the streets, with an escort of eight policemen and a man banging a gong. The entire town turned out to watch. There were complaints that the parade was not up to the usual standard: the woman was not much to look at, and no one had been identified as her lover.

But despite the absence of a lover, the death-parade was an indispensable spectacle. To see this loose woman, this husband-killer, paraded through the streets, was surely an edifying public lesson for our womenfolk. It may help to teach them not to ape their western counterparts, not to fight for so-called equality and education. These goals are in reality no more than opportunities to expose themselves in public, to have their chastity sullied and our entire Chinese tradition of feminine virtue destroyed.

It is hoped that this spectacle will be an inspiration to those of us who are concerned about the continuing decline in womanly virtue.

* * *

1

LINSHI'S MURDER of her husband, Butcher Chen, created something of a sensation in Deer Town. The press and the police both pointed to an unidentified lover. But it was popularly believed to have been an act of retribution, the spirit of her dead mother coming to take vengeance.

Linshi's grandfather had in his lifetime been a tutor to some of the local families, and had even been regarded as a scholar of sorts. He had also owned a little land. But his son, Linshi's father, had contracted tuberculosis, and knew nothing about farming. He sold the family land, and then spent all the money on doctors. When he died, his wife was not quite thirty years old, and his only daughter nine.

Linshi's uncle took immediate advantage of his brother's widow and her fatherless child. He took their only home away from them on the grounds that otherwise it would pass out of the Lin family. The girl would after all be unable to continue the family line, and the widow would be sure to marry again.

From that time on mother and daughter were forced to wander the streets during the day, scavenging or doing odd jobs to survive. At night they sneaked back to take shelter in the Lin clan shrine. This ancestral shrine, despite its name, was just a broken-down building with a courtyard in front of it. It had been put up in the heyday of the Lin clan and had seen better days. With time the building had

become more and more dilapidated, and by now all detachable items had been carted off by some branch or other of the clan, and only the absolutely immovable parts remained—the great pillars that a man could barely get his arms round, and a few tiles on the roof.

Some members of the Lin clan objected to mother and daughter living in their shrine. But as time went by, and the mother was seen to have done nothing to disgrace the family name, the Lins decided to be charitable and let them stay.

It all started one winter during the war. The ordinary people hardly cared who was fighting who. All that touched them was the upheaval, the bad harvests, and the stragglers and deserters who wandered into their small town. Linshi and her mother could find no work of any kind now, and were constantly on the verge of starvation.

It was an exceptionally cold night, around the time of Lunar New Year, with a full moon of unusual brilliance. Linshi had gone to a barren hillside nearby to look for firewood. Dusk was always brief in winter, and night soon fell, desolate, with a biting wind from the sea whistling through Deer Town, screaming down every one of its streets and alleyways.

Linshi was making her way back in the bright moonlight, and was still some way from home, when she caught sight of a man in military uniform sneaking into the shrine. She could see his face, a young face, but scarred. His grey leggings flapped loose in the fierce wind, and the brim of his ragged military cap had been blown up over his head.

Linshi was thirteen by now, old enough to understand danger. She stood there thinking for a brief moment, then decided to go and get help from her uncle, who lived nearby. She ran stumbling through the bitter cold of the night, her heart pounding in absolute terror, and soon reached her uncle's house. Her teeth chattered so badly she could hardly make herself understood.

The word "soldier" roused her uncle to action. He got together a band of five or six clan-members and neighbours and hurried to the shrine. There they sneaked noiselessly up to a side door, in order not to alert the intruder. In the bright moonlight that shone through the broken lattice, Linshi could clearly see the figure of a man astride her mother. It was the man in uniform, now trouserless and naked from the waist down, except for his grey leggings which had worked their way loosely round his ankles. Linshi's mother lay beneath him, her sickly, emaciated face alight with a rosy freshness, glowing with a new-found desire.

She was munching a rice ball, and had another clutched in her hand. Her mouth was stuffed with rice. She was slobbering noisily as she ate, and all the while a mixture of rice and saliva dribbled onto her face, down her neck, over her clothes.

When they dragged him off her, for a moment the tall man in uniform seemed too stunned to understand what was happening. Linshi's uncle, as soon as he saw that he was unarmed, landed him a hefty kick in the groin. The man clutched himself and doubled up on the floor.

But the mother just lay there, munching away, her pants down at her knees, her dress pulled all the way up above her thighs. In the end Linshi ran over to her and she began howling and wailing, held her daughter's hand, and broke into a

tearful incoherent lament: how hungry she'd been; for days she'd had nothing to eat but a scrap of dried yam and some pig swill; she hadn't had a full stomach for as long as she could remember

Linshi's mother and the man were each tied to one of the big pillars in the shrine. More family members were summoned to discuss what had happened, and a crowd of onlookers gathered. The mother had by now stopped crying. She just kept mumbling how hungry she'd been, how she'd had nothing to eat for days but dried yam and pig swill. The man in uniform had given her two rice balls; she'd been hungry, she'd had no idea it would lead to this.

The man in uniform stared gloomily in front of him. His face was blank and he said nothing. He was very young and good-looking, apart from the long scar that ran from one eyebrow right down to his chin.

A noisy and inconclusive discussion took place. One senior clan-member said the correct punishment for fornication was to be weighted down with rocks and drowned in the river. But he added at once that this was only ancient custom. Someone else warned them to be careful, since they had no idea which regiment the man belonged to.

Finally a grand-uncle of Linshi's, who fancied himself something of an arbitrator in such matters, spoke in defence of the mother, pleading that she had been forced to do this against her will and was not therefore guilty of common fornication. Linshi's uncle then made his way through the crowd, stood before the man in uniform, and slapped him twice on the face. He beat his own chest and launched into a long discourse about the great distinction of the Lin family. If Linshi's mother had had the slightest sense of honour, she should have resisted to the death. In which case they would have built a monument to her chastity.

At the mention of the word "monument" the crowd all burst out laughing. After a while, the spectators grew bored, and since it was getting dark, they began to leave.

When the crowd had dispersed, the family elder, who wanted the matter settled, gave Linshi's uncle a meaningful look. In the circumstances the uncle felt obliged to have the girl taken to his home: a member of the Lin family must not be polluted. As she was leaving, her mother, who had all along been babbling out the same few wretched words, suddenly let out a great wail. Linshi looked at her, standing there bound to the pillar. There was no sign of a struggle, not the slightest rip in the dress she was wearing. It was dishevelled, but in places still neatly creased. Linshi remembered, it was the wedding dress her mother had been keeping carefully folded at the bottom of a chest all those years. She had been able to find nothing else.

That was Linshi's last memory of her mother, tied to that huge pillar, all in red. She never saw her again. Various rumours reached her ears. She had been drowned in the river that very night; she and the man had both been given a beating, driven out of the town and forbidden ever to return; she had herself chosen to run off with the man rather than return.

It was arranged by the clan elders for Linshi to stay permanently at her uncle's, in the very tile-roofed house she had lived in before her father's death. But she was

not the least bit better off for the change. Although Deer Town was not directly involved in the war, the unrest and the poor harvests darkened their lives throughout those years. Linshi's aunt was permanently confined to bed, and Linshi had to do all the housework, in return for which she hardly ever got so much as a decent meal.

She managed to grow up nonetheless, into a tall, skinny woman, with a long face like her mother's, lanky arms and legs, undernourished and underdeveloped, like a doll carved out of a plank. The theory current among the local women was that her flat figure was the result of the late onset of menstruation.

Knowledge concerning such physical details was a secret handed down from mother to daughter, or from elder sister to the younger. Linshi was a motherless child, and as a result when her first period came, she panicked. This was considered understandable. But when she lay down on the floor, yelling and screaming that she was bleeding to death, they thought she was overdoing it. She was making a fool of herself.

Then Linshi began telling every living soul about her "dream". It always started in the same way: I bet you've never seen a pillar like the one I saw! It wasn't just an ordinary one, it was huge, so huge you could hardly get your arms round it—like the pillars in our shrine.

In her "dream", she would see several such pillars rearing their heads up into the sky, jutting into the clouds, into a patch of endless darkness. Then thunder suddenly came rumbling towards them from the distance; and then a mighty crash—but no flame—which left the pillars black and charred, but still upright. Then blood, dark red blood, began to ooze from the blackened cracks.

Her neighbours soon tired of this dream of hers. They couldn't see anything unusual about it in the first place, and her telling of it was so repetitive. And so the minute she opened her mouth, they would interrupt her and say quite bluntly: Not that dream of yours again! Lay off, will you! She lost her audience, and soon she gave up telling her "dream" and withdrew into her own lonely world. From time to time, she would lift her long face from whatever chore it was she was doing, deep in her own thoughts.

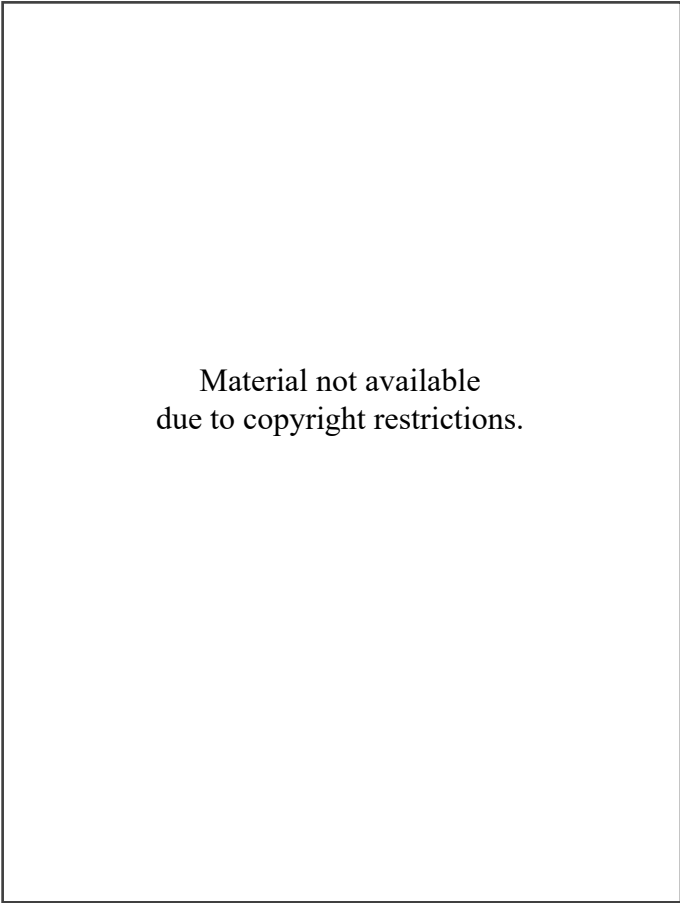
These long silences of hers were taken to be symptomatic of an obsession with the opposite sex. What else could cause a girl to stare at men with such abstraction and such intensity? One young fellow said it was like being swallowed alive—the way she stared at him. Her uncle had been waiting for an excuse to turn this niece of his to some profit. Only a sense of family shame had prevented him from selling her off several times before. Now was his chance. He held forth at great length on the subject of Linshi's voracious sexual appetite, pointing out how like her mother she was, and meanwhile proceeded to look for a match for her.

He eventually settled on a pig-slaughterer from a neighbouring village, a man by the name of Chen Jiangshui. Chen was about forty years old and still lived on his own. No one in his own village, Chen Village, had wanted him as a son-in-law. He had been in the slaughtering trade since his teens and had in that time taken the lives of countless pigs. It was rumoured that every night the spirits of these creatures could be heard squealing at his door. In the red-light district he had an

equally fearsome reputation. The whores all said he was an unbearable customer. To make him happy, they needed to squeal for him like a pig on the block. People just called him Killer Chen, and by and by his real name was forgotten.

The uncle must have made a lot out of the marriage, so rumour had it. Chen had such a bad reputation, and the difference in age between the couple was so great. The most widely accepted version was that Chen agreed to give the uncle a catty of pork every ten days or so. Food was short, and this kind of deal was much more attractive than the usual betrothal gifts. No wonder people in the neighbourhood were jealous. It struck them as a wonderful bargain, to trade a skinny body like hers for all those chunks of meat.

There were, of course, other versions. Some argued, for example, that Chen was just a pig-slaughterer, not a retail butcher, and therefore had no access to the supply of meat.



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Anyhow, Linshi was married. With a small bundle of everyday clothes on her arm, she walked the ten feet of Black Cat Bridge, over to Chen Village, where the sea could be seen in the distance.

She arrived at noon, and had to sit for hours, waiting with her head bowed. She was lucky in that Chen Village was a more rural area on the outskirts of Deer Town. They didn't stand much on ceremony. The makeshift match-maker couldn't stay with her; she had to help in the kitchen as well. So Linshi had ample opportunity to look her husband over. He was short and fat and had quite a paunch. Walked with his toes splayed outwards. His hair was close-cropped, and the back of his head shaped flat down, as if part of his skull was missing. His features were pretty normal, except for his eyes, small, and sunk deep in rings of puffy flesh. Eyes like that were called pig's eyes, so Linshi heard later. People with eyes like that had a predestined affinity with pigs.

The usual wedding feast was held in the evening. There were only two or three tables, nobody special came, mainly Chen's friends and neighbours, and Linshi's family. They began leaving soon after the meal. Linshi had had nothing to eat all day, and she was secretly glad to see the guests go. But then some of Chen's friends from the slaughterhouse stayed on to play drinking games, knocking back bowl after bowl till well into the early hours. Linshi could hear them eating and drinking noisily on the other side of the curtain, which was all that separated them, and her stomach rumbled for food. By the time the last guest left, she was faint with hunger and exhaustion.

But the drunken butcher still insisted on enjoying his rights, and Linshi howled at him pitifully with the little energy she had left. The neighbours heard her long drawn-out cries, carried on the whistling night wind, and took them for the squealing of a pig.

When it was over, Linshi all but fainted. Chen was an old hand at this kind of thing. He poured some wine down her throat, and she came to with a start, choking, conscious enough to complain of hunger. Chen fetched a big chunk of pork from the dinner table and stuffed it into her mouth, skin, fat and all. She wolfed it down and the grease spilled onto her chin and down her neck. Then she started weeping, and her tears trickled cold and pathetic down to the ends of her hair.

Linshi had never imagined that this was what life held for her—a series of days like this.

In the business of slaughtering, Chen was something of a master. He had started work at the slaughterhouse in his early teens, as a "helper", and his first chance with the knife had come soon afterwards. From the very first he had plunged the point of the foot-long tapering blade into the pig's throat with total conviction, going in fast and sure, his hand never wavering for one second. His fellow

slaughterers dubbed him Killer Chen, partly as a joking reference to his devastating "technique" with women, partly as a genuine compliment.

Having worked in the slaughterhouse for so many years, Chen was in the habit of getting up early, and the morning after his wedding night was no exception. He rose shortly after three o'clock, when it was still pitch dark, glanced at Linshi sleeping soundly by his side, and without waking her, quickly dressed himself, picked up his knife and set off to the small market-place in the centre of the village to have his breakfast.

The old man who sold wheatmeal gruel there early every morning had already set out his two broken bamboo chairs and his kettle was whistling away. He greeted Chen warmly. "Well I never! Still coming to me for breakfast?" He couldn't resist baiting him. "I thought you'd got yourself a woman now? You must love her a heck of a lot if you can't even bring yourself to get her out of bed in the morning."

"Fuck off!" Chen grinned at the old man and noisily slurped down two bowls of gruel, squatting on the ground. Then he headed through the village towards the slaughterhouse.

The slaughterhouse was south of the town. It was reached by a path which wound down through Back Lanes, the infamous red-light district, then across a wide paddy field and past a large pond. A substation had been built in the neighbourhood when electricity first came to Deer Town, but there were still very few people living there, and it was a lonely sort of place, made even more so by the thick clumps of bamboo which grew on both sides of the path, blocking out the light. In a strong wind, the rustling of the bamboo and the shifting shadows cast by the moonlight made it almost eerie. The people of Deer Town believed the whole area around the slaughterhouse and the pond to be haunted.

But Chen had never been bothered by things like ghosts. Poverty had forced him into his line of business very young, and like many other men in his trade, he was quite resigned to going to hell for having ended so many lives. So the spirits that haunted this earth were nothing to be particularly afraid of. At worst, he would simply go with them to the underworld.

But some form of religion was considered indispensable in the slaughterhouse, and a large stone over ten feet high had been set up at the entrance with the words "To the Souls of Animals" carved into it, painted bright red. In front of the stone stood a censer in which joss-sticks were always burning. They held services here every other week, and large-scale rituals on the fifteenth day of the seventh month, for the "salvation and peace of all tormented spirits".

The slaughterhouse was an L-shaped brick building. In the middle ran a long series of interconnecting rooms, where the actual slaughtering took place. Next to these, on the right, were smaller rooms where the inspectors marked the carcasses and where other miscellaneous jobs were carried out. Most of the butchers kept their personal effects there too.

When Chen arrived, he always went straight to one of these smaller rooms to put on his long rubber boots and occasionally an apron—though nowadays with all his years of experience, he seldom got blood on his clothes. He needed the boots

because the floor in the slaughtering area was constantly flooded.

When he was changed and ready, Chen walked into the slaughtering area. The familiar stench hit him straight in the face. His blood was up, he threw back his head and strode in.

To the right, inside the main slaughterhouse entrance, was a well, and there were already some women there drawing water. Several pigs lay trussed on the ground. It was early still and a few helpers were wandering around chatting with the meat vendors, who had brought in their pigs and were staying to watch the slaughtering.

Chen was greeted all round. One or two of the helpers jeered at him, and an old neighbour of his from the village poked him playfully in the groin. "Go on, tell us then: what was she like?" he asked loudly, with a big grin.

"A pretty tight fit, I'd say," one of the meat vendors commented in a mock-serious tone, as if he was making some sort of assessment. "A fair screw, eh? Not like that tatty old sack of Jinhua's at Venus Court. Get up her and you're in a bottomless pit."

His audience roared with laughter. A middle-aged helper remarked enviously: "Well, you've got yourself a woman now. No more roughing it for you. A woman to sleep with you, and cook for you. Now that's what I call the good life."

"The good life?" one of the others sang out immediately. "Why, look at him, he's all pooped out and almost late for work."

Another roar of laughter. But Chen didn't rise to the bait. He just threw them one "Fuck off!" after another, and a big leer pulled his sunken little eyes into a long slit across his face.

A bit more banter, and the helpers moved reluctantly to their stations. Two or three of them heaved up a pig, shouting in unison as they lowered it into the shallow V-shaped trough of the slaughter stand—brick-built, about three or four feet high. Once a pig was secured there on its side, its body wedged in and its legs trussed up, it could barely move.

But this beast, evidently aware of its imminent doom, let out a frantic squeal, and the other pigs on the ground struck up a gruesome chorus.

Suddenly one of the helpers bawled at Chen: "Did your woman squeal like that last night?"

This time instead of his favourite expletive, Chen lifted his knife in the air and ran it through an imaginary body. His mates fell about themselves laughing, some of them clutching their bellies helplessly.

For a moment they forgot the howling pig, which all but succeeded in rolling itself off the stand. They hurried over to pin it down. The shape of the stand made it easy to get the pig back in place and the situation was under control again.

Now Chen stepped forward. He held the pig's snout in his left hand, lifting the whole head and baring the throat, and in one lightning thrust drove in the long pointed blade. The pig let out a piercing squeal of pain. Then Chen pressed the blade down, made a two-inch slit, and withdrew, in a great stream of spurting blood.

This was always Chen's moment, the moment when he released the pent-up energy of the morning. When the blade had already entered the flesh, and as it was

about to be withdrawn, he would feel a warmth welling up at his finger-tips. He could smell the stench. He felt it come before the blood spurted. That warm welling breath, just the first touch of it, and he didn't even need to see the blood, he knew that he'd done a good job.

But somehow that particular morning, the morning after his wedding night, he had a restless gnawing in the pit of his stomach. He'd slept very little that night, he felt weak, slack with the knife. He knew he wasn't performing his best. He knew how much depended on that first stroke—the placing, the exact depth of it. That one stroke determined not just how the pig died, but the quality of the meat. If the blood had not been properly drained, the meat had a pinkish look to it—“butchered dead”, and the vendors wouldn't touch it.

Fortunately it wasn't the first or fifteenth of the month, or the birthday of the Great Ancestor, and there weren't too many pigs for slaughtering. Chen concentrated hard, and thanks to his years of experience he managed to get through the morning's batch without any gross blunders. But his knife hand felt clammy. It felt full of warm pig's blood.

Chen heaved a sign of relief when it was time for him to leave the slaughterhouse. It was still early, only a few minutes past seven in the morning, but the sun was already blazing down. From force of habit, he started heading straight towards the red-light district in Back Lanes; then as he was nearing the pond, he remembered the new wife he had waiting for him at home. He hesitated, wondering whether to go home or to walk on anyway to Venus Court and sleep with Jinhua in her snug cocoon. Then he suddenly remembered the pleasing way Linshi had squealed for him the night before, and turned with a glint in his eyes onto the road that led back to the village.

When he reached home, Linshi had evidently just got up. She was combing her hair, leaning against the bed, with her back to the door. Chen was struck by the darkness and lustre of her hair, which seemed somehow out of place on such a skinny woman. He stole up on her from behind, fondled her hair for a moment, then grabbed a handful of it and yanked her viciously towards him. She shrieked and fell flat on her back, and without further ado Chen clambered heavily onto the bed and straddled her. She soon fell silent when she saw who it was, but when he started pulling off her things and she realized what she was in for, she began to struggle and scream again, which only aroused Chen all the more.

This time it didn't take him very long. He relished her torment, he enjoyed having her howling helplessly under him, and screwed his puffy sunken little eyes into a nasty leer of pleasure.

When he came, there wasn't much to show for it. But the instant of ejaculation rid him of the bloated sensation that had gripped the pit of his stomach since early morning. His palms no longer felt clammy and shaky. An enormous wave of relief and exhaustion swept over him, and he immediately fell sound asleep.

Linshi lay awake, an excruciating pain throbbing in her groin. When she sat up and felt around with her hand, she was all bloody. The bed was smeared with blood too, dark round patches congealing on the bed planks. Then she caught sight of Chen's long shiny butcher's knife, lying there alongside the blood. He must have

dropped it climbing onto the bed. Linshi crept to the other side, to be as far away from the knife as possible. She could still feel the blood trickling from between her legs, and didn't dare pull up her pants again for fear of staining them. She had a feeling that this time she would die. She was too weak and exhausted to stay awake for long.

It was noon when she awoke. The room had one small window, and the sun was shining brightly through it, straight into her eyes. Against its light she could see a figure standing by the bed, holding out a large bowl of food. She reached for it instinctively, and recognized the figure as Chen.

It was just leftovers from the wedding feast the night before, but there was fish and meat in it, and Linshi was ravenous. She ate the heartiest meal of her life. When she finished she noticed Chen eyeing her with a strange expression on his face. She looked down at herself and suddenly realized that she was almost naked. Her pants were still down around her ankles. She had eaten the whole meal in this state. Terrified that Chen was going to assault her again, and shocked by her own nakedness, she quickly pulled on her pants and sat upright on the bed. She didn't dare get down. Chen took one more look at her and strode out, announcing that he would be back later.

Linshi remained sitting on the bed until she was sure he had really gone. Then she placed one foot on the floor. The movement brought the most unbearable tearing pain in her groin. She immediately bent over and pressed it with her hand. Gradually the pain subsided, but her insides still felt ready to burst. It was some time before she could straighten herself up, and began to move cautiously about the room.

She wandered about, taking the tiniest steps, feeling all the time like a total stranger in the house. Even now, at noon, the mud bricks of which it was built were still damp. Moisture glistened coldly on the rough dirt floor, and the one small window was shut tight. The entire place stank of mildew.

There were only two rooms altogether—a bedroom and a living room—divided by a curtain. In the corner, which served as a sort of kitchen, stood a stove and a few pots. It only took her a few paces to complete the circuit of the house. At first she was at a loss what to do, but when she realized how messy and filthy everything was, she found a mop and pail and began cleaning up, with the same industry she had practised in her uncle's house.

A while later, she heard footsteps. Somebody was walking in. She thought it must be Chen, and was about to hide, when she heard a squeaky voice asking if anybody was at home. Linshi stepped out to present herself, and found in front of her an old woman of about fifty, with a dark complexion, like most of the fisherfolk in the village. Her face was all wrinkles, and her silver hair scraped back into a neat bun. She seemed agile for her age.

"I'm Awangguan. I live next door. Folks call me AW," the old woman said, flashing an unbroken set of pearly white teeth that seemed much too healthy for someone of her age—almost as if she'd borrowed them from someone.

Linshi shrank to one side, in her confusion quite failing to offer her guest a seat. AW went ahead anyway and sat herself down on one of the two bamboo

chairs in the room, the one nearer the door. She started asking Linshi a whole series of questions—her name, her family, everything to do with the Lin clan. Then she confided in a low whisper:

“Actually, I knew your mother.”

Linshi lifted her head slowly and looked at AW. Suddenly, as if she had remembered something, AW began talking loudly about Chen. She said he wasn't a bad fellow really; but because he was a slaughterer, the pig-spirits would be after him in hell. He was doomed to be tortured, to have his belly slit open and to be drowned in the Pool of Blood.

The old woman described all this in graphic detail, as if she had seen it with her own eyes! But to her disappointment she failed to make much of an impression on Linshi. She then changed tack and asked Linshi if she would go with her from time to time to worship at the Chen ancestral shrine, to atone for Chen's sins: the wife (so she explained) would also be punished in hell for her husband's sins.

When she heard this, Linshi opened her eyes wide in terror, and nodded at once. AW smiled with pleasure, and uttered the name of the Lord Buddha. She reached into the pocket of her big baggy blue jacket (faded from many washings) and fished out a closely folded scrap of yellowish oil-paper, which she opened carefully. It contained a small dab of black ointment.

“Very good for wounds. Take it,” she said, smiling suggestively. She tried to seem matter-of-fact about it, but there was a voyeuristic expression on her face.

“I heard you screaming last night. And again this morning. I prayed to the Lord Buddha for you.”

Linshi blushed and hung her head. She seemed reluctant to take the ointment.

“Go on, take it. There's no need to be embarrassed.” AW took Linshi's hand and thrust the ointment into it.

“Did your aunt never teach you about these things?”

Linshi shook her head blankly.

“You poor motherless child!” the old woman muttered, getting to her feet. “I've got to go now. The men will be back from the sea. They'll be wanting their dinner.”

Linshi watched AW leave. Her feet had once been bound, but never tightly, never real “three-inch lotuses”. Now they'd grown back to their ordinary size. But she still had to hobble. Every step seemed to cost a great effort, hoisting one foot up, setting it down again, and again, and again.

Linshi sat there in a stupor, following AW with her eyes until she disappeared round to the left of the house. She clutched the ointment in her hand and watched the light fade in the sky. The pain in her groin had eased by now. Besides, over the years she'd learned not to pay too much attention to pain. Pain could be borne, it would pass. It was the strange bursting sensation inside that wouldn't pass. The memory of what had happened in the night haunted her.

Tears began to roll down her cheeks. She wiped them away with her sleeve, but they kept welling up in her eyes. She was not exactly sad, but somehow she couldn't stop crying. She just sat quietly weeping without knowing exactly why, until she saw Chen slowly approaching in the distance.

At first she didn't recognize him. She just saw this man walking on the vast dune that ran in front of the house. He was making very slow progress. He hardly seemed to be moving at all. The dune stretched all the way to the sea, but the distant horizon was taken up by a few bushes and clumps of reeds, and in the foreground was this vast grey wilderness of barren sand, littered in places with pebbles. It was a desolate place, particularly at dusk, when the sea-wind which was so characteristic of Deer Town started whirling the yellow sand into the sky, and the vast red ball of the setting sun loomed in the background.

It was against the orange glow of the sunset at the far end of the dune that Linshi saw Chen approaching. She vaguely registered in her mind that this was the man she was supposed to look to for the rest of her life. But she couldn't conceive exactly what it was she was to look to him for. All she could see at that moment was her man walking on the pebble-strewn grey dune, against the red setting sun. At first he seemed to be making no progress, but then he became recognizable, and soon he was at the door.

Linshi instinctively got up to hide. As he stepped into the house, Chen found her cowering to one side. He saw that the furniture had been rearranged. "You haven't cooked dinner," he said in an expressionless voice, lifted the curtain, and walked into the bedroom.

Linshi hurried to fetch some dry straw to start the fire. The familiar chores made her feel more at ease. She was almost happy when she saw what a big supply of leftovers there was in the pot from the night before.

She cooked some fresh rice and heated up the leftovers. As soon as she heard Chen coming out of the room, she put the pot on the bamboo table, picked up a bowl and was about to go and fill it with rice for him when Chen barked at her rudely to give it to him. He fetched a bottle of White Deer liquor from the bamboo cupboard by the wall, took the bowl from Linshi, filled it to the brim, and gulped it down at one go. Then he sat down with the bowl still in his hand.

He applied himself seriously to the business of drinking, occasionally helping it down with a bit of food. After a longish while, he noticed that Linshi was still standing there, looking helpless and ill at ease.

"Aren't you having any?" he asked in a loud drunken growl.

Linshi helped herself to a bowl of rice and dried yam, and topped it up with a little bit of the stock left in the pot. She didn't dare sit at the table, but ate the food standing, gobbling it down in a few mouthfuls. Chen was still busy drinking and had the bowl right up in front of his face, so she sneaked across to fill her bowl again, making sure it was tightly packed this time. She ate the second bowl slowly, first the yam, then the rice, chewing each grain with slow deliberation.

She was not really full, but she'd almost had enough, and didn't dare get any more. She stood leaning against the stove, gradually sliding down until she ended up squatting with her back up against it. She felt warmer and warmer, and eventually dozed off.

Chen was engrossed in his bottle. A few more bowls, and he started humming. Occasionally something resembling a tune would emerge and he even broke into song:

Oh the moon shines high, in the middle of the night.
And I take you by the hand, and I lead you off to bed.
Let the neighbours talk, let them gossip all they like;
'Cos the two of us are in love, we're determined to be wed

He sang and he hummed, one foot lolling on the ground, every now and then tapping time to the rhythm of his song. Suddenly he looked down and noticed that his bowl was empty, broke off in the middle of a verse and roared: "Where the hell are you? Come here and fill my bowl."

Linshi woke with a start. She'd been yelled at for years, she was used to it: she rose to her feet without registering any sense of shock. She was still not quite sure what Chen wanted her for, but instinctively obeyed and walked over to receive her orders.

Chen grabbed her round the waist. "Come and drink with me, you dirty bitch!"

Now she understood his intentions. And it was too late for escape. She took the bottle and obediently filled his bowl.

"Drink, damn it!" Chen mumbled incoherently.

She took the bowl and swallowed a mouthful. She'd drunk grog in secret before, during the winter months, to fight off the bitter cold. She'd even tried the local white bootleg, which was strong enough to make anyone choke. This White Deer was mild by comparison.

Chen was rather disappointed to see Linshi knocking the stuff back so easily. He waved his hand impatiently, and pushed her away.

"Get lost! Beat it!"

Linshi stumbled and fell to the floor. Chen laughed heartily. He pulled a few coins from his pocket and tossed them at her face.

"Your old man won today. Take them, you dirty whore. For your first night."

Linshi crawled back to the stove in fear and squatted down. She didn't dare pick up the coins, and she didn't fall asleep again. She leaned her cheek against the red bricks of the stove. The heat seemed to be fading away; it didn't seem so warm any more, perhaps because it was getting late, perhaps because she'd had the drink. Her cheeks felt slightly flushed.

Chen didn't seem to have any further designs on her. He tossed back his head, emptied his bowl to the dregs, burped and rose to his feet. Then he stumbled into the bedroom without even looking at Linshi. His snores soon reverberated round the house.

Linshi stayed huddled up beside the stove, not daring to move. She listened to Chen snoring, violently at first, gradually settling into an even rhythm, with an occasional peak like the eruption of some thousand-year-old grievance. Then, when she knew he was sound asleep, she crept away from the stove and grovelled on the floor for the scattered coins.

It was pitch dark outside, and the room was only lit by a dim five-watt bulb. The coins were the same mud colour as the floor, but somehow her instinct led her to them. She groped around for more, but soon gave up and squatted there

counting what she'd got. One "heavy" (a good coin) and a few "lights" (inferior ones). She was thrilled. She wanted to wrap them in something, but could find nothing. Then she reached into her pocket and found the ointment AW had given her earlier that afternoon.

She turned the little packet over in her hand several times before it occurred to her that the oil-paper it was wrapped in would just do. She scraped the ointment off the paper and put her four coins inside it. There was still a trace of the black ointment left, it would stain the coins, but she didn't mind; she wrapped them carefully and placed the little package back in the pocket of her jacket.

She sat down with a sigh of relief. She noticed there was still a dab of ointment on her index finger, and remembering what AW had told her, she took down her underpants and by the dim light smeared it all over the swollen raw flesh between her legs. The ointment had a cooling effect, and gave her some relief. It was a nasty pitch black colour, enough to put anyone off. She put her skirt back on, not bothering with the underpants. She felt safe without them now.

She got up to clean away the dinner and had soon finished washing the few dishes. She dried her hands and stood there not knowing what to do next. She listened to the wind, roaring and whirling around the house. Sometimes it made a panting noise, as if it was trying to break its way out of a tight trap. She felt scared.

She walked softly towards the bedroom and raised the curtain that hung in the doorway. Chen was lying there sound asleep, sprawled on the bed. She waited and then tiptoed nervously in. Without removing her dress she lay down in a corner, near the door. As she closed her eyes. Chen suddenly turned over and mumbled something. She sat up at once, seized with terror, and clutched the bundle she had brought with her from her uncle's place, ready to flee. Then Chen rolled over onto his other side, and was soon sound asleep again.

Linshi did not dare lie down again. She sat leaning against the side of the bed, hugging her bundle tightly to her. Gradually she fell asleep.