



Shanghai Baby

WEI HUI

*A story of
love, sex and
self-discovery*

THE INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLER



Wei Hui is the daughter of an army officer and spent three years of her childhood living in an army-occupied temple from which monks had been expelled during the chaos of the Cultural Revolution. She studied literature at the prestigious Fudan University in Shanghai.

First championed by the state media as a rising star of her generation, Wei Hui is now dubbed 'decadent, debauched and a slave of foreign culture.' *Shanghai Baby* was banned by the authorities in April 2000 and 40,000 copies were publicly burned, serving only to fan the flames of the author's cult status. Wei Hui calls the novel a semi-autobiographical account of her spiritual and sexual awakening. 'I grew up in a very strict family. My first year of college was spent in military training. What happened after that was natural. I rebelled. I went wild. That's what I wrote about.'

Wei Hui (*pronounced Way-Way*) is twenty-seven, has written four previous books and lives in Shanghai.

'*Shanghai Baby* possesses . . . beauty and rhythm, but it's younger and more decadent . . . a new literary personality has entered the scene, and a new kind of urban novel has been born in China. *Shanghai Baby* is beautifully written, and the young author clearly combines the qualities of natural feeling for writing with intelligence.'

Jianying Zha, author of *China Pop*

'China's most popular writer . . . one of the first in China to portray Wei Hui's generation of urban women, born in the 1970s, as they search for moral grounding in a country of shifting values . . . Wei Hui sees herself as a feminist helping her generation of women understand themselves.'

Craig S. Smith, *New York Times*

'A steamy Chinese novel in the Western style about life in contemporary China . . . condemned for exploring subjects that are completely taboo in modern Chinese literature.'

Dalva Alberge, *The Times*

'Steamy, contemporary and Western in style. It tackles the battle between love and passion in a semi-autobiographical work that looks terrific.'

Sarah Broadhurst, *The Bookseller*

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WEI HUI

*Translated from the Chinese
by Bruce Humes*

ROBINSON
London

Encounter with My Lover

'Well, there's a wide wide world of noble causes
 And lovely landscapes to discover
 But all I really want to do right now
 Is find another lover!'

Joni Mitchell

My name is Nikki but my friends all call me Coco after Coco Chanel, a French lady who lived to be ninety. She's my idol, after Henry Miller. Every morning when I open my eyes I wonder what I can do to make myself famous. It's become my ambition, almost my *raison d'être*, to bust upon the city like a firework.

This has a lot to do with living in a place like Shanghai. A grey fog hangs over the city, mixed with continual rumours and an air of superiority, a hangover from the time of the *shih yangchang*, the foreign concessions. This air of superiority affects me: I both love it and hate it.

Anyway, I'm just twenty-five, and a year ago I published a collection of short stories which didn't make any money but got me attention (male readers sent me letters enclosing erotic photos). Three months ago I left my job as a magazine journalist and now I'm a bare-legged, mini-skirted waitress at a joint called the Green Stalk Café.

There was a tall, handsome boy, a regular at the Green Stalk,

who would stay for hours drinking coffee and reading his book. I liked to watch his changes of expression, his every move. He seemed to know I was watching him, but he never said a word.

Until, that is, the day he gave me a note which said, 'I love you, along with his name and address.

Born in the Year of the Rabbit, and a year younger than me, this boy enchanted me. It's hard to put a finger on what made him so good-looking in my eyes, but it had something to do with his air of world-weariness and his thirst for love.

On the surface we're two utterly different types. I'm full of energy and ambition, and see the world as a scented fruit just waiting to be eaten. He is introspective, romantic and for him life is a cake laced with arsenic, every bite poisons him a little more. But our differences only increased our mutual attraction, like the inseparable north and south magnetic poles. We rapidly fell in love.

Not long after we met he told me a family secret. His mother was living in a small town in Spain, with a local man, running a Chinese restaurant. It seems you can make a lot of money in Spain by selling lobster and wonton.

His father had died young, suddenly, out there, less than a month after going to Spain to visit his mother. The death certificate said 'myocardial infarction', and his ashes were flown home in a McDonnell Douglas jet. Tian Tian still remembered that sunny day, and how his tiny grandmother, his father's mother, cried, tears streaming down her wrinkled face like water dripping off a wet rag.

'Grandmother was convinced it was murder. My dad didn't have any history of heart disease; she said my mother killed him. That she had another man over there, and they plotted it together.'

Staring at me with a strange look in his eyes, Tian Tian said, 'Can you believe it? I still can't work it out. Maybe Grandmother was right. But whatever, Mother sends me a lot of money every year to live on.'

He watched me in silence. His strange story grabbed me immediately, because I'm drawn to tragedy and intrigue. When I was studying Chinese at Fudan University in Shanghai, I'd wanted to become a writer of really exciting thrillers: 'evil omen', 'conspiracy', 'dagger', 'lust', 'poison', 'madness' and 'moonlight' were all words that sprang readily to mind. Looking tenderly into his fragile, beautiful face, I understood the root of Tian Tian's sadness.

'Death's shadow only fades little by little as time passes. There will never be more than a thin glass barrier between your present and the wreckage of your past,' I told him.

His eyes grew wet, and he clenched his hands tightly. 'But I've found you, and decided to put my faith in you,' he said. 'Don't stay with me just out of curiosity, but don't leave me straight away.'

I moved into Tian Tian's place, a big three-bedroomed apartment on the western outskirts of the city. He had decorated the living-room simply and comfortably, with a sectional fabric sofa from Ikea along one wall, and a Strauss piano. Above the piano hung his self-portrait, in which his head looked as if he'd just surfaced from a pool.

To be honest, I didn't much like the area. Almost all the roads were full of potholes, lined on both sides with cramped, shabby houses, peeling billboards and reeking piles of rubbish. There was a public phone box which leaked like the *Titanic* whenever it rained. Looking out of the window, I couldn't see a single green tree, smartly dressed person or a clear patch of sky. It was like not being able to see the future.

Tian Tian always said that the future is a trap set right in the middle of your brain.

For a while after his father died, Tian Tian lost the power of speech. Then he dropped out of high school in his first year. His lonely childhood had already turned him into a nihilist. His aversion to the outside world meant he spent half his life in bed: reading, watching videos, smoking, musing on the pros and cons of life versus death, the spirit versus flesh, calling premium phone lines, playing computer games and sleeping. The rest of the time he painted, walked with me, ate, shopped, browsed in book and record shops, sat in cafés or went to the bank. When he needed money, he would go to the post office and send letters in beautiful blue envelopes to his mother.

He seldom visited his grandmother. He had moved out of her house when it became a nightmare. She had sunk into a permanent state of delirium, fixated on that 'murder' in Spain. Her heart was broken, her face ravaged and her spirit gone, but she wouldn't die. She still lives in a western-style house in the city now, fuming with anger, cursing her destiny and her daughter-in-law.

Saturday. Clear weather. Pleasant indoor temperature. At exactly 8:30 a.m., I wake up and beside me Tian Tian opens his eyes. We look at each other for a second, and then begin to kiss silently. Our early morning kisses are tender, affectionate, smooth as little fishes wriggling in water. This is the compulsory start to our day – and the sole channel of sexual expression between us.

Tian Tian just couldn't handle sex. I'm not sure if it was related to the tragedy that had caused his mental problems, but I remember the first time I held him in bed. When I discovered he was impotent, I was devastated, so much so that I didn't know if I could stay with him. Ever since college I had

seen sex as a basic necessity (although I've since changed my mind about this).

Unable to enter me, he stared at me, speechless, his whole body in a cold sweat. It was his first time with a girl in his twenty-something years.

In the male world being able to perform sex normally is as important as life itself, any shortcoming is an unbearable pain. He cried, and so did I. For the rest of the night we kissed, touched and murmured to one another. I soon came to adore his sweet kiss and gentle touch. Kissing with the tip of the tongue is like ice-cream melting. It was he who taught me that a kiss has a soul and colours all of its own.

Kind, loving and trusting as a dolphin, it was his temperament that captured my wild heart. What he couldn't give me – sharp cries or explosive pleasure, sexual pride or orgasm – lost significance.

In *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, Milan Kundera gives a classic definition of love:

'Making love with a woman and sleeping with a woman are two separate passions, not merely different but opposite. Love does not make itself felt in the desire for copulation (a desire that extends to an infinite number of women) but in the desire for shared sleep (a desire limited to one woman).'

At the beginning of my time with Tian Tian, I had no idea that I would experience this myself, until a series of events and the appearance of another man gave me the chance to understand it.

At nine o'clock we got up, and he got into the huge bath while I smoked my first Mild Seven cigarette. In the tiny kitchen I made corn congee, eggs and milk. With the golden sunlight outside the window, summer mornings always seemed poetic, like melted honey. I felt totally relaxed, listening to the sound of water gushing in the bathroom.

'Will you come to the Green Stalk Café with me?' I asked, taking a big glass of milk into the steam-swirled bathroom. Tian Tian's eyes were closed, and he gave a long yawn, like a fish.

'Coco, I've got an idea,' he said in a low voice.

'What idea?' I brought the milk right to him, but he didn't take it in his hand, just leaned forward and sipped a little.

'Why don't you give up your job at the café?'

'Then what would I do?'

'We've enough money not to have to work all the time. You could write your novel.'

It turned out he had been brewing this idea for some time, that he wanted me to write a novel that would take the literary world by storm. 'There's nothing worth reading in the bookshops these days, just empty stories,' he said.

'Okay,' I said, 'but not right now. I want to work a bit longer. You sometimes meet interesting people in a café.'

'Whatever,' he mumbled. This was his pet phrase, meaning he had heard and taken in the comment and had no more to say.

We ate breakfast together, then I dressed and put on my make-up and wandered round the room until I finally found my favourite leopard-spotted handbag. String on the sofa, book in hand, he glanced up as I left. 'I'll call you,' he said.

This is the city at rush-hour. All sorts of vehicles and pedestrians, all their invisible desires and countless secrets, merge with the flow like rapids plunging through a deep gorge. The sun shines down on the street hemmed in on both sides by skyscrapers – the mad creations of humans – towering between sky and earth. The petty details of daily life are like dust suspended in the air. They are the monotonous theme of our materialist age.

Modern Metropolis

I had seen the skyscrapers fading out in a flurry of snowflakes. I saw them looming up again in that same ghostly way as when I left. I saw the lights creeping through their ribs. I saw the whole city spread out from Harlem to Battery, the streets choked with ants, the elevated rushing by, the theatres emptying. I wondered in a vague way what had ever happened to my wife.

Henry Miller

It was three-thirty in the afternoon and the Green Stalk Café was empty. A sunbeam filtered in through the leaves of the parasol tree, and particles of dust floated in it. An odd pall hung over the magazines and the jazz music from the stereo, as if they were survivals from the 1930s.

I stood behind the bar with nothing to do. It's always boring when there's no business.

Old Yang, the head waiter, was taking a nap in the back room. He was a trusted relative of the boss and camped out there day and night, managing the money and us.

My co-worker, Spider, took advantage of the break to sneak off to the computer company on the corner in search of cheap parts. He was a problem teenager with only one thing on his mind. He wanted to be a super-hacker. You could call him a half-graduate, because despite having an IQ of 150, he hadn't

completed his degree in computing at Fudan U. He was chucked out because he kept hacking into *Shanghai Online* to rip off account numbers and surf the web at their expense.

There we were, a former promising journalist and a computer hit man with a reputation, both working in a café. You can't deny that's one of life's little ironies. Wrong place, wrong roles, but united in our commitment to life's young dream. Our bodies were already tarnished, and our minds beyond help.

I began to arrange the scented white lilies in a large jar of water. So delicate, that feeling when my fingers touched those seductive white petals. My love of flowers is conventionally feminine, but I believe the day will come when I look in the mirror and compare my face to a poisonous plant. And my shocking bestselling novel will reveal the truth about mankind: violence, style, lust, joy, and then enigma, machines, power and death.

The old rotary-dial telephone rang piercingly. It was Tian Tian. Almost every day he would call about now, just as we were both getting tired of our respective surroundings. 'Same time, same place, I'll be waiting to have dinner with you,' he said urgently, as if it were important.

At dusk I took off my uniform mini-skirt and short Chinese silk jacket, and changed into a tight-fitting shirt and trousers. Clutching my handbag, I walked light-footed out of the café. The colourful street lanterns had just come on, and the fluorescent lights of the shops shimmered like shards of gold. I walked along the street, blending with the thousands of people and vehicles shutting back and forth, like the Milky Way blazing right here on earth. The most exciting moment of the city's day had arrived.

The Cotton Club is at the corner of Huaihai and Fuxing Roads, the equivalent of New York's Fifth Avenue or the Champs Elysées

in Paris. From a distance, the two-storey French building has an air of distinction. Those who come here are either *laowai* – foreigners – with a lewd look in their eyes, or slim, foxy Asian belles. Its shimmering blue sign looks just the way Henry Miller described a syphilitic sore. It's because we enjoyed this metaphor that Tian Tian and I used to go there (as well as writing *Tropic of Cancer*, Henry Miller lived to 89 and married five times, and I've always seen him as my spiritual father).

I pushed open the door, looked around, and saw Tian Tian waving to me from a corner. But what surprised me was that next to him sat a fashionable girl wearing what was obviously a wig, but a striking one, and a halter-top in shiny black. Her tiny face was dusted with gold and silver powder, as if she'd just landed from some planet incredibly far away.

'This is Madonna, we were at elementary school together,' said Tian Tian. Perhaps thinking that inadequate, he added: 'She's also been my only friend in Shanghai lately.' Then he introduced me to her. 'This is Nilki, my girlfriend,' he said, and quite unselfconsciously took my hand and held it on his lap.

We nodded and smiled, since the fact we were both friends of Tian Tian, as wholesome as a tiny butterfly, instantly disposed us to like and trust each other. But her first words startled me.

'Tian Tian has talked about you so often on the phone. He always goes on for hours. He adores you so much it makes me jealous.' She laughed, low and husky, like an actress in one of those old Hollywood movies.

I glanced at Tian Tian, who was trying to look as though he'd done no such thing. 'He likes chatting on the phone. You could buy a thirty-one-inch television with the money he spends on the monthly phone bill,' I added thoughtlessly, and immediately I realised how tacky it was to see everything in terms of money.

'I hear you're a writer,' said Madonna.

'Well, it's been a while since I wrote anything, and actually

... I can't really call myself a writer.' I felt a bit ashamed: just wanting to be a writer isn't enough.

Tian Tian interrupted. 'Oh, Coco's already published a collection of stories. It's neat. She's so observant. She's going to be very successful,' he said calmly, not a hint of flattery on his face.

'I'm working as a waitress just now,' I said matter-of-factly. 'And you? You look like an actress.'

'Didn't Tian Tian tell you?' She looked briefly quizzical, as if she were trying to guess how I'd react. 'I was a *mami*, a madam, in Guangzhou, got married, then my old man snuffed it and left me a bundle of money, so now I enjoy myself.'

I nodded, outwardly calm while an exclamation mark popped up in my mind. Right in front of me was a bona fide rich widow! And now I knew where those courtesan airs came from, and those alarmingly sharp eyes, which automatically made me think of an errant heroine.

We stopped talking for a moment as the food Tian Tian had ordered arrived, one after the other – all my Shanghai favourites. 'If you'd rather have something else, just order it,' he told Madonna.

She nodded. 'Actually, I have a very small stomach,' she said, cupping her hands to make a fist-sized shape. 'The evening is the start of my day, so most people's dinner is my breakfast. I don't eat a lot. My screwed-up life has turned my body into a garbage dump.'

'I like your garbage,' said Tian Tian.

I watched her while I ate. She had the sort of face that only a woman whose life has been full of stories could have.

'Come over to my place when you have time. You'll find singing, dancing, card games, drinking and all sorts of weird people. I've just redecorated my apartment. I spent half a million Hong Kong dollars on the lighting and sound system

alone. More fucking awesome than some Shanghai night-clubs,' she said, without a trace of smugness.

Her mobile phone rang. She took it out of her bag and switched to a grainy, sexy voice. 'Where? I'll bet you're at old Wu's place. One day you'll die at a mahjong table. I'm eating with friends right now. Let's talk again at midnight,' teased Madonna, eyes sparkling.

'That was my new beau' – putting down the phone – 'He's a crazy painter. I'll introduce you next time we meet. Boys today really know how to sweet-talk a girl. He just swore he'd die in my bed.' She started laughing again. 'True or not, it's enough to keep me happy.'

Tian Tian was reading the *Xinmin Evening News*, and ignored her. This paper, which he reads to remind himself that he still lives here, is the only thing that links him to the everyday side of Shanghai. And I was beginning to feel a bit inhibited in the face of the straight-talking Madonna.

'You're really cute,' Madonna said, looking straight at me. 'You're not just pretty in a delicate way, you've got an aloofness, too, that turns men on. Too bad I've washed my hands of the business, or I could make you the hottest property around.'

Before I could react, she was laughing so hard she could hardly catch her breath. 'Sorry, sorry, just kidding.' I could see her eyes darting back and forth all the time, avid with neurotic enthusiasm. She had the air of all practised flirts, past and present, Chinese and foreign, who can mix well with any company but only really get excited when new faces appear.

'Watch what you say, I'm getting jealous,' said Tian Tian, looking up amorously from his paper and slipping his arm round my waist. We always sat that way, like Siamese twins, even if it was a bit inappropriate for some places.

Smiling faintly, I looked at Madonna. 'You're very beautiful

too. In a *linglei* – unconventional – sort of way; not fake *linglei*, but the real thing.’

When we parted at the door of the Cotton Club, she hugged me. ‘My dear, I’ve stories I’d love to tell you – if you really want to write that bestseller of yours, that is.’

Madonna hugged Tian Tian close too. ‘My little good-for-nothing,’ she said. ‘Take good care of your love. Love’s the most powerful thing on earth. It can make you fly and forget everything else. A child like you would be ruined in no time without love – you’ve no immunity against life. I’ll call you.’

She blew us a kiss, slipped into a white VW Santana 2000 at the kerb, and sped off.

I thought about what she’d said. Buried in her words were fragments of philosophy, sparkling brighter than the lights, truer than truth. And the scent of her kiss lingered in the air.

‘She’s a crazy woman,’ said Tian Tian happily. ‘But she’s really something, isn’t she? She used to stop me doing anything stupid when I’d been alone in my room too long, by taking me for a midnight spin on one of those raised highways. We’d drink a lot, smoke dope, and wander around on a high until sunrise.’

‘Then I met you. It was all pre-destined,’ he went on. ‘You’re not really like Madonna and me. We’re different types. You’re ambitious and full of faith in the future. You and your drive are what give me a reason to live. Do you believe me? I never lie.’

‘Idiot,’ I said, pinching his bottom.

‘You’re a crazy woman too!’ He yelped in pain.

For Tian Tian, anyone who falls outside the bounds of normality, especially anyone in a mental hospital, is to be admired. In his opinion, crazy people are only considered mad by the rest of society because their intelligence isn’t understood. He thinks that beauty is only reliable when it’s linked to death or hopelessness, even evil. Like the epileptic Dostoevsky, ear-slicing Van Gogh, impotent Dali, homosexual Allen Ginsberg or the

movie starlet Frances Farmer, who was thrown into an asylum and lobotomised in the McCarthy witch hunts. Or the Irish singer Gavin Friday, who wore thick layers of brightly coloured make-up all his life. Or Henry Miller, who, at his poorest, would pace up and down in front of a restaurant to scrounge a scrap of steak, and wander the streets begging for a dime to take the subway. To him, these people are like wild flowers, bursting with vigour and living and dying alone.

The night colours were soft.

Pressing close together, Tian Tian and I strolled along Huaihai Road. The lights, tree shadows and gothic roof of the Paris Printemps department store, and the people in autumn garb meandering among them, all drifted peacefully among the night colours. An atmosphere unique to Shanghai, light-hearted but refined, hung over the city.

I am forever absorbing that atmosphere, as if it were a magic potion of jade or rubies that would rid me of the contempt the young have for convention and help me get deep into the guts of the city, like an insect boring into an apple.

Thoughts like that cheer me up. I grabbed Tian Tian, my lover, and whirled him into a dance on the pavement.

‘You’re a capricious romantic, like an attack of appendicitis,’ he said softly.

‘This is called “Lazy Steps To Paris”, my favourite foxtrot,’ I said earnestly.

As usual, we strolled slowly over to the Bund. At night, it becomes a place of heavenly quiet. We went up to the top floor of the Peace Hotel, where we’d discovered a secret passageway to the roof – through a narrow window in the women’s toilet and up the fire escape. We climbed up there often and were never caught.

Standing on the roof, we looked at the silhouettes of the buildings lit up by the street lights on both sides of the Huangpu

River, especially the Oriental Pearl TV Tower, Asia's tallest. Its long, long steel column pierces the sky, proof of the city's phallus worship. The ferries, the waves, the night-dark grass, the dazzling neon lights and incredible structures – all these signs of material prosperity are aphrodisiacs the city uses to intoxicate itself. They have nothing to do with us, the people who live among them. A car accident or a disease can kill us, but the city's prosperous, invincible silhouette is like a planet, in perpetual motion, eternal.

When I thought about that, I felt as insignificant as an ant on the ground.

But the thought didn't affect our mood as we stood on top of that historic building. As the sound of the hotel's septuagenarian jazz band came and went, we surveyed the city, yet distanced ourselves from it with love talk. I liked to undress right down to my bra and pants in the moist breeze from the Huangpu. Maybe I have a complex about underwear, or I'm a narcissist or an exhibitionist or something, but I hoped this would somehow stimulate Tian Tian's desire.

'Don't do that,' said Tian Tian painfully, turning his head away.

But I kept on undressing, like a stripper. A tiny blue flower began to burn my skin, and that odd sensation made me blind to my beauty, my self, my identity. Everything I did was designed to create a strange new fairy tale, a fairy tale meant just for me and the boy I adored.

The boy sat entranced against the railing, sad but grateful, watching the girl dance in the moonlight. Her body was smooth as a swan's, yet powerful as a leopard's. Every feline crouch, leap and turn was elegant yet madly seductive.

'Please try. Come into my body like a real lover, my darling, try.'

'No, I can't,' he said, curling himself into a ball.

'Well then, I'll jump off the roof,' laughed the girl, grabbing the rail as if to climb over it. He caught her and kissed her. But broken desire couldn't find a way. Love was a miracle the flesh couldn't copy, and the ghosts defeated us . . . Dust covered us, closing my throat and my love's.

Three a.m. Curled up on the big comfortable bed, I watched Tian Tian. He was already asleep, or pretending to be, and the room was strangely silent. His self-portrait hung above the piano. Who could help loving a flawless face like his?

Lying beside my love, again and again I used my slim fingers to masturbate, making myself fly, fly into the mire of orgasm. And in my mind's eye, I saw both crime and punishment.

I Have a Dream

'And the good girls go to Heaven,
but the bad girls go everywhere.'

Jim Steinman

A woman who chooses the
writing profession
often does so as to give herself a rank
within male-dominated society.'

Erica Jong

What sort of person am I? To my mother and father, I'm an evil little thing devoid of conscience (by five I'd learned how to stomp out, haughtily clutching my lollipop). To my teachers or ex-boss and colleagues at the magazine, I'm smart but hard-headed, a skilled professional with an unpredictable temperament who can guess how any film or a story will end from the way it begins. To most men, I qualify as a little beauty, as pleasing as spring light on a lake's rippling surface, with a pair of oversize eyes right out of a Japanese cartoon and a long Coco Chanel neck. But in my own eyes, I'm just an ordinary girl, even if I become famous one of these days.

When my paternal great-grandmother was alive, she often said: 'A person's fate is like a kite string. One end is here on the earth, and the other is in the heavens. There's nowhere to hide

from fare.' Or: 'Which part of life is the part worth living for.'

This old lady with snow-white hair and a tiny frame would sit all day, like a ball of white wool, in her rocking chair. Many people believed she had second sight. She successfully predicted the 1987 Shanghai earthquake which registered 3.0 on the Richter Scale, and told her relatives of her impending death three days before it happened. Her photograph still hangs on the wall of my parents' house and they believe that she continues to protect them. In fact, it was my grandmother who predicted that I would be a writer. With a literary star shining down on me and a belly full of ink, she said I would make my mark one day.

At university I often used to write letters to boys I was secretly in love with, rich in expression and affection, almost guaranteeing conquest. At the magazine, the interviews and stories I wrote were like something out of a novel, with their twisted plots and rarefied language, so that the real seemed false, and vice versa.

When I finally realised that everything I had done until then was just a waste of my talent, I gave up my highly-paid job at the magazine. My parents despaired of me once again, since my father had had to pull a lot of strings to get me the job in the first place.

'Child, are you really my daughter? Why does your head grow horns, and your feet grow thorns?' said Mother. 'Tell me, why all these wasted efforts? Mother is a pretty, frail woman who has spent her life ironing shirts for her husband and seeking the right road for her daughter's happiness. She can't accept the idea of sex before marriage, and absolutely cannot bear the shape of a girl's nipples when she wears a tight T-shirt and no bra.

'The day will come when you realise that a steady, down-to-earth life is the most important thing. Even Eileen Chang says

that human life needs a stable foundation,' said Daddy. He knows I admire this famous author. Daddy is a slightly chubby history professor who likes cigars and heart-to-heart talks with young people. A well-mannered man, he spoiled me from the start. When I was three he trained me to appreciate operas such as *La Bohème*. He always worried that when I grew up I'd lose my body and soul to a sex maniac. I'm his most precious baby, he says, and I should treat men cautiously and never shed tears over them.

'The way we think is just too different. We're separated by a hundred generation gaps. We'd best respect one another rather than arguing our cases,' I said. 'Anyway, it's a waste of time. I'm twenty-five, and I want to be a writer. Even though the profession's totally passé, I'm going to make writing up to date again.'

When I met Tian Tian and decided to move out, there was an uproar in my family fit to upset the Pacific Ocean.

'I don't know what to do about you. We'll just have to wait and see how you'll turn out. I might as well pretend I didn't raise you,' said Mother, almost shouting. She looked as if she had been struck hard on the face.

'You've hurt your mother's feelings,' said Daddy. 'And I'm disappointed too. A girl like you is bound to be taken advantage of. You say that boy's family is odd. His father died in strange circumstances. Is he normal himself? Is he reliable?'

'Believe me, I know what I'm doing,' I said. I grabbed my toothbrush, some clothes and discs and a box of books, and left.

Amber sunlight poured over the floor in front of the sound system, like spilled Scotch. After a group of immaculately dressed Americans left, the café was peaceful again. Old Yang was in his office-cum-bedroom talking up a storm on the

phone. Spider lazed against the window, snacking on a choco-late waffle left over by a customer (he was forever doing this to prove his animal-like survival instincts). Outside the window sycamore trees lined the street. The city's summer colours shone fresh and green, like the mood in a European film.

'Coco, what do you do when you're bored?' asked Spider vacantly.

'Being bored is when you haven't got anything to do, so what would you be doing?' I said. 'Like right now.'

'Last night I was bored, so I went online to chat. Chating with ten people at a time is neat.' I noticed those two oblong black eyes of his, floating on his face as though imprinted there with a spoon. 'I met someone called Enchantress, and it doesn't seem like one of those guys pretending to be a girl. She said she's very pretty, and still a virgin.'

'Nowadays, virgins are after something too, didn't you know?' I teased. 'And any girl who could say that sounds shameless.'

'I think what Enchantress says is cool,' he said, without smiling. 'Our ideals are amazingly similar. We both dream of earning a pile of money in one savage swoop, and then travelling the world.'

'Sounds like that pair in *Natural Born Killers*,' I said curiously. 'So how will you make your money?'

'Open a store, rob a bank, be a whore or a gigolo. Whatever,' he said half serious. 'I've got a plan right now.' He leaned his head down and spoke a few sentences softly into my ear, which knocked me off my feet.

'No, you can't do that, you're out of your mind!' I said, shaking my head furiously.

The creep wanted me to go along with him to steal money from the café. He had noticed that Old Yang stuffed the takings into a small safe every night, and went to the bank once a month to deposit the money. Spider had a friend who

specialised in safe-cracking. His plan was to hire this robber, and then, with help from us on the inside, grab the money and take off. Of course, afterwards we would have to say that an unknown thief had sneaked in and robbed the place.

The date was already set. The following Tuesday was Spider's birthday, and by chance we would both be on the night shift. He planned to use his birthday celebration as an excuse to offer Old Yang a drink. He'd get him plastered, and that would be that.

Spider's words made me nervous. I even felt a mild bout of cramps coming on. 'Stop dreaming! Forget it, think of something else. Wait a minute, this wouldn't be Enchantress's idea, would it?'

'Shhh!' Spider signalled that old Yang had finished his phone call and was approaching. I shut my mouth, terrified I might reveal a hint of Spider's plot.

The café door opened and Tian Tian came in. I felt a wave of warmth in my stomach. Wearing a grey shirt and black corduroy trousers, he had a book in his hands. His hair was a bit long and dishevelled, and his eyes a bit near-sighted and moist. Those lips of his, faintly smiling but cool too – more or less my sweet love's standard look.

'Hubby's come, and she's oh-so happy,' teased old Yang in Shanghainese, with an accent one hears in Suzhou ballads. Actually, old Yang is good and kind, if a bit simple.

Greeted like that, Tian Tian looked ill at ease. I brought him a cappuccino and squeezed his hand lightly. 'There's still forty-five minutes to go,' he said quietly, looking at his watch. 'I'll wait for you to finish.'

'Spider must have gone crazy thinking about money,' I said, disturbed. On the wall opposite the exaggerated movements of my arms made shadow plays. A candle was burning on the small round table where Tian Tian and I were playing five-in-a-row on a Chinese chessboard.

'When somebody bright gets it into their heads to commit a crime it's worse than catching rabies,' I said. 'They'll use computers to rob banks, let off bombs to destroy planes and ships, use invisible knives to kill people, even manufacture plagues and tragedies. If 1999 is the apocalypse, it'll be caused by weirdos like that.'

'You're going to lose, I'm about to get four in a row,' said Tian Tian, pointing to the chessboard to get my attention.

'Intelligence is a gift and madness is an instinct, but if you exploit them for material gain, that's not right.' By now, my passion for debating was beginning to kick in. 'In the end, a genius can get into a worse mess than an idiot. Lately I've felt the Green Stalk Café's too peaceful. You can almost hear yourself blink. It's because there's a murder plot or something. I've got a worrying premonition.'

'Then leave the place and come home and write,' said Tian Tian simply.

When he said 'home' it always sounded so natural. This residence of three bedrooms plus a living-room, filled with the scent of fermenting fruits, cigarette butts, French perfume and alcohol, filled with books and music and limitless space for fantasising, was tightly wrapped around our bodies like a bank of clouds from enchanted forests. You could wave them away, but they stayed put. Actually, our apartment was a block of space that felt more predestined, and more genuine, than a home.

Let's go home. Now must be the time to cut to the heart of things. Start writing; set off on this journey of writing using your dreams and your love. Use flawless prose to complete beautiful novels, one after the other. Use wit and passion to handle the story's opening, suspense, climax and conclusion, like the world's most fantastic singer standing on Everest, singing at the top of her lungs.

A hand grabbed this idea and wrote it in my mind. Tian Tian wanted me to promise him that I'd call old Yang tomorrow and leave my job.

'Okay,' I said. 'Quit a job, leave someone, throw something away. To a girl like me, abandoning something was almost instinctive, as easy as the flip of a hand. Drift from one goal to another, push oneself to the limit, and keep moving.'

'From the moment I first saw you at the Green Stalk, I just felt you were cut out to be a writer,' Tian Tian went on to flatter my vanity more. 'Your eyes are deep and your voice carries real emotion. You never stop watching your customers. And I've even heard you discussing existentialism and voodoo with Spider.'

I hugged him gently. His words were a caress that brought me a joy no other man had ever got near. Often, hearing his voice and looking at his eyes and lips, my sex would suddenly feel like a warm torrent and be soaked through in an instant. 'What else? Go on. I like hearing this,' I begged him, kissing his earlobe.

'Plus . . . you never let people see through you. Maybe born writers all have split personalities. I mean, they're a bit unreliable.'

'What are you worrying about?' I asked, confused, moving my lips away from his ear.

Tian Tian shook his head. 'I love you,' he said. He put his hands lightly around my waist, and rested his head on my shoulder. I could feel his eyelashes quivering against my neck, triggering a burst of velvet tenderness in my heart. One pair of hands reached my tummy, while another pair made contact with his buttocks. We stood face to face, and saw ourselves in the mirror — our reflection in the water.

Later, he had fallen asleep in an S-shape on the bed, and I held him from behind, in a daze. Indeed, all along his stubbornness

and his fragility were a mystery to me. For no good reason, I felt responsible for him – and also a sense of remorse.

In fact, nothing happened at the Green Skalk Café on Spider's birthday: no professional thief appeared, no safe disappeared and there was no plot – not even a fly disturbed things. As usual, old Yang was comfortable and worry-free, counting his money, supervising the staff, working the phone and napping. When she got down to work, the new waitress was no worse than me, and soon afterwards Spider left with his wicked schemes, evaporating without a trace like a bubble.

My attention turned to writing. I had no time to spare for anything else. My priority was to set up a hotline to my soul, and await the stealthy arrival of plot and characters amidst a madhouse-like silence. Tian Tian watched over me like a slave driver, pushing me to use my magical power to write a genuine book of enchantment. This became the core of his life.

He discovered a passion for shopping in supermarkets. Like our parents' generation, we pushed our shopping trolley in Tops Supermarket, conscientiously buying food and daily necessities. Health experts say, 'Don't get hooked on foods like chocolate and popcorn,' but those were just the things we liked.

At home, I spread out my snow-white manuscript-to-be and occasionally looked at my reflection in a small mirror, to check whether my face now had the wisdom and rarefied air of a writer. Tian Tian trod softly in the apartment, poured Suntory soda for me, prepared fruit salad with Mother's Choice salad dressing for me, gave me Dove chocolate bars for inspiration, chose discs which were stimulating but not distracting, and adjusted the level of the air conditioning. On the huge desk stood dozens of cartons of Mild Seven cigarettes stacked neatly like a brick wall, books and a thick ream of manuscript paper. I didn't know how to use a computer and didn't plan to learn.

I had already thought up a long string of book titles. My

ideal literary work would have profound intellectual content and a bestselling, sexy cover.

My instinct told me that I should write about turn-of-the-century Shanghai. This fun-loving city: the bubbles of happiness which rise from it, the new generation it has nurtured, and the vulgar, sentimental and mysterious atmosphere to be found in its back streets and alleys. This is a unique Asian city. Since the 1930s it has preserved a culture where China and the West met intimately and evolved together, and now it has entered its second wave of westernisation. Tian Tian once used the English term 'post-colonial' to describe it. The customers in the Green Skalk Café speaking all sorts of languages reminded me of the days when old-fashioned salons with their florid talk were in vogue; but time and place had altered, and now it was just like international travel.

When I had written what I thought was a good passage, I would read it out to Tian Tian, full of feeling.

'My darling Coco, you've got what it takes. You can use your pen to create a separate reality, more real than the one we live in. Here . . .' He grabbed my hand and put it on the left side of his chest. I could feel the rhythm of his heart. 'I guarantee this will bring you unlimited inspiration,' he said.

He would buy totally unexpected gifts, as if spending money on beautiful but useless knick-knacks were his sole pleasure.

But I'd rather have had him. How could I wait until the day when he would give me his body?

The deeper the love, the sharper the flesh aches.

Late one night, I had an erotic dream. In it, I became entangled, naked, with a man wearing dark glasses. Both sets of four limbs entangled like an octopus, embracing and dancing, the man's golden body hair glistening so provocatively that my body itched all over. When my favourite acid jazz music ended, I woke up.

I felt a twinge of guilt about this dream, but then a question occurred to me: just what was it that was preoccupying Tian Tian? He was more focused on my writing than I was, to the point of being almost fixated; perhaps writing really could function as an aphrodisiac, cultivating the inexplicable, but imperfect love between us? Did it come with a mission, and with divine blessing? Or, just the opposite . . . who knows?

I thought and thought and then turned and hugged Tian Tian. He woke immediately. His face could sense the moisture on mine, and without asking or saying a word, his hand gently caressed my body. No one had taught him how, but he had the gift of making me fly. Don't cry, don't speak of separation. I just want to fly to the other side of the night.

Our lives are short and bitter and romantic dreams leave no trace.

4

The Seducer

'From Berlin I hail, and your love is mine.

When the night nears, hold me, my love, and we shall soar.'

Boris Bracht

Wadonna invited us to a retro theme party called *Return to Avenue Joffe* on the top floor of the high-rise at the corner of Huaihai and Yandang Roads. Avenue Joffe in the 1930s, Huaihai Road today, has long symbolised Shanghai's old dreams. In today's fin-de-siècle, post-colonial mindset, this boulevard – and the bygone era of the revealing traditional dress, the *qipao*, calendar-girl posters, rickshaws and jazz bands – is fashionable again, like a bow knotted over Shanghai's nostalgic heart.

Tian Tian wasn't in a good mood, but he still came with me. As I said, we're often inseparable, shadowing each other like Siamese twins.

In my tailored *qipao* and Tian Tian's traditional *changshan*, we walked into the lift. 'Please wait a minute,' said a voice from somewhere. Tian Tian pressed his hand between the closing doors, and a tall Western man strode in, bringing with him the scent of CK cologne.

A pale, purplish light shone on our heads. With men to my left and right, and the indicator lights flashing the floor numbers in order as we climbed, I lost my sense of gravity for a