

*Chen Ying*

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*Chen Ying (1907-1986)*

Like many women from intellectual families in traditional China, Chen Ying's mother was a learned but illiterate woman. She often recited one of the hundreds of classical poems she had committed to memory to her daughter or asked a relative to read aloud from one of the great works of traditional Chinese fiction and drama. When Chen Ying's father, a late-Qing educator, allowed his daughter to attend a private elementary school in their native Shandong

province, he also insisted that she be tutored in the Confucian classics at home. As a pupil at Shandong Number One Girls' Middle School from 1920, Chen Ying continued to build upon her strong background in classical Chinese studies, but she was most inspired by a young teacher who introduced his students to new Chinese writing from Beijing and Shanghai as well as translations of modern literature from Japan, Russia, and Europe.

By the time Chen Ying's family moved to Shanghai in 1924, many universities had opened their doors to women; Chen entered the Chinese department at Shanghai University, a school founded by the Communist Party. Having participated in protests against imperialism since the age of twelve, Chen Ying was no stranger to political activism and quickly threw herself into the hotbed of Shanghai dissident politics. She joined demonstrations for freedom and democracy, distributed propagandist handbills, and helped to organize labor unions in several factories. However, the Guomindang crackdown on Communist sympathizers in 1927 closed Shanghai University and forced Chen to transfer to Fudan University, across town. She curtailed many of her overt political activities and devoted her energies to acting in new-style dramas and writing short stories. By the time of her graduation in 1930, she had already established a reputation as a talented new woman writer.

"Woman" appeared in *Short Story Monthly* under its original title, "Wife," in 1929. It is typical of the stories written by Chen Ying during the late 1920s and early 1930s, in which she focuses on a modern woman's dissatisfaction with the life she has created for herself. In "Woman," a young man describes the ordeal his common-law "wife" goes through in coming to and carrying out her decision to abort an unwanted pregnancy rather than give up her ambitions and become a dissatisfied mother. Chen Ying is often described as a writer of love stories, but

the complex emotional experiences uncovered in "Woman" carry deeper resonances than any simple romance. An extremely popular writer, Chen Ying published five collections of writing between 1929 and 1935, including *A Woman Writer* and *Woman*, all of which went into multiple printings.

Despite her youthful success, however, Chen Ying wrote very little fiction during the rest of her life. After a brief marriage to playwright Ma Yanxiang, Chen Ying moved to Beijing where she met and married Liang Zongdai, a professor of French at Beijing University, in 1935. They started a family and, like many intellectuals, moved inland to Chongqing in Sichuan province after the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese War in 1937. Near the end of the war, Chen Ying left Liang and moved back to Shanghai where she worked as a schoolteacher, joining the staff of the Shanghai Experimental Drama School in 1946. Her brother, a Guomindang military officer, persuaded her to move to Taiwan with her family in 1948.

In Taiwan, Chen Ying taught middle school and renewed her literary career as an essayist and translator. Her translations of works by Somerset Maugham, Stefan Zweig, Herman Hesse, and many other Western writers remain in print and are considered classics of modern Chinese translation. Chen Ying moved to the United States in 1972 to be near her children.

## WOMAN

(1929)

My wife and I live alone, so whenever I go out, she is left at home by herself. Unfortunately, my work takes me out quite often.

By the time I managed to set out for home that day it was already completely dark out. Thinking of my wife anxiously waiting for me, I rushed straight home, looking forward to her cheerful greeting. But when I pushed open the door, I found the apartment pitch black. Not a single light was on and all was still; it looked as if no one was home. Only after turning on the light did I notice my wife curled up on the bed. She was not asleep, however, and when she saw me come in, she languidly lifted her eyes and forced a smile. I knew right away that she had sunk back into the depression that had been plaguing her recently. Knowing that there was little I could do to comfort her, I just tried to distract her from her worries by talking about all manner of unrelated things and doing my best to avoid touching upon her problem. My wife not only seemed reluctant to say anything, but she also refused to listen to me and stubbornly remained in her melancholic state.

"Don't just lie there, why don't we go for a walk in the park?" I did my best to change her mood, but to no avail. Finally I sat on the sofa and beckoned to her with my arms outstretched.

"I don't feel like moving!" she mumbled as she sluggishly walked over to me.

We sat together on the couch embracing, neither of us saying a word. I was worried about bringing up the subject, but at the same time felt anxious, knowing that it would soon come up anyway. We remained silent, and yet we each knew what the other was thinking.

"Xige!" My wife suddenly called out my name and wrapped her arms around my neck, burying her head in my chest.

"What is it?" I asked, bending my head to look at her face.

"Whenever I think about it, I feel terrible, as if all were lost!"

"Don't say such things. If you loved me, you wouldn't talk like that!"

Her sadness had already had an effect on me, yet I still thought it best to try to avoid beginning this conversation. When I said these last words, she gently nodded her head and nestled closer against my chest in silence, but I could soon feel something wet soaking through the front of my shirt.

My wife and I had fallen in love and begun living together six months earlier. At the time we were intoxicated with love and full of fantastic dreams about our future. We both had literary ambitions, and after beginning our new life together we happily threw ourselves into a frenzy of hard work. We wanted to go on living together and working toward our common ideals forever. Neither of us wanted a conventional married life, so we even fashioned our lifestyle after our romantic school days. My wife wanted to learn to read Russian literature, so she had begun studying with a private tutor. Every evening, I would gaze at her as she sat with her head bent under the lamplight, looking like an innocent little child as she concentrated on mastering her Russian text. She seemed even more beautiful than usual as she sat illuminated by the glow of knowledge. Often I would be unable to stop myself from going over to kiss and embrace her, exclaiming: "I really love you!"

When she wasn't studying, my wife spent most of her time hunched over her desk, writing. Sometimes I would urge her to submit a manuscript for publication in one of the current popular literary journals. But my wife always felt very modest about her own work and liked to say, "Wait until I write a piece that I myself am completely satisfied with, and then I will send it out for publication."

She had a deep respect for literature as well as an almost juvenile love for it. Sometimes when we would reach a particularly happy moment as

we discussed our future plans together, she would cheerfully grasp my hands and say, smiling, "That would be wonderful, Xige! We must work hard for that!"

Other times she would excitedly, but still quite timidly, tell me about her own ambitions. She would carefully watch my face as she talked, and if she saw me smile, she would stop immediately and say resentfully, "You're laughing at me! I'm not going to tell you another word."

Happiness of any kind is hard to appreciate when you are in the midst of it. But the indescribable happiness that filled our lives then is not just a rosy memory, for even to us our life together seemed too wonderful to be true.

One day, however, a sad expression appeared on my wife's face. She told me about several changes in her body that made her fear she might be pregnant. After hearing this unwelcome news, I myself shared a little of her unhappiness, but gradually I began to feel that it was not such a terrible thing after all. I tried my best to comfort her, but no matter how hard I tried, my wife was unable to set her mind at ease. At times she would grow angry at my casual attitude. "You're just being self-centered," she would say. "You feel that what's done is done. It has nothing to do with you, so you don't really care." She would blurt out such exaggerations when she was in a dark mood, but of course I always understood and quickly forgave her.

As time passed, what we had feared in abstraction turned out to be reality, and her depression deepened. I told her that since it was now true, even though we hadn't wanted it there was no longer anything we could do about it, so it was not worth getting depressed over. She felt that I didn't understand her or have any compassion for her. Sometimes, either because of me or because of the problem—I was never quite sure which—she would become so aggravated that she would burst into tears. The fact was, she was never easily going to come to terms with the fate that had been dealt her. She would often say to me, "I never even wanted to be a conventional wife, so I can't tell you how much I detest the idea of becoming a mother." My wife had always had so many lofty ambitions that it wasn't hard to understand why she said such things. Cliches like: "It is a natural and spiritual obligation to be a mother" had little impact on her. I tried to comfort her, saying, "Even if we were to have the child, it wouldn't be that much trouble."

"How is that possible? Having a baby automatically transforms a woman into a maternal person. Even now, whenever I think about it I feel disgusted by it, but oddly enough, at the same time I find myself begin-

ning to wonder about the joys of motherhood. It's all too frightening! Women have maternal instincts, so it would be impossible to have a child without becoming a mother."

My wife thus was in a real dilemma. She was in despair, yet somehow found herself happily fantasizing about the future despite herself. One time when we went out, there was a three- or four-year-old child sitting directly in front of us in the trolley car. He was really cute and my wife couldn't keep her eyes off him. Even the slightest movement of the child seemed to interest her. She had an unconscious smile on her face, and every now and then she would nudge me and whisper "Look!"

"It would be fine if we had a baby like that!" I said admiringly, deliberately trying to provoke her.

She didn't get angry, but just smiled mockingly at me.

Another time after returning from a shopping trip, she was telling me this and that about her excursion when suddenly she smiled to herself.

"What is it?" I asked her.

"There were lots of children's clothes there that were really adorable and very inexpensive, only one *yuan* apiece." After saying this, she continued grinning, slightly embarrassed.

"You wanted to buy one or two, didn't you?" I couldn't help but laugh.

"No." She shook her head coquettishly.

"The child hasn't even been born yet and you're already preparing clothes for it!" I teased her.

"Who is it that really wants to start making preparations?" she mocked, throwing me an angry look.

"I know you love children and you would love a baby much more than you love me. I don't want you to have a child, because then you wouldn't love me anymore," I said to her provokingly.

"I don't want a child and I don't love children. I just want to keep on loving you," she said, running over and embracing me.

"No, I'm willing to have a child, that way we'll love each other even more."

"But I don't want to, no matter what happens," she blurted out with determination, falling back into her previous state.

Thus, the conversation abruptly ended.

Imagining what life would be like with a baby often became the focus of our conversation together. In those moments, my wife would appear to forget her usual depression, speaking quite cheerfully with me. But it did little to alleviate her mounting anxiety, and as the extent of her phys-

ical changes grew more obvious, she could rarely forget her troubles even momentarily. She grew alarmingly dispirited and refused to do anything. Normally so industrious, my wife stopped going to her Russian lessons and even gave up casual reading. She would often sit alone, despondently lost in thought, not moving for long periods of time. Once in a while when I spoke to her she would lift her head and stare up at me blankly, as if she were thinking about something else and had not clearly heard what I had said. I don't remember when it first started, but her face had grown as dark as the sky on a rainy day. Seeing her this way made me indescribably scared and upset; I began to feel that she was really suffering from some invisible, destructive force.

Thinking that keeping busy might distract her, I urged, "Why don't you review some of your Russian lessons? You don't want to forget everything you've learned."

"Study Russian?!" she exclaimed incredulously, on the brink of tears.

At other times I would try to speak with her about the future—her favorite topic in the past—but now she never wanted to talk about it and even seemed afraid to. She would often cut me off. "Everything is nearly over. What's the point of talking about it?" she would say dejectedly.

Although I myself had never considered the situation to be so tragic, as I watched my wife's misery I came to share in her despair.

My wife seldom divulged her worries. More often she sat alone in a gloomy silence that made her appear all the more mournful and dispirited. One day when she sat brooding like this, she cried out suddenly.

"What's wrong?" I asked, lifting my head immediately to look at her.

She didn't return my look, nor did she answer me directly but went on, lost in her thoughts. Then, hesitating momentarily, she slowly stated, "I want to go to the hospital."

"What? Where did you ever get such an idea?" I asked in astonishment and disbelief.

As if she had long foreseen my reaction, she turned her head to stare at me coldly, letting me know that nothing I could say would dissuade her.

"How could you do such a dangerous thing?" I continued.

"What danger is there? It's no more dangerous than having a natural birth. Besides, you're not saying this merely because you're worried about the danger." These last words came out with a sneer.

"Granted, it's not only the danger involved that makes me uncomfortable, but it's by far the most important reason. Besides, it's just too ruthless."



"It's still nothing more than a lifeless thing, so there is nothing cruel about it. I feel it would be more cruel to throw away my whole future for its sake."

"The way you are talking right now, it wouldn't be right for you to have a child anyway."

"It's just that for the sake of my ambitions, for my future, I can't have one right now."

"You are taking this problem too seriously. I doubt it would really be such a great obstacle for you."

"People's ideas change with their circumstances. If I have the baby, I will fall into the trap of motherhood; the person I am and have been will completely disappear. How can you say that there wouldn't be any obstacles? A trap has been set before me right now and before long I will walk straight into it. How could I be anything other than fearful and resistant? It's certainly possible that had this never happened, I would still not accomplish anything exceptional. But the moment I think that all will soon be lost, then it seems as if I had an amazing future before me which, if I am not resigned to fight for, will never happen."

"When the child is born we'll find somebody to take care of it. Then wouldn't you be able to go on living like you do now?" All I could do was offer my assurance.

"I think that is irresponsible. It wouldn't be right and it would be impossible; maternal love can't be so easily suppressed. If I were to become a mother, I would put all my energy into raising my child, and any aspirations I had before would be cast aside." With this my wife lost control and broke into tears of despair.

"But since it is already too late, isn't it best just to let nature run its course?" I said gently.

"Why should we give up and surrender to nature when we don't want to?" My wife's desperation had turned into obstinacy once again.

"But..." For a moment I was at a loss for words.

"At any rate, I have already made up my mind to do it," my wife said, more firmly.

"You can hate me or curse me all you like, but I beg you, please don't say such things!" The more I went on trying to dissuade her, the more resolute her decision became, so I tried appealing to her emotions instead.

"Doesn't it pain you to see me suffering like this day after day? Doesn't it upset you to think about a future in which all my former aspirations have turned to nothing and I have become someone I never wanted to become? Whenever I think about it, my future seems completely bleak as

I get closer and closer to that dark, ominous place; everything will be over." She grew distressed as she spoke and began crying again.

"Don't be this way. I don't feel good about it either. Go ahead and do as you wish." Deep in my heart I knew that I could no longer bear to oppose her, yet when I held her and consoled her I nearly cried.

"Don't just say that to humor me!" Almost begging, she lifted her tear-filled eyes and looked at me sadly.

"Really, I'm not just saying it." I tried to assure her of my sincerity.

"Then when should we go?" she asked, not daring to believe me, yet at the same time knowing that she had to trust me.

"This can't be done too hastily. First let me look into it, and when I find out which hospital is reliable, then we'll go. All right?"

"Do it as soon as possible. Now that we have made the decision, I don't want to prolong my unhappiness any longer." She sensed that my promise was nothing more than a few false words said to appease her for the moment, yet she did not want to come out and say she didn't trust me, so she kept on imploring me to make the arrangements quickly.

Perhaps to give me some time to do what I had promised, she didn't bring the matter up again for several days. Yet still her mind was not at ease. In fact, she appeared to be unusually nervous. Sometimes she would stare at me and her silent expression made me feel as if she were questioning and pleading with me. I felt so much pressure that I didn't dare look back at her.

As I watched my wife grow weaker by the day, my own pain in trying to deal with this alarming situation surpassed even hers. I never acted on the promise I had made to comfort her, nor did I come up with any alternative solution. My guilt deepened as I watched her so helplessly putting her trust in me and waiting, and I felt very confused. I knew that she had good reason to be depressed and that her fears were well founded, and I wondered at times if perhaps going ahead with her plan wasn't the right thing to do after all. I couldn't resolve this question. Would a woman whose aspirations went beyond the norm of simply being an obedient wife and good mother really be harmed by fulfilling her supposedly natural obligation to bear offspring? I thought of all the women I knew who were as ambitious and enterprising in their youth as any man, but who after getting married and becoming mothers shed all their youthful hopes as though merely stripping off an outer shell. They turned into completely different people. It was no wonder that my lovely wife was scared and struggling against the possibility of suffering a similar fate. I was well aware of the contradictions that arise in people's lives

under the present social system, but what could I do that would be best for my poor wife?

The moment I arrived home that day, the atmosphere in the room told me that my wife had been thinking about it again. She remained silent at first, but finally she broached the subject. "I don't want to talk about it," was all I could say as I tried to avoid the topic. But my wife seemed determined, and no matter how uneasily I acted, in the end she said the words I feared she would.

"What about the hospital?"

"This isn't the kind of thing that can be decided overnight. It's quite a lot of trouble," I lied once again.

"But it isn't something that can be put off easily either!" My wife's expression was extremely anxious as she spoke, but still she appeared more sad than worried.

"Of course I am aware of this. I will definitely take care of it soon," I said once again in earnest.

My wife was left repeating her pleas over and over again.

All our beautiful dreams had been shattered; the sweet life we had once shared seemed to have taken place in another world. Even though each day was so gloomy, the time passed surprisingly quickly. The extreme heat of summer gradually turned into the milder weather of autumn, but my wife's burning distress did not cool. On the contrary, like an illness taking a turn for the worse, her mood was so vile that her temper grew violent and she became extremely irritable, showing no patience with me. At times she would even say impulsive things like, "If there is no way to solve this problem, then I would rather just die. Death is better than not living life freely."

Finally my wife lost her trust in me and secretly took the matter into her own hands. Without telling me, she went ahead and made arrangements with a reliable hospital recommended by a girlfriend. Faced with her staunch determination and the finality of her action, I could say little other than, "Well, we'll go then." Afterward, I went myself to see her girlfriend and questioned her about all the details. We left for the hospital that very afternoon.

When I walked in the front doors of the hospital I felt as if something cold were piercing my heart. From the color of my wife's face I could tell that she felt somewhat strange too, but steadfast in her determination, her expression remained calm. It was a large, well-equipped hospital so I felt that it would be unlikely that the doctors here would be unreliable—a thought that comforted me slightly. In the waiting room we met with

the doctor who had been recommended by her friend. He was a middle-aged man with the gentle and dignified manner typical of doctors. He appeared to be very kind, but inexplicably I was unable to say a word to him. As he had been introduced to us through a friend, he already understood our situation; in a rather overly routine way he only asked my wife a few questions about her health before leading us upstairs to an examination room. The room on the second floor was large and tidy; everything in it was completely white, giving it a sterile air. Soon after we entered, a nurse carrying white bedding came in and placed it on the bed.

"Am I going to be staying here tonight?" Having assumed that we had come only for an examination today, my wife sounded slightly alarmed.

"Yes, that way we can begin administering the medicine immediately," the doctor answered with a smile.

"Will you need to operate?" I asked nervously from the side.

"Perhaps not," the doctor responded nonchalantly, and left the room.

My wife and I were then left alone in the whiteness, and for a time neither of us said a word as we sat in silence on the freshly made bed.

"Are you going home?" my wife asked me suddenly.

"I can't stay here, of course. Don't be afraid, I'll come to see you every day." I did my best to reassure her calmly.

"It's not that I'm afraid." Finally my wife could no longer maintain her composure and she fell into my arms crying.

"Don't do it, let's go home, okay?" I don't know why it had taken me so long to say this.

"No," she answered, lifting her head, her firm resolve returning.

Outside the sky grew dark as dusk arrived and turned to night while my wife and I continued to sit there, unable to think of anything to say; in my mind, however, my thoughts were racing chaotically. After a while I could stand it no longer and finally managed to get out the words "I should go."

"Stay a bit longer," she begged me, but still there was nothing to say.

After a time she burst out, "Go on home." And yet I couldn't get myself to leave right away. As I lingered she became extremely agitated and urged me repeatedly, "Hurry up and get going!" There was nothing I could do but force myself to leave quite uneasily. I am certain that as soon as I went out the door the tears she had been fighting back started flowing.

I walked home in a daze. I was so confused that I did not know what to think about and I felt even worse once I arrived. A few hours earlier this had still been our cozy little home, but now it had become frightfully barren. Everything seemed lifeless now that my wife was gone. A bouquet

of some kind of white flower buds that she had just brought home that morning stood in a vase on the table. We had never expected that she would be staying at the hospital so quickly and the thought that she would not be able to see the flowers bloom only compounded my escalating sense of loneliness. I thought of her in the hospital at that moment, perhaps already undergoing the operation. In her pain would she still think of me? Uneasy thoughts overtook me as I lay down on the bed, completely unable to fall asleep. Every time I began drifting off, I would suddenly be startled awake.

I was all set to visit my wife very early the next morning when I realized that the hospital would probably not be open yet. I tried to be patient and wait a bit longer, but when I finally went out on the street the yellow rays of the morning sun had just barely reached the tops of the buildings. Although the cold winds and falling leaves of autumn had not yet fully arrived, on this clear morning the sidewalks along the road already felt desolately autumnal. The streetcars were running, but there were hardly any passengers and my mood darkened. As I rode in the chilly streetcar, I contemplated how people continuously search for happiness, and yet life remains more full of sadness than ever. I walked straight up to the door of the tall hospital building and stared up at it before snapping out of my daydreams and gathering my thoughts.

Reaching the door of my wife's room upstairs, I seemed to hear a low moaning sound coming from within, but when I gently pushed open the door, it disappeared. The air in the room was as silent as the surrounding whiteness. Everything remained exactly as it had been when we first entered the room yesterday, only now my wife's pale face lay on the white pillow of the slightly raised hospital bed. She looked like she was sleeping. Fearing I would wake her, I tiptoed in, but my wife had already opened her eyes wide in surprise and seen it was me. Instantly her expression grew agitated, and she drew her arms out from beneath the blanket and held them out to me. I went over and embraced her tightly as she firmly buried her head in my chest without saying a word. Afraid that she was overly excited, I wanted to calm her down a bit, so I just stroked her hair in silence. Suddenly I felt my wife's shoulders begin to tremble, and only then did I hesitantly lift her head to discover that her face was already streaked with tears. I asked her right away, "What is it?"

She held me even tighter and cried, still not uttering a word. Only after I urged her over and over again did she finally blurt out, "I feel so sad."

Strangely enough, this outburst made me feel relieved and gradually I became more relaxed. She calmed down a bit as well, but before the tears on her face had dried, she suddenly broke into a smile.

"Did they give you the medicine yesterday?" I asked.

"Yes. Yesterday when I saw the nurse carrying in a tray of knives and scissors and things and the doctor took them and was about to begin, I really felt scared. I closed my eyes tightly, gritted my teeth, and prepared for the pain. My back broke out in a cold sweat, but then I did not feel a thing and before long it was over." In a playful tone my wife related the story of how happy she was that it had been so painless. I was relieved that my own terrible worries had been unfounded.

"You didn't ask whether they would have to operate when it started coming out?"

"I did, and he said that after administering the medicine inside, it comes out by itself and there is no need for an operation," my wife told me quite cheerfully.

"When did he say it could come out?"

"Probably tomorrow or the day after."

"Then take care of yourself and keep still. How do you feel now?"

"My stomach hurts a little."

"And yet you were still crying like that just now? It can't be good for you, from now on you must not do that!"

"Okay!" she answered, like an obedient little girl.

"Tell me, why were you so upset just now?" I asked her, smiling.

"I don't know why, but when I saw you I just felt like crying," she answered, laughing in embarrassment as she leaned her head on me.

"How come you feel like crying when everything is going so well? You really scared me just now. How do you think I felt?!"

"I missed you so much that as soon as I awoke at sunrise, I began to wait for you. Then when I saw you come in, I don't know why, but I just felt like crying."

"From now on don't be like that. If you do, then I won't dare come anymore."

"All right, I won't cry," she agreed, glancing up at me quickly.

Although she lay in bed like a sick patient, my wife's spirit was livelier and happier than it had been in months. It was as though her problems were already completely solved, and she could not help telling me about all the things we would do after she got out of the hospital, even bringing up plans for the very distant future. It was odd, though, for seeing my wife in such a happy mood hurt me strangely.

After a time, I had to leave for the office and my wife looked at me helplessly. She did not try to stop me, but just told me repeatedly to come back soon. When I got to the office I didn't feel quite as uneasy as the night before, but I still didn't feel completely relieved either. I kept thinking about how high her spirits had been when she saw me that morning, how sad she might have felt after I left, and how she was now waiting for me to come back.

It was four in the afternoon by the time I left the office. I rushed to the hospital and when I pushed open the door and went in, I deliberately hesitated for a moment, hoping that she would call out to me so cheerfully and beckon me with her arms outstretched as she had that morning. But when my wife saw me come in this time, she only smiled at me momentarily before letting her gaze drop down lifelessly once again.

"What's wrong?" I went to her side and asked.

"My stomach hurts."

"How badly?"

"Terribly, in spasms."

"Has the doctor been in?"

"He was here and said not to worry."

"It's probably going to come out soon. Don't be afraid, just be patient and it will soon be over."

"Yes." She nodded her head slightly in reply.

As I was saying this, my wife's expression grew tense, her eyes shut, and she seemed to be grinding her teeth; she looked as though she were trying her best to hold something back but couldn't, until finally she turned over in the bed and cried out, "Aiya!" Her hands grasped the sides of the bed, holding them tightly with all her bodily force.

"Your stomach hurts?" Frightened, I stood up, not knowing what to do.

My wife didn't seem to have heard what I said, but just went on crying in pain more and more intensely. The sound was so penetrating it made me crazy.

"Let me go get the doctor."

"No." She contained her pain and stopped me abruptly. Gradually her shouts subsided and her furrowed brow relaxed, but even though she was calm again, she was not exactly completely at ease. Her face had become pale and her eyes remained closed; her head rested listlessly on the pillow, perfectly still, as if she were asleep. I then noticed that her forehead was covered with large beads of sweat, and I wiped them off gently, my hand feeling the damp coldness of her skin. She looked unusually weak and I did not dare to say anything to her.

"Xige! It really hurts terribly." She rolled on to her side.

"It must be about to come out. Bear with it a bit longer." This was the only comfort I could offer.

Her eyes closed again and she fell silent.

Before long, she appeared to have recovered some of her strength, and she opened her eyes wide and asked for a drink of water. She seemed to want to say something, but her gaze and her voice did not return to their usual liveliness and her earlier cheerfulness had vanished altogether. Even when a smile appeared on her pale face, it only revealed all the more how miserable she felt.

"Are you starting to regret it now?" I asked her, smiling.

"Wouldn't it have been just as painful if I had gone ahead and had it?" she snapped back, annoyed by my question.

"Yes, childbirth is always painful."

"Why does it have to be painful? It doesn't seem natural," she said, as if asking herself.

"It's painful in order to show how serious a thing life is!" I said, trying to follow her train of thought.

Every time a contraction overcame her I was at a loss what to do and just stood there nervously. In her pain, my wife kept calling out my name over and over. What an unbearable sound! Was she crying out like this because she hoped I could alleviate her suffering? Maybe my standing in front of her so tensely, even if I could do nothing, might comfort her a little. I also thought about how awful it would be if I hadn't been here when the pain came, and I felt dissatisfied with the lack of sensitivity in the treatment provided at this hospital. The nurses did nothing more than come in like robots to take her temperature or indifferently ask her a few questions; they never tried to comfort the patient at all.

I said to my wife, "Why doesn't a nurse come to take care of you? If I weren't here, what would happen when you were having a contraction?"

"But I don't want them to stay with me. Seeing them won't help me when I'm in pain. Sometimes I can think of things to distract myself, but if they were in here it would just be annoying."

"What kinds of things do you think about?"

"I think about what I will do after I leave the hospital. Knowing that I will get back everything I lost makes me feel much better. The moment I think about how I will be my old self again, I'm really happy and I feel free to go ahead making plans for the future."

Hearing her speak so passionately, I recalled the hopelessly depressed state she had been in before and I was extremely touched. What could be



more moving than a person thinking so desperately of the future in order to lessen the pain of the present? This thought came to me as I contemplated my wife looking forward to life with such intensity.

Finally I could no longer stand by and watch my wife suffer wave upon wave of such terrible pain, and I went to get the doctor.

"She's in such agony, don't you think it's about to come out? Please have a look, doctor."

"It couldn't be coming so soon. Let me see..." The doctor spoke calmly, and taking the stethoscope from the nurse, he placed it on my wife's abdomen and listened quietly for a moment before saying, "Not yet."

"When will it most likely be?"

"Tonight at the earliest," the doctor said and walked out nonchalantly.

How will my wife be able to stand it for that much longer? The doctor's words only served to increase my own anxiety. My wife's condition remained unchanged right up until the time I had to leave. Back home, I seemed to be hearing her painful cries all night long. At moments I would wonder whether her pain had already subsided, but then would fear that this was just wishful thinking. The next day when I went to the hospital, her condition had changed little although the situation appeared to have grown more tense, as two nurses now stood watch before my wife's bed.

"It hasn't come out yet?" I asked in a whisper, since my wife looked like she was asleep.

"Soon," one of the nurses answered in a low voice.

Suddenly my wife's eyes flew open, and catching sight of me, she forgot the presence of the nurses and grasped my hands tightly, not saying a word as her tears began to fall. But just as I was about to speak, she let go of me and began writhing in pain again. The nurses held her firmly to keep her from turning over and ordered her, "Don't move!" My wife could do nothing but rock her head back and forth on her pillow wildly. The degree of pain had increased since last night, and the time between contractions shortened so much that even when the pain stopped, there was hardly time to say anything before it began again.

"It's going to come out soon. Please go out and wait for a while," one of the nurses said to me.

Just as I was about to go out, my wife sat up with a start and grabbed hold of me screaming hysterically, "Don't leave me, don't leave me!" Only when the pain began again did she release me.

"But there's no harm in letting me stay, is there?" I pleaded with the nurses.

The two nurses only glanced at each other in embarrassment, which I took as an expression of silent consent. I then sat next to my wife and took hold of her icy hands.

The nurse told my wife to draw her legs up on the bed. She tied a piece of cloth to the bed frame behind my wife's head, telling her that holding on to this when the pain came would help her push harder. When the next contraction arrived, my wife obediently raised her hands above her head to grab hold of the cloth and drew her feet up on the bed, exerting all her energy. After the nurse told her again to keep quiet, my wife only let out a scream when she was absolutely no longer able to restrain herself. But just as quickly as she let out the scream, she shut her mouth again tightly. Every muscle in her face was tense and trembling; I had never seen a more pained expression. She appeared to be completely unconscious of what was going on, yet obediently followed whatever the nurses instructed her to do. The unyielding expression on her face was astonishing. With every contraction, one nurse pressed down on her abdomen with her hand and sternly urged her, "Push! Push!" Some water would pour out from below and all of us would hope that "this time it will come out," but the contractions were stubborn and once the pain climaxed, the contraction stopped with no outcome. I felt almost disappointed each time I saw my wife's body suddenly go limp and still after having pushed with all her strength. When the contraction stopped, my wife was so tired she hardly seemed to have the strength to breathe. The color had completely drained from her face and lips. Large beads of sweat formed on her forehead and her hair was thoroughly soaked. She looked like she had no more strength left, but when the next contraction began, she would somehow muster energy again. But it was never with any result.

"I don't have any more strength left! I want to sleep!" My wife spoke deliriously, as if unconscious. She called out listlessly, and seemed to be completely exhausted and nodding off. But the contractions were coming in quick succession so it wasn't easy to have a moment's rest.

"How can this be right? I don't have any strength left! Will they have to operate?" my wife said, beginning to panic herself.

"Don't worry, it will come out soon," the nurse said encouragingly in an effort to comfort her.

"Shouldn't we ask the doctor to come in?" I sensed that my wife really did not have the strength to go on, and I was growing alarmed.

"Don't worry, it will come out. The doctor is operating on someone else at the moment."

The next contraction arrived and this time it was especially prolonged. My wife continued to struggle, but she was having to do her utmost to keep it up, and I was certain that she would faint. The nurse looked on nervously and then suddenly urged on my wife sternly: "Okay, quickly, push again!" I looked at my wife's face and thought that she would not be able to do it, but unbelievably, she pushed with even greater force. As she was pushing with her last bit of might, her body suddenly collapsed, and the fetus appeared from between its mother's legs. The nurses said happily, "Good, good," as they deftly went about taking care of things. I too felt an incredible sense of relief, as if suddenly letting out a deep breath I had been holding for too long. My wife, whom I expected would fall straight asleep from exhaustion, opened her eyes wide and smiled at me calmly. I could only hold her hands tightly, not knowing what to say.

As the nurse was placing it in a pan, she suddenly said, "Oh, it was a boy."

"Please bring it here for me to see," my wife said, raising her head.

The nurse carried the pan over, and in a pool of blood was a nearly completely formed body of a baby. A cold chill swept through me, and I could not look at it closely. My wife too lay her head back on the pillow. After the nurses had cleaned up everything properly, they said a few words to my wife and then went out. I gratefully thanked them. "I'm sorry we caused you so much trouble."

Left alone, my wife and I embraced in silence, our relief disturbed only by the impression left by the awful sight of the baby. My own emotions were in turmoil. Suddenly my wife stared at my face for a moment and said, smiling, "The baby really looked like you."

"I'm too upset. Please, let's not talk about it." I rested my head on my wife's chest, feeling so overwhelmed that I nearly broke into tears.

My wife immediately fell silent. I quickly realized that I should not let her get too excited since she was so exhausted.

"Aren't you tired? Why don't you go to sleep for a while now?"

"I don't understand why, but for some reason I don't feel the least bit sleepy."

Her mind was awake but her body was worn out, and before long my wife quietly drifted off to sleep with a tired but contented smile on her face. Like a mother watching over her child, I happily prayed in silence that she would sleep more, but at the same time I waited for her to wake. Although I sat there alone, I did not feel the least bit lonely.

At dinnertime my wife said to me suddenly, "Now I understand why childbirth is so painful. When a person is in extreme pain and the pain

vanishes instantly, nothing can be more joyous. And if a new life suddenly appears beside you as well, there is no comparable happiness—how fascinating the mysteries of life are." My wife seemed to be saying these last words to herself, and she went on smiling even after she finished speaking.

For a time I didn't know how to respond as I thought to myself, "Is my wife feeling somehow empty now?" Her reflections were not simply those of a fickle soul, however, but more likely arose from the mysterious essence of feminine nature.

Although my wife was very weak after the delivery, she did not feel unhealthy. She would often say to me quite cheerfully, "My health is even better now than before. All those little annoying illnesses are gone, and my appetite is back." But unlike her health, her spirit did not seem to recover, and instead of feeling happy she became consumed by a new series of anxieties. Every time I went to see her she would hug me warmly as if she were extremely happy, but then a moment later, as if greatly hurt, she would begin to cry for no apparent reason. "What's wrong?" I would implore, but then she would have even more trouble holding back her tears.

"What is making you cry?"

"Nothing, don't ask me that!" she would say, looking so embarrassed that if I persisted, her crying only became fiercer.

It was a few days since the birth, and already she had begun asking when she could be discharged from the hospital. Upon hearing answers like "at least another week," she responded all the more despondently, "How can it possibly be that much longer? I don't even want to stay here one more day!" Sometimes I would try to talk with her about what she would do after getting out of the hospital—a topic that used to make her so happy—but she no longer seemed interested. She would just reply "okay" or "whatever" with cool indifference to anything I tried to discuss with her. There didn't seem to be anything she wanted to talk about. She was easily upset and wept without provocation; sometimes it even looked as though she had been crying for hours before my arrival. One day as I was about to leave after a visit, she suddenly produced a letter, which I don't know when she could have written, and handed it to me, saying, "Read this when you get home." I tore open the letter and read it on my way there:

Xige,

I myself am at a loss to understand this pain, so it must make you feel even more exasperated. I know this and yet there is

nothing I can do to stop it; perhaps this letter will help you understand.

The hospital is such a frightful place, everything here makes me feel miserable. All kinds of sad, unknown emotions have overwhelmed me at once, and try as I may, I cannot rid myself of them. I think that I might feel better if I could leave this place. I can hardly bear it for even one more day!

Happiness always remains in the realm of the imagination, while in reality all is void. I know that just getting out of the hospital will not make everything all right as I often say it will, but I can't help hoping for this. People are endlessly searching and hoping even though all they find in the end is emptiness.

If you knew how I was suffering right now, then you would not continue to urge me to stay here. But you certainly can't know, since even I myself am at a loss to understand it.

I could sense that my wife was suffering, but how she had gotten this way I could not comprehend. At this point I felt that keeping her in the hospital wasn't likely to benefit her health any longer. So after a few more days—a week after the birth—I got the doctor's permission for her release from the hospital the following day. When my wife heard this news she immediately perked up, becoming so happy that she wanted to jump out of bed and get dressed right away. No matter how I urged her, she refused to listen, saying that she wanted to go downstairs and walk around a bit to see how it felt. I could only stand behind her as she unsteadily made her way, step by step, over to the mirror, where she paused for a moment and said with surprise as she gazed at her reflection, "What a state I'm in!" Indeed, my wife did look even thinner now that she was out of bed. She pulled at her clothes and looked in the mirror again; they were really much too big for her now. She wrapped them around her, gazing at herself in the mirror again and again, extremely pleased to see that her body had returned to its former slender shape. Only after I had urged her several times did she finally return to her bed, but she was unwilling to lie down. As I left, she instructed me to bring her clothes and makeup the next day, saying, "I am so happy to be getting out tomorrow that I want to make myself up a bit." Having something to look forward to and day-dream about again, my wife became very happy.

Since my wife had been in the hospital, our home had become practically uninhabitable. I only went back there to sleep at night and was never in the mood to tidy up, so a thick layer of dust covered everything. Now

that my wife was coming home the next day I had to do some cleaning. I spent the whole evening sweeping out the desolate rooms. Only now did I see that those nameless white flower buds that my wife had bought the morning before she went into the hospital had already bloomed and withered unnoticed in the vase. I was about to throw them out when suddenly a strange feeling came over me and I left them as they were.

When I arrived at the hospital the next day, my wife was already waiting for me, her hair combed neatly and her face powdered. Seeing my wife made up like this after having been in bed for so many days, I thought she looked especially beautiful.

"Oh, you've already made yourself up. Where did you get the makeup?"

"Since it was taking you so long to get here, I didn't want to waste any time when you finally did, so I borrowed some from the nurses."

As she spoke she changed into the clothing that I had brought along for her. She looked as happy as a little girl preparing to go out and play.

Taking my arm and walking unhurriedly out the door, she could not conceal the smile that appeared on her face. She grew even happier the moment we got home, like she was returning to her mother's bosom for the first time after a long separation. She looked very tired, but she would not go to bed and rest. Instead, she insisted on sitting on the sofa as if she were fully recovered and kissing me warmly. Her excited state lasted until the next day, when she gradually calmed down and quietly returned to bed. But my wife's mood was unstable; if she was not extremely excited, then she was abnormally melancholy, frequently falling back into her deep, brooding state.

Finally my wife noticed the vase of forgotten flowers that I had nearly thrown out the day before.

"Why are those flowers still here?"

"Because they are a commemorative marker, you bought them the day you went into the hospital."

"It certainly must have crossed your mind that these flowers would only become a memorial if I had died."

"Why would you say something like that?"

"Don't get mad, I was just joking!"

She smiled as she said this and seemed very cheerful, but she soon grew weary again. I then went to do some writing at my desk while she lay quietly on the bed. A serene atmosphere pervaded the room. Before long my wife suddenly said, as if she were trying to comfort herself, "If I had brought home a baby from the hospital, I don't think it would be this quiet."

"But that would have been fun too," I said, trying to draw out her real meaning.

"Nothing is ever easy. On the one hand it would have been fun, but on the other it would have been a lot of trouble," she said, sounding like she was no longer so resolutely opposed to having children.

"Next time let's have a child. This has made me too sad," I said.

"I don't know what it is, but whenever I recall his face, I think that it was very handsome. Really, he looked just like you." Smiling, my wife pretended as if she were speaking very casually.

She was not interested in any other topic of conversation, only becoming strangely excited when we talked about this one subject. She would seem to be smiling slightly while still subconsciously suppressing her own true feelings. She often said to me as if in jest, "Are you thinking about that baby again? Why don't you go get him? I'm sure he is still at the hospital." Or, "You want a baby, don't you? You're still so young and yet you want a child already?"

Life continued on without a new beginning. My wife's dream of "being a new person after I get better" had, needless to say, long since disappeared. Now she was once again tightly wrapped up in her sadness.

Knowing how my wife liked flowers, one day I brought home those white flowers that she liked the best. "Last time you bought them you weren't able to enjoy them, so I got some for you again."

After putting the flowers in a vase, my wife stared at them for some time. Then, in her old playful tone, she said, "From now on we'll only buy this kind of flower. They'll be a memorial to our baby."