



Can a  
concubine  
escape  
her past?

*The  
Painter of Shanghai*

JENNIFER CODY EPSTEIN

The Painter of Shanghai  
by  
Jennifer Cody Epstein

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*Part* ONE


*The* ATELIER

*Though a living cannot be made at art, art makes life worth living. It makes starving, living. It makes worry, it makes trouble, it makes a life that would be barren of everything—living. It brings life to life.*

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JOHN SLOAN

## *Montparnasse, 1957*



WHEN THE SESSION IS OVER, Yuliang retreats to the chipped sink in the atelier's corner. Of her two models, one leaves immediately. The other, Leanne, lingers a little, straightening her slip and shimmying her garters back into place high on her thighs. As she hooks the straps to her stockings, she leans over Yuliang's painting and the still-damp fruits of the past five hours: a tree, a lake. Herself kneeling by another nude.

Wiping her spattered palms on her painting smock, Yuliang observes Leanne observing the girl she has just been made into. She did well today, Yuliang decides. New models often need extra time to undress, to settle into their nudity before strangers. But Leanne surprised her, stepping out of her Orlon shift and underwear as blithely as though she'd undressed publicly all her life. She didn't fuss over her flesh; didn't apologize for or try to hide the pimple on her left thigh. But at each break in the five-hour session she crossed the room and, still unabashedly naked, silently inspected Yuliang's progress.

Yuliang, who usually works through her model's rest times, found these attentions disconcerting. She didn't stop working. But she worked differently than she'd planned, reluctant to retouch the girl's painted flesh under her real-life gaze. She worked on other things—her willow tree, the rumpled blanket—all the while inhaling her observer's scent: her cheap perfume, her old smokes, a sour-sweet hint of sweat. Something clean and cloverlike too, like sun-dried sheets. Leanne has said that her father runs a laundry shop near the Gare de Lyon.

Water rushes from the faucet, rust-flecked. Yuliang waits, fingertips pressing the soap-filmed chill of the tap. When the stream runs pure, she pushes her brushes beneath it. Colors wash into their neutralizing counterparts: ultramarine into cadmium into blue into yellow ocher, the brilliant shades blending into a mud-toned flow that disappears down the drain.

She is starting on her hands when Leanne sneezes, a breathy explosion so high-pitched it's almost sweet.

"*Pardon*," Leanne says.

"*Non, non*," says Yuliang. "I'm sorry it's so cold in here." She says it in French; Leanne's Chinese is, she's found, limited.

"The cat, perhaps. Sometimes they make my nose itch." The girl presses a handkerchief against her upper lip.

"Ah." Yuliang turns back to her brushes, the cloth momentarily etched in her mind's eye: the starry whiteness, the sheen endowed by hot iron and starch. Leanne's family, from Guangxi originally, ran one of Hanoi's Chinese banks until '54. Leanne hasn't offered more than this; Yuliang assumes the Communists took the bank when they took the rest of the north. *Does she miss it?* she wonders.

For she herself certainly misses China—despite everything. "Do you consider going home?" a reporter asked her at her last exhibition. "*Naturellement, parfois*," she replied, although in truth she "considers" it all the time. The truth is, "home" feels less like a place now than an inner part of her, an organ cancerously riddled with longing. The hurt recedes when she's painting. But the ache of it, of all she's

lost—that never leaves. Places and people still appear in an eyeblink, so tremblingly real she could touch them. The Parisian grace of Fozhou Road, its elm-lined streets and Tudor mansions. A Shanghai marketplace, its air saturated with dialects and the fierce smell of seared meat. Women washing food and dishes on a riverbank, nursing their howling red babies. The damp clatter of Yangtze commerce, its endlessly inventive curses.

She shuts her eyes. In an instant she is back on the steamship landing, Zanhua's arms stiff and desperate around her, that ridiculous cane poking right into her shoulder blade. It seemed so clear to her then—back in 1937—that Chiang Kai-shek's so-called New Life was already half dead. Chaipei lay in charred ruins. Hirohito's soldiers roamed Shanghai like wolves circling before another attack. But the true danger came from Yuliang's own countrymen, Chiang's Blue Shirts and Green Gang thugs—the Generalissimo's own oppressive little palette. Everyone knew at that point that Yuliang was a marked target—if not her body, then certainly her work. And yet Zanhua still begged her to reconsider. *You can stay*, he'd insisted. *It's not too late. Things here are on the verge of change. I feel it.* Even now—is it really twenty full years later?—Yuliang all but hears his voice. And for just an instant, doubt wells. *Should she have stayed?*

*Don't be ridiculous.* Opening her eyes, Yuliang shuts off the emotion as ruthlessly as she twists shut the tap. Her work is her life. She is lonely here, yes. But she has her painting, her cats. Her clients and admirers. Her small circle of intimates. Each one would confirm that her decision was the right one. Her friend Junbi said as much the other day, studying Yuliang's latest self-portrait: "There's something new in this one."

"You mean the fact that I've shown myself smoking, gambling, and drinking?" Yuliang didn't mention the nudity. Of course, that's not new.

"That's not it." Junbi thought for a moment, her soft brow furrowed. "Ah! I see it now. You are smiling. You actually look happy."

"Oh, really." But staring at herself—the flushed face, the round

contours, the unusually relaxed stance, Yuliang had to admit she saw it too: she looked, at last, like a woman enjoying her life.

Her reverie is interrupted by the bells of Chapelle des Auxiliatrices. She looks at her watch, then up at Leanne, still standing in stocking feet by the table. Has the girl really been here for an entire half-hour?

As though hearing Yuliang's unspoken groan, Leanne steps back from the painting. She is chewing her lower lip.

"Is something wrong?" Yuliang asks her.

"My legs. You've made them—how do I put it? Rather . . . fat."

*Ah-ha.* So that's what she's been mooning around for. "I apologize," Yuliang says curtly. And yet even as she says it, she sees in the girl's face that it isn't that, isn't vanity after all. It is simply a question. *Why? Why did you do it this way?*

It is not Yuliang's habit to explain her art. Not to critics. Certainly not to models. Nevertheless, she finds herself stepping to the girl's side. "*Alors,*" she says, and with her brush handle traces over the painting's surface. Three lines: from Leanne's thigh to the tip of her head; from her head to Xiahe's buttocks; finally, along Xiahe's outstretched leg to the toe that nestles against Leanne's bare knee. "They are not your legs alone. They're legs for the compositional structure. A triangle. See? If I make them too thin, it throws off the balance. Even the lines are thick. You know some calligraphy?" And when the girl shakes her head: "Well, if you did, you'd recognize the stroke. It's very similar to those used in scrolls."

Leanne drops her gaze to the floor. She twists a foot into a patent-leather pump. Yuliang follows the movement musingly. Then she does the one thing she absolutely should not do at this instant: she looks back at her picture.

What she sees sinks her spirits: a hundred flaws bloom. Brushstrokes that seemed precise a half-hour ago shapeshift into gaping mistakes. The willow tree is flaccid. Leanne's hair—painted, she had thought, so as to create a sense of translucence—now simply appears to be stringy. And, yes, no doubt about it—the girl's legs are too thick.

Defeated, she leans against the table. *I'm a farce*, she thinks. *Even after all these years . . .*

"Madame. Are you all right?"

With her shoes on, Leanne stands a good seven centimeters above her. For a moment there's an urge to throw her arms around the white neck, to confess. To weep. But then Leanne touches her arm, and Yuliang stiffens as she always does when touched without permission. "We said five francs, correct?" She picks up her purse, snaps it open, and offers the bills stiffly. Leanne blinks.

"Thank you," she says, and takes the fee. There's an uncomfortable pause. "I like your purse," she adds.

Yuliang smiles coolly. The girl turns to pick up her salmon swing coat. "Tomorrow at eleven again?"

"Tomorrow we rest." Yuliang says, although in fact she's only just made this decision. She will take a day alone. To repair the damage. "Come Friday at four." And when Leanne hesitates, "Friday is no good?"

"No, it's fine. I finish with my father at three."

"Good." Yuliang reseats herself. It is late. What she wants is to smoke, to lose herself in the soothing, circular work of ink-grinding. But she has a student coming at six, one of the boys from the Beaux Arts. A baby, but very handsome: a liquid-eyed Italian. He indulges her by letting her attempt to instruct him in his native language—although these days Yuliang's Italian surely isn't much better than his Chinese.

She fumbles for her Gitanes, awaiting the woolly rustle of Leanne's coat, the calm *click* of the door closing. When neither comes she glances at the small mirror she's hung opposite the door (less to deflect spirits than to detect their more annoying mortal counterparts). The mirror reveals Leanne, still at the threshold, one gloved hand on the knob.

"My dear," Yuliang says, "I have *work*."

"I'm sorry. I just . . ." The girl's voice is deferential but assured. She seems to know Yuliang will hear her out. Sighing, Yuliang sits back and waits, her eyes on the building across the street.

“Since we met last week,” Leanne begins quietly, “I’ve been feeling like it was more than . . . coincidence. The way you found me.”

“You mean destiny.”

Yuliang says it wryly enough that the girl looks at her quickly. “Perhaps. Yes.”

*You have much to learn*, Yuliang thinks to herself. But what she says is, “I didn’t find *you*, my dear. I simply saw a pretty face.” Though what had stopped her, as Leanne emerged from a Quai de Bercy cake shop, her egg tart in hand and warm sweet smells uncoiling in her path, wasn’t so much the girl’s classic features—the wide red mouth, the sweeping brow. It was a sense that something elusive and yet brittle underscored them—an emotional veneer, left by sorrow or hardship.

“At the girls’ school back home,” Leanne is continuing (so Hanoi is still home), “we studied art. I loved it.” She takes a breath. “I suppose that part of me had always hoped that someday—”

“You want to paint,” Yuliang interjects.

Leanne colors. “I’ve wanted to. I just haven’t known where to start.” She plays with her jade bracelet, the one accessory she hasn’t removed today. “I can’t pay much. But I’ll model for free. I can help with washing, too.”

Her hope is raw enough to make Yuliang blanch. Tightening her lips, she turns back to the window. The tenement is a brick glow in evening lamplight. She watches a window brighten as a light within is switched on. A small silhouette—child? dog?—darkens the pane. Then vanishes.

It must seem so easy, just to shift positions. Cross the studio, pick up a brush. And *voilà*, another Valadon. Unsurprisingly, Leanne is not the first model to ask this of her. They have no idea, these girls, of the pain—real pain—involved. The truth is that Yuliang’s purse may be in vogue but her work certainly isn’t. People don’t want girls and flowers right now. They want splashes and gashes. Inkblot tests. Fingerpaints . . . What was it that dealer from the avenue Montaigne said? “Our clients want work that goes beyond the figurative. They

want”—and this with a straight face—“metaphorical multivalence. Humor. Puns on form. You understand?”

In fact, Yuliang did not. In fact, she still doesn't. The very thought of that term (she couldn't find it in any of her six dictionaries) makes her want to laugh. But she understands one thing: If *multivalence de metaphor* is what is selling, she certainly can't afford to offer lessons at a discount. Especially not to a beginner.

What she hears herself say as Leanne shrugs on her coat is, “You have drawings? Bring them next time.”

The girl's eyes widen. “Thank you, madame.”

“I haven't said yes yet,” Yuliang lies crisply, and turns away a second time. “Please don't let the cat out,” she adds to the mirror. “He's something of a Houdini.”

A muffled *thunk* as the cat is tossed to a chair. Then—at last!—the door shuts. The high heels tap away down the stairs.

Still unsettled for some reason, Yuliang pours herself a glass of Bordeaux. She pulls out a cigarette, lights it. *I'm still too soft*, she thinks, exhaling haze over her lake. *It's why I'm where I am: barely covering the cat food*. Lifting her enameled cup, she studies the painted phoenix that glowers (faded now, but still proud) from its side. Then she studies her own hand. The gold band on her heart finger is scratched and tarnished. A mesh of blue veins and wrinkles stretches from cuticles to wrist: age is tightening its net. When the cat lands in her lap and begins kneading her leg, small needles of discomfort prick through her thin skirt. The pain, like a winter draft, brings her back to herself. She drinks some more, strokes the cat's white back. “You're spoiled,” she reprimands it, in Chinese. “You have had a very easy life. Do you know that? Do you, Master Cat?”

He slits his eyes sleepily. She follows his slow gaze to the picture. “I really should just start over,” she tells him.

But strangely—and perhaps it is only the wine's impact—her painting seems more redeemable. The sky at least works. Leanne's apple-plump breasts are nice, too. And that sad, small smile that says nothing. Little Mona Lisa in Hebei. Yuliang thinks of the burnlike

wound she saw on the girl's back. A rash? A tryst? A battle with a masked attacker? She's curious about this French Chinese girl from Indochina. Perhaps that's why she agreed. If Leanne does end up joining her students (and she will, why deny it?), they'll have a session. They'll drink cheap *vin de table*, discuss what brought them here. Yuliang does it with all her new recruits. It seems only fair, since most come as much for the story as for the skill. What they want is a lusty fable: bordellos, brutish men, and, at the end, the magic brush that painted her escape, the way Liang's did in the old story. Yuliang doesn't give them that, of course. She paints around the dangerous parts of her past, ending up with a dozen versions that tell only what is most important. She's wise enough by now to know that history—especially her history—sells. And she needs the publicity. Having sworn off the dealers.

Outside, bells chime again. Just once: six-fifteen. A door slams; she hears the tread of Italian shoes on the stairwell. Yuliang looks longingly at her inkstone. Then she sighs. *I need the money*, she reminds herself.

Heaving herself to her feet, she checks her hair in the mirror, wipes an ultramarine paint fleck from her otherwise unpainted cheek. She thinks ahead to tomorrow, a day alone with her ladies and her lake. A light rain on the shutters further lifts her spirits. Yuliang loves painting in rain, loves how the rain makes the world feel close and safe. She'll grind new ink to thicken Leanne's hair, make grasstrokes glisten with the dawn. When it is done, she'll triumphantly place her name. In Chinese:

潘玉良

Pan-Yu-Liang

That the buyer, if she finds one, probably won't be able to read it means little. Yuliang doesn't sign for him. She signs for herself, to bind her work to her. To tattoo it with a message: she has won.



Part TWO

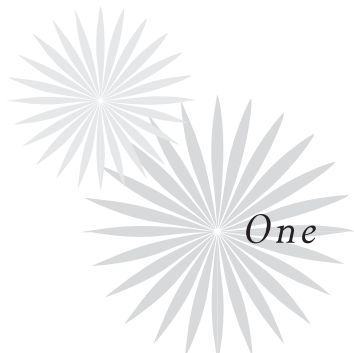
*The* JOURNEY

*My body is white; my fate, softly rounded  
Rising and sinking like mountains in streams.*

*Whatever way hands may shape me,  
At center my heart is red and true.*

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HO XUAN HUONG  
(AN EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY  
VIETNAMESE CONCUBINE)



## *Zhenjiang, 1913*

**A**T NOON SHE HEARS her uncle's voice, buoyant, backed by velvet rain-patter:

*Flute and drum keep time with the rover's song  
Amidst revel and feasting, sad thoughts come . . .*

The singing stops as he addresses the cat: "Hello, Turtle! Have you eaten yet?" Xiuqing pictures him stooping, stroking. His thin fingers limp on the arched black back; his wan face filled with wonder, even though he's had the cat for seven years now—a year longer than he's had Xiuqing. Still, he greets them both the same way. As though they are treats unexpectedly encountered in the pantry.

Cat patted, her *jiujiu* resumes his song. He's back later today than usual, Xiuqing realizes. Usually he leaves the little house at dusk and returns with the pale seep of sunrise. Xiuqing senses rather than hears these returns: the heavy vibration of his step; the cloying whiff of smoke-soaked clothes as he passes her door. The wall between them quavering slightly as he drops to his rickety bed.

Sometime after that, she'll sit, then rise. Creep out to see what's missing.

*What's missing:* it used to be things of scant consequence, things only Lina, their one young serving girl, would miss. The kitchen's extra ladle, a rice pot. In the past year, though, as Wu Ding's visits to the smoke houses near the All Heaven Temple have increased, it's become items of more value. The hanging scroll of Heaven and Earth, which Xiuqing would stand and stare at for hours in those first bleak days after she was brought here (wondering, *How do black brushstrokes become the Earth? How is an ink wash Heaven?*). The little pig they'd been fattening in the courtyard disappeared too, right ahead of the New Year's feast. And yesterday, Xiuqing found, even rice was missing: on her last trip to the storeroom there were three empty jars, mouths gaping. Xiuqing asked Lina about it. Lina said she didn't know. But her eyes shifted a little, oblique and anxious. Xiuqing knew what the serving girl must be thinking: when rice is carried off in the night, it's a sure sign that a house is headed for trouble.

"Little Xiu," she hears now, in his sleepy, singsong tenor.

"Yes." She puts down the doll that she'd been holding on her bent knees and giving a little ride to. The doll falls onto its back and stares blandly at the rooftop tiles. Its face is a dried-out pomelo rind her uncle carved two years ago, for Xiuqing's twelfth birthday. Its dress is Xiuqing's mother's apron, wrapped twice and tightly tied. The apron smells like her mother did, of rice water, ash, and cedar. At least, Xiuqing thinks she can smell these things as she hugs the little toy each night in bed. She also thinks sometimes she hears her mother's voice, although in truth she barely recalls now what it sounded like. Still, she wills herself to hear it in the presleep daze before dreams: mama. Singing her name softly: "*Xiuqing.*"

The courtyard stones are slick and silvered with the rain. Xiuqing picks her way over them carefully. Her uncle sits beneath an awning, the cat a plush mound in his lap. Gray half-moons border his eyes. He straightens the spectacles he sometimes lets her try on (worn for

show; their lenses are clear glass). “How are you?” he cries, beaming. “What’s for dinner?”

“I thought river butterfish in creamy sauce. And some cabbage rolls.” *And small portions of rice*, Xiuqing adds silently. She doesn’t ask where he’s been. She knows he’d only lie anyway. He lies to her often, just as he leaves her often. As long as he comes back, she doesn’t mind.

“Wonderful,” he says. “I’m famished.” Which is actually another lie: except for those few times he has tried to shake his smoking habit, Wu Ding eats with a sparrow’s stomach. But he likes it when Xiuqing and Lina cook as though for company. He likes the look and smell of a full table.

“I brought you something,” he adds, and reaches below his chair.

Xiuqing takes the gift and sits on the ground to open it. She unwinds the dingy string. Inside the brown paper is a stack of Western catalogues. Their covers feature curvaceous, flush-cheeked *yangguizi*—white-ghost women—in Western clothes.

“New republic,” her uncle says, beaming, “new look. This is what modern girls will start to wear now.” A self-declared intellectual despite his artisan background, he considers himself an authority on both the old and the new China. “I found them at the mission. I know how you like pretty pictures. You can look at them on our journey.”

“Journey?” Xiuqing looks up. She doesn’t go out much. Aside from the physical discomfort of walking on her folded feet, her mother believed that proper women remain indoors. And since bringing her here, Wu Ding, for all his talk of modern girls, has more or less abided by his sister’s wishes. He hired Lina to teach Xiuqing cooking and household skills and to take her to a neighbor’s house to embroider. Other than these brief trips, though, Xiuqing has left her uncle’s little house exactly twelve times: five festivals, three operas, and four New Year’s trips to the Zhenfeng Pagoda. Plus one surreptitious, teetering trip up the street, just to prove she could do it; though as a boar by birth, Xiuqing knows she’s destined to stay close to home.

Darting down the street after dark is one thing, however. Taking

a journey is quite another. The only trip she's really taken was the three-day sail here from Yangzhou after her mama's funeral. All she recalls are her own white mourning clothes, slowly growing gray with soot. "What . . . what about Lina?" she asks now with a quaver. "What about the housekeeping?"

"Don't worry about these things, little Xiu. Your life is about to change." He lets the words linger, pleased by their prescience. Then he breaks into song again: "'All is quiet. The moon lingers, and the emerald screen hangs low . . .'" He pauses, quirks a brow.

"Li Qingzhao?" It's a little game they have: he recites, she identifies. Modern girls, her *jiujiu* says, should have a grasp of the classics.

"Right!" He beams. "And she was . . ."

"A *ci* poetess, of the Song, Dynasty."

"Not just a poetess, little Xiu. One of the best our nation has ever seen, though many dismiss her poems as women's work. She lost everything at one point—her husband, home, wealth. But her misfortune didn't break her. She bent, like bamboo. She turned her grief into verse so pure and true that nearly a thousand years later she is still revered . . ." He drifts off for a moment, staring at his knobby knuckles. Then he pulls out a cracked pocket watch. "We need to leave," he adds, "in just about . . . oh, seventeen hours." He snaps the watch shut, an emphatic *snick*. "Why don't you go pack?"

"Pack?" He is serious.

"Yes. Pack a lot. Warm things too." He looks skyward. "And one nice outfit. Perhaps the red cheongsam I bought you to wear for New Year's." He makes a kiss-kiss sound at the cat and lifts his feet to the table to form a spindly bridge. Turtle eyes it, leaps, lands. He circles on his master's thighs and lies down. Xiuqing kicks a heel against her chair, faintly panicked. When she looks up, Wu Ding's eyes are shut: he is going to sleep.

BACK IN HER ROOM she lays the catalogues out so they overlap, a slick secondhand fan. She flips through them distractedly as two or

three raindrops tap on the papered window, testing for a downpour. From the kitchen comes the sound of Lina's butcher's knife, sparking thoughts of the green frost of cabbage. *I hope she cuts it finely enough*, Xiuqing thinks.

And, almost as afterthought, *I hope we can pay her this month*.

In his more capable modes her uncle letter-writes for the illiterate and peddles the shoes and handkerchiefs Xiuqing embroiders. But since she took over the household accounts (last year, after one of his longer clinic visits coincided with bill collectors carting off most of the little house's furniture), Xiuqing is well aware of the sword's-edge dance of their finances. It's only thanks to Lina's connections—and her fishing skills—that the household is eating at all.

Sighing, Xiuqing opens her pine chest, one of the few items she convinced the bill collectors to leave, and begins making a pile:

Two thick-weave cotton tunics.

Two pairs of cotton trousers.

A woven sash for holidays and special occasions.

The cheap, knee-length cheongsam her uncle bought her to wear on their few New Year's visits this year.

A padded winter jacket (*warm things too*).

After a moment's hesitation she adds a pair of plain cotton slippers, passing over another pair that is newer but too big for her now. When she last wore them her feet were freshly bound, the pain a raw shock, a silent scream. The soles are clean because she'd crawled on hands and knees for four months. Still, the training shoes prompt her to remember something else. Turning, she pulls out a pair of shoes wrapped in yellowing tissue. These haven't touched the ground either. In fact, they've never been worn at all. The red silk is intricately embroidered, with rows of Beijing knots plumping out magpies' breasts. Delicate stem and split stitches outline hills full of peonies. In places the technique is so delicate and skilled that the bare silk is itself a motif. But there is one small patch by the back of the left heel that is blank in a different way. Unintentional; unfinished. A small mouth, crying.

Xiuqing holds the shoes in her palms. Lifts them a little: one, two. They were made for her wedding day, to flutter over floor and ground. Her mama spoke of this someday wedding nearly every day toward the end, half reclining on her bed. Sewing, knotting, biting. It took Xiuqing a long time to realize that her mother was stitching more than just shoes. She was stitching her daughter a promise: after the binding, the finding. The making of a good match. *Your uncle improved his lot with his mind: he learned to read. But a girl's feet are her best chance to better herself. If we make them small enough, we'll get our fortunes back. When you've grown, when your feet are perfect lilies.*

But Xiuqing's feet never were perfect lilies. Her mother died before the bones had fully broken to the midwife's specifications, and she'd lacked the strength, at the end, to make Xiuqing walk upon them properly. By the time Xiuqing reached Zhenjiang, her feet had grown by three full fingers, and she'd lacked the determination to break them back again. The result is that now, when she is fourteen, her feet are even bigger than those the neighborhood grandmothers scornfully call "Yangzhou style"—six inches long, twice the size of the tiny lilies favored by Suzhou's famed beauties. Bigger feet make for easier walking, of course. But her mother would have been aghast. "Sea bass," she would have called them. Xiuqing tries not to think about it.

She can't help wondering now, however, whether this journey might be about the long-awaited making of a match. Is it possible? Has her odd old uncle actually found someone for her to marry? Xiuqing can't imagine him living on his own, without her. But she also can't imagine living here forever. As her mama always said, girls are raised for others . . .

In the end she sets the shoes on the "pack" pile, just in case. If she can't wear them, then at least they'll bring her luck.

Sitting back, Xiuqing scans the room for anything else she might need, her gaze coming to rest on her broken looking glass. Her most steadfast companion here, the Mirror Girl, gazes back at her blankly.

Her face is pale and slightly square, with a broad forehead and a strong chin. Her eyes are large, heavily lashed, her lips full and fresh, if slow to smile. Xiuqing knows she's considered pretty. Still all she sees now is a tight-faced, tired-looking girl. "We're going to be fine," Xiuqing tells her. "This will be an adventure."

The girl just stares back, her lips tense with unease.

AT THE ROYAL BRITANNICA Steamship Company's ticket office the signs are in Roman characters, with smaller Chinese characters beneath and even smaller characters and letters beneath that. All, for Xiuqing, are equally unreadable, although her uncle claims to differentiate between the five foreign languages (in order: English, Japanese, German, French, and "possibly American").

The *yangguizi* themselves queue at a window manned by another white devil, and Xiuqing studies them with some interest. The two women in line look nothing like her buxom magazine ladies; they are older, fatter, distinctly less fashionable. One of them returns Xiuqing's gaze with annoyance. Xiuqing stares right back, with all the impunity of a visitor to a zoo.

Her uncle edges toward the crowd's shoreline, describing how they'll travel. "Like the foreigners—like gentry. Two beds, one great window. A lovely view of the water." Xiuqing looks at the water, where the stripped hull of an old steamship serves as the landing for the newer one they'll be taking—the *Crying Loon*. To Xiuqing, the ship, with its myriad windows and mysterious lack of sails, looks like an enormous honeycomb. Passengers line the railings like indolent bees. Stark-naked coolies tow the huge hulk through the shallows to the makeshift landing, hemp ropes sawing at the sun-darkened skin of their backs. When they'd first arrived, Xiuqing had tried to make out what they looked like from the waist down. She got one glimpse of a purplish, wormlike stretch of dripping flesh before her *jiujiu*, following her gaze, primly hustled her off toward the office.

Now, facing her fellow travelers, Xiuqing shifts from foot to foot, trying to ease the cutting itch of her bindings, which she wound extra-tight this morning. “Will we really have a window, Uncle?”

“A window!” he reiterates grandly. “The silvery river. The blue of the sky.” He lights a cigarette, adding, “The fresh green face of the new nation.”

Both the Yangtze and the sky are gray, almost the same color as the pigeons that make feathery lumps both inside and outside the office. To Xiuqing, all three grays are beautiful, in different ways. The cloudbank is blue, white, and black furled together. The Yangtze is a thick flow of gray-gold. Even the pigeons hint at gleaming rainbows: aqua, violet, jade green, as though their drab feathers hide jewels.

Uncle Wu stands and stares at the three lines, fingering his spectacles. Finally he throws back his shoulders and leads them into the crowd, which sucks them in. Everyone seems to be shouting, a dozen dialects melding into a single singsong wail: *Walawala, wa-la*. Xiuqing feels elbows, backs, ribs pressing against her. The man behind her has just eaten salted fish, perhaps with old beer. She breathes through her mouth and looks at him from the corner of her eyes. It’s a soldier, just a few years older than she. Perhaps the age of her soon-to-be fiancé. He is wearing a khaki vest cut in a Western style but the pigtail and ballooning pants of the old imperial army. Xiuqing wonders whether he is being called to Nanjing. Her uncle has told her about the fighting there. One side fights for China’s provisional premier, Yuan Shikai, whom Uncle Wu hates. The other is fighting for something called either *parliamentary procedure* or *electoral outcome*, terms her *jiujiu* won’t clarify because as an opium addict he was barred from voting.

When the soldier catches Xiuqing’s eye and grins, Xiuqing feels herself flush. She pushes ahead to escape his stare, but the surging crowd pushes him forward right along with her. Soon she feels his hand brushing her back. Then dropping a little bit lower. Then lower still. Then—he does it so quickly and assuredly that at first she’s not

even sure she's reading her own body correctly—it's deftly nestled between her thighs.

*There.*

He doesn't leer; doesn't even acknowledge her shock. He acts as though this were simply ticket-crowd custom. *Is it?* Xiuqing wonders. What do people do in situations like this? If she were Washing Silk Woman from the *Tales of Honorable and Virtuous Women*, she would throw herself in the river. But then again, the river looks very dirty. And while the ancients may have lauded Washing Silk Woman's chasteness (for the soldier merely spoke to her; he never even touched her!), Xiuqing senses somehow that her uncle wouldn't feel the same way.

She twitches her hips tentatively, but the hand just wedges further into the split of her buttocks. Finally she puts her own small hand behind her and presses back. A gruff chuckle; another blast of salty fish-breath. Eventually the hand moves away. But her backside quivers with shame.

"Almost there," her *jiujiu* calls back encouragingly. "First class awaits!"

IN THE END, however, both first and second class prove too expensive. "They've raised it," huffs her uncle. "Must be all these rich foreigners." They travel third class, deep within the steamer's windowless hull, boxed in like steaming dumplings. Their only access to the water is a small rear deck barely the size of a small courtyard, its floor coated with hardened phlegm and ossified seagull excretions. "Perfect," Wu Ding mutters, staking out their small space on the floor. "Room to breathe here. Near the water. More than fine." He rolls out a blanket and anchors it with shoes. One of the pairs is his. The other is Xiuqing's. Not the wedding slippers, of course. Xiuqing knows little of opium, but she knows enough about her uncle to know that he wouldn't see what she does: a mother's failing fingers, the lush thread-gardens

they'd tended. He'd see pellets of opium balls, stacked up like a stagnant black mountain.

Even now, in fact, Wu Ding's eyes rove the crowd restlessly: he must not have much opium left. It occurs to Xiuqing that she may lose him for the night. The thought terrifies her even more than that of sleeping beside him directly, without their customary wall between them. In this room full of mostly men, she feels like a peach without its skin. *Get him to talk*, she thinks. "Jiujiu. I've a question."

Her uncle is rolling up a jacket, plumping it with small blows. "Look," he says. "Isn't this nice? It will make a comfy pillow. Give me your jacket, little Xiu. I'll make one for you too."

Xiuqing hands him the padded silk coat she's brought. Her *jiujiu* rolls it up as well. "You see, this isn't so bad!" He looks up, pleased. "What is it, little Xiu?"

She asks the first thing that comes to her mind: "I was just wondering whether you've thought at all. About my—about my future. What I want to know is, are you finding me a—" *This was a bad choice*, she realizes. How does one bring up what one isn't supposed to bring up? "My mother always said," she goes on, carefully, "that marriage is the most important thing. She said every woman must have children. She said . . ."

Drifting off, she looks up from her feet. Her uncle's face has abruptly emptied of mirth. For a moment he just licks his lips. Then he shakes his head. "Marriage!" he thunders, so loudly that the family next to them turns to stare. "Are you some simpering little fool who has no value without a husband?"

Xiuqing pulls her hands into her sleeves. It makes her feel less conspicuous.

"No, my girl, noooooo," he says, still loudly enough to elicit disapproving glares two rows over. Oblivious to them, he settles back on his mat, cross-legged. He is winding up for a lecture. Xiuqing heaves a silent sigh of relief. "I'm giving you an opportunity that goes beyond marriage," he goes on. "I'm sending you into the workforce, niece. You're headed to Wuhu. To work."

It takes a moment for the meaning of the words to settle. *Work?* Xiuqing pictures the straining coolies, their corded muscles, their backs covered with rope-wide welts. She pictures Lina scrubbing the floor by the stove, killing a chicken by calmly snapping its neck. “Work,” she says, trying to associate herself with the concept.

“You’re going to work,” he replies, beaming. “You’re going to be your own woman.” He closes his eyes, sings softly, but with feeling:

*The moon setting, heaven’s mirror in flight  
Clouds build, spreading to seascape towers.*

“Li Bai,” guesses Xiuqing.

“Correct again,” says her uncle. “You see? You’re very smart. You could be just about anything. A lady poet. A teacher.”

“I’m going to work as a teacher?” Xiuqing asks, incredulous. She’s always thought teachers were men. Old men. With long beards, and canes they use to beat misbehaving schoolboys.

Her uncle scratches his head. “Well, no. The place I’ve gotten for you is—well, you’ll be doing something else first. But the money’s good. The money’s very good.” He sucks a tooth contemplatively. Almost to himself, he adds, “And after a while, after you’ve saved, you can move on to something else.”

“Am I going to be doing embroidery?”

His hesitation is beat-quick; Xiuqing barely registers it before he slaps his thigh energetically in approval. “Yes!” he cries. “Embroidery! It’s just as Masters Hume and Emerson tell us. It’s about realizing your own potential.” Shutting his eyes, he recites with bravado: “‘Man is his own star. And the soul that can render an honest and a perfect man commands all light, all influence, all fate.’”

Xiuqing nods—purely from reflex, since her uncle still has his eyes closed, and she has no idea at all who the masters “YuMee” and “AyMah Soon” are. He enjoys bringing up such foreign names, especially after visits to his mission clinic and its reading room. Xiuqing is never certain he has them straight in his mist-filled head. But for

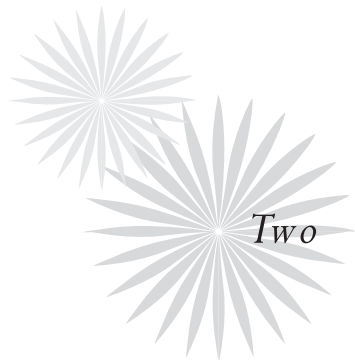
now it's enough: her *jiujiu* is pleased with her. He isn't leaving. And the soldier is nowhere in sight.

*Embroidery*, Xiuqing thinks, settling back a little on her new pillow. Of course there'd be money in that. Her parents had made a good living at it. Until, that is, the bad men came. Mama never said exactly what they did—the subject sewed her red lips together almost as tightly as her expert seams. But Xiuqing gathered it involved things like characters and written contracts, and the fact that her *baba* couldn't read. It is one of the reasons that Xiuqing has promised herself that one day, like her uncle, she will learn.

The boy from the ticket window sticks his head through the doors. “Anyone who doesn't have a ticket, off,” he calls. “Next stop, Wuxi.”

There's some stirring, some pocket-patting. No one leaves. Wu Ding grunts and lowers himself back onto the mat. “We're off.” He pulls his hat over his eyes. Xiuqing lies down on her own mat and thinks of her mother. Long, fragrant hair. A face as round and pale and essential as the moon. Soft, strong hands pulling thread through the metal embroidery frame. Full lips chanting the last line of Li Qingzhao's poem:

*I caress the withered flower, fondle the fragrant petals  
Trying to bring back the lost time.*



“WHY DID HE FALL?” Xiuqing asks three days later, and gives a little push with her toes. She’s leaning over the ship’s railing, tipping forward, almost to the limit of her balance.

Her uncle doesn’t answer: He seems to have lost the slim thread of his lecture about Li Bai. Not on the poems of the itinerate bard, but on his death: He fell from a boat more than a thousand years ago. Perhaps near here, or even on this very stretch of gold-gray water somewhere between Tongling and Wuhu.

Xiuqing pulls her jacket tight around her waist. After three days on the water she feels wind-whipped and shrunken, smaller inside her clothes. For a moment she imagines that that’s all she is: clothes. Creased and dust-streaked pants, a top. Rumpled cotton soaked in boat smells, hung on a railing to air. As her eyes reach the level of her thighs, she sees oily shadows of sloshed butterfly noodles. If they were home she could tell Lina to do laundry today, to soak their things in river water and pine ash. To spread it all on a boulder to dry. *Little on earth*, her mother used to say, *is as sweet as sun-dried laundry*. In the days before her foot-binding, Xiuqing would go along, chasing tadpoles and minnows while her mother beat clothes against a

rock. *That's far enough, Xiuqing!* her mama would shrill when Xiuqing strayed too far. *Stay where I can see you!*

"That's far enough, little Xiu," Uncle Wu says now. "Any farther and you'll fall right off." He crushes his fifth cigarette of the morning under one of his heels. "He fell the same way you very well might, if you don't start acting your age."

Just for a moment she defies him, testing gravity's tug and tumble. She looks past her legs to where they've just been. The boat leaves bile-colored pleats in the river's wake.

"Little Xiu." Her uncle's voice is beginning to tighten. With a small grunt, Xiuqing pulls herself upright. "He fell," Wu Ding resumes, "in the middle of an evening cruise. He was reaching for the moon."

"The moon?"

"It was under the boat. Underwater. The old bastard had had too much to drink." He lights a sixth cigarette, fingers dancing a little. He's beginning to reach his limit. Xiuqing does a quick mental calculation: It's been two days since she spied him squatting in the ship's soiled stern patio, sharing a pipe with a second-class merchant. They ran into the merchant this morning, strolling on deck. Her uncle gave him an ingratiating greeting and then hustled Xiuqing off. "Not a very refined man," he murmured vaguely. "Best to avoid him, in such small quarters." And Xiuqing knew without asking that he now owed this man too, just as he owed all the lenders and pawnshops back home.

"He drowned," he says now, firmly, as though settling a debate. "The man couldn't swim."

"That doesn't seem very sensible. Reaching for the moon in the water."

"Artists aren't interested in sense. They're interested in the *senses*." He coughs, the sound harsh and wet in the wind. He pats himself for his handkerchief, comes up empty. "They're after life's reflections, not life itself."

Xiuqing hops back on one foot, tries to balance again. She contemplates this gap: things and reflections. Objects and images. She

stares at the sinking sun, its rays chipping gemlike off the river. The moon—Li Bai's mirror—is a silver disk to the east. She'd like to string it on a silken cord around her neck.

Her uncle breaks into another round of coughing. Xiuqing hands over her handkerchief, watches him shudder into it. He glances at the blood flecks before hastily tucking the cloth into his pocket.

"I could get you some water," she offers worriedly. "I could go looking for the tea man."

"Ahhh, Xiuqing," he says softly, as he always does. "Little Xiu. What would I do without you?"

A gull slopes toward them, its wings stiff and still. Its cry is a raspy echo of Wu's cough. Below them, a swarm of coolies strip down and prepare to wade out to meet the boat. Her uncle watches them, the wind whipping a tear from his left eye. Then, abruptly, he looks up. "Wuhu awaits," he exclaims, as though this were a long-awaited surprise. "Let's get ready."

AS THEIR LAUNCH BOBS TOWARD SHORE, Xiuqing squints ahead into the gathering darkness. She makes out the tiled tops of the riverbank shops, the flickering winks of new streetlamps. A single, soaring spire rises before the mountains, its point brushed into softness by dusk. The cathedral, her uncle tells her, was built by Europeans who were part of Wuhu's small community of foreign traders and missionaries. When antforeigner feeling ran highest during the Boxer Rebellion, they had to hide in their building. They boarded up the candy-colored windows, nailed the elaborate doors shut. The townsfolk, goaded on by the Boxers, stood outside shouting *Hairy devils!* and *Mother-sexers!* They called the Europeans *washed-out ghosts* and *eaters of our babies*. Eventually they destroyed most of the structure. The foreigners and orphans fled down the river.

"The foreigners eat babies?" Xiuqing says now, horrified.

"No," her uncle says. "But people thought they did. They thought when they took the children in, they were planning a holiday feast. It

didn't help that they were feeding them pig food. Cow's milk. Boiled potatoes and corn."

Xiuqing shudders. Chewing wax, she thinks, would have more flavor.

The launch is being hailed by bobbing lights. A swarm of sampans approach like vengeful bugs, all eyes and wriggling arms. As they draw nearer, Xiuqing sees that the eyes are just paint: white-and-black dots with the sharp points of bows as noses. The arms belong to people, whole families shouting urgently as though they're coming to put out a fire:

*Three yang for baggage and transport, good deal! Good deal!*

*No, no; that dog-fart is lying. He'll steal you blind. Don't listen to him!*

*Come with me—my boat is brand-new! You'll ride in the lap of luxury!*

When the boats reach them, a riverman with an egglike nose grabs their bundle and smiles a foul-smelling smile. Another takes Xiuqing's arm, his hand squeezing around it in a greasy clamp. The launch rocks, water spilling over both sides. The navigator shouts, "Who are you pushing, snout-face! Were you born in the year of the boar? You'll drown us!"

"I was born in the year of the boar," Xiuqing murmurs. But no one pays any attention.

Somehow her uncle manages to negotiate through the chaos, and soon Xiuqing finds herself sitting beneath the arched bamboo of a boat. The riverwoman who steers has big shoes with strange, sharp points and smells of sweat, salt, and drying fish. When she sees Xiuqing, she smiles and says something in a tongue as incomprehensible as that of the gulls, still crying overhead.



IN THE MORNING she awakens from thick, disturbing dreams to the sound of her uncle's knuckles on the door: *crack, crack, crack*. "Up, up, little Xiu! An inch of time is an inch of gold."

Xiuqing opens her eyes. The door opens a sliver. Her uncle peers in, pupils swollen from smoking.

"Why don't you put on your dress?" he says. "Brush your hair. Look pretty for breakfast." He shuts the door with a bang.

Xiuqing stands and stretches. She pushes back the window's shutters. Outside, two sparrows bathe, twitching and fluttering in a puddle by a pump. Xiuqing thinks, *Come on, walk*. Lina says that when sparrows walk, it's good luck.

One of the birds bobs its head, takes a drink. Droplets fly from its beak like flung diamonds.

DOWNSTAIRS, HER *JIUJIU* SITS at a cluttered table across from a man in an emerald-green silk coat. The man looks up as Xiuqing stands in the doorway. He takes in the red cheongsam, her carefully combed hair. The directness of his gaze shames her slightly.

“There you are. Join us. Have some tea.” Her uncle pats the seat next to him.

“This is the niece,” the green-coated man says blandly.

“It is.”

Xiuqing spends the short silence that follows rubbing her teacup’s rim against her lips. The man studies her some more, his jaw wagging from side to side like a goat’s as he chews. Crumbs of prawn paste stick pinkly to his mustache.

“This is Master Gao,” her uncle eventually says. “He’s helping us to secure your position.”

“There are still some details to settle,” Master Gao says, and spits something onto the floor.

This is a practice Uncle Wu condemns as outmoded, unsanitary, and uncultured. But he doesn’t say so now. What he says, very mildly, is, “We understand that.”

Xiuqing fixes her eyes on the little teapot, on its picture of the Yellow Mountains in indigo. Pinnacles soar toward the handles; narrow rivers wend their way up the spout. When she pours, it’s as though the yellow river water comes to life and splashes into her cup.

Master Gao wipes his hands, then climbs to his feet. “If all is as you say, I believe we can use her. The Hall used to take only younger ones. But recently we’ve changed our policy. Too much money invested. Girls of this age—how old is she?”

“Fourteen.”

The man nods. “A bit old, but still young enough to learn. If she’s obedient.”

Xiuqing waits for her uncle to tell the man that she’s already learned what she needs to embroider. But he just says, “Oh, she’s very obedient, my niece.”

He begins folding and unfolding his newspaper, and Xiuqing watches ink spread like soot over his fingers. The man indicates the serving woman with a jut of his chin. “Zheng *niangyi* can handle the details and contract. If everything’s in order, she’ll take her over this afternoon.”

The woman looks up at the sound of her name. An eye skims

Xiuqing, narrow and assessing. The other is cloaked in a moist white veil that fits the cornea like a shield.

Master Gao scratches himself between his legs, strolls around the table. “More loans,” he reads over Uncle Wu’s sloping shoulder. “They’re yanking at their own balls, this fancy Western-style government. Why do we need wider streets?”

“I suppose for the automobiles.”

The man snorts. “No one’s going to be able to afford even a jack-ass if this keeps up. We’re going to owe everything to the damned long-noses.” He frowns. “I hear, by the way, that we share a friend.”

“Yes. Master Fang,” her uncle says in a tight voice. “I did mention that he sends his greetings.” Xiuqing looks up. Master Fang, she knows, owns Uncle Wu’s favorite opium den and the house that adjoins it, where men buy girls (“Buy them for what?” she asked Lina once. But the maid just pressed her lips together).

“I’m thinking of someone else,” Master Gao says. “Merchant Deng? From Chibi.”

Her uncle blanches. “Ah yes. We met aboard the *Crying Loon*.” He stands reluctantly, wringing his hands in a smudging self-caress. “We had a very interesting discussion.”

“He’d very much like to finish it,” Master Gao says meaningfully.

Xiuqing sees her uncle swallow hard. Then—stunningly—the other man reaches out and puts his hand on her shoulder. Easily. As if she’s his daughter. Or a wife.

Xiuqing looks to her uncle. She waits for him to speak. But he just shifts from foot to foot like a nervous schoolboy.

“Perhaps,” Master Gao says, rubbing Xiuqing’s neck gently, “you can stop by and see him. On your way back home.” His fingers smell like smoked fish. Xiuqing stares at her uncle, so wide-eyed that her lids ache. *Help. Help me.*

But Wu Ding is looking at his hands; he seems finally to have noticed the inkstains. “Certainly,” he says, accepting a hot, damp towel from the old woman. “I was planning to do that. In fact, I was going to go buy my ticket tonight.”

*Tonight?* Xiuqing's pounding heart skips again. Her uncle said he'd stay here for a few days. They would see the town together. Make her introductions. Then he'd take her to a fine, final meal before he went home. Just for a few weeks . . .

"Good," says Master Gao. He lets his fingers trace her ear. Then, abruptly, he steps away, throwing two coins on the table. "I'll send a runner so he'll know to expect your visit."

After he leaves, her uncle sits back down heavily. "*Jiujiu?*" Xiuqing asks quaveringly.

He stares into his cup. "Perhaps," he murmurs, "we should get started."

He's not speaking to her. But when Zheng *niangyi* puts a gnarled hand on Xiuqing's shoulder, he says sternly, "Cooperate, niece."

"Obey your uncle," the woman caws as Xiuqing twitches herself free.

Wu Ding turns his back. He studies the sole piece of wall art, a strange painting done entirely in iron. Its blunt lines portray a man fishing in a stream. The woman drops to her knees with a grunt, as though preparing to perform the kowtow. Xiuqing fights back an unplanned giggle, though she doesn't find it especially funny. The old fingers probe through Xiuqing's flimsy shoes, measuring length and width. They insert themselves into the peach-like clefts, testing for depth and tightness. When she is finished, she clammers to her own big feet and unties Xiuqing's shirtwaist. Xiuqing feels her hands again, cold this time, and hard, on her belly, her neck, her arms. She yanks her shirt back down. "Stop. Stop that!"

Zheng *niangyi* pauses. She looks at Wu Ding's fixed back. Then she cuffs Xiuqing on the side of her head. Hard. "Stay put." She takes the soft flesh of the girl's forearm and twists it like a key in a lock. "There's nothing else for it—you'll just have to endure. Try to think of something else."

Xiuqing's helplessness wells up from somewhere deep inside her. Her breath slows with the sheer rush of it. Her arms and

lips are numb; the place where the blow landed tingles. She feels leathery fingerpads brush her neck and nipples. *Something else.* Feels the nipples harden like two copper coins. *Think. Something else. Think.* She searches for something to cling to, some idea or image that will help, make it stop. She settles on flesh, its various tones and hues. The way it changes with touch. A slap mark glows red at first but fades slowly to peach-pink. Then to nothing at all. Pinches and punches, which she's seen on Lina (her father beats her sometimes), darken the skin. They leave purple marks but gradually lighten into streaking blues, reds, yellows. They can be covered, Lina has shown her, by a mixture made up carefully at the apothecary's. The ingredients are talcum powder and grease and rouge.

*Oh, Lina.*

Her uncle stretches a lazy finger out and touches the little iron man's iron fishing rod.

"Come," the woman says. "We'll finish upstairs."

THEY STAND IN XIUQING'S RENTED ROOM before the bamboo bed, the half-sorted clothes on top of it. The things that need washing lie heaped to the left. The still-clean things are folded flat on the right. The red shoes sit on top of the latter pile, where Xiuqing put them before breakfast. The catalogues are stacked neatly on the small, low table.

The woman picks up the shoes, turns them over. She leafs briefly through one of the catalogues. She looks at Xiuqing, puzzled. Then she shrugs and sweeps everything off the bed, onto the floor in a heap. Her good eye finds Xiuqing in the mirror. "Tell me, child," she says, pushing back her sleeves, "your uncle says you have yet to light the big candles. Is that true? I've seen enough opium-eaters in my time to know. I'll bet this one lies every hour."

Mirror Girl just stares back, as expressionless as a girl in a poster. Xiuqing, in fact, studies the framed reflection as though she were

merely considering a poster. Perhaps an advertisement for youth cream: an old woman and a young one. The way time molds our faces.

“Your melon,” the woman prompts. “He says it hasn’t been broken yet.”

Xiuqing’s mind presents melon: wet yellow-green flesh. Shiny, eye-shaped black seeds. Her uncle, in another of his peculiarities, hates the fruit. He says it takes too much work to eat.

“*Aiyaa*,” groans the woman. “Are you as empty-headed as a melon as well?”

She turns toward Xiuqing, positions her. Ungently, she pushes her down to the bed. She checks Xiuqing’s feet again, clucking in disapproval. Then she unties Xiuqing’s trousers and yanks them down, down around her little ankles.

Xiuqing feels the woman’s hands fumbling at her thighs. She registers air from the window washing her skin. *I will need to remember this*, she thinks numbly. *I’ll need to tell them everything. When they come for me.* And yet, who will come for her? Lina? Her mother’s hungry ghost? The fiancé she’d imagined a lifetime earlier? Besides, what’s happening isn’t something she’ll ever have words for. It will simply be shame—the head-splitting shame of it.

It’s the shame that makes her throw back her head back and call: “Uncle! Please! *Jiujiu!*” And then: “Mama!”

The scream rings through the stillness; a child’s voice, cracked and broken. A chair shifts abruptly against a floor somewhere. There is no further response.

AGES LATER, IT SEEMS, the fingers pull stickily out. Xiuqing hears steps, then splashing from the washbasin. The woman’s voice seems to travel from some faraway point: “All’s in order. I’ll go have him draw up the papers.” Her footsteps pad heavily off down the hallway.

Two images float past: of sparrows not walking, of Mirror Girl lying here on the bed. In her head the girl lies still, barely breath-

ing. Her pulse has slowed to almost the same still pace as that of the catalogue ladies, staring blithely at the ceiling.

WHEN XIUQING FINALLY RETURNS downstairs Wu Ding sits at the breakfast table, just as he did when she first came down. Now, however, it's Zheng *niangyi* who sits across from him, face-to-face. Like a man. The papers they both hold are slightly wet; her uncle has just copied them out with his pen. The woman squints at her version with the tense overfocus Xiuqing quickly recognizes as illiteracy.

Wu Ding reads:

*The sale being effected, she can be taken away, her name changed, and when she is grown up she shall abide by the will of the purchaser who may make use of her for any purpose he pleases, whether the same be respectable or otherwise. In the case of disobedience, she may be disposed of without hindrance. By this consignment her relations have yielded up all interest in her, and intercourse between her and her relations will cease forever and she shall not be redeemed. In the case of death, which is mutually to be regarded as the order of heaven, no complaints are to be preferred.*

A shuffling pause.

“What was that part about relatives?” Zheng *niangyi* asks.

“I have a grandmother,” Xiuqing announces abruptly. She is speaking loudly, in the same little-girl voice that emerged from her, unsummoned, upstairs. “I have a mother, too. Back home, in Yuangzhou. They’ll both be very angry—”

“Hush!” roars her uncle, and pounds the table.

Xiuqing hushes.

Slowly, as though it takes tremendous effort, her uncle relaxes each finger.

“I,” he says, “am her last living relative.” When the woman looks

dubious, he adds, “My mother died seven years ago. My sister a year later.” He puts down the papers, neatens them with his fingers. Aligns the corners and edges.

“How did they die?” the broker asks suspiciously.

“My mother was simply old. My sister died of disease with the blossoms. There was another sister, but she died as a child. When this one was still a baby.”

“How?”

“Of the water sickness.”

“Water,” repeats the innkeeper reflectively. “And the father?”

“Threw himself into the river when this one was two.” He says it flatly, as though the words mean nothing to him. “They say he’d lost all his money.”

“And she is how old, you said?”

“Fourteen.” He smiles, a little sadly. “Year of the boar. Which, as you know, means she’ll never stray too far from home.”

“But is she stubborn?”

Xiuqing stares at him beseechingly. “Not at all,” he says, meeting her eyes directly for the first time this morning. “She is strong, but like bamboo. She’ll bend if the wind forces her to. But she will not break.”

He holds her gaze a moment longer. Then he clears his throat and looks away.

THE NEXT TIME the old woman gives Xiuqing a blow, Xiuqing isn’t thinking about the colors of her skin. She is thinking about her feet, how they must be red with blood now. She has never, ever walked this far before.

The broker hits her again. “Hurry up. Are you a girl or a log with legs?” The hitting hurts, yet there’s something oddly affectionate, almost half-pat, to it. As though they share some sort of camaraderie. *We’ll make it*, the light blows seem to say. *We’ve been through a hard time together*. Xiuqing forces herself to walk faster, if only to avoid the woman’s touch.

“You know,” her captor says, scurrying now to keep up, “you are actually very lucky. My mother died too. I was around your age.” Her withered lips purse around her little silver pipe, making small kissing sounds as she sucks out smoke. “I got a good-for-nothing husband. An opium-eater, like your uncle. He didn’t talk or dress as fancily. But they are all the same, such men.”

Xiuqing thinks of her *jiujiu* waving gaily from the door at the inn. Reciting—as Xiuqing’s innards turned to stone—the final stanza of his steamboat verse:

*Poor waters of home. I know how it feels:  
Ten thousand miles of farewell on this boat . . .*

“As for me,” the woman is continuing, “I couldn’t keep anything in the house. He sold my pots, my sewing things. He even sold my daughters—all but the baby. When that money ran out he leased me to Old Man Cao. For six years I cleaned his dog-fart kitchen by day, slept with the old prick by night. My husband, he spent three years on his back in a better state.” She spits spitefully.

Xiuqing looks up, curious despite herself. “What happened then?”

“My husband died. Old Man Cao sent me back but kept my son. I came home to a daughter who didn’t know me.” Her face creases, at first in pain, then into something that almost looks like a pride. *See, it seems to say, I’ve endured.*

The streets have thickened with activity as they walk. Merchants hustle by, wheeling barrows of wheat flour, kerosene. A blacksmith with a portable forge almost runs Xiuqing over, his face a black smudge of soot and sweat. The forge’s breath is like dragon’s fire on her neck, doubly hot in the midsummer swelter. Xiuqing welcomes it as though it could burn the morning’s filth right off her. She thinks of leaping on the man’s cart, and pressing herself hard against his anvil.

“What you’re doing will be better,” the woman is saying. “And at least you’ll get a variety of men. Not just one old prick over and over.”

“They have *men*? Doing the embroidery?”

The *niangyi* looks at Xiuqing as though she's just offered up a bad joke. "He didn't tell you anything, did he?"

"He did," Xiuqing says, defensive again. "He told me about manifest destiny. And about how a perfect man commands all light, and influence, and—and all fate."

The verse rolls from her tongue, as elegant and opaque as anything Wu Ding ever recited. And for a moment, as the older woman squints in incomprehension, Xiuqing feels she has won something. But triumph dissipates with Zheng *niangyi*'s next words: "My little seamstress. Let me tell you something. This house is all about men and their needles. And they won't be poking them into your fine wedding shoes, either." She chuckles. "Or at least, not just into the shoes . . . But you'll find out for yourself soon enough." She shades her eyes. "You see that green roof? That's it. That's the Hall of Eternal Splendor."

Xiuqing looks. What she sees is somewhat short of splendid: a two-story house, its shutters painted a garish jade. Its doorway is crowded with elaborate signs, sculptures, and hangings, sprawling latticework, gold and red paint. Slips of paper hang on cords over the door, the print on them thick and stylized, the words winking in and out of view in the breeze.

As Xiuqing gazes, a moment comes to her unbidden: not just the sight, but the sounds and smell of summer. It was a morning two years back, maybe three. Hot and white like this one, the crickets sawing out a rasping chorus. She'd been scouring the courtyard jasmine trees for beetles with iridescent shells. She captured close to a dozen and then tried something she'd once heard of: tying linen threads around the insects' hairy hind legs, flagging the threads with slips of paper, and adding porcelain shards from a broken teacup for ballast. Then she released them on their leashes.

Weighed down by the shards, marked by fluttering confetti, the beetles flew in circles around her. She'd been thrilled with herself, thrilled with her power. She could make blizzards, she thought. Put nature on a leash . . . But by the third day all the beetles were dead.

They lay like luminous beads on the dirt, their little legs crabbed and still. Xiuqing buried them in a mass grave in the back courtyard.

They reach the fancy door. Woman Zheng raps on it sharply. It opens. "It's me," the woman says. "I've brought a harbor lily. A nice one this time. Well-shaped nose and chin. Fine hands." She doesn't, Xiuqing notes, mention the feet.

The manservant looks her up and down without apparent interest. His hair looks like it's been cut with a knife.

"Welcome," he says.