

store, her eyes staying on each face a moment too long, moved him. She was twenty-one, a child still.

"I got a fish sandwich for you," Boshen said when Sasha did not answer him.

"I haven't seen one happy face since arriving," Sasha said. "What's the other one?"

"Chicken."

Sasha threw the fish sandwich across the table and grabbed the chicken sandwich from Boshen's tray. "I hate fish," she said.

"It's good for you now," Boshen said.

"Now will be over soon," Sasha said. She looked forward to the moment when she was ready to move on. "Moving on" was a phrase she just learned, an American concept that suited her well. It was such a wonderful phrase that Sasha could almost see herself stapling her Chinese life, one staple after another around the pages until they became one solid block that nobody would be able to open and read. She would have a fresh page then, for her American life. She was four months late already.

Boshen said nothing and unwrapped the fish sandwich. It was a change—sitting at a table and having an ordered meal—after months of eating in the kitchen of the Chinese restaurant where he worked as a helper to the Sichuan chef. Boshen had come to America via a false marriage to a friend five months earlier, when he had been put under house arrest for his correspondence with a Western reporter regarding a potential AIDS epidemic in a central province. He had had to publish a written confession of his wrongdoing to earn his freedom. A lesbian friend, a newly naturalized American citizen herself, had offered to marry him out of China. Before that, he had lived an openly gay life in Beijing, madly in

The Princess of Nebraska

SASHA LOOKED AT BOSHEN IN THE WAITING line for a moment before turning her eyes to the window. She wished that she would never have to see Boshen again after this trip. She had run to the bathroom the moment they entered the McDonald's, leaving him to order for them both. He had suggested a good meal in Chinatown, and she had refused. She wanted to see downtown Chicago before going to the clinic at Planned Parenthood the next morning. It was the only reason for her to ride the Greyhound bus all day from Nebraska. Kansas City would have been a wiser choice, closer, cheaper, but there was nothing to see there—the trip was not meant for sightseeing, but Sasha hoped to get at least something out of it. She did not want to spend all her money only to remember a drugged sleep in a dreary motel in the middle of nowhere. Sasha had grown up in a small town in Inner Mongolia; vast and empty landscapes depressed her.

"You must be tired," Boshen said as he pushed the tray of food to Sasha, who had taken a table by the window. She looked tiny in the oversized sweatshirt. Her face was slightly swollen, and the way she checked out the customers in the

love with Yang, an eighteen-year-old boy. Boshen had tried different ways to contact Yang since he had arrived in America, but the boy never responded. The checks Boshen sent him were not cashed, either.

They ate without speaking. Sasha swallowed her food fast, and waited for Boshen to finish his. Outside the window, more and more people appeared, all moving toward downtown, red reindeer's antlers on the heads of children who sat astride their fathers' shoulders. Boshen saw the question in Sasha's eyes and told her that there was a parade that evening, and all the trees on Michigan Avenue would light up for the coming Thanksgiving and Christmas holidays. "Do you want to stay for it?" he asked halfheartedly, hoping that she would choose instead to rest after the long bus ride.

"Why not?" Sasha said, and put on her coat.

Boshen folded the sandwich wrapper like a freshly ironed napkin. "I wonder if we could talk for a few minutes here," he said.

Sasha sighed. She never liked Boshen, whom she had met only once and who had struck her as the type of man as fussy as an old hen. She had not hesitated, however, to call him and ask for help when she had found out his number through an acquaintance. She had spoken in a dry, matter-of-fact way about her pregnancy, which had gone too long for an abortion in the state of Nebraska. Yang had fathered the baby; she had told Boshen this first in their phone call. She had had no intention of sparing Boshen the truth, in a way, she felt Boshen was responsible for her misfortune, too.

"Have you, uh, made up your mind about the operation?" Boshen asked.

"What do you think I'm here for?" Sasha said. Over the past week Boshen had called her twice, bringing up the possibility of keeping the baby. Both times she had hung up right away. Whatever interest he had in the baby was stupid and selfish, Sasha had decided.

The easiest solution may not be the best one in life, Boshen thought of telling Sasha, but then, what right did he have to talk about options, when the decisions he had made for his life were all compromises? At thirty-eight, Boshen felt he had achieved less than he had failed. He was a mediocre doctor before he was asked politely to leave the hospital for establishing the first counseling hotline for homosexuals in the small Chinese city where he lived. He moved to Beijing and took on a part-time job at a private clinic while working as an activist for gay rights. After a few visits from the secret police, however, he realized that, in the post-Tiananmen era, talk of any kind of human rights was dangerous. He decided to go into a less extreme and more practical area, advocating for AIDS awareness, but even that he had to give up after pressure from the secret police and his family. He was in love with a boy twenty years younger, and he thought he could make a difference in the boy's life. In the end, he was the one to marry a woman and leave. Boshen had thought of adopting the baby—half of her blood came from Yang, after all—but Sasha's eyes, sharp and unrelenting, chilled him. He smiled weakly and said, "I just wanted to make sure."

Sasha wrapped her head in a shawl and stood up. Boshen did not move, and when she asked him if he was leaving, he said, "I've heard from my friends that Yang is prostituting again."

Not a surprise, Sasha thought, but the man at the table,

too old for a role as a heartbroken lover and too serious for it, was pitiful. In a kinder voice she said, "Then we'll have to live with that, no?"

BOSHEN WAS NOT the first man to have fallen in love with Yang, but he believed, for a long time, that he was the only one to have seen and touched the boy's soul. Since the age of seven, Yang had been trained as a *Nam Dan*—a male actor who plays female roles on stage in the Peking Opera—and had lived his life in the opera school. At seventeen, when he was discovered going out with a male lover, he was expelled. Boshen had written several articles about the incident, but he had not met Yang until he had become a *money boy*. Yang could've easily enticed a willing man to keep him for a good price, but rumors were that the boy was interested only in selling after his first lover abandoned him.

The day Boshen heard about Yang's falling into prostitution, he went to the park where men paid for such services. It was near dusk when he arrived, and men of all ages slipped into the park like silent fish. Soon night fell; beneath the lampposts, transactions started in whispers, familiar scenarios for Boshen, but standing in the shade of a tree—a customer instead of researcher—made him tremble. It was not difficult to recognize Yang in the moon-white-colored silk shirt and pants he was reputed to wear every day to the park. Boshen looked at the boy, too beautiful for the grimy underground, a white lotus blossom untouched by the surrounding mud.

After watching the boy for several days, Boshen finally offered to pay Yang's asking price. The night Yang came home with Boshen, he became drunk on his own words. For

a long time he talked about his work, his dream of bringing an end to injustice and building a more tolerant world; Yang huddled on the couch and listened. Boshen thought of shutting up, but the more he talked, the more he despaired at the beautiful and impassive face of Yang—in the boy's eyes he must be the same as all the other men, so full of themselves. Finally Boshen said, "Someday I'll make you go back to the stage."

"An empty promise of a man keeps a woman's heart full," Yang recited in a low voice.

"But this," Boshen said, pointing to the pile of paperwork on his desk. "This is the work that will make it illegal for them to take you away from the stage because of who you are."

Yang's face softened. Boshen watched the unmistakable hope in the boy's eyes. Yang was too young to hide his pain, despite years of wearing female masks and portraying others' tragedies onstage. Boshen wanted to save him from his suffering. After a few weeks of pursuing, Boshen convinced Yang to try a new life. Boshen redecorated the apartment with expensive hand-painted curtains that featured the costumes of the Peking Opera and huge paper lanterns bearing the Peking Opera masks. He sold a few pieces of furniture to make space, and borrowed a rug from a friend for Yang to practice on. Yang fit into the quiet life like the most virtuous woman he had played on stage. He got up early every morning, stretching his body into unbelievable positions, and dancing the most intricate choreography. He trained his voice, too, in the shower so that the neighbors would not hear him. Always Boshen stood outside and listened, Yang's voice splitting the waterfall, the bath curtain, the door, and

the rest of the dull world like a silver knife. At those moments Boshen was overwhelmed by gratitude—he was not the only one to have been touched by the boy's beauty, but he was the one to guard and nurture it. That alone lifted him above his mundane, disappointing life.

When Boshen was at work, Yang practiced painting and calligraphy. Sometimes they went out to parties, but most evenings they stayed home. Yang never performed for Boshen, and he dared not ask him to. Yang was an angel falling out of the heavens, and every day Boshen dreaded that he would not be able to return the boy to where he belonged.

Such a feat, as it turned out, was not unfounded. Two months into the relationship, Yang started to show signs of restlessness. During the day he went out more than before, and he totally abandoned painting and calligraphy. Boshen wondered if the boy was suffocated by the stillness of their life.

One day shortly before Boshen was expelled from Beijing and put under house arrest in his hometown, Yang asked him casually how his work was going. Fine, Boshen said, feeling uneasy. Yang had never asked him anything about his work; it was part of the ugly world that Boshen had wanted to shelter Yang from.

"What are you working on?" Yang asked.

"Why, the usual stuff," Boshen said.

"I heard you were working on AIDS," Yang said. "What has that to do with you?"

Stunned, Boshen tried to find an explanation. Finally he said, "You don't understand, Yang."

"I'm not a child," Yang said. "Why are you concerned with that dirty disease? The more you work on it, the more

people will connect it with gay people. What good does it do for me?"

"I'm trying to help more people," Boshen said.

"But you've promised to help me get back to the stage," Yang said. "If you insist on working on something irrelevant, you'll never fulfill your promise."

Boshen could not answer Yang. Afterward, Yang started to go out more often, and a few days later, he did not come home for the first time in their relationship. Boshen thought of all the predators waiting to set their fangs and claws on Yang, and he did not sleep that night.

"There's nothing for you to worry about," Yang said with a strange smile when Boshen confronted him. "You're not as endangered as you imagine."

"At least you should've let me know where you were," Boshen said.

"I was with a girl," Yang said, and mentioned the name Sasha, which sounded slightly familiar to Boshen. They had met her at a party; Yang reminded Boshen, but he did not remember who she was; he did not understand why Yang was going out with her, either.

"Why? What a silly question," Yang said. "You do things when you feel like it, no?"

THE FIRST TIME Sasha met Yang, at a party, she felt that she was looking into a mirror that reflected not her own face, but that of someone she could never become. She watched the ballet of his long fingers across the table while he listened absentmindedly to the conversation of others around the table. She looked at the innocent half-moons on his fingernails; her own fingers were plump and blunt. His

cream-colored face, his delicate nose and mouth reminded her of an exquisite china doll. Later, when they sat closer, she saw the melancholy in his eyes and decided that he was more like a statue of Kuan Yin, the male Buddha in a female body, the goddess who listened and responded to the prayers of suffering women and children. Sitting next to him, Sasha felt like a mass-produced rubber doll.

The uneasy feeling lasted only for a moment. Sasha had heard of his stories, and was glad to see him finally in person. She leaned toward him and asked, as if picking up from a conversation they had dropped somewhere, "What do you think of girls, then?"

He looked up at her, and she saw a strange light in his eyes. They reminded her of a wounded sparrow she had once kept during a cold Mongolian winter. Sparrows were an obstinate species that would never eat and drink once they were caged, her mother told her. Sasha did not believe it. She locked up the bird for days, and it kept bumping into the cage until its head started to go bald. Still she refused to release it, mesmerized by its eyes, wild but helplessly tender, too. She nudged the little bowl of soaked millet closer to the sparrow, but the bird was blind to her hospitality. Cheap birds, a neighbor told her; only cheap birds would be so stubborn. Have a canary, the neighbor said, and she would be singing for you every morning by now.

The boy lowered his eyes at Sasha's scrutiny, and she felt the urge to chase the beautiful eyes, a huntress of that strange light. "You must have known some girls, no?" she said. "When you went to the opera school, were there girls in the school?"

"Yes," the boy said, his voice reminding her of a satin dress.

"So?"

"We didn't talk. They played handmaids and nannies, background roles."

"So you were the princess, huh?" Sasha laughed and saw the boy blush, with anger perhaps, but it made her more curious and insistent in cornering him. "What's your name?" she said.

"Which name?"

"How many names do you have?"

"Two. One given by my parents. One given by the opera school."

"What are they?"

He dipped one finger into a glass of orange juice and wrote on the dark marble tabletop. She followed the wet trace of his finger. It was Yang, a common boy's name with the character for the sun, the masculine principle of nature, the opposite of Yin.

"A so-so name. What's your opera name?"

"Sumeng," he said. A serene and pure dreamer, it meant.

"Worse. Sounds like a weepy name from a romance novel," Sasha said. "You need a better name. I'll have to think of one for you."

In the end she did not use either name, and did not find a better one for him. She called him "my little *Nan Dan*," and that was what he was to her, a boy destined to play a woman's part. She paged him often, and invited him to movies and walks in the park. She made decisions for them both, and he let her. She tried to pry him open with questions—she was so curious about him—and slowly he started to talk, about the man he had loved and men who loved him. He never said anything about the opera school or his stage life, and she

learned not to push him. He was so vain, Sasha thought when he spent a long time fixing his hair or when he put on an expression of aloofness at the slightest attention of a stranger; she tensed him, and then felt tender and guilty when he did not defend himself. She made fun of the other people in Yang's life, too: his lover, Boshen, whom she believed to be a useless dreamer, and the men who boldly asked him for his number. She believed she was the first person in his life who did not worship him in any way, and he must be following her around because of that. It pleased her.

Was she dating the boy? Sasha's classmates asked when they saw her with Yang more than once. Of course not, she said. In a month, Sasha was to go to America for graduate school, and it was pointless to start a relationship now. Besides, how smart was it to date a boy who loved no one but himself?

EVEN THE WIND could not cut through the warm bodies lined up on both sides of Michigan Avenue. Sasha pushed through the crowd. They looked so young and carefree, these Americans, happy as a group of pupils on a field trip. She envied these people, who would stand in a long line in front of a popcorn shop waiting for a bag of fresh popcorn, lovers leaning into each other, children hanging on to their parents. They were born to be themselves, naive and contented with their naivety.

"I would trade my place with any one of them," Sasha said to Boshen, but when he raised his voice and asked her to repeat her words, she shook her head. If only there were a law in America binding her to where her baby belonged so that the baby would have a reason to live!

Sasha herself had once been used by the law to trap her

mother in the grassland. One of the thousands of high school students sent down from Beijing to Inner Mongolia for labor reeducation, her mother, in order to join the Party, married a Mongolian herdsman, one of the model interracial marriages that were broadcast across the grassland. Five years later, at the end of the Cultural Revolution, all of the students were allowed to return to Beijing. Sasha's mother, however, was forced to stay, even after she divorced her Mongolian husband. Their two daughters, born in the grassland, did not have legal residency in Beijing, and the mother had to stay where the children belonged.

Sasha pushed forward, looking at every store window. Silky scarves curved around the mannequins' necks with soft obedience. Diamonds glistened on dark velvet. At a street corner, children gathered and watched the animated story displayed in the windows of Marshall Field's. If only her baby were a visa that would admit her into this prosperity, Sasha thought, saddened by the memories of Nebraska and Inner Mongolia, the night skies of both places black with lonely, lifeless stars.

"There's an open spot there," Boshen said. "Do you want to stand there?"

Sasha nodded, and Boshen followed her. Apart from the brief encounter at the party in Beijing and a few phone calls, he did not know her. He had thought about her often after she had called him about the pregnancy. What kind of girl, he had wondered, would've made Yang a father? He had imagined a mature and understanding girl. Beautiful, too. He had made up a perfect woman for Yang and for his own peace of mind, but Sasha had disappointed him. When they settled along the curb, he said, "So, what's your plan after the operation?"

Sasha stood on tiptoe like a child, and looked in the direction where the parade would start. Boshen regretted right away speaking with such animosity. Seeing nothing, she turned to him and said, "What's your plan in America? Where's your new wife, anyway?"

Boshen frowned. He had told Yang that the marriage would be used as a cover, and his departure was meant only to be a temporary one. He had promised Yang other things, too, money he would send, help he would seek in the overseas Chinese community for Yang's return to the stage. Not a day since he had arrived did he forget his promises, but Sasha's words stung him. His marriage must have been an unforgivable betrayal, in Sasha's and Yang's eyes alike. "I can't defend myself," Boshen said finally.

"Of course not. You were the one sending him back to the street," Sasha said.

"It's been a troubled time," Boshen said, struggling over the words. "It's been difficult for all of us. But we certainly should try to help him out."

Sasha turned to look at Boshen with an amused smile. "You speak like the worst kind of politician," she said. "Show me the solution."

"I am thinking," Boshen hesitated, and said, "I've been thinking—if we can tell him that he'll be able to perform in America, maybe he would want to leave Beijing?"

"And then?"

"We will try here. There's a *Nan Dan* master in New York. Maybe we can contact him and ask for his help. But the first thing we do is to get Yang out of the country."

"Does that 'we' include me?"

"If you could marry Yang, he would be here in no time. I

know him. If there's one percent chance to go back to the stage, he'll try."

"A very nice plan, Boshen," Sasha said. "But why should I agree to the proposal? What's in it for me?"

Boshen looked away from Sasha and watched a couple kiss at the other side of the street. After a long moment, he turned to Sasha and tried to look into her eyes. "You must have loved him at least once, Sasha," he said, his voice trembling.

SASHA HAD NOT planned for love, or even an affair. The friendship was out of whimsy, a convenience for the empty days immediately before graduating from college. The movie they watched one night in July was not planned, either. It was ten o'clock when Sasha purchased the tickets, at the last minute. Yang looked at the clock in the ticket booth and wondered aloud if it was too late, and Sasha laughed, asking him if he was a child and if his lover had a curfew for him.

The movie was *Pretty Woman*, with almost unreadable Chinese subtitles. When they came out to the midnight street, Sasha said, "Don't you just love Julia Roberts?"

"What's to love about her?" Yang said.

Sasha glanced at Yang. He was quiet throughout the movie—he did not understand English, but Sasha thought at least he could've enjoyed the beautiful actress. "She's pretty, and funny, and so—American," Sasha said. "America is a good place. Everything could happen there. A prostitute becomes a princess; a crow turns into a swan overnight."

"A prostitute never becomes a princess," Yang said.

"How do you know?" Sasha said. "If only you could come with me to America and take a look at it yourself."

After a long moment, Yang said, "Every place is a good place. Only time goes wrong."

Sasha said nothing. She did not want to spend the night philosophizing. When they walked past a small hotel, she asked Yang if he wanted to come in with her. Just for the fun of staying out for a night, she said; he needn't have to report to his lover anyway, she added. Yang hesitated, and she grabbed his hand and pulled him into the foyer with her. A middle-aged woman at the reception opened the window and said, "What do you want?"

"Comrade, do you have a single room for two persons?" Sasha said.

The woman threw out a pad for registration and shut the window. Sasha filled in the form. The woman scanned the pad. "Your ID?" she asked.

Sasha handed her ID to the woman. The woman looked at it for a long time, and pointed to Yang with her chin. "His ID?"

"He's my cousin from Inner Mongolia," Sasha said in a cheerful voice. "He forgot to bring his ID with him."

"Then there's no room tonight." The woman threw out Sasha's ID and closed the window.

"Comrade," Sasha tapped on the glass.

The woman opened the window. "Go away," she said. "Your cousin? Let me tell you—either you have a marriage license and I will give you a room, or you go out and do that shameless thing in the street and let the cops arrest you. Don't you think I don't know girls like you?"

Sasha dragged Yang out the door, his lips quivering. "I don't believe I can't find a room for us," Sasha said finally.

Yang looked at Sasha with a baffled look. "Why do we have to do this?" he said.

"Ha, you're afraid now. Go ahead if you don't want to come," Sasha said, and started to walk. Yang followed Sasha to an even smaller hotel at the end of a narrow lane. An old man was sitting behind a desk, playing poker with himself. "Grandpapa," Sasha said, handing her ID to the old man. "Do you have a single room for my brother and me?"

The old man looked at Sasha and then Yang. "He's not fifteen yet so he doesn't have an ID," Sasha said, and Yang smiled shyly at the old man, his white teeth flashing in the dark.

The old man nodded and handed a registration pad to Sasha. Five minutes later they were granted a key. It was a small room on the second floor, with two single beds, a rusty basin stand with two basins, and a window that did not have a curtain. Koaches scurried to find a hiding place when Sasha turned on the light. They stood just inside the door, and all of a sudden she did not know what the excitement was of spending a night together in a filthy hotel. "Why don't we just go home?" Yang said behind her.

"Where's the place you call home?" Sasha snapped. She turned off the light and lay down on a bed without undressing. "Go back to the man who keeps you if this is not a place for a princess like you," she said.

Yang stood for a long moment before he got into the other bed. Sasha waited for him to speak, and when he did not, she became angry with him, and with herself.

The next morning, when the city stirred to life, they both lay awake in their own beds. The homing pigeons flew across the sky, the small brass whistles bound to their tails humming in a harmonious low tone. Not far away, Tao music played on a tape recorder, calling for the early risers to join the practice of tai chi. Old men, the fans of Peking Opera,

sang their favorite parts of the opera, their voices crackling at high notes. Then the doors down the lane creaked open, releasing the shouting children headed to school, and adults to work, their bicycle bells clanking.

Later, someone turned on a record player and music blasted across the alley. Sasha sat up and looked out the window. A young man was setting up a newspaper stand at the end of the alley, making theatrical movements along with a song in which a rock singer was yelling, "Oh, Genghis Khan, Genghis Khan, he's a powerful old man. He's rich, he's strong, and I want to marry him."

Sasha listened to the song repeat and said, "I don't understand why these people think they have the right to trash Genghis Khan."

"Their ears are dead to real music," Yang said.

"When I was little, my father taught me a song about Genghis Khan. It's the only Mongolian song I remember now," Sasha said, and opened her mouth to sing the song. The melody was in her mind, but no words came to her tongue. She had forgotten almost all of the Mongolian words she had learned, after her parents' divorce; she had not seen her father for fifteen years. "Well, I don't remember it anymore."

"The broken pillars, the slanted roof, they once saw the banqueting days; the dying trees, the withering peonies, they once danced in the heavenly music. The young girls dreamed of their lovers who were enlisted to fight the Huns. They did not know the loved ones had become white bones glistening in the moonlight," Yang chanted in a low voice to the ceiling. "Our masters say that real arts never die. Real arts are about remembrance."

"What's the point of remembering the song anyway? I don't even remember what my father looked like." Sasha thought about her father, one of the offspring of Genghis Khan. Genghis Khan was turned into a clown in the pop song. Mongolia was once the biggest empire in the world, and now it was a piece of meat, sandwiched by China and Russia.

"We live in a wrong time," Yang said.

Sasha turned to look at Yang. He lay on his hands and stared at the ceiling, his face taking on the resigned look of an old man. It hurt her, and scared her too, to glimpse a world beneath his empty beauty. "We were born into a wrong place, is what our problem is," she said, trying to cheer him and herself up. "Why don't you come to America with me, Yang?"

Yang smiled. "Who am I to follow you?"

"A husband, a lover, a brother, I don't care. Why don't you get out of Beijing and have a new life in America?" The words, once said, hung in the room like heavy fog, and Sasha wondered if Yang, too, had difficulty breathing. Outside the window, a vendor was sharpening a chopper with a whetstone, the strange sound making their mouths water unpleasantly. Then the vendor started to sing in a drawn-out voice about his tasty pig heads.

"Sasha," Yang said finally. "Is Sasha a Mongolian name?"

"Not really. It's Russian, a name of my mom's favorite heroine in a Soviet war novel."

"That's why it doesn't sound Chinese. I would rather it is a Mongolian name," Yang said. "Sasha, the princess of Mongolia."

Sasha walked barefoot to Yang's bed and knelt beside

him. He did not move, and let Sasha hold his face with both hands. "Come to America with me," she said. "We'll be the prince and the princess of Nebraska."

"I was not trained to play a prince," Yang said.

"The script is changed," Sasha said. "From today on."

Yang turned to look at Sasha. She tried to kiss him, but he pushed her away gently. "*A beautiful body is only a bag of bones,*" he sang in a low voice.

Sasha had never seen Yang perform, and could not imagine him onstage; he had played princesses and prostitutes, but he did not have to live with the painted mask and the silk costume. "The Peking Opera is dead," she said. "Why don't you give it up?"

"Who are you to say that about the Peking Opera?" Yang said, his face turning suddenly stern.

Sasha saw the fierceness in Yang's eyes and let the topic drop. Afterward, neither mentioned anything about the stay in the hotel. A week later, when Boshen was escorted away from Beijing, Sasha was relieved and scared. There was, all of a sudden, time for them to fill. To her relief and disappointment, Yang seemed to have forgotten the moment when they were close, so close that they were almost in love.

THE PARADE STARTED with music and laughter, colorful floats moving past, on which happy people waved to the happy audience. Boshen looked at Sasha's face, lit up by curiosity and sighed. Despite her willfulness and unfriendliness, the thought of the baby—Yang's baby—made him eager to forgive her. "Do you still not want to tell Yang about the baby?" he said.

"You've asked this the hundredth time," Sasha said. "Why should I?"

"He might want to come to the U.S. if he learned about the baby," Boshen said.

"There'll be no baby after tomorrow," Sasha said. She had tried Yang's phone number when she had learned of the pregnancy; she had tried his pager, too. At first it was messaged by hours and days, and then it became weeks since she had left the message on his pager. He might be living in another apartment with a new telephone number. The pager might no longer belong to him. She knew he had every reason for not getting her message, but she could not forgive his silence. In the meantime, her body changed. She felt the growth inside her and she was disgusted by it. Sometimes she hated it from morning till night, hoping that it would finally go away, somehow, surrendering to the strength of her resentment. Other times she kept her mind away for as long as she could, thinking that it would disappear as if it had never existed. Still, in the end, it required her action. In the end, she thought, it was just a chunk of flesh and blood.

"But why was there a baby in the first place?" Boshen said. Why and how it happened were the questions that had been haunting him since he had heard from Sasha. He wanted to ask her if she, too, had been dazzled by the boy's body, smooth, lithe, perfectly shaped. He wanted to know if she had loved him as he had, but in that case, how could she have the heart to discard what had been left with her?

Sasha turned to Boshen. For the first time, she studied the man with curiosity. Not handsome or ugly, he had a candid face that Sasha thought she could not fall in love with but nonetheless could trust. A man like Boshen should have an ordinary life, boring and comfortable, yet his craze for Yang made him a more interesting man than he deserved to be. But that must be what was Yang's value—he made peo-

eyes away from the television to stare at him. When he reached the brick sink in the middle of the courtyard, he sat on the edge and raised his bare legs to the tap. The water had run for a long moment before the landlady recovered from her shock and said, "Hey, the water costs me money."

Yang smiled. "It's so hot," he said in a pleasant voice.

"Indeed," the landlady agreed.

Yang turned off the tap and walked back to the room, with the same grace and idleness, knowing that the people in the courtyard were all watching him, his willowy body wrapped in the moon white robe. Sasha stood by the window, cold with disappointment. She became his audience, one of the most difficult to capture, perhaps, but he succeeded after all.

A Disney float approached the corner where Sasha and Boshen stood. "Look," Sasha said and pointed at a giant glove of Mickey Mouse moving ahead of the float. "There're only four fingers."

"I didn't know that," Boshen said.

"Yang needs us no more than that glove needs us for our admiration," Sasha said.

"But our love is the only thing to protect him, and to save him, too."

Sasha turned and looked into Boshen's eyes. "It's people like us who have destroyed him, isn't it? Why was there *Nan Dan* in the Peking Opera in the first place? *Men loved him because he was playing a woman; women loved him because he was a man playing,*" she said.

"That's totally wrong."

"Why else do you want so much to put him back on the stage? Don't think I'm happy to see him fall. Believe me, I

ple fall in love with him, and the love led them astray, willingly, from their otherwise tedious paths. Yang had been the one to bring up the idea of spending a night together again, and Sasha the one to ask a friend for the use of her rented room, a few days before Sasha's flight. It was one of the slightest summer evenings. After their lovemaking, sweet and short and uneventful, they stayed on the floor, on top of the blanket. Sasha had brought for the purpose, an arm's length between them, each too warm to touch the other. Outside, the landlady's family and two other neighbor families were sitting in the courtyard and watching a TV program, their voices mixed with the claps of their hands killing the mosquitoes. Sasha turned to look at Yang, who was lying with his back to her. The little pack of condoms she had bought was tucked underneath the blanket, unopened. She had suggested it and he had refused. A rubber was for people who touched without loving each other, Yang had said; his words had made her hopeful again. "Do you want to come to America with me now?" she asked, tracing his back with one finger.

"What am I going to do in America? Be kept as a canary by you?" Yang said and moved farther away from her finger.

"You can spend some time learning English, and get a useful degree in America."

"Useful? Don't you already know that I am useless? Besides, nothing humiliates a man more than living as a parasite on his woman," Yang said, and reached for a silk robe he had packed with him. Before Sasha had the time to stop him, he walked out the door. Sasha jumped to her feet and watched from behind the curtain; Yang walked with a calculated laziness, not looking at the people who turned their

wanted to help him as much as you do. He didn't have to be a man playing a woman—I thought I would make him understand. But what did I end up with? You're not the one who has a baby inside; he's not the one having an abortion," Sasha said, and started to cry.

Boshen held out his hand and touched Sasha's shoulder hesitantly. If only she could love the boy one more time. Yang could choose to live with either of them; he could choose not to love them at all but their love would keep him safe and intact; they could—the three of them—bring up the baby together. Yang would remain the princess, exiled, yes, but a true princess, beautiful in a foreign land. If only he knew how to make Sasha love Yang again, Boshen thought.

Sasha did not move away when Boshen put an arm around her shoulder. They must look like the most ordinary couple to strangers, a nervous husband comforting his moody wife after an argument. They might as well be a couple, out of love, he caring only for the baby inside her, she having no feeling left for anything, her unborn child included.

As if responding, the baby moved. A tap, and then another one, gentle and tentative, the first greeting that Sasha had wished she would never have to answer, but it seemed impossible, once it happened, not to hope for more. After a long moment, people in the street shouted, and children screamed out of excitement. Sasha looked up—the lights were lit up in the trees, thousands of stars forming a constellation. She thought about the small Mongolian town where her mother lived alone now, her long shadow trailing behind her as she walked home along the dimly lit alley. Her mother had been born into a wrong time, lived all her adult life in a wrong place, yet she had never regretted the births of her two

daughters. Sasha held her breath and waited for more of the baby's messages. America was a good country, she thought, a right place to be born into, even though the baby had come at a wrong time. Everything was possible in America, she thought, and imagined a baby possessing the beauty of her father but happier and luckier. Sasha smiled, but then when the baby moved again, she burst into tears. Being a mother must be the saddest yet the most hopeful thing in the world, falling into a love that, once started, would never end.