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PREFACE TO ROMANCES

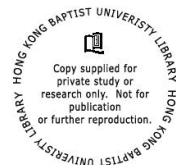
the shards and rubble, only the painted-lady type from "Hop-Hop" opera, this kind of woman, can carry on with simple ease. Her home is everywhere, in any era, any society.

So I feel an aching sadness. I often think about all of this, perhaps because of H. G. Wells's predictions. It all used to seem far away, and now it seems not far at all. But it is autumn still, water-clear and mirror-bright: I ought be happy.

September 1944

ALOESWOOD INCENSE

The First Brazier



GO AND fetch, will you please, a copper incense brazier, a family heirloom gorgeously encrusted now with moldy green, and light in it some pungent chips of aloeswood. Listen while I tell a Hong Kong tale, from before the war. When your incense has burned out, my story too will be over.

The story starts with Ge Weilong, a very ordinary Shanghai girl, standing on the veranda of a hillside mansion and gazing vacantly at the garden. Although Weilong had lived in Hong Kong for two years now, she was still unfamiliar with this wealthy residential district in the Hong Kong hills: this was her first visit to her aunt's house. The garden itself was little more than a rectangular grass lawn, framed by a low wall of white, swastika-shaped blocks, beyond which lay a stretch of rough hillside. This garden was like a gold-lacquered serving tray lifted high amid the wild hills: one row of carefully pruned evergreens; two beds of fine, well-spaced English roses—the whole arrangement severely perfect, not a hair out of place, as if the tray had been deftly adorned with a lavish painting in the fine-line style. In one corner of the lawn, a small azalea was in flower, its pink petals, touched with yellow, a bright shrimp-pink.

Still, inside that wall, spring was only pattering about. When it flashed into flame, it could leap out, scorching everything. Already, beyond the wall, a roar of wild azaleas was blooming across the hill, the fiery red stomping through brittle grass, blazing down the mountainside.

On the far side of the azaleas lay the deep blue sea, with big white boats bobbing in it.

But these glaring color clashes were not the only reason why the viewer felt such a dizzying sense of unreality. There were contrasts everywhere: all kinds of discordant settings and jumbled periods had been jammed together, making a strange, illusory domain.

The white house in the dip of the hills was smooth and streamlined—geometric like an ultramodern movie theater. The roof, however, was covered with the traditional glazed tiles of emerald green. The windowpanes were also green, their chicken-fat yellow frames trimmed with red; the window grates, with their fancy ironwork, had been sprayed the same chicken-fat yellow. A wide, red brick veranda circled the house, with monumental white stone columns that were nearly thirty feet tall—this went back to the American Old South.

From the veranda, glass doors opened onto a living room. The furniture and the arrangement were basically Western, touched up with some unexceptionable Chinese bric-a-brac. An ivory bodhisattva stood on the mantel of the fireplace, along with snuff bottles made of emerald-green jade; a small screen with a bamboo motif curved around the sofa. These Oriental touches had been put there, it was clear, for the benefit of foreigners. The English come from so far to see China—one has to give them something of China to see. But this was China as Westerners imagine it: exquisite, illogical, very entertaining.

Weilong glanced at her reflection in the glass doors—she too was a touch of typically colonial Oriental color. She wore the special uniform of Nanying Secondary School: a dark blue starched cotton tunic that reached to her knees, over narrow trousers, all in the late Qing style. Decking out coeds in the manner of Boxer-era courtesans—that was only one of the ways that the Hong Kong of the day tried to please European and American tourists. But Weilong, like any girl, sought to be

stylish, and she wore a small knitted vest on top of the tunic. Under that little vest, the tunic stretched down a long way—the effect, in the end, was unclassifiable.

Facing the glass doors, Weilong straightened her collar and smoothed her hair. She had a small, round face, bland but pretty, a “powder-puff face” that would be considered old-fashioned nowadays. Her eyes were long and lovely; the fine creases over the lids swept out almost to her hairline. Her nose was delicate and thin, her little mouth plump and round. Her face may have been somewhat lacking in expression, but vacuousness of that sort does impart the gentle sincerity that one associates with Old China. Once she’d been quite dissatisfied with her white skin; she’d wanted a tan, to match the new ideal of healthy beauty. But when she got to Hong Kong she found that the Cantonese beauties generally had olive complexions. Scarcity pushes value up: at Nanying Secondary, her white skin had earned her an untold number of admirers. One time somebody made a wisecrack, saying that if girls from Canton and Hunan, with their deep-set eyes and high cheeks, were sweet-and-sour pork bones, then Shanghai girls were flour-dipped pork dim sum—an “ill-bred remark” that popped into her mind just as she was appraising her looks. Weilong frowned, turned around, and leaned back against the glass door.

Her aunt’s housemaids seemed full of mischief—the sweet-and-sour type. They were jaunty, clopping back and forth on the veranda in wooden clogs. Just then, one of them called out sweetly: “Glance, who’s that in the living room?”

“I think it’s someone from Young Mistress’s family.”

Judging from her voice, Glance was the one who’d poured tea for Weilong—a long face and a water-snake waist, and though she wore a braid down her back like the others, her bangs fell loosely forward. Something was bothering Weilong. Who was this “Young Mistress”? Weilong had never heard anything about her aunt having a son, so how could there be a

daughter-in-law? Could it be Aunt Liang herself? Weilong's father had had a terrible row with his sister when she became third concubine to Liang Liteng, a Cantonese tycoon; ever since then, the family had severed relations with Aunt Liang. All that had happened before Weilong was born, but she knew that her aunt was two years older than her father, and had to be over fifty now. How could she still be a "Young Mistress"? Could this maid be a longtime retainer who'd served her aunt for many years, and had grown used to calling her that? Weilong was mulling this over, when she heard Glance's voice again.

"It's not often that our Young Mistress gets up so early!"

"It's Thirteenth Young Master from the Qiao family, that little devil, said he'd take her to Tsim Sha Tsui for a swim!"

Glance let out a little gasp. "In that case, I don't know when she'll be back."

"Naturally. After they've gone swimming they'll go to the Lido Hotel for dinner, then go dancing. This morning, before daybreak, she had me pack up evening wear and dress shoes to change into later."

Glance tittered. "That Qiao fellow! He's enough to make a person sick! I thought Young Mistress had given up on him. How can someone as smart as she is still be in his grip?"

"Hush! Hush!" the other one said. "Don't prattle on, there's someone inside."

"Tell her to go," Glance said. "Asking people to wait around for nothing isn't very nice."

"Who cares? You said she's a relative of Young Mistress, so she's probably come for a handout. We can't offer that much hospitality!"

Glance was silent for quite some time. Then, in an undertone, she said, "Better send her off. The Russian piano tuner is coming soon."

As soon as she heard this, the other girl started to laugh. "Oh," she said, clapping her hands, "you want to commandeer

this room so that you and that Alexander Alexandri can fool around! Here I was wondering why you were suddenly so pious and good, not wanting our guest to wait around for nothing. *Now I know why!*"

Glance chased after the other girl and struck her; a scuffle broke out. "Gentlemen use words, only scoundrels use their fists!" the other girl shrieked.

"True enough," Glance yelled back, "but only a hussy kicks! Hussy! Tarty toes! You do have tarty toes!"

Just then, a darling little wooden clog, with a painted spray of golden plum blossoms on a bright red background, skimmed through the air and smacked Weilong right in the knee; she had to bend over and rub the spot, it hurt so much. When she looked up, a winsome little dark-skinned maid had come bouncing into the room, knees and elbows lifted high; the girl skipped up to the clog, slipped it on, then turned and strode away, entirely ignoring Weilong.

Weilong couldn't help but be angry. Then she remembered "The King of Hell is a gentleman, but the little devils are pests" and "When you go under another's roof, how can you avoid bowing?" That was the rub, when you had a favor to ask. Still, judging from the looks of things, there wasn't much hope today—why hang around, inviting this sort of treatment? But, she thought, here I've climbed all the way up this mountain, after telling a lie so I could get out of school—how can I get another day off tomorrow? Besides, who knows if my aunt will be home tomorrow. And I can't simply phone up and make an appointment—not for something like this!

She hesitated. May as well leave, she decided at last. Going through the glass doors, she found Glance leaning sideways against a stone column, the bottoms of her trousers rolled up so she could pound on her calf with her fist; there was still a red mark where she'd been kicked. The dark-skinned girl peeked out from the end of the veranda, then ran off quickly.

"Glint, don't run away!" Glance called out. "I'm going to pay you back!"

Glint laughed from a distance. "What makes you think I have time to tangle with you? You want to slap and kick, well, wait till that Russian fellow comes—he'll be happy to slap and kick with you!"

Glance muttered under her breath, calling Glint a slippery-tongued scamp, but still she had to laugh. Then she looked around and saw Weilong. "You're not leaving, are you?" she asked.

Weilong smiled and nodded. "I have to go now, I'll come again another time. Could you see me to the gate?"

They cut across the lawn, taking a shortcut to a little green-painted iron gate. In Hong Kong, to escape the damp, rich people build their houses high off the ground, on stone foundations of some thirty or forty feet; from the gate, a winding flight of steps led down to the road. Glance was just opening the latch when a car horn sounded from below. Glint popped out of nowhere. Elbowing her way past Glance and Weilong, she clattered down the stairs, shouting all the while, "Young Mistress is back! Young Mistress is back!"

Glance shrugged and smirked. "Such a little thing, is it really worth flinging yourself around, just to get first prize? We're all mere servants, but I can't get used to the way some people degrade themselves!" She turned and went back in.

Weilong was left alone at the iron gate, staring blankly. Glint's crazy haste had jangled her nerves. The car door opened and a small, slender woman in Western clothes stepped out. She was dressed all in black, with a green veil hanging from her black straw hat. Pinned to the veil, an emerald spider the size of a fingernail flashed in the sunlight and climbed up her cheek. When it gleamed it looked like a trembling teardrop that was just about to fall; when it darkened it looked like a green mole. The veil, several feet long, was wrapped around her shoulders

like a scarf, and it floated and fluttered about her. The driver couldn't be seen clearly, but he seemed to be a young man. He leaned his head out to say good-bye, but the woman stiffened her neck and headed up the stairs.

Glint had already rushed in with a greeting, her face wreathed in smiles: "Won't Thirteenth Master Qiao come up to have a glass of beer?"

"Who has time to waste on his little games?"

Hearing this, Glint quickly put her smiles away. She took the woman's small rattan suitcase. "You must be tired!" she said softly. "Coming back so early!"

The woman turned and found that the car was leaving. She spat hard at the ground. "Go on then, and don't come back! We're finished!"

Realizing that her mistress was in a fury, Glint kept quiet now. The woman glared at her, consumed by her own thoughts, not deigning to disclose her complaint to the girl. Then, with a bitter snort, she snapped out of it. "Listen to this, Glint. He begs me to go to the beach early in the morning—a pretext, as it turns out. He wants a date with Mary Zhao, but those Cantonese are straitlaced and he thought her father wouldn't allow it. If someone older were there to keep an eye on things then the Zhao family's precious jewel would be protected by a safety charm. That was his little scheme—how very kind of him to let me in on it too!"

Glint stamped and sighed, cursing Qiao.

The woman paid no attention. She paused to catch her breath before continuing: "This certainly isn't the first time I've taken the lid off somebody's little secret. So, Mr. Qiao, you don't explain what's going on, you think you can make a fool of me. Well, I've seen plenty of men, and anyone who's got his eye on me can't be eyeing someone else too. Go ahead, sing that love scene from the opera about lovers meeting secretly in the rear garden—but I'm not playing the nurse! When I go to a

banquet, I'm not the second-class guest! Qiao, you little half-breed, your father may have bootlicked till the British gave him a garter, but your mother's a Portuguese whore from who knows where, a poker-chip girl from the Macao casinos. You monkey-chops, brazen as the sky is wide, gamboling about like a devil, and right in my face!" She yanked the veil around behind her hat and headed up the stairs, ticking off his offenses as she went.

Now Weilong could see her face. She really was an older woman. There was a green-blue tinge to her white skin, and she wore purple-black lipstick, the "mulberry red" that was the latest thing from Paris. Weilong recognized those deceptively drowsy eyes; in her father's photo album, there was a family portrait, yellow with age, that showed those very eyes. A beauty may age, but her eyes do not. Weilong grew flustered: she felt her cheeks getting hot. She heard Glint, who was still following her aunt, say, "Qiao is quite a rascal, but he can't pull one over on you. You didn't really go with him to pick up Miss Zhao, did you?"

At this, the woman's eyebrows flew upward, and her face quivered. "Do you actually think I'm such an idiot? When he raised the idea, there in the car, I said, 'Fine, let's go pick her up, but three's a crowd, so you'd better get someone else to come along too.' He said fine, but he wanted to pick up Miss Zhao first, and then invite another person—of course, he didn't want Mr. Zhao seeing two couples and getting suspicious. So I said, 'How about no fuss at all, just simple, like leading a goat: we can invite Mr. Zhao, won't that be nice? I can't swim, and he can't either, so we'll lie on the sand and sunbathe side by side.' He was quiet for a long time, but at last he said, 'Forget it! It'll be simpler if the two of us go on our own.' 'Oh,' I said, 'what's the matter?' He just drove on, not saying a word. I waited till we were almost to Tsim Sha Tsui, and then said I felt faint in the heat. He was riled up, but I made him drive me all the way

back. He was worn out, covered with sweat, but when he wanted to stop for a soda, I wouldn't let him—I did feel a bit better then!"

"Terrific!" said Glint, clapping her hands. "Young Mistress fixed him, that's for sure! There's only one thing—I assume he's no longer invited to tomorrow's party, but should we invite someone else in his place? Awaiting your orders, ma'am."

Cocking her head to one side, Aunt Liang thought it over. "Who to invite? Those British officers only come for the drinks—they haven't got any self-control, and just get soused. Oh, that's right! Help me remember—that army lieutenant, he shouldn't be let in again. He got drunk and chased Glance all over. No manners at all!"

Glint agreed, smiling.

"Has Sir Cheng Qiao telephoned?"

Glint shook her head. "I can't understand it. Before, when Master was still with us, the Qiao men, young and old, would phone up every day, full of schemes and ideas, causing all sorts of trouble for Young Mistress and scaring the servants to death—we were so afraid that Master would find out. But now that Young Mistress's friends can come in through the front door, they're suddenly too high and mighty!"

"What's so hard to understand? It's just their thievish way! It has to be sneaky, or else it's no fun!"

"When Young Mistress gets married again, and to the right man, they'll feel it, that's for sure!"

"Bah! Talking foolishness again. Let me tell you—" But then she stopped, having reached the top of the stairs and found, at the iron gate, an unknown face.

"Aunt," said Weilong, stepping forward bravely.

Madame Liang thrust her chin out and squinted at Weilong.

"Aunt," Weilong explained, "I'm the daughter of Ge Yukun."

"Is Ge Yukun dead?" her aunt snapped.

"My father, I'm happy to say, is quite well."

"Does he know that you have come to see me?"

Weilong didn't answer right away.

"Please leave at once," said Madame Liang. "If he hears of this, he'll be very upset! This is no place for you, you'll only sully your good name!"

Weilong responded as pleasantly as she could. "Of course Aunt is angry—here we've been in Hong Kong a long time, and haven't come to pay our respects. It's all our fault!"

"Oh, so you've come today just to pay your respects! I guess I'm too suspicious, thinking that no one climbs a jeweled staircase without reason, and that there must be something you want from me. As I've said before, when Ge Yukun reaches his end, I'll be good and buy him a coffin. But while he's still alive, he's not getting a penny!"

Madame Liang thrust deep and hard. Weilong was too soft and young, it was too much for her. She'd put on a big, broad smile; now the smile was frozen stiff.

Glint couldn't bear seeing Weilong paralyzed with embarrassment. "She's not said anything yet—why does Young Mistress think she's here to borrow money? Of course, as the old saying goes, 'Bit by a snake, scared by a rope, three years later.' Let me explain, Miss Ge. Here in this house we get distant relatives and former neighbors streaming in all year round, asking for so many favors that Young Mistress is now thoroughly alarmed. Don't be angry, Miss. You've come a long way to see your aunt—you two should have a nice chat before you go. Come inside and sit for a while. Let our Young Mistress rest up a bit. I'll call you when she feels better."

"So here you are, slave, making polite excuses!" Madame said coolly. "Stop meddling! Must be quite some tip you got from her!"

"What!" Glint protested. "As if I'd never seen money before! Judging from the looks of this young lady, she's not a big spender—I doubt she's got enough to buy me!"

Glint's intercession had been well-intentioned, but this last sentiment was hard for Weilong to take. Still wearing her forced smile, she flushed and then grew pale. Her feelings were in a tumult.

Leaning over, Glint whispered in Madame Liang's ear: "Young Mistress, you always forget. Dr. Feng at the beauty salon told you not to frown; you'll get wrinkles around your eyes."

When Madame Liang heard this, she smoothed her face into a pleasant expression.

"Standing in the hot sun like this," Glint went on, "you'll get freckles if you don't watch out!" With that, she talked Madame Liang into entering the house.

Weilong stood dazed and alone in the sun. Her cheeks were burning, but the two tears that rolled down her face were cold, chilling her to the bone. Wiping her face with the back of her hand, she walked slowly, unwillingly, through the passageway and into the living room, where she sat down. "Aunt doesn't have a very good reputation," she said to herself. "I always thought it was because people will gossip maliciously about a widow, especially since Liang Liteng was one of Hong Kong's wealthiest men and he left Aunt, who was his favorite, a lot of money, not to mention the property. Of course there would be plenty of people too jealous to say anything good about her. But now it looks as if all their talk is true! Here I am wading into muddy waters, and for a girl there's no way to get clean again, not even if she throws herself into the Yellow River. I should give up, and try to think of something else. But I've put up with so much already—and now it's all for nothing!" When she thought back over everything, she felt heartsick again.

The Ges were only a middle-class family, but Weilong had always been pampered—she'd never faced such a fierce attack before. Naturally she was quite hurt. From another room, she could just make out the sound of a loud argument going on,

then the slam of a door, and someone sobbing bitterly. A junior maid came into the living room to clear away the empty teacup; another girl in evident distress followed behind. She tugged at the first girl's sleeve. "Who made Young Mistress so angry?" she asked.

"Glance is the one who's in trouble," said the other, with a smile. "Why are *you* so upset?"

"How did it get found out?"

"I'm not sure," the first girl said. "She invited Sir Cheng Qiao but he didn't accept. Then she found out that Glance has gone out several times to see him. Of course he'd rather have her go out to him—that way, his time's not wasted on pointless visits here."

Although they spoke in undertones, Weilong caught about half of it. The girls cleared the tea things and went out.

Looking up, Weilong noticed a prickly pear in a blue ceramic dish on top of the piano. It was budding, and the thick blue-green leaves pressed upward on all sides like a nest of green snakes; the red tinge at the tip of the leaves looked like snake tongues. Behind the plant, a curtain shifted: Glint emerged smiling. Weilong shivered. Glint beckoned, and led her into the hallway.

"You arrived at an awkward moment, right after Young Mistress had lost her temper," Glint said gently. "Then, after we came in, and before she had calmed down, an uppity person we've got here broke a house rule. I'm afraid, young miss, that you've been caught in between, and have suffered quite unfairly."

"Oh you needn't say that, good sister! How have I been treated badly? Sometimes older folks take things out on younger ones—why can't she, my own flesh-and-blood aunt, do the same? Even a couple of slaps wouldn't really matter."

"Miss is very perceptive," Glint said.

Weilong was led into a small study decorated entirely in the

traditional Chinese style. White walls, a pale green throw rug, a gold-lacquered table, chair cushions of fine crimson silk, and the same fine crimson cloth for the curtains. A person of Weilong's generation rarely saw this kind of rich, old silk, except perhaps on a quilt top. On the floor was a square cloisonné vase, about two feet high and filled with little rustling flowers that looked at first like white lilies. In fact they were the pale flower buds of wild rice, but only someone who'd lived in southern China a long time would know that.

Weilong decided, in light of her many misgivings, simply to make good use of the opportunity: she'd just follow her original plan and ask her aunt for help. The decision was her aunt's to make, and if she refused, it might be for the best anyway.

Now that her mind was made up, Weilong felt much steadier. Looking around, she saw that the decor was simple but tasteful. Madame Liang lay half reclined in a lounge chair, one leg hooked over the armrest and a gold-embroidered high-heeled slipper dangling from her foot, ready to fall off at any moment. She had removed her hat; around the house she wore a parrot-green head wrap. Weilong couldn't help wondering about the color of the hair beneath it, and whether it had been dyed. She stood in front of her aunt, who appeared to take no notice. Her face covered with a banana-leaf fan, Madame Liang seemed to be sleeping.

Weilong wavered, shifting her weight from foot to foot. She was about to leave when her aunt barked, the sound coming out from around her ears: "Sit down!" Nothing more; apparently it was her turn to speak.

Humility was Weilong's only choice. "Aunt," she said, "you're like a Buddha made of solid crystal, reflecting undisguised reality—lying to you would be pointless. Here's the truth: two years ago, when Shanghai was full of rumors of war, our family fled to Hong Kong and I enrolled at Nanying Secondary. But life in Hong Kong is expensive, and my father doesn't have

enough to support us. Now that the situation in Shanghai is improving, my parents are thinking about going back. My own idea, though, is that since my studies here are going well, I can graduate next summer. If I go back to Shanghai and start at a new school, I'll lose a year. But if I stay in Hong Kong by myself, it will be hard to pay my living expenses, not to mention the school fees. I've been thinking this through on my own, without saying anything to my parents, because what would be the point, it would only make them worry. I thought about it for a long time, and finally decided to see if Aunt could help."

One of Madame Liang's delicate hands held the banana-leaf fan by the stem. As she twirled it around, thin rays of light shone through the slits in the leaf, spinning across her face. "Miss," she said, "it seems you've thought of everything except my own position in this matter. Even if I wanted to help you, I couldn't. If your father finds out, he'll say I've seduced a girl from a good family and stolen her away. What am I to your family? A willful degenerate who ruined the family honor—refused the man chosen by my brothers, went to Liang as his concubine instead, lost face for a family that was already on the way down. Bah! These declining old families, they're like out-house bricks, pure petrified stink. You were born too late—you missed all the fuss, and didn't get to hear what your father said to me then!"

"Father's got that stuffy old bookish way of thinking, and he won't change for anyone. He doesn't know how to moderate his speech—no wonder Aunt is angry. But it's been so many years, and you're a generous, fair-minded person—would you bear this grudge even against the younger generation?"

"Yes, I would! I like to chew on this rotten little memory! I won't forget what he said to me then!" She waved the fan, and the yellow rays of sunlight filtered through it onto her face, like tiger whiskers quivering around her mouth.

Weilong tried to placate her aunt. "Aunt hasn't forgotten,

and I won't either. Aunt should give me a chance to make up for my father's mistakes. If you raise me till I'm grown, I'll be your child. I'll make it up to you!"

Madame Liang kept picking and tearing at the slits in the fan. Suddenly Weilong saw that her aunt was treating the fan as if it were someone's face—and that it was *her* face that appeared through the slits. Weilong turned red. Madame Liang let her hand fall, then tapped the fan against her chin. "Do you plan to live at school?" she asked.

"That would be best, I think, after my family's gone. I've inquired, and found that boarders aren't charged much more than the day students."

"It's not a question of expense. If you live with me, there'll be someone around to keep me company, and anyway I have a car so you can get a ride to school every day. It won't be any trouble."

Weilong was stunned. "That would be perfect!" she finally managed to say.

"There's just one thing," her aunt said. "Are you sure that your father won't say anything? I don't want to be blamed for a family breakup."

"If my father opposes this plan in the slightest, I won't be back to trouble you."

Madame Liang laughed. "That's right! You can make up your own lie to tell your father. Just be sure that it's not too flimsy!"

Weilong was in the midst of declaring that she had no intention of lying when Madame Liang cut her off. "Can you play the piano?"

"I took lessons for a few years, but I'm not very good."

"We don't need a concert pianist. Work up a few popular tunes, some songs that everyone likes; the only thing you have to do is play the accompaniment. All the young English ladies can do this, and here in Hong Kong we follow the English

ways. I'm sure that your father, with his antique notions of child-rearing, never let you go to parties. He doesn't understand that after you're married, you'll have to know how to mix in society. You can't spend your whole life hiding away. There are things you can learn if you live with me—a lucky break for you, I'd say.”

Weilong kept murmuring her agreement. Then Madame Liang said, “If you know how to play tennis, you can be my practice partner.”

“I can play.”

“Do you have a tennis outfit?”

“Just what the school gives us.”

Her aunt groaned. “Oh yes, I know, those long bloomer pants, truly awful. Take my outfit and try it on for size. Tomorrow when the tailor comes, I'll have him make one for you.”

She told Glint to bring out a goose-gold knit shirt and some dove-gray shorts. Weilong tried on the outfit. It seemed large. So Glint got a needle and tucked in the waist.

“Your legs are too skinny,” said Madame Liang, “but girls are always thin.”

Weilong was deep in thought. She wanted to get home and tell her mother and father, to see what they would say. She quickly took her leave, changed her clothes, and went out, carrying a parasol. Of course there was a junior maid to open the gate for her. Glint also came, giving her a proper send-off. “Goodbye, young lady!” she said. It was all very different from the earlier treatment.

Weilong followed the road down the mountain. The sun was already sinking in the west, and reds, purples, and yellows mingled in florid profusion behind the hills, like a picture on a cigar box. The hot sun had baked the banana trees and the palms till they were dry, yellow, and wispy, like tobacco leaves. In the south, the sun sets quickly, and dusk lasts just a mo-

ment. The sun had not yet set, but far down the road, where the trees and haze blurred into a smooth greenish black, a crescent moon appeared. Weilong walked toward the east, and as she walked the moon seemed to grow whiter and more translucent. A pale phoenix with a plump white breast had alighted somewhere along the winding road ahead and was nesting in the forking tree branches, or so it seemed. As she walked, the moon appeared to be just beyond her, in the clump of trees around the bend, but when she got there it had gone. Weilong stopped and rested for a bit, feeling slightly dazed. She looked back at her aunt's house, and strangely enough she could still see the yellow and red of the window frames, and the green glass panes reflecting the sea. That splendid white house, covered in green roof tile, bore more than a passing resemblance to an ancient imperial tomb.

Weilong felt like one of those young students in Pu Songling's old ghost stories, the kind who goes up a mountain to see a relative and then, on the homeward journey, looks back at the mansion and finds it has become a grave mound. If the white Liang mansion had turned into a tomb, it wouldn't have surprised her much. She could see that her aunt was a woman of great ability, and had held back the wheel of history. She had preserved, in her own small world, the opulent lifestyle of the late Qing dynasty. Behind her own doors, she was a little Empress Cixi.

As for me, Weilong thought, here I am charging straight into the devil's lair. Whose fault will it be, if I get caught in a trap? Then again, we are, after all, aunt and niece, and she's got to consider appearances. She'll treat me properly, so long as I keep on my best behavior. If others want to talk, let them talk—I'll just concentrate on my studies. Someday, when I meet someone who cares for me, he'll be sure to understand, and won't believe any silly gossip.

When she got back home, she thought it through carefully.

She'd have to invent a story to tell her father, but with her mother she'd be more truthful. That way, she'd have someone in Shanghai to back her up, and there'd be less chance of being found out. With this plan in mind, Weilong told her mother all about going to see Aunt Liang, and how her aunt had agreed to pay her tuition and wanted her to move in. As for what she had gathered about the overall situation at her aunt's house—she said nothing about that.

Weilong's mother wasn't too happy about leaving her daughter alone in Hong Kong, but then neither did she want her studies to be disrupted. All that fuss about the aunt was water under the bridge, old history, practically forgotten. The aunt was a lot older now; and of course the years must have changed her. If she wanted to bury the hatchet and make a generous effort to repair things, by helping her niece continue her studies—well, this was good news indeed. Weilong's mother wanted to go and thank her sister-in-law in person, but Weilong stopped her by saying that Madame Liang was just about to go to the hospital to have her appendix out, and the doctor had ordered complete rest. The sisters-in-law hadn't seen each other in many years; if they got together, there certainly would be a tearful scene, and stirring up the emotions isn't good for someone who's sick. So Mrs. Ge had to give up the plan. To her husband, she said that the headmaster had noticed that Weilong's grades were very good and that he was offering her a scholarship to cover tuition and living costs. Ge Yukun was a man who relied on his social status, with little regard for the niceties; he didn't bother about the formalities the way his wife did. When he heard the news, he praised his daughter offhandedly. But he gave no sign of planning a trip to personally thank the headmaster for working so hard to educate young people.

Mr. and Mrs. Ge were eager to return to Shanghai, so they hurriedly packed their things and gave up the house they'd been renting. One old servant, the cook, who had been with

her employers for many years, was returning with them. The maid of all work, Amah Chen, had been hired in Hong Kong, so they paid out her wages and let her go. Weilong went to the boat with her parents to see them off. Night had already fallen. With Amah Chen carrying her suitcase, she set out for Madame Liang's house.

It was a humid spring evening, and the Hong Kong hills are famous for their fog. The white Liang mansion was melting viscously into the white mist, leaving only the greenish gleam of the lamplight shining through square after square of the green windowpanes, like ice cubes in peppermint schnapps. When the fog thickened, the ice cubes dissolved, and the lights went out. The Liang house stood alone on the street; the asphalt road was empty and quiet, but there was a row of parked cars. "I've picked the wrong day to arrive," Weilong thought. "Aunt has guests; she won't have time for me." She went up the flight of steps to the little gate. There she found a palace lantern, a replica of an antique, hanging from its arm of ornamented bronze. When she reached the door, she was surprised to find that it was quiet inside, as if there weren't any guests after all. But then, listening intently, she could make out the light clicking sound of mah-jongg tiles—probably four or five tables.

Big houses in Hong Kong are more densely packed, more modern and compact, than houses in Shanghai, and they make a different impression. Weilong was about to ring the bell when Amah Chen called out from behind, "Miss, be careful, there are dogs!" A pack of dogs started barking just then. Amah Chen was frightened. She was wearing a brand-new tunic of light blue cotton that was stiff with starch. When she got flustered she twisted around inside her clothes, so that the cloth rustled noisily. She wore her hair in a braid, as did Glance and Glint of the Liang household, but the braid was tied murderously tight, like a nine-segment steel whip in a martial arts novel. Weilong suddenly felt that she didn't know Chen, that

she'd never taken a good, hard look at her; now she realized that this longtime servant was not at all presentable. "Amah Chen, you should go now," she said. "If you wait any longer, you'll be scared going back down the hill. Here's two dollars for the ride. Leave the suitcase, someone will come to take it." She sent Amah Chen off, and rang the bell.

A junior maid went in and announced her just as the eighth round of mah-jongg was ending and dinner was about to begin. When she heard that her niece had arrived, Madame Liang hesitated for a while. Always careful about financial matters, she was planning to spend quite a lot on this niece, but still felt some uncertainty. Did the girl have potential? Was she worth the investment? Her tuition wasn't very expensive, but it wasn't cheap either. Since the money hadn't gone out yet, the smart thing would be to make use of this opportunity—tell the child to change her clothes and come meet the guests. As the saying goes, "True gold does not fear testing by fire." Then she'd find out right away. The only problem was that tonight's guests had been carefully matched; she'd gone to considerable trouble over the details. If this girl, with her very first trill, did cause a sensation—if the young phoenix sang more thrillingly than the old one—that would lead to all kinds of fuss, and the balance would be upset. If, on the other hand, Weilong wasn't up to the job and things went wrong, well, a blockheaded child in the middle of a party can spoil all the fun.

And there was another angle to consider: too many greedy-eyed people here. Madame Liang glanced at the lean and hungry tiger seated across from her. Of all her paramours, he'd had the greatest staying power. He was Situ Xie, a rich boss from Shantou, the owner of a factory that made ceramic toilets. Although Madame Liang knew a lot of people, she usually preferred Hong Kong's local big shots, members of the gentlemanly class who had ties to officialdom. Nonetheless, she'd been quite taken with this businessman, for he was an expert

charmer, with a talent for pleasing the ladies. They'd known each other for a long time now, with Madame Liang always walking in slight fear of him, letting him have his way and keeping herself in check. If twenty years had passed like a single day for Situ Xie and Madame Liang, it was because he understood her all too well, and paid her plenty of attention; besides, although she didn't pick up the tab for him, he didn't have to spend money on her, either. When he wanted to throw a dinner party, he could use her place—it was lovely and the guests were well treated; people could relax and enjoy themselves here. This evening's party was a send-off for Situ Xie himself: soon he would be returning to Shantou to marry a girl. Then again, if he were to take a liking to Weilong he might not go back to Shantou after all—that could get complicated.

Madame Liang quietly summoned Glint. "Go and make my excuses to the Ge girl," she ordered. "Tell her I can't get away right now, but I'll see her in the morning. Ask her if she's had dinner. The blue bedroom will be hers, so take her there."

Glint went off to discharge her duty. She was wearing a lilac-colored fitted tunic over a pair of narrow, kingfisher-blue trousers, her arms folded inside a white vest embroidered with gold thread—a slave-girl costume from the days of *Dream of the Red Chamber*. She wore no powder at all, only a bit of green oil, highlighting the lusciousness of her coppery skin.

As soon as she saw Weilong, Glint rushed forward and took her luggage. "Young Mistress has been anxiously awaiting your arrival, asking every day why you weren't here yet. But tonight, as luck would have it, she has guests."

Then, leaning over to Weilong's ear, she added, "They're all old masters and wives, and Young Mistress is afraid you'll feel awkward and uncomfortable with them, so she's ordered a separate supper for you upstairs."

"Thank you very much," said Weilong, "but I've already eaten."

"Then I'll take you to your room," said Glint. "If you get hungry later on, just ring the bell and order a sandwich. There will be someone in the kitchen all night."

When Weilong went upstairs, the people below sat down for dinner, and radio music drifted upward. Weilong's room, small like a boat, was launched on waves of music. The old wall lamp in its red gauze shade seemed to bob and float, and she felt herself swaying about, exuberant and elated. She opened the pearly net curtains and leaned against the frame of the glass door. There was a narrow balcony and, beyond the metal railing, the mist was drifting by, thick, white, and rolling; it felt like a shipboard view of the sea.

Weilong opened her suitcase, ready to put her things in the drawers, but when she opened the door she found the closet was full of clothes—gleaming, gorgeous clothes. "Whose are these?" she gasped. "Aunt must have forgotten to clear this closet out."

Like the child that she still was, she had to lock the door and try on all the clothes, which fit her perfectly. Suddenly she realized that her aunt had put them there for her. Silks and satins, brocade housedresses, short coats, long coats, beach wraps, nightgowns, bath wear, evening gowns, afternoon cocktail dresses, semiformal dining wear for entertaining guests at home—everything was there. What use would a schoolgirl have for all this? Weilong hurriedly stripped off the dinner dress she'd been trying on and threw it onto the bed. Her knees grew weak and she sat down on the bed, heat surging across her face. "Isn't this just how a bordello buys girls?" she whispered to herself. She sat for a moment, then stood up and put each outfit back onto its hanger. Hanging inside each dress was a little white satin sachet filled with lilac petals; the closet smelled of their sweet scent.

Weilong was leaning into the closet to straighten out the sachets when she heard a woman's laugh downstairs. It was a

sweet, slippery laugh, and Weilong couldn't help laughing too. "Glint said the guests were all old masters and wives. Well, there's no telling whether those masters really are old, but as for the wives, they don't sound like old wives—or like young wives either!"

When dinner was finished, the mah-jongg started again, but some of the guests turned on the phonograph and started to dance. Weilong couldn't get to sleep; as soon as she shut her eyes she was trying on clothes, one outfit after another. Woolen things, thick and furry as a perturbing jazz dance; crushed-velvet things, deep and sad as an aria from a Western opera; rich, fine silks, smooth and slippery like "The Blue Danube," coolly enveloping the whole body. She had just fallen into a dazed slumber when the music changed. She woke with a start. The panting thrust of a rumba came from downstairs, and she couldn't help but think of that long electric-purple dress hanging in the closet, and the swish it would make with each dance step. "Why not give it a try?" she murmured softly to everything downstairs. Only her lips moved, without any sound, but still she yanked the blanket up over her head. No one could hear her. "Why not give it a try?" she whispered again. Then, smiling, she fell asleep.

Weilong was used to getting up early, and the next morning she washed her face, combed her hair, and was downstairs at eight o'clock. The mah-jongg games had just broken up; the smoke in the living room was a choking, dizzying haze. Glint was supervising some junior maids as they picked up the snack trays. Madame Liang had taken her shoes off, and now sat cross-legged on the sofa with a cigarette, scolding Glance. Glance leaned on the mah-jongg table, scraping the tiles together and dropping them, with a clank, into a sandalwood box. Madame Liang wore a head wrap of midnight-blue crepe silk and a pair of dangling diamond earrings that, when they caught the light, seemed to wink and smile. Her face,

however, was as hard as iron. Upon seeing Weilong, she nodded and asked, "What time do you go to school? Tell the driver to take you. He's just returned from taking guests home, so he's still up."

"We're still on spring break," Weilong said.

"Oh?" said Madame Liang. "In that case, we could have a nice long chat today, except I'm so terribly tired. Glint, go and get some breakfast for the young lady." And she went on smoking her cigarette, just as if Weilong wasn't there.

Thinking that Weilong's arrival had put a stop to Madame Liang's scolding, Glance took the mah-jongg box and started to walk away. "Stand still!" Madame Liang shouted. Glance stood still, her back to her mistress. "We won't discuss what you were doing with George Qiao before all this," said Madame Liang. "I've told you about this so many times, but you let it go in one ear and out the other! Now I've barred the door to him, and you go sneaking out to look for him. And you think I don't know! You're so cheap, giving in to him like that! A natural-born slave girl, that's what you are!"

Glance was still young and couldn't back down, at least not with Weilong standing there. "Even if I did give in to him," she said sullenly, "he wouldn't want to keep me around. And if I wasn't like a slave girl, he wouldn't even give me the time of day. Why is that? I do not understand!"

Leaping to her feet, Madame Liang slapped Glance full in the face. Glance's feelings boiled over. "Who's been feeding you all this gossip anyway?" she cried out. "Maybe the Qiao family's driver? All the men in the Qiao family, young and old—you've got them all sewed up—probably even their Seventh Daughter-in-law's new baby boy! You haven't overlooked a single one, not even the driver. So hit me, go ahead, hit me! But watch out or I'll tell everything I know!"

Madame Liang sat back down, smiling. "Feel free!" she said. "Go ahead and tell it to the press. This kind of free publicity is

always a great bargain for me. I don't have any family elders to report to, I don't have any children or grandchildren. I've got money, I've got friends, so who am I afraid of? But you'd better learn to be more careful. I've been running this place for quite a while now, and I don't plan on letting a servant get the upper hand. Do you think you're irreplaceable?"

Glance turned and cast a glance at Weilong. "There's no question of my being irreplaceable," she said with a bitter smirk. "The replacement has already arrived. Must be a very satisfactory arrangement, one's own flesh and blood, everyone living together so cozily, and 'no water wasted on other folks' fields.'"

"Why do you always drag others in? You make everything dirty, don't you! I was going to have it out with you, but I'm too tired. I haven't got the energy to deal with your carryings on. Get out of here!"

"Then I'll go for good!" Glance declared. "I could spend a lifetime here and never get anywhere!"

"You think you're going to get somewhere? You'll lose the ground under your feet, more likely! You think you can spend a few years here, meet a few big shots, and one of them will help you out. Well, you can forget about that! I've got people at the governor's office: leave my place, and you'll never find another situation in Hong Kong. Who would dare to take you in?"

"Is this little patch of dried tofu they call Hong Kong the only place on earth?"

"You'll never get away! Your parents will marry you off in the countryside."

"My parents—control me like that?" Glance snorted.

"Your mother's no fool. She has half a dozen daughters and wants me to find places for them. She wants me to take care of your little sisters, and of course she's not going to cross me. She'll keep you under control."

Glance was stunned. At first she couldn't grasp what

Madame Liang had said, but after a moment of shocked silence, she burst into tears. Glint rushed up and practically dragged Glance out of the room, shushing her all the while. "It's all because Young Mistress has spoiled you, never keeping you in your place. Try to be more sensible! You know, as soon as Young Mistress feels better, she's sure to give you something toward your dowry."

When Glint and Glance had left the room, a junior maid crept in gingerly, bringing slippers for Madame Liang. "Your bath is ready, ma'am," she murmured. "You've been up a long time. Wouldn't you like to take a nap after your bath?" Madame Liang slid her feet into the slippers, tossed her cigarette into a potted azalea, stood up, and left the room. The azalea was densely packed with flowers, and the cigarette butt fell among them, scorching a petal brown.

Weilong stood alone in the living room until a junior maid came in and called her to breakfast. After breakfast, she went upstairs and stood at the window of her room, gazing vacantly. There was the rectangular grass lawn, neatly trimmed, sprinkled with dew, a bold deep green. With sharp jerky steps, a sparrow was crossing the lawn, only to stop along the way, as if dazed by that continent of stupefying green. Step by jerky step, it started back. Weilong had thought that sparrows only hopped; she had never realized that they could move in long, measured strides, and she watched for a long time. Perhaps it wasn't a sparrow? She was still wondering when two porters passed down the garden path, puffing as they carried a red trunk through the gate. They were followed by a middle-aged woman in a tunic and trousers of black gambiered silk; Glance's mother, apparently. Glance came out too and just stood there. She was waiting, it seemed, for another porter who was still inside. Her eyes were red and swollen from crying, and her powder had turned her face to a light brown. Weilong could only see her in profile, eyes staring straight ahead, face expressionless, a clay mask. Af-

ter watching for some time, Weilong noticed the slight twitch of a muscle running from cheek to temple. Oh, so that was it: Glance was eating peanuts. Every once in a while a shred of red peanut skin would pop out of the corner of her mouth.

Suddenly Weilong didn't want to watch anymore. She turned and opened the closet door, leaning against it. It was dark inside the closet, and the lilac scent made her dizzy. The air of the faraway past was in there—decorous, languid, heedless of time. In that closet there was no bright, clear morning like the one outside the window, with its flat green grass, mute frightened face, and peanut skins at the corner of the mouth... all that dirty, complicated, unreasonable reality.

Once Weilong had gone into that clothes closet, she stayed for two or three months, and she had lots of opportunities to dress up. A banquet, a tea party, a concert, a mah-jongg party—for her these were little more than occasions for putting on fine clothes. She considered herself fortunate, since Madame Liang merely used her as a signboard to attract the mainstream sort of youth. Her aunt did take her to fancy dance halls a few times, but usually she invited people over to the house. Steeped as they are in the conservative habits of the British upper class, the young ladies of Hong Kong's great families maintain an air of dignified reserve, quite unlike Shanghai's socialites.

Madame Liang was extremely picky about the young men who pursued Weilong, more severe even than the imperial household when it is choosing a royal son-in-law. If the lucky half dozen who were in the running grew excessively ardent in their pursuit, Madame Liang simply took the precious goods off the shelf: none of the suitors would be allowed to go near her niece. Then, when she had permitted one of them to get close, she swooped in with a dexterous display of charm, and recruited him for her own purposes. When a youth paid his addresses to Madame Liang, he was like an old drunk who pretends he doesn't want a drink; in the end, he succumbed, and

there he'd be, deep in an affair. Weilong got used to watching this little drama, without caring much about it.

One day, as she was preparing to go out, Weilong urged Glint to do up her hair quickly. Madame Liang had assigned her favorite attendant to wait on Weilong, and Glint had quickly got a very good grasp of Weilong's temperament. Weilong, with no family in Hong Kong to turn to, had found that Glint, though she could be quite cold-hearted, always had warm, wise advice for her. Glint was now her trusted confidante.

"How about the dress first and then the hair?" Glint said now. "Otherwise, you'll muss your hair when you pull the dress over your head."

"Pick out something simple," Weilong said. "The choir is going to practice in the church, and I'm afraid the people there won't approve of fancy clothes."

But Glint went ahead and chose a ginger-yellow crepe cheongsam. "I don't understand," she said. "You're not a Christian, so why join the choir? Your social schedule keeps you busy all day long, and then you study till dawn. These past two weeks you've been working so hard to get ready for your exams that you're positively wasting away! Why are you ruining your health this way?"

Weilong sighed and dipped her chin to let Glint part her hair. "You say I'm studying too much. But you know very well that I go out to parties just to help my aunt and keep her happy. I worked very hard for this chance to study, so now I have to do a good job and get respectable grades."

"I don't mean to rain on your parade, but what is the point of graduating? You're still in secondary school, Hong Kong has only one university, and university graduates can't find work anyway! If they do find a job, it pays fifty or sixty dollars a month, and for that they have to teach in a primary school run by the church and put up with the foreign nuns' bad tempers. It's really not worth it!"

"You think I haven't thought of all that? Still, I have to take what I can get!"

"Now don't get angry at what I'm going to say. I think you should use all these social occasions to look around and find someone who'll be right for you."

Weilong smiled sarcastically. "And who would that be, in my aunt's circle of friends? They're either young men as slippery as dance-hall playboys or the kind of old man who likes to hang around a harem. Or else they're British military men, in which case, if they're lieutenants or above, they don't want to get involved with someone from the yellow race. That's how it is in Hong Kong!"

"Oh, now I get it!" Glint responded with a sudden laugh. "No wonder you joined the choir even though you don't have any free time. They say there are quite a few college students in that group."

"I don't mind if you joke about this with me," Weilong smiled. "But don't go saying anything to Aunt!"

Glint was silent.

"Did you hear me?" Weilong was insistent. "Don't go spreading rumors!"

Glint was startled out of her reverie. "What do you take me for? You think I can't keep quiet about a little thing like this?" She glanced around, then said quietly, "Miss, you'd better be careful. While you've been looking for someone to pick, our Young Mistress, with her sharp eyes and quick fingers, has already picked one out for herself."

Weilong looked up sharply, knocking Glint's hand aside. "Who do you mean?"

"That Lu Somebody in your choir, the one who's good at tennis. He's a college student, isn't he? Oh, now I remember, his name is Lu Zhaolin."

Weilong's face flushed bright red; she bit her lips in silence. Finally, she said, "How do you know that she..."

"Eh! How could I not know? If it weren't for this, she wouldn't have let you join the choir in the first place. She wouldn't let you go off on your own to make friends, not even to sing with a big group of people in the church. That's the rule here. Anyone who wants to see you has to come in through the front door and pay a proper visit. And once they've come in that way, it's easy to manage things. I thought it was strange when she didn't say anything about your joining the choir. Two weeks ago, all she could talk about was holding a garden party and inviting your choir friends, so everyone would have a chance to get acquainted. Then that Lu person went to Manila for a tennis match, and the garden party was put off. As soon as Lu came back, she started talking about it again. As for the real purpose of tomorrow's party, well, of course you've been kept in the dark!"

Weilong ground her teeth. "If he falls for her sweet-talking and goes off with her, then he's not someone who can be trusted. I'll see through his act right away. Probably just as well."

"You're being foolish," Glint said. "Crows will be black, wherever you go; men will always fall for this kind of bait. Don't forget—your Mr. Lu is young, a student, probably inexperienced. If he falls for this, you can hardly blame him. Write him a letter, if you know him well enough. Ask him not to come tomorrow."

"Know him!" Weilong smiled blandly. "We've barely spoken to each other!" She let the matter drop.

The garden party was on the following day. There's a touch of nineteenth-century England in every garden party. In England the skies are hardly ever clear, but when at last the balmy summer days do arrive, the lords and ladies hold these sorts of semiformal parties on their country estates. The ladies wear straw hats with broad floppy brims, corsages of old-fashioned artificial flowers, and elbow-length silk gloves, all very fancy, just as if they were attending a formal court function. Anyone

in the county with the least claim to status is sure to attend, and the local minister and his wife show up to bow and scrape. Decked out in their finery, the company paces about the castle grounds and through the rocky ruins, engaging in stiff conversation. Then, after tea, they beg some young ladies to play the piano and sing "The Last Rose of Summer."

Hong Kong garden parties are even better. Hong Kong society copies English custom in every respect, but goes on adding further touches until the original conception is entirely lost. Madame Liang's garden party was garishly swathed in local color. "Good luck" paper lanterns had been planted on five-foot poles all around the lawn; when they were lit at dusk, they glimmered vaguely in the background—a perfect prop for a Hollywood production of *Secrets of the Qing Palace*. Beach umbrellas were stuck at various angles among the lanterns, an incongruously Western touch. Young maids and old amahs, their hair oiled and twisted into long braids, wove through the forest of umbrella poles, proffering cocktails, snacks, and fruit juice on shaky silver trays.

Since Madame Liang was throwing this party for the handsome young men in the choir, the guest list had been carefully scrutinized. Not a single tipsy little British officer was to be seen; the atmosphere was prim and proper. Given the religious nature of the choir, half a dozen Catholic nuns had also been invited. The monks and nuns of Hong Kong are used to attending social events, and they know how to mingle; they have lively, pleasing manners. These nuns, however, were not as brilliant as some, and they spoke only French and Latin. Since Weilong was taking French at school and had picked up a few phrases, Madame Liang dispatched her to entertain them.

Weilong watched helplessly as Lu Zhaolin arrived. Madame Liang, gorgeously attired, took his hand and, blinking in the bright sun, said something Weilong couldn't hear. Lu Zhaolin left his hand in Madame Liang's, but he glanced about, searching

for Weilong. Madame Liang's sharp eyes found her first. Madame Liang's gaze slid from Lu Zhaolin to Weilong, then back to Lu Zhaolin. Weilong gave Lu Zhaolin a forced smile. He was a tall, broad-shouldered, dark-skinned youth; when he smiled in return his white teeth flashed in the sun.

Then the wind changed, and started blowing toward Weilong; she could just hear Madame Liang saying, "Poor child! She hardly ever gets a chance to use her French. Let's not bother her while she's having fun." With that, she led him off, and they disappeared into the crowd.

The second time Weilong caught sight of them, they were sitting under a blue-and-white-striped beach umbrella. Madame Liang's elbows were propped on the table; she sipped on a straw and gazed at Lu Zhaolin, who sat across from her. Lu Zhaolin, however, was coolly scanning the crowd. Weilong followed his gaze as he looked around. There was only one person there who made his eyes grow fixed and brilliant. Weilong's heart fizzed sourly, like a carbonated drink after a squirt of lemon. Lu Zhaolin was looking at a mixed-race girl who was no more than fifteen or sixteen years old. The whiteness of her skin was not that of a Chinese; it was a flat white, altogether opaque. A snow-white face with large, pale-green eyes hinting of mischief, jet eyebrows and lashes, and full, luscious, scarlet lips—a face of almost forbidding beauty. This was Zhou Jijie, peerless among the party girls in Hong Kong's younger set. Her genealogy was said to be very complicated; it included, at the minimum, Arab, Negro, Indian, Indonesian, and Portuguese blood, with only a dash of Chinese. Zhou Jijie was quite young, but she had quickly risen to prominence, and her place in Hong Kong's social scene was quite secure. Weilong, by contrast, was a newcomer. A certain amount of enmity was unavoidable, but the two of them got along well enough.

Zhou Jijie could feel Weilong scrutinizing her, so she smiled back, and waved at her to come over. Weilong winked in return,

and then, pouting, glanced over at the nuns. The nuns were going on about the preparations they were making for the eightieth birthday of their mother superior. Suddenly a young Vietnamese appeared, speaking fluent French and asking about their recent fund-raising for the orphanage. The nuns were thrilled and started telling him, in great detail, all about a visit they'd received from the governor's wife. Weilong took the opportunity to escape, and went looking for Zhou Jijie.

Zhou Jijie pointed toward her own face. "You should thank me!" she teased.

"Was it you who sent the bodhisattva that saved my life? How extremely kind!"

Just then, a small scuffle broke out at the iron gate. Glint, all smiles, was barring the way to a man who was trying to get in. In the end, however, she couldn't prevent his entry; he strode right into the party. Weilong nudged Zhou Jijie. "Look, look, it's your brother, isn't it? I didn't know you had an older brother."

Jijie glared at her. Then her brow softened and she spoke in a deceptively pleasant manner. "I really don't like hearing that I look like George. If I had a face like his, I'd marry a Muslim straight off, and spend my life behind a veil!"

Weilong suddenly remembered being told that Zhou Jijie and George Qiao had the same mother but different fathers, though the details were of course entirely hush-hush. No wonder Zhou Jijie avoided the topic. Weilong was ashamed to have made such a faux pas, and hurried on to another subject.

But Jijie, after expressing such contempt for George Qiao, was now following his every move. Five minutes hadn't passed before she was stifling a giggle; covering her mouth with her hand, she whispered to Weilong: "Look over there—George is buzzing around in front of your aunt, and the more she ignores him, the more outrageously he flirts. She's just about to lose her temper!"

Weilong looked, but the first thing she noticed was the great

change that had come over Lu Zhaolin; he and Madame Liang were now getting on very well indeed—fused together, almost, their eyes beaded on a single string. Weilong and Lu Zhaolin had known each other for a while now, but they had never reached this stage. Weilong choked back anger, and her eyes grew red. “What an idiot!” she cursed under her breath. “What an idiot! Are all men so stupid?”

Meanwhile, George was pacing back and forth in front of Madame Liang, both hands thrust deep into his pockets. He was talking to the surrounding company, but his entire attention was fixed on her, and he kept glancing in her direction. Now people started looking at Madame Liang and Lu Zhaolin. Things got so heated, as the two of them battled it out with eyes and eyebrows, that everyone had to laugh. Madame Liang was the very picture of tolerant magnanimity, but now she felt a bit ill-at-ease. Pushing away her juice glass, she draped her arm over the back of the seat and gave Weilong a little wink. Weilong looked over at George Qiao; her aunt nodded slightly. It was time for Weilong to leave Zhou Jijie and make herself pleasant to George Qiao.

Walking toward him, she held out her hand in greeting. “Are you George Qiao? We haven’t been introduced.”

They shook hands, after which he put his hands back in his pockets and examined her appearance in great detail, smiling all the while. Weilong was wearing a cheongsam of thin, porcelain-green silk, and when he stared at her with his dark green eyes, her arms grew hot, like hot milk pouring out of a green pitcher—she felt her whole body melting. She steadied herself at once. “Am I bothering you?” she asked. “Why are you staring like that? It’s as if I were a thorn stuck in your eye!”

“Of course I’m staring! I don’t know if that thorn will ever come out. Better save it for a souvenir.”

“What a joker! The sun’s too strong here, let’s go walk in the shade a bit.”

They walked along together. George sighed. “I could hit myself. How come I never knew there was someone like you in Hong Kong?”

“You haven’t come around much, not since I moved in with my aunt, and I seldom go out. Otherwise, we probably would have met by now. You get around a lot, I hear.”

“And yet I almost missed this chance! What an amazing stroke of luck! We could have been born into separate worlds, or into the same world but with you twenty years older than me. Even ten years would be terrible. Of course, if I’d been born twenty years before you, that wouldn’t matter so much. You don’t think I’ll be too disgusting when I’m old, do you?”

“What a way to talk!”

She looked at him again, trying to imagine what he would look like when he was old. He had even less color in his cheeks than Jijie; even his lips were whitish, almost like plaster. Under his thick black brows and lashes, his eyes were like fields of young rice when the wind blows across them and reveals, in flashes, the green gleam of water between the rice shoots—flashing, then darkening again. George Qiao was tall and well built, but his clothes fit him so perfectly, with such casual grace, that you didn’t even notice his physique. He made Lu Zhaolin look rough and doltish. Weilong was feeling quite bitter toward Madame Liang because of Lu Zhaolin, and George was the only man she’d seen who could resist Madame Liang’s charms. That made her heart warm toward him.

When he learned that she was from Shanghai, George asked her, “Which do you like better, Shanghai or Hong Kong?”

“Well, the scenery in Hong Kong is better of course. It’s famous for its beaches. Perhaps if I could swim I’d like Hong Kong even more.”

“I’d be happy to give you some lessons later on—if you’re interested, that is.”

Next, he praised her English.

"Oh, it's not that good," Weilong demurred. "Up until this year, I never spoke English outside of school. Lately I've been speaking a little English with my aunt's friends, but my grammar is all wrong."

"Probably you're just not used to it," he said. "It's a bit tiring, isn't it? Let's not speak English."

"Then what shall we speak? You don't understand Shanghainese, and my Cantonese is terrible."

"Then let's not talk at all. You've been entertaining these dreadful people all afternoon, you must need a break."

"Now that you mention it, I do feel a bit tired."

She sat down on a bench, and George sat next to her. After a moment, Weilong laughed. "Three minutes' silence, just as if we're in mourning!"

"Can't two people sit together without talking?" As he spoke, his arm went out along the backrest, behind Weilong.

"It would be better to talk a bit," Weilong hurriedly said.

"If you insist on conversation, then I'll speak in Portuguese." He started rattling away at once.

Weilong listened, her head to one side and her hands clasped around her knees. "I don't know what you're saying. Something unkind, no doubt!"

"Is that what my tone implies?" he asked gently.

Weilong blushed and hid her face.

"I'd translate it into English for you, but I'm afraid I'm not brave enough."

Weilong covered her ears. "Who wants to hear, anyway?" Then she stood up and walked back toward the crowd.

By that time the sky was already dark. The moon had just risen; it was dark and yellow, like the scorch mark left on jade-green satin when a burning ash of incense falls into someone's needlework. Weilong turned and saw that George was following her. "I can't go on dallying with you," she said. "And I'll thank you to refrain from annoying my aunt."

"Oh, I just wanted to fluster her a bit. She doesn't fluster easily. If a woman's too calm, too steady and self-controlled, then she's not so attractive."

Weilong gave a little hiss, then ordered him not to cause her aunt any further displeasure.

"Your aunt doesn't lose very often, but against me, she lost," George said, smiling lightly. "Today, just when she was most contented, she saw me, and had to remember the defeat she suffered. Naturally, she's angry."

"If you keep on talking nonsense, I'll get angry."

"If you want me to leave, I will. Just promise you'll go out with me tomorrow."

"I can't. You know I can't!"

"Does that mean I have to come here to see you? Your aunt won't let me in the door! The only reason she didn't have me chased off today is that she didn't want to be embarrassed in front of all these people."

Weilong bowed her head, not saying a word. Just then, Madame Liang and Lu Zhaolin, holding their cocktail glasses high, came walking—or rather, floating—over to Weilong. They were both tipsy. "Go find Jijie," Madame Liang said to Weilong, "and play something for us on the piano. Let's sing some songs while everyone's still here, liven things up a bit." Weilong nodded, then turned to George Qiao. He had vanished.

Weilong couldn't find Jijie anywhere, but when she asked the maids they said she was upstairs washing her face. Weilong went upstairs and saw that her aunt's bathroom light was on. Jijie was standing in front of the mirror, wiping her face with a tissue and some cleansing lotion.

"They want you to play the piano," said Weilong.

"And just who is the silver-throated diva this time? I really haven't got the patience it takes to back them up!"

"No one's doing a solo. They're going to sing popular tunes together, try to have some fun."

Jijie wadded up the tissue and threw it at the mirror. "So it's for fun, eh? Those people all have windpipes like cracked bamboo. One person singing, but it sounds like half a dozen voices at once."

Weilong laughed, then sat down sideways on the raised doorsill. "You're drunk!" she exclaimed.

"What if I am? They plied me with alcohol." When she'd had a few, her face grew even whiter. Only the rims of her eyes were red.

"You seem to know all the guests pretty well."

"I've met a lot of those South China University students before. Whenever they throw a tea dance, a dinner dance, or a picnic, they love to drag my sister and me along. Last year my sister entered the university, so now we're in even greater demand."

"Are you planning to go to the university after you graduate next year?"

"What I'd really like is to get as far away from here as possible, go to university in Australia maybe, or Hawaii. I'm sick of Hong Kong."

"Is George studying at South China?"

"Him! He's the Qiao family's most illustrious good-for-nothing. He got into the university five years ago, but quit after only half a year. He went back last year because of my sister Jimiao, and what he did then stirred up a lot of talk. It's a good thing he's his father's least favorite son; otherwise the old man would have been furious. Weilong, you probably don't know about mixed-blood boys; even the best are a bit sullen, like slave girls."

Weilong swallowed the words that had risen to her lips, and smiled at Jijie.

"It's true! I'm mixed-blood myself and I've been through it all. These mixed-blood boys are the ones we're most likely to

marry. We can't marry a Chinese—we've got foreign-style educations, so we don't fit in with the pure Chinese types. We can't marry a foreigner, either—have you seen any whites here who aren't deeply influenced by race concepts? Even if one of them wanted to marry one of us, there'd be too much social pressure against it. Anyone who marries an Oriental loses his career. In this day and age, who would be that romantic?"

Weilong hadn't expected Jijie to pour out her heart. She nodded and bit her fingernails. "Really? I hadn't realized. Such a tiny group from which to choose!"

"That's why Jimiao is desperate to leave Hong Kong. It's too colonial here. If we go somewhere else, the race restrictions can't possibly be as severe, can they? There must be some place in the world where we can live." The rims of her eyes grew even redder as she spoke.

"You're really drunk!" said Weilong. "Here you are getting all emotional!" She waited a moment, then asked, "So what happened then?"

"When?" Jijie was confused.

"George Qiao and your sister."

"Oh, you mean them. Well, after that, a lot of ridiculous things happened! He made my sister really angry. You don't know what a loose tongue that George has. He spread all kinds of rumors..."

Before she had finished, there was a knock on the door and Glint entered. The two girls were wanted downstairs, she said. Jijie had to break off then and there. She and Weilong went downstairs together, chatting lightly.

As soon as the pair appeared in the living room, the others burst into applause. They demanded that Weilong sing. She tried to decline, but finally gave in and sang "Burmese Nights." When she had finished she surreptitiously searched Madame Liang's face; her aunt's hold over Lu Zhaolin was, she could see,

still uncertain. If Weilong stepped too far into the limelight, if the company paid too much attention to her, she might well incur the wrath of her aunt. She decided not to sing again.

The garden party was an afternoon tea, and by seven or eight in the evening the crowd had dispersed. Madame Liang and Weilong had been too busy taking care of guests to eat anything, so they were ready for a meal. Madame Liang felt a bit guilty about Lu Zhaolin, so she was being very kind to Weilong. Neither had much to say.

"The chocolate cake wasn't very good today," remarked Madame Liang. "Remember, next time, to ask the Qiao family to lend us their cook for a day."

Weilong agreed. Madame Liang cut a slice of cold cow's tongue, then stared at it with a smile. A moment later she picked up her water glass; she stared at it with a smile. Picking up the pepper shaker seemed to trigger a further memory; the smile lines around her mouth grew deeper yet.

Weilong sighed. "A woman is such a pitiful thing!" she thought. "A man is only a little bit nice, and see how happy she is!"

Madame Liang glanced at Weilong sharply. "What are you smiling at?" she demanded, barely suppressing her own smile.

Weilong was startled. "Did I smile?"

Behind Madame Liang stood a pine cupboard in which a silver plaque was displayed, an award that she'd received for her donations to the Royal Medical Society's Hong Kong branch. It shone bright as a mirror. Weilong caught a glimpse of her smiling reflection in the silver. She quickly wiped off the smile.

"Liar! And such a child—invite a few people over, and see how happy she gets!" Then, smiling secretly, Madame Liang went back to eating her slice of cow's tongue.

Weilong had a new thought, and again the corners of her mouth lifted; what made her smile was what, in her heart, made her pretend to frown: "What's the matter with you?"

You've got good reason to be angry—why are you so calm? People in the old days would 'dare to fume but dare not speak.' You don't even dare to get angry, is that it?" But her heart had slipped away from Liang and Lu as lightly as a dragonfly grazes the water, before carelessly flying off somewhere else. Aunt and niece had each invited an invisible guest: since there really were four at table, it was a most companionable meal.

After dinner, Weilong went back to her bedroom. Glint was turning down the bed. She folded up a moon-white nightgown and put it on the pillow. When she saw Weilong she said, "That George Qiao sure had eyes for you!"

"How bizarre," Weilong said with a sarcastic smile. "Qiao must be an amazing fellow. Everyone gets so worried if he talks to me for just a few minutes."

"That fellow, well, he's not so amazing, but still it's not a good idea to lead him on."

Weilong shrugged. "So who's leading him on?"

"You lead him on, or he leads you—what's the difference?"

Heading into the bathroom, Weilong said, "Yes, yes, you don't need to tell me. Zhou Jijie gave me an earful just now—told me all about his evil ways. You must have heard everything through the door."

She started to shut the bathroom door, but Glint wedged her foot in it. "Miss," she said, "you don't understand. The fact that he plays around doesn't matter that much. The bad thing's that his father doesn't like him. His mother fell out of favor soon after they got married, and she doesn't have any money to give him. His father has never taken him in hand, so he makes no effort to study. Even now, with his father still around, George is hard up, always strapped for cash. When Sir Cheng Qiao dies, he'll leave behind two dozen concubines and half a dozen sons. Even the favorites won't get much, so what do you think will be left for George? And he's good for nothing except playing around. He's got tough times ahead."

Weilong was silent. She looked Glint in the eye for quite a while and then she said, "Don't worry. I may be foolish, but I'm not that foolish."

Having said as much, she really did try to be careful. George didn't come charging into the Liang household again, but whenever Weilong attended a social function, he was sure to be there. Weilong was much cooler toward him than she had been when they first met. She was now going out surprisingly often; Madame Liang wanted her out of the house. Madame Liang and Lu Zhaolin were hitting it off beautifully, and because Weilong and Lu Zhaolin had once been attracted to each other, Madame Liang worried that her niece might resent her success. She also didn't want Zhaolin to be distracted. So she made sure that Weilong stayed out of sight, at least for the time being.

But good things never come without problems, and just at this point Madame Liang's old flame Situ Xie returned to Hong Kong. Although Situ Xie was no longer youthful, he was even touchier than a young man, and his suspicions were easily aroused. Madame Liang was not about to offend an old friend, just for the sake of a fling. She set Lu Zhaolin aside, and focused instead on keeping Situ Xie happy.

One night, Weilong and Madame Liang went to a banquet together. It was crowded and the guests included both George Qiao and Situ Xie. When the dinner was over, Madame Liang invited Situ Xie to her house to see the new cherry-red glass tile she'd had installed in the bathroom. Since Situ Xie was the head of a Shantou ceramics company, she wanted his expert opinion. She and Weilong rode home with Situ Xie in his car. Halfway there, a heavy rain began to fall. It was then early summer, right at the start of the plum-rain season. The mountain slopes were velvet-black, and the dark, plush wind came in urgent bursts, squeezing the hot, white raindrops into a round, whirling mass as big as a cartwheel; lit up by the car's headlights, it rolled on ahead of them like a white satin-covered ball. The

thick trees on the mountainside leaned over and shrank together into another whirling mass, a green satin ball rolling behind the white one.

The three of them sat in the car, with Madame Liang in the middle. The heat was too much for Weilong, so she leaned against the seat in front of her, feeling the humid breeze. It blew on her, and she began to get tired, so she nestled her head in her elbow. This reminded her of one of George's little habits. When he had to make a bit of mental effort, he'd bury his face in the crook of his arm and sit silent for a moment; then he'd lift his head and say, with a smile: "Right! Now I've got it!" It was childlike, and it filled Weilong with an almost maternal love. She wanted to kiss the short hair on the back of his head, kiss the face that was making such an effort to think, kiss the wrinkled sleeves at his elbows. Now all of George's delightful little gestures came to mind, and her heart grew soft and warm. Her heart grew hot, but her hands and feet were very cold. First hard, then soft, a current of cold happiness raced through her body, while outside the car window the rain blew hard, then soft, then hard again.

Sunk in reverie, Weilong was paying no attention to the conversation between Madame Liang and Situ Xie. Madame Liang gave her a nudge. "Look, look at this!" she said. Then she thrust her wrist into Weilong's face, so that Weilong could admire a diamond bracelet that was a full three inches wide. The car's interior light hadn't been switched on, but the bracelet gleamed so brightly that it made Madame Liang's red fingernails shine. Weilong gasped in admiration. "He gave it to me," said Madame Liang. She turned her face back toward Situ Xie, pouting. "I've never seen anyone so impatient, giving out jewelry when we haven't even reached the house!"

Weilong held Madame Liang's wrist and admired the bracelet. While she was exclaiming over it, and in far less time than it takes to tell—faster even than a detective whips out

the handcuffs and claps them onto a criminal—Situ Xie put another diamond bracelet, identical to the first, around Weilong's own wrist. Weilong was too startled to say a word. She fumbled in the dark, unable to find the clasp, struggling to remove the bracelet. In her impatience she started pulling at it, trying to force it over her hand. Situ Xie quickly took her hand in his. "Miss Weilong, you can't refuse me this honor. Wait a moment, and I'll explain the whole thing to you. These bracelets come as a pair, and I couldn't bear to see them separated. One goes to your aunt, so this one has to go to you, doesn't it? Someday your aunt's will be yours, so it all comes to the same thing. No, no! Don't take it off—give it to your aunt for safekeeping, if you like."

"I would never dare to accept anything so valuable."

"When one of your elders gives you something," said Madame Liang, "it is never wrong to accept it. A simple thank you will suffice!" Then, with a light kick, she pressed her lips to Weilong's ear. "Have you no sense?" she hissed. "Do you have to carry on like some low-bred idiot?"

Weilong controlled her feelings. "Thank you very much," she said to Situ Xie, "but really..."

"Oh, please don't mention it," Situ Xie said over and over. "After all, we're all good friends." And he squeezed her hand a few times, before withdrawing his and resuming his conversation with Madame Liang. Weilong couldn't find a way to break in; she didn't know what to do.

The car pulled up at the Liang mansion, the storm now blowing so hard that it seemed the mountains would be driven into the sea. None of them had brought an umbrella, so the driver honked the horn, alerting the servants to come down with umbrellas to escort each of them into the house. The white leather pumps that Madame Liang and Weilong wore were soaked and splattered; at each step they squeaked and oozed. No sooner had Weilong reached the door than she ran upstairs.

"Wash your feet and change your shoes," Madame Liang ordered, "then come down for brandy. Otherwise, you might catch cold."

Weilong consented, but to herself she thought, "Stay up late drinking with you two? I'd have to be brave enough to eat a leopard!"

When she reached her room she locked herself in. She started the water for her bath, then called out for someone to tell them that she'd caught a cold and gone to bed. Glint knocked a few minutes later, with some aspirin. Under the cover of the running water, Weilong pretended not to hear.

Her room, with its private bath and little balcony, was practically a separate apartment. Before going to bed, Weilong opened the glass door to the balcony to make the room less stuffy. Luckily, the wind wasn't blowing in her direction, and not much rain came in. There was an outcrop opposite the balcony—as if the mountain had reached out its tongue to give the balcony a lick. During plum-rain season, the trees on the mountain were steeped in mist; the scent of green leaves was everywhere. Plantains, Cape jasmine, magnolia, banana trees, camphor trees, sweet flag, ferns, ivorywoods, palms, reeds, and tobacco, all growing too fast and spreading too rapidly: it was ominous, with a whiff of something like blood in the air. The humidity was oppressive, and the walls and furniture were slick with moisture.

Weilong lay on her bed. The bedding was gummy; the pillowcase ready to grow moss. She had just had a bath, but already the humidity made her wish for another. She tossed and turned; she was painfully troubled. She kept thinking about Situ Xie and the change in his behavior toward her. He'd always been interested in her, but he'd never been so forward—certainly not in the presence of her aunt. Judging from his performance today, he must have reached an agreement with Madame Liang. Would he offer her such a valuable present for

no reason? He wasn't that kind of a person! Having thought things through this far, Weilong glanced at the bracelet on her dressing table. She had taken it off and tossed it there; it glittered beneath the small table lamp. She sat up sharply. "Better put it away safely," she thought. "No matter what, I must find a way to return it to him. Losing it would be no fun." She opened the closet and got out a little leather case, then put the bracelet into it for safekeeping. The closet was set into the wall and fitted out with rows of bright lightbulbs to prevent mildew in the rainy season.

When Weilong opened the closet door again, she found herself thinking back to the spring, and how nervous she'd been that evening when she'd first arrived. She remembered how, after making sure no one could see her, she had tried on all her new clothes. Since then three months had passed in a flash; in that brief time she'd done a great deal of dressing up, eating out, and playing around—she'd even made something of a name for herself. Everything the average girl dreams of, she'd done. It was unlikely that all this would come free of charge. From that perspective, the little drama that had just unfolded was inevitable. No doubt this wasn't the first time that Madame Liang had sacrificed a girl in order to please Situ Xie. And Madame Liang would be sure to require other sacrifices from her as well. The only way to refuse would be to leave the house altogether.

Weilong leaned against the closet door and watched the rain on the balcony. When the drops of rain hit the cement and caught a bit of light, they twirled around and shot out beams of silver light—long, long beams of light, like the silver skirts of ballet dancers. Weilong sighed. After three months of this life, she was addicted. If she wanted to leave Madame Liang's house, she would have to find a rich man to marry. A husband who was both rich and charming? It was unlikely. Plumping for a man with money—that had been Madame Liang's approach.

Madame Liang had a clear head, and she was unabashedly materialistic: as a young woman, she'd ignored the opinions of others and married a sixty-year-old tycoon, waiting for him to die. He died all right but, sad to say, a bit late—Madame Liang was old now, with a hungry heart that she could not fill. She needed love, she needed it from lots and lots of people, but to a young person, her way of looking for love seemed ridiculous! Weilong didn't want to end up like that.

Her thoughts turned to George Qiao. After her emotions had been so deeply unsettled by the day's unexpected turn of events, she felt she had no strength left: she had to give up the battle against George that had been going on in her heart. She had to surrender to love. Maybe George wanted nothing more than a moment's pleasure; maybe he treated all women this way. But if he made a sincere declaration of love, she knew that she would accept him. True, George hadn't behaved very well in the past. He was too smart, too detached; the people he knew didn't understand him. Surrounded by Hong Kong people, he lived like a foreigner. It was a good thing that he was still young. If his wife loved him and believed in him, he was sure to succeed. He didn't have money, but the Qiao family had contacts throughout Hong Kong. He'd find a way to make a living.

Weilong had changed her mind about George, and her tone changed too. The next time they met, he felt it at once. That day, a group of young people set out for a picnic on one of the local mountain peaks. Weilong grew fatigued along the way, and George, after arranging to meet the others at the summit, stayed with her while she rested. It had been raining for the past several days and the rain had just ceased. The skies were overcast, and the green peaks pierced the fog. Sitting with their feet hanging over the edge of the road, Weilong and George looked down through the clouds to a misty mountain slope below. Two or three blue-clad peasant women in coolie hats

were collecting tree limbs. Weilong felt a sort of swimming unreality, and because George was being especially gentle and kind that day, and was leaning against her quietly as they sat, she felt even more dazed, almost as if she were dreaming. She was wearing white slacks and a copper-red blouse with rusty green polka dots. A scarf of the same fabric had slipped from her head, revealing her long, wavy bangs. She picked at the grass blades. "George," she softly asked, "don't you have any plans for the future?"

"Of course I do. For instance, I plan to come and see you tonight, if the moon is shining."

Weilong's expression changed. Before she could speak, George continued. "I plan to come and see you because I have something important to tell you. I'd like to know what you think about marriage."

Weilong's heart did a somersault. Then George said, "I have no intention of getting married. Even if I could get married, I wouldn't be any good at it. I wouldn't be a satisfactory husband—not till I'm fifty, at least. Weilong, I'm telling you this straight out because you've never played games with me. You're too good—really, Weilong, you are. You let your aunt exploit you like this—and for whose benefit? When you're exhausted, all worn out, do you think she'll still want to keep you around? Weilong, you're worn out. You need a little happiness."

With that, he leaned down to kiss her, but her face stiffened. "Weilong, I can't promise you marriage, and I can't promise you love. All I can promise you is happiness."

This was a far cry from what Weilong had expected. She was confused, as if she'd suddenly tripped and fallen backward a long way. She pressed her hands against her temples, and turned away with a tiny smile. "What a tight-fisted guy!"

"I'm offering you happiness. Is there anything in the world that's harder to find than happiness?"

"You're offering me happiness? You're tormenting me, more than anyone ever has!"

"I'm tormenting you? Is that so?"

He wrapped his arm around her tightly and kissed her hard on the mouth. Just then, the sun came out and blazed right into their faces. George removed his lips, pulled a pair of dark sunglasses from his pocket. He put them on. "Look," he grinned, "the weather's clearing up! Tonight the moon is going to shine."

Weilong grabbed his coat collar, lifted her eyes, and stared into his face imploringly. She tried as hard as she could to find his eyes behind the dark lenses, but all she could see there was her own pale, shrunken reflection. She searched for a long time, then suddenly dropped her gaze. George clasped her tightly around her shoulders, and she buried her face in his chest. He discovered that she was trembling so hard that her teeth were chattering. "Weilong," he asked softly, "what are you so afraid of?"

"I—" she stuttered, "I—I'm afraid of myself! Maybe I'm going crazy!" She gasped loudly and started to cry.

George gave her a gentle shake, but she continued to tremble so violently that he could not hold her still.

Then she said, "No, I'm not crazy! What you say to me makes no sense—why on earth do I listen?"

There's an English saying in Hong Kong: "Hong Kong skies, Hong Kong girls." It's an apt comparison. Hong Kong girls are just as capricious, just as unpredictable, as the island's steamy climate. And the weather seemed to be listening to George, just like a girl: that night, the moon shone.

George came by moonlight, and he left by moonlight. The moon was still high in the sky when he climbed from Weilong's balcony to the cliff face nearby, clinging to the crooked tree branches as he went. The woods were still thick with humidity. It was hot and damp, the insects chirped, the frogs gurgled.

The entire hollow was like a huge cauldron that was slowly being heated by the dark blue blaze of the moon, heated till you could hear the water boiling. Even the firewood gatherers rarely came along this crest of the hill. George stepped cautiously. He was afraid of snakes and carried a stick. He took a step, pushed the tall grass back with his stick, swept it with the beam of his flashlight, then quickly turned off the light. Grass burrs stuck to his pants in itchy, prickly clumps. As he walked along, he heard a long, mournful wail that rose up from deep in the hills. It started suddenly and stopped as quickly—like a strangled cry for help. George knew it was only an owl, but fear chilled him to the bone. He stopped, listening intently. After a moment's rest, the wailing started again. George slipped; he almost fell down the slope. Grabbing a lemon tree, he steadied himself. Maybe it would be better to go across the garden, he thought. The gardener won't be there till daybreak, and that's awhile yet. Clinging to vines and creepers, he clambered down the cliff. George wasn't particularly athletic, but he'd been getting in and out of scrapes all his life, and this short scramble was well within his abilities. He climbed down till he was about ten feet above level ground, then hunched over to jump. He landed on the grass in the rear garden.

He walked around the corner of the veranda to the front lawn. Someone was standing by the little iron gate; he flinched in surprise. The person's back was clearly visible in the moonlight: a white linen blouse and wide black trousers of lightly lacquered silk; hair braided and coiled up on the head, serpent-like, because of the heat, the white neck surging naked above the collar. That small figure with the slender waist and bold curves—one he always watched, and remembered—it had to be Glint.

"The road down the hill," George thought. "It's famous as a lover's lane. In the summertime, people come and go all night long. The girl must have a date." He hesitated briefly, then

stole up behind her. But Glint was on high alert; the moment she sensed someone at her back, she whipped around, confronting him head-on.

George fell back a step. "You scared me!" he laughed.

Glint's hand fluttered at her chest while she caught her breath. "I'm the one who should be saying that! My goodness, what a lot of trouble you are! You could scare a ghost to death!" Squinting, she looked him up and down and snickered. "I know what you're up to."

George brazened it out with a smile. "Your Young Mistress asked me to come. Didn't she tell you?"

"If she asked you, it would be open and aboveboard, and of course she'd want you to spend the night. What are you up to, sneaking away like this?"

George reached over and touched a stray hair at the back of her head. "Your braid wasn't pulled tight. It's about to come apart." His hand moved down her neck, then down her spine.

Glint twisted away, shaking her head. She heaved a long sigh. "I'd scream," she said, "but the mistress, with that terrible temper of hers—she'd throw a fit, without minding the consequences; the young lady's reputation would be harmed..."

"Oh, I suppose you could bear it if the young lady's reputation got hurt—but your reputation, now that's another matter. That's what's stopping you. Noble, virtuous sister, whatever are you doing in the garden so very late at night?"

Instead of rising to the bait, Glint gave him a wolfish glare. And she reproached him sternly: "This time you've really gone too far. What's your grudge against the Liang people? Even after what you did to Glance, you won't stop—you've got to come after *her* as well? And she's not at all the same as Glance!"

"Ah, so you're going to avenge them? Waylay me in the dark, kill me, take all my money?"

"And how much money do you have anyway? As if I would touch it!" Glint turned and walked off.

George scurried after her. He grabbed her around the waist. "Dear sister, don't be angry. Here's a little something, please accept it."

With his free hand, he reached into his trousers pocket and pulled out a roll of banknotes, planning to stuff it into her pocket. He fumbled around in her white linen fitted top, searching for the inside pocket, but in his haste he could not find it.

Glint slapped his hand sharply. She scolded: "Forget it! Do you really think I want your bribe?"

George now tried in earnest to pull away from her, but in the confusion he couldn't—Glint's fitted top was too tight. After several moments' struggle, he finally managed to wrest his hand free.

"I'm so very sorry," Glint remarked snippily as she did up the fastening of her top. "We servants aren't like you ladies and gentlemen; we haven't got so much leisure for lolling about in the open air, savoring the moonlight." She headed toward the house.

George followed close behind her, and while she was opening the side door with her key he came up behind, resting his face on the nape of her neck. Unwilling to call out, for fear of waking the household, Glint gnashed her teeth; she struck backward with her right foot, kicking George's knee as hard as she could. He cried out once, then stifled his voice. Again Glint struck, her left foot kicking him squarely in the left knee. George let go of her, and she walked through the door. He went in too, watching her sway gracefully up the stairs. There in the light of the hall lamp, he took out a handkerchief and, with a frown, dusted the black spots off his knees. Then he closed the door and followed Glint up the stairs.

In another corner of the house, Weilong lay curled on her bed in the heavy darkness, no lamp lit. She lay sleeping, motionless, but her body seemed to be in a car on the highway,

with a soft summer breeze tapping rhythmically on her cheeks. But it wasn't a summer breeze, it was George's kisses. Weilong lay like this longer than she could tell, then sat up abruptly. She put on slippers and a dressing gown and went out onto the little balcony. The moon had already set, but she had been dipped in moonlight, steeped in moonlight, till her whole body was transparent. She leaned back against the louvered door: had the balcony been a black lacquer tea tray, she would have been the inlaid flower.

She was surprised to find her mind so clear—never before had she been so completely awake. Now, as she probed her feelings, she saw why she felt such stubborn love for George. This abject infatuation of hers had been inspired by his very real charm, of course; but in the end she loved him simply because he did not love her. George had learned from experience, perhaps, this secret way to conquer women's unreasoning hearts. He'd said many tender things, but never that he loved her. And yet now she knew that George *did* love her. There were, of course, some differences between his love and hers—and of course his love had lasted only a moment. But her self-respect had sunk so low that she was easily satisfied. Tonight, George had loved her. The memory of this little happiness was all hers; no one could take it away. Madame Liang, Situ Xie, and the rest of that tiger-eyed crowd—they could do what they liked. She had a new kind of security, a new sense of power and freedom. She was grateful that George hadn't married her. She'd heard about the man who went on an excursion to Mount Lu, and came back with half a dozen clay jugs: the jugs were filled with the mountain's world-famous white clouds, which he was going to release one after another to ornament his garden. People who marry for love are as foolish as the man with the cloud-filled jars! George was right, George was always right. She leaned against the railing, and like George, she buried her face in the crook of her elbow. Again it came—that

feeling of tingling ice-cold happiness, like golden bells ringing all over her body, the feeling she had when he clasped her shoulders tightly. Wanting to hug something herself, she gave a little whistle, and a white poodle came bounding out of the room wagging its tail. Murmuring softly, Weilong hugged the dog.

It was about four o'clock. The sky had begun to grow pale, but it was still full of stars, like a sheet of blue-green writing paper dusted with gold. Along the mountain face, the insects had fallen silent. There was a noiseless hush in the air. Suddenly, she heard footsteps—someone below walking toward the balcony. What a devoted gardener, Weilong thought. It's not even daybreak, and here he is already. Her heart was light and merry, playful like a little child's, and she pointed to the person in the distance, and whispered teasingly in the dog's ear: "Who do you think that is? Now just who do you think that is?" The dog began to bark.

Weilong looked more closely, and her heart started to pound—why did the gardener have such a monstrously swollen shape? Daybreak comes quickly in the tropics, and when the sky grew bright, the hazy oversize shadow resolved into two people walking together, wrapped in an embrace so close that they seemed to be one. When they heard the dog barking, they looked up and saw Weilong. There was no way for them to hide—right away she saw that it was George and Glint. Weilong had been holding the dog's lower jaw; now her grip tightened to a choke. The dog writhed furiously in her arms, then wriggled free and jumped down, yelping as it ran back into the room.

Weilong ran, stumbling, after the dog. Once she was in the room she stood stock-still; her arms hung stiffly at her sides. She stood there for a while, then fell onto the bed, arms still locked to her sides; she'd fallen flat on her face, but she didn't feel anything. She lay like that, face pressed downward, mo-

tionless, for the rest of the night. Gradually the sheet under her face grew damp. Icy tears soaked in under her shoulders.

The next day, when she got up, she was so cold that her whole body ached and her head felt swollen. The clock in her room had stopped, but the sunshine outside was bright and yellow—she couldn't tell if it was morning or afternoon. She sat on the edge of her bed for a long time. Then she stood up and went to look for Glint.

Glint was in the downstairs washroom rinsing out some things. She had plastered an entire wall with handkerchiefs—apple green, amber yellow, smoky blue, peach red, bamboo green—square upon square, some lined up neatly, others askew. The effect was almost painterly. Then she saw Weilong in the mirror, and her face froze. She tried to muster a smile, but Weilong pulled a sopping towel out of the sink and slapped her with it: one slashing sweep, right in the face, drenching her from head to foot. Glint cried out and turned away, raising her hands in defense, and the towel struck her hands as well. The towel was thick and sodden, so heavy it made Weilong's arm ache. She wrung it out with both hands, then slapped away furiously; Glint dodged the blows without making any effort to argue, apologize, or retaliate. Even so, there was a considerable noise in the washroom, and when the junior maids came running in, they were stopped dead in their tracks, unable to figure out what was going on.

Two of them grew restive; they huddled together and muttered, "A legitimate master doesn't trample on us like this—where did this Miss come from, that she has such a temper! And Glint, you hardly ever give in to others—what's wrong with you today?"

Glint sighed. "Leave her alone! She's the one to be sorry for!"

Her words pierced Weilong to the heart. She walloped Glint as hard as she could. Then, dropping the towel, she collapsed;

sitting on the edge of the bathtub, she buried her face in her hands and burst into tears.

By then, the commotion had reached Madame Liang's ears. When Madame Liang arrived at the scene, Glint was kneeling on the tiled floor mopping up the puddles. As she mopped, water dripped from her own clothes. "What's going on?" Madame Liang demanded. Glint made no reply. Weilong was questioned, but wouldn't say a word. All the junior maids who'd been watching said they didn't know why Miss was so angry. Holding her questions for the moment, Madame Liang ordered a maid to take Weilong upstairs to rest. Then she called Glint into her private room for a detailed examination.

There was no disguising the situation: Glint had to explain, in broken sentences, how Miss had made a date with George, and then she herself, upon hearing voices in Miss's bedroom, had grown suspicious. She hadn't dared to report it, for fear of causing a scene. Instead, she'd kept watch in the garden, planning to catch George as he was leaving and get to the bottom of things. But then Miss had found out, and not taking kindly to the thought of having tabs kept on her, she'd burst out in a rage against Glint.

Madame Liang listened and nodded, without saying a word; she had by now figured out the essentials of the true situation. After sending Glint away, she sat thinking, her anger growing till her face turned purple. She had been picking her teeth with a toothpick, and now she bit down so that it snapped. Grunting, she spat the end of the toothpick out. This George Qiao was an evil star in her astral house, forever playing tricks on her. She'd tried using Glance to hook him, but he'd merely swallowed the bait and gone on swimming about, free as he pleased. After that, she'd decided to take a loss, and to ignore him. But she couldn't keep Glance, not after all the ruckus he'd kicked up, and when Glance left it was like losing both of her hands. So she'd fired up the cooking pot again, and devoted all

her energies to training Weilong. Putting her whole heart into the effort, she'd brought the girl along till she showed some promise. Weilong was just now making her debut, she was ten times more valuable than before, and now George turned up, once again, to feast on the fruits of others' toil. Even this was not enough; he'd casually taken Glint too. Madame Liang had lost a queen and a pawn. All her best personnel has been netted by this fellow—how could she not be angry?

Still, Madame Liang knew enough not to lose sight of what really mattered. She pondered for a while and then, her rage in check, proceeded with a slow, measured grace to Weilong's room. Weilong was lying with her face to the wall, and Madame Liang sat down on the edge of the bed. After a moment's silence, she said in a faltering tone, "Weilong, how can you do this to me?" She dabbed her eyes with a handkerchief. Weilong was silent. "How do you expect me to explain things to your father?" said Madame Liang. "While you're living here with me, I'm responsible for your behavior. It seems I've been too trusting. I've been negligent, and now this has happened!" She sighed. "You certainly have flouted my authority!"

Weilong knew that she was caught, and she let her aunt have her say. Her regrets were past repair. She steadied herself and gave a simple, straightforward reply: "My mistakes aren't your fault. I'll go back to Shanghai. If there's gossip, I'll take the blame myself. Of course I'm not going to involve you in this."

Madame Liang stroked her chin. "You say you'll go back, but this isn't the time to go back. Of course, I don't mean to detain you. I would be very happy, for my own sake, to send you back to your father; then I'd be free of this burden, and all these worries. But you know how people talk, and it's all too likely that before you even reached home, rumors would have come to your father's ears. You know what a terrible temper he has. If you go back now, that will only prove what people are

saying. Your health has always been weak—how can you bear your father's constant displeasure, day after day?"

Weilong was silent. Madame Liang sighed. "Blame this, blame that—but in the end the blame's on you because of the scene you made in front of the servants. You're in a fix, and you've done it to yourself! Here you are all grown up, but you behave like a child, pay no attention to your own reputation—how are you going to face others now?"

Weilong blushed, before smiling bitterly. "Aunt will have to forgive me," she said. "I'm still young and reckless. When I've reached Aunt's age, then maybe, just maybe, I'll know how to fall in love with grace and style!"

Madame Liang responded with a sarcastic laugh. "If, at my age, you still have the opportunity to fall in love, that will be surprising indeed. You must have noticed that the average woman from the middle class and below, once she's past thirty or forty is nothing but an old crone. I have a nice place. I look after myself. Otherwise, I'd have turned old a long time ago. But you—you don't protect your own reputation. You've ruined your own prospects—an upper-class match will be out of reach, and there's no telling where you'll end up!"

These were words to hurt the ears and pain the heart. Weilong covered her face with her hands, just as if her powdery white, inky black good looks had already been leached away by the years that stream by like water.

Madame Liang twisted around, propping her elbow on Weilong's pillow. "For a woman, there's nothing more important than her reputation," she said in a low voice. "When I use the word 'reputation,' I mean something a bit different from a fusty old scholar's idea. These days, people who are even a little bit modern don't care that much about chastity. When a young lady goes out and mixes at banquets and parties, there's bound to be a certain amount of gossip. That kind of talk, the more it spreads, the more it stirs up interest, the more it increases your

prestige. It certainly won't harm your future. The one thing that must be avoided at all costs is this: to love someone who doesn't love you, or who loves you and drops you. A woman's bones can't withstand a fall like that!

"In a situation like the one today, people who know the inside story will say that you run off and do whatever pops into your head, just like a child. But if outsiders come to hear of it, their poisonous tongues will say you scrapped with a maid over George Qiao. Now that would be unpleasant, wouldn't it?"

Weilong sighed heavily. "Well, I can't do anything about it. Anyway, I'm going back. I don't want to see Hong Kong ever again!"

Madame Liang furrowed her brow. "The same old tune! You keep saying you'll go back to Shanghai, as if going home would solve everything. It's not that simple. Of course you can do as like—you have your freedom! Still I'm worried about you; your father won't make life easy for you at home. This is no time for sulking. If you want to get your strength back, you have to make George Qiao submit. Once he's surrendered completely, then you can drop him—or keep him around for amusement's sake, that would show true skill! If you run away now, you'll be making it too easy for him!"

Weilong smiled wanly. "Aunt, George and I are finished."

"You think there's no hope left? That's because, from the very beginning, your attitude toward him has been all wrong. You're too straightforward. He's sure there's no one in your heart but him, so he's not serious and doesn't bother to take you seriously either. You should arrange to spend more time with other people; that way he'll be on edge all the time. He doesn't think much of you, but there are plenty of others who do—"

Weilong could see that she was working her way, in round-about fashion, to the same old appeal on Situ Xie's behalf. She struggled to suppress a little burst of laughter. "Fool that I am,"

she thought, "I'm not yet such a fool as that." If, after falling into George's trap, she now turned around and fell into Situ Xie's, was that likely to make George respect her? She sat up straight, feet bare on the floor, with her head bowed. Smoothing her tangled hair with both hands, she slowly pushed it back from her brows. "Thank you, Aunt, for thinking things through so carefully for me. But I still think I should go back."

Madame Liang sat up straight also. "You're quite sure then?"

Weilong concurred, her voice low.

Madame Liang stood up and firmly laid her two hands on Weilong's shoulders. She looked deeply into her eyes. "When you came you were one kind of person. Now you are another kind of person. You have changed and your home must change along with you. You can try to go back to your previous life, but you might not be able to."

"I know I've changed. I didn't much like myself before, and now I like myself even less. I'm going back because I want to be a new person."

Upon hearing this, Madame Liang fell silent for a while. Then, bending from the waist, she solemnly kissed Weilong on the forehead and left the room. The gesture, with all its Catholic-style theatrics, appeared to have no effect on Weilong. She thrust both hands up into her hair again, and stared into space. Her face bore the trace of a smile, but her eyes were dead.

As soon as she'd left the room, Madame Liang telephoned George and told him they had something important to discuss. George knew that he'd been found out and, as per usual, gave lots of reasons why he couldn't come. So Madame Liang scared him: "Weilong is in tears and wants to go back to Shanghai, but her parents are sure to take this up. Her family in Shanghai will be hiring a lawyer to speak to you, and then it will be a big case! Your father, once he loses his temper, will clamp down hard on you. And since Weilong met you at my place, if

this gets out, it's not going to help my reputation either, which is why I've been trying to reach you—to see if there's some solution. Who would have guessed you'd take it so calmly? The emperor does not worry—and that's what worries his advisers!"

George came, but he was smiling. "I'm no expert on the Chinese, but on this aspect of Chinese custom and lore, I've done my homework. If Weilong's family wants to talk with me, it'll only be to pressure me to marry her! Making this a public matter is the last thing they'd want."

Madame Liang stared him in the eye. "Marry her! Are you willing to marry her?"

"Weilong has her points."

"Answer me honestly. You can't marry her."

"Since you know, why are you asking? I don't have the right to marry as I please. I don't have any money and I'm used to the good life. Nature apparently intended me to be an imperial son-in-law."

Madame Liang stabbed him with her finger. "I always knew you for a money-loving materialist!" she scolded.

The two of them talked over the problem of getting Weilong to change her mind. By now, George realized that the threat of legal action had been made up by Madame Liang. His first step, in order to defuse the situation, was to render a full account of his behavior, and bare his heart to her. They talked through the night, and Madame Liang finally got an answer that satisfied her.

The next day, George's calls to Weilong rang the phone off the hook, and a steady stream of bouquets arrived for her, each with a note tucked inside. Weilong hurried down the hillside to the city to ask about the boat schedule and bought a ticket that same day. Madame Liang's attitude was one of strict noninterference, hearing nothing, asking nothing. Weilong hadn't taken the car—instead she'd caught a bus at the bottom of the hill—

and when she was on her way back up again, rain started coming down in buckets. The water swept smoothly down the steep asphalt road, and Weilong wrung out her dress as she walked, but no sooner had she wrung it out, than it was drenched again. For the past two days she'd been on the edge of catching a cold; now she was chilled through and through. Once she got home she fell ill, first the flu and then pneumonia.

Her temperature ran high, and she was feverishly anxious to return home. When she was sick at home, the room wasn't crowded with flowers from friends, the way this one was, but there was something more beautiful than flowers: a glass globe on her father's desk that he used as a paperweight—it would be given to her to hold, to cool her burning hands. There were tiny red, blue, and purple flowers all through the ball, neatly arranged in a simple pattern. It was very heavy in her hand. Thinking of it reminded her of everything in her life that seemed solid, substantial, reliable—her home; the black iron bed that she shared with her sister; the quilt on the bed, made of coarse red-and-white cloth; the old-fashioned boxwood dressing table; the darling little peach-shaped ceramic jar that shone red in the sunlight and was filled with talcum powder; the fashion-girl calendar tacked up on the wall, the girl's arms covered with phone numbers her mother had scribbled in a thick pencil script, numbers for the tailor, the employment agency, the soy-milk vender, and two different aunts. Twisting her hands in the sheets, Weilong thought about nothing but going home, going home, going home, but the more she wanted to go, the more her illness lingered. By the time her condition had started to improve, Hong Kong's incessantly rainy summer was over; it was fall, bracing and bleak.

Weilong was smitten with doubt—could she have fallen ill on purpose? Was she unconsciously unwilling to go home, seeking to delay her return? It was easy enough to say that she'd go back, become a new person, start a new life, and so

on; but she no longer was the simple girl she'd once been. Go to school, then go out and get a job: perhaps this wasn't the best path for someone like her—pretty, but without much ability. Of course she'd have to get married. A new life meant a new man. A new man? She'd lost all her self-confidence because of George; she couldn't cope with other people now. The minute George had stopped loving her, she was in his power. She knew very well that he was only an ordinary playboy, that there was nothing especially terrifying about him—the terrifying thing was the passion, raging and wild beyond words, that he inspired in her.

She lay on her bed looking at the sky through the window. The afternoon sun shone brilliantly, the sky a cold metallic white, cutting the eyes like a knife. The air grew chilly, and a bird flew toward the mountaintop. High in the white sky, the dark bird gave a mournful cry, as if cut by the blade of the knife; then it dropped down over the mountain.

Weilong closed her eyes. Ah, George! One day he would need her, but by then she'd have lived in the narrow confines of some other household for too long. She'd have adapted to that place, her new flesh enmeshed in the fence around her life—no way to pull it free. If, at that point, George wanted her back, it would be too late.

Suddenly, she decided not to leave—no matter what, she would not leave. Then she went on changing her mind every five minutes: leave, don't leave, leave, don't leave. Lying on her bed, she rolled back and forth between the two extremes, her heart frying in hot oil. Seeking relief from the pain, she rushed off, the moment she was well enough to leave the house, and booked her passage. Later, as she was returning home, with darkness falling and the wind shuffling through the dwarf bamboos, the air grew sharp with cold. The sea beyond the bamboos, and the sky beyond the sea, were already gray and ocher; all along the road, in the gathering gloom, the ten-foot-high

ivorywood trees bore their red flowers, high and low, as big as bowls.

As Weilong walked, a car came from behind; it drove right up to her, then stopped. Weilong recognized George's car but did not turn her head; staring straight ahead, she increased her pace. George followed slowly in the car, down a long stretch of road. Weilong had only just recovered from her illness and was still a little weak; soon she was sweating with the effort and had to stop and rest. The car also stopped. Weilong guessed that George wanted a chance to clear everything up, but when he didn't say a word, she glanced over. One of his arms was resting across the top of the steering wheel, and he was slumped against it, motionless. Weilong saw him, and pain tugged at her heart. Tears flowed down her face as she began to walk faster. This time George did not follow. At the next bend in the road, she turned back to look: his car was still there. Night had fallen, and the whole world looked like a gray Christmas card, everything shadowy and vague except the ivorywoods' enormous red flowers—simple, primitive, as big as bowls, as big as buckets.

When she got back to the house, Weilong asked where she could find Madame Liang, and was directed to the small study. She went straight there. The study was lit by a single small aquamarine desk lamp. Weilong sat at a distance from her aunt, in a yellow chair, and neither spoke for a long while. The room was full of the strong, almond-extract scent of Cutex. Madame Liang had just finished painting her nails and was stiffly holding her fingers out to dry. Her snow-white hands looked as if they'd been tortured in a finger clamp, the smashed fingertips dripping blood.

"Aunt," Weilong slowly asked, not looking at Madame Liang, "is George's not marrying due to financial reasons?"

"It's not that he doesn't have enough money to get married. The Qiao family isn't so poor that they can't afford to support a daughter-in-law. George's problem is that he's proud and he's

set his sights higher; he wants his own place after he's married, since that would be more comfortable. Besides, the Qiao family is extremely complicated, and any daughter-in-law has a rough time of it there. If his wife had money, the two of them could avoid all sorts of provocations, all those ugly words and ugly faces."

"Then he wants to marry a young lady with a big dowry."

Madame Liang said nothing.

Weilong hung her head and continued in a tiny voice. "I don't have any money, but . . . I can earn money."

Madame Liang looked at her quizzically, biting her lips and smiling slightly.

Weilong's face went red. She continued: "Why can't I earn money? I didn't say anything to Situ Xie and he gave me that bracelet."

Laughter rose in Madame Liang's throat, and as she laughed she pointed a bloodred finger at Weilong, unable, for a moment, to get a word out. Finally she said, "Look at this child, fancy her remembering Situ Xie at this point! He was once very kind to you, but you were so vehement in your refusal, as if a diamond bracelet could bite you. If I hadn't acted quickly he probably would have been quite offended. And now you want to ask him for something. With a young lady so apt to balk at anything big, he won't know what to give—candy, maybe, or roses!"

Weilong hung her head. She sat in the dark, saying nothing.

"You shouldn't think that just because a person is reasonably good-looking, knows how to make chitchat and sing a few English songs, that people are going to come running to give her stacks and stacks of money. Speaking as a member of the family, and without mincing my words, I'd say you are too bashful, too weak, and too bad-tempered; you're indecisive, and you get too emotionally involved—you're not at all suited to this sort of thing."

Weilong let out a long, slow sigh. "Give me a chance to learn!"

"You do have a lot to learn, that's for sure! Well, why not give it a try."

And Weilong did try. She gave it her best effort, and with Madame Liang at her side to offer expert advice, the results were nothing short of excellent. At Christmastime, there was an item in the *South China Morning Post* announcing the engagement of George Qiao and Ge Weilong. On the day of the formal engagement, Situ Xie sent a very impressive gift, and even George Qiao's father, Sir Cheng Qiao, gave Weilong a wristwatch of white gold inlaid with diamonds. When Weilong went to offer her thanks in person, the old man was so pleased that he bought her a mink stole. Then, because he was afraid of displeasing Madame Liang, he bought her an ermine stole.

George was still apprehensive about the marriage, but Madame Liang gave him a talking to. "You should make the best of things! You want to marry a rich girl, but you've set your sights too high—if she's not high enough on the social register, you turn up your nose. A girl from a really rich family is used to getting her way, not nearly so easy to bring around as Weilong. You'd have to put up with all sorts of restrictions. The reason you want money is to have a good time, and if you're not having a good time, what's the point of the money? Weilong's earnings will decline sharply, of course, seven or eight years from now. When she can't bring in enough to pay the bills, get a divorce. Obtaining a divorce, in the British legal system, is quite difficult; the only legal grounds are adultery. How hard will it be to find evidence of that?"

After this talk, George was perfectly ready to go along. The wedding was announced right away. It was held at the Hong Kong Hotel, and was a great success.

Hong Kong doesn't have many apartments, and renting a whole house for just two people seemed too expensive. Sharing

a house didn't appeal either, since it would mean a loss of privacy. Madame Liang couldn't do without Weilong just then, so she got George to move in with his wife's family, and gave the couple three rooms on the lower floor. It was just like having an apartment of their own.

From then on, it was as if Weilong had been sold to Madame Liang and George Qiao. She was busy all day long, getting money for George Qiao and people for Madame Liang. And sometimes she was happy—for instance, when she and George went to Wanchai on Chinese New Year's Eve, just the two of them, mingling with the crowds.

Wanchai isn't in the center of Hong Kong; in fact, it's quite far away from the city, and filled with low-class amusements. However once a year there's a New Year's market, not unlike the temple festivals in northern China. When the market opens, people flood in, and lots of fashionable people like to join in the throng and buy a few trinkets. Weilong spotted a jadeite potted plum in a stall that sold curios and antiques, and George squeezed forward to haggle with the vendor. The vendor squatted on top of a many-tiered stack of display shelves. He wore a tight-fitting padded jacket made of coarse blue cotton sackcloth, trousers of the same cloth, and a woolen hat pushed back from his brow. A gas lamp was hanging in the center of the street, and its greenish glare fell directly on his sharp Cantonese features, bringing out the prominences, deepening the ravines, darkening the hollows. He rested one hand on his knee and gestured with the other, but after a lot of haggling, he still shook his head.

Weilong pulled George away. "Come on, let's go!"

Pushed back and forth by the crowd, she had a strange sensation. The sky overhead was a dark purple-blue, and the sea at the end of the winter sky was purple-blue too, but here in the bay was a place like this, a place teeming with people and lanterns and dazzling goods—blue ceramic double-handled

flowerpots, rolls and rolls of scallion-green velvet brushed with gold, cellophane bags of Balinese Shrimp Crisps, amber-colored durian cakes from the tropics, Buddha-bead bracelets with their big red tassels, light yellow sachets, little crosses made of dark silver, coolie hats—and stretching out beyond these lights and people and market goods, the clear desolation of sea and sky; endless emptiness, endless terror. Her future was like that—it didn't bear thinking about; if she did think, it was only endless terror. She had no lasting arrangement for her life. Her fearful, cringing heart could find a makeshift sort of rest only in little odds and ends, like these spread out before her.

Dirty as the place was, there were still moments of wild pleasure. Firecrackers flew headlong and at random up and down the street, and she and George hunched over as they walked, dodging the little green-and-red comets.

"Oh!" George suddenly cried out. "You're on fire!"

"There you go, tricking me again!" said Weilong, twisting her head around to check the back of her dress.

"When have I ever tricked you! Quick, kneel down. Let me stamp it out."

Weilong knelt on the ground; George stamped on her dress, dirty shoes and all, and put out the fire that was burning at the hem. Her cotton-lined dress, made of violet satin that was embroidered with small silver "longevity" characters, had a hole burned through. They laughed, and went on walking.

After a moment, George said, "It's true, Weilong, I love to tell a lie, but I've never lied to you. Even I don't quite understand it."

"Still thinking of that?"

George insisted: "I've never lied to you, have I?"

Weilong sighed. "Never. You know very well that a tiny little lie could make me very happy, but you refuse. You don't want to be bothered."

"You don't need me to lie to you. You lead yourself on, all by yourself. Someday you'll have to admit that I'm despicable. When that happens, you'll regret having sacrificed so much for me. Who knows—maybe you'll be so enraged you'll murder me! It scares me, I tell you!"

"I love you, so I'm not going to blame you for anything."

"That's all very well, but our current division of rights and duties really is unfair."

Eyebrows raised, Weilong smiled slightly. "Fair? There's no such thing as 'fair' in relationships between people. But I have to ask, what's suddenly pricking your conscience today?"

"Because I can see how much you're enjoying the New Year, just like a child."

"I look happy, and you have to say something awful so I won't be—is that it?"

The two of them walked along examining the items on display. Every possible sort of thing was there, but pride of place went to the human goods. A group of girls was standing in the severe light of a gas lamp; the intense chiaroscuro turned their noses light blue and the sides of their faces green, while the rouge that was slathered over their cheeks looked purple. One girl was very young, thirteen or fourteen at most. Her skinny little body was dressed up Western-style, with a short, dark-violet serge coat over a bright red skirt of pleated silk. The cold made her shiver so hard that her smile rippled unevenly across her face like a reflection in water; her lower lip was bitten through by her chattering teeth. When a drunken English sailor came up to her from behind and laid a hand on her shoulder, she twisted her head around and shot him a flirtatious glance—and her eyes were truly luscious, with drooping corners that swept out to the hairline. It was a pity though that she had a bright pink chilblain on her ear. She clasped the sailor's arm with her two hands and leaned her head against him; pressed tight, they walked a few steps, and then another

sailor arrived—two big, tall men, squeezing in on her from both sides. Her head only reached their elbows.

Along came a gang of sailors, drunk and throwing firecrackers in every direction. When they saw Weilong, they started to aim at her, and the firecrackers raced like meteors toward the moon. Weilong was so scared she turned and ran. George found their car, and pushed her toward it; they got in, started the engine, and left Wanchai.

"Those drunken mudfish," George said with a smile. "What do they take you for?"

"But how am I any different from those girls?"

Steering with one hand, George reached out with the other to cover her mouth. "Talk such nonsense again and—"

"Yes, yes! I was wrong, I admit it," Weilong apologized. "How could there not be any difference between us? They don't have a choice—I do it willingly!"

The car passed through Wanchai. The sharp pop-pop of the firecrackers faded behind them, and the red traffic lights chased each other across the windshield, then slipped into darkness. The car drove through the heavy blackness of the city streets. George hadn't looked—it was too dark to see—but he knew she must be crying. With his free hand he pulled out a cigarette case and lighter. Cigarette dangling from his lips, he struck a light. On that bitter winter's night, the flame flashed before his mouth like an orange blossom. The blossom bloomed, then died. The cold and the dark returned.

Here is the end of this Hong Kong story. Weilong's brazier of incense will soon go out too.

JASMINE TEA