

jay landed near a baby rabbit, its head bobbing while its wings fluttered.

"Can we take a walk together Sunday afternoon?" she asked, putting her hand on the window ledge and looking at him expectantly. The same sweet smile appeared on her face.

"Yes, where should we meet?" He couldn't believe his voice.

"How about in front of the grocery store?" Her eyes were shining.

"What time?"

"Two?"

"Sure, I'll be there."

"I have to run. Doctor Liu is waiting for these test results." She waved a sheaf of slips in her hand. "Bye-bye now."

"Bye."

As she was walking away, for the first time he noticed she had a slim back and long, strong legs. She turned around and gave him another smile, then quickened her footsteps toward the Medical Ward. He said to himself, If this leads to an affair, so be it.

6

On Sunday afternoon they met in front of the grocery store and then walked about in the compound. At the beginning Lin felt uneasy, especially when they ran into others. He knew that people, after passing them, were turning around and looking at him and Manna. But soon her carefree manners put him at ease.

They talked about the downfall of the capitalist-roaders on the Central Party Committee—Liu Shaogi, Deng Xiaoping, and several others who were being denounced by the Red Guards in Beijing. Who could imagine that so many "time bombs" had ticked around Chairman Mao? They also talked about the fighting in large cities, of which they had heard from different sources. Manna told him that in Changchun City two factions of revolutionary rebels had recently shelled each other with tanks and rocket guns installed on locomotives. She heard that the train station at Siping City had been leveled by gunfire.

As they strolled along the path between the turnip and eggplant fields behind the mess hall, they began talking about recent events in the hospital. After the Cultural Revolution had broken out the year before, the medical staff here had divided into two factions. They would argue and quarrel, blaming each other for deviating from the Party's line and for revising genuine Mao Tse-tung Thought. Unlike most people, Lin and Manna had not yet joined either of the organizations, although she was interested in the one called the Red Union.

"Don't join," he told her.

She was taken aback and asked, "Why?"

"None of them really understands Mao Tse-tung Thought. They

just waste their time arguing and fighting. So many people want to be a commander of some sort. We shouldn't join up."

"But don't you want to take part in the Cultural Revolution?"

"You don't have to fight with others to be an active revolutionary, do you?"

She seemed impressed by his candid words and agreed not to become involved with the Red Union. In fact Lin was also surprised by what he had said. Under other circumstances, he wouldn't dare give such advice that might get himself into trouble, but with Manna, the words had just flowed out of his mouth.

On their way back, she said to him as if embarrassed, "Can I ask you something I can't figure out by myself?"

"Sure, anything you think I know."

"What's an angel?"

He was amazed by the question. "Well, I'm not sure. An angel is someone who carries out God's missions, I guess. It's a Christian idea, superstitious stuff."

"Do you know what an angel looks like?"

"I saw a picture once. It's like a chubby baby with three pairs of wings, like a sweet child."

"I see."

"Why did you ask?"

She raised her eyes and gazed at him for a moment, then answered, "An old man once said I looked like an angel."

"Really? Why did he say that?"

"I've no idea. It happened when I was eight. A group of girls in our school performed a dance at an arts center for some heroes of the Korea War. We were all dressed like ducks, wearing white hats and feathers around our waists. When the dance was over, I left the stage for the ladies' room and ran into an old couple at the side entrance to the hall. They both looked shaky with age. The small old man stopped me at the gate and made the sign of a cross over

me, saying, 'You look like an angel, child.' For some reason my heart started kicking, although I knew he meant no harm. Some policemen rushed over and dragged the old couple away, while they were shouting, 'Believe in Jesus! Believe in the Lord!' I ran off to change my clothes without going to the bathroom because I was afraid of running into the police. Later I tried to find out what an angel was. I checked the word in some dictionaries, but none of them carried it. I dared not ask anybody. You are the only person that I've ever asked. Now I kind of see what the old man meant, but I was never a chubby child. Why did he call me that?" She said the last sentence as if to herself.

"You must have looked very happy and innocent."

"No, I was never happy in my childhood. I envied those kids who had parents, and even hated some of them. By the way, Lin, don't tell anybody about this angel thing, all right?"

"Sure, I won't."

He peered at her face. The innocent look in her eyes convinced him that her angel story was true.

The next Sunday they met and walked together again; and again the following weekend. In a month they began to meet more often, twice or three times a week before nightfall. By and by Lin grew attached to Manna. Once she couldn't see him as they had planned because she was assigned to accompany a patient to another army hospital; he was so restless that he paced back and forth in his office for two hours that evening. It was the first time that he suffered such a longing to be with a woman.

After August he and Manna didn't need to arrange to meet anymore. They ate at the same table in the mess hall; they went to the hot-water room together, each holding a thermos; they sat next to each other at meetings and political studies; they played table tennis and badminton together; they strolled about within the compound in the evening whenever the weather allowed, chatting and some-

times arguing. At times Lin wondered whether they had become too close, like an engaged couple, although they had never become intimate, not even touching hands again. He kept reminding himself that he was a married man.

Neither he nor Manna would join a revolutionary organization, but they dutifully participated in political activities. Lin even lectured on three of Chairman Mao's essays, "Serve the People," "In Memory of Dr. Norman Bethune," and "The Old Man Moved the Mountain." His talks were so well received that some people borrowed his notes to read. Because both Lin and Manna were Party members and had a clean family background, the revolutionaries in the hospital didn't accuse them of harboring a reactionary motive.

Nevertheless, people began to gossip about them, saying they were having an affair. The hospital leaders were concerned, but they found no evidence that Lin and Manna had broken any rule. Never had they been together outside the compound; nor had their conduct revealed any intimacy, which lovers usually couldn't help showing, such as patting each other and signaling with glances. Yet beyond question, their relationship was more than camaraderie, because no two mere comrades of different sex would spend so much time together. Even those who were engaged wouldn't have to meet each other every day, but Lin and Manna were simply inseparable.

At the time Ran Su was the vice-director of the hospital's Political Department, and Commissar Zhang enjoined him to handle this case. Ran Su had been on good terms with Lin, because they both loved books and often talked about novels.

He summoned Lin to his office one winter afternoon and said to him, "My friend, I understand that your marriage was arranged by your parents, and probably you don't love your wife, but I want to warn you beforehand that your relationship with Manna Wu may

affect your future, no matter what kind of relationship it is, normal or abnormal. In fact you're heading toward trouble."

Lin made no response. He had thought of that, but was unsure whether he could break with Manna, who was actually his first girlfriend. Never had a woman been so close to his heart. He believed that Manna and he, if not lovers in the physical sense, were becoming kindred spirits. These days he almost couldn't refrain from joining her whenever it was possible.

Ran Su combed his dark hair with his fingers, looking at Lin. A pair of little crinkles appeared under his triangular eyes. He smiled and said, "Come on, Lin. I treat you as a friend. Tell me what you think."

Lin managed to say, "I shall keep the relationship normal.

Manna Wu and I will remain just comrades."

"Promise me then that you and Manna Wu will have no abnormal relationship unless you have divorced your wife and married her." By "abnormal" he meant "sexual."

For half a minute Lin remained silent. Then he raised his head and muttered, "I promise."

"You know, Lin. I have to do this. If you break any rule, I won't be able to protect you. Now that you've promised, I'm going to assure my superiors that there's nothing unusual between you and Manna Wu. Don't break your word, or else you will get me into trouble as well."

"I understand." A coldness was sinking into his heart. How he regretted having agreed to meet Manna three months ago. Already deep in the relationship, how could he extricate himself without hurting her and filling his own heart with despair? He had his family and shouldn't have gone with a young woman this way.

Ran Su gave him a Peony cigarette and said he would return Lin's novel *How Steel Is Tempered* in two weeks. These hectic days

made it impossible for him to finish the book. "I don't understand why the Russians always wrote such fat novels," he said. "They must've had a lot of time. I often skip the first chapters, too many descriptions, passage after passage. The pace is too slow." In fact, it was this little man who had notified Lin the previous year that he ought to close his library without delay to avoid having to forfeit his books.

When Lin told Manna about his talk with Ran Su the next evening on the sports ground, she made a long face and dropped her eyes, her elbow resting on a vaulting horse, which stood between them. Nearby were a set of parallel bars, a horizontal bar, and two jumping pits filled with sand.

After a brief silence, she lifted her head and asked testily, "What are your true feelings about me?"

He was puzzled by the question and asked, "What do you mean?"

"Who am I to you? Are we going to be engaged one day?" She looked him straight in the eye.

He took the question with composure. "If I could, I would propose to you. Actually I've thought about that."

Hearing his words, she melted into tears. Her right hand was holding her side as though she were suffering from a stomachache. Disconcerted, he looked around and saw only a few children playing the game "Catch a Spy" in the dusk. A cluster of tall smokestacks fumed lazily in the south. Fortunately none of their comrades was in sight.

He handed her his handkerchief, murmuring, "Don't be so upset, Manna. I love you, but we cannot be together. I'm sorry."

"It's not your fault. Oh, why is the Lord of Heaven so mean to me? I'm already twenty-eight."

Lin sighed and said no more. I'd be a happy man if she were my wife, he thought.

Manna was also summoned to Director Su's office a few days later and was made to promise the same as Lin had.

At the end of December, for the first time Lin was not elected a model officer. Some people complained about his lifestyle. One officer reported that Lin once had not stood at attention like others when the national anthem was broadcast, even though they had been in the bathhouse, all naked in the pool. A section chief remarked that Lin shouldn't keep his hair so long and parted right down the middle. The hairstyle made him look like a petty intellectual, like those in the movies. Why couldn't he have his hair cropped short like others? What made him so special? His college diploma? Then how come the other three college graduates in the hospital didn't bother so much about their hairstyles? How come one of them didn't mind having his head shaved bald?

Without delay Lin asked his roommate Ming Chen to give him a crew cut. Manna was troubled by his new haircut, which made him look nondescript, saying he now seemed like "neither a drake nor a gander." But he said it didn't matter, since it was winter and he wore his fur hat most of the time.

At political studies Lin often felt that people expected to hear more from him about his inmost thoughts, as though he were supposed to make a self-criticism. He was upset and for months remained gloomy.

7

For over a year Manna wanted to see what Shuyu looked like, but Lin wouldn't give her a chance. Whenever she asked him to show her a photograph of his wife, he would say he didn't have one. Manna was sure he did. In secret she had once searched through the drawers in his desk when she was helping clean the windowpanes of the office he shared with another doctor, but she had found no photograph in them. Her roommates often asked her about Lin's wife, and she felt embarrassed that she could tell them nothing. Without fail they would warn her that Lin might be of two minds about their relationship. So she should be more careful.

At the hospital's annual sports meet in the early fall of 1968, Manna won a third prize for table tennis. She was awarded a perfumed soap wrapped in a white towel. To please her more, that afternoon, in Lin's dormitory, he asked her to make a wish.

"My only wish is to see Shuyu's majestic face," she said, rolling her eyes, which lit up with excitement.

Since his roommates were not in, he picked up his dictionary, *Forest of Words*, took a photograph out of the vellum cover, and handed it to her. It was a new one, black-and-white and four by three inches.

Looking at it, Manna couldn't help giggling. Both Shuyu and Hua were in the photograph. The baby girl, in checkered overalls, stood on the ground with her knees bent, like a dog rising on its hind legs. Her hands were reaching out for the bench on which her mother sat. Shuyu was closer to the camera than Hua, her face gaunt and her forehead grooved by wavy creases. Her flabby mouth

spread sideways as though she were about to cry. A small fishtail of wrinkles gathered at the end of her right eye, which was half closed. More surprising, she was dressed like an old woman: a short gown like a dark iron barrel encased her sloping shoulders and short upper body; her thighs were thin, both shanks wrapped in puttees; on the ground her feet were splayed in black shoes like a pair of mice. A fierce-looking goose was flapping its wings on Shuyu's left. In the background were water vats, the thatched adobe house, and half an elm crown over the roof.

"Heavens, oh her tiny feet!" Manna cried. Lin stood up as she went on, "Isn't she your mother?" She broke into laughter, bending forward.

His eyes flashed behind the lenses of his glasses. He picked up his cap and left the bedroom without a word.

"Hey, Lin, come back. I didn't mean to hurt your feelings."

She followed him out, but he didn't turn his head. He was heading toward the back gate of the hospital grounds.

Beyond the wall of the compound stretched an orchard, which had been planted four years before by the local commune members and was now in fruit, the apple-pear trees standing row after row all over the hillside. Hurriedly Lin walked out of the back gate and disappeared in the orchard.

That was the only time Manna saw him in a huff, but he returned to normal the next day. When she again apologized, he told her to forget about it.

The photograph was a great relief to her, because it convinced her that Lin and his wife didn't make a good match, and that sooner or later he would leave Shuyu. At last she had hopes of marrying him one day.

Despite her roommates' plying her with questions, Manna wouldn't reveal anything to them about Shuyu. She still claimed she knew nothing about the country woman. But a month later, unable

to contain her excitement, she told her friend Haiyan Niu about the photograph.

They were both on the second shift, which was from 7:00 p.m. to 3:00 a.m. At night when the patients in the ward were asleep, the two nurses had little to do except distribute some medicine in the wee hours and take a few patients' temperatures, so they would chat. Haiyan was pretty and pert, always smiling with near teeth and often surrounded by young men. She had grown up in Muji City, though she had been born in Habin. Her paternal grandfather had been a well-known capitalist, but she hadn't suffered much from her family background, because the old man had donated a huge sum of money to the Communist government for a MIG-15 so as to fight the United States in the Korean War. The donation bankrupted his businesses—an oil mill and a tannery—but his family was classified as Open-Minded Gentry, so that later his descendants miraculously remained untouched during political struggles. And his granddaughter Haiyan had even joined the army. In her there was a kind of wildness, which Manna very much admired, and which was probably a residue of the frontier spirit that still possessed some Northerners. Sometimes Haiyan reminded Manna of a sleek leopard.

"If I were you, I'd go to bed with Lin Kong," Haiyan said to her one night, her hands crocheting a woolen shawl.

"What? Girl, you're crazy," said Manna. With a pair of large tweezers she was taking some sterilized syringes and needles out of a stainless steel pot that had boiled for half an hour on the electric stove.

Haiyan was working loop after loop of the cream-colored wool. Without raising her head she said, "No, I'm not crazy. You have to find a way to develop your relationship with him, don't you?"

"Well, I'm afraid that might scare him away."

They both laughed, and Manna sneezed. It had grown humid in

the office; tiny dewdrops appeared on the metal lid of the trash bin standing by the desk. Haiyan put down the crochet work on her lap and said, "Listen, elder sister, once you've done it with him, he won't abandon you. If he really loves you, if he's a man with a heart, he'll follow you wherever you go. If he doesn't, he isn't the man you want, is he?"

"You think like a little girl. No love is so romantic."

"Don't give me that. What do you know about love?"

"All right, you know everything."

"Of course I know."

"Tell me, how many men have you known?" Manna winked at her. She always doubted if Haiyan was still a virgin. Rumor had it that Haiyan had gone to bed with Vice-Director Chiu of the hospital. That must have been true; otherwise she would have been discharged long ago. Unlike Manna, she had never gone to a nursing school.

"A thousand," Haiyan said teasingly. "The more the better, don't you think?"

"Yes," Manna said matter-of-factly.

They laughed again. Haiyan flung back her braid, whose end was tied with an orange string. Her toe kept tapping the red floor. Manna had never thought of sleeping with Lin. The fear of being expelled from the army prevented her from conceiving such an idea; she didn't even have a hometown to return to. Furthermore, she was uncertain whether he would continue to love her if she was discharged and banished to a remote place. Even though he wanted to, love would be impossible under such circumstances, because he might be sent back to his home village and they would have to remain apart. Yet Haiyan's suggestion pointed out a possibility. Manna was almost twenty-nine; why should she remain an old maid forever? Once she and Lin made love, he might go about divorcing his wife. For better or worse, she shouldn't just sit and

wait without doing anything, or there would be no end to this ambiguous affair. Recently people in the hospital had begun to treat her like Lin's fiancée; young officers would avoid talking with her for longer than a few minutes. She resented this situation, which she was determined to change.

So she decided to act. The next night, after they had distributed medicine to the patients, she said to Haiyan, "Can I ask you a favor?"

Her earnest tone of voice surprised her friend. "Of course, anything you think I can do for you," Haiyan said.

"Do you know some quiet place in town?"

"What do you mean some quiet place?" Haiyan's large eyes sparkled.

"I mean where you can . . ."

"Oh I see, a place where you and he can have a good time together?"

Manna nodded, her face coloring.

"Well, so you agree with me at last. Tell me, what made you change your mind so quickly? You are a bad girl, aren't you? You're planning to seduce a good man, a revolutionary officer, aren't you?"

"Come on, spare me all the questions."

"Comrade Manna Wu, do you understand what you are doing? You've really lost your head, haven't you?" She pointed her forefinger at Manna with her thumb raised, like a pistol.

"Please, just help me!"

Haiyan tittered, then said, "All right, I'll find you a place."

Because hotels and guesthouses in every town demanded an official letter before taking in a guest, it was impossible for an unmarried couple to find lodging in any of them. Manna had to resort to the help of Haiyan, who seemed to have infinite connections. Two of her siblings lived in Muji. That was why she had readily promised to find Manna a place.

On Thursday, at lunch, Haiyan sat down by Manna and nodded to her meaningfully. After others had left the table, she handed her a brass key and a slip of paper with an address on it. She said, "My sister's going to visit her parents-in-law this weekend. You can use her home on Sunday."

"Thanks," Manna whispered.

Haiyan batted her eyes. "But remember to tell me what it's like, all right?"

"What do you mean?"

"You know," Haiyan batted her eyes again.

"Damn you, as if you didn't know."

Chuckling, Haiyan patted her on the shoulder and said with a straight face, "Every man is different."

Since she decided to take this step, Manna had been possessed by a thrill that she had never experienced before. She began to have a faraway look in her eyes and smiled more to herself. At night she often felt as if she were in Lin's arms, her breasts swelling and her tongue licking her lips. She was amazed to find herself having changed into a rather voluptuous woman in a matter of a few days. She enjoyed sleeping without her pajamas on, although she was afraid that her roommates might see her naked legs if she kicked her quilt off in her sleep. The thought of spending an unforgettable day with Lin invigorated her limbs and filled her heart with ecstasy.

The next day when they were walking together in the late afternoon, she told him about the arrangement and even mentioned she would buy a bottle of plum wine and two pounds of smoked sausages. She got so carried away that she didn't notice the shock in his eyes.

"Lin, this is a fabulous opportunity," she said. "We've never had a place for ourselves."

He frowned a little and went on kicking pebbles while walking silently.

The setting sun was like a huge cake sliced in half by the brick wall of the compound. A few patients in blue-striped uniforms were playing soccer with a group of boys on the sports ground. Dried leaves were scuttling about, making tiny noises; bats were twittering and flitting about in the chilly air.

Seeing him unenthusiastic about the arrangement, Manna said peevishly, "I just want to spend some time with you alone, to have a heart-to-heart talk. That's all."

Still he didn't say a word. The look on his face seemed rather distant, although he was blushing a little. Running out of patience, she asked, "Do you think it's easy for me to have gone this far? I've risked losing everything, don't you understand?"

"Risk is the word," he said thoughtfully. "It's too big a risk to take. We shouldn't do this."

"Why?"

"Didn't we promise Ran Su not to break any rule? This would get him into trouble too. I'm a married man; if the secret is out, we'll be dealt with as criminals, don't you think?"

"I don't care."

"Don't lose your head, Manna. Think about this: just a moment's pleasure will ruin our lives for good."

She didn't answer.

He went on, "Besides, you know Haiyan Niu has a loose tongue. Even if she doesn't tell anybody now, what will happen after she gets married someday? For sure she'll tell her husband about this. Then they will have something on us. You know there's no wall without a crack. If we do this, sooner or later people will find out."

"She promised not to tell anybody."

"Do you absolutely trust her?"

"Well, I can't say that." She shook her head. Something stirred in her chest, and tears came to her eyes, but she controlled herself.

"What should we do with this?" She waved the key, which glistened in the last sunlight.

"Return it to Haiyan before this weekend. It's crucial to show her that we won't use the place."

His words made her ashamed, and in silence she blamed herself for yielding to her passion. She was overcome with doubtful thoughts. Why did he refuse to spend time with her alone in town? Did he have another woman in his mind? Unlikely. Pingping Ma had left the army the year before, and Lin had treated her merely as a tomboy; he and that girl had just been book pals. Whom was he close to these days? No one except Manna herself. Still, he might've been seeing another woman. No, if so, it couldn't escape her notice since she saw him every day. Then why did he seem to have no desire for her at all?

Manna feared that in his eyes she might be a different woman now. How she regretted having listened to Haiyan.

They passed the medical building, which looked like a green knoll because of its mossy tiles. Two lights flashed on inside. There was a meeting at seven o'clock to study a document recently issued by the Central Committee, which demanded that all the revolutionary rebels fight with words instead of force. Lin would have to attend the meeting, while Manna should get ready for the night shift.

Haiyan was surprised when Manna handed the key back to her. Manna explained that they had to keep their promise made to Ran Su and that they shouldn't break the rule.

Haiyan said, "Hm, I didn't know Lin Kong was such a loyal friend. A good man indeed. No wonder somebody called him 'a model monk.'"

"Like I said, he isn't a bold man."

"But doesn't he love you? Maybe he's no good in bed."

"Come on, he made a baby with his wife, a very healthy one."

Haiyan sighed feebly and clasped her hands. "To be honest, Manna, perhaps he doesn't love you enough to run the risk. Are you sure you know his heart?"

She didn't respond, still uncertain why Lin wouldn't go to bed with her. She felt that there must have been something more than the reason he had given. Many men broke rules for the women they loved, and some did not regret having done that even when they were punished. How come Lin was so different from others? Did he really love her? Why was he so passionless? Did his refusal mean he was reluctant to get embroiled with her?

Gradually Haiyan's words sank in.

8

In spite of his calm appearance, Lin was quite disturbed by Manna's boldness. That same night, lying in bed, he reviewed the details of their meeting in his mind and felt he was right to ask her to return the key to Haiyan. If he had not opposed her wish, there would definitely be disastrous consequences. Ever since he made his promise to Ran Su, he had tried to cool down his passion for Manna, always reminding himself that he must not fall too deeply in love with her. To his mind, it was still unclear whether their relationship could develop fully and end in marriage, which would require him to divorce his wife first. He had better not rush it.

Outside the window, raindrops were dripping from the eaves, producing a light ding-ding-ding sound. With his eyes closed tight, Lin tried to go to sleep. But a voice rose in his head, asking, "Don't you want to make love to Manna?"

He was startled by the question, but replied, "Not now. Sex is out of the question. It would ruin both of us."

You really don't want to sleep with her? the voice persisted.

No, honestly no. I love her and am attached to her, but that has nothing to do with sex. Our love is not based on the flesh.

Really? You have no desire for her at all?

I can control my desire. At this point of my life I must treat her as a comrade only.

That's a lie. Why don't you talk and walk with another comrade every day? You and she have already formed a special bond, haven't you?

All right, that's true, but the bond doesn't have to be sexual. We love each other. That's enough.

What? You're too rational.

I'm a doctor and an officer. My profession demands that I be a rational man.

Don't you think you might have hurt her feelings by refusing her offer?

I'm not sure. If I did, it couldn't be helped. I didn't hurt her on purpose. She can forgive me, can't she? Can't she see I had her interest in mind as well when I said we shouldn't do this?

The voice fell silent, and soon sleep claimed him. His mind drifted to a distant place reminiscent of the countryside where he had grown up. He then had an extraordinary dream, which would trouble him for weeks. He was walking along the edge of a vast wheat field on a fine summer day. The sun was gentle and the breeze warm. He was whistling at leisure, with a fishing rod on his shoulder. "Lin, Lin, come here," a sugary voice called. He turned and saw a young woman in the field, her head veiled in a red gauze mantilla, but her breasts were naked and full like a pair of white musknelons. Around her the wheat ears were rustling briskly. Without hesitation he dropped the rod and walked up to her. The luxuriant wheat reached his waist and gave out a sweetish scent. Approaching her, he found a tiny clearing covered by dog-tail grass mixed with dried rice straws. Stark naked, she was lying on the grass with her knees spread open, her hand beckoning him. She no longer had the mantilla on, but her face was concealed by her long glossy hair. He found her midriff a little plump, but her limbs were so youthful that the sight of them made his heart skip a beat. Her pubic hair was thick, a few dewdrops in the downy tuft. Breathing hard, he took off his sweater and shorts and dropped them to the ground.

They began rolling on the grass. Her hands kept caressing his back, rib cage, and thighs while he was wriggling atop her. Then she embraced him firmly against her chest, her belly rocking under him with a rhythmic motion as if she were swaying to some music. She

was groaning like an animal; her ecstatic voice was so invigorating to him that he felt his blood seething in his loins. A skein of ducks flew past, calling wildly. Their harsh cries made his arms shudder a little; he held her tightly, like a man incapable of swimming gripping a life buoy in the ocean.

He copulated with her for a long time until exhaustion overcame him and he lay down alongside her. His hand went on massaging her quivering hips, whose size had somehow tripled in the meantime. A moment later she rolled over, raised herself up on her elbow, and hooked her arm around his neck, moaning, "More, more, let's do it again."

He reached for his clothes buried in the grass. The back of his hand hit the iron bedpost, and he woke up, soaked with sweat. He realized he had just had a wet dream. He was deeply stirred by the experience, which was his first time. Who was that woman? he wondered. She had waist-length hair and a shapely body, smelling of fresh peanuts. There was a birthmark on her left forearm, as large as a burton. He tried to recall all the women he knew, but couldn't match her with anyone. If only he had caught a glimpse of her face.

Across the dark room Ming Chen was snoring like a bellows. Lin sat up noiselessly, opened his pillowcase, and took out a change of underwear to replace the one he was wearing, which was soiled on the front. For many years he had often heard other men talk about having a wet dream and wondered what it was like. Before his marriage, he had even doubted his manhood, because unlike other men who were crazy about women, he had never fallen in love with a woman. After his daughter was born, he was finally convinced that he was a normal man. Still, what did a wet dream feel like? Why had he never had one? Was there something wrong with him? Those questions would pop up in his mind whenever he heard his comrades bragging about their virility and wild dreams. Now finally he had experienced one, which was quite thrilling to him. Yet the sen-

sation was not unadulterated. Deep in his heart he wished that the woman in the wheat field had been somebody he knew.

He got up at 5:30 when the reveille was sounded on a bugle. Hurriedly he put on his clothes, folded up his quilt, and placed his pillow atop it. Then he saw a yellowish stain on his white sheet. There was no time to wash it off because he had to leave for the morning exercises immediately, so he covered the spot with the current issue of the pictorial *The People's Liberation Army*. Then he rushed out into the cold dawn together with Ming Chen.

The two-mile run was more exhausting to him today, and he sweated a good deal, huffing and puffing all the way. His head was spinning a little.

When Lin returned to his dormitory, Jin Tian, who hadn't gone to the morning exercises because he had been on duty the night before, greeted him with a quizzical grin. "Hey, Lin, you had a wet dream last night, didn't you?" His wide eyes were winking and his stubby nose was wrinkled as though sniffing something delicious in the air.

Flushing to his neck, Lin rushed to his bed, pulled off the sheet, and thrust it into his washbasin, which was half full of water.

"Come on, don't blow off like that. It's a natural thing," said Jin Tian, chuckling.

Ming Chen chimed in, "Of course it's natural. I have it every week. When too much of that stuff has accumulated in you, it will flow out by itself." He turned to Lin. "You don't need to wash your sheet like it caught a virus or something. Look, I don't bother about the splotches on my sheet."

"Me neither," said Jin Tian.

Lin wished they had left him alone, but with a smirk on his face Jin Tian went on to say to him, "Well, I can guess who you dreamed of."

"I did it with your sister," Lin snapped.

"Oh, that's not a problem. If I had one like Manna Wu, you'd be welcome to ride her like a wild pony as long as you please, but only in your dreams."

His two roommates roared with laughter. Wordlessly Lin took a bar of soap out of his bedside cupboard, picked up his washbasin, and left the room. He was still confused by the dream. In real life he could never imagine lying with an unknown woman in a wheat field and coupling like an animal. He felt a little sick.

Lin's desk lay a sheet of paper, half torn in the middle. It was a telegram from his elder brother, which said, "Father passed away. Return immediately."

Thinking of his father, who had toiled in the fields all his life but grown poorer each year, Lin was tearful again and kept massaging the inner corners of his eyes with his forefinger and thumb. If only he had been able to go home and attend the funeral. He had asked the leaders to allow him to take an early leave, but they hadn't approved, because throughout the spring of 1969 the hospital was in combat readiness. There had been conflicts between the Chinese and the Russian troops on the Amur and the Wusuli rivers in the winter. Though the ice on the rivers could no longer support the Russian tanks and personnel carriers, the Chinese troops would not slacken their alertness until May.

Lin had sent two hundred yuan to his elder brother, Ren Kong, who lived nine miles away from Goose Village, and asked him to give their father a proper burial. Before he died, the old man had bequeathed the farmhouse to Lin because he had been grateful to Shuyu, who had looked after his wife and himself with diligence for so many years.

For months Lin had been in a dark mood. He became taciturn and read more in his free time. When walking with Manna in the evenings, he often looked absentminded. She asked him whether he was gloomy because he couldn't go home for his father's funeral. He said probably. In reality his mind was full of other thoughts. Now that both his parents had died, his need for his wife had changed; now she was only caring for their baby daughter. In his

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heart he felt for Shuyu, who had never lived an easy day since their marriage, but he didn't love her and was unwilling to spend the rest of his life with her. He wanted a marriage based on love and a wife whose appearance wouldn't embarrass him in the presence of others (to his mind, Manna would be a fine choice). Yet the feelings of guilt, mixed with compassion for Shuyu, were draining him.

In the meantime, Manna began to insinuate that he should seriously consider divorcing his wife. He tried evading the topic whenever she was about to bring it up.

One night in early June, a section chief in the Military Department of the City Administration died of a heart attack. He had been a stalwart man, in his mid-forties. At nightfall he had heartburn and took some medicine, but the symptom persisted. He told his wife that he was going to the hospital to see the doctor. He set out with a flashlight and an umbrella, since it looked like rain. Before he reached the hospital, the heart attack felled him. He lay in a ditch and couldn't climb out to get on the road. When people found him before daybreak, he was dead, his lower lip bitten through and his face smeared with mud and husks of grass seeds. He left a widow and three small children. His death disturbed Manna profoundly, as she had known him by sight.

The next evening when they were walking on the fringe of the sports ground, she sighed and said to Lin, "Life is such a precarious thing. Today we're alive, tomorrow we may be gone. What's the point in trying so hard to live like a human being every day?"

"Don't be so pessimistic. If we think that way all the time, we can't live."

She stopped and leaned against the flaky trunk of a birch. Her right hand held her left wrist, twisting it back and forth, and her eyes dimmed staring at him. She said in a choked voice, "I can't bear this anymore, Lin. This is stifling me. Why don't you do something?"

"What are you talking about?" He looked puzzled.

"We can't continue to be like this. Who am I? Your fiancée or your concubine? You must do something to change this situation."

"What could I do?"

"Ask Shuyu for a divorce." She looked close into his eyes, her lips pursed up.

His head turned away. "I can't rush. I have to figure out a good way. This is not an easy thing to do."

"Why is it so complicated? Tell her you want a divorce and see how she takes it."

"No, you don't understand."

"I don't understand what?"

"I can't just dump her like a pair of outworn shoes. I have to give a good reason, or else everybody will condemn me and I won't be able to get a divorce."

"What's a better reason than that you don't love her?"

"No, no." He gasped.

"Listen, Lin, it's time for you to decide. I'm tired of waiting like this. Who am I to you? I'm not even your mistress." She broke out sobbing and turned around, about to walk away.

"Listen to me, Manna. Wait a moment, please!"

"I've heard enough."

"Please be reasonable!"

"I'm sick of being reasonable. If you do nothing, it's over between us," she said loudly, hurrying away with her palm over her mouth. Her head bent forward and her legs looked shaky while her body kept convulsing a little. A scrap of birch bark was clinging to her hair. She crossed a pile of dried grass and passed the holly hedge.

With a numb heart he watched her disappear at the corner of the lab building. Around his head a few midges were flitting. A pair of magpies clamored in a tall elm, tossing their mottled tails. In the

distant sky a squadron of jet fighters were banking away noiselessly like silver swallows.

From that day on, an emotional tug-of-war was waged between them. Lin was accustomed to being alone, so he didn't go and look for Manna. He wanted peace of mind. Yet whenever she came into sight, he couldn't help looking at her. She seemed aware of his attention and always kept her face away from him. She laughed more than before, especially in the presence of other men, and her neck grew straighter. She wore shirts of bright colors and a pair of new leather shoes. Like some other young nurses, she began using Lily Lotion, the most expensive kind of vanishing cream. In the evening she often played badminton with others in front of the bathhouse, as though all of a sudden she had become a young girl again, full of energy and life.

Never had Lin thought she could be so headstrong. He felt miserable and often breathed with difficulty, as though a weight of lead were jammed into his chest.

He was at a loss, wondering if she really loved him. When his colleagues asked him what had happened between him and Manna, he would say, "I shouldn't keep her waiting. She has to make her choice. I'm a married man."

"So you two broke up?"

"I think so."

For all his calm appearance, Lin felt feverish. Whenever he was reading a book, his mind would wander. He couldn't sleep well at night, sighing and thinking of his life and the women he knew. Some of them were better-looking and tenderer than Manna, but they all seemed beyond the grasp of his mind, which would roam through them one after another and gradually return to Manna. How sorry he felt for her. She had been waiting, waiting, only for a beginning or an ending between them. But his life seemed to have

been caught in a circle that he could not escape so as to establish a starting point again. Love did not help. The possibility of love only filled him with despondency and languor, as though he was sick in the soul. If only he had never known Manna; if only he could get back into his old rut again; if only he could return to an undisturbed, contented life.

During the day he tried working harder and even undertook the project of recataloguing all the medical records in his office, just as a way to wear himself out, so that he wouldn't think too much when going to sleep at night. As long as he kept himself busy, he felt in control and self-sufficient. He needed no woman.

10

National Day came. The hospital gave its staff a dinner. In the mess hall, Commissar Zhang, a short paunchy man, spoke before the banquet started. He thanked the nurses who had helped the cooks in the kitchen that morning and talked briefly about the significance of this anniversary to the Chinese nation and to the revolution. Then he spoke about the principle that the Party always commands the gun. After that, with a wave of his hand, he announced, "Now enjoy the meal."

He went to a corner and sat down at the table reserved for the leaders, which had an unlimited supply of dishes and wine.

People began to propose toasts and raise chopsticks to eat. At once the room echoed with laughter, chattering, and the clatter of bowls, plates, ladles, mugs. Eight courses were served. There were smoked flounder, sweet-and-sour ribs, sautéed pork with bamboo shoots, scrambled eggs with tree ears. Each table was given two bottles of red wine, a jar of wheat liquor, and a basin of draft beer.

Lin and Manna didn't sit at the same table, but she was within his view and earshot. Unlike the other men at his table, who were feasting heartily, Lin felt as if his stomach were full, although like most people he too had skipped lunch that day to save his appetite for this banquet. He turned his head and saw Manna's right arm resting on the broad windowsill behind her while her left hand was holding a green enamel mug.

"The wine's divine," she said loudly to Lin's roommate Jin Tian sitting next to her, then she giggled. She removed her arm from the windowsill and touched her nose with her fingertips.

Her words made Lin's cheek muscle twitch. A middle-aged

woman doctor at his table said kindly, "Try a meatball, Lin. They're delicious."

He held out his chopsticks absently and picked up a meatball, which, though made of ground pork, tasted like tofu to him. He didn't like the insipid beer either, but he drank some from his white blue-rimmed bowl. Instead of attacking the meary dishes and the fish like the others, he ate radish salad seasoned with sugar and vinegar. Now and then he let out a small burp.

Meanwhile, at the other table, Manna was laughing jovially, the tops of her cheeks red as if rouged. She lifted her mug and clinked it with others, and with her head tilted back she drained the remaining wine in one gulp.

"You're quite a drinker!" Jin Tian complimented her in a thin voice, then ladled beer into her mug, filling it to the brim.

"Stop," she cried cheerfully. "You want it to overflow?" She laughed again.

"Why not?" Jin Tian said. The head of the beer spilled over.

A ceiling fan chopped away vigorously above Lin's head, yet he was sweating. He didn't feel like eating anymore, so he finished the rice in his bowl, stood up, saying he had forgotten to put out the lights in his office, and made for the door. Passing the table at which Manna was sitting, for some reason he stopped to say, "Manna, don't drink too much. It's bad for your health."

"Am I drinking anything that's yours?" she said, simpering. She raised the mug, whose green surface had peeled off in places, and downed a large gulp of beer. The people at her table paused to watch.

Without a word Lin hurried out, his cap crumpled in his fist. How he regretted having shown his concern for her! A voice began speaking in his mind. Stupid, you've never learned your lesson. Why can't you forget her? Why not let her drink to death?

Leave her alone. Let the alcohol burn up her insides! Serves her right.

The large quadrangle of the compound was quiet. Nobody was in view except for the sentry at the front entrance, holding the muzzle of a rifle that stood beside him with its bayonet raised. Lin went directly to the orchard behind the barracks. The apple-pears had just been harvested, but there was still some fruit left on the trees here and there. Three ponies, one pied and two sorrel, were grazing on the slope. In the depths of the orchard a young man was singing an aria from the revolutionary opera *Taking the Tiger Mountain by Strategy*. "These days I have probed into the enemy's positions / And gotten quite good results. . . ." A flock of wild geese, in the form of a V, appeared passing the tip of the hill, flapping south, honking, and stretching their necks. As they flew past, their wings whistled faintly.

Lin sat down on a boulder and lit a cigarette. The hospital sprawled beneath him, a few windows of the medical building flickering in the setting sun. From the hill slope, the compound looked like a large factory encircled by a thick line of aspens planted along the brick wall. In the east some red rooftops were obscured by wisps of smoke. The humming of the traffic in the city could be heard vaguely. Lin sighed, his heart aching, and he began thinking about what had happened just now. Why had she made a spectacle of him on purpose? Did she hate him so much? She should have appreciated his concern for her health, shouldn't she? A woman's heart was so unpredictable. What a shame it was to be humiliated in front of so many people.

It serves you right, he thought. You're a husband and a father; you shouldn't have started this affair. You asked for trouble and deserve this kind of humiliation. Why can't you wash your hands of this woman? Why do you allow her to clasp and yank your heart

like an octopus? You are so cheap that the more distant she is from you, the more you're attracted to her. Enough of this insanity! You must pluck her out of your chest, or she'll eat up your insides like a worm.

As he was smoking and thinking, Manna emerged from behind an apple-pear tree, striding toward him. Her breathing was heavy and her face carmine. He got to his feet, puzzled, wondering how he should greet her.

Before he knew what to do, she rushed over and embraced him. Racked with sobs, she buried her face in his chest.

"I can't stand this anymore!" she moaned. "I can't. I didn't mean to do that."

"Don't, don't cry."

"I'm bad, so bad," she whimpered. She held him tighter, her arms trembling with the strain. Her hair smelled of ginger and scal-lion; obviously she had worked in the kitchen before dinner.

"Manna, it's not a big thing," he said. "You see, I haven't taken it to heart. I forgot it already." He looked around, fearful of being seen, as the thought came to him that they had broken the rule that prohibited such a meeting outside the wall.

She raised her eyes, which were radiating an intense light. Then she lowered her head and giggled hysterically. "I'm an old maid, a thirty-year-old virgin, do you know?"

"Don't talk like this."

"That's why I'm so cranky, I guess."

"You've drunk too much."

"No, I just had two mugs."

"That's more than you can hold."

"By the way, don't you want to know I'm still a virgin? Never been touched by any man."

"Manna, you've lost your mind. You shouldn't—"

"Come on, can't you deflower an old maid? Don't you want to

do it to me?" She let go of him and broke out laughing, which turned into coughing and more sobbing.

"Let's go back, dear." He slipped his arm under hers.

"Can't you do it to me?" she cried.

"Don't, don't—"

"Are you a man or not? You have a fearful heart like a rabbit's.

Come on, do it to me!"

"All right, it's all my fault. I'm a good-for-nothing. Let's go back."

Despite her struggling and sobbing, he pulled her down the slope, holding her upper arm with both hands. All the way down she kept whimpering, "Do it, do it to me. I want to give you a baby."

He dared not take her to the dormitory by the front way, so he pulled her through the near rows of aspens to the back door of the dormitory house. Coming out of the grove, they ran into a group of nurses who had just left work and were heading for the mess hall. Before the young women could greet them, Lin said, "Manna has drunk too much." Hurriedly he dragged her past. The nurses turned around and watched the couple staggering away.

For a week Manna was the topic of the hospital. She had set a record: For the first time a woman on the staff had gotten drunk at a holiday dinner. The word was that she could easily outdrink most men.

After being shaken by this holiday incident, Lin began to think seriously about getting a divorce. He decided to bring it up with Shuyu the next summer.

After telling Lin that she would be back around mid-afternoon, Shuyu left for their family plot with a short rake on her shoulder and a straw hat on her head. She grew pumpkins, taros, corn, and glutinous millet on their squarish half-acre of land, about five hundred yards west of the village. The soil was fertile, and the produce was more than she and Hua could use, so her brother Bensheng would sell the surplus for her in Wujia County and Six Stars, which was a nearby commune town. Shuyu seldom worked in the production brigade's fields, since she had to take care of the child and the home. The money Lin sent back each month helped her make ends meet.

Lin was reading a picture-story book under their eaves with Hua sitting on his lap. The baby girl held a thick scallion leaf, now and again blowing it as a whistle. The roots sounded like a sheep bleating. In front of the house was a deep well walled up with bricks to prevent the child and the poultry from falling into it. Because of her bound feet, Shuyu couldn't fetch water from the communal well with a shoulder pole and a pair of buckets as others did, so Lin had had the well sunk in their yard four years before. To the right of it stretched a footway, paved with bricks, leading to the front gate. Beside the pigpen, a white hen was scraping away dirt and making go-go-go sounds to call a flock of chicks, the smallest of which was dragging a broken leg. It was warm and windless; the air reeked of dried dung.

Without Lin's noticing, Hua opened her mouth. Her cracked lips clamped on the front of his T-shirt and pulled. He lowered his eyes and looked at her in puzzlement. She said, "Daddy,

I'm hungry." Her soiled palm touched his chest, fondling its left side.

He gave a laugh, which baffled her. She looked up at him without blinking. He said, "Hua, a man can't feed a baby like your mom. I have no breasts, see?" He pulled up the T-shirt and showed her his flat chest. A mole like a tiny raisin was under his right nipple. She looked confused, her dark eyes wide open.

"Would you like some cookies?" he asked.

"Uh-huh."

He put aside the book, picked her up, and set her astride his neck. Father and daughter went to the village store to buy cookies.

At dinner that evening Lin described to his wife how Hua had wanted to suck his nipple. Shuyu smiled and said, "Silly girl."

"She's almost four," he said. "You should stop breast-feeding her, shouldn't you?"

"Mother's milk keeps a baby healthy, you know." She took his bowl and refilled it with pumpkin porridge. "Have some more," she said.

"Does Hua often mention me when I'm away?"

"Yes, of course. Sometimes she says, 'I miss daddy.' It's the blood tie, she doesn't know you that well."

He turned to his daughter. "Did you really miss me?"

"Yeah."

"Can you show how you missed me?"

The baby placed both hands on her stomach, saying, "Miss you here."

He laughed, then tears came to his eyes. He held his daughter up, set her on his lap, and moved her bowl closer so that she could reach it. Before she could go on eating, he smacked a kiss on her chafed face and then wiped her nose clean with a piece of straw paper.

Though Shuyu and Lin slept in different rooms at night, he

enjoyed being at home, especially playing with his daughter. He liked the home-cooked food, most of which was fresh and tasty. The multigrain porridge, into which Shuyu always urged him to put some brown sugar though she wouldn't take any herself, was so soft and delicious that he could eat three bowls at a meal without feeling stuffed. The eggs sautéed with leeks or scallions would make his belches redolent of the dish even hours later. The steamed string beans seasoned with sesame oil and mashed garlic gave him a feeling of ease and freedom, because he would never dare touch such a homely dish in the hospital for fear of garlicy breath. What is more, it was so relaxing to be with his family. There was no reveille, and he didn't have to rise at 5:30 for morning exercises. When their black rooster announced daybreak, Lin would wake up, then go back to sleep again. The morning snooze was the sweetest to him. He had been home four days already. If only he could stay for a whole month.

His brother-in-law Bensheng came that evening and asked whether Lin could lend him some money. He was a scrawny man in his mid-twenties and he had just gotten married; the wedding had cost him eighteen hundred yuan and thrown him deeply into debt. As if burdened with thoughts, he sat at the edge of the brick bed, chain-smoking. His deep-set eyes flickered nervously, and his mustache spread like a tiny swallow. From time to time he expelled a resounding belch.

While the two men talked, Shuyu sewed a cloth sole with an awl and a piece of jute thread. She didn't say a word, but kept glaring at her brother.

"Why do you need money so badly?" Lin asked Bensheng. His daughter was on his back, her arms around his neck.

"I got in trouble at the marketplace and was fined." Two tentacles of smoke dangled under Bensheng's nose.

"What happened?"

"Bad luck."

"How bad is it?"

"Come on, elder brother, don't ask so many questions. If you have money, help me!"

Seeing him so anxious, Lin put down Hua, stood up, and went into the inner room where his wallet was. "Serves you right," he heard his wife say to her brother.

He returned with five ten-yuan bills and handed them to his brother-in-law. "I can only lend you fifty."

"Thanks, thanks." Without looking at the money, Bensheng put it into his pants pocket. "I'll pay it back to Shuyu, all right?"

"That's fine." On second thought Lin said, "How about this: you keep the money, but you'll help us thatch our roof this fall when you have time?"

"That's a deal. I'll do it."

"Make sure you use fresh wheat stalks."

"Of course I will."

Bensheng left with his blue duck-billed cap askew on his head, whistling the tune of the folk song "A Little Cowherd Gets Married." Lin was pleased with the arrangement; these days he had been wondering how to get the roof thatched. Although his brother-in-law wasn't always reliable, Lin was certain he would do the job properly. Bensheng had just become the accountant of the production brigade and could easily get fresh wheat stalks.

After his brother-in-law was out of sight, Lin asked Shuyu why he had been fined. She shook her head and smiled, saying, "He asked for it."

"How?"

"He sewed up piglets' burtholes."

"I don't get it. What actually happened?"

She twined the jute thread around the iron handle of the awl and pulled the stitch tight in place. Then she began to tell him the

story. "Last week Bensheng went to Wujia Town to sell piglets, a whole litter of them. Before he left, he sewed up four of their burtholes with flaxen thread. He wanted to make them weigh more. When he showed the piglets at the marketplace, folks wanted to buy the four fat ones. Fact is those fat ones with their butts blocked up weren't fat at all. They were heavier and worth more, only 'cause they couldn't crap, almost burst. Bensheng was just about to take the money from a buyer when the guy thought, 'Well, how come these four rascals are so clean?' The other piglets all dropped a pile of crap behind them. He looked closer and saw huge bulges on the four fat piglets' butts. He shouted, 'Look, the big suckers all have a sewed-up burthole.'"

Lin burst into laughter, lying down on the brick bed. Immediately Hua straddled his belly and began a horse ride with an imaginary whip. "Hee-ya, hee-ya, giddap!"

"Oh whoa—whoa!" he cried.

The girl kept riding him until he held her waist with both hands and raised her up, her feet kicking in the air and her laughter tinkling.

He sat up and asked his wife, "Then what happened?"

"They grabbed him and dragged him to the officials. The officials took his piglets away and fined him ninety yuan. He had to pay on the spot, or they wouldn't let him go home. Lucky for him, Second Donkey was there selling chickens and fish. He loaned Bensheng the money, but he must have it back this week. Second Donkey's building a home, a five-room house, and he needs the money for beams and electric wires."

"It served him right indeed," Lin said. They both laughed, and Shuyu went on licking her lips.

That was a rare moment in the family. The couple seldom talked, and in their home the poultry made more sounds than the human beings. Even Hua was quiet most of the time.

The next afternoon, while working the bellows in the kitchen, Lin came across a scrap of lined paper in the soybean stalks. He looked it over and saw scrawled numerals and drawings in pencil, which included a square, a box, bottles of different sizes, a circle, a jar, a knife. What can these mean? he wondered.

Shuyu was outside in the yard washing clothes, the wooden club in her hand sending out a rhythmic clatter on the stone slab. Hua was playing beside an iron water bucket, into which a mud-flecked goose went on thrusting its bill to drink. Hua washed her hands in the bucket now and then, shouting at the goose, "Shoo!" But it would not be intimidated and kept coming back.

After dinner Lin showed his wife the piece of paper and asked her what it was. Sucking in her lips, she muttered, "A list."

"A list of what?"

"Things."

"What things?"

"Groceries."

She began to explain the list to him. The small bottle stood for vinegar, the big bottle for soy sauce, the jar for cooking oil, the star for salt, the square for soap, the circle for soda ash, the sack for corn flour, the knife for pork, the box for matches, the bulb for electricity.

Behind the jar Lin saw "50" and realized she spent fifty fen on cooking oil. That was less than half a pound each month. Under the knife was "1," which probably meant one yuan's worth of pork, about a pound. He was surprised, because since he was home he had eaten meat or fish every day. He asked, "Shuyu, is the money I send you enough?"

"Yes."

"Do you want me to give you more?"

"No."

She rose to her feet and tottered to the cork-oak chest on the

restle against the back wall. Lifting the lid from a peach-shaped porcelain jar, she took out a sheaf of cash and returned.

"You must need this," she said and handed him the money.

"Where did you get that?"

"Saved."

"How much have you saved?"

"A hundred yuan last year, but spent most of it when Father died."

"How much do you have here?"

"Thirty."

"Keep it, all right? It's yours, Shuyu."

"You don't need?"

"Keep it. It's your money."

Something stirred in Lin's chest, and his breath turned tight. He moved to the wooden edge of the brick bed and put his feet into his suede shoes, which were scuffed and weighted with dried mud on the soles. Hastily he tied the shoelaces and went out for a walk in the gathering dusk alone.

The following afternoon Lin said he would go visit his parents' graves the next morning. His words threw Shuyu into a muddle. She hobbled to the village store and bought two pounds of streaky pork, then went to Second Donkey's home and got a grass carp from his pond. For dinner she boiled ten ears of corn since she didn't have time to bake cakes; but in the evening a small plate of stewed pork was placed beside Lin's bowl on the table. Though he pushed the dish to the center of the tabletop, Shuyu wouldn't touch it, whereas Hua ate with relish, smacking her lips and crying out, "I want fat meat." Her mother stared at her, but Lin smiled and put more pork cubes into her bowl.

Lin got up late the next morning. On the wooden cover of the cauldron sat a bamboo basket. He removed its lid and saw four dishes in it: a fried carp, stewed pork, tomatoes sautéed with eggs,

and steamed taros, peeled and sprinkled with white sugar. The last dish had been his mother's favorite. On the chopping board, by the water vat, were a packet of joss sticks and a bunch of paper money. Shuyu had gone with Hua to cut grass for the pigs. Lin touched the bamboo basket, its side still warm.

Quickly he drank two bowls of millet porridge and then set off for the graves, which were at the edge of the larch woods in the valley south of the village, about ten minutes' walk. In recent years most of the dead had to be cremated to save arable land. Lin's elder brother, Ren Kong, had treated the village leaders to a twelve-course dinner and obtained their permission to let their father join their mother on the hillside.

The sun was directly overhead, and Lin was panting slightly when he arrived at the larch woods. Some cocklebur seeds had stuck to his trouser legs, and his shoes were ringed with dark mud. Mosquitoes were humming around hungrily while a few white-breasted swallows were darting back and forth, up and down, catching them. His parents' graves were well kept, covered with fresh earth. Beyond them, wormwood was yellow-green and rushes were reddish, all shiny in the sunlight.

Apparently somebody had cleaned up the place lately. Against the head of either grave leaned a thick bunch of wild lilies, still soaked with dew, but their small yellow flowers had withered long ago. Lin knew that it must have been Shuyu who had gathered the flowers and laid the bouquets, because his elder brother couldn't possibly think of such a thing, he was too deep in the bottle. On one of the headstones was his father's name, "Mingzhi Kong," whereas the other stone carried only "Kong's Wife." His mother had never had her own name. Lin opened the basket and set the dishes in front of the graves. He lit the joss sticks and planted them one by one before the dishes, and then he stewed around the paper coins, each of which was as large as a palm and had a square hole

punched in its center. He said softly, "Dad and Mom, take the money and enjoy these dishes Shuyu made for you. May you rest in peace and comfort."

A shotgun popped in the east; a pair of snipes took off, making guttural cries and drifting away toward the lake in the south. A dog broke out yelping. Someone was shooting pheasants and grouse in the marsh.

Unlike the villagers, Lin didn't burn the money. His mind was elsewhere, having neglected the right way of sending cash to the nether world. He was thinking of Manna. He had promised her to start divorcing Shuyu as soon as he got home. Now he had been here for seven days—only three days were left for the leave, but he hadn't mentioned a word of it yet. Whenever the words rose to his throat, they were forced down. Somehow he felt that the idea of divorce was too unseemly to be disclosed. It would make no sense to anybody in the countryside if Lin said he wanted to divorce his wife because he didn't love her. He had to find a real fault in her, which he couldn't. People here would not laugh about her bound feet, and he did not feel ashamed of her in the village.

Having returned from the graves, for a whole day he thought of his predicament. He was certain that if a villager asked him about Shuyu, he would admit she was a perfect wife. Probably had he lived long enough with her, he would have been able to love her, and the two of them would have led a happy life, just as many couples who had gotten married without knowing each other beforehand became perfect husbands and wives later on. Yet how could he and Shuyu have lived together long enough to know each other well? Unless he had left the army and strayed home, which was unthinkable. He had his career in the city.

An ideal solution might be to have two wives: Manna in the city and Shuyu in the country. But bigamy was illegal and out of the

question. He stopped indulging in this kind of fantasy. For some reason he couldn't help imagining what his life would have been like if he had never met Manna. If only he had foreseen this dilemma; if only he could extricate himself from it now.

Two days before he left home, his wife took a pillow into his room at night. He was already in bed and was surprised to see Shuyu come in with her face lowered and twisted a little. She sat down on the bed and sighed. "Can I stay with you tonight?" she asked timidly.

He didn't know what to say, never having thought she could be so bold.

"I'm not a shameless woman," she said. "After Hua was born you never let me share your bed. I wouldn't complain, but these days I'm thinking of giving you a son. Hua's going to be big soon, and she can help me. Don't you want a son?"

For a moment he remained silent. Then he said, "No, I don't need a son. Hua's good enough for me. My brother has three sons. Let them carry on the family line. It's a feudal idea anyway."

"Don't you think of our old age? When we're old and can't move about and work the fields, we'll need a son to help us. You're always away, this home needs a man."

"We are not old yet. Besides, Hua will help us when she grows up. Don't worry."

"A girl isn't a reliable thing. She belongs to someone else after she's married."

He said no more, amazed by a sudden realization that if she were Manna, he might embrace and kiss her, calling her "Little Treasure" or "Sugar Ball," but he did not know what to do with Shuyu, whom he had kissed only in the darkness a long time ago. Now any intimacy with her would be unnatural.

She stood up and walked away, her shoulders drooping more.

He let out a deep sigh. By the door a coil of artemisia was still burning, keeping out mosquitoes. The room was filled with a bitter grassy scent.

Her words made him realize that his wife must have been lonely when he was away. He hadn't thought she had her own ideas and feelings. More worrisome, she never doubted that they would stay together for the rest of their lives. What a simple-hearted woman!

This realization distressed him and foiled his first attempt at a divorce.

Why doesn't he want to see me? Manna asked herself time and again.

She was anxious to know how Shuyu had responded to Lin's request for a divorce. He had been back from the country for a week and always said he had too much work to do in the evenings and couldn't walk with her. She sensed that something had gone awry. She talked about it with her friend Haiyan, who advised that she should confront Lin, and if necessary give him an ultimatum. Haiyan said to her, "Without pressure no well will yield oil. You must press him."

On Tuesday, after dinner, Manna went to Lin's office to look for him. Only a reading lamp was on in the room, which was as dark as a movie theater. She was surprised to find he wasn't busy at all. He was lounging in a chair and dozing with his mouth hanging open and his feet on the desk. A hefty book was lying in his lap. She coughed. He woke up with a start and put the book on the desk. Then he rose to his feet, went across the room, and switched all the lights on, so that people passing by in the corridor wouldn't suspect that the two of them might be doing something unusual in the office.

He looked tired and yawned uncomfortably. Manna's temper flared up and her face hardened. She pointed to the book, which she recognized as Marshal Georgi Zhukov's memoir of the Second World War, *Remembrance and Thought*. "So you're busy studying military strategy in order to become a general. What an ambitious man."

He grimaced, ill at ease. "Come on, don't be so nasty."