

He read it out loud. His heart was smiling triumphantly, he thought; it extended infinitely, like the ocean. The way he used to think suddenly struck him as being funny. An infantile disorder! Laughter slowly welled up from the bottom of his heart. Vainly trying to suppress the ungainly display, bending over with his hands on the railing, he raised his face toward the horizon. There was the first sign of the continent.

### *Chapter Three*

#### *1. A Room with a View of Mount Zijin*

To the east of Nanjing is a mountain that has, people say, a regal air. At sunset, the enshrouding purple mist seems indeed to be rising from the legendary gold that the king of Chu buried in these lands more than twenty centuries ago, to bring peace to his country. Come autumn, the mantle on Mount Zijin, or Purple Gold Mountain, is too gorgeous for words, and so too is the graceful line that links the peak to Lake Xuanwu.

Mandarin had gotten on Tainming's nerves, and he was gazing out the window on the second floor of the Zeng house. Taiwan's mountains were mere crags in light of this continental majesty.

Zeng and his family lived one flight above and never came down except at mealtime, so Tainming had the floor to himself after his teacher, who came for an hour every day, left. In the quiet, the lodger looked at Mount Zijin, and his mind wandered aimlessly. For almost a month, he had been living here—imprisoned, practically—because he did not understand Mandarin.

Zeng, who had invited him so enthusiastically and had even found a job for him, cautioned with curious persistence from the

moment he met Taiming in Shanghai that their identity must be concealed: "People will look askance at us wherever we go, it's our fate. It's not about what we've done or haven't done. We're deformed—fate's monstrous children. Of course it's unfair, but we can't do much about it, and we mustn't behave like sulky foster children. We've got to prove ourselves through deeds, not words. The truth is that our passion is second to none when it comes to making sacrifices for China."

Taiming could understand this contorted position from his own experience at the China Association lecture in Tokyo, where revealing his identity had jeopardized his life. Still, he was depressed that he had to swallow such humiliation simply because he was born on an unpropitiously situated island.

At any rate, he was thoroughly fed up with this house arrest. How could he master the language speedily if he could not practice it in the streets? Did Zeng want an old man to be the girls' math teacher? To walk downtown, to breathe the air of China! "But nation building is a long and winding road," Zeng chided, "so calm down, Hu, and look at the Yangtze, which flows majestically but faster than you'd think. Let's be more like the great river."

What irritated Taiming was that the passion that the very word China could arouse in him was cooling with each day he wasted trying to learn a language in a vacuum.

He was at a loss. He was nostalgic for the days he spent in Shanghai. A piece of the real, living China, the city demolished the shallow, dared notions he had had of the country. The modern, Western atmosphere of its French settlement drove home to the young Taiwanese that he was, after all, a country bumpkin. The modern clothes of the quite visible young women did not succeed in concealing the aura of a mature culture, five thousand years old.

On the second deck of the bus he took from the French settlement were three schoolgirls who balanced on their laps foreign

magazines with beautiful covers. Zeng explained that it was the fad among Shanghai's schoolgirls to travel with a book prominently displayed, and Taiming thought it was strangely feudal of the girls to glamorize reading. The trio's sophisticated dress duly impressed him: they all wore a blouse, a skirt, socks, and elegant Shanghai shoes and carried a handbag, but each girl's taste was distinct, shown by their impeccable color coordination. In comparison, Taiwanese girls, no matter how polished, were boorish. Finding the girls free of the spiritual conflicts typical of the mindless devourers of Western trends who abandon their own tradition entirely, Taiming noted to himself that they had already internalized the Chinese woman's sensibility and the Confucian principle of the Mean. Nor did he fail to notice their delicate manners, carefree eyes, and young skin, all of which he found mesmerizing. Were they perhaps aristocrats—ladies-in-waiting? Certainly not of the same world as he, for they seemed to embody the poetry of Chinese literature and to offer a history lesson, with a whiff of the *Analecs*, a classical ghost living in modern times through them. And what did such creatures say to one another? Although they hardly spoke, they sometimes indulged softly in what must have been the most exquisite exchanges—why had he not learned Mandarin? Unable to make out a word of what they were saying, no matter how hard he tried, he sorely regretted having presumed that because Taiwanese were Chinese after all, he should be able to get by with the southern languages he already knew, those of Guangdong and Fujian. It was a mistake.

Although his tour of the great city lasted only a few days, he managed to see the cultural landmarks, to sample the international cuisine, to smell the back alleys, and to hear the wild fowl squawk, in other words, to meet the women of the street. Things Euro-American, Chinese, and even Japanese all coexisted chaotically in disharmonious harmony in the International Settlement. Tall buildings, those man-eating monsters of plutocracy, domi-

nated the landscape while at their feet, people and automobiles formed a flood, so that one crossed the torrent at risk to one's life. When Taiming thought he had reached the opposite shore, he was drawn into an entertainment complex, a veritable whirlpool of human desires whose gaudy, artificial intensity gave him a headache in a matter of minutes. He escaped to the roof for fresh air, but there the darkness was thick with the murmurings of young couples, among whom alert women of the night kept an eye out for prospective customers. Even as Taiming watched, one was lured to some unknown place by a pitiless pro.

The other houses of amusement were no different, offering to souls paralysis rather than solace.

He hurried back to his inn. The next day, he went back out to chase the moving streets again. The city was diverse, with its fair share of beggars and those too weak even to beg, not to mention the thoroughly Westernized native girls, the arrogant pipe-toting Europeans, and those brainy Japanese who did not know about Li Bai's dreams. At the entrances of trading companies, banks, and factories stood armed Sikhs, whose size and attire were imposing but who seemed somehow emasculated, having lost all means and become obedient hounds. As gentle as they were, their glistening black steel weapons had the desired effect on Taiming. He had rarely seen guns.

He was quite willing to escape the monstrous city when the time came to depart for Nanjing.

He had looked forward to the view the rail journey would offer of Suzhou, where the hermit Han Shan used to live, but the bleak landscape did not appeal to him at all. The traveler recalled Zhang Ji's famous poem about the hermit's temple, and that was all. But just when the train was preparing to pull out of Suzhou station, a flower blossomed in full view.

The young woman who came on board may have still been a student, but her mature, sensual appearance attracted Taiming as

never before. He laughed nervously at his heart, which did not respond as readily to landscapes as it did to women. He asked himself, "So is she what they call a Suzhou beauty?" When the train arrived at Nanjing, the Suzhou beauty, in order to retrieve her belongings from the rack where an attendant had placed them and which she could not reach, climbed onto her seat without taking off her shoes. She left with her baggage while Taiming sat pondering her unladylike manner. Two tiny indentations, left by her Shanghai shoes, remained where she had stood. So charmingly small were they that he forgave her lack of consideration, and his brain retained the imprints long after the velveteen surface had lost all trace of them.

Watching Taiming study around the clock, Zeng called him a Mandarin freak. But Taiming's efforts began to pay off in the form of an inordinate but unfulfilled desire to converse in the language. He took walks, venturing farther and farther each time, but never opened his mouth, still fearing what his speech would betray.

One evening, however, Zeng came to his room in a different mood. "Shall we?" he asked in Mandarin. They took the long moonlit path from the house to the closest street. Zeng looked at the crescent that was rising over Mount Zijin and remarked, "I've hardly taken walks since I came to Nanjing. You know, I'd forgotten how good it feels—nature, the evening, a friend, and all that."

Upon reaching the street, Zeng hailed a rickshaw, which carried the two to a restaurant called Dragon Gate. There, drink in hand, Zeng related to Taiming the recent developments in international affairs—how tense things were getting. A warm glow spread from Taiming's stomach to his extremities, partly due to the liquor and partly because his friend's enthusiasm was endearing. Taiming grew talkative, too, more than he had ever been with this friend, and after a few hours, when his voice started sounding strange to himself, his depression disappeared.

They stepped out for a walk and chose lonely alleys. By now, the moon of the lower Yangtze was shining at its zenith.

When they came to a street, a beggar appeared from the dark to ask Taiming for change. Finding only bills in his pockets, Taiming turned to his friend, but Zeng was pretending not to have seen the apparition. It refused to disappear, though, and followed them ten yards, twenty yards, pleading in a most pathetic tone, "Sirs, sirs . . ." At fifty yards, sensing that the sirs were not about to be forthcoming, the beggar switched to a louder, pushier "Sirs, sirs!" Mortified, Taiming dug into his pockets once more, but no change had materialized in the meantime. He did have several ten-yen bills, but in any event, he currently had no income. No one in his position would give so much to a beggar, right? And by the way, why was Zeng so opposed to parting with just a little change? Taiming began to find his friend very annoying but quickly grasped the contradiction and felt ashamed of himself.

The beggar now was crying. His pathetic wail ripped painfully through the dark. He showed no sign of relenting, perhaps having sensed that Taiming was debating whether he should part with one of his ten-yen bills.

"Here," Taiming finally said to the beggar, "don't be surprised."

But just as he was pulling the bill out of his pocket, Zeng slapped a coin on the beggar's hand and said, "Now get lost."

The beggar thanked them as melodramatically as he had pleaded, squatted down, and stopped bothering them. Taiming was baffled by Zeng's behavior. How could he walk on so coldly for so long if he were prepared to give, as he eventually did? There was something unfathomable about Zeng, or perhaps such behavior was the norm in China. Whatever the answer, the question restored Taiming to an undesired sobriety.

That night, he had trouble falling asleep. His mind, half awake, flitted from Shanghai to Taiwan to Japan, from places and times

to people and ideas, mixing them all up. "Life," he thought, "provokes three kinds of tears: tears of poverty, tears of illness, and tears of parted lovers." But which were the worst? He fell asleep. It was morning when he opened his eyes.

There was one thing about life in the Zeng house that Taiming could not stand: he had to eat rice gruel every morning. He had never liked rice gruel, but a beggar had no choice but to keep his dislikes to himself. If he had to, he could stomach the Zeng family's notion of breakfast; what he really could not live with was that the Zengs ate frightfully little, satisfying themselves with a single bowl each. Taiming was humiliatingly hungry by lunchtime even if he had asked for seconds, thirds, even fourths—and that was easier said than done. No matter how quickly he ate, the Zengs were all done by the time he was finishing his second bowl. Taiming's first goal was to learn how to eat fast enough to be ready for a third bowl every morning. It was not a goal he could achieve without practice. Every morning, as he spooned the scalding pap down his throat, he tasted both the joys and sorrows of a beggar. To be liberated from such a predicament, he had to find a place of his own. He vowed to leave as soon as possible.

As autumn deepened in the lower Yangtze, the trees of the Pavilion of the North Pole shed their scarlet leaves, and the people of Nanjing prepared for winter. A housewife was repairing a futon out in the empty alley and basking in the last warm rays of the year. Taiming had a winter robe made for himself. It was not until he snuggled into his brand-new traditional garment that he realized the discomfort of Western clothes, the perversity of collars and neckties. The Chinese robe, loose and free, felt better than it looked. One could wear any kind of garment underneath it, and as many as one liked, layer over layer if it was cold, and lie down without worrying about creases. A fresh convert to traditional attire, Taiming also felt as though his robe were turning him into a different man. No one stared at him when he went

downtown, he was one of them. It did not hurt that his Mandarin now was nearly functional. He was dying to be at the front, that is, of the workforce, but Zeng, who did not believe in on-the-job training, ignored his pleas. In his free time, Taiming went to places of entertainment but soon got tired of them. He could not enjoy films and plays when leisure nauseated him.

Snow began to fall like willow leaves. The second floor of the Zeng house was empty and stoveless. Wrapped in his blanket, Taiming tried to read a book but could not, but not because of the cold. He was wondering what rumors people back home might be exchanging about him. Ah-San and Ah-Si were probably bragging about the adventures of Hu Taiming as though they were the heroes. Such imagined thoughts made Taiming restless—and less and less able to read. Shut in by the snow, which fell day after day, his irritation rose. Mount Zijin, enveloped by snowflakes, shone a bright white as far as he could see.

One afternoon, a young man with a large trunk arrived all alone at the Zeng house. He was of the same ethnic stock as Taiming but had grown up farther south in the Pacific Ocean, where many Chinese had emigrated. A graduate of the University of Fudan, he spoke perfect English and some Japanese and hoped to work (a letter of introduction from Zeng would be of great help) for the People's Government's Bureau of Propaganda. His father had pledged an enormous sum to the revolutionary movement.

The newcomer locked the door every time he left his room, even though it was on the second floor, whose only other resident was Taiming. But Lai—that was his name—was not suspicious; he was just being Chinese. In fact, he turned out to be a carefree, talkative, and fun-loving man or, rather, boy, given the way he unleashed peals of laughter about nothing in particular. By the evening, he was blissfully off guard and addressed Taiming as a friend. For better or worse, Taiming's lonely days were over.

During dinner, Lai implored Mrs. Zeng to give him sake as though she were his mother. The man's impudence shocked Taiming, but only him. Lai prattled on about mahjong, dancing, plays, and other trivial matters about which Taiming knew nothing.

The next day, Lai was already teasing Taiming: "But relax! You don't really understand society until you've enjoyed life, I mean, until you've played until you're half dead. And if you don't understand society, you don't know what good politics is. No dance, no mahjong? We can't talk then, you and I. You really must be a teacher!" Coming from Lai, who was utterly devoid of malice, this cajoling did not annoy Taiming. In fact, the pair decided to go to the bath house together that afternoon.

Beyond the filthy shop curtain was an otherworldly warmth: the room for undressing heated by several stoves. A few customers were dozing peacefully in large armchairs. Taiming sat by one of the stoves and felt his snow-chilled body thaw as though spring had come. Lai stuck out his legs playfully, one at a time, so the attendant could take off his shoes and socks for him. The monarch's clothes and underpants were removed by the same hands, which Taiming shooed off when they tried to undress him as well. Taking his clothes off by himself, he wrapped himself in a large towel and followed Lai into the steaming room. The bath itself was divided into three sections, and Taiming chose the least hot. After a while, coaxed by the attendant, he lay down on a long wooden board that extended over the lapping water, and there surrendered himself to a coarse-grained towel that scrubbed the grime off his body from the tip of his fingers to his toes. As the towel was run sometimes vigorously and sometimes lightly over his skin which, after having shriveled in the cold, had suddenly relaxed in the warm water, Taiming experienced a sensation almost like pain. Leaving the bath room, he sank into the chair in which he had sat previously. There, the attendant gave him a deeply satisfying foot massage. Lai first glanced through a

porn newspaper while his attendant pounded his feet, but soon his eyelids began to droop. The rhythm of the massage had the same hypnotic effect on Taiming, who forgot his worries about mastering Mandarin, forgot the beggars and whores who wandered the streets, and those twists who knew the number and location of cannons but nothing else, that pest problem in the parks. In his corner of the room, he forgot everything little by little and slept like a prince who did not know about watchdogs or bad men. It was already dusk when he awoke from his dream.

Mahjong, the theater, or dinner? But Taiming rejected all of Lai's suggestions and insisted on returning to the second floor of the Zeng house. On the way home, Lai, who had no choice but to accompany Taiming, began, for no apparent reason, to talk about liberty and equality. His ideas were childish. Desperately wishing to be liberated from the iniquity of this situation, barely listening to his friend's inanities, Taiming sensed at the same time a vague contradiction in his own attitude. For had he not also been transfixed by the mysterious allure of the Chinese bath? Had he not sunk into a mood of happy stupefaction, immersed himself in an atmosphere that he had so recently considered unclean when Zeng had tried to introduce it to him for the first time? While Lai chattered on about liberty and equality, Taiming pondered the strange assimilative force of Chinese society, its ability to numb the nerves of newcomers. China itself—or at least the Chinese bath—was opium.

With the addition of Lai, the Zeng house became a merry place, and its master started to come straight home from work. They played mahjong every night at Lai's behest but also because, as it turned out, Mrs. Zeng had always had a place in her heart for the game. When Lai, Mrs. Zeng, and her husband could not find the necessary fourth party, they looked to Taiming. The game was not half as difficult as Mandarin; a cursory introduction to the rules was enough to start playing; and the sullen parasite really

had no right to refuse. As a child, Taiming used to watch Opium Tong and his cohorts gamble at a similar game involving four colors, compared with which mahjong seemed easy, and in fact, in less than ten nights, his skill came to rival Mrs. Zeng's. The only problem was that he was forced to stay up late on some nights—those when Zeng did badly in the first round and requested a second and sometimes a third. Two rounds meant staying up till one or two in the morning and feeling tired and stupid the next day. One night, while they were playing to the tune of Zeng's baby's wailing, uninterrupted except for an occasional sneeze—it had caught a bad cold—the wail began to drift toward them. The maid was bringing the little prince to the table.

"Your boy is hungry, missus," the hired woman ventured.

"You feed him some milk," replied Mrs. Zeng calmly, not even turning to see.

The fact was that she was just a step from gathering a hand consisting entirely of paulownia tiles, the devastating "All Qing," a secret she had been struggling to keep her face from divulging. Let alone taking a break at this crucial juncture, she was not even going to let the maid's interruption get on her nerves. An over eagerness to continue playing might tip off the others, especially her husband, to what she had coming to them all. She had been losing tonight, and this was the last stretch of the round. With an "All Qing" now, she would not only make up for her losses but end up above zero, two thousand above zero, as she had already silently computed. The maid took the baby back to the other room.

There, however, the baby cried as though it were on fire, and after some futile efforts, the maid came back rather alarmed.

"Missus, I'm afraid he has a fever."

This time, Mrs. Zeng pretended not to hear and perhaps did not hear. She was busy trying to figure out if there were still any "one paulownia" tiles in circulation. Seeing only one tile in the discard pile, she rejoiced in the depths of her heart. She had a pair of them

herself, so whoever had the fourth had no use for it and would discard it sooner or later—and then—

“Missus, your son has a fever.”

“Please put him to sleep,” she replied, this time her voice slightly betraying impatience.

But her husband did not notice. For although he had been dealt a marvelous hand—“Triple Yuan”—almost from the outset and had been close to winning for a long time, the tile he needed was being very sly. The master of the house was yearning for the “white” tile to come out of hiding while his wife was hoping for “one paulownia” or, as she now understood, “three paulownias,” which would serve her just as well.

“Mrs. Zeng, how about a short break, your baby isn’t well,” Taiming suggested. Mrs. Zeng merely pursed her lips and did not take her eyes from the table. The maid took the baby back to the adjacent room, where it redoubled its piercing cries.

Around the table reigned the tensest of silences, disturbed only by the clinking of tiles and, of course, the baby’s pleas. As each player took his or her turn drawing from the central pile, either discarding the piece immediately or keeping it and removing another from his or her hand, the others awaited like sharp-eyed eagles, hungry vultures, wise owls. Zeng already had two open threesomes, green and red, laid out on the table, and it was clear that he either had a threesome of whites in his hand already or was waiting for the third tile. The utmost caution was called for, and this sense of danger clutched Taiming, too.

It was Zeng’s turn to discard. The others gulped while he hesitated. Suddenly, Zeng’s eyebrows drew closer, and with a sweep of his arm, he threw down a “three paulownias” tile on the game table. Nothing he had done in days pleased his wife as much as this move. The game was over.

“Pardon me, Mr. Zeng, but I think you’re a fool,” accused Lai. He stood up abruptly, stomped around to Zeng’s side of the table,

and examined the loser’s hand. Indeed, what a bonehead, Zeng should have discarded his “one bird” instead. The game ruled in cases like these—in which Lai and Taiming were helpless victims whose hopes and dreams had been dashed by Zeng’s stupidity—that only the offender must pay up. His wife’s glorious hand of “All Qing” cost Zeng thirteen thousand points, or a penalty of thirteen yen, and what was worse, the round was over. The defeated man clutched the now useless threesomes of greens and reds and bowed his head like a bereaved father. The gleeful Lai and the others merrily analyzed the suspenseful bout.

“Another round!” Zeng demanded.

But neither Lai nor Taiming, let alone Mrs. Zeng, wanted to play again. Meanwhile the baby, apparently tired of screaming, had quieted down.

It was at this moment, however, that the maid burst back into the room to say that the baby was in some sort of crisis. More interested in nursing his own hurt, Zeng stubbornly mixed the tiles and started arranging them for a new round. But his wife seemed to register that there was a problem and hustled off to see her baby.

All set, Zeng turned to the crouching figure in the dimly lit chamber. “Will you hurry up?” he yelled, his voice amplified by a certain vindictiveness. There was no response.

“Mr. Zeng, your son seems quite sick. How about playing again tomorrow night?” Taiming offered appeasingly with a half smile. One had to be careful with Zeng.

“Humm,” the master grumbled and trudged into the bedroom.

He came back in a second with an expression that was hard to describe. “Hu,” he said, “could you call Changchun Hospital in Taiping Street? We need a doctor.”

It was past one in the morning, and it was hard to reach him. When the doctor finally arrived, it was half past two. According to his diagnosis, the baby was suffering from acute pneumonia,

with a high fever, and required round-the-clock medical attention. Taiming's mood darkened: so mahjong was opium as well.

When the new year came, the children of Nanjing played with buzzing tops in the streets. Filling the crisp air with their white breath and tightly bundled up in thick cotton, they manipulated the pairs of sticks—to which the tops were attached by a string—and shouted with joy when the tops spun and buzzed. In the Zeng house, too, the children were making enough noise for a whole year. Taiming did not particularly care for the festivities but had been looking forward to the new year. He was to start teaching, the mere thought of which dispelled his damp winter mood.

But Lai insisted on taking things easy and extolled the virtues of sponging on others until a good opportunity came rolling in his general direction. He was eager to elaborate for Taiming's sake: "People who've studied abroad are in such a hurry—maybe too much pride?—but it's counterproductive, I'm sorry to say. If what you're interested in is improving this country, you won't be able to do it until everyone feels the need. 'Rome was not built in one day.' You've just returned, and you hardly know China, its affairs. Why, you hardly speak its language. Let's say you get a good job, but at this point, I'm afraid you'd do more harm than good. No, I'm all for taking a breather. It might seem as though I were missing something, but a year or two is nothing. Good opportunities aren't all that uncommon. If I get to head the Income Tax Section for a year, just one year, I'll be able to provide for you until you die. So take it easy."

Taiming was offended by this loosely veiled opportunism, according to which a bureaucratic career was nothing but a splendid way to make money. Lai had neither theory nor ideals, only shrewd self-interest. "An office produces wealth," as he summed it up. Still, Taiming was impressed by how up-to-date on the bureaucratic scene his possible future provider was.

"The Chinese bureaucratic system isn't a ladder, did you know that? The beauty of it is that a broker working for a foreign-owned trading firm can become minister of finance overnight. Opportunity is the name of the game. If you find a good boss, your current occupation is irrelevant.

"Let me tell you, too, that a year governing a province can be more lucrative than ten years at the head of a ministry. It all depends. You can't top heading some financial department, but the next best deal is probably mayor of Shanghai. I bet you can't tell me why."

## 2. Shuchun

As planned, Taiming was finally released from the confines of the Zeng house at the beginning of the new semester. His return to the more or less real world, in the form of a girls' high school, proceeded smoothly thanks to his hard-won facility with Mandarin, and it did not hurt that the academic level of the exemplary institution was in fact that of the highest class of a Taiwanese middle school.

By the time the spring breeze began to caress the new teacher and his students on their way home, they were quite familiar with each other. When the new season's grip on the lower Yangtze seemed firm, Taiming invited some of the girls on a Sunday outing to the nearby tombs dating from the Ming period.

The landscape there was in full bloom, and his students, dressed prettily for the occasion and with delightfully open minds, reminded him of what the word *fulfillment* meant. These future mothers hanging on his every word, plainly, sensibly delighting in every drop of his wisdom, were not bad at all. What a service he must be doing for China's future in thus guiding the girls to intellectual womanhood! The business of educating had its own rich returns—he had almost forgotten.

Taking in the panorama of spring from an ancient tomb and pointing things out to his eager disciples, who clustered closely around him, he barely noticed the other female voices coming from somewhere behind him. He turned around casually to find a European man leading a group like his own. When Taiming caught sight of the face of one of the women, however, he almost unintentionally exclaimed, "Ah."

For who was it but the woman who had brightened his dreary train journey from Shanghai to Nanjing, the Suzhou beauty whose shoepoints on the velveteen seat still lingered in his mind? But the glance she cast toward Taiming was indifferent. She walked away without a trace of recognition when the other women did. Taiming's students informed him that the women were from Jining University and that the European was their professor. This bouquet of flowers disappeared as quickly as it had appeared. After that, his words were incoherent, and the future mothers made fun of him.

Ever since that afternoon at the tomb, he was aware of a thread linking his destiny to that of—but what was her name? He spent every minute of his free time tugging at this thread, roaming the streets and neighborhoods in search of her shadow. Sometimes, he tired of all the people and chose the most desolate paths he could find. He visited one historical site after another.

The area around the Temple of the Crowing Cock was famous for monuments.

The Six Dynasties, whose resplendent capital had been Nanjing, were indeed dead. Walls that, though crumbling, had fared better than whatever they had enclosed meekly asked of the living, "Splendor?" The Rouge Wall that people liked to mention did not hint at its past glory. Taiming left the abandoned shaft and trekked to the imperial palace.

One did not have to be a poet to shed tears on its ruins, the most renowned of those of the Six Dynasties. The palace did not live up to its reputation unless its fame could be based on the

increasing disappointment that Taiming was feeling. The poet Weizhuang, traveling a century after Li Bai, had sung:

It rains  
Upon the river.  
The banks are greener;  
Remains  
Of lines of sovereigns,  
However,  
A cipher.  
The grief a birdcall feigns!  
The willows don't remember,  
But perfect lanes  
Leagues long maintaining, shiver  
On misty plains.

As Taiming recited the lines to himself, he was struck, as by a blow, by the utter futility of all human endeavor. The absence of meaning made him stagger. The willows, sole evidence of the Six Dynasties culture, were in fact not related to the original trees, which had perished long ago at the hands of various armies. The ones he was looking at now had been planted much more recently—the vanity of it all! Throughout time, only nature lasted, sometimes claiming man to its endless needs. Why had he worried about Society and fretted about Nation? Because like most people, he was conceited. He felt foolish. How vain Confucius and Mencius were, who clung to their theories and preached to lords! Regarded as wise while they were alive, after they died, they found numerous adherents, who for more than twenty centuries vainly tried to build a path of virtue. It had not existed for a single day. Equally vain were Buddha and Christ. People shed tears for them, that was true, but no flesh-and-blood human had ever been saved by either one, though they had been fooled by them. Doubting even that which most people do not, Taiming felt an urge to give up everything, to abandon

his current life. Was there any reason that humans shouldn't lead appropriately human lives? No, and he concluded a few hours later that "happiness for man means living peacefully with a lovely and healthy woman who shares his interests." What had taken him so long? Vanity, of course. He was a nobody who had been acting shamelessly out of turn. He felt stupid, but now, at last, he had an idea, and it seemed revolutionary to him.

Memories suggesting love came back to him, of Ruie, Naito Hisako, and the widow's daughter, Tsuruko. He admitted, not without pain, that none of these memories deserved to be called "love" now that they were as faint as illusions, if they had ever been anything more.

The figure of the Jinling University student came to him like a religious vision. "This must be love," Taiming said to himself. "The Bible (if one were to believe it) says, 'Seek and ye shall find.' But was Jesus also thinking about romantic love?" At any rate, Taiming already was seeking, and he wished to expand his search.

One day, returning late to the Zeng house after one of his endless strolls, he saw Zeng gesture to him: they needed to talk. In addition to his day job as a professor, Zeng taught Japanese at a private institution. Now, however, the Diplomacy Department was asking for his help, and he had to give up his language teaching. "The question, Taiming, is this: will you be my replacement?"

Taiming hesitated. Zeng strongly recommended the job. The place was a small, privately run center of learning, and he would not have to teach more than three hours a week. Eventually Taiming gave in, and Zeng said with a grin, "If my replacement were to be anybody else, I would have felt really guilty. Well, great! Please go introduce yourself—tomorrow." He might have told him this last bit a little sooner, but Taiming didn't have a good reason to refuse, anyway.

After school the next day, with Zeng's recommendation in hand, Taiming went to the private center of learning. The principal, beaming, said, "Ah, I didn't expect such an excellent replacement so soon! We have such difficulty finding suitable persons." He introduced Taiming to the other instructors. The school had three levels: beginning, intermediate, and advanced, and Taiming was to teach at the second, the very next evening.

Thus, only two days after Zeng's friendly request, Taiming stood at the head of a class that for some reason consisted entirely of women, both students and nonstudents. After the principal's brief introduction, Taiming started to take attendance. It was a lively place, and he was somewhat flustered by the atmosphere, but calling off the names on the roster alleviated his nervousness. By the middle of the list, his teacher persona had taken over, and he could look up and coolly scan the faces in his classroom. But wait, whose face was that over there in the corner?

"Ah!" his heart seemed to exclaim, skipping a beat at the coincidence. She had first come into his life at Suzhou station. She had visited him at a Ming tomb. She attended Jinling University but lived in his soul and appeared in his dreams.

Taking attendance had never been so thrilling or rewarding for him. She answered to the name "Shuchun."

That day, his teacher persona was particularly passionate, if not feverish. On his way home and at home, he trembled with gratitude: "Shuchun—a name I'll never forget." Whom should he thank for the coincidence? He had looked for and found "gentle," *shu*, and "spring," *chun*. There was a reason for his life now. For what else but destiny could have occasioned the encounter?

But for the next few weeks, their relationship did not advance a step beyond the ordinary closeness of a teacher and student. As a teacher, of course, he could easily manufacture excuses to talk to her, but that was something he would not, and could not,

do, given the other students. His passion, meanwhile, grew with every lesson.

It was luck that came to his aid once again. Reading in the local paper one morning that the Sino-German Cultural Association was hosting an art exhibition, Taiming immediately thought of Shuchun. With a lover's instinct, he had discovered her inclinations and exquisite learning: "lover's instinct" were his words. With a confidence unusual for him, he made a mental note to ask her out on a date.

After class that day, the perfect situation presented itself. Among the students busily packing up, one was taking slightly longer than usual and had to give up the race to the door. While she resigned herself to sitting out the rush, Taiming felt the warm smile of the goddess of opportunity on his back. He sidled over to the lone figure and said:

"Shuchun."

He was amazed at the naturalness of his own voice. All teachers like some students more than others, and the reverse also is true. Wasn't it normal, then, for a teacher to gravitate more easily to a particular student in this way right after class?

"Yes," Shuchun responded to the unassuming utterance of her name; the normality seemed to have rubbed off on her. In an off-handed manner, she stopped packing up and looked him straight in the face.

"We could talk about anything at this point," Taiming thought. With the ease brought by his initial success, he mentioned the exhibition and said that he would be delighted to accompany her. She readily accepted. Her response seemed to confirm his instincts.

The woman of exquisite inclinations had promised to see him on Sunday. The roses that filled the air on his way home followed him to the second floor of the Zeng house and floated in the purple mist that enveloped Mount Zijin. Before the longed-for day of rest, he would see her in class once more.

The lesson turned out to be delightful. It was as though an invisible thread linked the man at the lectern to the woman at the student's desk. Shuchun's gaze contained a familiarity that had not been there earlier and that seemed to say, "This Sunday, remember, Sensei?" He responded by encoding a message in a glance he cast toward her. Throughout the lesson, their looks conveyed and deepened a secret inaccessible to the other pairs of eyes that, unbeknown to Taiming, expressed annoyance that he was misreading the text and blushing now and then.

On the morning of the Sunday in question, Taiming was suddenly seized by the fear that she might not appear at the meeting place, for reasons he would never know. Although this seemed unlikely, the incredible happiness of his past few days fueled his suspicion that there must be a catch.

Driven by his anxiety, he left the Zeng house long before the appointed time and arrived at the meeting place an hour early, despite a roundabout route.

He went into a bookstore to kill time. He flipped through many pages without reading even one line. "No art is so profound and no philosophy so elevated as to rival Shuchun's slightest smile," he concluded and left the store smiling.

It was now close enough to the appointed hour for him to enter the restaurant he had chosen as their meeting place. He sat down at a table in the corner. The wait was long and nerve-racking.

Shuchun arrived only a few minutes late. Although these few minutes were unspeakably tortuous, Taiming's face regained its color as soon as he caught sight of her. Shuchun's face was red and her breathing rapid; she had had to run. She apologized for being late. The beauty of her eyes, agitter with life, stunned Taiming, and he duly noted that her blouse was indigo and that her skirt was a fresh field of flowers, some of which were hiding in the folds. A sour but sweet taste filled his mouth. She had come not as his student but as a member of the opposite sex.

They ate lightly and walked over to Shanghai Street where the Sino-German Cultural Association was holding its exhibition of calligraphic and pictorial art. The calligraphy section featured old and well-known manuscripts as well as the work of contemporary masters. In regard to a particularly famous book of history on display, Taiming wondered whether the country's proud heritage was visible in the edges of the ink. Although some of the items from the Jin era were copies, even they outshone the best modern efforts. The Tang and Song works were a marvel, needless to say, but it was a shame that not everybody was knowledgeable enough to pause before the Qing masters Shi An, Banqiao, and Bao Shichen. Almost all the paintings, on the other hand, were disappointing. Whatever it was that modern Chinese artists thought they were doing, nothing at the exhibition was worth seeing, Taiming concluded, except for a handful of works executed in the late impressionist style.

Shuchun seemed to have a deep respect for his critical eye. She was just as he had imagined, then. Though learned in artistic matters, her own comments included questions of form within a broader critique of civilizations. She seemed inordinately smart; and so their contemplation of beauty catalyzed the fusion of their souls.

This wholesome intellectual arousal followed them out of the exhibition, and they talked and talked, surrendering themselves to the workings of their hearts, consciously and unconsciously trying to learn more about each other. They seemed ready to talk through the night. Time passed without their knowledge, and dusk fell. Neither of them wanted the splendid day to end, so they had dinner together at a restaurant with delicious vegetable dishes. While he ate, Taiming decided that they must part after dinner. His pedagogic self was telling him that he should not detain her long after dark. But when Shuchun suggested that they go to the theater afterward, his pedagogic self determined that the experience might be educational.

The traditional opera at the Morning Star Theater was less absorbing than the woman who sat next to Taiming. Nonetheless, she herself followed the events on stage as though they mattered. A suspicion disturbed him: "She doesn't care for me as much as I do for her."

The lover's anxiety remained with him after they said good night. In the darkness of his room, at the edges of his growing happiness, shadows still danced.

### 3. That Which Follows

Although that Sunday, which brought them rapidly closer, was not their last—they went on to enjoy each other's presence almost every week—none of the later dates added as much to their affair as the first one had. Taiming was frustrated that their relationship was not progressing. It was already summer.

He wanted to verify her love, marry her, and sleep with her, the sooner the better.

Spring had its attractions, but so did summer. The change in season was as visible in Shuchun as it was in the landscape. Her shirt was a light blue like the sky, and the youth of her sensuous arms, flowing white out of her short sleeves, vied with the bright leaves. Just as a dying man thirsts for water, so Taiming craved her flesh and yearned for the day when her youth would be his to devour.

They never tired of walking, from the hills to Lake Xuanwu to the neighborhood of crooked alleys across Taizhun Creek.

One Sunday, on their second trip to Lake Xuanwu, Taiming was suffering from a kind of heartache. Since early morning that day, he had yearned for irrefutable proof of her love.

The place was crowded. Under a willow tree on the long embankment, he saw two charming young girls, sisters perhaps. The view was a ready-made embroidery. Taiming, who was feel-

ing generally sentimental, now felt a surge of poetic emotion and came up with this:

Notice the detail at the seam

Below the thousand tendrils green:

How sage the sisters seem,

Doubling the slender form that willows preen.

Not dissatisfied, he handed the piece of paper to Shuchun.

After a minute of silent appreciation, she said, "It's not bad," but added, "I don't think their waists are so slender that they should be envying the willow."

It was a gentle jab, not so much at Taiming as at the sisters portrayed in his verse, a clear expression of Shuchun's own jealousy. A certain openness that their first Sunday lacked was now routine in their exchanges.

They walked from the embankment to the Five Islets Park. He waited for the right time. But the crowded area was not suitable for declarations.

At the place on the shore where boats, all painted in bright colors, were docked and boat attendants were waiting for customers, Shuchun suggested that they rent a boat. It was the opportunity Taiming had been waiting for, and the boat glided slowly toward the center of the lake.

As the girl attendant maneuvered the vessel skillfully with the single oar at the stern, Taiming and Shuchun sank back deeply in their seats and dropped softly into a contemplative mood. There was no one else on the boat.

Taiming waited patiently. The shore was far away, and no other boats were visible. Perhaps this was the moment.

"Shuchun . . ." he said, and the splashing water filled the pause. Against the boat, the lake lightly lapped.

"Shuchun . . ." he asked gently, "What do you think about us?"

He peered into her face. She looked back at him but did not speak. She glanced sideward at the wobbly dance of the lake's surface. Taiming studied the same mesmerizing play of water on her somewhat nervous face, which reflected the sparkling.

He had not forgotten his bitter experience with Naito Hisako and had vowed not to be too aggressive. A confession of love had to be cautious, in fact needed to be a gentle form of reasoning. Leaning back against the cradling boat and using its rhythm, he described his feelings, from those at the Suzhou station to this pleasure ride and this confession itself—a gentle, almost impulsive confession.

This description of his feelings was followed by a long pause and some lapping of the water.

Then she said, "I was aware of Sensei's feelings, but may I tell you what I've been thinking? I have a particular idea, and I want to live by it. You might think me silly, but I have a very high regard for marriage—please don't mistake my meaning when I say that." It was her turn to talk, and what she told him was a theory. She was very idealistic about marriage; she would not be able to find her ideal partner if she did not go about it methodically. And the method? She had to go out with at least thirty boyfriends, fall in love with the three she liked best, and only then, from among the trio, choose a husband. She spent almost half an hour expounding this idea with perfect grace and ended by repeating her plea that Taiming not misunderstand her. "Everything I've just said is unrelated to the fact that . . . Sensei, I love you, too."

During her speech, from the moment he could tell that her idea was typical of the new woman—formulaic and superficial but strangely eager at the same time—Taiming began to sink into something very different from the seat, from which he felt suddenly ejected, thrown against the ground, as by the water buffalo on that far-off meadow. Because his situation physically was still

so sweet—in nature with the woman he loved—he sank, all the more stupefied, into his darkness, his old despair.

“Brava, a courteous rejection!” he thought. “In the guise of a newfangled theory of ideal marriage! Well expressed!” He was struggling to hold back his tears.

But he thought about her words a bit longer. Was she asking to be thrown into the lake? Perhaps she wanted him to take the plunge? What an unforgivable woman, to escape into such a heartless formula, to reject him from on high! If she had an ounce of kindness in her, she wouldn’t have resorted to such defenses. Why, she’d just seek his embrace, wouldn’t she?

He recalled something a jaded playboy had told him back in Taiwan: “Hu, there are some formidable women in Shanghai who say that love is like candy. They get bored if they have to eat chocolate all the time, so they change snacks now and then. They aren’t trying to shock you or anything. They mean it, and they practice it. Real women of the future! I wouldn’t mind being one of their snacks. In fact, I’d love it. There’s a real toast, eh?”

If that was the new woman, wasn’t Shuchun a new woman? But he had felt so close to her! Now, suddenly, she seemed beyond his reach.

The boat had passed the Temple of the Crowing Cock and was now by the foot of Mount Zijin. Taiming maintained a gruff silence.

Shuchun said, “I’m sorry, Sensei. I know I’m being very difficult.” She sounded less sorry than adamant.

Taiming nodded gravely a couple of times. He was too sick and tired to speak.

#### 4. That Which Returns

Day after day, Hu Taiming took pleasure in nothing. He kept away from her after that Sunday, and seeing her in class was pain-

ful. Since he was not going to win her over, he wanted to stop teaching Japanese. But unbeknown to him, the affair was taking an unexpected turn.

Strange are the movements of the heart. Shuchun was beginning to learn that her theory was much easier to preach than to practice. It would be difficult to find thirty boyfriends without becoming something less than a new woman. The idea of choosing the best three from the thirty, and her husband from the three, was looking less and less realistic. With her plan crumbling in her hands like old parchment, she began to appreciate Taiming more. After all, just as she had a place in his heart, he had a place in hers. Her rejection had been nothing more than a passing burst of pride.

It was already late autumn when Shuchun came to the Zeng house one afternoon asking for Taiming. The visit surprised him, as they had not seen or spoken to each other outside class since that early summer day.

“Sensei, would you take a walk with me?” Her eyes glittered strangely as she offered this invitation.

Taiming did not turn her down. The aspen trees by the roadside had shed all their leaves, and in the chilly wind, the light gray trunks looked especially naked. The two entered a park, and as they walked in silence over the chicken feed, a pecking rooster flapped out of their way.

The grass was good to sit on in a soulless region of the park. Almost as soon as they sat down, Shuchun buried her face in Taiming’s lap and exclaimed, “Forgive me about then!” Her body twisting, she spat out the words, “I’ve been so difficult. . . . I’m sorry.”

Learning that she had come to accept his love, Taiming became a furnace. He roughly seized her chin, turned up her face, and stared into her wet eyes.

“Forgive you?” he said in a low but firm voice, “There is nothing to forgive. I was just . . . waiting.”

That last word and her bursting into tears came almost simultaneously. Taiming's passion overwhelmed both him and her weeping. Her lips held up to his, he devoured them as his right and duty as a lover. He no longer hesitated, she no longer forbade, and their flaming lips came together, a seal on their joined hearts. They married a month later and took up residence on a block near Taiping Street.

##### 5. Friction

Their married life began with the new year. Shuchun, who was to graduate in March, still had some course work and continued to attend Jinling University. Taiming went on teaching, now as a means rather than an end. A maid whom they hired managed the household.

Taiming was quite satisfied. Up to his neck in married happiness, as if in a tub of water at just the right temperature, he asked nothing more: Shuchun was the answer to all his problems. Although he finally seemed to have kicked his old habit of endlessly cogitating and brooding, this happy state did not last long.

After Shuchun graduated, the couple discovered that they held contradictory views regarding her future. The man wanted his wife to settle down and become a good housewife, whereas the woman insisted on pursuing a career.

She said, "When it comes to crucial matters, you're as feudal as a grandpa. I didn't intend to give up my freedom when I married, and I don't want to be tied to the hearth. Marriage isn't a business contract, you know. Or by any chance do you believe, like most men, that a wife is just a prostitute with a long-term contract?"

Taiming found such radical assertions very depressing.

Unyielding, Shuchun ignored all his suggestions, decided to go into politics, and landed a job in the Diplomatic Bureau with the help of her university. Taiming feared such a path was especially

inimical to a happy home life, and his fears were borne out. Little by little, Shuchun's tastes and lifestyle began to diverge from his. In vain he recited his favorite lines from the *Romance of the Western Chamber* and *Dreams of the Red Chamber*, but she didn't want to discuss them anymore. The countryside ceased to appeal to her, and she did not want to take walks with him, not even on Sundays. Her new pleasures were dancing, playing mahjong, and going to the theater.

She was always surrounded by her favorite colleagues, all of them young men. One of them was Lai, who had entered the Bureau of Propaganda, just as he had wished. Shuchun's colleagues met in Taiming's own house, which, before he could do anything about it, had become a sort of club for them. Shuchun flourished, so aware was she now of her beauty, and she behaved like a queen. Mahjong tiles clinked night after night in the Hu Club. At first, the proprietor participated in the gambling, too, but only because he had to, for he actually hated the opiate. The more accustomed the clubmen grew to the place, the less gentlemanly they became. At one point, they began to exchange obscenities, and the queen did not stop them, for her religious faith in liberty and equality did not permit intolerance of any kind. Moreover, the absolute equality of the sexes in all matters meant that she did not care what her husband thought or felt. Because her minions were always ready to pay tribute to her—mostly cosmetics and ornaments—the principle visibly enriched her everyday life.

One evening, when her admirers were assembled in the guest room as usual, Lai, who had just returned from Shanghai, presented her with a gift from the city. With great delight, she opened the box and took out a pair of Shanghai shoes—of the latest style and very fashionable, according to Lai. Targeted at women who fell for the newfangled, the gaudy design was exactly what Shuchun liked. Taiming did not say anything but saw the smug expression on Lai's face and wanted to kill him. Lai's vulgar intentions

showed through his filthy, lecherous grin. How dare he be on such intimate terms with Shuchun and completely ignore her husband? Didn't he know that the master of the house was displeased?

They played mahjong late into the night. Taiming hung around for a while, but finally, being too upset, he withdrew into the bedroom. The sound of the tiles and the men's coarse laughter still in his ears, he tossed and turned. His father, Hu Wenging, always spoke of thieves, whores, and gamblers in the same breath and hated all three passionately. Taiming trembled with a premonition. But then, he realized with a start, wasn't his house already their temple? A high-pitched shriek of laughter reached his bedroom; his wife was having one of her dissolute fits of glee. This could not go on, he thought, as her lascivious burst subsided. Something had to be done, for his wife's sake, for his own, for the children to come. But the mere idea of having to ask Shuchun for her cooperation plunged him into despair. Not only would she refuse, but if pressed, she would demand a divorce on the grounds of "incompatibility," a sufficient reason in China. Given her character, he bet that she would advertise the breakup in the local papers. His courage wilted.

It was past three in the morning when the guests departed. Taiming had not fallen asleep for a second. He listened as his wife's dainty feet approached the bedroom. She opened the door, flicked on the light, and saw that Taiming lay wide awake.

Bubbling with joy, she said, "You're still up? You know, tonight we made two hundred yen just from the banker's fee!"

Something about her voice made him lose control of himself.

"Filthy lucre," he spat out, more vehemently than he meant to.

Shuchun froze and gazed at him, frightened. She threw down the money and said, "You . . . I don't believe it! You're telling me I'm a whore!"

She began to sob, angry as much as hurt. So helpless did she seem that Taiming felt sorry and consoled her: It was OK, he should not have said that; she should stop crying and get some sleep.

She did not change her ways, however, and to compensate for her late nights, got up late. Taiming had lived such a regulated life since his childhood that no matter how hard he tried, he could not stay asleep long after sunrise. Sometimes he lay awake till his body ached, and still she did not open her eyes. Thus every morning, he got up alone and waited pathetically for his wife to rise. Sundays were the worst. If he needed Shuchun for some reason and tried to wake her up, she was irritable for the rest of the day. But waiting for her to wake up was not good for his mental health either.

When she did wake up, the maid was summoned to bring water to her and to help her wash her sleepy face. Gargling, eating, drinking coffee—Shuchun never did anything without the maid's help. On Sundays, when the maid was out, she did not wash her face until she returned. And that was not all. Once, leaning back in her rocking chair and reading the paper, she started to ring vigorously for the maid, who lived downstairs. Taiming wondered what she wanted but did not ask. It turned out that some pages of the newspaper had slid out of her hands. She did not want to pick them up herself, since that would have required getting out of her chair. Taiming did not know what to say.

Meanwhile, Shuchun always had a lot to say, about the equality of the sexes, the liberation of women, the improvement of everyday life, the new domesticity. There was not a fashionable movement that she did not support, of which she did not want to become the spokeswoman, and that she did not try to push on everybody. But practice was apparently a different matter, for she did not seem to sense any contradiction. On this point, Taiming considered his wife to be a mysterious creature, an inexhaustible fountain of surprises, an everlasting source of wonderment.

Her passion for mahjong finally began to abate. It was just a game, and she was tired of it. She much preferred dancing now and rarely came home from the downtown dance hall before midnight. Her dance partners were culled mainly from her loyal entourage

of young bureaucrats. Taiming, who could not stand mahjong, hardly knew what dancing was and never went with her to such places. This arrangement suited Shuchun, who did not care what he thought or, for that matter, what anyone thought. She was free, and her freedom was her only pride in life. Taiming told himself that all this was just a sign of a dawn, of new times, but he lost weight anyway. Every evening, he sat alone waiting for his wife to return. Some nights, when he had trouble falling asleep, he fantasized about his wife and how she must be dancing arm-in-arm with young men to the jazzy tunes that probably filled the dance hall. Such images aroused in him an obscene resentment. He remembered Tsuruko and wondered how free of ordeals his life would have been, how much happier, if he had married her instead.

One evening, Shuchun invited her husband to come with her. He had trouble reading her intentions, but she was so insistent, and he was so curious, that they met at an international restaurant downtown. Four or five members of the usual crowd, including Lai, were there as well.

What was pressed upon Taiming that night was, for someone with his ethics, an unforgivably extreme form of decadence. In tune with the salacious melodies, men and women contorted their bodies like insane people and showed no trace of shame. When the dancing reached a climax and the lights were momentarily turned off, noisy kissing was heard from everywhere in the darkness. If Taiming could have observed this scene as something unrelated to him, he might have been able to bear it. But shoved in his face were the dissolute limbs of his own wife, who changed partners now and then. Why, for what reason, was Shuchun so eager to show herself in this way to her husband? Was this what they called modernity?

Taiming could not sit through it. He left early, caught a terrible cold, and ended up spending an entire month in bed. It was as though he had met a demon on a mountain path. In bed for

a month, he wrestled with the question of whether it was his duty, as Shuchun's husband, to rescue her from such a life. It was possible that the antiquated remnants of feudalism in him, which he had not been able to erase entirely, were hampering his understanding of modernity. Consciously or unconsciously, those who judged by past standards were always negative, defensive, reactive to the newness of the present, which deserved to be judged by new moral principles and a new cultural sense. Shuchun's deeds, grotesque at first sight, were perhaps one of those phenomena that inevitably accompanied social progress. In this sense, she was a victim, and the thought helped him forgive her somewhat. Still, he could not convince himself emotionally of the theory that he managed to accept intellectually. Even though he might allow his wife to carry on in this way, he feared that in the near future, her restraint might be tested and fail. Taiming could reconcile himself to the idea that the process of social transformation entailed sacrifices, but did that include an adulterous wife? Perhaps he should begin planning for this eventuality and prepare to be cuckolded. Here ended his reason; the rest was nothing but emotion.

When he finally recovered from his sickness, he had also arrived at a kind of resignation, as one sometimes does after a lengthy psychological struggle. "My wife is my wife, and I am I," he concluded. "I must recover the old self that I gave up when I married."

For the first time in months, he enjoyed the company of books. He became reacquainted with thinkers from Confucius's times and with the *Spring and Autumn Annals*, the classic history of that era. With his growing familiarity came the feeling that his worries were no more than the petty complaints of a petty man, and he welcomed the feeling.

No longer harassed by her husband, Shuchun experimented with one pleasure after another. Not until the end of winter did

she begin to show signs of fatigue, which, however, suggested that she was quite ill.

One evening, Shuchun told Taiming what her problem was. There was an unusual feminine tenderness in her voice, a desire to be protected by her husband, when she told him, "Five months." An aspect of her personality that he had not appreciated was revealed. That evening, they talked late into the night and felt like a couple again. Taiming secretly hoped that motherhood would transform his wife into a different sort of woman.

The baby, born that summer, was a girl. Borrowing the character for "purple" from the mountain, they named her Ziyuan.

Little by little, it became clear that the baby was not fulfilling the task that her father had entrusted to her. As Shuchun convalesced, she left her baby more and more to the maid. In no time, Shuchun had fully recovered her old self as a new woman.

Her husband no longer expected any surprises from her. "What will be, will be," he decided.

Dissatisfied with family life, he channeled his passions into reading and teaching. His part-time job he found especially rewarding because learning Japanese had now become a fad. Not only were his students more enthusiastic, but they also were more diverse, bureaucrats and businessmen as well as college women. By now one of the institute's senior instructors, Taiming felt respected and needed and gladly agreed to double his teaching load to six hours a week.

The student with whom he spent the most time was of the same southern stock as he was, a diplomatic councillor named Zhang whose analysis of social phenomena his teacher found most entertaining. One day, over tea, Zhang asked Taiming detailed questions about the situation in Japan and paid for the favor by leaking some news from the bureau. He related the juicy gossip in the winning manner of a young and able diplomat.

"Let me tell you something that happened recently. The press

club was grilling us with aggressive questions about our pro-Japanese policy. Huang, who's from our bureau, answered them right back, a really good answer, in my opinion. He said, 'China is about to fall. Let's all make as much money as we can from it!' This shut everybody up. Don't you see? Sure, his cynicism meant that he was angry about our sad state of affairs, but to think that he had to speak in such a self-deprecating way to drive home the brutality of historical change! The sorrow of China is that when Huang said this, all the reporters could do was feel sorry."

Zhang sighed. Taiming thought gloomily about this story. Like these foreign reporters, he had some rethinking to do. He and Zhang became good friends and saw each other often.

The coming Sunday was the Feast of the Chrysanthemum, and Nanjing's literati assembled at the Pavilion of the North Pole to compose poetry. Taiming set out to attend but decided not to go alone. He made a detour to Zhang's place to see whether his friend was interested. He was not; he didn't like Chinese verse and would much prefer going to the festival at the Temple of the Crowing Cock. Taiming, who did not want to push poetry on an unwilling person, agreed to this alternative.

To approach the temple, one had to walk past numerous beggars who begged in various ways under the scarlet leaves framing the Hall of Civil Examinations. A gray-haired old man, so sunburned that his face looked like tanned paper, kept banging his forehead on a brick so as to beg with a bloodied face whenever someone passed by. There was another whose legs were rotting, another who wailed with a baby in her arms, another apparently still a child but more like a moving pile of rags. Men and women, young and old, it was as though the harrowing paintings of the eighteen hells, which Taiming's mother had taken him to see when he was little, had come to life. He left small coins in his wake, but Zhang walked on as if he had not seen anything.

The two reached the top of the hill, where there was a pavilion from which to admire the sunset. At a nearby teahouse, they rested their feet, drank the sweet-tasting water from the waterfall, and gazed at Lake Xuanwu. Autumn had put on a good show.

Taiming fondly recalled his Sundays while courting. Not much time had gone by since then. Yet now, and despite their child, Shuchun was hopelessly far away. What if they hadn't married? While Taiming indulged in bitersweet grief, Zhang did not dwell on the sentimental. He lunged forth with ideas and swung them around as spiritedly as a lunatic with a knife.

Sipping the water, he remarked, "Sensei, the issue of treason is becoming popular among the intellectuals of this city. They like to criticize Qin Hui of the Southern Song dynasty for having persecuted the prowar faction in those days. What do you think?"

He was not really asking for Taiming's opinion; the solicitation was only a sort of preface to the exposition of his own views. This was fine with Taiming, who listened with greater and greater interest to what Zhang had to say with such passion.

"All acts that benefit the enemy merit the label of treason. There are many kinds, but I think historical traitors can be divided into roughly three types. The first are the ignorant and incompetent who are interested only in making a living and commit what amounts to treason without knowing it. The second are the more aggressively greedy who are very clever when it comes to satisfying their greed. Middle-class and intellectual traitors belong to this category; they like to think they have a theory, but in fact, they don't. They're feeble men, unprincipled opportunists. The third type has loads of talent and intellect but gives up on their country, forgets its history, and sets out to shake hands with the enemy—in short, sells out their country. The first two are lightweight. Only the third is committing treason in the full sense.

"Who or what can save China from them? My answer is youth and youth only—the feverish recitude of youth. Just recently,

the head of the Diplomatic Bureau had to cancel his train trip to a round of negotiations. This was because a university student who disagreed with our foreign policy lay down in front of the locomotive just as it started to pull out. Literally, the thing was going to happen over his dead body. The blood he was ready to shed is what can save China."

Zhang's last words were hoarse with emotion, and he was not the only one to be moved by the lecture. Indeed, Taiming felt ashamed of himself for being preoccupied with merely private matters. Equally regrettable was the way he had sought and found refuge in the classics. The friends continued to see each other frequently.

The young diplomat's earnestness was contagious. Gradually, the high school teacher adopted the same urgent style. What he thought was in his power, he acted on. Through his students, he tried to fuel the patriotism of the Nanjing people.

Zhang's ideas about classical education were revolutionary. He believed that Chinese culture had to be abandoned altogether, for even though it was immensely rich, it had an equal number of liabilities. Like the river Yangtze, which flowed faster than one might think, Chinese culture was indeed great in the present as well as in the past but did not consider human intervention and was impossible to purify. The result was that the culture could be appreciated only by aristocrats. Adapted to the few, it was undemocratic. The main problem was that the difficult writing required at least ten years to learn and thus effectively precluded the dissemination of culture. The masses had to make a living, which, of course, was not easy, and they didn't have time to master a complicated language. As long as characters were used, the masses would be illiterate. An ideographic language was protection for any autocratic polity and ensured an uneducated population. China could not compete with more civilized nations as long as it took half a lifetime to learn how to read. With such a

handicap, how could a nation absorb the science and culture of other nations? The only solution was to adopt a phonetic writing system. Although the transition would be inconvenient for their own generation, for the sake of future ones, it had to be begun, now. Inconvenience for Zhang and Taiming meant convenience for their descendants.

Another absurd thing about Chinese culture was the literature it produced using that writing system. Sophisticated, abstruse, it was purposely beyond the apprehension of ordinary people. In China, the ability to read was sufficient for one to be deemed extraordinary. In this way, the literati had ruled China for many centuries. The common people could not even correspond with one another. Without a phonetic writing system, Chinese culture could not be reconstructed, and without a new Chinese culture, China could not become independent. Thus Zhang had decided.

Though hesitant to follow Zhang on this logical journey, Taiming had to admit that his friend was at least partly right. But granting that he was right, were his opinions practicable? Taiming doubted the wisdom of destroying an entire heritage that had lasted for aeons and had formed the nation's character, which foreigners admired. Was Zhang saying that what it had produced was opium? Taiming, who was not courageous, asserted that if this were the case, the classics should be preserved out of scientific interest. As a scholar and then as a specialist, Taiming would study this curiosity that did bring pleasure to a few. He was always ready to compromise.

## 6. One Night

The young men at the diplomacy bureau knew how to hold their liquor. Under Zhang's influence, Taiming was beginning to learn the joy of drinking for its own sake. Zhang took him to various gatherings, at all of which, however, the talk centered on politics.

According to Zhang, ever since China lost Manchuria, it was clear that sooner or later, it had to take a final stand. The steadily mounting pressure already was apparent in the rush to learn Japanese, which could not be dismissed as a mere fad. Those who had any feelings were worried about China's future. To be sure, some students at the Japanese Institute said in a casually self-hating tone that made one cry: "Since China is bound to perish, I'm learning Japanese to earn my daily bread tomorrow." But not everyone spoke that way. Others gave as their purpose of study, "Japanese culture is a culture of translation," "and their language is a gateway to sources from around the world." It was with discomfort and a sigh that Zhang added that some radicals were learning Japanese in order to fight the enemy. As much as Zhang wanted a diplomatic solution to the whole affair, he admitted that cruel destiny was perhaps impervious to human desire. Taiming shivered when he remembered that early in the twentieth century, when what came to be known as the Russo-Japanese War seemed imminent, people in Japan scrambled to learn Russian. If his students' interest in Japanese also was a forewarning of a storm, he was not going to participate quietly in such a tremendous misfortune of history.

Only a few days later, the bureau had good news for Zhang: he would be stationed in Japan. Taiming, who was invited to the farewell party, an intimate affair for close friends only, cut through the quarter where the cram schools for passing civil exams were clustered, went down a more verdant block, and, as he had been instructed, knocked on the door of house number twelve. He was shown to the second floor. There, in a room with several large chairs surrounding an equally large table with four vases of pretty flowers set on it, a number of young men sat waiting for the main guest to arrive. Not recognizing any of them, Taiming crept in but did not know how to introduce himself. After a while, an older man came in, spoke to Taiming, and introduced him by name to the others: four young diplomats and an instructor from the Shanghai School

of Arts. The older man was accompanied by two women, beautiful entertainers, who briefly greeted Taiming and smiled broadly.

A car horn beeped out on the street, an engine was turned off, and footsteps came briskly upstairs. It was Zhang. A rose-colored silk handkerchief peeked out of his breast pocket. His suit clearly was new, and his shoes were shining. He shook hands with each of the guests, and they all congratulated him. Zhang, who was being overly modest, had to be forced to the place of honor. Taiming sat down across him, but when the other guests discovered that it was this quiet person who had taught Zhang his Japanese, they would not let him sit anywhere but beside the guest of honor. As soon as they were all arranged, Zhang was on his feet again, officially thanking his friends for coming.

Once they had had enough to drink, the celebration turned into a spirited debate. Eventually, the two art professors deadlocked over some minute point of aesthetics. One of them had studied in France, the other in Japan. The one with the degree from France got emotional and ended the academic disagreement rather abruptly:

"Anyway, you people will be ruling China. The people of France are not likely to take over this country." Spat out bitterly through pursed lips, these words silenced his opponent and everybody else at the table.

An awkward, oppressive silence threatened to spoil the whole evening. It was at this point that the two women revealed their reason for coming. Could they sing a song or two? But of course, none of the gentlemen had the heart to refuse them. The duo's rendition of "Tianshui Checkpoint" restored the gentlemen to their former high spirits. Now, in Tokyo, what should Zhang do first?

He had been handpicked from a large pool of young talented men. A lot was expected of him, and the gravity of the mission was crushing. A man bracing for a storm during the preceding quiet probably would have reacted in the same way.

He asked Taiming for advice, and the gist of the response was preparation and preemption. The young diplomat had to make sure that China did not always react too late to others' initiatives. "I understand what you're saying. I'll try my best not to disappoint you," said Zhang, squeezing Taiming's hands in his. Zhang was going to Tokyo on an impossible errand, and Taiming prayed for his friend with all his heart.

Taiming was so drunk that he couldn't remember how he managed to make his way home that night. Someone had driven him home in an automobile, he was told later. That night, for a change, Shuchun came home earlier than he did.

It was she who opened the door. The vile political atmosphere of house number twelve was still with him, and he ordered his wife, "You! Bring me some tea!"

Curiously enough, Shuchun obeyed him.

Frightened, she peered into his face. "You've been drinking!" she observed, her voice slightly tinged with fear.

Her husband fixed her with dull eyes. Her rosy lips aroused in him an unusually imperious urge. "Hey, come here!" he commanded, throwing an arm around her and pulling her to his chest.

Interestingly enough, Shuchun did not complain. It was with a fawning look that she said, "Oh, you."

That night, forgetting everything as he did the night itself, her husband feasted on her flesh like a healthy beast.

#### 7. Before the Tempest

The café on the sixth floor of the Fuchang Restaurant, though furnished in no particular way, played only tasteful music records. Intellectuals, finding the place relaxing, frequented it. The view to the east was magnificent, and on sunny days, Mount Zijin seemed to be within arm's reach. Looking down, one could see the city's bustling streets stretching all the way to the entertainment district.

When Taiming grew stiff from wandering aimlessly through the streets, he came up here to listen absently to the records and to enjoy his solitude. His married life had not improved.

His ideas about family life, with which his wife did not agree, instead were fulfilled by his daughter. Not receiving much love from her mother, Ziyuan became attached to Taiming. She added flavor to his otherwise vapid life, and the time he spent with her—teaching her new words, for instance—was certainly his most satisfying. Yet this, too, was marred by a certain anxiety.

The ubiquity of politics was threatening to destroy what remained of his conviction regarding the true happiness of man. The news from Shanghai that a people's front had been formed and that grisly acts of terror had become commonplace divided Taiming's workplace into two factions, for and against war. The atmosphere was electric, and animosities grew personal.

In an attempt to escape that turmoil, Taiming was killing time again at the sixth-floor café, when loud chanting and trumpet blasts coming from the world below drowned out the tasteful record music. His reverie interrupted, he walked to the window, and saw that the students were demonstrating.

The trumpeters were playing the national anthem, and the chanting that punctuated its phrases consisted of prowar slogans like "Down with imperialism" and "Fight for the nation." The demonstrators were marching, and as they approached in perfect unison, the noise of their orchestrated steps grew to an earth-shaking rumble.

Taiming lost his hold on the precious calm he had been nurturing that afternoon. Since his earliest days, scenes like these had always thrown him off balance. He felt irritated and restless.

Leaving the café like a hounded man, he marched down the main street in the opposite direction toward the new quarter, as if to counteract the students, only to discover that the vortex of

frenzy had swallowed up the less excitable people as well. In the new quarter, masses of ordinary people had assembled at the traffic circle, and in their midst, agitators were speaking to them.

"Here, too?" Taiming wondered, but stopped. Standing up on his toes at the outermost of the concentric walls of people, he tried to find out what was being said and by whom.

Various speakers of both sexes were taking turns at the podium, all of them young and sharing a curious enthusiasm for clichés. But their passionate tone—tearful or irate or both—appealed to the crowd, and a round of applause followed every platitude that they fervently uttered.

The audience cheered loudly when a pretty woman came to the podium. Wasn't her figure vaguely familiar? Taiming squinted. It was his wife.

With a certain disdainful curiosity, a stranger's cool interest, he wondered what she had to say.

"My brothers, my sisters," she began. What followed was in the irate style. Like the other agitators, she spoke like a sentimentalist who had nothing to say but who knew how to string together the relevant phrases. Impressed that she had had to absorb so much hostility, the audience clapped sympathetically.

It was too ridiculous for words. As Shuchun went on, Taiming instead began to feel a quiet hatred. If she were his daughter rather than his wife, he would have dragged her away and given her a thorough spanking for being so irresponsible. He would have done the same to the other speakers for propagating theoretically groundless opinions that were not even theirs, leaping to conclusions, and promising the impossible. Political frauds had been common throughout history because the people were stupid. As Zeng once put it, they understood "phenomena but not reality—and in this regard, nine-tenths of intellectuals can claim close ties with the people." Taiming seemed to have found the perfect example of Zeng's view. Rant about the inevitability

of war but say nothing about the armaments of the parties concerned. Say nothing? See nothing! For Taiming knew how little his wife knew about China's military, let alone military affairs in general. Should we fight anyway? It was depressing. These irresponsible political brokers who were urging the masses to take up arms that they did not have, the absurdity of someone like his wife advocating war, made his skin prickle. To defeat the Kingdom of Wu, Goujian of Yue waited twenty years, spending a decade on production and another on spying. Unless victory was almost certain, war had to be avoided. A wise man did not draw his sword if he could bear the indignity. The fact that one's arrogance was unmatched was not a sound basis for declaring war. But whether or not China should go to war and how it could win was not his point, he remembered. What annoyed him was that Shuchun—wasn't she supposed to be a diplomat?—was advocating war when she didn't even know how many cannons China had. Although Shuchun was not so meek a woman as to follow her husband's advice, what sort of a man was he to allow her to be like this? Maybe his silence was to be pitied. He sighed.

Meanwhile, Shuchun's speech was becoming more heated, and the audience egged her on with more and more applause. Taiming could not stand it any longer and fled the circle, his hurried steps a plea for escape. He was hurt beyond words by the idea that his and Shuchun's married life had been such a disaster.

So the fevered air of the lower Yangtze—and the politics of summer—did not subside but continued and even intensified. In August, the political parties became even more active. The "Society for National Salvation" was formed and immediately issued 200,000 copies of its organ, *Mass*, which shook the Shanghai publishing world. September came but did not cool the sweltering heat. Nanjing's pavements were still hot.

Though highly sensitive to this gathering of energy, Taiming refused to consider what had caused it. Readjusting his interpre-

tation of the matter each day to suit himself, he struggled to find whatever peace he could in his own rationalizations. If the crisis had a mind, however, it did not agree that he was a bystander and proceeded to draw him in.

One night in the middle of September, a hot night that brought Taiming out to his yard, he received a visit from a messenger: Master Zeng wanted his former lodger to come to see him as quickly as possible. Such a call was without precedent. Speculating wildly, he tagged behind the messenger. One look at the house, however, exceeded all his expectations.

The house had the peculiar hushed air of an abandoned building. But it had not been abandoned, at least not entirely, for a solitary lamp shone through the window of what was or used to be Zeng's study. The messenger left. Taiming entered the house and then the room, on the bare floor of which Zeng sat doing nothing other than wait for his friend—who exclaimed upon seeing the state of the study, "What happened?"

The room was nearly empty except for the bookshelves, themselves empty as well. In a corner, three large suitcases lay on top of each other in a neat pile.

Zeng was laughing. "The time has come!" he declared. "I am leaving tonight!" he announced. "You don't need any more explanation, do you? We should have a few more drinks together, though. True, it's unusual for the person leaving to be hosting the farewell party, but I didn't think you'd be surprised. Please, drink up."

Indeed, a modest banquet had been prepared on a low table that had not been stored. So that was it! Taiming did not have to ask where Zeng was going and why; it was to the northwest according to an escape plan Zeng had ready for some time. It was finally being carried out, and his wife and children had, no doubt, been sent ahead. Matters were coming to a head, then! Taiming, who had had no clue, stood speechless.

That night they drank silently. There was not much that they needed to say, although each felt feelings and thought thoughts. The fact that Zeng was leaving everything behind—and that the other, who was not, had been invited to drink with him—was an eloquent expression of Zeng's philosophy. Although it had never been a secret that Zeng avidly studied political affairs in order to decide whether or not to pursue a certain goal, nor hard to guess that the physics professor's frequent trips to Shanghai were a way of staying in touch with members of the allied front, still, for Zeng to act so soon and so decisively came as a great surprise to Taiming. His own behavior, on the contrary, was probably indistinguishable from sitting on the fence. Zeng's silence seemed disapproving, and Taiming could not look at him.

When the time came to part, they shook hands firmly. Without letting go of Taiming's hand, Zeng said, "We've come to a point where abstract reasoning won't help. There's only one thing that can save China now. That, of course, is action. I don't know what direction your path will take, but I just hope you find one. Permit me to give you some advice, though: at least give up all your ideas. What's going on now isn't just other people's business. It's your own, Hu, and it eventually will affect you."

This advice, characteristic of a man of principle and action, also was a senior compatriot's farewell, but Taiming could say nothing in return. As the other left, Taiming bitterly deplored that he didn't share the strength of Zeng's convictions.

#### 8. Another Room of Captivity

The fast-moving times brought resistance in their wake. The Communists joined the Nationalists after the Xian incident. The dark clouds that covered the continent rolled over Mount Zijin, too, and spring and its flowers could not dispel the anxiety or the turmoil.

One night, just as Taiming was falling asleep, he felt as though somebody were shaking him. When he opened his eyes, a few strangers were standing by his bed. Panicked, he was about to yell and ask them to identify themselves when he was interrupted by a low, confident male voice.

"Metropolitan Police. We're sorry to disturb you at this late hour. Just a couple of questions—please come with us." The man's epaulettes gleamed coldly, intimidatingly, on his shoulders. His name card identified him as no less than the head of the Secret Service Division.

"It's happened at last," Taiming realized, and this put him strangely at ease. "All right," he answered, "but could you wait while I get ready? In fact, my wife hasn't even come home yet . . ."

"Your wife, is that so? Certainly we can wait," the secret person replied. His smooth manner was unspeakably oppressive in its very gentleness.

"I might take a long time," Taiming added. Fortunately, Shuchun returned while he was packing. She understood the situation immediately but kept quiet. Husband and wife conferred for a couple of minutes to arrange for her to handle matters on her own while he was away.

Then Taiming said to the officers, "Sorry to keep you waiting. Let's go."

Nanjing was dark. The automobile took them down Taiping and Jiankang Streets before turning off on to narrower streets. A long trip on a one-way ticket, Taiming thought. He shut his eyes and sank into the darkness, like a lost man wandering deeper and deeper into a maze, but his mind felt unusually alert. The uniformed bodies that sandwiched him in were warm and elicited a bizarre longing for human company.

The automobile stopped on an unknown block somewhere in the city. The shabby building was probably a special, isolated facility; it certainly was not the police headquarters.

The house's interior was forbidding. The entrance hallway, lighted by a single bulb, stretched deep into the shadows like a road to hell, down which, guarded at the front and the back, Taiming proceeded. They walked through a number of rooms. They finally stopped in a makeshift interrogation room with an imposingly large desk, behind which the head of the secret police sat down. There was a chair in front for Taiming. The questioning began immediately.

From the moment Taiming saw the police in his bedroom, he figured out why he was being arrested. The purpose of the interrogation, which concerned his background, proved him right. So be it, he decided; from his first day in China until now, he had never really wanted to lie about his status. Openly admitting that he was a citizen of the Japanese Empire, he explained his genuine affection for the Chinese nation.

The interrogator extended his sympathies. He said he was impressed but that "the administration's policy" was a different matter, that pleading with him was futile. "Mr. Hu, you've convinced me—thoroughly, I might add—that you're not capable of espionage. I wish it were within my power to release you. Unfortunately, by order of the government, I am to limit your freedom."

The questioning over for the time being, Taiming's freedom was limited to horribly dilapidated confines behind a locked door. Left among cobwebs, he understood quickly and viscerally that he had been cut off from the rest of the world and could do nothing about it. The weak electric light source of the closetlike room revealed an old desk and what appeared to be a bed. Sitting on the latter, Taiming heaved a huge sigh and contemplated the sudden change of scenery.

Many other civil servants of Taiwanese origin must have been suffering the same fate. Why this persecution, Taiming wanted to ask. Was being Taiwanese so bad? He remembered Zeng's parting

words that "it isn't other people's business." Zeng had been right. Still, who would have expected this business to affect Taiming so soon? And who was it who revealed that he was Taiwanese—his own wife, perhaps? That was impossible—but then, who? The more he thought about it, the more the mystery deepened. In the first place, how, when, and from where did the police sneak into his bedroom? What, could they turn into smoke? The more he thought about it, the more confused he became.

He thought some more between the filthy, sinking sheets. When he got used to the stench, he turned off the light to get some sleep. But his eyes grew accustomed to the dark, and his overworked brain could not rest. He started worrying about his daughter, Ziyuan. Now four years old, she had been raised by him and the maid and hardly knew a mother's love but still was getting to like Taiming's wife well enough. Shuchun returned her affection and sometimes played with her now that her daughter required less care. But surely little Ziyuan missed her father? His daughter's affection made his heart ache.

How interesting that the Japanese word for bedbugs is "Nanjing bugs." In any case, the itching was severe. The absolute silence of the room was broken only by his occasional twisting and turning until the sun streamed in through the bars of the tiny skylight. He examined the bite. It was a red circle the size of a large coin.

All day he waited for the second round of interrogations, but his captor was not obliging. Apart from the times the guard brought him his meals, Taiming could not even hear footsteps. The room was dank and chilly. He wanted to read, but there were no books. He wanted to write, but there was no paper. He thought some more, but no new thoughts came to him, and night fell again. Even though Taiming enjoyed peace and quiet, this hush, this desperate loneliness of solitary confinement, was too much. Was he imagining it, or was he actually trembling? He lay down to get some rest, but his overtaxed mind kept working aimlessly.

Little by little, the mountains and rivers of his homeland appeared to him. Behind his grandfather, who led him by the hand, he was hiking to the Ladder to the Clouds. Such happy days, when in the fields and hills wild pomegranates awaited anyone with a basket, which could be filled in no time. The rivers teemed with fish. A pound or two was easy catch for anyone with a rod and a free afternoon. In those days, there were no bad people, and people did not mind missing a couple of tangerines or persimmons from their orchards—provided it was just a couple. The villagers hardly ever studied but did not doubt that greatness was in store for anyone who did. Taiming shared this belief and, as a child, vowed to study hard and become great. He studied hard but did not become great. . . . Grandfather's tomb lay on the hilltop. The view was good from there: far away was the Central Mountain range, and close by was a tea field surrounded by acacia trees. Before leaving his village, Taiming burned five incense sticks there and prayed to his grandfather. Pledging to become the first of many generations of Hui in the Yangtze delta—where *his* bones would be buried—he sought his ancestors' protection. Though not as strong willed as Zeng, Taiming now vaguely wanted to go home. The mountains and rivers of his homeland were exquisite songs and poems compared with which the continent's peaks were prosaic. He choked on his emotions at this thought. The snowless country was green, green with banana and palm trees. . . . His mother's face appeared before him. How was she? But he had not written to her for a long time, and her careworn face, or its apparition, faded. Other faces came and went: his father's, his brother's, and, one by one, those of neighbors whom he had never thought about in his entire life. If and when he was cleared of suspicion and released from this cell, he would go home. Anything about his dear homeland he was ready to suffer, everything about it would endure. . . .

But he did not know whether he could go home again. Exhausted, he finally fell asleep. There were many more red coins on his skin when he woke up.

The wretched days and lonely nights merged into a span of gray time as his body and mind wilted into one. At least two weeks of anguish and tribulation passed with no calls from the interrogator. Three times a day, the prison guard brought his food. Taiming looked forward to the taciturn man's visits.

One night, around midnight, he thought he heard someone knock at the door. Though suspicious that he was imagining things, he pricked up his ears and peered through the darkness. In a moment, he heard more tapping. It certainly came from the door, which he rushed forward to open, even though it was locked from the outside. Something was slid under the door. It felt like a piece of paper.

Instinctively, Taiming asked, "Who's there?"

There was no response. Whoever it was tiptoed away, and the silence resumed its reign. Fearfully, Taiming turned on the light to examine the piece of paper. On it was a poem, written in a clear and slender script:

Remember how a sparrow found  
A farmer's hut could be its nest?  
Remember having by a mound  
Intoned, "A life is but a guest?"  
Remember always, Yue or Wu,  
We're kin and kind, as heaven knows.  
Master, remember that, and do  
With harsher chants this shame oppose.

At the end of the poem were a couple of characters that Taiming at first took to be the signature. He could not recall anyone with such a name but in a moment realized that "bingding," an

ancient synonym for "fire," was an instruction to destroy the piece of paper once he had figured out its meaning.

But what was it? He read the poem over and over again to try to understand the message—not the superficial one but the one underneath, its hidden meaning. To begin with, who was the eccentric who wanted to play such games after midnight? The script looked female. Who was the difficult woman?

Just then it occurred to him that it had to be her, that clever girl who was among those he had taken to the Ming tomb. He remembered the lines he had composed in the garden by the mound; that she had quickly grasped their meaning and that her own poems had been precocious. Her name was Suzhu, and when Taiming saw that its first character had been worked into the poem, he was convinced that it was she. Suzhu had gone on to marry a detective. "Ah ha," he thought. The entire puzzle finally seemed to be coming together. What a novel-like coincidence! He was trapped in a house whose mistress was his former student. Suzhu, she was the author of the letter, and the reader's heart beat fast.

### 9. Flight

The novel did not have any more installments. The time without day or night resumed, marked only by the meals that the prison guard, Taiming's sole contact with humanity, brought three times a day with mechanical regularity. The miracle of Suzhu did not recur.

The days were somewhat brighter than the nights. When the dark grew thick and sticky, it was night.

One night—was it a dream?—he thought he heard footsteps. It appeared that the faint noise had waked him up, though he did not remember falling asleep. He strained his ears, and the footsteps ceased. He was sure he was not hearing things. Some-

body was there (somebody other than himself) listening just as hard on the other side of the door; somebody was breathing as quietly as he was. There was a rustling and the sound of a key being inserted into a keyhole—the one to his cell. Taiming held his breath.

The door opened slowly, seemingly by itself, and without so much as a creak. Something like a shadow slipped in and drew close.

It said in a breathless whisper, "Teacher, it's me, Suzhu." He was right, then. The odor of a young woman wafted over him. The person of Suzhu was there. Was it a dream? But in a moment, they were hugging tight.

They compared notes in the dark, in hushed voices, her bosom against his, but this was no time for talk. She had not come to renew old ties; she had come to free him from his present bondage, and the first step was out of this closet. She left a twisted wire in the lock to indicate the prisoner's resourcefulness. She seemed well prepared.

"Quick, this way," she said, leading him. Tonight, her husband—the head of the Metropolitan Secret Police—was out. He was attending a banquet. The prison guard she had sent out on a complicated errand.

Everything proceeded as planned, and the final step of the deception was to bind and gag her. There was not a moment to be spared now. Her eyes begged him to be off. Former teacher and student exchanged parting looks full of emotion.

He slinked out of the house and ran west down a dingy alley. The soles of his shoes rang loudly in his ears. Across the deep night, he ran as fast as he could, at one point knocking over something that he later realized was a person.

A taxi, barely fitting into the alley, awaited him at an intersection. On the window of the rear left door was draped a large white handkerchief that seemed to shine in the dark. He tumbled into the back seat. Soaked in sweat, he was too breathless to notice

that he was not alone, but the car accelerated with a roar and sped down the alley.

"Teacher, it's me." Taiming recognized the voice, which was low for a young woman's. He could not see her face in the dark, but it was no doubt Youxiang, whom Suzhu said she had contacted. Youxiang had also come on that Sunday outing and had admired the garden by the tomb. A wise girl, with a broad forehead, she had been one of his favorites, attending his special math sessions after school and, like Suzhu, giving him poems to read and revise. The three of them were aficionados of poetry as well as teacher and students. After graduation, the girls returned to Shanghai, where both of them had grown up, and corresponded with their favorite teacher for a couple of years before losing touch with him. Taiming did not know that they were in Nanjing—a dramatic, even melodramatic encounter.

The taxi drove down Taiping Street and turned at Central Mountain West. The police sergeant at the intersection momentarily frightened Taiming, but he let the car pass. The fugitive wanted to stop by at his house but thought the better of it: the person he had knocked over in the alley may have been the prison guard, in which case his homecoming would quickly end in his being rearrested. Youxiang agreed and promised she would put him in touch with his wife. The taxi whizzed past another policeman. Why were the nights of Nanjing being so carefully patrolled? Youxiang asked the cab driver to take Main Avenue, which was not so prosperous as it sounded and was free of police after dark. The car passed through Yijiang Gate, turned right, and skidded to a halt. They were on the Lower Piers, where the *Hankou* was moored, flying a Japanese flag.

The escape was three-quarters complete. All that remained was for Taiming to board the *Hankou*. If the captain refused to grant him illegal passage, then that was that. He was ready.

#### 10. So Long

Youxiang handed him some money and gave him the address of a man named Li, to be contacted in Shanghai. Their good-byes were short.

Facing the captain, Taiming gambled by telling him the truth and pleaded in Japanese for special passage. The *Hankou's* skipper was an odd sort. He nodded and even echoed his words amiably throughout Taiming's story but, as soon as it ended, said cuttingly, "I think I get it, mister. When you're in trouble, you folks become Japanese citizens. Ha, how convenient!" Then contradicting this, he spat out, "Falling onto my boat. . . . Take the berth next to mine. I can't refuse, can I?"

Not for nothing had the man sailed up and down the Yangtze in these tense times. He may have been prickly, but he was broad-minded and trustworthy. Taiming came to agree with the captain that the *Hankou* was the mother ship of the Yangtze fleet and that there was no safer place.

Taiming's landing in Shanghai required some playacting on his and the captain's part, but the show was an easy success.

He had made it. The escape from the cell to the boat to Shanghai could not have worked out more elegantly. It was a miracle.

He found an inn in an abandoned quarter and registered as "Huang Taiming." Once he had calmed down, he went out to meet Li.

Li, a broker now but formerly an official in the People's Government, had married Youxiang's older sister, Taitai, a graduate of Beijing University. She loved debating and welcomed him as a comrade, Taiming soon found.

In Shanghai, the rush of history was gathering speed as in no other place. The overpowering current easily carried off mere

individuals without even allowing them to take a breath. Prominently active was the Society for National Salvation, whose anti-Japanese operations steadily intensified the general anxiety. The foreign settlements served as a superb hiding place, but there, too, the talk centered on war. Sensuous melodies were no longer heard in the cafés, bars, and dance halls. Instead, people sang stirring songs by a native composer about the vanguard as society at large silently inched toward war.

United under the slogans of the allied front, the people rose all at once; the curtain rose on the historic strikes against Japan's textile interests. Day after day, students, even those still in high school, demonstrated in the streets. It was rumored that the Koreans had also risen and that their independence movement was under way. But the Taiwanese were mysteriously disappearing every day. Caught in the vicissitudes of history, divided internally—exactly as Japanese “higher politics” had envisioned (which saddened Taiming more than anything else)—Taiwanese were facing the their greatest crisis in modern times.

One evening, Li said to Taiming in a sarcastic tone that was only slightly playful, “You must feel pretty lonely watching things from on high. It breaks my heart, really. You see the forces of history carrying away everything, and you can’t join any of them. Let’s say you manage to convince yourself one way or the other. You won’t convince anyone else; everyone’ll think you’re a spy. Come to think of it, you’re a sort of misfit, aren’t you?” Li had been infected. He had given up his job and was now feverish from political activity.

Taiming was afraid that the ex-broker wanted to use him in some kind of covert operation. When Li offered to take him in, however, he left his inn, for the Japanese settlement was now being searched for dissenters and was no longer a safe haven. In the bloodthirsty eyes of the Japanese authorities, who at that moment did not have time to ferret out subtle differences, all

natives from the province of Taiwan were suspect. The fact that one was innocent was not a good reason not to be terrified.

About that time, three letters from Nanjing arrived at Taiming’s new address. The first two were from Suzhu and Youxiang. Taiming gobbled up his former students’ reports; braver than he, they cheered him on and promised to remain in touch with his wife. He opened the third letter, and Shuchun’s handwriting—he had not seen so much of it in a long time—conjured up warm feelings he had not felt toward her for ages. Back when they lived together, her ways offended him more often than not, but now that he was underground in a stranger’s house, her spiritedness was a relief. There was absolutely nothing to worry about, she wrote, except that Ziyuan’s ability to make mischief was improving. Enclosed was a photograph of Ziyuan and her mother. The younger lady was laughing. But wait—it wasn’t possible—how could his daughter become even more adorable than she already was?—and Shuchun looked good. Their future had been weighing on Taiming, and he felt relieved. The idea he had been mulling over in his mind was beginning to look more and more practicable. Li agreed that it was probably necessary for Taiming to seek refuge. His wish to sail home thus became a plan to do so.

One day toward the end of May, Taiming boarded the *Mount Song* from a pier on Yangshu Bay. It was a lonely departure. Only Li was there to wave to him as the propeller churned the muddy waters of the Huangpu, shortly to flow into the great river and out into the ocean.

Watching the city by the river recede, Taiming tried to sort out his feelings. He could not decide how he felt when he thought, “So long, continent—will I see you again . . . ?”

The ship was heading for the river delta. But it was going against the current, for the tide was rising and the water was flowing upstream, washing the ship on the way.

The water brought with it a man floating facedown. He neared the ship and rubbed against it. Nobody clamored to lift him out of the water; the continent was a cold place. In the timeless flow of history, he was worth no more than a handful of dust, no more than a corpse.

But wasn't the magisterial river flowing backward? So it was, carrying the nameless man toward—Shanghai.

"So long, continent," Taiming said once more. Dusk was setting on the international city.

## *Chapter Four*

### *1. The Gloomy Homeland*

Looking back on them from his homeland, the years Taiming had spent on the continent were but a passing dream. He was relieved to be back in Taiwan, but at the same time, from the moment he got off the ferry in Chilung, a burdensome feeling weighed on him wherever he went.

The excessive, meticulous inspection by the harbor police and customs surprised him. Although he had nothing on his conscience, he cringed in their fine net. He actually trembled when he faced the detective on duty.

Because Taiming had become accustomed to the continent's freeness and openness, its happy-go-lucky atmosphere, it was as though he had suddenly wandered from a wider place into a dank, narrow alley. It was suffocating.

This feeling boarded the train with him at Chilung station. In Taipei, where he got off, he noticed a swarthy man with razor-sharp eyes. The man followed Taiming like a shadow to the bus, to the coffee house, wherever he strolled. The shadow came along to the Ximen market when he went shopping. Was he being