

I Myself
Am a Woman

Selected Writings
of Ding Ling

Edited by

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with

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Introduction by

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NOTE TO THE READER

Every book has its intended audience. This anthology took shape with three readers in mind. One comes to Ding Ling out of interest or familiarity with China studies. The second, because Ding Ling was such an important female writer, arrives through women's studies or the desire to know about Chinese women's lives. And the third is attracted because of Ding Ling's literary reputation. We hope that we have not only accommodated the needs of each reading constituency but have also served to introduce them to each other.

As translators we strived to balance accuracy against elegance. Chinese and English have little in common and thus translation between them allows for even greater interpretive variety than between the major European languages. Accuracy means faithfulness to the world represented as well as to diction. Readers of both languages will find, depending on the individual translator, varying degrees of literalness in the renditions that follow. Under all circumstances, nonetheless, elegance means good English. In those cases where literal translation rendered awful English sentences, we took our liberties with the Chinese text.

In one respect we have done some violence to accepted English usage as well. To transmit the "Chineseness" of the texts, we made several choices. First, judicious use of Chinese terms for kinship relations reinforces the notion of cultural difference. Thus the reader will find occasional reference to the kin terms, like "Gonggong" and "Popo," rather than the rather flat English "parents-in-law." Second, feeling strongly that literal translations of place names exoticize translations from the Chinese, we have generally left them transliterated unless they signify obvious meaning or had a contemporary English usage, as for example,

Union Medical College, Sincerity Department Store, or Shanghai's Bund. Third, Ms. Barlow has included historical and textual annotations in the form of notes. These are aimed at both the Chinese-reading audience and the exclusively English reader. Some of the notes explain the importance of key terms. Some clarify a cultural usage. Others point to consistent use of tropes, vocabulary, and logic.

To avoid excessive noting, the following information holds true for all of the texts. Chinese names usually begin with the surname and tack onto that a one- or two-syllable given name. A person might be called by her or his full name, say Jiang Bingzhi, or more familiarly, "Lao (Old) Jiang" or "Xiao (Young) Jiang," depending upon whether the namer is junior or senior to the named. The same person would be referred to familiarly as *jiejie* (older sister) in the following ways, again assuming that the namer is junior to the named: *Bingjie*, *Zhijie*, *Bingzhi jiejie*, and so on. (Younger sister, *meimei*, and older/younger brother are just as elastic.)

Many people of Ding Ling's generation either chose or were given two-syllable names, a surname and one given ideograph. We have transliterated, where the sense is not immediately clear, into two "words" any name that begins with a surname. Thus, Wang Wei rather than Wangwei, but Zibin not Zi Bin. Ding Ling's pseudonym, which she chose in the mid-twenties, has no great ideographic sense. As an anarchist gesture she chose a name by arbitrarily selecting syllables from an open dictionary. Not so arbitrarily perhaps, the *ding* signifies an adult human being, and *ling* is the sound of two jade pieces striking each other.

TEB



Miss Sophia's Diary

"Miss Sophia's Diary" depicts a cycle familiar to European dramas of self-knowledge. The story was published in 1927, and contemporary readers found the first-person rumination on loneliness and lust enthralling. In part they like it because both author and protagonist were female, and older Chinese literary convention had discouraged women from writing on erotic topics. In greater part, however, its popularity can be ascribed to the skillful way Ding Ling handled the Oedipal trajectory: Sophia succumbs to blind desire. She holds off the searing light of reality for as long as she can but finally submits to the torments of self-knowledge.

As a May Fourth text, "Miss Sophia's Diary" is significant not only in its description of female sexuality but in its use of Chinese and European conventions. Ding Ling invokes both canons in her depiction of love triangles. She bows to the late-eighteenth-century Chinese memoir *Six Chapters of the Floating Life* when she hints that Sophia, Ling Jishi, and Yun(je) might form a triangle. Yun, Sophia's girlfriend, is a homophonic reference (same pronunciation, different name) to Shen Fu's wife, who, he claimed in *Six Chapters*, died of love for the courtesan Han Yuan after failing to acquire the girl to be her lover and his concubine.

"Miss Sophia's Diary" ransacks Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, as most of Ding Ling's early stories do. The primary triangle of Weidi, Ling Jishi, and Sophia is obvious. Sophia's blindness and willful femininity resound with Emma's voice. "I've a lover," Emma shouts in triumph, "a lover." "Sophia," the diary reads, "Sophia has a lover." Flaubert's influence on Ding Ling is most obvious in the story's peculiar diction. The diary is notoriously difficult to interpret because of what one critic has called its

"loose" language. Ding Ling didn't use punctuation very consistently (it was new to Chinese), and she scattered semiclassical structures at will into her phrasing. Sophia's diary sounds a lot like *Madame Bovary* in Chinese translation. The diction is a period mannerism, the mark of the writer's sophisticated borrowing from Western-language sentence structure.

Both May Fourth writers and May Fourth feminists looked to Western literature for models of modern behavior. The category "woman" that Sophia transmitted to her readers contains a little Rousseau, a little Herbert Spencer, a little Maupassant. Her question "What is love?" echoes the torment of many liberated Chinese women who struggled against the contradictory claims of political rights and modern theories that made women less than men by nature. The "feminine" liberated woman is possessed by love. But to her everlasting sorrow, Sophia finds that the more feminine she becomes for Ling Jishi, the less clearly she can see herself.—TEB

December 24

The wind's up again today. The blowing woke me before day broke. Then the boy came in to start the stove. I know I'll never get back to sleep again. I also know that my head will start whirling if I don't get up. Too many strange thoughts run through my mind when I lie wrapped in the covers. The doctor's instructions are to sleep and eat a lot and not to read or think. Exactly what I find most impossible. I can never get to sleep until two or three o'clock in the morning and I'm awake again before dawn. On a windy day like today, it's impossible to keep from brooding over every little thing. I can't go outside when the wind's this strong. What else can I do but brood, cooped up in this room with nothing to read. I can't just sit vacantly by myself and wait for time to pass, can I? I endure it one day at a time, longing for winter to be over fast. When it gets warmer, my cough is bound to clear up a little. Then if I wanted to go south or back to school, I could. Oh God, this winter is endless!

As the sunlight hit the paper window, I was boiling my milk for the third time.¹ I did it four times yesterday. I'm never really sure that it suits my taste, no matter how often I do it, but it's the only thing that releases frustration on a windy day. Actually, though it gets me through an hour or so, I usually end up even more irritable than I was before. So all last week I didn't play with it. Then out of desperation, I did, relying on it,

as though I was already old, just to pass time. I read the newspaper as soon as it comes. I start, systematically, with the headlines, the national news, the important foreign reports, local gossip, and then . . . when I've finished the items on education, party propaganda, economics, and the stock market, I go back to the same announcements I read so thoroughly yesterday . . . and the day before . . . the ones recruiting new students, the notices of lawsuits over division of family property. I even read stuff like ads for "606" and "Mongolian Lark" venereal tonics, cosmetics, announcements of the latest shows at the Kaiming Theater, and the Zhenguang Movie Theater listing. When I've finished everything I toss the paper away, reluctantly. Every once in a while, of course, I find a new advertisement. But what I can never get free of are the fifth- and sixth-year anniversary sales at the fabric shops, and the obituaries—with apologies to those not contacted personally.

Nothing to do after the paper except sit alone by the stove and work myself into a rage. What infuriates me is the daily routine. I get a nervous headache every day as I sit listening to the other inmates yell at the attendants. Such loud, braying, coarse, monotonous voices, "Attendant, bring hot water!" or "Wash basin, attendant!" You can imagine how ugly it sounds. And there is always somebody downstairs shouting into the telephone. Yet when the noise does let up, the silence scares me to death. Particularly inside the four whitewashed walls that stare blankly back at me no matter where I sit. If I try to escape by lying on the bed, I'm crushed by the ceiling, just as oppressively white. I can't really find a single thing here that *doesn't* disgust me: the pockmarked attendant, for example, and the food that always tastes like a filthy rag, the impossibly grimy window frame, and that mirror over the washbasin. Glancing from one side you've got a face a foot long; tilt your head slightly to the side and suddenly it gets so flat you startle yourself . . . It all infuriates me. Maybe I'm the only one affected. Still I'd really like a few fresh complaints and dissatisfactions. Novelty, for better or worse, always seems just out of reach.

Weidi came over after lunch.² The familiar hurried sound of his leather shoes carried all the way from the other end of the corridor and comforted me, as though I'd suddenly been released from a suffocating room. But I couldn't show it. So when he came in, I simply glanced silently at him. Weidi thought I was peeved again. He clasped my hands tightly and cried, "Sister, Elder Sister!" over and over. I smiled. Of course. Why? Oh, I know. I know what's behind those shy glowing eyes. I understand what it is that he'd rather keep from others. You've been in love with me for such a long time, Weidi. Has he captured me? That is not my respon-

sibility. I act as women are supposed to act. Actually, I've been quite aboveboard with him. There isn't another woman alive who would have resisted toying with him, as I have. Besides, I'm genuinely sorry for him. There have been times when I couldn't stand it any longer, when I wanted so badly to say, "Look, Weidi, can't you find some better way of going about this? You're making me sick." I'd like Weidi a whole lot better if he'd wise up, but he persists with these stupid abandoned displays of affection.

Weidi was satisfied when I smiled. Rushing around to the other end of the bed, he tore off his overcoat and leather hat. If he'd turned his head and glanced at me just then, he'd have been saddened by my eyes. Why doesn't he understand me better?

I've always wanted a man who would really understand me. If he doesn't understand me and my needs, then what good are love and empathy? Father, my sisters, and all my friends end up blindly indulging me, although I never have figured out what it is in me that they love. Is it my arrogance, my temper? Or do they just pity me because I have TB? At times they infuriate me because of it, and then all their blind love and soothing words have the opposite effect. Those are the times that I wish I had someone who really understood. Even if he reviled me, I'd be proud and happy.

I think about them when they forget me. Or I get mad at them. But then when somebody finally does come, I end up harassing him without really meaning to. It's an impossible situation. Lately I've been trying to discipline myself not to say whatever jumps into my mind, so I don't accidentally hurt people's secret feelings when I'm really only joking. My resulting state of mind as I sat with Weidi can easily be imagined. If Weidi had stood up to go, I'd have hated him because of my depression and fear of loneliness. Weidi has known this for a long time, so he didn't leave me until ten o'clock. But I deceive no one, certainly not myself. The fact that Weidi waited around so long gave him no special advantage. In fact, I ended up pitying him because he's so easy to exploit and because he has such a gift for doing the wrong thing in love.

December 28

I invited Yufang and Yunlin out to the movies today. Yufang asked Jianru along, which made me so furious I almost burst into tears. Instead I started laughing. Oh, Jianru, Jianru, how you've crushed my self-respect.³ She looks and acts so much like a girlfriend I had when I was younger, that without being aware of what I was doing, I started chasing her. Initially she encouraged my intimacies. But I met with intolerable treatment from her in the end. Whenever I think about it, I hate myself for what I did in the past, for my regrettably unscrupulous behavior. One

week I wrote her at least eight long letters, maybe more, and she didn't pay the slightest bit of attention to me. Whatever possessed Yufang to invite Jianru when she knows I don't want to dredge up my past all over again? It's as though she wanted to make me mad on purpose. I was furious.

Though there was no reason for Yufang and Yunlin to notice any change in my laugh, Jianru must have sensed something. But she can fake it—play stupid—so she went along as though there was nothing between us. I wanted to curse; the words were on the tip of my tongue, when I thought of the resolution I'd set myself. Also I felt that if I were that vehement she'd get even more stuck on herself. So I just kept my feelings to myself and went out with them.

We got to the Zhenguang Theater early and met some girls from our province at the door. Those girls and their practiced smiles make me sick. I ignored them. Then I got inexplicably angry at all the people waiting to see the movie. So I capitalized on the situation, and as Yufang talked heatedly with the girls, I slipped away from my guests and came home.

I am the only person who can excuse what I did. They all criticize me, but they don't know the feelings I endure when I am with other people. People say I am eccentric, but no one notices how often I'm willing to toady for affection and approval. No one will ever encourage me to say things that contradict my first impulses. They endure my eccentricities constantly, which gives me even more cause to reflect on my behavior, and that ends up alienating me even further from them.

It is very late and the entire residence is quiet. I've been lying here on the bed a long time. I have thought through a lot of things. Why am I still so upset?

December 29

Yufang phoned me early this morning. She's a good person and wouldn't lie, so I suppose Jianru really is sick. Yufang told me that Jianru is sick because of me and wants me to come over so she can explain herself. Yufang and Jianru couldn't be more mistaken. Sophia is not a person who likes listening to explanations. I see no need for explanations of any kind. If friends get along that's great; when you have a falling out and give someone a hard time, that's fair enough too. I think I am big enough not to require more revenge. Jianru got sick because of me. I think that's great. I'd never refuse the lovely news that somebody had gotten sick over me. Anyway, Jianru's illness eases some of the self-loathing I've been feeling.

I really don't know what to make of myself. Sometimes I can feel a kind of boundless unfathomable misery at the sight of a white cloud

being blown and scattered by the wind. Yet faced with a young man of, what, about twenty-five?—Weidi is actually four years older than I—I find myself laughing with the satisfaction of a savage as his tears fall on my folded hands. Weidi came over from Dongcheng with a gift of stationery and envelopes. Because he was happy and laughing, I teased him mercilessly until he burst into tears. That cheered me up, so I said, “Please, please! Spare the tears. Don’t imagine I’m so feminine and weak that I can’t resist a tear. If you want to cry, go home and do it. You’re bothering me.” He didn’t leave. He didn’t make any excuses, either, or get sullen, of course . . . He just curled up in the corner of the chair, as tears from God knows where streamed openly, soundlessly, down his face. While this pleased me, I was still a little ashamed of myself. So I patted his head in a sisterly way and told him to go wash his face. He smiled through his tears.

When this honest, open man was here, I used all the cruelty of my nature to make him suffer. Yet once he’d left, there was nothing I wanted more than to snatch him back and plead with him: “I know I was wrong. Don’t love a woman so undeserving of your affection as I am.”

January 1

I don’t know how people who like to party spent their New Year’s. I just added an egg to my milk. I had the egg left over from the twenty that Weidi brought me yesterday. I’ve boiled seven eggs in a tea broth; the remaining thirteen are probably enough to last me for the next two weeks. If Weidi had come while I was eating lunch, I’d have had a chance to get a couple of canned things. I really hoped he’d come. In anticipation, I went out to the Danpai Building and bought four boxes of candy, two cartons of *dianxin*, and a basket of fruit to feed him when he got here.⁴ I was that certain he’d be the only one to come today. But lunch came and went and Weidi hadn’t arrived.

I sat and wrote five letters with the fine pen and stationery he’d brought me a few days ago. I’d been hoping I’d get some New Year’s picture postcards in the mail, but I didn’t. Even the few girlfriends I have who most enjoy this kind of thing forgot that they owed me. I shouldn’t be surprised that I don’t get postcards. Still, when they forget about me completely, it does make me mad. On the other hand, considering that I never paid anyone else a New Year’s visit—forget it! I deserve it.

I was very annoyed when I had to eat dinner all by myself.

Toward evening Yufang and Yunlin did come over, bringing a tall young fellow with them. How fortunate they are. Yufang has Yunlin to love her and that satisfies them both. Happiness isn’t just possessing a lover. It’s two people, neither of whom wants anything more than each

other, passing their days in peace and conversation. Some people might find such a pedestrian life unsatisfying, but then not everyone is like my Yufang.

She’s terrific. Since she has her Yunlin, she wants “all lovers to be united.” Last year she tried to arrange a love match for Marie. She wants things to work out for Weidi and me, too, so every time she comes over she asks about him. She, Yunlin, and the tall man ate up all the food I’d bought for Weidi.

That tall guy is stunning. For the first time, I found myself really attracted to masculine beauty. I’d never paid much attention before. I’ve always felt that it was normal for men to be glib, phony, cautious; that’s about the extent of it. But today as I watched the tall one, I saw how a man could be cast in a different, a noble, mold. Yunlin looked so insignificant and clumsy by comparison . . . Pity overwhelmed me. How painful Yunlin would find his own coarse appearance and rude behavior, if he could see himself. I wonder what Yufang feels when she compares the two, one tall, the other not.

How can I describe the beauty of this strange man? His stature, pale delicate features, fine lips, and soft hair are quite dazzling enough. But there is an elegance to him, difficult to describe, an elusive quality, that shook me profoundly. When I asked his name, he handed me his name card with extraordinary grace and finesse. I raised my eyes. I looked at his soft, red, moist, deeply inset lips, and let out my breath slightly. How could I admit to anyone that I gazed at those provocative lips like a small hungry child eyeing sweets? I know very well that in this society I’m forbidden to take what I need to gratify my desires and frustrations, even when it clearly wouldn’t hurt anybody. I did the only thing I could. I lowered my head patiently and quietly read the name printed on the card, “Ling Jishi, Singapore . . .”

Ling Jishi laughed and talked uninhibitedly with us as though he were with old, intimate friends; or was he flirting with me? I was so eager to avoid seduction that I didn’t dare look directly at him. It made me furious when I could not bring myself to go into the lighted area in front of the table. My ragged slippers had never bothered me before, yet now I found myself ashamed of them. That made me angry at myself: how can I have been so restrained and boring. Usually I find undue attention to social form despicable. Today I found out how moronic and graceless I could seem. Mmm! he must think I’m right off the farm.

Yufang and Yunlin got the feeling that I didn’t like him, I was acting so woodenly, so they kept interrupting the conversation. Before long they took him off. They meant well. I just can’t find it in me to be grateful. When I saw their shadows—two short, one tall—disappearing through

the downstairs courtyard, I really didn't want to return to my room, now suffused with the marks of his shoes, his sounds, the crumbs of his cake.

January 3

I've spent two full nights coughing. I've lost all faith in the medicine. Is there no relationship at all between medicine and illness? I am sick to death of the bitter medicine, but still I take it on schedule, as prescribed; if I refuse medication, how can I allow myself any hope for recovery? God arranges all sorts of pain for us before we die to make us patient and to prevent us from rushing toward death too eagerly. Me? My time is brief, so I love life with greater urgency than most. I don't fear death. I just feel that I haven't gotten any pleasure out of life. I want . . . all I want is to be happy. I spend days and nights dreaming up ways I could die without regret. I imagine myself resting on a bed in a gorgeous bedroom, my sisters nearby on a bearskin rug praying for me, and my father sighing as he gazes quietly out the window. I'll be reading long letters from those who love me, friends who will remember me with their tears. I urgently need emotional support from all these people; I long for the impossible. What do I get from them? I have been imprisoned in this residence for two full days: no one has visited me and I haven't even gotten any mail. I lie in bed and cough; I sit on the stove and cough; I go in front of the table and cough—all the time brooding over these repulsive people . . . Actually, I did receive a letter, but that just completed my total wretchedness. It was from a tough Anhui guy who was pestering me a year ago. I ripped it up before I had even finished reading it. It made my flesh crawl, reading page after page of "love, love, love, love, love." How I despise grandstand affection from people I loathe.

But can I name what I really need?²⁵

January 4

I just don't know how things went so wrong. Why did I want to move? In all the fuss and confusion I've also deceived Yunlin. The lies came so easily I felt I almost had an instinct for it. Were Yunlin to know Sophia was capable of deceiving him, how wretched he would be. Sophia is the baby sister they love so much. Of course I'm upset now, and I regret everything. But I still can't make up my mind. Should I move? Or not?

I had to admit to myself, "You're dreaming about that tall man." And it's true: for the last few days and nights I have been enmeshed in wonderful fantasies. Why hasn't he come over on his own? He should know better than to let me languish for so long. I'd feel so much better if he'd come over and tell me that he'd been thinking of me too. If he did, I know I wouldn't have been able to control myself, and I'd have listened

to him declare his love for me and then I'd let him know what I wanted. But he didn't come. I guess fairy tales don't usually come true. Should I go looking for him? A woman that uninhibited would risk having everything blow up in her face. I still want people to respect me. Since I couldn't think of a good solution, I decided to go to Yunlin's place and see what would happen. After lunch I braved the wind and set off for Dongcheng.

Yunlin is a student at Jingdu University and rents a room in a house in Qingnian Lane near the university, between the first and second colleges. Fortunately I got there before he'd left and before Yufang had arrived. Yunlin was surprised to see me out on such a windy day, but wasn't suspicious when I told him I'd been to the German Hospital and was just stopping by on my way home. He asked about my health. I led the conversation around to the other evening. Without wasting any energy, I found out that Ling Jishi lives in Dormitory No. 4 in the second college. After a while I started to sigh and talk in vivid terms about my life at Xicheng Residence Hall, how lonely and dismal it was. And then I lied again. I said I wanted to move because I want to be near Yufang. (I already know that Yufang was going to move in with him.) When I asked Yunlin if he would come help me find a room near theirs, he seemed delighted and didn't hesitate to offer his help.

While we were looking around for a room, we just happened to run into Ling Jishi. So he joined us. I was ecstatic and the ecstasy made me bold enough to look right at him several times. He didn't notice. When he asked about my health and I told him I'd completely recovered, he just smiled, skeptically.

I settled on a small, moldy room with low ceilings in the Dayuan Apartment House next door to Yunlin. Both Ling Jishi and Yunlin said it was too damp, but nothing they said could shake my determination to move in the next day. The reason I gave was that I was tired of the other place and desperately needed to be near Yufang. There was nothing Yunlin could do, so he agreed and said that he and Yufang would be over to help me tomorrow.

How can I admit to anyone that my only reason for choosing that room was because it's located between the fourth dormitory and Yunlin's place?

He didn't say goodbye to me so I went back to Yunlin's with them, mustering all my courage to keep on chatting and laughing. Meanwhile I subjected him to the most searching scrutiny. I was possessed with a desire to mark every part of his body with my lips. Has he any idea how I'm sizing him up? Later I deliberately said that I wanted to ask Ling Jishi to help me with my English. When Yunlin laughed, Ling Jishi was taken aback and gave a vague, embarrassed reply. He can't be too much

of a bastard, I thought to myself, otherwise—a big tall man like that—he'd never have blushed so red in the face. My passion raged with new ferocity. But since I was concerned that the others would notice and see through me too easily, I dismissed myself and came home early.

Now that I have time for reflection, I can't imagine my impulsiveness driving me into any worse situation. Let me stay in this room with its iron stove. How can I say I'm in love with this man from Singapore? I don't know anything about him. All this stuff about his lips, his eyebrows, his eyelashes, his hands, is pure fantasy. These aren't things a person should need. I've become obsessive if that's all I can think about now. I refuse to move. I'm determined to stay here and recover my health.

I'm decided now. I'm so full of regret! I regret all the wrong things I did today, things a decent woman would never do.

January 6

Everyone said I was being terribly foolish when they heard I'd moved. And when Jin Ying from Nancheng and Jiang and Zhou from Xicheng all came over to my damp little room to see me and I started laughing and rolling around on the bed, they all said I was acting like a baby. That amused me all the more and made me consider telling them what's really on my mind. Weidi dropped by this afternoon too, miserable because I'd moved without discussing it with him first and because now I'm even farther from him. He looked straight through Yunlin when he saw him. Yunlin, who couldn't figure out why he was so angry, stared right back. Weidi's face darkened even further. I was amused. "Too bad," I said to myself, "Weidi's blaming the wrong man."

Yufang never brings up the subject of Jianru anymore. She has decided to move into Yunlin's room in two or three days. She knows I want to be near her and won't leave me alone longer than that. She and Yunlin have been even warmer than ever.

January 10

I've seen Ling Jishi every day, but I've never spoken more than a few words to him, and I'm determined it's not going to be me who mentions the English lessons first. It makes me laugh to see how he goes to Yunlin's twice a day now. I'm certain he's never been this close to him before. I haven't invited Ling Jishi over, either; and although he's asked several times how things are going now that I've moved, I've pretended not to get the hint and just smile back. It's like planning a battle. Now I'm concentrating all my energy on strategy. I want something, but I'm not willing to go and take it. I must find a tactic that gets it offered to me voluntarily. I understand myself completely. I am a thoroughly female woman, and women concentrate everything on the man they've got in

their sights. I want to possess him. I want unconditional surrender of his heart. I want him kneeling down in front of me, begging me to kiss him. I'm delirious. I go over and over the steps I must take to implement my scheme. I've lost my mind.

Yufang and Yunlin don't detect my excitement; they just tell me I'll be getting better soon. Actually, I don't want them to know. When they say how improved I am, I act as if I'm pleased.

January 12

Yufang already moved in, but Yunlin moved out. I can't believe the two of them; they're so afraid of her getting pregnant that they won't live together. I suppose they feel that since they can't trust themselves to make "good" decisions when they're in bed together, the best solution is to remove sexual temptation completely. According to them, necking is not too dangerous, so their list of proscriptions doesn't preclude the occasional stolen encounter. I can't help scoffing at her asceticism. Why shouldn't you embrace your lover's naked body? Why repress this part of love? How can they be so preoccupied with all the details before they've even slept together! I won't believe love is so logical and scientific.

Of course, when I tease them they never get angry. They're proud of their purity, and laugh at my childishness. I suppose I understand how they feel; it's just another one of those strange, unexplained things that happen in life.

I went to Yunlin's tonight (I guess I should call it Yufang's now) and we told ghost stories, so I didn't get back until ten o'clock. When I was a child I used to sit in my Auntie's lap and listen to Uncle tell strange tales from the *Liaozhai* all the time.⁶ I loved to hear them, especially at night; but I never let anyone know how much they frightened me, because if you said you were afraid, that was the end of the stories. The children wouldn't be allowed out of bed and Uncle would have disappeared back into the study. Later, in school, I learned some rudimentary science from the teachers, and pockmarked Mr. Zhou inspired me enough to trust the books so I outgrew my terror of ghosts. Now that I'm grown up, I always deny the existence of ghosts. But you can't halt fear by simple declaration, and the thought of ghosts still makes my hair stand on end. No one grasps fully how eager I am to change the subject when the topic comes up. That's because later, when I'm sleeping alone under the covers at night, I think about my dead Auntie and Uncle and it breaks my heart.

On the way back, I felt a little jumpy when I saw the dark alley way. What would I do, I thought, if a monstrous yellow face appeared in the corner, or a pair of hairy hands reached out at me from that frozen alley. But a glance at the tall strapping man beside me—Ling Jishi—acting as

my bodyguard, reassured me. So when Yufang asked me if I was frightened, I just said, "No. No, I'm not."

Yunlin left with us to go back to his new room. He went south, and we went north, so we'd only gone three or four steps when the sound of his rubber-soled shoes on the muddy boards was no longer audible. "Sophia, you must be scared," said Ling Jishi, reaching out to put his arm around my waist. I considered freeing myself, but couldn't. My head rested on his shoulder. What would I look like in the light, I thought, wrapped in the arms of a man so much taller than I am? I wriggled and slipped free of him. He let go, stood beside me, and knocked at the door.

The alley was extremely dark. But I could clearly see which way he was looking. My heart fluttered slightly as I waited for the gate to open.

"Sophia, you're frightened."

The bolt creaked open as the doorman asked who was there.

"Good ni . . ." I said, but before I'd finished, Ling Jishi was holding my hand tightly.

Seeing the large man standing beside me, the doorman looked surprised.

When the two of us were alone in my room, my bravado disappeared. I tried to conceal my discomfort with a little conventional chatter, but couldn't manage that either. "Sit down" was all that came out, and I went to wash my face. I can't remember how we got off the subject of the supernatural.

"Sophia, are you still interested in studying English?" he suddenly asked.

It was he who had come looking for me. He's the one who brought up the subject of English. He'd never sacrifice his time just to help me with my English, and no one as old as I, over twenty, could be deceived by such an offer. I smiled and said, "I'm too stupid. I probably wouldn't do very well. I'd just make a fool out of myself."

He didn't say anything, just picked up a photograph from the table and toyed with it. It was a picture of my older sister's daughter, who had just turned one.

By that time I'd finished washing my face and was sitting at the end of the table. He looked at me and then back at the little girl, then at me again. It's quite true. She does look a lot like me, so I asked him, "Cute, isn't she? Does she remind you of me?"

"Who is she?" There was unusual earnestness in his voice.

"Tell me, don't you think she's cute?"

He asked again who she was.

Suddenly I realized what he meant by the question, and I had an impulse to lie about it. "She's mine." I snatched the photograph and kissed it.

He believed me. I made a fool of him. My lie was a complete success. His seductiveness faded in the face of my triumph. Otherwise how—once he'd revealed such naiveté—how was I suddenly able to ignore the power of his eyes and become so indifferent to his lips? I had triumphed indeed, but it cast a chill over my heated passion. After he left, I was consumed with regret for all the obvious chances I'd let slip away. If I'd shown more interest when he pressed my hand, if I'd let him know I couldn't refuse him, he'd have gone a lot further. I'm convinced that if you dare to have sex with someone you find reasonably attractive, the pleasure must be like bones dissolving, flesh melting. Why was I so strict and tight with him? Why had I moved to this shabby room in the first place?

January 15

I certainly haven't been lonely recently. Every day I go next door to visit, and at night I sit and talk to my new friend. Yet my condition continues to deteriorate. That discourages me, naturally, since nothing I desire ever ends up helping me. Is this craving really love? It's all so completely absurd. Yet when I think about dying—and I think about it frequently—I'm filled with despair. Every time I see Dr. Kelly's expression I think to myself, it's true, say what you like: there's no hope left, is there? I laugh to mask the tears. No one knows how I cry my eyes out late at night.

Ling Jishi has been over several nights in a row, and he's telling everybody he's helping me with my English. Yundi asked me how it was going, but what could I say? This evening I took a copy of *Poor Folk* and put it in front of Ling Jishi, who actually began to tutor me, but then I threw the book aside. "You needn't tell people you are helping me with my English anymore," I said. "I'm sick and no one believes it anyway." "Sophia," he said hastily, "shall we wait until you're feeling better? I'll do whatever you want, Sophia."

My new friend is quite captivating. Yet for some reason I can't bring myself to pay much attention to him. Every night as I watch him leave morosely, I feel intense regret. Tonight, as he put on his overcoat I said to him, "I'm sorry. Forgive me, but I'm sick." He misunderstood what I meant, took it for convention. "It doesn't matter. I'm not afraid of infection," he said. Later I thought that over. Perhaps his comment had a double meaning. I don't dare believe people are as simple as they appear on the surface.

January 16

Today I received a letter from Yunjie in Shanghai that has plunged me into a deep depression.⁷ How will I ever find the right words to comfort her? In her letter she said, "My life, my love are meaningless now."

Meaning, I suppose, that she has less need than ever for my condolences or tears shed for her. I can imagine from her letter what married life has been like even though she doesn't spell it out in detail. Why does God play tricks on people in love like her? Yunjie is a very emotional and passionate person, so it's not surprising that she finds her husband's growing indifference, his badly concealed pretense at affection unbearable . . . I'd like her to come to Beijing, but is it possible? I doubt it.

I gave Yunjie's letter to Weidi when he came over, and he was genuinely upset because the very man making Yunjie despair is, unfortunately, his own older brother. I told Weidi about my new "philosophy of life." And, true to form, he did the only thing instinct gives him leave to do—he burst into tears. I watched impassively as his eyes turned red and he dried them with his hands. Then I taunted him with a cruel running commentary on his little crying jag. It simply didn't occur to me then that he might indeed be the exception, a genuinely sincere person. Before long I slipped off quietly by myself.

In order to avoid everyone I know, I walked alone around the frigid, lonely park until very late. I don't know how I endured the time. I was obsessed with one thought: "How meaningless everything is, how I'd rather die and have done with it."

January 17

I was just thinking, maybe I'm going crazy. It's fine with me if I lose my mind. I think, once I've got to that point, life's sorrows will never touch me again . . . It's been six months since I stopped drinking because of my illness. Today I drank again, seriously. I can see that what I'm puking now as a consequence is blood-redder than wine. But my heart seemed commanded by something else, and I drank as though the liquor might ease me toward my death tonight. I'm so tired of being obsessed by these same endless complications.

January 18

Right now I'm still resting in my bed. But before long I'll be leaving this room, maybe forever. Can I be certain I'll ever have the pleasure of touching these things again—this pillow, my quilt? Yufang, Yunlin, Weidi, and Jinxia are all sitting protectively in a gloomy little circle around me, waiting anxiously for dawn when they can send me to the hospital. I was awakened by their sad whispers. Since I didn't feel much like talking, I lay back and thought carefully over what had happened yesterday morning. It wasn't until I smelled the stench of blood and wine in the room that I was overcome with agony and convulsive tears. I had a premonition of death as I lay in the heavy silence and watched their dark, an-

guished faces. Suppose I were to sleep on like this and never wake up . . . would they sit just as silently and oppressively around my cold, hard corpse? When they saw I was awake, they drew near me to ask how I felt. That's when I felt the full horror of death and separation. I grabbed at each of them and scrutinized their faces, as though to preserve the memory forever. They all wept, feeling, it seemed, that I was departing for the land of the dead. Especially Weidi; his whole face was swollen, distorted with tears. Oh! I thought, please, dear friends, cheer me up, don't make me feel worse. Then, quite unexpectedly, I started to laugh. I asked them to arrange a few things for me, so out from under my bed they dragged the big rattan box where I kept several little bundles wrapped in embroidered hankies. "Those are the ones I want with me when I go to Union Medical College," I told them. When they handed me the packages I showed them they were stuffed full of letters. I smiled again and said, "All your letters are here," which cheered them up a bit. I also had to smile when Weidi took a picture album from the drawer and pressed it on me as though he wanted me to take that along, too. It contains a half dozen or so photographs exclusively of Weidi. As a special favor I let him hold my hand, kiss it, and caress his face with it; and so, just as we'd finally dispelled the sensation that there was a corpse in the room, the pale light of day broke across the horizon. They all rushed about in an anxious flurry searching for a cab. Thus my life in the hospital began.

March 4

It was twenty days ago that I got the telegram notice of Yunjie's death. Yet for me each passing day means more hope of recovery. On the first of this month, the crowd that had brought me to the hospital moved me back to the freshly cleaned and tidied residence. Fearing I might get cold, they'd even set up a little iron coal stove. I have no idea how to convey my thanks. Especially to Weidi and Yufang. Jin and Zhou also stayed two nights before they had to go. Everyone has played nursemaid, letting me lie in bed all day feeling so comfortable it's hard to believe I'm living in a residence and not at home with my family. Yufang decided she's going to stay with me a couple more days, and then, when it warms up, she'll go to the Western Hills to find me a good place to convalesce. I am so looking forward to getting out of Beijing, but here it is March and it's still so cold! Yufang insists on staying here with me. And I can't really refuse, so the cot set up for Jin and Zhou remains for her to use.

I had a change of heart about some things during my stay in the hospital. I must credit it to the overwhelming kindness and generosity of my friends. Now the universe seems full of love. I am especially grateful to

Ling Jishi. It made me so proud when he visited me in the hospital. I thought that only a man as handsome as he should be allowed to come to the hospital to visit a sick girlfriend. Of course, I was also aware of how much the nurses envied me. One day that gorgeous Miss Yang asked me, "What's that tall man to you?"⁸

"A friend." I ignored the crude implication.

"Is he from your home area?"⁹

"No, he's an overseas Chinese from Singapore."

"Then he's a classmate, right?"

"No, he isn't."

She smiled knowingly, "He's just a friend, right?"

Of course I had no reason to blush and I could have called her on her rudeness, but I was ashamed to. She watched the way I closed my eyes indecisively, pretending to be sleepy. Finally she gave a satisfied laugh and walked off. After that she always annoyed me. To avoid further trouble, I lied whenever anyone asked about Weidi. I said he was my brother. There was a little guy who was a good friend of Zhou's whom I also lied about. I told them that he was a relative or close friend of the family from my home province.

When Yufang leaves for class and I am alone in the room, I reread all the letters I've gotten in the last month or so. It makes me feel happy and satisfied to know there are so many people who still remember me. I need to be remembered. The more the better. Father, needless to say, sent me another picture of himself, hair whiter than ever. My older sisters are all fine, but too busy taking care of their children to write more often.

I hadn't yet finished rereading my letters when Ling Jishi came by again. I wanted to get up but he restrained me. When he took my hand, I could have wept for joy.

"Did you ever think I'd make it back to this room?" I asked him. He gazed, tangibly disappointed, at the spare bed shoved up against the wall. I told him that my guests were gone but that the bed was left up for Yufang. When he heard that, he told me that he was afraid of annoying Yufang and so he wouldn't return that evening. I was ecstatic. "Aren't you afraid that I'll be annoyed?" I said.

He sat on the bed and told me in detail what had happened over the past month, how he had clashed with Yunlin over a difference of opinion: Ling Jishi felt I should have left the hospital earlier, but Yunlin had steadfastly refused to allow it. Yufang had agreed with Yunlin. Ling Jishi realized he hadn't known me very long and that therefore his opinion did not carry much weight. So he gave up. When he happened to run into Yunlin at the hospital, he would leave first.

I knew what he meant, but I pretended not to understand. "You're always talking about Yunlin," I said. "If it hadn't been for Yunlin, I

wouldn't have left the hospital at all, I was so much more comfortable there." I watched him turn his head silently to one side. He didn't answer.

When he thought Yufang was about to return, he told me quietly that he'd be back tomorrow. Then he left. Shortly after that Yufang came home. Yufang didn't ask and I didn't tell her anything. She doesn't like to talk too much, since with my illness I might easily exhaust myself. That was fine with me. It gave me a chance to think my own thoughts.

March 6

After Yufang went to class, leaving me alone in the room, I started thinking about weird things that go on between men and women. It's not that I love boasting, actually, it's just that my training in this regard is far greater than all of my friends' combined. Still, recently I've felt at a spectacular loss to understand what is happening. When I sit alone with Ling Jishi, my heart leaps and I'm humiliated, frightened. But he just sits there, nonchalantly, reaching over to grasp my hand from time to time, and tells stories about his past with apparent naiveté. Although he carries on with supremely natural ease, I find that my fingers cannot rest quietly in his massive hand; they burn. Yet when he rises to go, I feel an attack of anxiety as though I am about to stumble into something really horrible. So I stare at him, and I'm not really sure whether my eyes seek pity or flash with resentment. Whatever he sees there, he ignores. But he seems to understand how I feel. "Yufang will be back soon," he says. What can I say to that? He's still afraid of Yufang! Normally I wouldn't like to have anybody know what kind of private fantasies I've been having recently; on the other hand, I do feel the need to have someone understand my feelings.¹⁰ I've tried to talk indirectly with Yufang about this, but she just covers me with the quilt loyally and fusses about my medication. It depresses me.

March 8

Yufang has moved out, and Weidi wants to take over her job. I knew I would be more comfortable with him here than I was when Yufang nursed me. If I wanted tea in the middle of the night, for instance, I wouldn't have to creep back under my quilt with disappointment, as I did when I heard Yufang snoring and I didn't think it would be fair to disturb her sleep. But I refused his kind offer, naturally. When he insisted, I told him bluntly, "If you are here I will be inconvenienced in a number of ways, and anyway I'm feeling better."

He kept insisting that the room next door was empty and he could live there. I was just at my wit's end when Ling Jishi came in. I didn't think they knew each other, but Ling Jishi shook Weidi's hand and told me they'd met twice before at the hospital. Weidi ignored him coldly.

"This is my little brother," I said with a laugh to Ling Jishi. "He's just a kid who doesn't know how to act in mixed company. Drop by more often and we'll have a great time together." With that Weidi really did turn into a child, pulling a long face as he rose and left. I was annoyed that somebody had been present when this took place, and I felt it would be best to change the subject. I also felt apologetic toward Ling Jishi. But he didn't seem to notice particularly. Instead he just asked, "Isn't his last name Bai? How can he be your younger brother?"

I laughed. "So you only let people surnamed Ling call you 'Little Brother' or 'Big Brother,'" I said to him, making him chuckle.

These days when young people get together, they love to explore the meaning of the word "love." Although I feel at times that I understand love, in the end I can never really explain it. I know all about what goes on between men and women. Perhaps what I already know about it makes love seem vague, makes it hard for me to believe in love between the sexes, makes it impossible to think of myself as someone pure enough, innocent enough to be loved. I am skeptical of what everyone calls "love." I'm just as skeptical of the love I've received.

I was just becoming aware of the realities of life when those who loved me made me suffer by allowing outsiders the chance to humiliate and slander me. Even my most intimate friends abandoned me. And it was precisely for fear of the threat of love that I left school.¹¹ Although I mature more each day, those previous liaisons influenced me so much that I still have doubts about love and sometimes thoroughly despise the intimacy love brings. Weidi claims he loves me. Then why does he make me so miserable all the time? He came over again this evening, for instance, and as soon as he got here, he burst into tears and sobbed his eyes out. No matter what I said—"What's wrong with you? Please talk to me" or "Weidi, say something, I beg you"—he just carried on as before. Nothing quite like this had ever happened before. I exhausted myself trying to guess what catastrophe had befallen him until I couldn't think of any other possibilities. Eventually he cried himself out. Then he started in on me.

"I don't like him."

"Who's bullying you, Weidi? Who made you cry and throw this tantrum?"

"I don't like that tall guy. The one you're so close to now."

Oh! I really hadn't realized until then that he was furious over something I had done. Without thinking, I started to chuckle. This insipid jealousy, this selfish possessiveness, this is love? I couldn't help myself. I broke into laughter. And that, of course, did nothing to calm poor Weidi's raging heart. In fact, my condescending attitude increased his fury. Watching his blazing eyes, I got the feeling that what he really wanted

was to rip me to shreds. "Go ahead and do it," I thought to myself. But he just put his head down, started bawling again, and rubbing tears from his eyes, staggered out the door.

A scene like this might conceivably be considered an ardent expression of tempestuous love. Yet Weidi stages these things for me with such artless lack of forethought that he defeats himself. I'm not asking him to be false or affected in the expression of his love. It's just I feel it's futile for him to try to move me by acting like a child. Maybe I'm just hard by nature. If so, I deserve all the anxiety and heartbreak that my failure to live up to people's expectations has brought me.

As soon as Weidi left, I scrutinized my own intentions. I recalled in vivid detail someone else's tenderness, someone else's warmth, generosity, and openly passionate bearing, and I was so drunk with sweet joy that I took out a postcard, wrote a few sentences, and ordered the attendant to take it over to Dormitory No. 4.

March 9

When I see Ling Jishi sit so relaxed and casually in my room, I can't help pitying Weidi. I pray that not every woman in the world will neglect and disdain his great sincerity, as I do, thus submerging myself in a morass of guilty sorrow I cannot get free of. More than that. I hope a pure young girl comes along who will redeem Weidi's love, fill the emptiness he must feel.

March 13

I haven't written anything in days. I don't know whether it's because I'm depressed or that I just can't find the so-called right mood. All I know is that since yesterday all I've wanted is to cry. When the others see me crying, they think I'm homesick or worried about my health. When they see me smile, of course, they think I'm happy, radiant with the glow of improving health . . . but my "friends" are all the same. Who can I tell about my stupid moods, which I refuse to cry over but haven't the strength to laugh at? Since I know it's because I won't forsake my ardent, worldly expectations, and because everything I try to do ends in disappointment, even I can no longer sympathize with myself when I end up heartbroken, as I invariably do. How can I possibly take pen in hand and spell out in detail all my self-accusations and self-hatred?

Yes, I guess I'm whining again. But it's only silent suffering, the unrestrainable repetition of my own voice inside my head, so it doesn't matter. I've never had the sort of courage it takes to let people see my agony or listen to me moan, although people very early on unconditionally labeled me as "haughty" and "eccentric." Actually, I don't want to whine so much as to cry. I want someone who'll hold me close and let me sob,

someone who'll listen to me cry, "I've degraded myself again!" But who will understand me? Who will embrace me and comfort me? Only laughter prevents me from crying aloud, "I've degraded myself again."

What I'm really doing is very difficult to put into words. Naturally I have never for a moment acknowledged to myself that I might be in love with Ling Jishi. But if I'm not, why do I find him vaguely present at the core of my most intimate thoughts? His tall lean body, his delicate flower-soft skin, his soft lips and provocative eyes are tempting to women susceptible to beauty, and his languid sensuality unsettles me. But how could I become infatuated with this totally foreign man just because of his unwitting seductiveness? Our most recent conversations have taught me a lot more about his really stupid ideas. All he wants is money. Money. A young wife to entertain his business associates in the living room, and several fat, fair-skinned, well-dressed little sons. What does love mean to him? Nothing more than spending money in a brothel, squandering it on a moment of carnal pleasure, or sitting on a soft sofa fondling scented flesh, a cigarette between his lips, his legs crossed casually, laughing and talking with his friends. When it's not fun anymore, never mind; he just runs home to his little wifey. He's passionate about the Debate Club, playing tennis matches, studying at Harvard, joining the foreign service, becoming an important statesman, or inheriting his father's business and becoming a rubber merchant. He wants to be a capitalist . . . that is the extent of his ambition! Aside from dissatisfaction because his father hasn't sent him enough money, there isn't anything to disturb his sleep. Were there, it would be displeasure at finding so few pretty girls in Beijing and the fact that he finds going to so many theaters, so many plays, movies, and public gardens so very, very tiresome . . . God! What else is there to say? When I think that in this precious, beautiful form I adore, there resides such a cheap, ordinary soul, and that for no apparent reason I've gotten intimate with him several times (but nothing even approaching what he gets at his brothel)! When I think about how his lips brushed my hair, I'm so overwhelmed with regret I nearly break down. Don't I offer myself to him for his pleasures the same as any whore? But what makes the whole thing so painful is that I have only myself to blame. Because if I had been able or willing to face him with determined refusal in my eyes, I dare say he would never have been this bold with me. And I dare say the reason he wouldn't is that he's never been ignited by the fires of passionate love. Oh God! How can I revile myself enough!

March 14

Is this love? Perhaps only love can influence us so powerfully; otherwise, how could my thoughts have been so easily reversed. When I fell asleep,

I despised the gorgeous man. But as soon as I woke up, opened my tired eyes, the philistine was in my thoughts at once.¹² I wondered . . . Would he come today? When? Morning? Afternoon? Evening?

Then I leapt out of bed, quickly washed my face, made the bed. I picked up the large book I'd dropped on the floor last night and stroked its spine. It was a copy of Wilson's collected speeches, which Ling Jishi had left behind the night before.¹³

March 14, evening

I've been living an illusion, an illusion which Ling Jishi created for me—and which he just destroyed. Because of him, I can drink the sweet wine of youthful love to my heart's content and spend the morning basking in the smile of love. Yet also because of him, I now appreciate this plaything "life." I've been disenchanted, think again of death; the self-loathing I feel at my own willingness to fall is the lightest punishment. Really, there are times when I wonder whether I have the strength to kill him in order to protect my romantic illusion.

I've thought it over and decided that to preserve the beautiful fantasy and prevent my vitality from ebbing away day by day it's best that I go immediately to the Western Hills. But Yufang says her friend in the Western Hills whom she'd asked to find a room hasn't answered her letter yet. I can't really make further inquiries or pressure her, can I? So I made my decision. I decided to give that bastard a taste of me when I'm not so passive, a little taste of my outrageous arrogance and sharp, derisive tongue.

March 17

The other night Weidi left in a great rage. Today he cautiously returned to make his meek peace with me, and I couldn't help chuckling at that. I found myself thinking how cute he is. If all a woman wanted was an honest man to live with, I don't think she could find anybody to match Weidi for reliability. "Weidi," I asked jokingly, "do you still hate me?" "I don't dare," he said, abashed. "You understand me, dear sister. I have no designs on you other than hoping you don't completely abandon me. I only want you to be healthy and happy. That's quite enough for me." That is true devotion! Genuinely moving! How can an ashen face and ruby lips compare to this? Then I said to him, "Weidi, you're all right. The future is sure to bring you everything you've wanted." He responded with a pained smile. "That will never happen. I only wish things could be as you say." Not again. He was making me despair all over again! If only I could kneel down in front of him and beg him to love me like a friend or brother. Out of pure selfishness, I wish I could decrease these complications and increase my own happiness. Weidi loves me. And he

can mouth those lovely sounding words. But he overlooks two things: first, he really ought to cool his ardor, and second, he should learn to hide his love. I can't stand the pain of regret in the face of my own ambivalence toward this ingenuous man.

March 18

I asked Xia to go to the Western Hills and find me a place to stay.

March 19

To my amazement, Ling Jishi hasn't been by in days. Then again, I don't dress well, I'm no good at entertaining, I'm a terrible housekeeper, I've got TB, and I'm broke. So why should he? I didn't need him in the first place. Only when he doesn't come, I feel so terrible and become convinced of his fickleness. Could it really be that he's as genuine as Weidi, and when he read the note I sent him—"I'm sick. Please don't bother me anymore"—he believed it and stopped coming out of respect for my wishes? This uncertainty makes me want to see him again, if only to make sure once and for all what this strange creature sees when he looks at me.

March 20

Today I went over to Yunlin's place three times without bumping into the person I wanted to see. Yunlin suspected something and asked whether or not I had seen Ling Jishi over the past few days. I returned dispiritedly. I'm terribly worried and there's no sense deceiving myself; I've been thinking about him constantly.

Yufang and Yunlin came by at seven to invite me to Jingdu University to an English debate at Third College. Ling Jishi is the captain of the second team. My heart began to pound when I heard that last bit of news. But I used my health as an excuse to decline their kind invitation. I'm a useless weakling. I don't have the courage to withstand that kind of excitement. I still hope I won't have to see him. Yet as they left, I asked them to send my greetings to Ling Jishi and tell him I was asking after him. Damn. How stupid can I be!

March 21

I had just finished drinking my egg and milk when I heard the familiar knock at the door and a long shadow appeared on the paper window pane. My one thought was to leap up and open the door but at the direction of an inexplicable emotion, I swallowed hard and bowed my head. "Sophia, are you up?" His voice was so gentle that the second I heard it, I nearly burst out crying.

Did he just want to know if I was out of bed and sitting in the chair? Or was it to find out if I'd be capable of rage and refuse to see him? Tentatively he pushed the door open and came into the room. I didn't dare to raise my wet eyes.

"Are you feeling better? Did you just get up?"

I said nothing.

"You're really angry with me, aren't you, Sophia. I bore you. I'd guess I'd better go." It should have suited me fine to see him leave. Suddenly I raised my head, my gaze stopping at his hand as he reached for the door.

Who says he isn't a bastard? He understood the situation perfectly and boldly grasped my hand.

"Sophia, you're playing with me. I've passed your door every day but didn't dare come in. If Yunlin hadn't assured me you wouldn't get angry, I'd never have dared come today. Sophia, are you sick of me already?"

Had he dared to embrace me, had he kissed me passionately, I'd have fallen into his arms and cried, "I love you! God! I love you!" But he was so dispassionate, so cool and dispassionate, that I hated him for it. "Come, hold me," I thought wildly, "I want to kiss your face!" Naturally, through all of this he was still holding my hands, his eyes fixed steadily on my face. I searched frantically but nowhere in his expression could I find what I wanted. Why is he only able to respond to my helplessness, my vulnerabilities? And why doesn't he understand what position he occupies in *my* heart? I wished I could kick him out, but a different kind of feeling dominated me. I shook my head, to indicate I wasn't upset at his coming over.

So once again I yielded to his shallow affection and listened while he talked animatedly about the stupid pleasures he enjoys so much, listened to him expound on his philosophy that making money and spending money sum up the meaning of life. I even acceded to his insinuation that I try acting more feminine. That made me despise him even more than before, and I cursed him and ridiculed him secretly, even as inwardly my fists struck painfully at my heart. Yet when he left me quite triumphantly, I was so upset I could barely contain myself. I'd repressed my frenzied desires. I hadn't begged him to stay.

He left.

March 21, evening

What a life I was living last year at this time! To trick Yunjie into babying me unreservedly, I'd pretend to be sick and refuse to get out of bed. I'd sit and whimper about the most trivial dissatisfactions to work on her tearful anxiety and get her to fondle me. Then there were the times when,

after spending an entire day in silent meditation, the mood of desolation I'd finally achieved made me unwilling to do anything, since by that time I could derive such utter sweetness from it. It hurts even more to think about the nights I spent lying on the grass in French Park listening to Yunjie sing "Peony Pavilion."¹⁴ If she hadn't been tricked by God into loving that ashen-faced man, she would never have died so fast and I wouldn't have wandered into Beijing alone, trying, sick as I was, to fend for myself, friendless and without family. I admit I do have some friends here. Very sympathetic friends, in fact. But how could I possibly equate my relation to them with the love Yunjie and I had. When I think of Yunjie, I want so badly to lose myself in unrestrained sobs, the way I could do when we were together. But I've gotten more self-conscious this year. Even though I'm always on the edge of tears, I choke them back out of fear people will get tired of hearing about my troubles. Recently I've struggled even harder to understand why I get so desperately anxious. I no longer seem to find the time and leisure to sit and contemplate my own actions, my thoughts, my health, my reputation, or what, good or bad, is going to happen to me in the future. All day long my tangled mind revolves around what I try not to think about. It's precisely what I want to avoid that drives me to the extreme of mental distress. Besides stating for the record that I deserve to die, what other hope is there? Can I solicit sympathy and comfort? Even now I sound like I'm just begging for pity.

Yufang and Yunlin came over after dinner. When it got to be nine, I was still unwilling to let them go. I knew that Yufang could only stay a little longer, just to save my face. Yunlin seized on the pretext that he had to prepare for tomorrow's class and left alone. So very circumspectly I mentioned to Yufang how tormented I'd been feeling lately. I really thought she'd understand. I thought she'd take the initiative and force me to change my way of life, since I'm clearly not up to doing it myself. But when she'd heard what I had to say, she took it at its opposite meaning and warned me: "Sophia, I don't think you're being honest. Naturally you don't intend anything, but you should be more careful about the way you look at men. You must realize that people like Ling Jishi are not like the guys we ran around with in Shanghai."¹⁵ They have very little contact with women and don't understand well-intentioned friendliness. You don't want him to end up disappointed and unhappy, do you? I say this because I know you would never actually fall in love with a man like Ling." The blame, it seemed, was on me now. If I hadn't enlisted her help but had just complained, would she have said such infuriating things to me? I swallowed my anger and smiled. "Yufang, don't make me out to be so awful!"

Yufang was willing to spend the night, but I got rid of her.

When they are feeling bad, talented women these days can write poems about "how depressed I am," "Oh, the tragic sufferings of my heart," and so on. I'm not gifted that way. I find I'm incapable of exploiting a poetic situation. Or even of letting my tears act as poems to somehow express the terrible war going on in my emotions. Actually, given this feeling of inadequacy, I ought to forget everything and pack myself off again to start my life over. I should make myself good with either a pen or a gun even if its purpose is just my own vanity or to win the praise of some shallow audience.¹⁶ I've lowered myself into a dominion of suffering worse than death. All for that man's soft hair and red lips . . .

It was the chivalric European medieval knights I was dreaming about. It's still not a bad comparison; anyone who looks at Ling Jishi can see it, though he also preserves his own special Eastern gentleness. God took all the other good qualities and lavished them on him. Why couldn't God make him intelligent? He doesn't understand what love is. If fact, he hasn't the slightest idea, though he has a wife (Yufang told me tonight), and once in Singapore he had a short affair with some woman in a rickshaw he'd chased on his bike. All those nights at the Hanjiatan brothel notwithstanding, has he ever really experienced a woman's love? Has he ever loved a woman? I dare say he has not.

A strange thought burned its way into my mind again. I think I'll teach this college boy a lesson. The universe is not as simple as he seems to think!

March 22

In my mental confusion I've managed to force myself to keep this diary. I initially started it because Yunjie wrote and asked me repeatedly to do so. Now even though Yunjie has been dead a long time, I can't bear to give it up. I suppose I'll go on forever, writing the diary in her memory as a testimonial to all the things she told me while she was alive. However much I'd rather not, I always feel I have to scrawl a page or so. I'd been dozing, but I couldn't stand seeing Yunjie's picture looking at me from its place on the wall, so I got up and started noting things down to avoid the pain of thinking about her. I have always felt I didn't want anybody but Yun reading this diary. That's because I was writing it primarily because she wanted to know about my life, which I recorded in quotidian detail, and second, because I'm afraid that another reader might turn the face of Reason on me, and I'd be devastated. It seems that I really do feel like a criminal when I violate the moral code that other people prize so highly. So for a long time, I've kept the little black leather

book under the mattress below my pillow. Today, inopportunely, I disobeyed my original injunction. In retrospect it seems fated, though at the time I appeared to act without forethought. I did it because Weidi has been consistently misinterpreting me lately, using his observations to feed his chronic apprehension, then infecting me with his anxiety. I believe my behavior has always made my attitude perfectly clear. How could he possibly misunderstand me? If I told him directly, would that obliterate his love? I often think that if it weren't Weidi but someone else, I'd know how to deal with it better. But no. He's such a good person that I just can't steel my heart against him. I had no other recourse. I gave him my diary to read. It was to show him the hopelessness of his situation, how undeserving of love, how cold and inconstant a woman I am. If, of course, by reading my diary, Weidi ended up understanding me, then he'd become my intimate confidant, the friend to whom I could pour out my heart, embrace earnestly, kiss. Then I'd become the most beloved, beautiful woman in the world, the woman of his desires.

Diary, Weidi read through the pages once. Then once again. All the while he remained self-composed despite tears. I had not anticipated this. "Do you understand me," I said.

He nodded.

"Do you believe me?"

"Concerning what?"

Finally his nod made sense. A reader who really understood would know that the diary revealed only a fraction of me, and could then help me see my limitations and misery. How could I hope for understanding from a reader, when all I give him is a diary carefully crafted to convey meaning solely through writing? That's devastating enough by itself. On top of that, Weidi was afraid that I'd thought he'd not fully understood me, so he burst out, "You love him. You love him! I'm not good enough for you."

I nearly tore the diary to pieces out of spite. I'd debased it by letting Weidi see it—how could I claim otherwise?

"I want to go to sleep," was all I could think of to say. "Come back tomorrow."

We can expect nothing from other people. That's terrifying, isn't it? If Yunjie were alive and read my diary, I know that she'd hold me in her arms. "Oh, Sophia, my Sophia," she'd cry. "Why can't my valor rescue Sophia from so much suffering?" But Yunjie is dead. I cannot figure the best way to grieve with this diary.

March 23

Ling Jishi said to me, "Sophia, you really are a strange girl." This was not, I repeat, not praise based on a clear grasp of who I am. He finds

strangeness in the fact that I wear tattered gloves, that I don't perfume my dresser drawers, that at times for no reason I've been known to tear my new cotton-padded jacket, that I've saved some old toys from childhood. What else? He hears me laugh from time to time. There's nothing more to it. He comprehends nothing. And I've never said anything to him that really came out of me. For instance, when he says, "I want to focus on making money from now on," I laugh. When he talks about the time he went to the park with some friends to harass women students—"Boy, that was interesting, Sophia"—I laugh. All he really means by strange, of course, are things that fall outside the scope of his ordinary life. It hurts me deeply that I'm not able to command his respect and understanding. Now all I want is to go to the Western Hills. Contemplating the absurd fantasy he used to inspire in me, I can't help laughing at myself.

March 24

When he's here alone with me, I suffer scouring torment as I stare into his face and listen to the musical sound of his voice. Why don't I crush his mouth with kisses, his temples, his . . . his whole body. The words "My lord and master! Grant me one kiss!" rise to my lips. But then reason overcomes me—no, no, I've never been reasonable. It's my self-respect that surfaces and controls my emotions allowing me to choke back the words. My God! No matter how dreadful his ideas, there is no doubt he is driving me mad with desire, so why can't I admit that I'm in love with him? Not only that, I know for certain fact that were he to hold me tightly in his arms, let me shower his body with kisses, and then throw me into the sea, or into an inferno, I would happily close my eyes and await the arrival of the death that sealed my love. God! I love him so much. Let him give me a sweet death; I'll be satisfied . . .

March 24, midnight

I've made up my mind. In order to save myself from being destroyed by this sexual obsession, I'm going to Xia's place tomorrow morning.¹⁷ It's to spare myself the torment of seeing Ling Jishi, torment that has ensnared my life for too long already.

March 26

I left because of one involvement. But I got tangled up in another, so I had to rush back again. My second day at Xia's place, Mengru arrived.¹⁸ Although she said she'd come to see somebody else, her arrival made me feel terrible. That night she expanded at great length on some new theory of emotions she'd picked up somewhere, taunting me covertly as I lay there in silence. To deny her any further satisfaction, I closed my eyes

and lay on Xia's bed until daybreak when, rage barely checked, I rushed home.

Yufang told me she'd found a place in the Western Hills and that she'd gotten hold of a good friend, also recuperating from illness, who'd stay with me. I should have been delighted by the news, but even though I forced a smile onto my face, I felt a cold mournfulness settling over me. Although I left home at an early age and have pretty much run wild since, I have always had a few friends or relatives close by. This time, even though I'm only going to the Western Hills, only a couple of miles from town, it will be the first time in my whole short life I've ever gone to a strange place by myself. If I were to die in those hills, who'd be the one to discover my corpse? Who can reassure me that I won't die out there? Other people might smile and say I'm morbid, but I really did cry over this once before. When I asked Yufang if she would be able to let me go that far, she just laughed at my infantile question and said it was such a short distance that it was hardly a matter of being able or not. Finally Yufang promised me she'd come to the hills every week. Embarrassed, I dried my eyes.

That afternoon I went over to Weidi's place and got him to promise he'd also come to the hills once a week, on a day Yufang wasn't coming.

I got back home that night and began to pack desolately. As I thought about the Beijing friends I'm leaving behind, I started to cry. When it finally struck me that they had no intention of ever weeping over me, I brushed aside the tears running down my face. I'll leave this ancient city alone.

I thought of Ling Jishi again, I was so lonely. Actually, that's not entirely accurate. With Ling Jishi it's not a matter of saying "I thought of him . . . then I thought of him again." Since I'd been thinking of him obsessively all day, it's closer to the truth to say that I wanted "to *talk about* my Ling Jishi again."

March 27

Yufang went to the Western Hills early this morning to get the room fixed up for me. She determined that I'd leave tomorrow. How can I repay her enormous kindness when I can't even put my gratitude into words? I had thought initially of staying another day in the city, but now I just can't force myself to say so.

Just when my anxiety over leaving so early was at its peak, Ling Jishi arrived. I grasped his hands tightly. "Sophia," he said. "I haven't seen you in days!"

How I longed to burst into tears and cling to him, weeping. My tears refused to flow. I was reduced to grinning. I did get a little consolation;

on hearing that I'd be leaving tomorrow for the hills, he was so surprised that he was moved to sigh. My expression became more genuine. His grip tightened in response to my smile, so tight it hurt. "You're smiling," he said resentfully. "You're smiling."

The pain this cause him flooded me with a pleasure I'd never experienced before; it felt as though something had pierced my heart. Just as I was about to fall straight into his arms, Weidi arrived. Weidi knew I hated him for coming at that moment, but he wouldn't leave. I gave Ling Jishi a sign with my eyes and said to him. "Don't you have a class now?"

Then I escorted Ling out. He asked me when I was scheduled to leave the next morning. I told him. I asked him whether or not he was going to come back before then. He said he'd be back soon. I looked at him happily, forgetting how despicable his character is, and the mirage that is his beauty, because at that moment he was a storybook lover in my eyes.¹⁹ Hah! Sophia has a lover . . .

March 27, evening

I rushed Weidi out of here five hours ago. How can I describe those hours? Restlessly, in this cramped room, like an insect on a hot pan, I've sat, then stood, then rushed to the crack in the door to peer out. But . . . he isn't coming. He just isn't coming. Again I teetered on the edge of tears because my exit from Beijing has to be so desolate and lonely. In all Beijing will no one cry with me? I should just leave this cruel city. Why am I so loathe to renounce this hard board bed, the greasy desk, the three-legged chairs? . . . That's it. I'm leaving tomorrow. My friends in Beijing will never be burdened with Sophia's illness again. Why doesn't Sophia do her friends a huge favor and die somewhere out in the Western Hills. They're perfectly willing to let me go off to the hills lonely, desperate, friendless. On the other hand, presumably I won't die and people won't be harmed or unduly grieved . . . Oh, don't worry it to death. Don't think about it! What's there to think about, anyway? If Sophia weren't so needy that she ran around begging for an emotional fix, then she'd get some satisfaction from the looks of sympathy she does get, wouldn't she? . . .

I have nothing further to say on the subject of friends. I only know that Sophia will never find satisfaction in ordinary friendship.

But what satisfaction can I ever expect? Ling Jishi promised he'd come. It's already 9 P.M. Even if he does, will that make me happy? Can he give me what I need? . . .

I've even more reasons to hate myself now that it's clear he's not coming. In the far, far distant past, I knew how to adjust my style to suit the

man, but I've gotten quite moronic about that lately. Why did I give him such a supplicating look when I asked if he'd be back? In the case of such an attractive man, I should avoid being too candid, since he'll just despise me for it . . . But I love him. So why should I use technique? Can't I express my love directly? Anyway, providing that it harms no one, why shouldn't I be allowed to kiss him as many times as I want to?

He said that he was coming back, but he's broken his promise again, so it's clear he's only playing me along. You wouldn't lose anything, beloved friend, just by humoring Sophia a little on her way out of town.

I've gone insane tonight. How useless speech and the written word seem now! My heart heels as though it were being gnawed by tiny rats, as though a fire inside it were raging out of control. How I'd love to smash everything in sight. How I'd love to rush out into the night and run wildly in desperate confusion. I can't control the surges of madness. I lie on this bed of the thorns of passion. I turn this way and feel the stabs; I turn the other way only to be pierced again. I'm in a vat of oil listening to its roaring boil, feeling its burning heat sear my entire body . . . Why don't I run away? Because I linger over a vague and meaningless wish. God! . . . When I think of those red lips, I lose my mind again. If this wish could only come true. All alone, I can't restrain my own explosive laughter as I interrogate myself compulsively: "Do I love him?" Then I break into fresh gales of laughter. Sophia could never be such a fool as to allow herself to love that man from Singapore to such extremity. Is it possible that because I refuse to admit I love him I'll never be allowed to consummate this perfectly harmless relationship?

If he doesn't come tonight, how can I just leave complacently for the Western Hills?

Damn! 9:30!

9:40!

March 28, 3:00 A.M.

In the course of my life, my desire for people to understand and sympathize with me has been too strong, which is why I've felt such bitter despair for so long. Only I know how many tears I've shed.

Rather than calling this diary a record of my life, it's more accurate to regard it as the sum of all my tears. At least that's the way it feels. But now it's time to end the diary because Sophia doesn't need it anymore, doesn't need it as a vent or consolation, since now she understands that nothing has any meaning whatever and that tears are only the most elegant proof of that lack. Yet on this last page of the diary, I ought fervently to toast the fact that suddenly from the depth of disappointment I did achieve the satisfaction that should rightly have killed me with ecstasy. I

. . . I . . . all I felt out of that satisfaction was victory. From victory came a terrible sorrow and an even profounder understanding of how pathetic and ludicrous I am. And so the "beauty" that has been the focus of my tangled dreams for months was dissolved away, revealed as nothing more than the image of a tall man's exquisite bearing.

How shall I analyze the psychology of a woman driven insane by the way a man looks? Of course I didn't love him, and the reason why is easy to explain: inside his beautiful appearance his soul is completely degraded! But I revered him. I thought about him so much that without him I'd have abandoned all that makes life meaningful. I often thought that if one day my lips touched his, I'd happily see my own body disintegrate from the force of my heart's violent laughter. In fact, for a sweet, soft caress from that knightly man, wherever his fingers deigned to touch me, I would willingly have sacrificed everything.

I ought to be mad with joy now, since all the wondrous elements of my fantasy actually happened to me as though in a dream, effortlessly. But did I get all the soul-intoxicating bliss I had imagined? No!

When he—when Ling Jishi—came in at ten and began stammering about his desire to have me, I felt my heart throbbing in my breast. The lust in his eyes scared me. I felt my self-respect revive finally as I listened to the disgusting pledges sworn out of the depths of Ling Jishi's depravity. If he'd tried the same pat, superficial, revolting come-on with some other woman, she would certainly have been fascinated and he might well have achieved his goal. But when he tried it on me, he drove me off by the very force of all those words. Stupid, pathetic man! God granted you this beauty of form but deceived you by giving you a totally incongruous soul. Did you really think that all I desire is marriage and family?²⁰ That all that amuses me is money? That all I'm proud of is my "position"? You have shown yourself to be an extraordinarily pathetic man! As I teetered on the edge of tears over this turn of events, he locked his eyes on my face. The lust burning in his eyes was terrible. If he'd wanted nothing more than sexual satisfaction, he might conceivably have seduced me with his sensuous beauty. But then in a tearful, trembling voice he said, "Trust me, Sophia, just trust me. I'll never fail you."

Wretched, wretched man! He still had no inkling of the disdainful pity the woman seated before him felt at his stooping to such a ridiculous affectation. Finally I burst out laughing. It's absurd to say that he knows what love is, that he's able to love me. Beyond revealing his shallow, contemptible need, those outrageous, lustful, flashing eyes made it certain that he would never understand a thing.

"Oh stop it! Get out of here! You'll find the kind of pleasure you like at Weijia brothel." Since I saw through him so clearly, I should have said

that. I should have told one of the vilest beasts on the face of the earth to leave me the hell alone. Yet even as I was secretly ridiculing him, when he flung his arms around me in a reckless, bold gesture, I forgot everything. I stood poised to toss away all my self-esteem and pride. I was bewitched by this man who had only his appearance to offer. In my heart all I could think was "Tighter. Hold me longer. I'm leaving tomorrow." If I'd had a little self-control at that moment, I'd have thought beyond his beautiful form and thrown him out of my house like a rock.

God! What words, what feelings can voice my bitter regret. That disgusting creature Ling Jishi kissed me! I endured it in silence! But what did my heart feel when lips so warm and tender brushed my face? I couldn't allow myself to be like other women who faint into their lovers' arms! I screwed open my eyes wide and looked straight in his face. "I've won!" I thought "I've won!" Because when he kissed me, I finally knew the taste of the thing that had so bewitched me. At the same moment I despised myself.

Suddenly I felt deeply hurt; pushing him away with all my strength I wept.

He probably dismissed my tears. Maybe he thought that the warmth and tenderness of his lips, their smooth delicacy, had made my heart so drunk with joy that I'd just gone crazy. So he sat nearer and went on muttering the revolting nonsense that he believes expresses love.

"Why go on showing your most repellent weakness?" I thought, but I felt a surge of pity for him again. I said, "Don't be ridiculous. There's no certainty I'll be alive tomorrow."

It's hard to say what his reaction was. He tried to kiss me again. But I moved away and his lips fell to my hand . . . I decided then that as I was in full control of my mental faculties, I wanted him out. He looked peeved; he kept after me. I thought, "Why are you so incredibly stupid?" It was almost 12:30 before he'd go.

After he left, I tried to think about what had just happened. I drew on every strength remaining to me and struck my heart! Why, why had I permitted a man I despise to kiss me? I don't love him. In fact, I mock and ridicule him. Yet I permitted him to embrace me. Was it just his knightlike airs that had brought me so low as this?

In short, I caused my own ruin. The self is every person's true enemy. How in God's name will I ever avenge myself and restore what I have lost?

It's certainly fortunate that in this universe, my life is my own plaything. I've wasted more than enough of it. This one experience had me

plunged into the most profound anguish. Yet I now feel as though it's been a mere trifle.

I don't want to stay in Beijing. I'm even less interested in the Western Hills. I've decided to take a train south, somewhere where no one knows me, where I can squander the remaining days of my life. The agony is gone and I feel excitement. I laugh wildly, I feel so sorry for myself.

Life sneaks on. Death too. Oh, how pathetic you are Sophia!

Translated by Tani E. Barlow



Shanghai, Spring 1930

Ding Ling wrote the two chapters that make up this novella in June and October of 1930. It was a time when she and “bourgeois” writers like her felt that the ground on which they stood, from which they spoke, had shifted suddenly and forcibly. Cultural figures increasingly saw it as their responsibility to resist Japanese encroachments and rightist reaction. It reflects the turmoil surrounding her that the two halves of this novella belong together only by force of a certain intellectual logic. But the disjointedness of the chapters is misleading, for each is the account of a heterosexual couple in domestic conflict. Side by side the parts recombine so that each gender contributes one progressive and one “bourgeois” protagonist in a neat four-cornered structure.

Ding Ling was also beginning to develop a more social cast to her fiction whereby relationships between people precede personality. Later this would develop into the cast-iron code that class relations determine personal identity. Her more socialist orientation accounts for the life she manages to breathe into what could have been a very ordinary plot. If, as the Communist writer Ding Ling would later insist, character emerges in daily practice, then personality is indeed malleable, not essential, and relations between women and men really are remediable. The literary practices to which resistance culture was exposed (from, for example, anti-imperialist Russia), as well as the new appreciation of European naturalism, licensed colonized writers to begin drawing on certain older, previously discredited conventions for representing human affairs in fiction. In Ding Ling’s work, personality began appearing as the effect of prior social relationships, and also as a secondary focus, the new emphasis being plot mechanics.

Both Meilin (the Chinese name is significant) and Mary are women. Meilin seeks strength and social justice in a socialist community of comrades, while Mary, courage and intelligence notwithstanding, ruins herself with the work of being a woman: who to sleep with, what to wear, where to be seen. Sophia, we recall, really had nowhere to go but the grave. Meilin can step away from her enthrallment to bourgeois “love” and into service. The narrator’s voice, though present in this story, seems less caustic and self-righteous than before. There is more dialogue and social detail to underscore the looser diction that is so very different from the imploded, tightly wound sentences of earlier works like “The Diary of Miss Sophia.” More and more, it seems clear, Ding Ling felt herself empowered to represent reality.—TEB

Part One

I

When the elevator reached ground level, the sudden discordant clatter of leather soles sounded riotously through the long corridor. Half a dozen exhilarated young people strode toward the massive glass doors on their way out of the building. The way they looked at each other, their eager lips, they acted as if they had an inexhaustible supply of new ideas, yet they spoke little as they walked straight out to the street where they would have to part. They had just attended a big youth conference sponsored by a literary club.

One of them, a thin dark fellow named Ruoquan, strolled toward the north, images of what had just happened jumbled in his mind. The speeches, arguments, flushed faces, generous sincere laughter, bizarre suggestions, and stubborn prejudice . . . He could not help smiling. In fact, he felt that it had not been such a bad meeting at all. He relaxed his pace at the thought and soon had reached the crowded Great Avenue.

“Hello, where are you headed?”

Someone had caught up to him and grabbed his shoulder.

“Oh, it’s you, Xiaoyun.” He looked a little surprised.

“Are you busy now?”

“No.”

The two of them turned and joined the flow of the crowd, exchanging a few words now and then about what had happened at the meeting. When Xiaoyun suggested that they go somewhere for tea, Ruoquan said no, that he wanted to go home. But then, abruptly, he said that he wanted

to visit a friend and asked Xiaoyun if he would like to go along. When Xiaoyun found out that the friend was Zibin, he shook his head.

"No, no, I don't think so. I really don't feel comfortable seeing him these days. He just loves sneering at people. You'd better not go either. It's no fun there."

Ruoquan took leave of Xiaoyun anyway and boarded a streetcar for the Jing'an Temple. The streetcar swayed a lot, and he held onto a rattan ring with one hand and let his body rock back and forth. As he looked at the neat blocks of buildings through the windows, the tangle of activities at the meeting and Zibin's nonchalant manner soon faded from his mind.

2

Zibin had just come home from Great Avenue, too. At the Xianshi Store he had bought a piece of light green fabric for his lover to make a lined winter gown. For himself he had purchased several packages of paper and pens for the amazing work he planned to produce this spring. He was driven by an ambition to prove his ability to the pathetic readership, constantly misled by promoters' gimmicks, and to shame the second-rate, even third-rate, writers hanging around taking up space these days. What trash they wrote. The language alone was enough to get them sent right back to college for a few more years. It was only fad and profit-mad businessmen that allowed them to become "writers." This upset Zibin. More and more things upset him these days. Actually, he was getting to be a real grouch.

Zibin was still a rather celebrated writer who enjoyed the affection of a certain element of young readers. He showed considerable skill with language, for which one might say he was admired. But there were critics who took a different view and were quite uncomplimentary. They often dismissed his work for its emptiness and lack of social relevance. That was the reason he was often plagued with a vague depression, which he did not care to reveal to anyone, and even his lover knew nothing about this secret.

Zibin's lover was a lively young woman who had decided to live with him a year ago because she was a great fan of his works and was extremely sympathetic toward his personal history. Despite their differences in temperament, they never seemed to have major disagreements. Zibin was older and extremely fond of pampering her. She was energetic and unaffected. Her age and interests did not make her exactly the ideal companion for a despondent writer. Still, he loved her and he took good care of her, and she loved and worshiped him. Although people often gossiped

about how badly mismatched they were, they had managed to live together in harmony for quite some time.

Blessed by society and the times, Zibin had gotten himself a pretty good position and, from among a small number of intellectual women, he'd been able to select a young woman who was above average in appearance, bearing, and culture. He was clearly quite fortunate in the area of finance, as well. They lived in a single apartment in a two-story house on a very clean and quiet alley off Jing'an Temple Road. There they had a bedroom, a living room, and a tiny study, and they employed a maid who cooked their meals, so they ate quite well indeed. Not to fear, however: there were still plenty of readers who, deceived by his works, felt sorry for him because of his poverty. In reality, he not only lived well, but often went to movies, ate chilled fruit cocktail, and bought gourmet candies. Sometimes he just squandered money on a whim.

The couple were looking at the fabric when Ruoquan walked in through the back door. They were a little surprised because two weeks had passed without one of his customary visits.

"Why haven't you been over to see us for so long?" Meilin asked, looking at him with her big eyes opened wide.

"Because something has . . ." Ruoquan began but interrupted himself when he noticed how thin Zibin had gotten. "Why have you lost so much weight?"

Zibin said he could ask Ruoquan the same question.

Holding up the fabric, Meilin asked for Ruoquan's honest opinion.

Ruoquan had supper with them. He felt that there should have been plenty to say to his old friend Zibin, but well acquainted with his temperament, he didn't know how to start. He smoked several cigarettes and felt that he had been sitting around too long wasting all that precious time. He was just about to leave when Zibin asked, "Have you got any manuscripts ready to be published?"

"No," Ruoquan replied. "I haven't touched a pen for a long time. I guess I've sort of forgotten about things like writing."

"How could you let that happen! Someone in Beijing is about to publish a literary supplement and wants the two of us to contribute. The rate is something like four dollars per thousand characters, maybe more for us. You can write up a few things, and I'll mail them out for you. I always feel somehow closer to northern readers."

Ruoquan looked at him and at Meilin.

"Sometimes I feel I could quit writing altogether and it would be no great loss," he said with a sigh. "We wrote some things and people read them, but after all that time, nothing at all has changed. Besides the money we got for it, can you see any other meaning to it? It's true that

some readers were moved by a particular anecdote or passage, but look at the kind of readers they were! Nothing but petty bourgeois students in high school and beyond who have just reached adolescence and are prone to melancholy. They found that these works suited their taste perfectly because they described the kind of depression they felt but couldn't understand. Or else they found that those stories represented their ideals, and the characters were very adorable, so much like themselves. They also felt that the characters must embody qualities of the writers, and they fell in love with the authors and manufactured naive fan letters. So then we got the letters and naturally we were really excited, felt as though our art had had some effect. We wrote back, choosing our words with care . . . and then what? I now realize that we've actually done harm by dragging younger people into our old rut of sentimentalism, individualism, discontent, and pent-up anxiety! . . . What's their way out? They can only sink deeper and deeper into their own rage. They can't see the connection between their suffering and society. Sure, they can train themselves to write better, get involved in cranking out a few articles and poems, even get a few compliments from older writers; but tell me, what good does it do them? What good does it do society? That's why I for one am giving up on writing. And I wish the other writers we know would give some thought to this problem, too, change direction a little. Although it would be too much to hope for immediate success, it will be meaningful to the history of future literature."

Ruoquan hoped that Zibin would respond. It didn't matter if Zibin disliked his ideas, for Ruoquan wanted to continue this conversation, to argue, and finally to reach a conclusion even though it might irritate Zibin, really make him mad. They had often argued over trivia in the past and Zibin had gotten upset.

"Aha," Zibin only smiled. "Here we go again with your fashionable preaching!" he said calmly. "The push is on to promote proletarian literature these days. Batch after batch of proletarian writers are being produced. So where are all the great results? Aside from the critics, their own friends, who heap them with flattering praise, what impression have they made? Go ask their readers, China's proletarian masses . . . or are they their own readers? All right, all right, we won't discuss it any further. I don't think it matters who the era belongs to. You can't go wrong if you just keep on working hard."

"I don't agree . . ." Ruoquan began but was interrupted as Zibin gestured to Meilin.

"Get changed," he said. "We're going to a movie. You haven't been here for so long. No matter how progressive you've gotten, we can still have some fun. I still have a few dollars. You choose: Carleton or La

Lumière . . . either is fine." Zibin spread the newspaper out in front of Ruoquan. Ruoquan said he wasn't going.

Zibin grew impatient. He shot Ruoquan an angry glance, then quickly turned it to a smile. "Right," he said in a mocking tone. "You've even quit going to the movies!"

Standing by the door and looking at the two of them, Meilin did not know what to do. "Are we going or not?" she asked haltingly.

"Why not?" Zibin looked very angry.

"Ruoquan!" Meilin looked at him with her lovely, imploring eyes. "Come on, let's go!" Ruoquan regretted having made his friend so angry and wanted to nod yes.

"If you don't insist," Zibin said coldly, "he won't come!"

Ruoquan really felt a little angry too, but he acted as if nothing had happened and kept his eyes on the newspaper.

When Meilin came downstairs dressed to the hilt, the three of them walked to the street corner together. Leaning toward Ruoquan, Meilin whispered in his ear and asked him again to come along. But when Ruoquan noticed how annoyed his friend looked, it all seemed pointless. With a loud "goodbye" he walked off rapidly, heading east.

3

Zibin and Meilin did not enjoy the movie. They were too preoccupied to speak to one another. Meilin couldn't figure out what had made Zibin so angry. To her, what Ruoquan had said made a lot of sense. She loved Zibin. She appreciated everything he wrote, since she always found in his work exceedingly beautiful phrases and a certain elegance of style. She admired his talent. But she could find nothing in Ruoquan's remarks that was wrong or would justify such anger. She looked at Zibin. Even though his eyes were fixed on the screen, she could tell that he was agonizing over something. "Well," she thought, "this really is an odd situation. Why did he insist on coming to the movie?" She nudged him with her elbow.

"It's a good film, isn't it?" He took her hand and whispered, "Mei, I love you." Then the film seemed to absorb him again.

Yes, Zibin certainly was in a rage, but it was hard to tell just who had offended him. Ruoquan's remarks kept echoing in his ears as if every word had been aimed at him. It really made him feel uncomfortable. Was it true that his work produced only the kind of result Ruoquan described? He just couldn't believe it! The critics' words were nothing but an expression of jealousy. Ruoquan was completely unaware that he'd become the dupe of those critics. Zibin pictured Ruoquan's dark, thin

face, and slowly he began to feel that it no longer looked like him. He recalled the Ruoquan of the period when they first met.

"Oh, we've grown so far apart, Ruoquan, my friend!" he sighed with regret.

They really had! Ruoquan had reached a point where Zibin could no longer understand him. No matter what Zibin thought of Ruoquan, that he was bad, or even evil, his friend Ruoquan occupied a very firm position. Confidently he strode toward a new age. He couldn't hesitate. He wouldn't wait.

Zibin looked at Meilin and saw on her tender face an aura of tranquility derived from never having had to worry. He found her adorable. Yet the very next instant he felt that, charm notwithstanding, something about her left him dissatisfied. He looked at her for quite a while, suddenly envious of her carefree attitude. He turned his head back and exhaled softly.

Yes, far apart! The woman had never understood him. They had always been far apart despite an intimate year of living together. But he had never gauged the distance between them, since it would prove only that a clever person like himself could make a mistake.

Though throughout Zibin's musing, one might have noticed only Meilin's simple charm and delicate beauty as she sat watching the movie, actually she was absorbed in what Ruoquan had said. There seemed to be a great contradiction between Ruoquan's words and those of the man she had always admired.

They went home late, exchanging few words. Neither one wanted the film mentioned because they were both afraid they wouldn't be able to answer any questions about it. The story line was a blur, really, nothing but a blur.

4

Time went by. Day by day two weeks passed. Ruoquan got very busy. He joined a number of new organizations and was assigned several jobs. He felt his ignorance and spent time and energy reading as much as he could. He lost weight. Deep, firm lines appeared on his face, but his spirit was unusually lively, as vigorous as the coming of spring. One day he was working in an office that looked like a residence. It was an exceedingly run-down, old-style alley house, huge and empty inside. A comrade and his wife (she had never been to school, but was quite intelligent) and two children lived downstairs. An organization took the upstairs as its temporary office. Ruoquan was leafing through several minor newspapers in search of the daily diatribes against inferior writers that one critic was writing under a number of different pen names.

The "inferior" writers being attacked were Ruoquan's new acquaintances who had common goals for which they worked hard. Ruoquan respected these people and was on good terms with them. The critic, however, called the ones who had established names for themselves opportunists and claimed that the others, having no means of achieving fame, had simply surrendered to a certain banner and were working like little soldiers, doing their utmost to flatter their bosses and attack whatever their bosses disliked. Once their opportunities came, their names started popping up in magazines, and so in the end they too became writers of that wing. Then there were some who were just villains and careerists from start to finish and who were training their lackeys and praising their patrons. They had knocked around literary circles for a long time as a way of lining their pockets. They often took aim at their patrons and collaborated with their enemies and so on, and so on. Ruoquan found this critic—who knew literary circles but whose viewpoint was totally wrong and whose behavior was extremely ugly—disgusting. He often thought of writing an essay that would thoroughly, systematically refute his misleading criticism, especially his mistaken and nonsensical literary theory. While Ruoquan did not have time to write, he could not ignore it either, and so every day he flipped furiously through the papers to see if a new article had appeared.

There was a racket on the stairs, and three people walked in one after another. The first was Xiaoyun, who came each day. The second was Chaosheng, staff member of the Worker's Association as well as a cousin of the woman who lived downstairs. The third was the woman herself. Her name was Xiuying.

Chaosheng shook hands warmly with Ruoquan because they had not seen each other for so long. Different demanding jobs prevented them from being together more often, but they had maintained a cordial friendship ever since meeting, and after brief greetings they started talking gleefully about the strike then under way in a textile factory. Ruoquan was very interested because he was hoping to take the plunge from the intellectual movement into the workers' movement. Chaosheng had promised to look for the right opportunity. That was why, whenever they met, they talked for the most part about what was happening to the workers. After a while, Chaosheng suddenly asked, "Are you still writing articles?"

"No," Ruoquan answered, slightly ashamed. But he gave his excuse proudly. "No time for it."

Chaosheng told him that their paper had a column called "The Club" that could use some literary things. He hoped that Ruoquan could take care of the thing or else invite a few of his comrades to do it. But, Chaosheng reminded Ruoquan, workers did not understand their style.

They had to make it a little simpler and shorter. He talked as well about the theory of popularizing literature and art from the perspective of the working class.

Before long Chaosheng left. He was very busy indeed. He said that he would come again to discuss the matter he had just proposed. He also asked Xiaoyun to give it some thought, for he really wanted to have a good, concrete plan. When only Ruoquan and Xiaoyun were left, Xiaoyun took a newspaper from under his arm, handed it to Ruoquan, and said, "I really wonder why Zibin had to do this."

Ruoquan was a little taken aback. Recently he'd almost seemed to have forgotten his friend, though their seven-year-old friendship made it impossible for him not to feel concern. Also he'd been hearing a lot of criticism of Zibin lately. He could no longer defend him as a close friend, but he had hoped that Zibin would abandon that stubborn attitude of his. He should bend a little, make a more sincere ideological change. Ruoquan sensed that something was wrong from the look on Xiaoyun's face.

"What about Zibin?" he asked and took the paper.

"Read it, you'll see."

It was a literary supplement titled in bold type: "Another Kind of Movement Activist on Our Literary Scene." It was signed "Xin."

"Did Zibin write this?"

"Who else? When he publishes short stories in *Shooting Star*, doesn't he sign himself 'Xinren'?" Anyway, look at the article; it's obvious that nobody else could have written it. And look at the supplement—it's edited by Li Zhen, [the Party's] cat's paw.¹ Imagine sending in a manuscript to that kind of a paper and mocking people for no reason at all! It really puts those of us who are his friends into a difficult position. Maybe he considers the great gentlemen of the *Shooting Star* clique to be the good people, his dear friends, while we're beneath contempt. I feel sorry for him."

Ruoquan glanced at him and then started reading the article. The tone was teasing. It was just as beautifully composed as Zibin's other work, and Ruoquan read through it as naturally as water flows. The structure was good, subtle, and compact. But it still had all the old flaws. It was neither an essay nor criticism, just light and pretty, and totally vacuous from start to finish. You might classify it as satire. Yes, actually, the whole thing could be called a satire; only it was impossible to find the target. As for names, he listed a few he considered to be "another kind of movement activist on the literary scene," and some others too. But he didn't do more than list them. He didn't place them in an adversarial position or attack them head on. Neither did he express any objective judgment

as a critic. You could see that the author had derived satisfaction from the article. He'd gotten to express some personal grievances. He may also have been able to convince a tiny number of readers (one or two at most) to feel as he did. But in the final analysis, the article had no strength. It wasn't worth paying attention to because the author had no position, no objective. The piece was useless, like a shot fired at the sky. All it did was let off steam.

Ruoquan was silent for a while as he thought about his friend. "I don't find anything wrong with it," he said slowly to Xiaoyun.

"In a word, it's his attitude." Xiaoyun looked unhappy and sighed. "His attitude stinks. A lot of people have been talking about it. I can't defend him at all."

"Then let the others talk. If he isn't concerned, why should you worry?"

"You don't really understand. I'm convinced at this point that he does have regrets. He's no brave fighter. I know him really well. That's why I hate him and feel sorry for him at the same time. Otherwise I'd have joined those who are attacking him."

"Don't I know him," Ruoquan nodded. "He's so smart but he belongs to a different age. We can't drag him over to our side. I often feel sorry for him. I am sure that he has really been frustrated recently. Why don't we go to see him tonight?"

"It's useless. All you can talk about is food, drink, or entertainment. If you raise the real issue, he'll avoid arguing by giving you the cold shoulder or else he'll get really sarcastic. I don't want to see him."

"Why should that bother you? Let's drop by for a casual chat. I just want to see him cheer up a little. Being happy can actually give you courage to live. Let's go see him tonight. Are you free?"

Reluctantly, Xiaoyun agreed.

5

Although it was already eight o'clock in the evening when Ruoquan and Xiaoyun got to Zibin's house, the living room presented a lively scene. Three young men in Western suits were there with Zibin and Meilin. Zibin was a little surprised at their arrival, but he introduced them around with ready pleasure. Two of the three young men were students in a Shanghai art school and the least handsome one had just come down from Beijing. They were all unknown young poets willing to dedicate their lives to literature and art. So when they heard Ruoquan and Xiaoyun's names, they were delighted. Cautiously they extended their hands as they made admiring sounds.

Not a trace of displeasure showed on Zibin's face. Although he was thin, he didn't seem as pale as before, and there was a rosy glow of excitement on his face as though he were in such a good mood that he could go on talking forever. He talked a lot about life in Beijing, and about American architecture, and he took out a dozen or so photographs that a friend had sent from the United States. Later he also spoke of Japanese painting and told them a friend of his was doing very well in Japan selling paintings.

The maid brought in a mound of candy and fruit. Zibin ate the most. He picked up a famous chocolate, praised it highly, and urged his guests to help themselves. "Meilin just loves this. Right, Meilin?" he looked at her.

"Sure she likes it," Xiaoyun thought to himself. "But you were the one who instilled this taste in her because it shows class. If she only liked *dabing* and *yutiao*, you probably wouldn't be so happy to put her on display."²

Actually, what Meilin retorted was, "No, I don't like it any more. I'm tired of it. Yours is the taste that never changes."

Zibin frowned a little, and quickly changed the topic.

Ruoquan felt that Meilin was less talkative than she had been before, and mostly just sat there silently observing people. He walked over to strike up a conversation.

"Seen any movies lately?"

"Sure, a lot." She seemed very upset. "But I don't like to go because I don't get any happiness from them."

Zibin looked right at her but acted as though nothing was wrong.

"Why?" Ruoquan's eyes fixed on her. "Why don't you feel happy?"

"I don't know why," she glanced over at her husband. "Life is just so tiresome . . ."

"Find a job," Xiaoyun said, looking at Meilin in amazement. He'd never heard her say that she was unhappy before. "You'll feel better if you have some work to do."

"What can I do? Sometimes I still think about going back to school."

"Mei, darling," Zibin, interrupting them pointedly, tried to change the subject. "Are you talking about going back to school again? Weren't you tired of student life? I try to get you to read English every day here at home, but you won't, and I'd love to see you write but you're too lazy. So what's all this talk about going out to work?"

Meilin stared at him resentfully from the corner of her eye. "You're the one who likes that sort of thing, I don't . . ." she mumbled.

At nine o'clock, one of the students had to leave. He lived in Zhabei near the Tiantong convent, and if he waited much longer it would be

hard to get home. The other two students then thought that they had better leave, too. One of them kept asking for Ruoquan's address, saying how much he'd love to visit in the future and solicit some advice. Then Zibin saw the three of them off.

The other two guests were still unwilling to leave. Zibin turned around, looked at their eyes tiredly, and sank weakly into his chair. He touched his cheeks. He could tell he had a fever. Listlessly, he picked up a tangerine and ate it.

"You have so many guests!" Xiaoyun had waited a long time to blurt this out.

"Yes! What can I do about it!" Zibin replied. "I can't refuse them. They often keep me from work and they wear me out. They sit here as though they're never going to leave. I just don't have the time to entertain them."

"It's all because 'guests flock to the good host.'" Xiaoyun almost made the conventional response but swallowed his words. He was afraid Zibin might imagine he was being mocked. Lately, Xiaoyun had begun feeling he had to be more careful with this friend than with anyone else.

"Why can't you refuse them? You can, you know. I guess there must be lots of these meaningless functions." Ruoquan was absolutely sincere.

Zibin didn't want to admit that and said nothing.

Meilin also believed such functions were completely unnecessary, but she didn't want to say anything. "If nobody came," she finally said, obliquely criticizing Ruoquan and Xiaoyun, "that would be terrible too."

Everybody looked at her but only Ruoquan responded.

"Quite right, it would be lonesome. But we could figure out something else to do. We could get together more and discuss real, concrete issues or form a reading group, since reading alone is not very inspiring. You don't learn as much and it's pretty superficial a lot of the time. It's not that we don't want to get together, we just want to cut back on the wasteful functions. We still want plenty of contact with people."

Meilin's big eyes sparkled. She seemed lost in thought. She was just about to say something when Zibin seized control of the conversation.

"It's not a good idea for her to do the things you're talking about," he said. He didn't want any more discussion along this line and changed the topic again.

By ten o'clock, the conversation had really taken a turn for the worse. There was no focus and each felt walled off from the others. No one was willing to express an opinion or to give others the opportunity to express one. It was too obvious. As soon as anybody said anything, the split opened up. Then everyone began yawning. They felt tired, but it seemed that nobody wanted to stop the conversation. They kept on talking, but

all of them had the same deepening sense that their fragile friendship was deteriorating. They were drifting farther apart with no possibility of compromise.

Finally it was Ruoquan who stood up and made a resolute gesture to Xiaoyun, who nodded in agreement. The two said goodbye and walked out without the slightest regret. Zibin saw them off graciously as he always did, but he had no wish to prolong their visit.

When they had been escorted out through the back door, Ruoquan turned and spoke loudly as he would to children: "Get back in now, both of you. All right?"

"Come again in a few days, OK?" Meilin suddenly said in a sharp voice. Her voice was quivering and everyone noticed.

"Yes," said Ruoquan, "we'll come again for sure." And Xiaoyun repeated it.

6

"You're crazy! Screaming so loud!" Zibin was furious and scolded her.

He had never shouted at her before in anger. This was the first time he had shown his violent side. He did not know why his disgust with Meilin had surfaced at this moment, and he didn't know what it was that he hated about her. All he knew was that nothing felt right, that words could not describe his unhappy feeling, and that Meilin only intensified it as though she meant to cause an explosion. She not only didn't give him the consolation and the courage to live that a lover should (she never understood how hard life was), she made things worse and added to his agony. That was why he had yelled at her, and she may have had it coming. But since he had pampered her for so long, he now felt regretful. Though he actually felt worse than ever, he just said gently, "It's very late. Let's go up to bed."

Meilin said nothing as she went obediently upstairs.

Zibin tried to make up by talking to her sweetly and giving her two big apples. But she was thinking, "You always treat me like a child."

Before long Meilin went to bed like a good little girl. Zibin kissed her good night, but did not go to bed. He was very excited and still wanted to work. He went up to the attic, to his little study.

But sleep would not come for her, and she lay in bed thinking about life. She didn't deny that she was fortunate to have his love. But she didn't know why she suddenly felt dissatisfied. This surprised her, for she had lived her life in a muddle for so long. In the past she had read his fiction and had worshiped him. Then he had fallen in love with her, so she had fallen in love with him. He had proposed that they live together,

and naturally she had agreed with him. However, she should have known that as soon as she moved in with him, her separate social status would disappear. Only now as she thought about it did she realize that except for him she had nothing. In the past, having read a lot of classical and romantic fiction, her ideal had been to throw over everything for love. Once she fell in love with him, she really had left everything behind and plunged into his embrace. She had gone along quite happily the whole time thinking muddle-headedly that she was fortunate. But now things were different. She needed something else! She wanted her own place in society. She wanted to have contact with many, many people. Even though they loved each other, she could no longer be locked up in the house as one man's after-work amusement. Yes, she still loved Zibin and, no, she would never leave him, of that she was certain. But she felt that he was somehow stifling her. Worse than any old-fashioned family, he did not allow her any freedom. He pampered her, petted and amused her, and satisfied all her material wants. But he only wanted her to love his ideas and what he loved. She wondered why he was like this. He was so tender, yet so autocratic.

Meilin could not sleep as her mind was flooded with thoughts of the person closeted in the attic. She had only just now discovered that he was unhappy. She had no idea anymore whether or not he had been happy in the past. She certainly had not been aware of any problem. His laughter, his praise of her, his constant assurances of how content he was, and his appreciation of her generosity had all made her think he must be happy. From time to time, he got angry over some little thing and would dash off some articles to let off steam. She had felt uneasy and at a loss then, but it had never lasted very long and he'd soon be feeling better again. He could admit later that he had forgotten what they'd fought about and that he had an irritating temper. Then the unpleasant episode would pass without a trace like white clouds blown away by the east wind. Now, however, she sensed that he was often annoyed, even though he pretended that nothing was wrong. He locked himself in the attic a lot to avoid seeing her. What was he doing there? He often came to bed very late and then said that he had been writing. But she had taken a look at everything he had done lately and discovered that his recent output was pitifully slight. He was eating very little, although he denied it and often said, straight to her face, that he was overeating. What did it all mean? Didn't he trust her anymore? He had never talked with her about any of these matters, and he never talked about his problems to his friends, despite the fact that his articles were full of discontent. He often wrote long letters filled with gloom and doom to people living far away, but they always contained the same old complaints. Things had been at this

standstill for the past few years! But none of this completely explained the basis of his unhappiness. What was really causing it?

Meilin's thoughts eventually turned to Ruoquan. She and Ruoquan had known each other even before she met Zibin, but it was his friendship with Zibin that drew him so close that he began treating her like a member of the family. She didn't think about him as being right or wrong, but got along with him very well. After quite a few arguments between him and Zibin, however, she concluded, from her limited perspective, that the cause of the problem between them was Zibin's stubbornness. Ruoquan was very sincere and modest, and what he said was not unreasonable. Zibin, on the other hand, was quite unreasonable. He mocked Ruoquan, treated him coldly, and avoided him. Why did he behave like this? They had been such close friends before. Meilin could tell that Zibin meant to abandon his friend because he no longer so much as mentioned Ruoquan to her. This was quite a different situation than before. Not once did Zibin suggest visiting Ruoquan even when he had not come over for a long time. This was also quite different from before. In fact, it was more than just Ruoquan. Zibin was intentionally keeping a distance from a lot of his former friends. Why was that?

The more Meilin pondered, the more puzzled she became. Quite a few times she was about to go up to the attic hoping to get to the bottom of things, but then reconsidered since she knew he'd never reveal anything to her, and would just caress her and sweet talk her into going back to sleep. He'd never let her know what was bothering him. Finally she realized that he would always treat her like a child.

The clock struck two o'clock. He still had not come down. She sank deeper into her thoughts and the anxiety of waiting. What was he doing?

Zibin was suffering from a headache. He had fever and a cough. He sat at his desk as usual. He had grown used to looking into a small round mirror when he sat down and he was saddened to see how much more weight he had lost. In the past this sight might have made him shatter the glass by throwing it into a corner of the room, but since a woman now shared his place, he just tossed the mirror into his desk drawer. That way he wouldn't be stuck for an answer to her interrogation. It was the same that night too. But after he tossed the mirror aside, he also made a resolution: "I'm not going to look in the mirror ever again."

Once seated, as was his custom, Zibin lit up a Beauty brand cigarette. White silky smoke floated slowly up and then dispersed. His mind was like the silky smoke—directionless, empty, tangled, and drifting—yet he could feel a heavy pressure. Zibin was depressed. He struggled against his physical discomfort and tried not to give in to bed. As though he were angry, he wanted to persist and to write a gripping masterpiece that

night. He made a quick calculation and realized that if he went two more weeks without writing for *Creation Monthly*, it would be fully two months since he had communicated with his readers. As for *Shooting Star*, he seemed to remember that there was nothing left to send it either. Readers could easily forget a writer, and critics were merciless. It saddened him that these people couldn't accommodate a talented writer more kindly. Meanwhile, however, he could only keep plugging away, because he was afraid people might think, mistakenly, that he had burned out creatively. He was a capable and prolific writer whose work was superior to others—that, at least, was his own conviction. The day was sure to arrive when his masterpiece would shake contemporary literary circles. Yet at the moment, life was extremely irritating, for he lacked prolonged periods of time to think and could hardly finish even the shortest piece.

Zibin read through several old unfinished manuscripts one more time. He felt that each one of them was too good to be discarded. But now, no matter what, he was not in the frame of mind he needed to finish them. He pushed the pile of manuscripts aside for a time when he would be more free and could finish them off. He took out a clean sheet of paper to write on, but for some reason his mind was a blank, and he grew anxious. His hopes were one thing. Reality was a different story altogether. Yet he refused to believe that what really prevented him from producing anything was a lack of talent. Time was passing and exhaustion began to overtake him. His mind, however, was clearer than ever. He cast the manuscript aside and angrily lay down on his chair. He was beginning to hate his friend.

Once upon a time Zibin's mind had been calm, the very thing that creative writing needed. He was quite intelligent to begin with and had a probing intellect, but he couldn't stand challenges. Whenever Ruoquan came around, he left Zibin with a terribly uncomfortable feeling. Ruoquan's news had to do with social concerns that lay beyond Zibin's understanding. This puzzled Zibin, but it also made him resentful of the blow to his pride. Further, Ruoquan's self-assurance and confident attitude toward life made Zibin feel unsettled and jealous in a way that was hard to explain exactly. Zibin felt contempt for Ruoquan (he never had respected his writing) and called him shallow, a blind follower. He had deliberately talked himself out of respecting his friend, yet he could not forget him. He hated Ruoquan for no particular reason, and then, as Ruoquan displayed more sincerity and worked more steadily, the more disgust Zibin felt over his efforts, and the harder it got to forget him. Zibin felt equally resentful toward people who were like Ruoquan and toward those who were even more diligent and resolved than he, though

to Zibin they all seemed very far away and insubstantial. He could rattle off the names of those who deserved to be mocked, but they weren't engraved in his mind, as Ruoquan was, as constant pain. Zibin found it possible to respect anonymous people who really were working hard, but Ruoquan's bunch he just could not believe. They were nothing but shallow, confused opportunists.

At two o'clock he heard Meilin coughing. His own cough was even more severe. He was thinking it was really time to go to bed when he recalled Meilin's recent unspoken stubbornness and her closeness to Ruoquan that evening: it made him feel that even Meilin had drifted away from him. He was standing all alone in this frustrating position that demanded so much struggle. Out of pure spite, he refused to go to bed. He wrote two long letters to two far-away readers whom he didn't even really know. At this moment, there was no one else he could feel close to. The letters were pretty much the same. As he wrote them his mind relaxed, and by four o'clock he had blanked out from exhaustion and fallen asleep at his desk.

7

"I wonder why my life shows no sign of improving," Meilin said to herself. It was true. They had endured a life without pleasure or hope into mid spring, Shanghai's most exciting season. Pot-bellied businessmen and blood-sucking devils wizened and shriveled from overwork on their abacuses were going at full tilt in the careening money market, investing and manipulating to increase their exploitation of the laboring masses and to swell their astronomical wealth. Dozens of newspapers being hawked in the street carried banner stories about antagonists on various battlefronts, but the news was contradictory and unreliable. Beautiful young aristocratic ladies, faces rouged and eyes radiant, strolled through the streets wearing their new spring outfits. They crowded the amusement parks and took outings to scenic suburban spots to gratify their pampered bodies and untroubled moods. Amusements like these were bound to keep them young, beautiful, content, and confirmed in their ways. As for the workers, although they had endured winter's rigor, their lives got harder with spring's arrival because rent and the price of grain were up, and working hours lengthened. They worked harder and got weaker. The old and feeble who didn't have their wages cut were fired and replaced by children who never had enough to eat and whose age and build were obviously below the legal limit. The workers suffered so much that they simply had to resist. And so struggle began. Every day brought news of strikes and the beating and killing of workers. Subsequently, revolutionary young people, students, and members of the

[Communist] Party found themselves extremely busy. They sympathized with the workers, supported them, and under the leadership of various people rushed around all sweaty and excited . . . It was mid spring. The wind was soft and the weather intoxicating! But every evil, pain, agony, and struggle unfolded under the soft clear sky.

Meilin wore a new outfit every day, green ones, red ones. She went out regularly with Zibin, but got no sense of fun or pleasure from it. She imagined that each person she saw on the crowded streets had a more meaningful life than she. Meilin did not want to die. Quite the contrary, she wanted to really live and she wanted to be happy. It was just that she could not find direction and needed guidance. She wished that Zibin could understand, that he would feel the same way, so they'd be able to talk things over and set out on the same road of life together. Yet looking at Zibin made her miserable because the man she'd once worshiped had become so inscrutable. He seemed to be her exact opposite. He wasted life seemingly without intending to. He was deeply thoughtful yet never revealed what he was thinking about. When people disgusted him, he prided himself on staying civil. (He had never felt so pained in front of company before.) When he did speak out against someone, he'd immediately retreat into self-hatred. Sometimes he showered Meilin with affection; other times he was indifferent. His behavior was contradictory and his misery self-inflicted. Sometimes Meilin tried to talk to him about life, but then things became really hopeless because he never answered her, just smiled silently. And the smile hurt her too, because she could sense its bitterness and she knew how agonized he must be.

This situation lasted until one evening around eight o'clock when the house was empty of guests. Tired from running around all day, Zibin lay on the bed reading a book of poetry. Meilin sat on a chair by the bed reading the latest issue of a magazine. On the table by the bed sat a lamp with a red silk shade and a pot of tea. In bygone days it would have been a sweet night. Now, however, Zibin felt listless as he flipped through the pages, glancing at Meilin from time to time. Meilin also looked over at him now and then, but neither seemed to want eye contact. In fact, each hoped for comfort from the other and both looked pathetic, he sad and she anxious. Finally Meilin reached her breaking point. She threw down the magazine.

"Don't you feel we're awfully quiet? Come on, Zibin, let's talk," she said.

"All right," he replied, pushing his book to the corner of the bed.

But the silence continued. Neither knew what to say.

Five minutes later Meilin spoke in a trembling voice, "I think you've been very miserable lately," her eyes fixed on him. "Why? It makes me sad to see you like this!"

"You're imagining things . . ." As usual Zibin gave his phoney smile, then turned away and heaved a long sigh.

Meilin was deeply moved. She walked over and took his hand. "Tell me," she begged in an anxious, tender voice. "Tell me everything you've been thinking about! Tell me about all your worries!"

Zibin remained silent for a long time. Lots of unpleasant thoughts were tangled in his mind. If only he could tumble into Meilin's arms and cry out loud as he had with his mother when he was little. Then all problems would vanish and he'd be able to start over, living vivaciously for her sake, making discriminating plans for their future, slowly straightening his own life out. But he understood—he gritted his teeth as he thought about this—that it actually would be useless to cry because this woman was more weak than he and could not bear the turmoil. If he cried he would frighten her. Anyway, even if he did cry till his tears dried up, what good would it do? All the conflicts and agonies of reality would remain to be faced. Unless he died and left behind the world he knew so well, he would never be able to free himself of all that. The result of this was that he said nothing, and just endured his growing pain. He held her hand tightly. His face twisted grotesquely.

His fearful face made Zibin look like a tortured, wild animal. "Why are you making such a face? Have I whipped you?" she screamed at him, baffled. "Tell me! Damn it, I can't stand any more of this! If you don't talk I'll . . ."

She shook her head as she looked at him. He turned his face toward her. Tears flowed across his cheeks. He held her neck, drew his face close to hers and said brokenly, "Mei, don't be frightened. Darling, you love me, so let me tell you slowly. Oh my Mei! So long as you don't abandon me, I'll be all right."

He held her tight. "Well, there's really nothing," he continued. "Yes, I have suffered a lot recently. I can't describe it. I know that my health isn't good. Everything has gone wrong because of that. I need to recuperate is all."

After a while he went on, "I resent everybody, every conflict in the world. All I need is love and you. I think of us leaving here and everything familiar. We could go to an isolated island or an empty village. Publications, fame, it's nothing but shit. Only you, only our life of love really exists!" And on and on he went at great length.

Meilin wavered. She abandoned her desire to be more ambitious and involved in life. For his love and what he had just said she pitied him. She wanted to help him because, after all, he was a man of talent. She was in love with him. Finally, she cried too. She comforted him for a long time because she wanted him to believe that she would always be his.

For his health's sake and peace of mind, she hoped that they could leave Shanghai for a while. They could take a trip to somewhere where mountains were green, waters clear, birds chirped, and flowers danced, to spend a delightful spring. If they were a little frugal and sold just one more book to the Shooting Star Bookstore, they would have enough. What did it matter if they were slightly short? They figured that if he collected his smaller, unpublished drafts, he would have about seventy to eighty thousand words. That would just about do it. The trip would not be hard to arrange. Imagining herself and Zibin strolling around all day at some beautiful scenic spot cheered Meilin up. Zibin also felt good about leaving the city for a while, since he just couldn't put up with all the new pressures anymore. For his health's sake, he needed a trip or a long-term rest in the country. Therefore they resolved that night to go to West Lake, since it was fairly close and Meilin had never been there.

Both felt much happier, which made for a wonderful night such as they hadn't enjoyed recently; and that was because they both saw a ray of hope for their future—however dim it might be.

8

The next day they got part of the money for the manuscript. So they did a lot of shopping but waited for the rest of it to start their trip. But the day after that the weather turned and the rain started, now pouring, now drizzling, and their mood clouded over too. Meilin spent the entire day in bed complaining nonstop. Zibin, unhappy also, made another futile trip to the bookstore. He would have to wait a few more days to receive the rest of his money. The rain continued day after day with no sign of letting up. Both of them stayed at home; neither was in a mood to do anything. The days lengthened, became excruciatingly dull. At first Zibin had kept telling Meilin about West Lake scenery over and over, but now it bored them both. They grew tense waiting for the money, yet when they finally did get the full sum six days after deciding to go, it didn't make Zibin happy. "What should we do?" he said indifferently to Meilin. "It's still raining. We might as well wait a couple more days."

It was hardly a reason at all. The rain was not heavy and West Lake not far away. If he had really meant to go, they could have left right then.

Meilin was neither angry nor surprised. It seemed perfectly natural to remain at home and suffer, since they had no urgent need to go to West Lake. The delay cooled their excitement, and both sank at once into the same private thoughts that had tortured them before. Zibin often heard news that depressed him. Quite a number of friends and acquaintances were involved in activity outside the world of bookstores. None asked

about him. He was forgotten. It was most unbearable news. He despised them, hated them, but felt he should not run away. He wanted to stay in Shanghai, keep an eye on them, and wait. Also he would apply himself and really show them. What would he get out of going to West Lake? Temporary peace and temporary separation from the world, but he wasn't sure that he could forget it all and go on living in peace. Also he was sure that it would not be hard for the world to do very well without him. When they heard about his trip, his friends would almost certainly mock him for being frightened into hiding out of fear of the new era. Then everyone really would forget him and even his name would become unfamiliar. Worst of all, the young students who worshiped him and the learned celebrities who praised him would be cut off from all intelligence of him, and slowly the good impression he had made would become weak and blurred. This he feared above all else! He could not act like ancient hermits who fled everything. He had lots of desires. He did not want to lose what he had gained. He decided that going to West Lake was foolish. But he was very afraid that Meilin would insist they go. If she did, he thought, he would have to go against her wishes, or he would go with her for two or three days and then come immediately home. Staying for a long time would never work out. Seeing that Meilin was not as anxious to go as before, he relaxed, and yet finally there came a time when they had to discuss the matter. He just told her his idea, and said that the reason for not going was that he had to write an essay and did not have time right then. It would be better, he felt, for them to take the trip next month. He spoke eloquently, for he was afraid that Meilin would disagree or would at least pout and get angry. He was amply prepared with the tender expressions necessary for coping with a lovely, delicate woman. When he finished what he had to say, he leaned his head toward the back of her chair so that his lips grazed her white neck, and his breath brushed her lightly.

"What do you think?" he asked softly. "I'll do as you wish. It's up to you."

Meilin agreed in a few words. The matter was resolved without any untoward display of emotion. All Zibin had to do after that was get to work on what he hoped to accomplish. He was a literary man possessed of ample self-confidence and was not made for other kinds of struggle. He had decided to stay in Shanghai to satisfy his ambitions; yet the danger was that if he went on locking himself up in that little room, getting angry and writing discontented letters as time passed and other people went forward, then he would always be a malcontent and would end his life in meaningless misery without ever having had any success worth mentioning. Even if he had exceptional intelligence, it would be useless.

So far as Meilin was concerned, a life of leisure was no longer acceptable. Action had become an instinctual need. She wanted to be with the masses, to try to understand society, and to work for it. She was no longer a woman who could live happily in seclusion. Already she had lived far too long as the wife of a gloomy man eight years older than she. She felt that living with him had made her more subdued and taught her to worry and to be depressed, and yet she still hadn't reached a level where she could understand her husband. It just wasn't the life for her. Ever since the beginning of spring, she had been feeling uneasy with her husband's new agonies. The role of wife, the role of lover, did not satisfy her. She gave a great deal of thought to doing something about it but lacked opportunity and someone to guide her. She did not know what to do and it depressed her. She knew perfectly well that her depression would never win sympathy from Zibin, and that compounded her unhappiness. She couldn't figure out why just a few days earlier she had suddenly wanted to go to West Lake. Of course it would have been an improvement, but as they had delayed the trip, she came to feel that spending somebody else's money and going on a holiday with him and wasting time while so many other people were working hard not only wasn't right, it was actually disgraceful. It was fine with her that Zibin now didn't want to take the trip. Yet his reason—that he didn't have time and had to write—made her feel that whether she went or not was unimportant, because it looked as though she really was a person who had nothing at all to do. The thought made her ashamed. She wanted to find something to do, and she believed that sooner or later she would. But she figured it would be best not to talk it over with Zibin. For the time being, she kept it secret.

9

Ruoquan received, unexpectedly, a letter that had been forwarded to him through a chain of friends. Meilin's name was written on the envelope in large characters, and concern for Zibin's health filled him as he opened it with surprise. He was nearly certain his friend was sick again. It made him sad. Whenever he thought of his friend it was like this. The letter, however, scrawled at a horizontal slant like a telegram, read:

I assume that you're free Sunday morning. Do come to Zhaofeng Park, please. I have something important to discuss. I'll wait for you. Meilin.

It didn't sound like Zibin was sick. Then what was it? Had they quarreled? He'd never seen the two of them arguing. Ruoquan still suspected it had something to do with Zibin, because he did not think that Meilin

had any other reason to come to him. He had known her for two years now, but they weren't really close. He wasn't all that familiar with her background and had never paid any particular attention to her. She impressed him as a young woman who was naive, pampered, and definitely not bad looking. Thinking of Zibin, he decided he would make the long trip to the far west end of Shanghai the next morning.

At seven o'clock in the morning, Ruoquan was preparing to leave. He picked up a handful of coppers and two silver coins, brushed the dust off the old Western-style suit he was wearing, and rushed out of the house. He figured that he would arrive at Zhaofeng Park around seven-forty. Meilin and Zibin were people who got up very late, so she might not even be there by then. But, he thought, there would be no harm in waiting for her. He had not visited the park for over half a year, and the opportunity to walk around and breathe fresh air would do him good. Lately his lungs had felt bad.

After transferring trolleys three times, Ruoquan arrived at the entrance to the park. He paid admission and stepped through the gate. The soft breeze bore a pleasant spring fragrance. Ruoquan stood up straight, unbuttoned his suit jacket, inhaled deeply, and felt refreshed right away. The tension and exhaustion he usually felt left him without a trace. Anyone arriving at this verdant carpet of grass, leaving behind the noise of the world, feeling the spring breeze, warmed by the morning sun, would forget everything and unshoulder all cares. Visitors to the park would relax their bodies and allow the quiet environment to give them such pleasure that they would forget where they were.

There were not many people in the park. A few Westerners and some children's carriages were visible here and there. The green of old and new leaves surrounded him. Dazzling sunlit white cotton clouds moved and shifted shape slowly in the vast blue sky overhead. Ruoquan walked lazily across the undulating grass for quite a way, almost forgetting why he had come. He felt very comfortable and the air was just perfect. Just then he heard a swishing sound on the grass not far behind him, and when he turned to look, he saw Meilin standing there wearing a *qipao* of white with grey stripes and a dark red woolen sleeveless jacket.³

"Oh, I didn't know you were here," he said without thinking. "You're early!"

Meilin was very calm, but a touch of happiness and a slight flush showed on her face. "I've waited for you for a long time!" she said sweetly. "I hope it won't bore you," she continued in a more serious vein. "But I want to talk with you. That is why I invited you here. Shall we go find a place to sit?"

As he walked along eastward with her, Ruoquan watched her high-heeled, brown leather shoes as she minced along. She had on flesh-toned

stockings. Were her feet really that tiny, or did the elegantly crafted shoes make them look so pathetic and feminine?

"How's Zibin?" He tried to strike up a conversation. "Is he in good health?"

"Yes. He's started writing again," she answered without much enthusiasm.

"How about you? Are you writing too?" he went on.

"No."

He noticed that her face twitched and an unhappy expression appeared.

They sat down on a red painted bench next to some trees. On the left a group of huge hydrangeas were blooming luxuriantly, the massive flowers exuding a delicate fragrance and pink glow. Ruoquan didn't know what to say. He was still in the dark about the point of this talk, about how Zibin was doing and how the two of them were getting along.

She looked at his puzzled expression and said with a smile, "Did you think it was strange to get a letter from me?"

"No. I didn't."

"So then you know why I wanted you to come here?"

"Well, not really," he answered hesitantly.

She smiled again and said, "I didn't think you'd know. But I must tell you that the reason is I've been feeling awfully depressed for a long time . . ."

She paused and glanced at him. He lowered his head, gazing silently at the lawn. Then she continued on at great length. She stopped frequently and, because she appeared somewhat nervous, did not seem able to get it all poured out freely. But from start to finish Ruoquan uttered not one word, and did not even look at her because he wanted her to finish what she had to say. She told him all the fragmentary recent notions and hopes she'd had until she finally felt that she desired his comment.

"What do you think?" she concluded. "You don't find this foolish, do you? I guess I'm quite naive."

Ruoquan remained silent for quite some time looking at her tender, dignified, and honest face. He hadn't expected the woman to be so frank in expressing her discontent with life and her bold determination to get involved in society. He felt extremely happy because her unexpected attitude encouraged him. After a long silence, he extended his hand, grasped hers warmly, and said, "You are just wonderful, Meilin! I think I finally understand you now!"

Meilin was so happy she blushed.

Afterward they were much more open in talking about their feelings and newly acquired knowledge. They were both in good spirits, partic-

ularly Meilin, because she could speak freely and Ruoquan not only listened to her and understood her, he was willing to help. She saw a light ahead. She was anxious to know how to start working immediately. He hesitated, but he did promise to see her again in a few days. Possibly he could introduce her to some people who would find her work.

IO

Meilin kept smiling after she got home. She could not hide her joy, and at times the words nearly slipped out. She felt that she should inform Zibin, but restrained herself because she was afraid that he would interfere and sabotage her plan. Zibin noticed nothing. He was considering a novel and the mischievous, taunting language he would use to describe his main protagonist, a Chinese Don Quixote. It would be vivid writing, sharp satire. He figured that if there were no unexpected interruptions or upsetting events, he had two undisturbed weeks of writing time. He could shock the world with a novel of one hundred thousand words by the summer of 1930. Then, as the author of such a work, everyone would know his name. Temporarily he brushed aside all potentially troubling matters. He wanted to clear his mind, once so keen. He had been at home in seclusion for several days now, avoiding all contact with other people.

It was a different story with Meilin. Two days after her meeting with Ruoquan, she attended an afternoon meeting of [the Communist] study group on literature and art. Over half of the fifty people attending were workers, and the other half included a few young writers and a good number of lively students. Meilin had never experienced this sort of life and it made her feel excited. She looked around amicably, wishing she could shake all of their hands warmly and converse frankly with each one. Aside from Ruoquan, she did not know anyone there, but she did not feel awkward. On the contrary, she felt quite comfortable because she and they were all "comrades." Aside from being slightly apologetic about her beautiful outfit, simple but well-tailored, she was completely enthusiastic. It was a general meeting, so the number attending was large. Except for a few workers with unavoidable time conflicts, almost everyone in the organization was there. When the meeting began, the chairman asked a young man wearing a Western-style suit made of Hong Kong fabric to deliver a political report. Everyone was solemn and silent. Meilin fixed her eyes on him, raptly intent on the simple ideas she was hearing for the first time. The speech was simple, but it presented the world's political and economic situation very clearly and analyzed it accurately. The speaker was young, no older than twenty-five. Later Ruoquan told her that he was a worker in a print factory who had had two

years at university. Meilin felt inexpressible shame. Everyone there, she felt, had a better grasp of politics than she did and was more capable than she. Following a number of work reports, the discussion turned to organizational work. Meilin did not know how to participate since she was not familiar with the whole situation, but the chairman kept looking at her to solicit comments anyway. It made her feel uneasy, but she was quite sure that before too long she could be retooled and her ignorance remedied. The last matter they took up was what action to take on [May Day].⁴ At this point somebody else stood up to make a report. He was a representative from an organization directing [the Party]. Then the decision was made. On [May Day] they would all mobilize and go to [the designated] avenue and occupy it. The meeting ended on this high note with everyone tense and excited.

"Day after tomorrow," people kept reminding each other on the way out. "Don't forget, nine o'clock, just go to [the] avenue!"

Meilin stayed a little longer to chat with Chaosheng, who had just chaired the meeting and worked for the labor confederation and a few others. They all treated her with great cordiality and respect. A woman working in a textile factory was particularly friendly.

"We want to make a revolution," she said to Meilin. "But we also want to learn about literature and art we can understand. You writers need a revolution too, so we've united. I am afraid we're too busy to do a good job. In a few days I'd like to show you some things I've done. Chaosheng said that you're a woman writer. I've just begun to learn how to write, and it's all because Chaosheng has encouraged me. I have a lot of ideas, but I can't express them. Next Monday I'll be able to find some free time. I would like to write a newsletter for the factory because Ruoquan says they need one."

Meilin said she couldn't write literature either. She also said that she would love to work in a factory.

Then the woman described various hardships at the factory, including a couple of tragic incidents. She said that she would try to help if Meilin really wanted to go to the factory, but she worried that Meilin would get sick right away because of fatigue and dirty air. Chaosheng also said that it was not difficult to get in and expressed the wish that some of the intellectuals in this group would go to work at factories to get a real understanding of the [proletariat], and get [proletarianized]. It was the only way to create an authentic [proletarian] literature.⁵ However, Chaosheng had reservations about Meilin's health. She, on the other hand, insisted that she could train and get stronger.

Since Meilin had more free time than the others, she was assigned to work for two hours each day at their organization office. They gave her

the address and told her that she would probably get more hours in the future because as [May] approached, more needed to be done. Far more workers wanted to join and they had to be trained, as well. As a beginner, she had shouldered a heavy load, and she knew she had to work extremely hard.

II

The [first of May] arrived.

From the time, at eight o'clock, when Zibin discovered Meilin's absence, he felt uneasy. He asked the maid, but she didn't know anything about it. He couldn't imagine where she could be. It dawned on him that recently she had often gone out without telling him where. Also he recalled that she had not spoken much to him recently. He kept waiting and waiting, but she didn't show up. In a fit of anger he stamped into his study, swearing that he would waste no more time thinking about the woman. He'd finished part of his writing already and wanted to get on with it. He sat down at the desk, but his mind was elsewhere. He opened the drawer, and there he discovered the letter Meilin had left him. He read hurriedly, as though to swallow it whole. The letter was clearly written, as follows:

Zibin, I simply can't hide the truth from you anymore. When you read this letter, I will probably already be on [the avenue] as assigned by the organization to carry out [a Communist] movement. I imagine that you will be unhappy to hear this news, but I feel I have to let you know and explain it, because honestly I love you very deeply. Even now I still hope that you do not misunderstand me. That's why I'm reporting to you now. I hope you will give it some thought, so that when I come back we can have a rational discussion. We should both criticize each other very sincerely and thoroughly. I have a lot of things to tell you, some about myself and some about you. I'll talk to you more later on.

Meilin

For a long time Zibin was stupefied. He could barely breathe. He had never wanted this. It was too unexpected. He thought back to all the unpleasant news and all the familiar faces, and then he thought about Meilin . . . Oh, such a woman, so gentle and soft. Now she too had abandoned him to follow the masses. He had great ambition and talent, but it was in vain because he could not go that direction. He was left all alone. He was despondent and wanted to cry, but couldn't. In his imagination he pictured what [that avenue] must look like at that moment, full of terror and danger. Despite a deep anxiety, he did not look forward to Meilin's return. He did not want to see her again, because she would

bring him so much pain, pain that would worsen over time. He could not bear to have her in the same room with him anymore. He ripped the letter to pieces angrily. Then he saw his notebook, yawning open like a mouth, and the paltry few pages he'd written. He grieved over it silently before slamming the cover shut and throwing it in the drawer. Then he heaved a long sigh.

Part Two

I

At dawn on an early spring day, a moist breeze swept in softly through the broken window, brushed everything gently, and left quietly. The pale light of the sky reached into every corner and coated the room with a mysterious color. The bustling noises of the city had not yet begun. It was a good time for peaceful sleep, but Wang Wei, who had stayed up very late, awoke with a start. He opened eyes that were heavy with sleep, looked dumbly at the sky for a while, and then, as if he hadn't thought of anything, closed his eyes, turned over, and dozed off again. He was a likable, bronze-complexioned young man. Just as his eyelids closed, a beautiful vision sprang into his mind. He turned over, as though startled for a second time, and sat up. Seeming to doubt himself, he took out a terse telegram from under the pillow, which he reread:

Taking steamer Dairen to Shanghai tonight. Arriving morning day after tomorrow. Meet me. Mary

The bronze face shone with joy. He rubbed the stubble on his chin and beamed. Even more happily, and with an occasional "whew," he put on his old black woolen trousers and thought over and over to himself, "This is really a strange one. When I was longing for her letters, not a word. Now, when I'm up to my ears in work, she comes. Oh, Mary, you strange creature."

A pleased, happy expression adorned his face as he spoke that adorable name. After splashing some cold water on his face, he dashed out into the light fog and headed toward the Bund.

The streets were quiet. Only a few horse-drawn garbage carts and several listless street cleaners were out. Now and then, an apprentice, half asleep, stepped out of a small shop to take down the shutters over the doors. The fog made the streets damp. Everything seemed to be enshrouded by a thin white cloud. It was cool, but pleasant. Wang Wei walked to a streetcar stop and after a short wait boarded a streetcar

headed for the Bund. The din of the iron wheels shattered the surrounding stillness as the car swayed violently down the tracks. Wang Wei wasn't thinking about any of this. He ignored everything and thought only of the place he was headed in the thick fog, in which he kept seeing a flowerlike, petite, and charming face. He had met her at an informal banquet last summer. On that occasion, she hadn't even noticed him. She had talked a lot, been very lively, and her drinking had attracted considerable attention. But she had hardly glanced in his direction. Yet, somehow, he had found her nonchalant arrogance captivating. Noticing an occasional inadvertent frown, he felt that she must be very lonesome in a way that was incomprehensible to ordinary people. Because of this he felt very close to her, and when he heard her laughter, his heart unexpectedly raced. The next day he plucked up enough courage to visit her. He was warmly welcomed, but a few days later she left for Beijing to study. Not daring to believe that there was a firm friendship between them, he felt somewhat pessimistic and disappointed. Later, however, a few letters were exchanged between them, and thoughts of what might happen led to wishful thinking. Suffering from the uncertainty, he felt he simply had to go to Beiping.⁶ There they lived together as happy as could be for a while before returning south together. Since this had happened during winter break, she insisted on going home, agreeing to return to Shanghai after the Lunar New Year; but she did not keep her word. Only after a long time did he receive a short letter from her from Beiping. She gave no explanation, asking only that he forgive her.

His anxieties would have overwhelmed him if a new hope had not brought him encouragement. By then he had become very interested in contemporary politics and economics, was reading diligently and insatiably, and was also gradually becoming involved in practical struggles. As a result, even though he often wrote to her, missed her, and felt sorry about losing her, after a short time his letters became shorter and he didn't miss her so much. Sometimes he even forgot her for a few days. Yet despite everything, her pretty face was deeply engraved on his heart, comforting him after his hard work. Only he knew how much he loved her. When yesterday he received this telegram out of the blue, it revived many hopes and dreams and brought back the sweet past. He wished he could see her at once and tell her many things, about his recent work above all. In no time at all the streetcar arrived at the Bund.

On the Huangpu River several large ships, their iron chains rattling, were ready to weigh anchor. The air reverberated with sharp, loud whistles. Small sampans carrying workers across the river were well out toward the center of the river. The sun had already risen, casting its pale yellow, warm rays from the other shore, and giving people on the road

long thin shadows. Wang Wei took a deep breath of the morning air, and as his flushed face was touched by the pleasantly cool breeze, he felt very comfortable. His whole body seemed filled to the bursting point. He was carefree, yet anxious to find the Riqing Company quay.

When Wang Wei found the quay, it was surprisingly quiet. There was no boat, only a rippling stretch of river. At a loss, he fixed his eyes on the water, not knowing whether he was late or early. He feared that the telegram was a trick Mary was playing on him, because with her taste and temperament, she was quite capable of such cruelty. Often all she considered was the satisfaction of her own impulses. He did not know what to do, but finally decided to go to the company office and inquire. The company's answer was that the boat would not reach the quay until two-thirty in the afternoon. This gave him new hope, although he still felt listless on his way back home.

After breakfast Wang Wei went to his workplace, where he sat for two hours translating newspapers from English into Chinese and from Chinese into English. He had been working hard recently, sometimes delivering documents to other organizations. He also attended frequent meetings where such topics as the business of the organization, various theoretical problems, and the correctness of recent political policies were discussed. Because of this, he was often so busy that he didn't return home until midnight. Yet there were also times when he could not rest in the morning because he had to draft planning outlines, organizational outlines, manifestoes, and correspondence. He had not had enough sleep for quite a few nights, so when he went to work this day he looked exhausted.

A unit of the [underground society] temporarily occupied this office-like room. The [society] had been established under the direction of the [Party] and was an organization that promoted the proletarian literary activity of a number of intellectuals. Since the organization's activities were illegal under the present government, an embroidery goods company sign was hung above the door. Several staff members came regularly, but young Wang Wei was the most respected among them as one who was never late or absent from work. When he arrived this morning, aside from the cleaning man, only the short secretary, Feng Fei, was there. Feng often came late since he lived far away, but today he was sitting there alone smoking leisurely. When Wang Wei entered, he was surprised to see him there.

"Hey, Feng, why so early?"

"It's not really early."

Noticing that Feng's slightly flat face was beaming, Wang Wei asked, "What is it? You look so happy."

"Oh, nothing . . ."

Yet Feng could not get a certain fortuitous encounter out of his mind. A month ago, he had noticed a woman ticket-seller on a bus, but they had never had an opportunity to talk. He would see her at the same time every day, and each time he saw her his respect for her increased. She was so unaffected, a capable woman whose face had that healthy color that came, not from makeup, but from working with a will and high spirits. From her appearance and her speech (she often argued with passengers and forcefully expressed her opinions), he concluded that she was an educated woman who had a kind of simple, clear understanding of politics that resulted from having class consciousness. He nearly spoke to her many times, for he was already feeling very close to her; but because of his habitual timidity, he always missed his chance. This day, however, he had left home earlier than usual to handle some extra business; and while at the bus stop, head down, as he thumbed through the pages of a local paper, he had suddenly heard a familiar voice. Turning around, he saw her standing behind him calmly looking at him and smiling, making him ill at ease.

"Hi there. You're early today," she said.

"Yes . . . right . . ." he sputtered.

"I'll be busy today," she continued. "I have to take another girl's place, so I won't have a break all day. She's sick, but can't ask for any time off. Tonight I'll have to buy some medicine to make an herbal brew for her. And you, sir, where do you work?"

"I'm on the staff of a company," he replied.

Looking him over, she shook her head and remarked, "No, you don't look like it. You look like you're still a student. I'm good at figuring people out."

After they had exchanged a few more words, the streetcar came. She had hopped aboard gracefully and, after saying hello to another ticket-seller, had taken over the wooden ticket board and canvas coin bag. When Feng was about to get off, he had casually remarked, "See you again," as though he were addressing an old acquaintance.

Now he was thinking again about what had just happened. He had never had much contact with women, and disliked the usual young misses who were students. The ticket-seller was the first woman he had ever paid any attention to. He made a lot of guesses about her background and created a glorious, gripping history for her. He did not notice that freshly shaven Wang Wei, despite being exhausted, was showing an even greater joy on his face.

On this day Wang Wei left early and also missed a meeting. At the dock, he finally fetched his dazzling beauty and several pieces of luggage, and took them home.

2

A sedan drove from the Huangpu River onto wide, smooth Victoria Avenue. Wang Wei took a small tender hand in his. Not knowing what to say at first, they just smiled silently at each other. They were both very happy. After a long time she broke the silence, "How are things going? You look like you've lost quite a bit of weight."

Touching his freshly shaved chin, he answered with a laugh, "I thought I looked better today."

He thought of how his beard was growing so rapidly lately and smiled again. He was going to tell her about it, but changed his mind. He would wait for her to discover it by herself. Holding her hand tightly, he said, "Mary, you look more beautiful than ever!"

He drew her soft hand up to his lips. She moved a little closer to him. He sighed and, with a sad look on his face, said, "Ah Mary, don't leave me again!"

She tenderly turned her face toward him, and the two pairs of lips that were longing to join pressed tightly together. Intoxicated and dizzy, they embraced each other gently and forgot everything else.

At a sharp turn, the car shifted suddenly, jolting them back to reality. They pulled apart. He hastily steadied the little suitcase that was swaying violently, and then, looking at the small round mirror up front, he noticed the driver's smile. This made him feel a little annoyed and embarrassed, but all he could do was smile back at that sly, grinning face.

After arriving at Wang Wei's apartment, they got out of the car in high spirits. Four times he ran from the small back door to the third floor. Her luggage was lined up on one side of the stairs. As he searched his pocket for the key, he looked at Mary and said, "The room might be too small for two people, but we can move somewhere else later, all right?"

The room was certainly not big and had only a few simple things in it: a bed, a desk, two chairs, a bookshelf, and a wardrobe. Because there weren't a lot of things, it really didn't appear to be all that small. It was just that the ceiling was low, which created a closed-in effect. Since Wang Wei was seldom at home, usually just to sleep, he hadn't noticed this. But Mary, who had just spent two days on the vast ocean, felt it immediately. She did not want to say anything, though, and on the contrary, praised the room for being clean and the occupant for his neatness.

"The credit goes to the woman who rented the room to me," Wang Wei explained. "She does all the cleaning. The furniture is hers too. She even provides me with tea. All of this convenience is the reason why I live here. Why don't I ask her to bring us some boiled water?"

Mary stopped him. Looking at her wristwatch, which said about five o'clock, she asked, "What do you do about meals?"

"That depends. I don't have a fixed time and place to eat. Are you hungry?"

"I'm starving. I only had a bowl of thin rice porridge in the morning, and at noon I was in such a hurry that I didn't eat. Let's take care of filling our stomachs before we do anything else."

"All right." He picked up his hat and started to go.

"Where shall we go? Where do you usually go?" she asked.

Small, filthy, crowded restaurants flashed through his mind. Then he glanced at her outfit—the imported velvet coat with a fur collar, the neat gloves, and the shiny satin shoes—and burst out laughing, "We can't go to any of those places. Mary, lately I've been living in the style of the common people. Today let's go to a nice place as a treat to welcome you. We'll work out a long-term plan tomorrow. Tell me where you'd prefer to go."

Mary looked at him and smiled sweetly. "You'd like to treat me? How much money do you have?"

He figured out what was left in his pocket; perhaps four yuan or so. If they weren't extravagant it should be enough. Mary liked Cantonese cooking, so they hired a rickshaw to go to a restaurant that was quite far away.

They had an excellent and leisurely meal. Mary was in an agreeable mood and generous with her beauty, often taking a captivating pose for no particular small reason. She had taken off the hundred-and-twenty-yuan coat and was wearing only a thin, light green, tight-fitting, soft silk *qipao* that delicately revealed the intriguing parts of her body. She talked a lot about funny occasions when she had missed him and how she would never leave him again. She told him why she hadn't kept her promise and how, although she had known he was able to forgive her, she had suffered twice as much. Ah, how painful her recent life in Beiping had been. She hadn't wanted anyone else to know about this pain and had not understood these feelings herself. She said she only wanted him to know about this pain, and that if he gave her a little more love it would be all right. She spoke very movingly, even excessively, and he felt her pain himself. A kind of physical instinct pressed upon him, making him wish that at that moment he could press her down and enjoy again the wild intoxication of her beautiful flesh without having to use words to express his love. Several times he said, "Let's eat up quickly!"

It was different for Mary, though. The atmosphere of the restaurant stimulated her. The red lights shone over them and made Wang Wei look more handsome than usual and so earnest. As for herself, she had a slight fever and was sure this made her more attractive. As she sipped wine or black tea, her excitement increased. She enjoyed sitting with her lover on

the soft seat, whispering hypnotic words, and forgetting everything else. She enjoyed the exciting sensations that made their hearts burn with barely controllable desire. Wanting very much to prolong this feeling, she was unwilling to leave. She was afraid that going back would break the mood. That place was cold and cheerless, and there were trivial things waiting for her to do. Wasn't her luggage still piled up in the middle of the room? She sipped her wine ever so slowly.

Wang Wei, on the other hand, gradually fell silent. Just a while ago he had been suffering from an unfulfilled beautiful desire. Controlling himself, he felt his entire body burning hot. Red capillaries filled his eyes and seemed ready to ignite. He remained silent, trying not to listen to her, to be vulnerable to her seduction. This was because he was really feeling more pain than pleasure. He even tried to think about some trivial things in order to relieve this unbearable emotion. He stayed silent, and pretended to be listening to her, but actually, his thoughts were slowly drifting away to many small matters. He should be forgiven for this because Mary was simply unaware of the suffering a young man commonly endures in the presence of a pretty lover.

The big clock in the restaurant struck seven. Wang Wei was shocked, for he suddenly recalled that he absolutely had to attend a meeting at seven-thirty that evening. Over twenty people would be waiting for him, the chairman. He looked hesitantly at his beautiful partner, not knowing what to do. He really had to go, and even if he set out right away, he would probably still be late. But how could he do that? How could he just leave Mary alone in the restaurant? He became very nervous and angrily snapped at the waiter, "Hurry up and bring the rice!"

Mary gave him a wondering look, but said in a charming voice, "All right, let's eat."

They finished eating in a great hurry, after which Wang Wei stood up and walked out. Mary had not even put on her coat, so she was a little irritated. She did not, however, let her feelings show, and silently followed him as he walked quickly out onto the street. They hopped into separate rickshaws and were soon flying toward home. She felt an indescribable annoyance, but she forgave and followed him.

Once they arrived, Wang Wei felt sorry for Mary. He took her into his arms, kissed her, and stretching her full length on the bed, begged, "A thousand apologies, my love! I've got to leave you for a while, but I'll be back soon. I'll explain it all when I come back. Anyway, you must try to understand me. I love you very much, but I have too much work to do. Later on, maybe I'll find a way to do less, but for now there's no way. Well, sleep tight. I'll help you unpack your things after I get back. Okay, close your eyes. Don't hate me! I have to go."

Mary was baffled. Disheartened, she lay in the bed and looked at him. Wang Wei turned and rushed out the door. All she heard was the sound of his feet running quickly down the stairs.

As soon as Wang Wei left Mary, he forgot about her. Running like crazy down the street, he thought of the people who were waiting for him. They were certainly even more anxious than he was.

3

The beautiful, lively young woman who had been left behind lay on the large bed alone. She really had a gentle, beautiful heart. She had many intense interests that she had brought with her from afar. She would generously give this man much affection and tenderness if he would adore her. In fact, it was only her need for this kind of considerate care and some measure of excitement that had sustained her through all the trouble of coming here. Now what? What was she getting? She was treated coldly. He left her here all alone and went somewhere else. What could be more important than the reunion of two lovers after a long separation? She lay on the bed in frustration for quite some time. The dim yellowish light of the sixteen-watt bulb reflected off the ceiling. She thought about Wang Wei. She didn't understand, but she couldn't help feeling angry, for what he had done had hurt her pride. She thought of moving all her things to a hotel in a fit of pique, but she really loved him too much. In fact, she had become less bold than before and was willing to put herself at risk to forgive him. Perhaps he really did have something more important to handle. Perhaps he would be back any minute. She cheered herself up, got out of bed, and started to straighten up her things. Her face felt a little uncomfortable and she wanted to wash it. Also, most important, she wanted to change her clothes, because her coat was too good to be rubbing up against the things in this room. She opened up a fine leather suitcase that contained quite a few colorful playthings. She took them out and set them one by one on his desk, which she discovered was completely bare. Next she took out several nicely wrapped packages that contained fine gifts she had brought him—a beautiful tie, two colorful silk handkerchiefs, and some other things, such as buttons. As she held these things, her heart softened. She imagined how happy he'd be and how lovely he'd think she was when he saw these gifts. Lovingly, she pushed these things to a corner of the desk. Last, she took out a thin, quilted *qipao*. It wasn't quite new and was made of black satin.

She took off her coat in front of the wardrobe mirror and in the dim light looked at her pretty figure. Her slightly flushed face was framed by thick black hair and was held high by the high collar of her light green

dress. She looked quite dignified and exciting. Slowly she unbuttoned her dress to reveal the lace of her pink slip. She looked at her half-nude body with affectionate, playful eyes. Only after enjoying the sight of her white neck and shoulders for a long while did she reluctantly cover them with the quilted *qipao*. This dress was so long that the hem covered her ankles, making her look taller. She was truly beautiful and a pleasure to behold. It seemed that whatever style and color she wore only added to her beauty. She opened the wardrobe and found it practically empty. There wasn't a single item of clothing, just a few pairs of socks in a corner and several empty hangers. She was puzzled, and suspected that there must be a suitcase somewhere where Wang Wei had placed his clothing. She hung her beautiful dresses in the pitiful wardrobe and then started to look for his suitcase. She found two of them lying under the bed. As the bookcase was full of books, perhaps he hadn't taken his clothing out and still had it packed in his suitcases. She thought of how Wang Wei wasn't one for dressing up, how he often ruined good clothes and wore old, worn-out things. She continued to unpack her own things, but even though many items that she wanted to use were placed in a convenient place, the room was still a mess. Several gaping suitcases lay open on the floor, and used wrapping paper was scattered all over. She was very tired and really felt unable to straighten everything up at once. Actually, there wasn't that much to do, but she couldn't handle it. She became angry and, not wanting to see the pile of trash anymore, lay down on the bed again and tried to sleep.

It was already eleven o'clock. When she had been occupied with her lovely treasures and passing the time admiring herself, she hadn't realized that it was so late. However, tired though she was, she still couldn't fall asleep. She was feeling lonely and couldn't get Wang Wei off her mind. She felt more anxious and distressed than when she had been on the ship. She simply couldn't understand him. Why wasn't he back yet? Why had he left her alone in such a desolate room for such a long time? Something was up, for in their past there had been only tenderness and affection between them.

Mary was young and pretty. For years she had easily attracted the interest of men. She was clever enough to realize this and accepted it with pleasure. Yet she loved no one but herself. She knew she was basking in the radiance of her own youth. She wanted to hold onto this throne forever instead of letting someone seize it. Having read many works of fiction and seen many movies, she knew that marriage was the end of a woman's life. First one became a tender, docile housewife, then a good mother who loved her husband and children. What might be called the tender love of family would then take away many other possible joys,

and in the blink of an eye, a woman's hair would be white, her emotions exhausted, and she would be allowing her husband love affairs on the outside. All she could do then was set her loving old woman's heart in order and calmly wait to become a grandmother. What was so wonderful about that? She didn't need that. She was quite happy with what she had. She was leading a life of freedom, and the money she received from home, though not enough for her to be extravagant, was certainly sufficient for her needs. She also had many friends who adapted to her every change of mood like obedient servants. She had lived happily like this for a long time. Strangers might think that she had considerable experience and had known frustration, but actually, her heart had never been touched by anyone. All that had happened was that her face had become more beautiful than ever and she had cultivated a distinctive style that made her even more attractive.

It might have been possible to live according to her ideal because her appeal to the opposite sex would not have diminished that quickly. However, she had been conquered by Wang Wei's affection, and her entire view had changed. Although she had once despised men's love, Wang Wei's every move expressed a masculine love that did not deserve humiliation. She was moved by his behavior, and could not control herself; so she had fled to Beiping because she did not want to yield. In Beiping there were a number of men who loved her even more than Wang Wei. Once she had been happy to live there, but now, even though she joked with people as she always had, there was a firm, reserved figure that she could not forget. She was deeply impressed by his special qualities and wanted to be with him again. It seemed that what he had given her was not love, but a boundless new hope for life and an energy that she had never experienced before. Then just as she was longing for him, he had rushed heroically to Beiping like a legendary passionate warrior. This action suited her perfectly, and she responded to his bravado with generous affection. For some time they lived together romantically and tenderly. During that period, she was genuinely happy and enjoyed life as never before. However, being accustomed to freedom, she slowly began to feel that the sacrifice was too great. She was afraid—afraid of living an ordinary life, afraid of becoming a mother, and afraid of losing her friends. To lose all of her admirers for one man would not be worth it. She loved Wang Wei and wanted to hold on to that feeling, but for the time being she wanted to be apart from him. They could be a pair of free lovers and lifelong friends, but she didn't want to be husband and wife, cuddling up against each other like two tame doves. So she made up her mind to flee. She went back home, but after staying for a short time, she felt even more disgusted with family life, and became more determined than ever to leave Wang Wei. That is why she didn't keep her promise and went to

cold Beiping. She wanted to stay in that tranquil ancient kingdom for two years, until she graduated from college. At first everything went fine. But soon she began to think of Wang Wei. As his letters dwindled off, her mind grew more and more confused. She was afraid that this warm-hearted person would drift away. In the end she decided to sacrifice everything and go to Shanghai. She simply could not leave this man. She cursed her stupidity and thought of her earlier life. "Ah, that was life! But what is this?" She went anyway, taking her passionate heart and casting it into the bosom of her lover, whom she had loved and respected. He was the man of her dreams.

Now what? This time he had really offended her. How could he treat her like this? She was both angry and sad. She waited until twelve o'clock, then one. Finally she heard the sound of light footsteps running up the stairs. She knew they were his. Suddenly a feeling of sadness overwhelmed her, and before she knew it, a teardrop had fallen silently onto the sleeve of her long black *qipao*.

4

Wang Wei tiptoed in. At this moment all problems and activities disappeared from his mind. He was prepared to suffer in patience the torture of her love and to give her extra tender affection. He knew that it would be hard for her to understand and forgive him for his behavior tonight because she didn't know about the recent change in his outlook on life. But afterward he could let her know, and she would not only be sympathetic, but would encourage and join him. He walked softly to the bed and bent down to look at her. She didn't make a sound, as though she were asleep. He sat down next to her, but dared not disturb her. He looked at the messy room. It was like the tangle in his mind, where there was so much to think about and so much confusion that he couldn't straighten it out. For instance, he thought of his work and what it would mean to live with Mary. He didn't think he had the time or energy to do all that was expected of him. The best thing, he thought, would be to tell Mary everything right away. She would be happy and they could work together. Besides being in love, they could discuss many important questions, such as the world economy, politics, and how to liberate the laboring masses. Their opinions might differ and then they would argue. Perhaps Mary would be correct. In the end they would agree and still be lovers. He lowered his head again and looked at her. She had such beauty, such noble beauty. Every inch of her body testified to the fact that she was fit only for a happy life, nutritious food, and pure fresh air. Her every movement was fit only for high society. Yet, he thought, if Mary gave up her extravagant clothing for a coat of homespun cloth, it would

highlight her distinctive qualities even more. If she could learn to be a little less delicate, she could have a different style of beauty. It was possible. As he looked at her again, she seemed to change form and become his ideal. She was strong, fit, and slightly masculine, but she still retained her original, seductive beauty. He wanted to kiss her, but he stopped for fear of waking her. He continued to think about many things, all of them dreams of being together with Mary. Ah, they were such happy dreams, but they were not something that Mary could understand.

A long time passed. Wang Wei lay down next to Mary in utter exhaustion, but his mind was very clear. He saw the fulfillment and glory of his future life. He held his happiness in his own hands, just as a helmsman holds the rudder. He could not fall asleep because he was overtired, his head ached, and his mind was still working. Now and then he smelled the fragrance of Mary's body. This excited him, and he began to have wild desires.

Wang Wei was too close to Mary. She could hear his heart beat, and his rapid breathing brushed softly against her, making her skin tingle. She hadn't been asleep, just a little angry and unwilling to talk to him. When she couldn't stand it any longer, she turned quietly away, thinking of moving a little farther from him.

"Are you awake, Mary? I've been waiting a long time."

He reached toward her. She pushed his arm away and said in a soft, cold voice, "I haven't slept a minute."

Her tone of voice said it all. He moved closer, hugged her apologetically, and pleaded.

"Will you let me explain, Mary? You should know that you've misunderstood me. Have pity on me! You've already given me too much. Even if you only stayed for one hour, I couldn't express in an entire lifetime my gratitude for your coming from Beiping. If you want to be cruel, I deserve any pain you inflict upon me. But don't misjudge me, Mary. I can bear being wrongly judged, but when I see you angry because of your misunderstanding, I feel hurt. I know that you're angry with me, and perhaps you are suspicious of me too, but can you let me explain? In fact, it's really because . . ."

"No, don't say anything. I don't like to hear explanations. Explanations are nothing but high-sounding excuses. I'm certainly not angry with you. You have your freedom. You can arrange your time however you want. I only hate myself for being too weak and valuing love too highly."

"Mary, I don't want us to spoil our life together. I don't want to quarrel with you on this first happy night. I'm in the wrong, but you will forgive me eventually. You really don't know how much I love you."

Wang Wei reached out again to hold her. Her anger was not appeased, but she did not want to talk about it anymore. She let him hold her.

Wang Wei used loving phrases and slowly mollified her. He wasn't afraid to utter moving expressions, and at the right moment he was mischievous and cute. It was not that he liked to be hypocritical like this, but he knew that some of these techniques were indispensable if he was to make her love him a little more. Also, they were sincere. As a matter of fact, Mary soon forgot the recent unpleasantness and, cradling her head in his arms, said, "I was worried because you came back so late. Do you often come back this late?"

He answered that he often did. He usually had work to do, and even when he came back early, he still was unable to sleep. He said that he felt lonely in the room all by himself. His head was bowed, and from time to time he stroked Mary's face and hair. Mary felt that he was much thinner than before. She held his cheeks and said, "You've lost weight, Wang Wei!"

"Now I can start getting healthier because you're here."

But Mary was thinking that perhaps he'd be even busier and have less time to rest.

They forgot how tired they were and went on chatting. Sometimes they talked like little children, and said funny things that only people in love could understand. Only when dawn was breaking did they try to fall asleep in each other's embrace and lie there quietly with their eyes closed.

Because they were madly in love, he was still very passionate and she became more tender. So they lived together happily and peacefully for a short while.

5

Wang Wei usually got up every day at about eight o'clock, a little earlier than she did. He would straighten up the room, then read the newspaper, soaking up all the news he could. He wanted to learn everything he could about the world economy, developments on revolution in China, and evidence of the daily weakening of the ruling class, so he could prove the correctness of the political line that had been decided upon. He also searched for opposing arguments in reactionary papers and looked for indications of rumor and deceit. He was most interested in *Western Newsworld*, for it was more accurate than all the major Chinese newspapers and published exciting news that couldn't be found in China's [Communist] newspapers. This paper carried shocking stories under banner headlines and openly discussed the Chinese revolution from its capitalist, imperialist standpoint. It called for the Chinese warlords to

wake up to the development and the strength of the power opposed to them, to recognize that this power was definitely not just bandits or a mob, as they thought it to be. Wang Wei, naturally, wasn't happy with this view and looked only for actual news stories that would encourage him. He also had to read some other papers in which he looked for speeches and reports on both domestic and international policies, decisions on construction and revolution, and news about factories. Sometimes he had to write things, like outlines of a plan or tasks ahead. At such times his brain seemed to expand as many thoughts and proposals welled up within it, but he had to find a place for them. Since he wasn't all that accustomed to this kind of work, he had to think carefully about it, put it in order item by item, and then lay it out on paper. Three months before he had still been a melancholy student who could easily and very quickly have produced moving, clever, and touching lines in a poem of equal length. When Wang Wei was about to finish this daily task, the beautiful one would awaken. She looked so enchanting, with her hair spread over the pillow; and when she noticed that her man wasn't beside her, she would hum softly, and Wang Wei would know that it was time to finish up. He would put everything aside and walk over to the bed. Two long arms as snowy white as lotus root would stretch out above the green quilt, and sometimes he would catch a glimpse of her breast under the white or pink embroidered collar of her sleeveless undergarment. Her skin, with its rosy hue after a good night's sleep, highlighted her eyebrows, eyes, nose, and lips, and made shadowy areas more distinct. Wang Wei would be even more bewildered by this beautiful form. Sometimes he would kiss her violently, and sometimes, not daring to kiss her, he would just gaze at her quietly with sincere admiration. When that happened, she would be both charming and reproachful, saying to him with the air of a spoiled child, "You've sneaked out of bed and left me alone again."

Then he would explain, sometimes with words but more often with actions. He was still completely enraptured with her and passionately in love with her. Even though she was sometimes unhappy with him for not spending as much time with her as before, she could only forgive him. She would have to lie in bed for a while before getting up, and he would lie there beside her. This was such tender enjoyment! They would forget everything as they kissed and made dreamy conversation. For him, her innocence was absolutely lovable!

If she had a slight headache from sleeping too much, she would stretch lazily before kicking the soft quilts with her snowy white bare feet and climbing out of bed. Then Wang Wei would hustle back and forth look-

ing for little things like garters, dainty silk underwear, and a variety of feminine paraphernalia whose names he didn't know. She would then comb her hair and get dressed while he took meticulous care of her. She was very pleased with him, this tender slave who was also such a fortunate slave!

Later they would walk hand in hand to a small nearby restaurant to eat. Sometimes they went to a Cantonese restaurant because she liked Cantonese food. Occasionally they went to a small Western-style restaurant because she liked its quiet setting. At times like these, he would become nervous because he could see the clock on the restaurant wall moving very quickly, and he didn't have a lot of time to keep her company. Saying goodbye was always the most difficult part of the day for him.

After eating they would go back home. He couldn't help rushing, and she would realize that it would soon be time to part again. Hating to see him in such a hurry, she'd be silent for a long while, and then he would pause for a moment before going. But such moments were not pleasant, and eventually he had to kiss her cold cheek apologetically and rush off.

Now it was always he who was a late arrival at that place where he had to go. He appeared more rushed in doing his translations, and when several others would discuss something at another table, even if he wanted to listen, he didn't have the time. All he could do was glance at them once in a while. Once the short fellow, Feng Fei, who always had a happy expression, said to him, "What's happening? You seem to be preoccupied with other things lately! You look more tired every day."

Wang Wei simply answered with an "umm." He really hadn't had enough time lately to observe Feng's increasingly radiant face. Feng Fei and the woman ticket-seller had already become close friends.

Wang Wei would quickly finish what he had to do, then hurry off to somewhere else. It was not the same place every day. Sometimes he had to go a long way to attend a meeting, and this took time as well as physical and mental energy. Many controversial issues would be waiting for him, and there would always be disagreement. They would continue arguing for a long time and not end the meeting until it was time to eat. Then, because of the distance, he couldn't return home quickly, so most of the time he wasn't able to eat supper with Mary. In addition, he usually was busy at night, and although he tried to reduce his workload, he couldn't. As a result, the earliest he could get home was eleven o'clock. And even that did not mean that he had solved all the day's problems.

Only occasionally was Wang Wei free to return home by dinner time. This was the happiest time for Mary, since she could have him alone the

whole evening. In the enjoyment of love, Mary was forever insatiable. She'd drag him out onto the street to look for little restaurants that they had never been to before, or sometimes they would go to larger ones. After dinner they would walk along the brilliantly illuminated, bustling streets because it was still too early for the late movie. She often paused before windows that had the most delicate items on display and would say in a tone of surprise, "Oh, that's really nice!"

Wang Wei didn't have the slightest interest in such things, but he had to smile and go along with her. Sometimes she was not satisfied with his response and would turn to look at him and ask, "Do you mean it's not good? But it's gorgeous, really gorgeous!"

Wang Wei then had to answer, "Yes, it's very nice. The rich really know how to enjoy life. There'll come a day when we confiscate it all."

He meant to make her happy with such banter, but she would get angry and answer him seriously, "You're the only one who thinks so. I'd never want to possess such luxuries."

She would start to pout and walk away from the window as if she didn't care. At these times she looked as beautiful as an imperious queen. Wang Wei would say a few words of praise, and slowly she would forget her pique and start smiling again like an innocent child.

When there was still lots of time, Mary would insist on going to large stores to buy fruit. The fruit, naturally, was good, but it was expensive. Mary, however, was not one to think about small numbers, so she would ask Wang Wei to pay without a second thought. Wang Wei had become so poor, however, that he often walked long distances instead of taking a third-class streetcar, so on these occasions, they usually used Mary's money. He felt that they were spending too much, but reluctant to say anything, he simply obeyed her.

After this they would go to a deluxe movie theater, buy tickets, climb the elegantly carved stairway, pass through the doors where handsome ushers were standing, and take their seats. At such times she was happy. It didn't matter when the movie started or if she liked it or not. She had spent a lot of money, and spending money was the best way to satisfy her vanity. At these moments she would be sitting in Shanghai's first and foremost place of entertainment. Not far from her sat well-dressed foreign wives, and from time to time one could smell the fragrance of their superior perfume. She was prettier than they were, and her makeup probably cost as much as theirs. Some people would look at her, then size up Wang Wei, who was good looking in a masculine way. He displayed a very male determination and an incontestable dignity. Mary loved him for this. However, Wang Wei did not have a natty appearance. He often

wore shabby clothes, and no matter how many times she mentioned it, it was still the same. Over the past few years, he had not had even one new outfit made. Now, because he was so short of money, there was even less chance that he'd buy something. She had once wanted to get him a nice lined overcoat as a gift, but he had refused it. In fact, he did not think he needed an overcoat or had the time to go to a tailor.

When the movie started, Mary was happy, no matter what it was. She did not come for an exciting plot, because the ones she imagined were always better. Even less did she need to look for ideas and art from the Americans. She was very familiar with what appeared on the screen. If she wanted to find ideas and art, she could read books. Coming to the theater was strictly for enjoyment. Of the one yuan that she spent to attend the movie, eighty cents was for the soft, cushioned chair, the shiny brass banisters, the velvet curtains, and the pleasing music. Only a country bumpkin would come solely for the movie.

As for Wang Wei, in the past he had been fascinated by these pictures. He had often come when he had nothing else to do to see the romantic plots, the stirring tragi-comedies, and the half-nude bodies. Now that he was so busy, he no longer had an interest in such meaningless works, no matter how many millions of dollars had been invested in them. Now he considered these movies senseless, or even hateful, because they so easily numbed people's minds and influenced society for the worse. He and people like him could not approve of these things that were merely entertainment for ignorant capitalist matrons and young ladies. However, for the sake of Mary, the person who loved him, he put up with it. He thought of how he often left her home alone and how this was a way to make her happy. It was a sacrifice for him but a compensation for her.

They would amuse themselves until late at night before heading home. It was never enough for Mary, but when she saw that Wang Wei was exhausted, she controlled her excitement. Wang Wei would be so tired that his eyes would be red, his face puffy, his joints stiff. As soon as they reached home he always fell fast asleep, something that Mary also regretted.

Leading a life like this could be considered enjoyable, but when it lasted too long, problems arose. Wang Wei was worn out from the constant lack of sleep, while Mary had too much time on her hands. Loneliness annoyed her, and she often said to him, "I feel that our past was so

wonderful. How can I make you come back to me and belong to me forever? Now I feel that this is probably just a woman's illusion. Ah, Wang Wei, whenever I think of my weak points, a woman's weak points, I start to hate men."⁷

Wang Wei knew that they were an incompatible pair. If Mary were a peasant girl, a factory worker, or a high school student, then they would get along very well because there would be only one idea, one outlook. He would lead her and she would obey. But Mary was from a relatively well-to-do family and had never experienced hardship. Her intelligence made her proud and her learning confirmed her attitude toward society. She was engrossed in the pursuit of pleasure. She believed in herself and would yield to no one. Sometimes she could become very firm and determined. Wang Wei saw this crisis, like the world economic crisis, spreading out before his eyes. He loved Mary. First, she possessed flawless beauty. She was intelligent, had skill in dealing with others, and was courageous. Her shortcoming was her upper-class upbringing, which taught her to indulge herself in a world of fantasy. She had no desire to deal with the real world because it was too troublesome and too tiresome, especially those things that she saw as ugly and commonplace. She was already twenty years old, and the most important thing for her was to keep looking young. She did not want to let anything snatch away her youth. Wang Wei understood this well. He often searched for a way to change her, but his methods were slightly clumsy, and Mary would realize what he was up to. Then she would mock him.

"In a word, Wang Wei, you've wasted your efforts again. If I wanted to join the revolution, I would have done so long ago. You'd better believe that I haven't lacked the opportunity. It's not that I don't believe in revolution: I'm just tired of it. You really don't need to use your propaganda on me. And as for yourself, let me tell you right here and now, just wait and see, one day you will lose your life for it. Ah, it isn't worth it. You're much more useful alive than dead."

She spoke from the heart, for she really was growing tired of all this. She had never discussed his work with him and had never read the books and newspapers he brought home. Her interest focused entirely on herself. She had read some of the minor newspapers, but they only reported news about campus queens, sports celebrities, film stars, and pimps and prostitutes. Wang Wei disapproved and sometimes, unable to control himself, would say to her, "Mary! I don't think that this is very worthwhile entertainment. You didn't have this inclination before."

Mary would respond, "If you stayed at home, I wouldn't have to read these. I'm just too lonely. I need something to while away the time, but your books don't amuse me."

"Then come along with me, how about that? You can treat it as a lark."

Mary would give him a sour smile.

After he urged her several times to come to work with him, Mary began to waver. Her lonesomeness was getting unbearable. So one day she decided to go with him to a routine meeting.

After lunch she began to make herself up very carefully. She expected that the people at the meeting would all be quite ragged, even more pitiful than Wang Wei. She had heard that these people were all very poor. She did not mean to be arrogant or show off, but she wanted to shock them with her beauty. She wanted to disturb the minds of those revolutionaries. She was very happy about this romantic notion and its imagined success.

Mary gazed into the mirror until she could not find a single flaw; only then was she satisfied. She sat down and waited anxiously until three o'clock, when Wang Wei ran back pantingly to pick her up. She wanted to look in the mirror one more time to seek his approval, but there wasn't time. Seeing that she was ready, Wang Wei said happily, "Wonderful, I was worried you might not be ready. Let's go. I'm late again." Paying no attention to her clothes or appearance, he walked hurriedly ahead of her.

As predicted, they were late. A discussion on a general plan and concrete steps to carry out a program was already underway, so no one greeted the latecomers. They only glanced their way and then returned to their discussion. As Wang Wei sat down with Mary at one corner of the table, someone whispered to him, "Wang Wei, good heavens! You're always late for meetings. If this happens again, you'll be disciplined."

Nobody paid any attention to Mary, except for one or two who scanned her face for a second. It did not please them.

Mary looked at the seven or eight people. Two were wearing long scholars' robes and the rest were in Western suits. They were quite young, and two of them looked like little street urchins. They all shared a common quality, namely, that they looked dynamic, vigorous, and full of vitality. Mary had already sensed this. She alone did not have this quality.

Mary was often high-spirited too, but what stimulated her? It was definitely not to make progress in life. Her excitement lay in erotic pleasures, in the pursuit and enjoyment of physical desire. Of course, at certain times and places, this was enchanting and bewitching, but in this place it was obviously colorless and ugly. She became faintly conscious of this and started to feel an inexpressible unhappiness.

At this time Wang Wei seemed to have forgotten her completely. He appeared more cool-headed and methodical than ever. He had the most

ideas and he was the one most to the point. He not only didn't pay any attention to Mary, he didn't even look at her. Several times she nudged his elbow to express her discomfort, but instead of taking the hint, he moved his arm away. Slowly she became angry with him.

The longer Mary sat there, the more bored she felt. She stopped listening, for what they were doing had nothing to do with her. She did not know why, but she even started to hate these people. All she could think of was leaving, but there wasn't any opportunity to say something to Wang Wei. Five o'clock. Six o'clock. Night fell. She saw that there was no sign of a break. She had sat so long that she was feeling fidgety all over. She was contemplating showing some anger. Finally she stood up with a determined look on her face. Only then did Wang Wei ask, "What do you want?"

"I have to leave to do something," she answered defiantly.

"All right, I'll be finished in a little while."

Wang Wei rose slightly and handed her the big red leather handbag she had forgotten. By now everyone was looking at her. Their eyes followed her out of the room with a look of disapproval. She stalked out of the room with the haughty stride that only an aristocratic woman possesses.

The meeting went on without interruption until seven-thirty. As Wang Wei took his hat and was about to leave, the chairman of the meeting, Shuyin, asked him, "Are you busy tonight?"

Wang Wei thought for a while and said no.

"Let's go and have supper then." As he spoke, Shuyin looked at the one-yuan bill he had just taken out of his pocket. Wang Wei was reminded of Mary and said he had to go back home.

"There's not enough time. From here to your house takes at least an hour. Are you worried that she's waiting impatiently for you?"

He began to waver.

"Is the young lady who came today the one you're about to recommend for membership?" Shuyin asked.

"Yes. I think she's very capable, and I hope she'll like being one of us."

Frowning a little, Shuyin unconsciously lowered his voice, "In my opinion, Wang Wei, you won't succeed! She's a woman set in her ways."

Wang Wei nodded gloomily and answered, "I've been worried about that painful stage because Mary could never put up with it. I realize now that she has endured too much already."

In the end Wang Wei decided to go home to eat. He waited there for Mary for quite a long time, but she did not come back. It was sheer agony! He recalled how Mary had often waited for him like this and felt more sorry for her. He prepared to wait for her and show her warmth after she returned.

7

At midnight, when Wang Wei was so tired he nearly fell asleep, he heard the click of her high-heeled shoes coming up the stairs. Wang Wei awkwardly got up to greet her. In the dim light, he did not see the trace of unhappiness on her face as she said in a cheery, sharp voice, "Why aren't you in bed? Sorry to have kept you waiting so long."

Standing in front of the mirror, she examined her warm face. Wang Wei asked in a relaxed manner, "Where have you been, Mary?"

"You don't have to know. It has nothing to do with you. Tell me, when did I ever question you?"

"But . . ." Wang Wei walked over to her with a pitiful expression on his face. "Ah, Mary, are you angry with me?"

"No." She laughed and kissed him on the cheek.

"But, Mary, you have to tell me."

Mary laughed happily. Seeing the wrinkles of worry deeply etched in his face, she savored the joy of victory. She actually began to have a cruel desire for revenge, wanting to torture him for his neglect, which was intolerable for a woman who craves affection.

She would never forget that moment at the meeting when she had stopped existing as a person, especially in Wang Wei's mind. She had been sitting so close to him. Why for so many hours hadn't he thought of her or looked over at her and realized that she was not used to such activity. Moreover, when she left, he hadn't seen her off or talked with her. Such behavior was nothing less than mistreatment for a proud woman. When she walked out of the meeting, she had almost burst into tears. She had hated Wang Wei, those people, and that so-called meeting! After sitting there for several hours listening to all that talk, she found not even one word earned her admiration. Sitting like that and talking all day long came as a disappointment. She was not, definitely not, opposed to a revolution and was certainly willing to work hard. But she didn't see how all this talk was going to create a revolution.

Naturally, this idea sprung from her vanity, but from this point on she lost some respect for Wang Wei. Because she looked down on his work, she felt an unreasonable hatred and scorn toward him. His leaving her alone at home became unbearable. In the past, she had accepted the situation because she loved him and, rather than interfere, respected his wishes. But now she understood everything. She would have to drag him back. He should not have a life separate from her. If he resisted, she planned to make him suffer, to avenge the love she had granted him that he had not returned sufficiently. Once her mind was made up, she had begun by going out alone for a walk. She prepared first to give him some-

thing bitter to taste and make him wait anxiously at home for her. She had gone to a restaurant for dinner. It was crowded with young couples and groups of young people, and she was the only one there all alone. Many people looked at her in surprise, making her feel uncomfortable. She kept thinking about Wang Wei, but soon she heard a surprised and happy voice from a table opposite hers: "Well, Mary, hello. Is it really you?"

She raised her head and saw a woman of medium height, wearing a Western-style outfit, rushing toward her. She was so happy her heart jumped.

"Oh, Molan!" she called out.

They grasped each other's hands and looked at one another for a long while before Molan asked Mary in a puzzled voice, "Are you by yourself?"

Mary felt a little embarrassed and told her that she had come with a girlfriend who had had to leave earlier, and that was why she was alone.

"Ah, then, you are lonesome. Come join us."

Mary wanted to say no, but Molan had already called to the white-clad waiter. She had no choice but to follow Molan to the other table. Two men and a woman were sitting there. As Molan introduced them, Mary looked them over. They were all good-looking, fashionable people, but none of them looked as good to her as Wang Wei. Wang Wei didn't have that common air. Mary braced herself because their eyes were following her every move. Partly out of flattery and partly out of admiration, Molan complimented Mary, "Well, it's been almost a year since we've seen each other, and you're more beautiful than ever, Mary. How do you do it?"

Everyone trained their eyes on her outfit and on her. This was the result of the several hours she had spent in front of the mirror preparing to elicit compliments.

Mary and Molan had been very good friends in the past. Now they had met again at a time when she was lonely. How could she not be happy? So even though at times she still thought of Wang Wei, she ate her dinner in a good mood.

Molan wanted to go to see where she lived, but she preferred not to return right away and invited Molan to see a movie. Molan liked a good time, so naturally she agreed. Mary intentionally chose a place relatively far from home, so it would take longer to get back and Wang Wei would have to wait even longer.

The result was exactly what Mary had hoped for, with Wang Wei waiting for her anxiously. Even without looking carefully, she could tell that this was a time to be satisfied. Although she finally yielded to his repeated questioning and told him where she'd been, she did not tell him about

Molan. He felt sorry for her and said that after this he wanted to keep her company, because he realized how lonely it was to be alone, particularly in Mary's situation. Mary, however, did not say much, as if she did not really care one way or the other. She yawned a few times, took off her long *qipao*, lay down on the bed, and fell fast asleep.

The next day saw their usual morning routine. Wang Wei got up before getting enough sleep, and Mary lay down on the bed and fell asleep. The day after that was once again the same, and Wang Wei got up before getting enough sleep. But then Mary awoke with a start and jumped out of bed. She didn't help him at all as he did the tedious job of cleaning up, paying attention only to making up in front of the mirror.

"Mary, why are you getting up so early?" he asked her.

"I can't sleep," she answered indifferently.

She was ready at half past ten. "How about going to eat a little early?" she suggested.

"Why not, let's go." He was a little unhappy because she was making him postpone his morning assignment.

They went out to eat, but spoke very little as if there were nothing to talk about. On their way back home, however, Mary said with a smile, "I don't think that either one of us needs to go back. You can go to work, since you probably have a lot to do. As for me, I want to visit a friend whom I haven't seen for a long time."

She bade him goodbye with her eyes and walked off quickly in the opposite direction. Wang Wei ran to catch her, asked where she was going, but she gave him a determined look and asked angrily, "Why are you trying to control me?"

Wang Wei had more questions, but she jumped into a rickshaw. He could only stand there at a loss, watching as she went away. He then walked home listlessly.

His place was a total mess. Clothes and stockings that Mary had worn were everywhere and the washbasin was full of dirty water with grease from cosmetics floating on the surface. He had thought of using this extra time to do some work, but he was preoccupied with thoughts of Mary. He wasn't angry with her; he felt sorry for her. He decided that she had left him today because she was still angry with him, and that although she had acted indifferently, she actually was feeling depressed. He lay down on the bed, that bed that still retained the fragrance of her body, and sank deep into thoughts of Mary and her future. She was so intelligent. He didn't want to imagine that one day they might part. He wanted to walk with her hand in hand down the same road. He hoped that Mary would keep up with the changes of the era and stop drifting. He really needed to be with her.

8

From then on, Mary was seldom at home because of her visits to Molan and other old friends. She didn't feel lonesome when she was away from Wang Wei, but since she was still in love with him, she often felt a slight ache. Wang Wei was also suffering. He saw things more clearly than Mary did and thought that if one day she should leave him, although it would be awkward for him, it would be hardest for her. The reason was that he was busy and could become absorbed in his work. His faith would still exist and would not change at the loss of a woman. Although at the time he would feel sad, he could use another kind of power and his reason to fill in the void left by that love. But as for Mary, she was only a woman who liked fantasy and pleasure. If her surroundings turned bad, she would not have the strength to pick herself up, and she might be beaten down by her sorrow. He considered every aspect of her situation and wanted, for her sake, to pull her back. However, because Mary came back too late every night, sometimes when he was already fast asleep, he didn't have a chance to do it. In addition, in the morning Mary often got up earlier than he did. She had become indifferent, and when he wanted to say something affectionate, she employed various means to stop him. Although he had good intentions, he didn't have much time, so how could he devote his whole mind to this affair? They continued on like this until one night when Mary came in just as Wang Wei was turning back the covers. She seemed to have had more wine than usual, and her face was rosy. Without thinking, he said to her, "Mary, go look in the mirror. You're so beautiful!"

Had this been in the past, hearing the compliment would have thrilled her and she would have given him a charming smile in return. Now, however, she only said coldly, "None of that nonsense!"

Seeming to be completely wrapped up in herself, Mary kept her mouth tightly shut and went to bed. Although Wang Wei was lying in bed next to her, he didn't receive the slightest trace of warmth. He thought of their past affection and love, and sighed without meaning to.

"Why are you sighing like that?" Mary asked. "You're keeping me awake."

"I was thinking of our past . . ."

"The past is history! What's there to think about?"

"Those were sweet times! But now . . . I hate to tell you, Mary, but you've made me suffer quite enough!"

At this Mary became very angry. Using the direct, frightening manner that was one of her special qualities, she yelled at Wang Wei, "I made you suffer? Nonsense! It's you who has made me suffer! What pain do

you have? During the day, you go out to 'work.' You have a lot of comrades! You have hope! You have goals! At night you come home and rest. You have a woman whom you can kiss anytime you want! As for me, I have nothing. All day I roam around. I have boredom, loneliness, and the deep regret that comes from losing my love! Yet I still put up with it. I keep you company and serve as your amusement after your tiring day. I've never uttered a word of complaint, while you sigh and complain about me . . ."

Anger choked off her last words and her entire body was convulsed.

These irrational words almost made Wang Wei lose his temper too, but when he saw Mary in such a state of hysteria he controlled himself and just said, "Don't be like that! Don't be like that!"

Mary was silent for a long time with her head buried under the covers. Then Wang Wei heard the muffled sound of sobbing. Unable to bear it, he touched her even though he was still afraid of rejection. But Mary, although she ignored him, didn't react. She had been defeated by her own tears. He took her softly into his arms and said tenderly, "It's all my fault. I understand. Forgive me, please, Mary! I beg you not to cry! You'll ruin the eyes I love so much."

She ignored him and continued to sob.

At a loss, Wang Wei waited patiently, constantly repenting his mistakes, scolding himself, and making some rather silly pledges. But still Mary went on crying. This saddened Wang Wei because they had been on such good terms from the time they met each other. Now at the start of their break-up, Mary was in such pain. He thought of the causes and felt that there was no way to save the situation. Maybe they couldn't be reconciled, and Mary would be leaving him. This thought made him so sad that, even though he had not cried for years, he burst into tears.

When Wang Wei's tears fell on her face, Mary was deeply touched. Her heart softened and she lifted her hand to feel his face. The wet face and gaunt cheeks made her feel sadder, and she began to cry out loud.

Wang Wei held her tight as he moved his wet face over to rest against her still wetter face.

"Mary, I love you!"

Mary embraced him and let him kiss her. Then she said, "I will always love you, Wang Wei!"

The obstacles that had separated them disappeared. The resentment that had been in Mary's heart rushed away, and she fell into his arms. She told him in detail about her suffering, and he talked about his hopes. Mary felt once again that he loved her very much, and that she was fortunate. Wang Wei was happy too. He had a chance to express his thoughts, and this woman believed him and believed in him. It seemed

that what he had imagined was not that far from reality. He felt that women were always like this; it was better to move them by love than to convince them by reasoning. This phenomenon was the opposite of what he'd hoped to find in women. However, since Mary was like this, he was glad to handle it this way, and to prove as well that he really loved her.

The two of them were filled with tenderness, the kind of tenderness that follows heartbreak. Holding each other tightly, they talked all night long, then slept through the following morning.

9

In the afternoon, Wang Wei managed to return home early. Mary, who was still very tired, hadn't gotten out of bed. Her eyelids were slightly swollen and the pure white light coming from her face made her look a little weak, but in his eyes she just became more pathetic and lovable. He took her hand. It was completely limp.

"How come you came back so soon?" she asked.

"Slowing down, of course!" he answered with a smile.

She was very happy, but then said, "Don't do this again. I don't want you to do this."

For many days Wang Wei came back relatively early, and he did not go out at night either. He told everyone he was sick, which was believable since he looked so wan and sallow compared to two months earlier. Besides, his exhausting work schedule in the past was evidence that he was no shirker. Wang Wei, in fact, really did need some rest. However, from the very beginning he felt uneasy, because all he was doing was sitting at home keeping a woman company.

Mary did not go out and run around anymore. She waited for Wang Wei, and while he was out even cleaned the room for him. She wanted to move to a better place and see about getting one or two pieces of finer furniture. Wang Wei agreed. He certainly didn't want Mary to lead as hard a life as he did. The weather was becoming warmer, and Mary wanted to make some fashionable light dresses. Only if she wore something nice would going out be enjoyable. Not going out in spring to have a good time would really make her sad. She also wanted to read several Soviet novels that Wang Wei had bought especially for her. Wang Wei's idea was that these works would have some influence on her, and he hoped that slowly she would change her ideology and her interests. She knew Wang Wei's intentions, but read them only as something to pass the time, although she did say that they had fresh plots. If Wang Wei wanted to extend the discussion, she would talk about the beauty of the

language. He could not do anything but embrace his original position: "Slowly it will come."

They lived peacefully like this until April, when, through his involvement with the National Trade Union, Wang Wei's work became more urgent and he had less time than ever. Most days he was only at home to sleep at night. In the beginning Mary put up with it, but after a few days she began to feel resentful. When she asked him to go out for some relaxation, he refused. When she asked him to stay at home a little longer, he expressed impatience. When she asked about moving, he shook his head. Mary threatened him several times: "Wang Wei, if you keep on like this, never being at home, there'll be a day when you'll come home and not find me here. Do you think I'm some docile wife? Do you mean to tell me that being in love with a woman doesn't rate any time? Wang Wei! What do you say? I insist that you stay home now. Otherwise . . ."

Wang Wei, who did not know what to do, shook his head and said, "Why look at it that way? Mary, I hope that you're a rational person. Think this over carefully. Right now I really can't wait any longer. I've got to go right away. You should be more understanding and forgiving, and you shouldn't be living like this anymore. If you like, just say the word, I can find some suitable work for you right away. We really need workers now."

Mary angrily threw herself onto the bed and when Wang Wei took the opportunity to run out, this upset her even more. There was no doubt about it: Wang Wei's work was more important to him than she was, and he considered love worthless. How could she go on living with a man who didn't love her! She thought about what he had said: "If you like, just say the word, I can find some suitable work for you right away." Ha! What would suitable work for her be? She recalled the boring meeting she had attended. She knew herself well enough to know that she could never join such an organization, because there was no appeal to vanity and no praise, only dullness that could never stimulate her interest. Yes, it was true. She was not rational. She relied upon her emotions completely. She did not deny it. She was born that way. So now, since Wang Wei was no longer excited by emotion, she did not have to force herself to conform to his hopes. Furthermore, she concluded that no matter what she did, even if she left him, it wouldn't affect him very much. In fact, he did not need her anymore.

The unhappy times were wearing her down. She felt that she had aged a lot. She really could not go on like this, especially after she discovered that he did not seem to be troubled at all. She no longer said much to him, since she knew it was useless! He did not talk much to her, either, because he didn't have enough time and knew that she wasn't interested

in his work. Now the room became dreary, and because Wang Wei was hardly ever at home, this dreariness surrounded only Mary. The more excited Wang Wei became about his work, the more it upset Mary. She realized how incompatible they were but didn't know what to do about it. If she couldn't blot out her identity and become a person with a mind like his, then she had to try hard to drag him back to her again. But could she succeed? She was not sure and was as a result even more depressed. Originally, he had not been this kind of person, and she hadn't been away from him for all that long a time. Yet he had changed completely. What was it that had such power? It was beyond her comprehension and very frightening. But she could never follow him. Their backgrounds and personalities were too different.

IO

Time sped by without a trace, but the pain grew greater and greater. When Mary could no longer stand it, she had no choice but to take the ultimate measure. So it was that one night when Wang Wei returned home, he sensed that the room was somehow different. He still didn't think about Mary possibly leaving, until he went to bed and discovered that only his dingy cotton quilt was left on the bare bed, and Mary's soft, thin satin quilt was gone. He was astonished. He opened the wardrobe and discovered that all of the dazzling Chinese dresses had disappeared. All that remained were a few tangled hangers and his old coat. Mary's suitcases were missing, and her dainty makeup things had been removed from the drawers. Only then did he realize that the day he had dreaded had finally arrived. He gazed blankly around the empty room. He didn't know what to do. Shanghai was so big. Where could he go to find her? Besides, he knew that even if he found her and brought her back, he wouldn't know how to deal with her. Could he be with her all the time?

"Ah, it all happened so fast."

He reflected on their first encounter, their sweet life together, their separation, and her coming to Shanghai . . . He felt sad for himself, but he felt even more sorry for her. It was he who had ruined her! If he had not fallen in love with her and had not pursued her, she would still be leading the happy, carefree life of an innocent maiden. But now, he had been unable to change her and had only given her many painful memories. She would never be happy again unless she could find someone who would offer her an even purer and warmer love. Only love, the most lofty love, not Wang Wei's kind, could rescue her. He knew that he had treated her poorly, for which he felt extremely remorseful. But he was unable,

and would always be unable, to comfort her. He lay disconsolately on the bed and silently repeated that lovely name, "Mary, Mary . . ."

Wang Wei awoke the next morning exhausted. He was lying in bed with his clothes on and his eyes were wide open, but he could not get up. When he heard the old landlady's knock on the door, he shouted, "Come in!"

A gray-haired old woman entered the room. Her reddish face wore the same smile it always had, which gave her a friendly expression.

"Forgive me, sir," she said. "I forgot. When the young lady left yesterday, she asked me to give you a letter as soon as you returned. I waited up for a long time, but you came back too late!" As she spoke, she drew a letter from her bosom. Wang Wei snatched it from her.

"The young lady said she had received a telegram from home informing her that someone there was sick. She said that all you had to do was read the letter to understand everything. Is someone in her family really sick? She gave me two dollars. I'm very grateful to her. She is so kind."

Wang Wei opened the letter, but noticing that the old woman was still standing by the bed, he said, "Yes, something has happened back home. You can go now."

Finally the old woman walked out slowly. The letter was quite simple:

Wang Wei, I am leaving. I know this will not surprise you, but I must tell you. I am going to stay at a friend's house and wait for your letter. If you still love me, I hope that your reply will be satisfactory. Otherwise, we will not have another chance to see each other. You should understand the reasons that caused me to leave. They are your unfaithful love and your work. If you can't give a full explanation and find a way to solve this problem, then you need not respond, because no answer means no solution. You should know my temperament and the reasons for my leaving. In a word, to make it even clearer, all I want to tell you is, if Wang Wei doesn't belong to Mary, Mary prefers to suffer alone.

Mary

P.S. The address is GPO, Box 1782.

Wang Wei read the letter and didn't say a word. He could not deny that he was still very attracted to this woman. He thought of how care-free he felt when he was in her arms.

That afternoon Wang Wei took some time off and went to the post office, but the post office maintained absolute secrecy and he failed to find out anything. In the evening he decided to write her a letter, even if it wouldn't be able to satisfy her. If she came back he would be grateful, and if she didn't he would naturally feel sad. However, he was not going to shoulder the responsibility for their separation. It wasn't his fault. He

rubbed his drowsy eyes as he read the letter again, and then he started writing on a white sheet of paper.

Oh, Mary, you can imagine how cruelly time weighs on my hands. The room where you left me with a lot of memories is now as desolate as a graveyard. I am forcing myself, despite a piercing headache and sore eyes, to carry out this heartbreaking job according to your order. I don't need to defend myself. There is bound to be a day when you will understand whether or not your Wang Wei has loyally fulfilled his responsibility to love, and you surely know that your lover didn't do anything whatsoever to deceive you. I am sure that this is not overstated and that you will understand. Yet the fact is clear that you felt compelled to leave. You were dissatisfied with my behavior, which is to say that I could no longer please you. This situation was not what you had hoped for and it hurt you a lot. But this was not what I had hoped for either, so I should not be the only one to blame. I've suffered a lot, and maybe I started to suffer before you did. I also tried to ward off this terrible moment. You are intelligent and should have understood my painstaking effort. But it was only my fantasy. Your old outlook on life couldn't be changed in the least. You are proud by nature. I don't want to go on talking about this, now that the crack has become a crevice and you have left with your mind made up. I do not have the heart to blame you for your cruel treatment of me, because I know that you have fallen into hopeless misery because I could not offer you a satisfactory reply. Yes, I could say that I will give up everything and join you in a carefree life if you will come back, but I don't want to deceive you (I have never lied, you know that); and even if I tried to get rid of my present work, my ideas could not change. Wang Wei probably will never be a lovable man in Mary's eyes.

That's all I have to say. It's all up to you now. How can I behave like an innocent child crying for his Mary? I await your final judgment.

The Offender,
Wang Wei

Quite a few days passed after Wang Wei mailed his letter. He waited uneasily and anxiously hoped, but there was no reply. He inquired all around, but learned nothing. His reply had obviously made Mary decide to suffer rather than return to him. From this point on, they were separated, and no one could devise an alternative ending for this sad story.

II

Wang Wei's life reverted to what it had been before Mary's arrival. He was busy, and getting even busier, but no matter how busy he was and no matter to what degree the image of Mary faded in his mind, even to the point of disappearing at times, when he lay down on his bed alone,

he could not help missing her. He worried about her. He couldn't stop worrying about her. He couldn't imagine her life and how bitter she must be. He had asked around in the hope of getting some news to console himself, but he had failed. Mary had left, taking all traces with her. Yet he had a turbulent heart and was still enthralled by that will-o'-the-wisp.

One day near the end of the month, around the start of the third week since Mary had left, Wang Wei was sent to a busy part of the city to deliver a speech. When he arrived he saw that crowds of his organization's people were spread out along the street, at the entrances to shops, and at the trolley stops, and that demonstrators, all of whom were students, were coming and going. A tall Sikh policeman was pacing vigilantly but calmly in this tense atmosphere. Because it was still early, Wang Wei slowed his pace on the sidewalk to examine the situation.

He felt an excitement that he couldn't control, as if he were seeing a surge of roaring waves toppling the mountains and churning up the seas. He also seemed to see an erupting volcano engulfing the city in its raging flames. It was possible that this might happen immediately, since so many people were ready for it! And he, he would accelerate the great storm and ignite the flame! Some acquaintances were also there, and a fire had begun to burn in their hearts too. Their outer calm could not mask their inner turmoil. The joy of anticipation had brought a slight flush to their faces. At that moment, two people approached him. He raised his eyes and saw Feng Fei, secretary of the organization, whose round face shone with a proud smile, and the ticket-seller, a healthy woman whose hand was clasped tightly in Feng's. As soon as Feng saw Wang Wei, he went over to him, smiling as if he had a lot to say. Wang Wei winked at him, nodded slightly, and walked past. However, there was something extraordinary about Feng Fei's happy expression that made a deep impression on Wang Wei. The image of Mary swiftly sprang to mind. Ah, his former dream had now been realized by Feng Fei! That woman was a true revolutionary. But he had no time to think about this because the hour was drawing nigh. As he reached the public office building, even greater crowds were gathering, and many of his acquaintances had grouped together to await the first order. The minutes passed. At exactly nine o'clock the deafening roar of firecrackers was suddenly heard across the street, and immediately after came the thunderous yelling of slogans. Astonishingly loud shouting filled Wang Wei's ears: "Charge in! We'll occupy the assembly hall first! Charge!"

As Wang Wei pushed himself into the public office building, a great crush of people squeezed against him. They forced their way in, and in no time the assembly hall was filled with people. A hubbub of voices filled the space. While Wang Wei and two others were trying to get to the

platform, someone shouted, "Quiet please! We'll start the meeting now. Presiding officers!"

The crowd became quiet immediately. By now Wang Wei had already pushed his way up to the base of the already crowded platform. Someone called to him, "Comrade Wang Wei, you first."

Wang Wei leaped onto the platform and stood in the chairman's place. He was hailed with prolonged cheers and applause, but he was able to slowly calm the crowd with shouts and gestures. Then he spoke calmly and seriously in a loud voice: "Today we have come here to hold our meeting. First, we have to understand the meaning and mission of the meeting! That is to say . . ."

Two gun shots were heard outside, and a phalanx of policemen rushed in. The ranks of the masses began to waver and disintegrate. Shouts of "charge" were heard, and the sound of excited, trembling voices filled the air. Some people tried to escape quickly from the iron batons and bullets as the meeting place was turned into chaos. At the sight of this dramatic change, Wang Wei tried hard, but unsuccessfully, to calm the people, for as more policemen rushed in the masses panicked. Someone beside him whispered to him, "Things are looking bad. Let's go down and blend into the crowd."

Wang Wei jumped down but was promptly seized by a big hand that reached out from the crowd. It held his arm tightly, and then a giant of a man squeezed out in front of him. All Wang Wei heard was the man cursing him: "You bastard, I've been trailing you long enough. Let's see you try to run off now. Hah, if you want to make trouble, do it in the police station."

Wang Wei's hand was twisted painfully, but when he looked at the detective's face he felt that there was no use saying anything. He continued to shout loudly toward the masses: "We must prepare quickly for the [Communist] general demonstration! We will destroy imperialism."

A big fist hit him on the face and stopped him from shouting. Then he was dragged out onto the street. Many of the masses were still scattering. Wang Wei noticed their angry faces, their encouraging and consoling eyes. He also heard fragments of slogans and saw that in a few places the masses were fighting the police. He was pushed over to a large, black iron truck, already filled with fighters who had been arrested, and thrown on top. As he looked out through the wire mesh, he spotted a charming lady by the entrance to a big department store. Ah, it was Mary! She was still so attractive and graceful, like a queen from a distant land. She looked happy, yet serious. Obviously, she had been out shopping, since she was carrying parcels. Moreover—yes, yes, it was true—there was a handsome young man accompanying her. Wang Wei looked

in amazement at the sight and thought to himself, "Good, she's happy again. That's the kind of person she is, and I don't have to worry about her anymore. Goodbye, Mary!"

At this moment there was an uproar inside the truck because two more people were thrown in almost on top of him, and he heard several voices cursing: "Damn it! Damn! If we're going, let's go! What are we waiting for?"

The truck started abruptly, and all the arrested people fell down. Quickly, however, they pulled themselves up and began shouting slogans together: "Down with . . ."

Translated by Shu-ying Ts'ao and Donald Holoch