

WAITING

VINTAGE INTERNATIONAL
VINTAGE BOOKS
A DIVISION OF RANDOM HOUSE, INC.
NEW YORK

HA JIN

"Enlightening . . . a delicate rendering of the universal complications of love. . . . Ha Jin's natural storytelling quietly captures the texture of daily life in a dual Chinese culture. . . . No detail is extraneous in this sad, funny, and often wise novel."

—*The Village Voice Literary Supplement*

"Remarkable . . . compellingly ingenious . . . gorgeously cinematic."
—*The Philadelphia Inquirer*

"A wonderfully ironic novel . . . complex and sad as life. . . . It captures the difficulties of love in totalitarian China with sharp prose and a convincing portrayal of human vagaries."

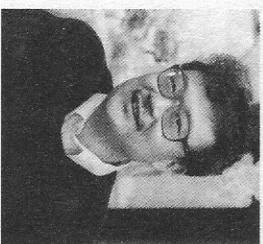
—*Minneapolis Star Tribune*

"Subtle and complex . . . his best work to date. A moving meditation on the effects of time upon love." —*The Washington Post*

"[Jin] reveals some startlingly original insights on human life and love . . . in a narrative that dazzles the reader with its simplicity and grace."
—*The Providence Sunday Journal*

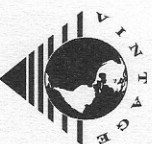
"[*Waiting* is] a masterpiece of realism and a work of ironic allegory, its mystifying, foreign world full of characters who grow more familiar with every page. . . . Through an accumulation of small, deft brushstrokes, 20th century China is superimposed onto the landscape of an ancient, painted scroll." —*The Plain Dealer*

"A high achievement indeed." —*The New York Review of Books*



HA JIN WAITING

Ha Jin left his native China in 1985 to attend Brandeis University. He is the author of two books of poetry; three collections of stories, *Under the Red Flag*, which won the Flannery O'Connor Award for Short Fiction in 1996, *Ocean of Words*, which won the PEN/Hemingway Award in 1997, and *The Bridegroom*; and *In the Pond*, a novel. *Waiting*, his second novel, won the 1999 National Book Award and the 2000 PEN/Faulkner Award. He lives near Atlanta, where he is a professor of English at Emory University.



INTERNATIONAL

P R O L O G U E

Every summer Lin Kong returned to Goose Village to divorce his wife, Shuyu. Together they had appeared at the courthouse in Wujia Town many times, but she had always changed her mind at the last moment when the judge asked if she would accept a divorce. Year after year, they went to Wujia Town and came back with the same marriage license issued to them by the county's registry office twenty years before.

This summer Lin Kong returned with a new letter of recommendation for divorce, which had been provided for him by the army hospital in Muji City, where he served as a doctor. Once more he planned to take his wife to the courthouse and end their marriage. Before he left for home, he had promised Manna Wu, his girlfriend at the hospital, that this time he would try his best to make Shuyu stick to her word after she agreed to a divorce.

As an officer, he had a twelve-day leave each year. Since the trip home took a whole day—he had to change trains and buses at two towns—he could stay in the countryside only ten days, saving the last day for the return trip. Before taking this year's leave, he had thought that once home, he would have enough time to carry out his plan, but by now a whole week had passed and he had not yet mentioned a word to his wife about the divorce. Whenever the subject came to his tongue, he postponed it for another day.

Their adobe house was the same as two decades before, four large rooms under a thatched roof and three square windows facing south with their frames painted sky blue. Lin stood in the yard facing the front wall while flipping over a dozen mildewed books he had left to be sunned on a stack of firewood. Sure thing, he thought,

Shuyu doesn't know how to take care of books. Maybe I should give them to my nephews. These books are of no use to me anymore.

Beside him, chickens were strutting and geese waddling. A few little chicks were passing back and forth through the narrow gaps in the paling that fenced a small vegetable garden. In the garden pole beans and long cucumbers hung on trellises, eggplants curved like ox horns, and lettuce heads were so robust that they covered up the furrows. In addition to the poultry, his wife kept two pigs and a goat for milk. Their sow was oinking from the pigpen, which was adjacent to the western end of the vegetable garden. Against the wall of the pigpen a pile of manure waited to be carried to their family plot, where it would go through high-temperature composting in a pit for two months before being put into the field. The air reeked of distillers' grains mixed in the pig feed. Lin disliked the sour smell, which was the only uncomfortable thing to him here. From the kitchen, where Shuyu was cooking, came the coughing of the bellows. In the south, elm and birch crowns shaded their neighbors' straw and tiled roofs. Now and then a dog barked from one of these homes.

Having turned over all the books, Lin went out of the front wall, which was three feet high and topped with thorny jujube branches. In one hand he held a dog-eared Russian dictionary he had used in high school. Having nothing to do, he sat on their grinding stone, thumbing through the old dictionary. He still remembered some Russian vocabulary and even tried to form a few short sentences in his mind with some words. But he couldn't recall the grammatical rules for the case changes exactly, so he gave up and let the book lie on his lap. Its pages fluttered a little as a breeze blew across. He raised his eyes to watch the villagers hoeing potatoes in a distant field, which was so vast that a red flag was planted in the middle of it as a marker, so that they could take a break when they reached the flag. Lin was fascinated by the sight, but he knew little about farm

work. He had left the village for high school in Wujia Town at the age of sixteen.

An oxcart emerged down the road, loaded high with millet sheaves and swaying as it rolled along. The lead animal was a meek heifer, slightly lame in her hind leg. Lin saw his daughter Hua and another girl on top of the load, both partly buried in the fluffy sheaves. The girls were singing and laughing. The driver, an old man in a blue serge cap, was holding a pipe between his teeth and flicking his short whip over the shaft bullock's hindquarters. The two iron-rimmed wheels were screeching rhythmically on the bumpy road.

As the cart came to a stop at the front gate, Hua dropped a bulging burlap sack to the ground and jumped down. "Thanks, Uncle Yang," she called out to the driver. Waving at the plump girl atop the load, she cried, "See you this evening." Then she brushed bits of straw from her shirt and pants.

Both the old man and the plump girl looked at Lin, smiling at him without a word. Lin vaguely remembered the driver, but couldn't tell what family the girl belonged to. He was aware that they didn't greet him the way the villagers would do one another. The man didn't shout, "How's your day, buddy?" And the girl didn't say, "How are you, Uncle?" Perhaps this was because he was wearing the army uniform, he thought.

"What's in the sack?" he asked his daughter, getting up from the grinding stone.

"Mulberry leaves," she said.

"For the silkworms?"

"Yes." Hua seemed reluctant to talk with him. She raised some silkworms in the shack behind their house, in three large wicker baskets.

"Is it heavy?" he asked.

"No."

"Can I help?" Lin hoped she would say a few words to him before she went in.

"No, I can carry it myself."

With both hands she swung the large sack over her shoulder. Her round eyes gazed at his face for a moment, then with a casual gait she walked away. He noticed that her forearms were sunburned, spotted with whitish peeled skin. How tall and strong she was, obviously a good farmhand.

Again her gaze disturbed him. He was unsure whether her petulance had been caused by his attempt to divorce her mother. He felt that was unlikely, because he had not yet broached the subject this year. He was unhappy that his daughter seemed somewhat estranged from him now. When she was a baby girl, she had been very attached to him and they had often played together whenever he came home. As she grew older, she became more reticent and remote from him. Now she seldom said an unnecessary word to him, and at most she would give him a thin smile. Does she really hate me? he wondered. She's grown up already, and in a few years she'll have her own family, no need for an old man like me.

In fact Lin looked quite young for his age. He was in his late forties, but he did not seem like a middle-aged man. Despite the uniform, he resembled an official more than an officer. His pale face was smooth and handsome with a pair of black-rimmed glasses on his straight nose. By contrast, his wife Shuyu was a small, withered woman and looked much older than her age. Her thin arms and legs couldn't fill up her clothes, which were always baggy on her. In addition, she had bound feet and sometimes wore black puttees. Her dark hair was coiled into a severe bun on the back of her head, giving her a rather gaunt face. Her mouth was sunken, though her dark eyes were not bad-looking, like a pair of tadpoles. In every way the couple did not match.

"Shuyu, can we talk about the divorce?" Lin asked his wife after

dinner. Hua had just left to study with her friends, preparing herself for the entrance exams for a trade school in Harbin.

"All right," his wife said calmly.

"Can we go to town tomorrow?"

"All right."

"You always say 'all right,' but you'll change your mind afterward. Can you keep your word this time?"

She turned silent. They had never quarreled, and she would agree to anything he said. "Shuyu," he went on, "you know, I need a home in the army. It's hard to live by myself there. I'm no longer a young man."

She nodded without a word.

"Will you say yes to the judge this time?" he asked.

"All right."

A hush fell in the room again. He resumed reading the county's newspaper, *County Constructs*, while his fingertips silently drummed the tabletop.

Shuyu was making a jacket for their daughter, cutting a piece of black corduroy with a pair of scissors and a stub of French chalk. Two yellow moths were circling around the 25-watt bulb hanging from the papered ceiling. On the whitewashed wall, the shadow of the lamp cord severed the picture of a baby boy, fat and naked in a red bib, riding a large carp in billowing waves. On the mat-covered brick bed were two folded quilts and three dark pillows like huge loaves of bread. The sound of frogs croaking came from the pond at the southern end of the village while cicadas' chirping seeped in through the screen window. A bell tolled from the production brigade's office, summoning the commune members to a meeting.

Twenty-one years before, in 1962, Lin had been a student in a military medical school in Shenyang City. One day in the summer he received a letter from his father, which said his mother was very ill and their house had been neglected because the old man had to

work in the fields of the commune most of the time. His father wanted Lin to get married soon so that his bride could look after his mother. Out of filial duty, Lin agreed to let his parents find a wife for him.

After a month's talking with an old matchmaker, they settled on the eldest daughter of the Lius, a family that had recently moved to Goose Village from Lokou County. Since Lin was a college student and would soon become a doctor and officer, Shuyu's parents did not ask for any gift or money and were pleased to marry her to him. Lin's parents mailed him a black-and-white snapshot of Shuyu, and he agreed to be engaged, feeling she was a fine, normal girl. She was twenty-six, just a year younger than himself.

But when he returned home in the winter and saw his fiancée in person, he was dismayed—she looked so old, as if in her forties, her face wrinkled and her hands leathery. What is more, her feet were only four inches long. This was the New China; who would look up to a young woman with bound feet? He tried reasoning with his parents to get out of the engagement, but they were adamant and said he was silly. How could they break the engagement without proving that Shuyu couldn't be a suitable wife? Had they done that, the whole village would have turned against them.

"Can good looks feed a family?" his father asked sullenly.

"My son," his mother said from her sickbed, "a pretty face fades in a couple of years. It's personality that lasts. Shuyu will be a good helper for you."

"How can you tell?" Lin asked.

"I know that in my heart."

His father said, "Where can you find such a kindhearted girl?"

"Please," the mother begged. "I'll die happy if I know you agree to marry her."

So Lin yielded to his parents. But despite accepting Shuyu as his

bride, he believed she was absolutely unrepresentable outside his home village. That was why, after they were married the next summer, for two decades he had never let her visit him at the army hospital. Furthermore, for seventeen years, since the birth of their only child, he had remained separate from his wife. Whenever he was home, he would sleep alone in his own room. He didn't love her; nor did he dislike her. In a way he treated her like a cousin of sorts.

Now his parents had died long ago, and their daughter Hua had graduated from middle school. He felt that the family didn't depend on him anymore and that it was time to move along with his own life. For better or worse, he should disentangle himself from this loveless marriage.

Early the next morning the couple caught a tractor that was going to Wujia Town to fetch an electric motor for the village's new mill-house. Together with them in the trailer sat Shuyu's younger brother Bensheng, the accountant of the production brigade, who had heard about their going to the divorce court. For more than ten years, every summer Bensheng had gone to the courthouse with them, though he had remained silent in the court. From the very beginning, Lin had believed that it was Bensheng who had made Shuyu change her mind at the last moment. Yet the two men, sitting against the panels of the trailer, didn't show any animosity toward each other. Quietly they were smoking Lin's Glory cigarettes.

Wujia Town was eighteen miles west of Goose Village. On both sides of the road many fields had been reaped, bundles of wheat and millet were piled like thousands of tiny graves. Several horse carts were being loaded in a field by the commune members, the tines of their pitchforks glinting in the sun. The tractor passed a meadow, where a dozen milk cows were browsing, a few calves skittering. In the north stretched the Songhua River, broad like a lake; on its sur-

face a brownish steamer was crawling east, leaving behind strips of black smoke. A pair of pelicans were flying beyond the water, bobbing on the horizon.

The tractor jolted along slowly on the rutted road. Halfway through the eighteen miles, Lin began to feel a backache, which he hadn't had in past years. I'm getting old, he said to himself. This case shouldn't drag on forever. I must brace myself for the judge and get it settled this time.

At the entrance to the county town, the road was blocked by a column of horse carts transporting bricks, and the tractor had to follow them at a walking pace. Bensheng and the driver, nicknamed Dragonfly, grew impatient and couldn't help cursing time and again. Not until half an hour later did they reach the town center. It was market day, so the sidewalks of Central Street were occupied by vendors. They were selling poultry, vegetables, fruits, eggs, live fish, piglets, clothes. Everywhere were wicker baskets, chick cages, oil jars, fish basins and pails. A bald man was blowing a brass whistle, a sample of his wares, and the noise split the air and hurt people's ears. Some young girls at watermelon stands were smoking self-rolled cigarettes while crying for customers and waving goose-feather fans to keep flies away.

The tractor driver dropped his passengers at the black brick courthouse, which was at the west end of Central Street, opposite New China Bookstore. Then he drove away to pick up the motor at the repair shop.

Divorces were rare in the county. The court would handle about a dozen cases a year, and only two or three would end in a divorce. Most of the time the court tried to help the couples resolve their marital problems and get them back together.

The judge was a rotund fiftyish man in a police uniform. At the sight of Lin and Shuyu, he made a face and said, "Again?" He shook

his head, then waved at a young policewoman at the back of the courtroom to come to the front and take notes.

After everybody was seated, Lin went across to the judge and handed him the letter of recommendation.

Following the formality, the judge asked him to present his case to the court. Remaining in his seat, Lin said, "There has been no love between us, so we are applying for a divorce. Please don't take me for a heartless man, Comrade Judge. My wife and I have been separated for seventeen years. I've always been good to her and—"

"Let's get this straight first," the judge cut him short. "You said 'we are applying for a divorce,' but the letter of recommendation only mentions your name. Is your wife applying for a divorce too?"

"No, I'm sorry. I apply for it myself."

The judge was familiar with this case, knowing Lin had been involved with another woman in Muji City, so he didn't bother to question him further. He turned to Shuyu and asked if the husband's statement was true.

She nodded, her "yes" almost inaudible.

"You two have not slept together for seventeen years?" asked the judge.

She shook her head.

"Yes or no?"

"No."

"Would you accept a divorce?"

She didn't answer, her eyes fixed on the wide floorboards, which warped in places. Lin stared at her, thinking, Come on, say yes.

For a minute or so she made no sound. Meanwhile the judge was waiting patiently, waving a large fan, on which a tiger stretched its neck howling with a mouth like a bloody basin. He said to her, "Think hard. Don't rush to a decision."

Her brother raised his hand. The judge allowed him to speak.

Bensheng stood up and said, "Judge Sun, my sister is an illiterate housewife and doesn't know how to express herself clearly, but I know how she feels."

"Tell us then."

"It's unfair for Lin Kong to do this to her. She has lived with the Kongs for more than twenty years, serving them like a dumb beast of burden. She looked after his sick mother until the old woman died. Then his father fell ill, and for three years she took care of the old man so well that he never had a single bed sore. After his father was gone, she raised their daughter alone and worked inside and outside the house like a widow, although her husband was still alive. She has lived a hard life, all the villagers have seen it and say so. But during all these years Lin Kong kept another woman, a mistress, in Muji City. This is unfair. He can't treat a human being, his wife, like an overcoat—once he has worn it out, he dumps it." Bensheng sat down, his face red and puffing out a little. He looked a bit tearful. His words filled Lin with shame. Lin didn't argue, seeing his wife wipe her tears. He remained silent.

With a wave of his hand, the judge folded up the tiger fan and clapped it against the palm of his other hand. Then he brought his fist down on the desk; dust jumped up, a few yellowish skeins dangling in a ray of sunlight. He pointed at Lin's face and said, "Comrade Lin Kong, you are a revolutionary officer and should be a model for us civilians. What kind of a model have you become? A man who doesn't care for his family and loves the new and loathes the old—fickle in heart and unfaithful in words and deeds. Your wife served your family like a donkey at the millstone. After all these years, the grinding is done, and you want to get rid of her. This is immoral and dishonorable, absolutely intolerable. Tell me, do you have a conscience or not? Do you deserve your green uniform and the red star on your cap?"

"I—I've tried to take care of my family. I give her forty yuan a month. You can't say that I—"

"This court declines your request. The case is dismissed."

Before Lin could protest more, the short judge got up and strode away to the side hall, where the bathroom was. His fat hips swayed while the floor creaked under his feet. His cap still perched on the desk. The policewoman eyed the back of the judge, a faint smile playing around her lips.

It was noon. The sun was blazing outside. Because many people had left the fair, the street was less crowded now. Harness bells were jangling languidly in the distance. A group of schoolgirls skipped and danced over a chain of rubber bands on the sidewalk, singing a nursery rhyme. The cobbled street, whitish in the hot sunlight, had puddles of rainwater here and there. Seeing a young woman selling plait ribbons, Lin stopped to buy a pair for Hua. But he wasn't sure of what color his daughter liked. Shuyu told him "pink." He paid half a yuan for two silk ribbons.

Together they went into Sunrise House at a street corner, a small restaurant that offered mainly wheaten food. They sat down at a table by a window. The oak tabletop looked greasy, its center marked with a few grayish circles. A ladybug was crawling along the rim of a glass jar containing a bunch of chopsticks, its wings now rubbing each other deliberately and now revolving like a pair of miniature rotor blades. A waitress came and greeted them pleasantly as though she had known them, saying, "What would you like for lunch today? We have noodles, beef pies, leek pancakes, sugar buns, and fried dough sticks."

Lin ordered a plate of cold cuts—pork liver and heart cooked in aniseed broth—and four bowls of noodles, two of which were for his brother-in-law. Shuyu and he would each have one bowl.

In no time the dish came and then the steaming noodles, which

were topped with starchy gravy made of minced pork, snap beans, scallions, coriander, and egg drops. While stirring the noodles with a pair of chopsticks, Shuyu spilled a blob of gravy on her left wrist. She raised her hand and licked it clean.

They ate quietly. Lin didn't want to talk, his heart numb. He had tried to hate his brother-in-law when they left the courthouse, but he hadn't been able to summon any intense emotion.

After finishing his first bowl of noodles, Bensheng broke the silence, saying to Lin, "Elder brother, don't take to heart what I said in the court. Shuyu's my sister and I had to do that." His thin eyes were glittering as he chewed a piece of pork heart.

"I understand," said Lin.

"So, no hard feelings?"

"No."

"We're still one family?"

"Yes."

Shuyu smiled and sucked her noodles vigorously. Lin shook his head and heaved a sigh.

The tractor driver, Dragonfly, had promised to wait for them at the crossroads by the post office, but when they arrived there after lunch, there was no shadow of the tractor. Apparently it had left for home, so they had to walk a mile to the bus stop in front of Green Inn. Bensheng couldn't stop cursing Dragonfly all the way.

Manna Wu had been in love with Lin Kong for many years, still waiting for him to divorce his wife so that they could get married. Summer after summer he had gone home and tried to carry through the divorce, but never succeeded. This year Manna did not expect a breakthrough either. According to the army hospital's rule, established by Commissar Wang in the winter of 1978, it was only after eighteen years' separation that an officer could end his marriage without his wife's consent. The commissar had died of hepati-

tis the next summer, but for twenty-five years the rule had been strictly observed in the hospital.

By 1983, Lin and his wife had already been separated for seventeen years, so with or without Shuyu's agreement, he would be able to divorce her the next year. That was why Manna was certain that he wouldn't make a great effort this time. She knew the workings of his mind: he would always choose an easy way out.

The day after Lin was back from the countryside, he went to Manna's dormitory and told her about the court's rejection. She responded unemotionally, "Before you left, I knew it wouldn't work out."

He clasped his hands around his knee and said, "Don't be so upset. I really did my best."

"I'm not upset."

"Come on, next year I'll divorce her, whether she agrees or not. Let's just wait another year, all right?"

"Another year?" Her voice turned rather shrill. "How many years do you have in your life?"

He remained silent for a moment, his chin propped on his palm. Then he said, "After all, we've waited so many years. Only one year more."

She lifted her face, staring at him. "Look at me, Lin. Am I not becoming an old woman?"

"No, you're not old, dear. Don't be so grouchy."

True, she wasn't old, just in her early forties. Her face had a few wrinkles, but her eyes, though a little wide set, were still bright and lively. Despite some gray hair, she had a fine figure, tall and slender. Seen from behind, you could easily take her for a woman of thirty.

The door opened and Manna's roommate Nurse Hsu came in, humming "On the Sun Island," a popular song. Seeing Lin sitting on the edge of her bed, which was opposite Manna's, Nurse Hsu

struck out her tongue and made an apologetic face at the couple. "Sorry for disturbing you," she said.

Lin said, "I'm sorry for taking your space in here."

"That's all right." Nurse Hsu went over to her bedside cupboard and took out a large tomato. Hurriedly she walked out, crooning the song again.

Lin got to his feet and closed the door. Silence followed, as though neither of them wanted to talk anymore.

He began washing his hands in Manna's yellow enamel basin supported by an iron washstand in a corner. He threw a few handfuls of water on his face, then said to her, "I have to go to work. I'll see you this evening, all right?" He wiped his face with her white towel.

She nodded without speaking.

They both worked in the Medical Department of the hospital, Lin as a physician and Manna as a head nurse. Though they were an acknowledged couple, they couldn't live together and could only eat at the same table in the mess hall and take walks on the hospital grounds. The hospital's regulations prohibited a man and a woman on the staff from walking together outside the compound, unless they were married or engaged. This rule had been in force for nineteen years since 1964, when a nurse got pregnant by her boyfriend, who was an assistant doctor. After the pregnancy was discovered, the couple confessed they had met several times in the birch woods east of the hospital. Both were expelled from the army—the man became a village doctor in his hometown in Jilin Province while the woman was sent to Yingkou City, where she packed seafood in a cannery. Then the Party Committee of the hospital made this rule: two comrades of different sex, unless married or engaged, must not be together outside the compound.

The rule was devastating to many nurses at the time, because, fearful of being punished, unmarried male officers in the hospital

soon turned their eyes on young women in the city and nearby villages. Most of the nurses resented it, but for nineteen years the rule had been strictly observed. Whenever offenders were discovered, the leaders would criticize them. Because Lin was a married man and Manna couldn't become his fiancée, they were not allowed to walk together outside the hospital grounds. By now, after so many years of restriction, they had grown accustomed to it.

in Kong graduated from the military medical school toward the end of 1963 and came to Muji to work as a doctor. At that time the hospital ran a small nursing school, which offered a sixteen-month program and produced nurses for the army in Manchuria and Inner Mongolia. When Manna Wu enrolled as a student in the fall of 1964, Lin was teaching a course in anatomy. She was an energetic young woman at the time, playing volleyball on the hospital team. Unlike most of her classmates who were recent middle- or high-school graduates, she had already served three years as a telephone operator in a coastal division and was older than most of them. Since over 95 percent of the students in the nursing school were female, many young officers from the units stationed in Muji City would frequent the hospital on weekends.

Most of the officers wanted to find a girlfriend or a fiancée among the students, although these young women were still soldiers and were not allowed to have a boyfriend. There was a secret reason for the men's interest in the female students, a reason few of them would articulate but one which they all knew in their hearts, namely that these were "good girls." That phrase meant these women were virgins; otherwise they could not have joined the army, since every young woman recruited had to go through a physical exam that eliminated those with a broken hymen.

One Sunday afternoon in the summer, Manna was washing clothes alone in the dormitory washroom. In came a bareheaded lieutenant of slender build and medium height, his face marked with a few freckles. His collar was unbuckled and the top buttons on his jacket were undone, displaying his prominent Adam's apple.

He stood beside her, lifted his foot up, and placed it into the long terrazzo sink. The tap water splashed on his black plastic sandal and spread like a silvery fan. Done with the left foot, he put in his right. To Manna's amusement, he barked his feet again and again. His breath stank of alcohol.

He turned and gave her a toothy grin, and she smiled back. Gradually they entered into conversation. He said he was the head of a radio station at the headquarters of the Muji Sub-Command and a friend of Instructor Peng. His hands shook a little as he talked. He asked where she came from; she told him her hometown was in Shandong Province, withholding the fact that she had grown up as an orphan without a hometown—her parents had died in a traffic accident in Tibet when she was three.

"What's your name?" he asked.

"Manna Wu."

"I'm Mai Dong, from Shanghai."

A lull set in. She felt her face flushing a little, so she returned to washing her clothes. But he seemed eager to go on talking.

"Glad to meet you, Comrade Manna Wu," he said abruptly and stretched out his hand.

She waved to show the soapsuds on her palms. "Sorry," she said with a pixieish smile.

"By the way, how do you like Muji?" he asked, rubbing his wet hands on his flanks.

"It's all right."

"Really? Even the weather here?"

"Yes."

"Not too cold in winter?" Before she could answer, he went on, "Of course, summer's fine. How about—"

"Why did you bathe your feet eight or nine times?" She giggled.

"Oh, did I?" He seemed bewildered, looking down at his feet.

"Nice sandals," she said.

"My cousin sent them from Shanghai. By the way, how old are you?" He grinned.

Surprised by the question, she looked at him for a moment and then turned away, reddening.

He smiled rather naturally. "I mean, do you have a boyfriend?"

Again she was taken aback. Before she could decide how to answer, a woman student walked in with a bucket to fetch water, so their conversation had to end.

A week later she received a letter from Mai Dong. He apologized profusely for disturbing her in the washroom and for his untidy appearance, which wasn't suitable for an officer. He had asked her so many embarrassing questions, she must have taken him for an idiot. But he had not been himself that day. He begged her to forgive him. She wrote back, saying she had not been offended, instead very much amused. She appreciated his candor and natural manners.

Both of them were in their mid-twenties and had never taken a lover. Soon they began to write each other a few times a week. Within two months they started their rendezvous on weekends at movie theaters, parks, and the riverbank. Mai Dong hated Muji, which was a city with a population of about a quarter of a million. He dreaded its severe winters and the north winds that came from Siberia with clouds of snow dust. The smog, which always curtains the sky when the weather was cold, aggravated his chronic sore throat. His work, transcribing and transmitting telegrams, impaired his eyesight. He was unhappy and complained a great deal.

Manna tried to comfort him with kind words. By nature he was weak and gentle. Sometimes she felt he was like a small boy who needed the care of an elder sister or a mother.

One Saturday afternoon in the fall, they met in Victory Park. Under a weeping willow on the bank of a lake, they sat together

watching a group of children on the other shore flying a large kite, which was a paper centipede crawling up and down in the air. To their right, about a hundred feet away, a donkey was tethered to a tree, now and then whisking its tail. Its master was lying on the grass and taking a nap, a green cap over his face so that flies might not bother him. Maple seeds floated down, revolving in the breeze. Furtively Mai Dong stretched out his hand, held Manna's shoulder, and pulled her closer so as to kiss her lips.

"What are you doing?" she cried, leaping to her feet. Her abrupt movement scared away the mallards and geese in the water. She didn't understand his intention and thought he had attempted something indecent, like a hoodlum. She didn't remember ever being kissed by anyone.

He looked puzzled, then muttered, "I didn't mean to make you angry like this."

"Don't ever do that again."

"All right, I won't." He turned away from her and looked piqued, spitting on the grass.

From then on, though she didn't reproach him again, she resisted his advances resolutely, her sense of virtue and honor preventing her from succumbing to his desire. Her resistance kindled his passion. Soon he told her that he couldn't help thinking of her all the time, as though she had become his shadow. Sometimes at night, he would walk alone in the compound of the Sub-Command headquarters for hours, with his 1951 pistol stuck in his belt. Heaven knew how he missed her and how many nights he remained awake tossing and turning while thinking about her. Out of desperation, he proposed to her two months before her graduation. He wanted to marry her without delay.

She thought he must have lost his mind, though by now she also couldn't help thinking of him for an hour or two every night. Her head ached in the morning, her grades were suffering, and she was

often angry with herself. She would lose her temper with others for no apparent reason. When nobody was around, tears often came to her eyes. For all their love, an immediate marriage would be impracticable, out of the question. She was uncertain where she would be sent when she graduated, probably to a remote army unit, which could be anywhere in Manchuria or Inner Mongolia. Besides, a marriage at this moment would suggest that she was having a love affair; this would invite punishment, the lightest of which the school would administer was to keep the couple as separate as possible. In recent years the leaders had assigned some lovers to different places deliberately.

She revealed Mai Dong's proposal to nobody except her teacher Lin Kong, who was known as a good-hearted married man and was regarded by many students as a kind of elder brother. In such a situation she needed an objective opinion. Lin agreed that a marriage at this moment was unwise, and that they had better wait a while until her graduation and then decide what to do. He promised he would let nobody know of the relationship. In addition, he said he would try to help her in the job assignment if he was involved in making the decision.

She reasoned Mai Dong out of the idea of an immediate marriage and assured him that she would become his wife sooner or later. As graduation approached, they both grew restless, hoping she would remain in Muji City. He was depressed, and his despondency made her love him more.

At the graduation she was assigned to stay in the hospital and work in its Medical Department as a nurse—a junior officer of the twenty-fourth rank. The good news, however, didn't please Mai Dong and Manna for long, because a week later he was informed that his radio station was going to be transferred to a newly formed regiment in Fuyuan County, almost eighty miles northeast of Muji and very close to the Russian border.

"Don't panic," she told him. "Work and study hard on the front. I'll wait for you." Though also heartbroken, she felt he was a rather pathetic man. She wished he were stronger, a man she could rely on in times of adversity, because life always had unexpected misfortunes.

"When will we get married?" he asked.

"Soon, I promise."

Despite saying that, she was unsure whether he would be able to come back to Muji. She preferred to wait a while.

The nearer the time for departure drew, the more embittered Mai Dong became. A few times he mentioned he would rather be demobilized and return to Shanghai, but she dissuaded him from considering that. A discharge might send him to a place far away, such as an oil field or a construction corps building railroads in the interior of China. It was better for them to stay as close as possible.

When she saw him off at the front entrance of the Sub-Command headquarters, she had to keep blowing on her fingers, having forgotten to bring along her mittens. She wouldn't take the fur gloves he offered her; she said he would need them more. He stood at the back door of the radio van, whose green body had turned gray with encrusted ice and snow. The radio antenna atop the van was tilting in the wind, which, with a shrill whistle, again and again tried to snatch it up and bear it off. More snow was falling, and the air was piercingly cold. Mai Dong's breath hung around his face as he shouted orders to his soldiers in the van, who gathered at the window, eager to see what Manna looked like. Outside the van, a man loaded into a side trunk some large wooden blocks needed for climbing the slippery mountain roads. The driver kicked the rear wheels to see whether the tire chains were securely fastened. His fur hat was completely white, a nest of snowflakes.

As the van drew away, Mai Dong waved good-bye to Manna, his hand stretching through the back window, as though struggling to

pull her along. He wanted to cry, "Wait for me, Manna!" but he dared not get that out in the presence of his men. Seeing his face contort with pain, Manna's eyes blurred with tears. She bit her lips so as not to cry.

Winter in Muji was long. Snow wouldn't disappear until early May. In mid-April when the Songhua River began to break up, people would gather at the bank watching the large blocks of ice cracking and drifting in the blackish-green water. Teenage boys, baskets in hand, would tread and hop on the floating ice, picking up pike, whitefish, carp, baby sturgeon, and catfish killed by the ice blocks that had been washed down by spring torrents. Steamboats, still in the docks, blew their horns time and again. When the main channel was finally clear of ice, they crept out, sailing slowly up and down the river and saluting the spectators with long blasts. Children would hail and wave at them.

Then spring descended all of a sudden. Aspen catkins flew in the air, so thick that when walking on the streets you could breathe them in and you would flick your hand to keep them away from your face. The scent of lilac blooms was pungent and intoxicating. Yet old people still wrapped themselves in fur or cotton-padded clothes. The dark earth, vast and loamy, marked by tufts of yellow grass here and there, began emitting a warm vapor that flickered like purple smoke in the sunshine. All at once apricot and peach trees broke into blossoms, which grew puffy as bees kept touching them. Within two weeks the summer started. Spring was so short here that people would say Muji had only three seasons.

In her letters to Mai Dong, Manna described these seasonal changes as though he had never lived in the city. As always, he complained in his letters about life at the front. Many soldiers there suffered from night blindness because they hadn't eaten enough vegetables. They all had lice in their underclothes since they couldn't take baths in their barracks. For the whole winter and

spring he had seen only two movies. He had lost fourteen pounds, he was like a skeleton now. To comfort him, each month Manna mailed him a small bag of peanut brittle.

One evening in June, Manna and two other nurses were about to set out for the volleyball court behind the medical building. Benping, the soldier in charge of mail and newspapers, came and handed her a letter. Seeing it was from Mai Dong, her teammates teased her, saying, "Aha, a love letter."

She opened the envelope and was shocked while reading through the two pages. Mai Dong told her that he couldn't stand the life on the border any longer and had applied for a discharge, which had been granted. He was going back to Shanghai, where the weather was milder and the food better. More heartrending, he had decided to marry his cousin, who was a salesgirl at a department store in Shanghai. Without such a marriage, he wouldn't be able to obtain a residence card, which was absolutely necessary for him to live and find employment in the metropolis. In reality he and the girl had been engaged even before he had applied for his discharge; otherwise he wouldn't have been allowed to go to Shanghai, since he was not from the city proper but from one of its suburban counties. He was sorry for Manna and asked her to hate and forget him. Her initial response was long silence.

"Are you okay?" Nurse Shen asked.

Manna nodded and said nothing. Then the three of them set out for the game.

On the volleyball court Manna, usually an indifferent player, struck the ball with such ferocity that for the first time her comrades shouted "Bravo" for her. Her face was smeared with sweat and tears. As she dove to save a ball, she fell flat on the graveled court and scraped her right elbow. The spectators applauded the diving save while she slowly picked herself up and found blood oozing from her skin.

During the break her teammates told her to go to the clinic and have the injury dressed, so she left, planning to return for the second game. But on her way, she changed her mind and ran back to the dormitory. She merely washed her elbow with cold water and didn't bandage it.

Once alone in the bedroom, she read the letter again and tears gushed from her eyes. She flung the pages down on the desk and fell on her bed, sobbing, twisting, and biting the pillowcase. A mosquito buzzed above her head, then settled on her neck, but she didn't bother to slap it. She felt as if her heart had been pierced.

When her three roommates came back at nine, she was still in tears. They picked up the letter and glanced through it; together they tried to console her by condemning the heartless man. But their words made her sob harder and even convulsively. That night she didn't wash her face or brush her teeth. She slept with her clothes on, waking now and then and weeping quietly while her roommates wheezed or snacked their lips or murmured something in their sleep. She simply couldn't stop her tears.

She was ill for a few weeks. She felt aged, in deep lassitude and numb despair, and regretted not marrying Mai Dong before he left for the front. Her limbs were weary, as though separated from herself. Despite her comrades' protests, she dropped out of the volleyball team, saying she was too sick to play. She spent more time alone, as though all at once she belonged to an older generation; she cared less about her looks and clothes.

By now she was almost twenty-six, on the verge of becoming an old maid, whose standard age was twenty-seven to most people's minds. The hospital had three old maids; Manna seemed destined to join them.

She wasn't very attractive, but she was slim and tall and looked natural; besides, she had a pleasant voice. In normal circumstances she wouldn't have had difficulty in finding a boyfriend, but the hos-

pial always kept over a hundred women nurses, most of whom were around twenty, healthy and normal, so young officers could easily find girlfriends among them. As a result, few men were interested in Manna. Only an enlisted soldier paid her some attentions. He was a cook, a squat man from Szechwan Province, and he would dole out to her a larger portion of a dish when she bought her meal. But she did not want an enlisted soldier as a boyfriend, which would have violated the rule that only officers could have a girlfriend or a boyfriend. Besides, that man looked awful—owlish and cunning. So she avoided standing in any line leading to his window.

2

In the mid-1960s the hospital had only four medical school graduates on its staff. Lin Kong was one of them. The rest of the seventy doctors had been trained by the army itself through short-term courses and experience on battlefields. In addition to his diploma, Lin carried on each shoulder one bar and three stars, having the rank of captain and a monthly salary of ninety-four yuan. Understandably some nurses found him attractive, especially those new arrivals who didn't know he kept a family in the countryside. To their disappointment, they would find out later that he was already married. Word had gone about that his wife was eight years older than he and had been taken into his family as a child bride when he was just seven. It was said that she had been his nanny for many years. For all the rumors, nobody could tell exactly what his wife was like.

From their days in the nursing school, friendship had developed between Lin and Manna. He had been a teacher but without any airs, unlike most of the other instructors. For that she had respected him more. Now as they worked in the same department, she gradually grew attached to this tall, quiet man, who always spoke amiably to everybody. When others talked with him, he would listen patiently and give weight to their ideas. Different from most young officers, he seemed very mature for his age, which was thirty. His glasses made him look urbane and knowledgeable. People liked him, calling him Scholar or Bookworm, and every year he had been elected a model officer.

When Manna told Lin that Mai Dong had broken their engagement, he said, "Forget him and take good care of yourself. You'll find a better man."

She was grateful for his kind words. She was certain that unlike others, he would not gossip about her misfortune behind her back.

One day in the summer, she stopped by his dormitory to deliver the journal *Studies in Military Medical Science* and some pills for his arthritis. Lin was alone in the bedroom he shared with two other doctors. Manna noticed a tall wooden bookcase beyond the head of his bed, against the wall. On the shelves were about two hundred books. Most of the titles were unfamiliar to her—*Song of Youth*, *Cement*, *The History of International Communism*, *War and Peace*, *The Guerrilla Detachment on the Railroad*, *White Nights*, *Lenin: World's First Nuclear-Powered Ice-Breaker*, and so forth. On the bottom shelf there were several medical textbooks in Russian. That impressed her greatly, since she had never met a person who could read a book written in a foreign language.

By contrast, Lin's two roommates, as though illiterate, owned no books. On one of their bedside desks, a brass artillery shell, a foot in length and four inches in diameter, stood beside a lamp, which was made of conch shells glued together. Yet they both had flowered quilts and pillows, whereas Lin's bedding was in plain white and green—a standard army set. His mosquito net was yellowish, its bottom edge frayed. It reminded Manna of a whisper among the nurses that Lin was so tightfisted he would never buy an expensive dish. She didn't know whether that was true, but she had noticed that unlike other men who would bolt down their meals, Lin often ate in a fussy manner like a woman doing needlework.

To her surprise, Lin bent down and pulled a washbasin out from under his roommate Ming Chen's bed, saying, "We have some fruit here." In the basin were about twenty brown apple-pears, which the three doctors had bought together the day before.

"Oh, don't treat me like a guest," she said.

"No. You're lucky today. If you come tomorrow, they'll all be gone." He picked up a large pear and with his foot pushed the basin

back under the bed. The metallic rasp on the cement floor grated on her a little. "I'll be back in a second," he said and went out to wash the pear.

She picked up a book from his bed, which was written by Stalin, entitled *The Problems of Leninism*. Opening it, she found a woodcut bookplate on its inside front cover. At the bottom of the plate was a foreign word, *EX-LIBRIS*, above which was an engraving of a thatched cottage, partly surrounded by a railing and shaded by two trees with luxuriant crowns, five birds soaring in the distance by the peak of a hill, and the setting sun casting down its last rays. For a moment Manna was fascinated by the tranquil scene in the bookplate.

When Lin came back she asked him, "What does this mean?" She pointed at the foreign word.

"It's Latin, meaning 'from my collection.' " He handed her the pear. She noticed he had long-boned hands, the fingers lean and apparently dexterous. He should be a surgeon instead of a physician, she thought.

"May I look at some of your books?" she asked.

"Of course, you're welcome."

She took a bite of the pear, which was juicy and fragrant and reminded her of a banana she had eaten many years ago. She began flicking through several books. They all carried the same woodcut plates behind the front covers, and some thick volumes had Lin's personal seal on their fore edges. She was impressed by his caring for the books and would have loved to see more, but she couldn't stay longer because she had a package to deliver to another doctor.

After that visit, she started to borrow books from Lin. The hospital had a small library, but its holdings were limited to the subjects of politics and medical science. The two dozen novels and plays it had once owned had been surrendered to the bonfires built by the Red Guards before the city hall two months ago. Strange to say,

Lin's books remained intact. No one seemed to have reported him, and none of the hospital's revolutionaries had suggested confiscating Lin's books. Manna soon discovered that several officers were using Lin's library in secret; sometimes she had to wait for a novel to come back from another borrower.

She wasn't a serious reader and seldom read a book from cover to cover, but she was eager to see what Lin and his friends were reading, as though they had formed a clandestine club she was curious about.

On National Day, October 1, she ran into Lin before the hospital's photo shop, which was run by an old crippled man. Lin asked her if she could help him make dust jackets for his books. He explained, "It's not safe to show their titles on the shelf. Everybody can see them. I've wrapped up half of them already."

"I'll come and help. You should've told me earlier," she said.

When she arrived at his dormitory that evening, Lin's roommates, Ming Chen and Jin Tian, were there, bent over a chessboard, playing a war game and drinking draft beer, which they poured from a plastic lysol can sitting on a desk. Ming Chen was an acupuncturist and Jin Tian an assistant surgeon, both trained by the hospital. Lin took out a thick roll of kraft paper, a pair of scissors, and a packet of adhesive tape. Together he and Manna began working on the books while his two roommates were battling noisily on the chessboard.

"Foul," Ming Chen shouted. "My colonel killed your captain."

He had rancid breath, which Manna could smell three yards away.

"Come on," Jin Tian begged, "let me take back a move this once, all right? I let you do that just now when my land mine blew up your field marshal."

"Give me that piece, Bean Sprout." Ming Chen reached across the desk for Jin Tian's fist, which had grabbed the captain.

Dodging his opponent's hand, the spindly Jin Tian said, "Watch your mouth!"

"I watch your mother's ass."

"Knock it off, man! We have a lady comrade here."

"From now on no false move!"

"Okay."

Lin and Manna were working quietly. The books were lying on his bed. One by one they placed them on the table, wrapped them up, then returned them to the bookcase. Three or four times her hand touched his as they reached out simultaneously for the scissors. She tried to smile at him but felt herself blushing, so she kept her head low. In the presence of his boisterous roommates, she had lost her natural manners. If the other two men hadn't been around, she would have talked some with Lin, which was what she was eager to do.

Within two hours every volume was cloaked in a kraft jacket. Standing together on the shelves, the books now looked indistinguishable to Manna.

"My, how can you tell one from another?" she asked Lin, drinking a bottle of mineral water he had opened for her.

"No problem, I always can tell which is which." He smiled rather shyly, two pink patches on his cheeks. She felt he avoided her eyes.

In addition to wrapping the books up, he thumbtacked a piece of white sheeting to the bookshelf as a curtain. Now he seemed to have closed his library forever. She couldn't help wondering how he could get along with his two roommates, who were so different from him. He must be very good-natured.

Two days later, the hospital's Political Department ordered all the staff to hand in their books that contained bourgeois ideology and sentiments, particularly those by foreign authors. Lin told

Manna that he had turned in a dozen books, most of which had been extra copies. She was surprised that the leaders didn't demand that he surrender all his novels. It seemed that he must have known about the imminent orders, or else he wouldn't have asked her to help him jacket the books in a hurry and closed his library right before the confiscation. Why should he run the risk of keeping them? He could be publicly denounced for doing that. Everybody knew Lin owned many foreign novels; why didn't the leaders have them confiscated? She dared not ask Lin, but she stopped borrowing books from him.

3

In the winter of 1966 the hospital undertook camp-and-field training. For some reason a top general in Northeastern Military Command had issued orders in October that all the army had to be able to operate without modern vehicles, which not only were unreliable but also could soften the troops. The orders said, "We must carry on the spirit of the Long March and restore the tradition of horses and mules."

For a month, a third of the hospital's staff would march four hundred miles through the countryside and camp at villages and small towns. Along the way they would practice treating the wounded and rescuing the dying from the battlefield. Both Lin and Manna joined the training. He was appointed the head of a medical team, which consisted of twenty-eight people. For the first time in his life he became a leader, so he worked conscientiously.

The march went well for the first few days, since the roads were flat and the troops fresh. But it got tougher and tougher as they approached a mountainous area where snow often left no trace of a road. Many of the men and women began to hobble, which often drew the attention of civilians, who would watch them with excitement. Sometimes when the troops entered a town, even the spectators' sincere applause sounded derisive to the limpers and made them hang their heads. As men and women were equal, all the female nurses had to trudge along in the same way as the men did, though they didn't shoulder a rifle and at times were allowed to carry lighter pieces of equipment.

One windless day they marched through a forest toward a village in the north. They walked for a whole day with only a lunch break.

By seven o'clock they had covered twenty-eight miles, hungry and exhausted, but five miles still lay ahead. Then came the orders that they had to reach the village within an hour—"before the battle gets under way," as they were told. Instantly a forced march started, the troops running at full speed.

Manna's feet were severely blistered from bearing a stretcher for six hours. The "wounded soldier" had been a side of pork weighing a hundred and twenty pounds. So now she could barely walk. Lin took the medical box off her shoulder and slipped its strap over his head, carrying it for her. Then two soldiers held her upper arms and pulled her along to keep up with the troops.

Their big-toed boots were throwing up puffs of snow, and now and then a voice commanded loudly, "Close up!" or "Don't take off your hat!" In the sky ahead the Big Dipper was dancing zigzag as though the earth were turning upside down. Flocks of crows took off from the trees, flapping away in every direction and cawing like starved ghosts. Time and again a mug or a canteen dropped on the ice with a sharp clank. Suddenly a tall man fell; the seventy-pound transmitter he carried on his back hit the stump of a felled tree. The frightened Jin Tian, who was in charge of communications, helped him up while saying through his teeth, "Damn! If the machine's broken, you'll go back to your home village and eat sweet potatoes the rest of your life!"

All the way Manna was groaning to the men who were hauling her, "Let go of me . . . Oh so tired. Please let me die here, in the snow . . ." But they dragged her along. The orders allowed nobody to be left behind.

Fifty-six minutes later they arrived at the village, which consisted of about eighty households. Lin Kong's team was blistered in three farmhouses—the two larger ones were for the doctors and soldiers, the smaller one for the seven women nurses.

In the pale moonlight, smoke and sparks were spouting out from two chimneys atop the production brigade's office house. The mess squad was busy cooking in there, burning cornstalks and brushwood. Two cleavers were chopping cabbages rhythmically while the cooks were making a soup and baking wheaten cakes. From time to time they larded the field cauldrons with two thick pieces of pork skin. In the yard the horses were drinking warm water and munching fodder, their backs and flanks still steaming with sweat. The mess officer had gone out to look for a stable for the horses, but he hadn't returned yet.

After Lin's men had settled in, Lin went to the "kitchen" with an orderly to fetch dinner. In there he didn't see any of the nurses of his team. It occurred to him that they must have been too exhausted to come. So he let the baby-faced orderly take the wheaten cakes and the cabbage and pork soup back to the men, while he borrowed an aluminum pot from the cooks and carried some soup and a bag of cakes to the nurses.

The wind was rising, and wisps of steam were blown up from the pot, swirling about Lin's chest. Dogs barked at the sentries, who were patrolling the village, toting flashlights and submachine guns. Stars glittered like brass nuggets above the pine woods that were swaying wave after wave in the south. On arrival at the farmhouse, Lin found Manna Wu and Haiyan Niu bathing their feet in a large wooden bowl. An old woman with a weather-beaten face was heating more water in an iron bucket for the other nurses. "Why don't you go fetch dinner?" he asked them.

"We're still drenched in sweat," Nurse Shen answered.

"I'm dog tired," said Manna, whose feet rubbed each other in the warm water with tiny squeaks.

"No matter what, you have to eat," Lin said. "Otherwise how could you walk tomorrow?" He put the soup and the bag of

wheaten cakes on a nail-studded chest of drawers. "All right, eat dinner and have a good sleep. We'll have a long way to go tomorrow."

"Doctor Kong, I—I can't walk anymore," Manna said almost in tears, pointing to her feet.

"I can't walk either," the large-eyed Haiyan broke in. "I have blisters too."

"Let me have a look," he said.

The old woman moved an oil lamp closer. Lin squatted down to examine the two pairs of feet resting on the edge of the wooden bowl. Haiyan's feet had three small blisters, one on the ball of her right foot and two on her left heel; but Manna's soles were bloated with blisters that were shiny like tiny balloons. With his forefinger he pressed the red skin around the largest blister, and Manna let out a moan.

"The blisters must be drained," he said to the nurses standing by. "Do you know how to do it?"

"No." They all shook their heads.

Lin sighed, but to their amazement, he rolled up his sleeves and said, "Manna, I need two or three hairs from you, long ones."

"All right," she replied.

He turned to the old woman. "Do you have a needle, Granny?"

"Sure." She went out of the room and called to her daughter-in-law, who was at the other end of the house. "Hey, Rong, bring me some needles."

"Here you are," said Manna, handing Lin a few hairs, each about a foot long. He picked one and put the rest on his knee.

A thirtyish woman stepped in, carrying a large gourd ladle filled with scraps of cloth, balls of white, blue, and black threads, and a small silk pincushion. She said, "I've all the needles here, Manna. What kind you need?"

"A small one will do," Lin put in.

A two-inch needle was placed in his hand. He threaded it with a hair, then said to Manna, "Don't be scared. It won't hurt much."

She nodded. Lin cleaned his hands and the needle with a few cotton balls soaked with alcohol. Then with another cotton ball held with tweezers he wiped the largest blister on Manna's right heel. After patting it gently with his fingertip for a few seconds, he pierced it through. "Ow!" she cried and shut her eyes tight. At once her heel was covered with warm liquid flowing out of the punctured skin.

Lin cut the hair with scissors and left a piece of it inside the blister. "Let the hair stay. It will keep the holes open so the water drains," he said to the nurses gathering around to look.

"Boy, tur-tur-tur," the old woman said, "who'd think you get rid of a blister like this." She shook her wrinkled face, one of her white eyebrows twitching.

Lin went on to pierce and drain the rest of the blisters on Manna's right sole, while the other young women were working on Haiyan's feet and Manna's left foot. The old woman climbed onto the heated brick bed. One by one she turned the seven wet fur hats inside out and placed them at the warmer end of the bed to dry.

When he had finished treating Manna's blisters, Lin washed his hands in a basin, saying to Haiyan, "Don't worry, you should be able to walk tomorrow, but I'm not sure about Manna. It may take a few days for her feet to heal."

At those words, a shadow flitted across Haiyan's face. The other nurses thanked Lin for showing them how to treat blisters and for the dinner he had brought them. "Eat and rest well," he said. "Don't forget to return the pot to the mess squad tomorrow morning."

"We won't," said one of them.

"Doctor Kong, why don't you eat with us?" Nurse Shen asked.

"Yes, eat with us," a few voices said in unison.

"Well, I ate already."

That was a fib, although he felt a sudden warm thrill rising in his chest. Something soft was filling his throat. He was surprised by the invitation and afraid that if he stayed with the nurses for dinner, people would gossip about him and the leaders might criticize him as well. He forced himself to say, "Good night, everybody. Good night, Granny." He raised the thick door curtain made of gunny-sacks and went out.

Once outside, he overheard the old woman say, "Good for you, girls. Such a nice man, isn't he? I wish I had blisters too." Laughter rang inside the house.

One of the nurses began singing an opera song:

The wide lake sways wave after wave.

On the other shore lies our hometown.

In the morning we paddle out

To cast nets, and return at night,

Our boats loaded with fish . . .

Lin turned around in the snow, gazing back at the low farmhouse for a long time. Its windows were bronze with the light of oil lamps. If only he could have eaten dinner with the nurses in there. He wouldn't mind walking twenty miles just for that. He wondered whether he had visited them for some unconscious reason other than to deliver the dinner. Then a strange vision came to his mind. He saw himself sitting at the head of a long dining table and eating with all seven young women and the old woman too. No, the old woman turned out to be his wife Shuyu, who was busy passing around a basket of fresh steamed bread. As they were eating, the women were smiling and chattering intimately. Apparently they all enjoyed themselves as his wives living under the same roof. He remembered that in the Old China some rich men had several

wives. How lucky those landowners and capitalists must have been, wallowing in polygamous bliss. A scream of the wind brought him back to the snowfield. He shook his head and the vision disappeared. "You're sick," he said to himself. He felt slightly disgusted by his envying those reactionary men, who ought to be condemned as social parasites. Yet the feel of Manna's foot, which seemed to have penetrated his skin, was still lingering and expanding in his palms and fingers. He turned and made his way to his men's billet. His gait was no longer as steady as it had been an hour ago.

Manna couldn't walk the next day. Lin arranged to have her taken by a horse cart, which hauled utensils and provisions, running ahead of the troops. He gave her both his and Haiyan's sheepskin greatcoats, which she wrapped around her legs, so that they wouldn't have to carry them. She traveled in the cart for two full days; then the troops stopped at a commune town for a week. That gave enough time for her feet to heal.

During the remaining days of the training, Lin carried her medical box most of the time. Whenever she thanked him, he would say, "Don't mention it. It's my job."

4

After the troops had returned to Muji, Manna's gratitude to Lin gradually turned into intense curiosity. At work she often stopped by his office to say a word with him. At night, after taps was sounded, she would remain awake thinking about this odd man. Questions rose in her mind one after another. Does he love his wife? What does she look like? Is she really eight years older than he? Why is he so quiet, so kindhearted? Has he ever been angry with anyone? He seems to have no temper.

Silly girl, why do you always wonder about him? He's a good man, all right, but he's already married. Don't be a fool. He's not there for you.

What if he doesn't love his wife and wants to leave her? If so, would you go with him? Stop fantasizing and get some sleep.

Would you marry him?

Hard as she tried, she couldn't stifle the thought of him. Night after night, similar questions kept her awake until the small hours. At times she felt as though his hands still held and touched her right heel, so sensitive and so gentle were his fingers. Her feet couldn't help rubbing each other under the quilt, and she even massaged them now and then. Her heart brimmed with emotions.

From Haiyan she learned that Lin's wife had given birth to a baby girl. This information upset her, because he was bound to his family more than she had thought. Probably you'd better distance yourself from him, she kept reminding herself. You're heading for trouble. No matter what the outcome is, people will blame you. A third party is like a semi-criminal.

Despite all her reasoning, she couldn't help glancing at Lin

whenever she caught sight of him. She began to feel as though she were living in a trance.

One evening in June, Manna went to the guinea pigs' house to see a newborn litter. Afterward she returned to her dormitory alone. On the way she saw a man and a woman strolling by the aspen grove west of the mess hall. From the distance she couldn't tell who they were, though from behind the man looked like Lin. The dusk was balmy after a whole day of drizzling, and the trees seemed like a dark fence, against which the two figures in white shirts were moving west.

Manna was eager to find out who they were. There was a footpath going diagonally through the rows of young aspens. Without thinking twice, she turned into the grove so that she might see the man and woman clearly at the other end. As she walked along the path, her heart began galloping. Around her water was dripping pit-a-pat from the broad leaves as if a rain were starting. The indigo sky was drilled with stars.

A shadow appeared ahead of her and paused in the middle of the path. It was a dog. Manna stopped and couldn't tell whether it was the one raised by the cooks or a homeless dog going to the kitchen to steal food. The pair of greenish eyes looking in her direction sent an icy shiver down her back, as she remembered that a boy had been attacked by a rabid dog near the grove a few weeks before. She knew that if she turned back, the dog would chase and snap at her, so she stood still. Then she saw a leafy branch lying nearby, and she picked it up, waving it at the animal menacingly. The dog went on watching her for a while, then skulked away with its nose touching the ground repeatedly.

When Manna reached the far side of the grove, she heard a female voice say, "So he lost the book? I can't believe it." She recognized the voice, which belonged to Pingping Ma, the young woman in charge of the hospital's library.

"Next time I'd better ask him for security," Lin said in a joking tone.

They both laughed. Manna was observing them from behind a few thin aspens. Lin looked very happy. They stopped under a street lamp, saying something Manna couldn't quite hear. Beyond them spread a small pond of rainwater shimmering in the moonlight, from which toads were croaking. Pingping Ma bent down, picked up a stone, and threw it underarm into the pond, the flat stone skipping away on the surface of the water and sending up tiny flashes.

"I made three," she cried in a silvery voice. The stone had silenced the toads for a few seconds, then one of them resumed croaking hesitantly.

"I used to be good at playing ducks and drakes," Lin said. He flung a stone too.

"Wow, five!" the woman said.

They turned around to look for flat stones, but couldn't find a good one. Neither of them made more than three skips in the following attempts thanks to the lumpy stones they had to use. But they obviously enjoyed themselves.

Manna dared not stay too long, because the footpath was often used by others and she was afraid someone might run into her. Also, the dog might appear again. She hurried back, carrying the branch on her shoulder and feeling something pulling her guts. She began to swallow hard as a thirst ragged in her mouth. Her sneakers and the bottoms of her trouser legs were soaked through when she reached her dormitory.

That night she stayed awake for hours, thinking about the scene she had just witnessed. What was the true relationship between Lin Kong and Pingping Ma? Were they lovers? They might have been, or they wouldn't have skipped stones together so happily, like small children. No, that was unlikely because Pingping Ma was at least

ten years younger than Lin. Besides, she was merely an enlisted soldier, not allowed to have a boyfriend. But she wouldn't give a damn about the rule, would she? No, she wouldn't; otherwise she would not have dated a married man. Was Lin really attracted to her? Probably not. Her face was bumpy and ugly like a pumpkin, and she had gapped teeth. Still, Lin seemed to enjoy being with her very much. He had never looked that natural with others. Again in her mind's eye Manna saw him standing by the pond with arms akimbo as he watched that woman skipping the stones.

The more Manna thought, the more agitated she became. What troubled her the most was that Pingping Ma's father was a vice-commander of the Thirty-ninth Army in Liaoning Province. With such a powerful family background, even a pig could appear attractive in some men's eyes. Was Lin such a snob too?

That thought made Manna more wretched as she remembered the deaths of her parents. Had they been alive, they could have been ranking officials as well. Her aunt had told her that when her father was killed in the traffic accident, he had been an eminent journalist for a large newspaper. For a thirty-one-year-old man, that was remarkable. Her mother had been a college graduate, specializing in French; with that kind of education she could surely have made a lot of progress in her career.

Then another troublesome thought came to Manna's mind. Pingping Ma was well read in classics and worked as the only librarian in the hospital. It was said that she often told legendary tales to her roommates, who would treat her to haw jelly and sodas to keep stories rolling out from her tongue. This might have been what made her attractive to Lin. To some extent they matched each other; both were bookworms. No doubt they would continue to spend time together chatting about books.

What should Manna do? Let that girl take him away? No, she had to do something.

in had been considerate to Manna, especially after he came to know she had grown up in an orphanage in Tingtiao City. During her first two annual leaves, she had stayed at the hospital, having no place to go. She had neither siblings nor relatives, except for a distant aunt whom she had never felt close to. Lin often advised her to rejoin the volleyball team or take part in the hospital's propaganda and performing arts club, but she said she was too old for them. Instead, she would declare to him half jokingly that she wanted to go into a nunnery. If only she had known of a convent that was still open and would recruit nuns. In reality the Red Guards were smashing temples and abbeys throughout the country, and monks and nuns had been either sent back home or banished far away, so that they could make an honest living like the masses.

Recently Lin was aware of Manna's glances and tried to avoid them. He was unsure whether he was really attracted to her. Since the previous summer when Mai Dong broke the engagement, she had changed a lot. Her face was no longer that youthful. Thin rings appeared around her eyes when she smiled, and her complexion had grown pasty and less firm. He felt bad for her, realizing that a young woman could lose her looks so easily and that however little the loss was, it was always irretrievable. He wanted to be kind to her, but sometimes her smiles and her expressive eyes, which seemed eager to draw him to her, disturbed him.

By the summer of 1967 he had been married for almost four years, and his daughter was ten months old. Whenever he saw a couple walk hand in hand on the street, he couldn't refrain from looking at them furtively and wishing he were able to do the same.

As a married man, why did he have to live like a widower? Why couldn't he enjoy the warmth of a family? If only he hadn't agreed to let his parents choose a bride for him. If only his wife were pretty and her feet had not been bound. Or if only she and he had been a generation older, so that people in the city wouldn't laugh at her small feet.

But he was by no means miserable, and his envy for men with presentable wives was always momentary. He held no grudge against Shuyu, who had attended his mother diligently until the old woman died; now she was caring for his bedridden father and their baby. On the whole Lin was content to work in the hospital. He earned enough, more than most of the doctors did because he held a medical school diploma. His life had been simple and peaceful, until one day Manna changed it.

On his desk in the office she left an envelope. It contained an opera ticket and a note in her round handwriting, which said: "This is for *The Navy Battle of 1894* at 8:00 p.m. I hope you will go and enjoy it." He had seen the movie and knew the entire story, so he wondered whether he should return the ticket to her. On second thought he decided to go, because he had nothing else to do that evening and the opera was performed by a well-known troupe from Changchun City. Besides, the seat was good, close to the front.

The hospital's theater was at the southeastern corner of the compound. When Lin arrived, he was surprised to find Manna sitting in the fifth row too, right next to his seat. He hesitated for a second, then went up to her. The moment he sat down, people began throwing glances in his direction. Some of the audience were waving fans and a few were cracking sunflower seeds. Children were chasing one another in the front and through the aisles, holding slingshots, wooden pistols and swords, all of them wearing army caps and Chairman Mao buttons on their chests and a few with canvas belts around their waists. Through the loudspeaker a man

was urging people to stub out cigarettes, explaining that smoke would blur the captions projected on the white wall on the right of the stage. A few nurses from the Department of Infectious Diseases were searching about for their patients, who were not allowed to mix with others at such a public place.

Lin was worried, wondering why Manna was so indiscreet, but she didn't seem to care about others' eyes and even stretched out her hand to him, half a dozen candies in her palm. He was nervous but picked one, peeled off the wrapper, and put it into his mouth. It was an orange drop. She smiled, and he felt she looked rather sweet. City girls, they're so bold, he said to himself.

A female announcer came out from behind the curtain and in a melodious voice gave a brief introduction to the historical background of the story. Then the curtain went up. Two actors in golden official robes and black caps with long trembling ears stepped onto the stage, sidling around in their white-soled platform shoes. They were singing to each other about the Japanese inroads on the Korean Peninsula.

One of them sang in a high falsetto:

*News just came from the border:
Five thousand dwarf bandits
Emerged from the ocean.
After waiting two days on the sea,
They landed last week,
Now heading toward Pyongyang...*

The other man chanted "Oh—ah—" from time to time while listening to the report.

Lin couldn't make out all the words and had to turn to read the captions on the wall now and again. Yet like others, soon he was immersed in the opera, in which a top Manchu official was inspect-

ing the North Fleet, twirling a long telescope in his hands. After the inspection, a group of gunners, barebacked and wearing pigails, were preparing for the battle with the Japanese navy. Large brass shells were standing on the fore deck of a battleship, around the main cannon. In the background was a seascape on pea-green cloth, white breakers leaping up and falling away.

But before the opera reached the point where the warships engaged the enemy on the Yellow Sea, a hand landed on Lin's left wrist. He wiggled a little but didn't withdraw his hand. He glanced left and right and found everyone enthralled by the send-off party on the stage, drums thundering, horns blaring, gongs clanking, and firecrackers exploding. He looked sideways at Manna, whose eyes narrowed, squinting at him.

Gently her fingertips stroked his palm, as though tracing his heart and head lines. He touched her hand and felt it was warm and smooth, without any callus. How different her palm was from Shuyu's. She pinched the ball of his thumb a little, and in return he held her pinkie, twisting it back and forth for a while. Then she caressed his wrist with her nail. The itch was so tickling that he grabbed her hand and their fingers were entwined. The two hands remained motionless for a moment, then turned over, engaged in a kind of mutual massage for a long time. Lin's heart was thumping.

He didn't pay much attention to the naval battle, which brought the audience to applause and shrieks, although the entire Chinese fleet was sunk to the bottom of the sea. Lin's and Manna's hands remained together throughout the last act. When the curtain fell, all the lights came on and people continued shouting "Down with Japanese Imperialism!" Lin gazed into Manna's eyes, which were gleaming intensely, her pupils radiant like a bird's. Her moist lips curled with a dreamy smile as though she were drunk. Slightly dizzy himself, he stood up and hurried away for fear that others might see his face, which was burning hot.

That night he tossed and turned in his new mosquito net, taking stock of what Manna had done. Despite not liking what had happened, he believed she was a decent young woman, not a coquette at all, unlike the few shameless ones who would open their pants for their male superiors if the leaders promised them a promotion or a Party membership. Is this the beginning of an affair? he asked himself, and was uncertain of the answer. How come she takes so much interest in me? She knew I was a married man of course, why did she do that in the theater? She was so bold. Is she going to be after me from now on? What should I do?

Questions rose one after another, but he could focus on none of them. His roommate Ming Chen was annoyed by his restless movements and said, "Lin, stop making noise. I can't sleep. I have a train to catch tomorrow morning."

"Sorry," Lin turned on his side and remained still.

Outside, a sentry cried out at someone, "Who's there? Pass-word?"

"Double Flags," a male voice barked back.

Somewhere in the roof two crickets were exchanging timid chirps. Moonlight slanted in through the window, casting a pale lozenge on the cement floor. Lin closed his eyes tight, counting numbers in order to fall asleep.

He remained awake until midnight. Then in a half-sleeping state he saw himself and a woman, whose face he didn't see clearly, but whose figure resembled Manna's, working together in an office, both in doctors' white robes and caps. They were planning to operate on a patient with heart disease, and a moment later he was chalking words and numerals on a blackboard and briefing a team of doctors and nurses about the plan for the operation. Then, falling deeper into his dream, he saw a spacious home, which had a study full of hardcover books on oak shelves and several framed pictures on the walls. At the back of the house there was a glassed-in

veranda facing an oval green lawn. It was a Saturday evening and several friends and colleagues had come over to talk about operas and movies, while the woman was pouring tea and soda for them and passing around spiced pumpkin seeds, tiger-skinned peas, roasted peanuts, and cigarettes. He still didn't see her face, though obviously she and he were the mistress and master of the house. A few of the guests stayed late, playing cards. In the study there were even two children, whom Lin taught patiently. It seemed that he intended to send them to colleges in Beijing or Shanghai.

The next morning when he woke up, his head ached as if from a hangover, and his tongue and teeth felt fuzzy. He was somewhat bewildered by the scenes in the dream. He had never been interested in having children. Why had he dreamed of having another two and taking their education in hand? Also, cards had been banned and were nowhere to be found nowadays. How could they play them? More bizarre was that he had never desired to be a surgeon. Why were he and the woman planning to operate on a patient in his dream? Many years ago his secret ambition had been to become a three-star general. When he was leaving high school for the army, his language teacher, an old bookish man, had written in the notebook he presented to Lin: "May you some day return as a commander of ten thousand troops!" By bad luck he had later gotten into the medical profession, which most ambitious young men avoided because it did not lead to a top rank.

When he ran into Manna in the department at midday, he felt a little embarrassed, but he managed to greet her as usual. They talked about the condition of a patient dying of gastroesophageal cancer, as though nothing had happened between them the previous evening. He was amazed that he could talk with a woman so naturally, without his usual diffidence. Outside the window, the sunlight was flickering on the cypress hedge, and four white rabbits were nibbling grass behind an enormous propaganda board. A blue

jay landed near a baby rabbit, its head bobbing while its wings flut-tered.

"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.

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 Shaogqi, 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