

80s Lovers

by Yu Xiaodan

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Chapter 1

Her name was Mao Zhen.

At least that was her name the last time Liang Wen saw her, twenty years ago.

It was May, and the rain fell in bursts that day, a hot, sticky smell of earth rising to the apartment. A raindrop clung to the lashes of her round, swollen eyes. It split in two with a blink. The thumb and forefinger of her left hand worried at her lips continuously, tearing away dead skin a piece at a time.

She had spent the whole day reading against the headboard of the bed. Wen could still remember that on the cover of her book there was a city corner coated in a heavy layer of yellow earth. In the foreground a wide-angle lens had stretched a cobblestone road particularly broad, and in the background, the lofty spire of a church towered before an ashen sky. It was almost five in the evening when she said she was hungry. They went down and found the most respectable-looking restaurant on Deshengmen Outer Street for dinner.

After they'd finished eating, Wen watched her go back upstairs before he went around to the police station behind her building. He retrieved his bicycle from the courtyard of the station and rode back to the news bureau.

That was the last time he saw her.

Chapter 2

Liang Wen met Mao Zhen during his last winter break of high school. The year was 1982.

Y University, where his older brother Wu was a sophomore, had turned four volleyball courts into an ice rink. Wen was busy preparing for the college entrance exam, and whenever he tired of studying, he'd ride over to the ice rink. That day he had just locked his bicycle when he heard Wu calling him from behind. He looked around and saw he was with a girl—Mao Zhen. Wu introduced her as a classmate from the special foreign languages boarding school he had attended. She was a sophomore in college, too, but she attended D University.

Zhen smiled warmly, her round eyes looking at him from beneath a gray knit-wool cap. She pulled a hand from her navy blue mittens to shake Wen's. Her fingers felt thin, their tips cold and hard.

Wu led them to the ice rink, and Wen followed behind, his head lowered. He was surprised to see Zhen wore a pair of black, quilted corduroy shoes like those the elderly might wear—the kind with black rubber soles and a seam stitched up the back.

Wu led them through the crowd for a long time before finally finding a bench with two free seats. At that moment someone called to him, and he raised his head to see who it was. With a look back at them, he said, "Don't move, I'll be back in a second."

They sat down, and Zhen pulled her skates from her book bag. Wen watched as she laced them up, and feeling like he should say something, remarked, "Your slippers are very interesting."

Zhen smiled. "Really? They're pretty rustic, huh?"

Wen rushed to respond, “No, not rustic! They suit you very well. It’s just, not many people wear those shoes anymore. Were they hand-me-downs from your grandmother?”

Zhen laughed, and lifting her feet, she put her toes together, forming a triangle with their stitching. “No, I bought them at a Nei Lian Sheng shoe shop. They’re really cheap—just one yuan. Hmm,” she turned her head toward him. “How did you know I have a grandmother?”

“A shot in the dark,” Wen said. “You don’t wear high heels? All the girls wear heels now.”

“My butt’s pretty big, so I always fall when I wear high heels.”

Wen was curious to see how big, and he started to look behind her, but quickly thought better of it.

“Don’t worry—you’ll see when I stand up.”

Wen nodded sheepishly. Seeing she was squinting at him, he asked, “What?”

“You look a lot like Liang Wu.”

“Really?”

“He once told me he had a little brother, and I wondered if you looked like him or not.”

“Nope—can’t compare with him.”

“Pretty similar,” Zhen said, “just a bit shorter. But the short ones are usually smarter than the tall ones. Are you smarter than him?”

“Not me. There are only a handful of people in the world smarter than him.”

“Oh, you really put him on a pedestal, don’t you?”

“Yeah, I do.” Wen nodded, and then asked her, “Is there something wrong with your throat? Do you have a cold?”

“No, it’s naturally like this. I just inherited it...”

“Then how’d you get into the foreign languages school? When they selected students, didn’t they check your voices?”

“They did, and I was almost cut. After my oral exam, the teacher came out after me to ask the same thing—if I was sick with a cold. I immediately told him I was and coughed a couple of times. He believed me.”

“You’re pretty smart.”

“Does that count as smart? You seem honest. Your brother always said I was just being crafty.”

“Crafty is still smart.”

“It’s unfortunate—he said crafty was foolish.”

They sat there waiting on Wu. Zhen sometimes played with the cord hung around her neck, making her felt mittens bounce against the edge of the bench. Occasionally, she would turn to Wen and smile, but most of the time she looked off into the distance.

That day a lot of people had come down to the ice rink, and a dense circle of heads watched from the railing. In the rink, those that knew how to skate moved in a large, outer circle, which turned rather slowly, burdened with too many people. Those that didn’t know how to skate huddled in the center of the rink, churning and colliding like dumplings in a pot just brought to boil.

“Can you skate?” Zhen asked him.

“Well enough.”

“As good as Wu?”

“We’ve never competed.”

“You’re not willing to compete with him?” she asked pointedly, turning to look at him.

“There’s no use in competing; he’s definitely better than me.” Wen paused a moment. “We’ve never skated together. I don’t see him very much—you’ve probably spent more time with him than I have.”

“That’s very likely.” She pulled her hands out of her mittens and crossed them, digging them into the sleeves of her down coat. “We’ve lived at school since we were little, so we’ve spent more time with classmates than with our families... Then, are you two close?”

“Pretty close, I guess.”

“Pretty close?” She looked at him and said, “I’ll test you. Do you know what kind of pants or tank-tops he wears?”

Wen stared blankly for a moment.

“Do you know if he shaves or not? How many times he shaves in a week? What kind of razor he uses?”

Wen laughed.

“You don’t know any of that, and you still call yourself close? Have you gone to the park together? How many times? Oh, right—have you gone to the public baths together and bathed?”

Wen turned away and burst into another laugh.

“Your answers are all ‘no,’ right?” she asked, using the English word.

“Then all of yours are ‘yes’?” He squinted at her.

“I haven’t either, you pervert!” She gave him a gentle push, but continued.

“You’re right, though. I’ve probably spent more time with him than you have. We’ve been classmates for eight years. Except for eight hours apart spent sleeping, we’ve been together all day, every day, studying from morning till night, sharing three meals in between. I’m not very good at math, but my rough estimate would be...more than ten-thousand hours? On top of that, he’s so tall, you can’t miss him.” She lifted her chin, stretching her neck to look across the rink. Wen followed her gaze and saw Wu in the distance, chatting with some girls.

Zhen put on her skates and chopped at the ice a bit with their blades. Wen asked her, “Are you majoring in English, too?”

“I’m in the Western Languages department.”

“Western Languages department?”

“Western Languages and Literature.”

“Then are you studying language or literature?”

“I study language. All the girls in our department study literature—none of them want to study language, so I picked language.”

“You don’t find studying language boring?”

“Oh, it is. I don’t like it either, but that’s why I study it. You should study what you don’t like. It’s like my grandmother said: The more you dislike a person, the more you ought to be their friend.”

“Why suffer so much?”

“It’s not so much suffering. It’s pretty fun actually.” She laughed. “If you don’t believe me, try it yourself.”

“Your grandmother really said that?”

Zhen nodded. “What about you? Which university are you planning to go to? Mine? Or the same as Wu?”

Wen thought for a moment. “Probably the same as him.”

“Why?”

“Don’t know. It’s like you said, but more of a pissing match: The harder it is to beat someone, the more you want to compete with him.”

They both laughed.

“You’re not putting on your skates?” Zhen asked.

“I’m not going to skate.”

Just then a shorter man cut a pretty curve over to them and stopped, asking Zhen if she wanted to skate. She hesitated a moment before standing up. Wen waited until she left her seat and then tried to steal a look at her butt, but her coat was too long.

It was obvious that was the first time Mao Zhen had ever worn skates. She hadn’t gone two steps before she reeled over and fell. She fell another seven or eight times before she just sat down on the ice, grinning with a furrowed brow as she rubbed her rear-end. The short fellow dragged her back up with some effort and tied her mitten cord in front of her chest. He said something to her, and then she gave him her left hand. From then on, he held onto that hand. They skated a few laps around the rink, and she gradually started to show some improvement. They started chatting. He spoke more, but

occasionally she would also say something. She laughed more; sometimes it seemed a bit forced, but other times she would double over laughing.

Before they noticed, it was ten-thirty at night, and the loudspeakers began announcing closing time. Zhen returned to where Wen was sitting, her head covered in sweat. She asked him why he didn't skate. Wen said he didn't like skating, just liked watching.

“Well, I skated pretty badly, right?”

“You were okay.”

Zhen twisted her lips and sat down to put her slippers back on. After waiting a while in vain for Wu to return, they decided to go look for him. As soon as they got to the entrance of the rink, they found him surrounded by several giggling girls. Wu saw them, and waving goodbye to the girls, he led Wen and Zhen to the school cafeteria for a late-night snack.

When they got to the cafeteria, Wu went to the window to buy food while Zhen and Wen went to find seats. They picked a bench next to a window, and she pulled him into the seat next to her. She took off her down coat, holding it against her legs. Wen took off his padded jacket, too. She looked at him, and after a moment, looked again. She reached a hand over and tugged his sweater collar down. “It looks so awkward—all wrinkled. You can't even wear a sweater right.”

“Psh.” Wen turned his head away and said, “Who can't wear a sweater right?”

“What—don't be shy!”

Wu brought over a tray full of meat buns along with two bowls of milk and sat down across from them. “Put your coats back on. You can't be that hot, can you?” he said.

“I’m really hot! I just sweated half my weight in water,” Zhen said.

“Put them on right now!” As Wu said this, he placed the bowls of milk in front of Wen and Zhen.

Wen did as his brother said, but Zhen simply draped her coat over her shoulders.

“Put it on!” Wu said again.

Wen helped her into her sleeves, and her mouth curled again as she slipped in her arms. She gave her bowl of milk back to Wu, but he pushed it back to her, saying, “I got it for you to drink. If I had wanted some, I would have bought it.”

Zhen was obviously hungry. She ate five of the buns, but picking up a sixth, she thought a moment and put it into Wen’s bowl instead. He barked out a laugh and said, “I thought you were going to eat them all.”

Wu did not smile. He just said, “Slow down or you’ll choke on your milk.”

Two cars rolled past slowly, and Wu watched as their headlights lit one window after another. Casually, he asked, “Who was that short guy back there? The one you had such a good time skating with.”

Zhen lowered her head and took a long sip of her milk. “He’s from your school.”

“What department?”

“He said ME Languages.”

Wu said nothing more.

“ME Languages—is that like Arabic?” Wen asked.

Wu did not respond, and Zhen put her chopsticks to her mouth to signal Wen not to ask. Wu took the chopsticks from her hand and used them to put the last bun into her

bowl. She tried to refuse, but he said, “Eat it.” He watched her finish it, then gathered all the bowls and chopsticks to take to the sink to wash.

Leaving the cafeteria behind, the three of them rode their bicycles to the gate of the school. Wu asked his little brother, “How’s your studying going?”

“It’s getting done, more or less,” Wen said.

“How much less is more or less? Good enough to get into Peking U or Tsinghua? Or good enough to get into Beijing Foreign Studies or China Foreign Affairs University?”

“Good enough to get in somewhere,” Wen said, and he made to pedal off.

Wu grabbed the rear rack of Wen’s bicycle. “What are you hurrying off for? You need to be more careful on the road. This late at night, you better keep straight. You’re not allowed to go anywhere else, you hear? Go straight home.”

Wen did not respond. Wu gave him a smack on the back of the head and asked again, “You hear me?”

Wen made to pedal off again, and without looking back he said, “I hear you.”

The second time Wen saw Mao Zhen was several months later.

Having taken the college entrance exam, he now spent most of his time sleeping. Wu came home unexpectedly one afternoon and shook him awake. “Get up! Get up! I’m taking you to eat Western food.” Without waiting for Wen to fully wake up, he dragged him out of bed, pushed his face into the sink, and turned on the water. “No more sleeping. Mom said you’ve slept a whole week. You’ll sleep yourself stupid pretty soon.” He

pulled a white, short-sleeve collared shirt out of the closet and told Wen to put it on. They rode their 28-inch black Phoenix bicycles side by side, flying out of the compound called the “Automobile Department” at that time. They crossed the great width of Chang’an Avenue, and cutting a large curve, turned north on a newly-paved road.

“Where are we going to eat?” asked Wen.

“Don’t ask—you’ll find out when we get there.”

Wen could never remember the name of that road afterward. Apparently the road had just been widened, and there were two strips of fresh asphalt, dark gray on either side. It seemed like it was still warm, still drying. Very few trees lined the road; at one point, he spotted a sawed-off stump. As far as Wen could remember, this was the first time they had gone out riding together just as two brothers. It would also be the only time. Sometimes Wu would reach his arm over to rest on his brother’s shoulder, his other hand letting go of the handlebars. He asked Wen if he looked like an eagle, but Wen could only laugh, his bicycle reeling every which way.

The buds of the willows had already grown into dark green leaves, and catkins from the poplar trees tumbled about on the ground, collecting in filthy piles along the curbs. The days had gradually lengthened, and the sun shone from the left, casting long shadows of the two brothers. Wen heard Wu say, “In a little while, two others are going to meet us for dinner.”

Wen lowered his voice, “I should have thought so. There’s no way you would have invited me alone. Who, then? To whom do I owe the honor?”

Wu told him it was Mao Zhen.

Wen asked, "If you invited her to dinner, what do you want me coming along for?"

"You think I wanted you to come along? She's the one who wanted to bring someone else. She only told me today, so I didn't have time find someone else."

"Why does she want to bring someone?"

Wu looked away, laughing quietly. "She's up to something crafty, I bet."

"Who's she bringing? It's not a guy is it?"

"Think she'd dare? Fearless of my wrath?"

They rode through the street's wide opening. Wu suddenly hit his breaks and turned sideways into a stop, one foot still on a pedal, the other planted on the ground. Wen stopped behind him and followed his gaze to where he looked below. Beyond a short slope, there was a deep depression. A thick ring of white poplars lined the low-lying area, their broad leaves forming a dense canopy. Between their trunks, Wen spied a vast lake. The trees cast a shadow over the lake so not a thread of sunlight touched its surface. It reflected the deep, lush green of the poplars instead. The way Bayi Lake looked that day was probably the furthest from reality: misty, clouded, slippery—it was like a bowl of green milk.

"Want to go look?" Wu asked.

"Sure."

They locked their bicycles, and Wen trotted down the steep slope behind Wu.

"Do you know this place?" asked Wu.

"Yeah, who doesn't know it?"

"Have you come here before?"

“Seldom to this part. I usually go to the other stretch.”

“To do what?”

“What else? To swim.”

Wu picked up a small rock and hurled it down into the lake. The ripples on the surface hardly moved, and the rock disappeared with a hollow splashing sound. Wen also picked up a rock and skipped it across the lake’s surface.

Bayi Lake at this time was still undeveloped—remote and quiet. There was not a person to be found, nor a whisper heard. Wu walked down to the edge of the lake and probed the water with a broken branch, carefully studying its point. Afterward, he told Wen they were leaving. When they had rode some distance away, he said, “Listen to me when I say this: don’t screw around and swim in that part of the lake.”

“Why?”

“The water’s too deep. It looks fine on the surface, but there’s no telling what’s below.”

“How do you know?”

“You thought I was just playing around when I threw that rock? If you fell in, no one would hear a sound—no one’s even around. All you could do is splash with your hands like this—“ Wu reached up with both hands like he was grabbing for something, his eyes rolling up and his head stretching like he was trying to breathe. His bicycle swerved left and right as he mimed. When Wen snickered, his brother lowered his arms and took hold of the handlebars. “Don’t laugh. I’m not kidding. Did you see? The shore is just rocks, and it’s steep below the water. The rocks are covered in moss—even if you could swim to it, who knows if you could climb out?”

“Have you gone swimming there before?”

“I have, but that doesn’t mean you can. Are you as good in the water as me? Remember what I said.”

Wen muttered, “How do you know I’m not as good as you?”

Wu reached out a hand and smacked his brother’s head, and Wen said nothing more.

To Wen’s surprise, Wu led him to the Moscow Restaurant.

After parking their bicycles, they waited for a while on the steps below the entrance. Zhen and another girl eventually ran over. “Oh, you brought Wen along.” Zhen smiled, and pushing forward the girl next to her, said, “This is my good friend, Feng Siyi. She goes to ‘Foreign Affairs.’”

Wen nodded at Feng Siyi and followed them inside. Zhen had the same short hair as before, visibly parted on the right side. It made her round head look like a mushroom about to lift off. The neck of her light gray sweater was cut large, and there was also a slit cut on the right shoulder, longer than an inch. Wen looked down at her butt. Not bad, he thought. It bumped along like two ripe melons in her tight, black pants. Zhen probably sensed something because she suddenly stopped and turned around, batting her eyes at Wen.

Before they had even sat down, Wu started to look at the menu, and soon thereafter he called over the waitress. In one breath, he ordered three soups and eight dishes. Wen looked at him with surprise, wondering where he got all the money to pay for it. Zhen and Siyi kept whispering, “That’s enough! It’s already too much! Who can eat so much Western food?” Wu was deaf to their pleas, flipping the menu over and over,

studying everything on the single sheet. At last the waitress tapped her pad with her pen, wrinkling her brow and asking, “You’ve ordered a lot—can you eat it all?” Zhen and Siyi chimed in, “She’s right, she’s right.” Wu finally handed over the menu.

“Come on, tell us what you two did today!” Wu said to the two girls, leaning forward onto the table.

Siyi laughed. “Boring stuff—ask Zhen.”

“How can you call it boring? We went to a movie!”

“That’s good—what movie?”

The two girls looked at one another, and Siyi said, “*The Red Detachment of Women.*”

“There are still cinemas that show movies like that?” Wen asked.

“Yep. Each week the auditorium at the First Machinery Industry Department plays an old movie along with new ones.”

“You haven’t seen *The Red Detachment of Women* before?”

“Sure we have.”

Wu said, “You should ask Zhen how many times she’s seen it.”

“How many times now?”

“If I say, you can’t make fun of me! Today was the ninth.”

“Wow. You must really love revolution?”

“Revolution?” Siyi gave Zhen a playful push. “If this petty bourgeoisie loves revolution, it’s only because the revolution has Wang Xingang.”

“Wang Xingang? The guy who plays the Party Representative?”

Zhen hummed a note of confirmation.

“He’s so great it’s worth watching nine times?”

“Yes!”

“What’s so great about him?”

Zhen reached over and pretended to slap Wen’s arm in anger. “Everything’s great,” she said in a low voice.

“Yeah.” Siyi looked at Zhen and explained for her. “She loves his little face with its little bit of stubble. She loves the way his throat moves when he speaks. And she loves his arms! You guys probably never noticed his arms?”

“His arms?” asked Wen.

“At the end, when he’s fastening the messenger’s buttons and says, ‘It’s chilly, so take care to keep warm on your journey,’ and then the lens focuses on his arms.”

“What’s so special about that?”

“You have to ask her.”

Zhen lowered her head and laughed. “They look good.”

“She also loves the sound of his voice,” said Siyi.

“His voice? He has a bit of a Northeastern accent, doesn’t he?”

“Even if it were a Hebei accent she would like it,” said Siyi. She glanced at Wu.

“Okay, okay—that’s enough. People so handsome are just in the movies, not real life.”

Zhen fiddled with her fork and knife. “Why can’t the movies be real?”

Wu glanced at her and said, “It’s an awful idea for real life to be like the movies.”

“What’s so awful about it?”

“People who believe movies are real are people without any imagination. You don’t want to be that kind of person, do you?”

“What’s this have to do with imagination?” asked Zhen, lowering her head.

“Everything. Have you ever imagined what Wang Xingang is like most of the time?” asked Wu, fixing his eyes on her.

“What he’s like?”

“Like—do you know if he burps and pisses? Do his burps stink? Does he piss loudly? Does he snore when he sleeps? Do you know if he gets constipated?”

Zhen looked up, but her face sunk. “Why would I want to know all that?”

“Why? Because you need to know!” Seeing Zhen look so upset, he relaxed some. “What I mean is, real life is already so rich—you still need real life to be like the movies?”

“Whether or not there’s a need, I know everything I should know. I know everything I shouldn’t know, too.”

Wu looked at her and wanted to say something, but just then the waitress brought the salad, and he told everyone to dig in. When the waitress brought the chicken kiev and butter prawns, Wu placed them in front of Zhen. She took a single prawn and put it on her plate, but after trying a bite passed the rest to Wen. She took a piece of chicken, cut it, and put a bite in her mouth. After chewing it for a moment, she looked like she would vomit. She covered her mouth with a hand, swallowed, and then slowly set down her fork and knife.

“What, you don’t like it? It’s really good,” Wen said, passing her the salad. Zhen made no move to take it. A dozen plates of various sizes now filled the table, and Wu was busy talking to Siyi, pulling up his sleeves and taking voracious bites all the while.

“Eat! Don’t just look at it. So much good food—you guys have to eat every last bite I ordered. You hear me, Wen?”

“There’s no need to tell me.” Wen looked at him, and then glanced at Zhen out of the corner of his eye.

As soon as Siyi placed a steak fillet on Zhen’s plate, she forked it and put it back. Wu told Siyi, “You eat yours.” He passed a pork rib with his fork to Zhen and said, “Hold up your plate.”

Zhen waved it off, saying, “Don’t pick food for me—if I want something, I’ll get it.”

Wu looked at her a moment, and then turning to Wen and Siyi, he said, “You guys eat yours. Eat your fill. You know what I hate most in life? Food left unfinished on the table. What could be happier than eating? Why make it difficult for yourself?”

Zhen stood up.

Siyi tugged on her arm. “Where are you going?”

“The bathroom.”

Siyi said, “I’ll go with you.” She stood up and dropped her napkin, prepared to go with her.

“There’s no need,” Zhen said, waving her off. “You sit and eat.”

“Okay, come back quickly then.”

“I will.”

Wu said, “Go ahead and eat. If someone wants to go, there’s no use watching them.”

Wen sat staring at a steaming piece of fish on his plate. As soon as Zhen left, he picked up his fork and knife to cut a bite. The first bite was full of flavor, but the second tasted greasy. He poured a bowl of mushroom soup, but he found it even greasier. He quickly asked the waitress for another bowl and spooned some borscht into it. While he sipped, he stole a glance at the clock on the wall and then looked at Wu. He looked unperturbed, intently chewing a mouthful of food. For her part, Siyi kept her head low, silently taking small bites.

“Everyone’s named after May First or October First,” Wen said as he spooned a bowl of borscht for Siyi. “Sometimes it’s even June First... How’d you get named after April First? There’s no holiday on ‘Four-One.’”

As soon as Siyi heard him ask, her face relaxed. Smiling, she said, “Can’t I have my own holiday?”

“Sure, that’s a reason,” Wen said. “Were you born on April First?”

Siyi shook her head.

“Then why? Just trying to be different? There’s no ‘Four-One,’ so let’s make one?”

Siyi smiled again and said, “It doesn’t have anything to do with holidays. It has to do with my mom and dad.”

“What’s it mean? It couldn’t be that they conceived you on April First?”

“I have no idea about that. My dad works for Fourth Machinery, and my mom for First Machinery.”

“Then your dad must have it bad, always getting teased by your mom?”

“Now why’s that?” Siyi laughed, but just as she saw Zhen returning, she sat up straight. Zhen pushed her back toward the conversation and took her own seat across from Wu. It was apparent she had just washed her face, the hair along the edge still a little wet. She had clipped her hair up in front, revealing her broad forehead. She knew Wen was looking at her and asked him:

“Wen, you’ve been eating all night—tell me what’s best.”

“The borscht.”

“Seriously? All this food, and the soup is the best?”

“Seriously. The soup is the best thing.”

She passed him her bowl, asking, “Is it sour?”

“Extremely sour.”

“Then pour me a bowl.”

Wen reached for her bowl, but Wu beat him to it. He spooned some of the borscht into the bowl, but seeing it was almost gone, he simply tilted the whole soup dish into it.

Zhen gulped the soup down, and then to Siyi she said, “It’s actually a little better than the borscht we had at your house.”

“Your family can make borscht?” Wen asked.

“Yeah, her mom studied in the USSR.” Zhen turned toward Wu, and asked with lowered eyes, “Is the soup expensive?”

“What are you asking? Didn’t get your fill?”

Zhen nodded and said, “Would you order more?”

“If it makes you happy, a hundred yuan is just spare change. If you’re not happy, a penny’s too much to spend,” said Wu. He waved at the waitress.

Zhen said, “Wen, do you know why Liang Wu is treating us tonight?”

Wen asked why.

“He just did a huge translation for Capital Steel. They’re crazy! They gave him 60 yuan per thousand characters, and he was just as crazy... He translated over two hundred thousand characters in two months! He got rich overnight, and now we’re piggybacking.”

Siyi said, “But you’re the fiercest one—piggybacking all the way to ‘Old Moscow.’”

“He asked us to pick a place.”

“But only you would pick here! Who else would dare?”

“Alright, Siyi, you’re heartless. Who says it’s crazy to want Western food? What a shame, I didn’t eat much. Wu, next time you can take just me to dinner.”

Wu looked up at her and said, “As long as you look like you enjoyed it, there will be a next time.”

They had ordered too much after all. While Wen tried his best for his brother, in the end there was still a lot of food left over. At least when the four of them left, they were all smiling. Zhen held onto Siyi’s arm, her eyes still lowered. It seemed they had planned in advance that Siyi would accompany Zhen back to school. The two girls waved goodbye to Wu and Wen and rode off together. Wu said he wanted to go see a friend at the foreign languages school, and Wen watched his brother ride off into the distance. He climbed onto his own bicycle and slowly made his way home.

When Wen recalls that May evening, he remembers the breeze kissing his cheek, warm and moist. It carried a scent, sweet like myriad flowers in mingled bloom. As he

rode home, he pondered why Zhen would bring a friend when Wu had asked her to dinner. That night, at least, he didn't figure out why.

This was just the first question Mao Zhen planted in his mind.

Chapter 3

Wu died on the Tuesday of Wen's second week at Y University.

He had just sat down in the classroom to begin his evening studies when his class advisor suddenly pushed open the door, an apron still hanging down his front. After a moment's survey from the doorway, he proceeded directly to Wen's side, asking him in a whisper to leave with him. Wen discovered two men from campus security standing outside the doorway. He followed them out of the building and across the sports field, his advisor holding him firmly by the arm the entire time. His hair and clothes nauseated Wen with their reek of green onions and old oil. The clouds hung low that evening, and the temperature was cool. The sky had not yet completely darkened, and there were still runners on the track. In the distance, several boys played basketball on the court while four or five girls holding thermoses watched from the side. No one said a word to Wen the whole way. When they reached the school gate, he saw a jeep parked on the side of the road with four policemen waiting beside it. The men from campus security led him over, and the police ushered him into the jeep.

Wen's muddled head could make sense of nothing; he could not tell where the jeep was driving or for how long they drove. When he got out, he looked around and realized they were near Yuyuantan Park and Bayi Lake. The police led him to an office where they told him that his parents had already been notified and would arrive soon. Then one policeman asked Wen if he wanted to see Wu, and he nodded. The policeman asked Wen if he wanted to wait for his parents so they could look together, and he nodded again. The policeman paid no more attention to Wen, so he just sat there. After some amount of time, a policeman came in and announced the arrival of his parents. Wen

leapt up from his chair nervously, and just as quickly, he sat back down, holding his head in his hands. He was a little afraid to see his mother and father.

They walked with a policeman down a long slope and crossed a narrow stone bridge before starting down another gentle slope. It was then that they saw people crowding in the distance. Once they had walked over, his mother grew faint, collapsing backward before the policeman had even finished drawing back the cover from Wu's body. Some of the people behind them tried to hold her up, but after a few attempts, they realized it was no use. They had to join arms to carry her back to the jeep.

Wu lay on a plastic tarp next to the lake, his hair tidy, running straight back behind his head as if it were just washed. His forehead was smooth, and his tall, straight nose rose up from its luminance. One of his eyelids was partially open, revealing half of an upturned eyeball. As far as Wen could remember, Wu had never been so imperfect, so uncomposed, except in jest. Despite the muddled moonlight, Wu's skin shone brightly with a delicate, satin sheen. No muscles were apparent; it seemed even the bones of his upper body were soft enough to bend. It made one want to hold him, and his father did just that, pulling Wu's large, clasped hands from where they rest against his chest and rubbing them. Below Wu's arched chest, his stomach was flat save for a small rise of muscle at his narrow pelvis. Black swimming trunks hung slackly below his waist, where the limp bundle of his genitals joined with a handful of dark hair. His legs leaked forth from the swimming trunks, lying weakly aside the track of their bones. Two symmetrical and strong legs ran straight from the start of the thighs to the ankles. Ten toes spread wide like the webbed feet of a duck, like they were still flexing with strength.

Wen couldn't remember anything else they did there or how they made their way home afterward. For the following several days, he felt as if the sky never brightened because he never saw the sun. The curtains on his window were not drawn open, no lamps were turned on at night, and the stove was never lit. His father once made a pot of rice porridge and placed plates of pickled vegetables and pickled tofu on the table, along with a can of dried chicken bits. If Wen grew hungry, he would ladle himself a bowl of porridge and take it into his room to eat. He never saw his father eat at the table, nor did he ever see his mother leave their room.

Another several days passed before Wen finally realized what he was supposed to do. He went to the grocery store. The shopkeeper, whom Wu had once called "Helen of Groceries," had just had a baby. She looked at him with her ruddy and freckled face as she picked out large eggs for him. She weighed them and said, "I haven't seen your mother or father come to buy anything!" She put the eggs in a plastic bag and handed it to him. "It's no good not eating. You have to make them eat. In times like these, food's not the most important thing, but it's no small matter either!"

Wen nodded and thanked her. When he got home, he bumbled his way through making a pot of rice and frying eggs with tomatoes. He carried the bowls to his mother and father's room, and his father looked up from where he sat next to the window at the sound of his entrance. Wen saw his mother was curled up under a thin sheet. He placed the bowls at the headboard, and then he squatted next to the bed. He only spoke after he had squatted there a long time. "I know you've lived the last twenty years for Wu. Now, do you think you could live twenty years for me? I'm not asking much, just another twenty years. If after twenty years you still want to follow after your firstborn son, then I

will certainly let you.” His mother remained silent, and Wen remained squatting, waiting. After some time, she at last began to move. His father rushed over to help her rise to a sitting position, ordering Wen to bring some hot water. She drank the water, and then took the bowl of food.

With the help of one of his brother’s classmates and a teacher, Wen packed Wu’s things from school into two large cardboard boxes. They used one of the school’s cars to take them home, and he put them in the brothers’ room. Before Wen went to bed each night, he would stare at them for a while, but he never opened them.

The memorial was simple. Wen didn’t let his parents attend, nor did he inform their only family of relatives in Beijing. Wu’s classmates and teachers came from every school he had ever attended. From Y University came the student council, basketball team, volleyball team, and track team. Even most of Wen’s own newly-acquainted classmates came. A handful of girls who had performed with Wu at the welcome party for new students stood around him, sobbing terribly. Siyi arrived just as the ceremony was coming to a close. It was only then that Wen thought of Zhen. Siyi walked over to him and gave him a big hug. Her icy hands lingered a long time on the back of his neck, and Wen felt his shoulder dampening with cold moisture. At last she whispered, “She wanted to come, but I wouldn’t let her.” Wen nodded.

After three weeks away from school, Wen returned to find the “Welcome New Students” banner still hanging above the stage in the cafeteria. Everything seemed the same as when he had just started school. His college career was supposedly just beginning, but he felt like it had already come to an end.

Wen didn't expect the shockwave Wu's death sent through campus. Many students were now blaming the incident on the administration's decision to close the pool the previous semester. A large number of students had previously gone to the president's office to petition against the closing. It was said that at one point, some bigwig with the title of director of something or another gave in to their demands, but ultimately he left the affair unsettled. It was not long before the pool turned into a construction site marked "No Admittance." Wu's death gave new meaning to the students' protest: If the school's pool was still open, would he have had to go swimming in a dangerous lake? While Wen was busy preparing the arrangements for Wu, every notice board on campus had filled up with posters large and small asking questions such as this. Those large-lettered posters still hung on the boards when he finally returned to campus. Every time he went to the cafeteria he passed them, flapping at the lightest breeze as if to remind him of Wu's former presence and subsequent death.

Students in his dormitory told Wen work at the pool had paused for a week already for some reason. The administration hadn't made clear its stance on the issue, though, and it was likely work would start again sooner or later. Wen listened quietly, seeing what seemed like expectance in their eyes. He said nothing in response.

Not long after this, an upperclassman came by. He brought with him a letter to some administrative bigwig already drafted, and he had attached Wen's name to it. He hoped someone from the victim's family would lend voice to the cause. Wen read the letter, but he didn't consent. The upperclassman asked him why he refused, and Wen simply told him he had no reason why. The upperclassman asked him what he meant by

that, and he said, “I still haven’t been to the pool. Let me take a look first, and then we’ll talk.”

Even if Wu hadn’t died, Wen wasn’t sure he would have liked life at Y University. Studying English was less romantic than he had imagined and actually much more boring. Every day he had to sit through multiple classes, memorize tons of vocabulary and texts, and practice pronunciation by reading along with a tape recording. He would read this way until his tongue was dry and swollen, and still he felt he had little to show for it. He couldn’t help blushing like a child when the teacher corrected his pronunciation. There were two students in his class who had attended a foreign language boarding school like Wu, transferring directly to the university. Wen was dumbstruck hearing them speak English with the teacher. Judging from their ability, he guessed they could skip the first two years of class without missing much. He knew they had been learning English for much longer than him, but he still felt stupid. He could barely breathe amid the endless classes and assignments. When class was dismissed each day, he would go stuff himself with food in the cafeteria, and if he could spare half an hour, he would always make his way to the reading room in the library. There he flipped through periodicals on the racks, feeling like he had at least a little contact with the outside world. It was his only way to relieve some of the stress.

After he finished reading “Humanities Resource” one night, he stepped out of the reading room in a daze to find Siyi standing there with a few boys. She saw him and immediately greeted him, “What luck running into you here!”

“What are you doing here?” he asked.

“My cousin goes to school here.”

“Oh, I don’t remember you mentioning that.”

Siyi waved her hand in a gesture which seemed to mean it wasn’t worth mentioning. Wen had nothing more to say. The wind picked up, buffeting the leaves on the ground around them, and Wen hurriedly yanked up his collar. After a moment’s thought, he started toward the construction site at the pool rather than hurrying back to his dormitory. Siyi asked where he was going, and he turned back to tell her. “I’ll go with you,” she said.

The pool was on the south side of the sports field, not far from the school’s southern gate. Two floodlights towered over the pool on either side. The construction site was empty of workers, and there was no sign there had been work earlier that day. They had completely excavated the bottom of the pool, most of the stone slabs already removed from the scene. They had also scraped away much of the lime walls, revealing the various layers of earth behind them. In addition to the oval-shaped pit, there were still a few other vestiges of the pool’s former existence, but it was already difficult for Wen to imagine water or the scent of bleach wafting in a summer breeze.

Beside the pool there was a small house built of stone which had probably served as a changing room in the past. A lock hung on the door, and through the broken fragments of glass in the window, Wen could see decrepit benches piled inside. The side of the house that faced the pool was covered in posters, some of which were obviously older, while others were just as obviously recent. Among these was a large sheet a meter long, on which someone had written in coarse, black brushstrokes, “Who is responsible for Liang Wu’s death?” The gargantuan question mark took up almost half of the poster.

Wen engrossed himself in these posters for a while, at last noticing a sheet of pink printer paper. Soaked by rain and baked by the sun, the pink had faded almost to white, and the writing was completely blotched. This was probably the original notification from the past semester that the pool would be torn down for construction of an audiovisual education building. There were a few lines still clear enough to read, among which was printed: "...training superior experts of foreign language." This was a positive justification; he couldn't argue with that. But was it worth the cost of destroying the pool? Was the swimming pool the only choice?

Next to him, Siyi seemed to read his mind. "Whose bright idea was it to destroy the pool? That takes a lot of imagination." After a moment's thought, she said, "Or maybe a real lack of imagination."

Wen took a seat on a small pile of bricks, and Siyi stood next to him, stuffing her hands in her pocket. He invited her to take a seat, but she shook her head. "I'll just stand—it's too cold." Wen pulled a pack of cigarettes out of his pocket, and after checking that there was no "Smoking Prohibited" sign in the vicinity, he groped for his box of matches. Lighting up, he sucked the smoke into his mouth. When he exhaled, the wind immediately scattered the curls of smoke. He took out another cigarette and handed it to Siyi. She accepted, lighting it with the tip of his own and exhaling a cloud.

"So tell me... It wasn't hot that day. In fact, it was already after the first day of autumn. Why would Wu go swimming?"

"I don't know."

"Zhen... Did she say anything to you?"

Siyi thought about it. "No."

“You think he knew he could never climb out before he even tried?”

Siyi didn't answer his question. “Don't think like that.”

Wen was silent for a while, and then he said, “I've wanted to ask you... You said you didn't let Zhen come to the memorial. Why is that?”

Siyi threw her cigarette to the ground and stamped it out. “Forget about it. All of that's in the past now.”

They sat there for a while longer. The wind was harsh and full of an autumnal bleakness. Despite her wearing a heavy sweater, Siyi's teeth began to chatter. Wen looked at her and rose from the pile of bricks, putting out his cigarette. He walked her to her cousin's dormitory and then returned to his own.

The next day he ran into the group of upperclassmen. He told them he had gone to look at the pool, and he didn't oppose the school putting the audiovisual building there. The disappointment in their faces was obvious, and one was actually audacious enough to say that had it been Wen who died, Wu would never have made the same decision.

That was the only semester Wen studied at Y University. He transferred to D University the following semester. He considered switching his major during the transfer process, but decided against it in the end. This way, his credits carried over to his new school, and he was readily accepted into the current class without a problem.

The night before he went to D University, his mother tried to help him pack his bedding, but he refused and she didn't persist. The family of three sat in the kitchen talking for a while about trivial things, with many silent moments in between. The faucet dripped water the entire time. Wen fetched some pliers and twisted it a few times, but it

didn't improve. He took a thin piece of leather from a shoe box, cut it into a circular cushion, and tried inserting it.

"It's no good. You'll have to get the custodian to fix it," he said.

"Okay, don't worry about it. I'll talk to someone at our work unit next time," his father said.

For some reason, Wen's mother began to cry when she heard their conversation. Wen insisted she stop, but it was no use. He ushered them into their room to go to bed, waiting for their light to switch off before going to his own room. Without turning on the light, he sat down on the side of his bed. Moonlight fell through the window, lighting some places and casting shadows over others. Wu's two boxes sat there like monsters in the darkness, lording over the floor around them. Wen stared at them for a while before he decided to open them. His heart thumped loudly in the moment it took to cut the tape.

The first box was filled almost entirely with books. There were a dozen or so dictionaries, as well as a few volumes from an English-version *Encyclopedia Britannica*. Most, however, were novels: lots of French novels and some Russian, too. There were only a few English novels. Some were photocopied versions he had paid to print, while others were printed teaching materials. The real bound books included: *Madame Bovary*, *Sentimental Education*, *Anna Karenina*, and *Sense and Sensibility*.

The second box contained articles daily life. There were some clothes: two pair of white underwear, two white hurdling jerseys, a blue tracksuit with a white stripe, a pair of black sneakers with white soles, a pair of leather shoes with black laces, and several pairs of white socks. There was a brown envelope pressed between the pairs of underwear, folded into a square. Wen picked it up and held it in his hands a while before opening it.

Inside he found a plastic bag containing several translucent condoms. After a moment's surprise, he put them back in the envelope and placed it with the underwear.

The box also contained a packet made from newspaper half-full with peanuts, four bags of instant noodles, and a bag of fried noodles. In the very bottom of the box, buried tight under several layers, was a Nikon camera, a telephoto lens, and a bankbook. In the bankbook was over nine-thousand yuan, which Wen knew must be the commission from Capital Steel. There was a 36-frame roll of black and white film in the camera, shot through the thirteenth frame.

Chapter 4

There were all kinds of lectures at D University, and every building on campus had a board out front with the announcements in red and green. Wen liked to sit and listen regardless of the department. He would sneak into lectures such as one on contemporary literature at the Chinese Department, history of the Wei and Jin and the Northern and Southern dynasties at the History Department, and unsolved mysteries at the Archaeology Department. He even went to a few periods of an upper-level elective for English majors on European civilization.

The busy season came after the Tomb-Sweeping Festival, when it seemed there was a lecture on a popular subject every night of the week. The entire campus fell quiet at night interrupted only by the sporadic sound of applause and laughter escaping through the windows of lecture halls. Wen hurried to Hall No. 4 as soon as he finished eating one night to listen to a lecture called “The New Era of the Novel.” It began at seven-thirty, but Wen arrived at seven-ten only to find every seat was full. People even sat on the steps of the walkways and the two windowsills. Fortunately, his roommate Beanpod had arrived early enough to grab a seat and saved a space for him just the size of his book bag.

The lecture was organized by the school’s literary association, but Wen hadn’t heard of the speaker before. He wasn’t a professor from their own school, nor was he a well-known author. He was a young teacher from another university. He was not very tall, and his hair was buzzed. He wore a close-fitting, navy Mao suit jacket, unbuttoned at the collar. If it were not for his glasses, he would seem just another muscular country-dweller. He looked rather shy as he made his way through the crowd in large strides to the podium.

As soon as he opened his mouth to speak, the raucous clamor ebbed at once like a receding wave.

Strange as it may seem, little impression of this lecture would remain with Wen. He filled four and a half journals of notes while at school, but made no mention of this one talk. What he would remember was the lecturer's voice, its rough and grinding tone. He would remember the ashen color of the sky, girls' faces rosy with powder, and the simmering heat in the lecture hall. It was only April, but it felt like the height of summer to Wen. The lecturer spoke quietly, but eloquently, eliciting bursts of applause and laughter from the students every few minutes. The mood of the audience seemed to remain at a constant climax. He would remember the brief silence just before it boiled over when the lecturer took a piece of chalk from the desk, continuing to speak as he backed toward the blackboard. With one hand, he began writing over his shoulder with the chalk. When he finished, he lightly tossed the chalk back into the box on the desk. There was a beat of silence before applause thundered through the room, accompanied by squeals erupting from girls in every corner. The lecturer looked up bashfully at the crowd. The clapping continued for a full two minutes, as did the lecture's coy smile. Wen didn't join in the applause, however. He slowly pulled from his bag the copy of Guo Moruo's *Twin Flowers* he often carried and proceeded to turn to the page where Nie Zheng commits suicide. As the applause petered out, he realized the person behind him was patting him on the shoulder. He turned to look, and the young man asked:

“What are you reading?”

Wen held it up so he could see the cover.

The man said nothing more, patting him again on the shoulder to let him know he could continue reading. He left ten minutes later, before the lecture had even finished. It was two weeks before Wen saw him again in the cafeteria. By that point, Wen knew his surname was also Liang, but people just called him Chai. He was in the Chinese Department and a year ahead of Wen. He spoke flawless Mandarin despite coming from the remote, southwestern province of Yunnan.

“Now what are you reading? Don’t tell me it’s still *Flowers*,” he asked after walking over to Wen.

He looked a bit like Wu. He had the same shape of head, the same wide shoulders, and the same long legs. He was just thinner. Chai straddled the bench on which Wen sat and grabbed the book to glance at it. When he gave it back, he asked, “You really like Old Guo that much?”

“No, of course not. I just like this play.” Wen then asked him, “Why’d you leave that lecture before it finished?”

“It was too raucous. It pulled the wool over the eyes of those freshmen girls alright, but the lectures these days are all just oratory competitions.” He turned to Wen and asked “You’ve always got that book with you—is that the only thing you read?”

Wen grunted in affirmation.

“You still haven’t finished it after all this time? Is it worth it?”

“I finished it a long time ago, I’m just not sick of it yet. When I get sick of it, I’ll stop reading it.”

Chai laughed. “You’re trying real fucking hard to be eccentric, you know that? Old Guo tries pretty hard, but you’re trying harder. Don’t you think?”

“Are you asking about Old Guo or me?”

“Guo.”

“He tries really hard, but few would ever try to match his brand of eccentric.”

“Why not?”

“Could you kill yourself the way Nie Zheng does?”

“What’s the problem? First slice off the eyelids, then the lips and nose. Chop off two ears, then cut your face to hell. And only then slit your own throat... I—,” he stretched out the syllable, “—could do it, but wouldn't. It’s just too fucking affected.”

“Cheers,” Chai said and bumped his bowl against Wen’s own before gulping down its corn porridge. “I—like people like you. I give credit where credit is due. Good is good, and bad is bad. Guo’s *The Goddesses* is truly terrible, but *Twin Flowers* is decent. It has suspense and climax. And the dialogue has dramatic elements so you can imagine the effect on stage as you read.” He paused a moment and then asked Wen, “Have you read any modern Western drama?”

“I read some Beckett, but it was too hard, so I stopped.”

“It’s no good not reading it. You can dislike it, but you should read it. There are so many good books, you can’t waste all your time on just one. How about I make a list for you? A list of a hundred books. When you’re done reading them all, there won’t be anything else you need to read. I—don’t like modern drama either. I wouldn’t put it this way, but no one’s going to care about modern drama in ten years. Plays will have to go back to being like Shakespeare’s. They need to tell stories; if they don’t, what good are they? They also need to speak like normal people. Guo’s biggest problem is he’s too poetic.

“But Shakespeare’s all poetry, too.”

“It’s no problem if it’s written in verse, but if what they’re trying to express is stuck in a poetic concept, then all the verse is just rubbish in the end.” Before Wen could respond, he continued, “Read novels; they’re more reliable. If your English isn’t good enough yet, read translations. Hemingway, Faulkner, Mark Twain, and Maugham are all good. Kafka, Zweig, even Dumas—they’re all good. You must’ve read *The Count of Monte Cristo*, right? I—began my education with that at age ten. You can also read some biographies. Maurois—the quality of his style is arguable, but it’s still very good. There’s also Irving Stone’s biographies of Van Gogh and Freud... There are so many good books now. Okay, I’ve told you enough for now. Any more and you won’t be able to digest it all.”

After a moment’s pause, Chai suddenly said, “I’ll take you to have some fun at the American consulate next Tuesday.”

“What kind of fun?”

“Don’t worry about it—just come with me. If you have a class required for your major, then ask permission to miss it first, but if it’s an elective, no one will care. Just borrow someone’s notes. I wouldn’t put it this way, but the electives here are pretty lousy. You’re better off learning on your own. Oh, right, there’ll be a girl so don’t be awkward.”

It was sunny the day they went to the consulate. They set out early, riding across all of Beijing before they reached its solemn and forbidding gate. Chai withdrew a crinkled sheet of paper to show the guard. It seemed like he knew Chai, and after a few laughs, he let them proceed. They crossed the open space beyond the gate and entered the building. After a few twists and turns they came to a small parlor where they found a

dozen or so people divided into four or five groups in deep discussion. They were speaking in English and Chinese. There were black people and white people, but most were Asian-looking. When she spotted Wen, a Chinese woman in her forties walked over with drinks to welcome them. Chai introduced Wen, and just as she was inviting them to have some of the food, a man of mixed race called to her in fluent Chinese. A long table near the entrance was stacked with all kinds of cookies and cakes, bread, and ham. There was also coffee and other drinks. Chai poured himself a cup of coffee very naturally, while Wen looked around for a while before at last taking a dessert and a cup of orange juice. The woman returned and led Chai by the hand over to a group of foreigners leaning against the side of a sofa. Smiling, Chai shook their hands one by one, speaking fluent English with them. Not long after, someone came out to announce that the time had arrived, and everyone in the room put down their drinks and moved into the adjoining room.

The room turned out to be a small theater with eight rows of chairs upholstered in sapphire velvet. On the wall hung a small screen, already splashed with light—probably waiting for a signal, Wen thought. He sat in the row furthest back, and from there he could see Chai sitting in front with that woman, his arm wrapped around her shoulder. She gazed at him, never turning away. After ten minutes, the signal finally connected, and a man of Asian descent with gray-flecked hair appeared on the screen. He yelled an enthusiastic greeting into the camera.

One by one, the Chinese on their side of the broadcast took the microphone, standing to speak. Sometimes it seemed like they were asking questions, and sometimes it seemed they were just making statements. Some of them used a translator, while others

spoke for themselves. Because of his limited English, Wen understood none of it as they mumbled along. Nearly an hour passed in this way. The figure on the screen would either respond with a few words or simply not speak at all, brows knitting together as he scratched his head. As it went on, he began to prop his head with his hand in contemplation, his face growing ever graver. It was then that Chai took the microphone from someone's hand, and without standing, he said in a flat voice, "I'm a student at D University. Mr. Hwang, I want to ask you a question: *I want to go to Broadway too. Can you tell me how?*" He asked the question in the same perfect English Wen had heard him speak earlier. The man on the screen was silent for the few seconds of delay in the connection, but then he erupted in laughter. He looked into the lens and earnestly answered, "Fly. I'll pick you up at the airport."

As they left the conference room, foreigners came over to pat Chai on the back one by one. The older woman's hand remained on the small of his back, occasionally lowering to make soft pats to his butt. She saw Wen and Chai to the entrance and said goodbye.

That night Wen went with Chai for drinks, and he asked who the person on the screen was. Chai said, "He's an American playwright who just won a big award on Broadway." Wen asked who the people asking questions were, and Chai clicked his tongue distaste. "They're all the country's best directors, drama critics, and theorists. Nothing they said made any sense, did it?"

Wen then asked who the woman was, and Chai said, "She's a French professor at our school."

"The French department? How's her English so good?"

“She grew up in England and studied in France.”

“You and her...?”

“We’re having a small affair.” He asked Wen then if he had a girlfriend, and Wen said he did not. Chai asked him if he had ever had one, and Wen shook his head. He picked up his chopsticks and pointed them at Wen, saying “Wrong. That’s the wrong way to do things. You’d be making a big mistake. The way I—see it, you have to live your youth like you’re young.”

“And what does that mean?”

“You’ve got to be crazy, real crazy. So crazy you puke! And you stay crazy until you’re 45 and you run out of crazy, and only then can you begin a normal, quiet life. Otherwise, the older you get in life, the more you’ll feel you missed out. You’ll crave what you didn’t get enough of, and in the end if you’re not a chump, you’ll be an old pervert.

“What do you mean by crazy?”

“I mean get with more girls!” He lowered his voice, saying, “The way I—see it, you ought to try every kind of woman.”

“How many kinds are there?”

“That’s something I—can’t tell you; you’ll have to figure that out for yourself. But don’t do anything more than try them. Whatever you do, don’t get stuck. If you get too entangled, you’ll get soft, and it will be too hard to walk away.”

“How many women have you been with then?”

“I—... Not many, not enough.”

“And you haven’t gotten stuck with a single one?”

“No. I—don’t get stuck. How could I?”

“No wonder they say so many girls on campus hate you.”

“Love me, hate me—it’s no matter to me, really. Now if they love me *and* hate me, then that might be something interesting.”

“And this affair is one of those?”

“Yes.”

Wen had seen Chai eating at the cafeteria with a girl in the same year as him. She was on the school’s dance team and had danced in Swan Lake. She was the plumpest of the four little swans. She was chubby, but she was the most flexible of any of them. Wen also saw the French professor a few times around campus, and it seemed her relationship with Chai was no secret. She was nineteen years older than him and had given birth to two daughters. Her husband was also a professor in the French Department and taught the history of the French Revolution. Few, if anyone, had seen them together in public, but plenty of people had seen Chai and the female professor get food together in the cafeteria and take it back to her home.

After that, Wen had heard Chai had another woman who was a few years older than him, the owner of a salon. Her name was Chen Qing. “Qing’s Salon” was outside the south gate of campus, and Wen had seen her on his way home; he had seen her a few times. She was either working with her head lowered, steadily, unhurriedly, or she was sitting quietly in the swivel chair, legs propped up on the table. Her expression was like that of a cat lazing in a sunny spot, absently watching passers-by. It was obvious she was different from the female students on campus. She was like the Horae who gives Botticelli’s Venus her flowered cloak—her lush, wavy hair especially so. After twisting a

few times behind her head, it scattered casually across her lower back. She liked to leave her arms exposed and wear tight blouses and denim jeans. Her limbs were all firm and long. Some people said you could tell what Chai was up to just by looking at her. If she was busy at work and humming a song, Chai had probably spent the previous night at her place, but if she spent the whole day sitting in that swivel chair without saying a word, then Chai was most certainly off with the professor.

Wen asked Chai to confirm if these rumors had any validity, and he said, “None of them are true. If you want me to be perfectly honest, though, I—admit I’ve been seeing Qing.”

Wen was somewhat surprised.

“Why, you ask? Because in just a few years’ time, people will start wagging their tongues about our business. If the subject of Qing comes up, at the very least, I—can say it was born from desire; after a few years, any reason will do just as well. As for the other affairs—regardless of why they started, they could become the subject of jokes to my embarrassment.

“Then why sleep with anyone else? Why not just sleep with her?”

“What do you think? Can she alone satisfy me?”

“The professor can’t satisfy you either?”

“She... There are too many possibilities, as well as too many impossibilities with her.”

Chai was a prodigy. They said when he took the foreign languages exam upon entering university, the test results shocked the professors. They said he could directly enter second-year English or French. He then took the second-year exam, and his results

shocked the teachers once again. After that he took the third-year exam. When he finally passed the fourth-year exam, the administration called him in and asked if he wanted to transfer to the Western Languages Department and change his major to English or French. They said he could skip his undergraduate degree and proceed directly into graduate school. Chai said no. The administration then told him there were opportunities to study abroad in the Western Languages department. Chai again said no. He wanted to stay in the Chinese department and stay in his year; he didn't want to skip ahead.

Wen asked him why this was.

“Staying in my year means I have more free time, and I can sleep with more women. That's life's most important course, and unfortunately you have to teach yourself. If you don't pass, then you'll be sorry the rest of your life.”

Of course, Chai didn't tell that to the administration; he just said he liked Chinese. “And it's the truth. I—don't mean to disappoint you, but what kind of major is foreign language? You better find another as soon as you can, even if it means taking more classes.”

It was almost eleven o'clock when they finished drinking that night. All of a sudden, Chai asked Wen, “Can you dance?”

Wen shook his head.

“It doesn't matter really. You don't need to learn this kind of dancing. Let's go, there's somewhere I want to take you.”

They rode their bicycles around the neighborhood to the nearby agricultural college. Chai led him on a circuit through the campus, but at last said, “No luck tonight.”

The following Friday Chai called him up again. “We have more accurate information this time. Qing’s word is more reliable than most.”

They ate dinner at a small restaurant first, drinking seven or eight bottles of beer. It was almost ten o’clock when they finally mounted their bicycles and headed over.

From the outside, the place looked like just another house or reception office next to the sports field. Only once they had gone inside did Wen realize the secret of the place was not above ground, but below. A dark staircase spiraled downward twenty meters, leading to two glass doors. Beyond the doors there was a large classroom stretching two-hundred square meters under a vaulted ceiling. The brick walls were thick, but a cool breeze seemed to draft through them, reminding Wen of the smell of an old air-raid shelter. The desks and chairs had been pushed into a circle lining the walls, and several young men sat in the corner, quietly chatting and chewing melon seeds. Two black speakers hung in the corners of the ceiling, emitting the voice of Paul Simon.

Chai led Wen to a spot across the room from the glass doors where they took a seat. After ten-thirty the music gradually grew louder, and the doors opened and closed as male and female students streamed in to the room. It seemed not all of them were students, though. As the number of people grew, they began to run out of chairs. Many of them took seats on the desks while others quickly sat on the ground. People stood on either side of the classroom, calling and waving to one another. The girls blushed and laughed with one another, the giggling rising to a crescendo. The boys mostly hid in the corners, quietly sneaking looks at the girls. The mood was like water on a stove, slowly rising in temperature. Someone at some point hung a heavy, black curtain over the glass

doors, and several of the lights turned out. Voices mingled together, and some of the people began to edge toward the center of the room.

It was almost eleven o'clock by the time Qing arrived with another girl in tow. She surveyed the room with an easy glance until she spotted Chai. All of the lights were off by this point, exchanged for a few candles placed in each corner of the room. Qing took off her jacket and took a seat next to Chai, dragging her companion down next to Wen. Chai scorned her loudly, "What took you so long?" but wrapped his arm around her shoulder. She snickered and whispered into his ear a few seconds. Chai lowered his head and sniffed down by her breasts, but she pushed him away, laughing. The feeble light fell across her face and bare arms, and Wen saw a golden sheen reflecting from the slight coat of down on her skin.

More and more people moved into the center of the room, holding hands with one another, spinning in easy circles. Wen lit up his fourth cigarette of the evening, spewing a dense plume of smoke. It hung before him, clouding his eyes. Chai was right: you didn't need to learn this kind of dancing. The girl next to him leaned against her chairback, head tilted toward him, watching. After a few songs, she finally asked, "Having fun just sitting here?"

"What would you rather do?"

"Dance!"

"Find someone else to dance with."

"What? I can't dance with you?"

"I don't know how to dance."

"Psh, there's nothing to know about this kind of dancing."

“You’ll have to show me then...”

“Sure, why didn’t you just say so!”

He rubbed out his cigarette and followed her out into the space where people were dancing. First she placed one of Wen’s hands on her waist, and then she took the other in her hand. She led him through several slow steps to the rhythm of the music. Once they were moving along, she took his other hand and put it on her waist as well. Her two hands took a light hold of his shoulders, and like that, the carefully maintained half-meter of space between them disappeared. Wen could smell the faint fragrance of baijiu on her breath, or perhaps it was just the music. He could tell she must have just washed her hair with a shampoo that smelled like apples. Her neckline was cut low, and the deep curve of her breasts rolled with the beat of the music. Violet-scented perfume leapt from that crevice with every tremble. Never in his life had Wen been besieged by so many smells, and now he felt the alcohol billowing through his veins. His face swelled with warmth. The air grew stuffy, and he couldn’t muster the courage to lift his head and look the girl in the eye. All he could feel were her two arms hanging heavily from his neck, her head sinking closer to him. The hollow between her breasts seemed to bend up to his eyes. Her firm bosom rolled toward him, surging against his ribs. He let her pull him closer, tighter. Beads of sweat first seeped, then poured from his forehead and temples. More ran down his back. Just as the music swelled, she pressed her pelvis between his legs, swaying gently from left to right, and Wen surrendered completely.

Wen wasn’t sure when they left the agricultural college, but he remembered going out the gate and stumbling after his three companions into a small restaurant across the street. They drank two bottles of baijiu, or maybe it was four. Qing and her friend could

really drink. As they threw back swallows of baijiu, the girl fixed an eye on Wen. She asked him, "Is this your first time?"

Feigning ignorance, he asked, "First time for what?"

"You know what I mean. Don't play dumb."

He said it wasn't his first time.

She didn't believe him.

He asked her why not.

She doubled over the table and laughed. "The first time's no big deal. If you just admit it's your first time, then I can give you some pointers."

Wen still insisted it was not his first time. They continued this game until they somehow made their way to bed. Perhaps to prove to her it wasn't his first time, he threw himself whole-heartedly into the task. He couldn't remember how many times they did it that night. The chemical odor of the room gave him the feeling he was in a secret chamber of some laboratory, and he couldn't restrain his enthusiasm. Her body was soft, her waist, knees, and ankles all very lithe. Wen asked why her body was so nice, and she told him she had done ballet. Wen didn't believe her, so she stood and pulled her leg up into a split as he watched. She collapsed in laughter and continued to laugh as they began fooling around again. It seemed like she was just playing the entire time. Wen could remember Qing's moaning coming from the adjacent room. It sounded somewhat forlorn and shrill, easily penetrating the wall between them, like the wail of a cat. In the disarray of that night, her moans filled him with an intense excitement.

Wen found himself lying naked on a strange bed the following day. The heavy odor of chemicals remained, and he soon realized he was in a salon. The bed was actually

four benches squeezed together to make a platform. A filthy cloth hung at the bedside, and worn-out towels were piled at the foot of the bed; they were a color somewhere between white and gray. His clothes lay in a pile next to them. He pulled open the curtain only to find another. Chai's leather shoes sat below it, while a basin and plastic bucket were stacked in the space between the two curtains. Wen could see a mirror hanging on the wall of the outer room. Combs and scissors lay haphazardly spread out over the tabletop beneath it. A girl sat in a swivel chair smoking a cigarette, but it wasn't Qing. She turned toward Wen, looking at him in silence for a moment. He quickly retracted his head. He didn't know how he should act. Should he feel guilty, or should he show her some warmth?

He rested his head on the pillow again for a while. When it suddenly dawned on him that his first time had been in a place like this, he couldn't help feeling some disappointment. He glanced nervously outside, figuring it wasn't her first time. Had it been, he would have felt very sorry for her. He could lie there no longer, so he found his underwear in the pile at the foot of the bed and put them on. They were still a little damp in front, and when it touched his penis, he felt a burning pain. He pulled them away and looked down to see he was swollen red. *Shit*, he thought to himself, *I had only heard it hurts for girls the first time*. His head was swimming. Apparently the salon was closed for business; plain white sheets were hung over the windows and the door.

“If you want to wash your face, you can fill the basin with some water. The sink's over here,” the girl said.

Wen grunted, but he didn't move. He pulled his cigarettes from a pocket in the pile of clothes, but couldn't find matches. The girl walked over and gave him her cigarette to use.

"Awake?" Chai asked from the other bed.

Wen grunted again, exhaling some curls of smoke as he leaned back against the headboard. After looking dumbly at the ceiling for a while, he rubbed out his cigarette and threw it to the floor. He hopped up from bed and began putting on his clothes as the girl watched from the swivel chair.

Just as he was about to walk out, Qing pushed the door open, carrying an aluminum pot and two lunchboxes. "I bought some food. Let's eat!" she said.

"Can't. Is my bike outside?" Wen looked at himself in the mirror and combed his hair with his fingers. Qing stuck her head back out the door and said, "It's there alright. Drunk as you were, you still remembered to lock it."

Wen rummaged in his pockets and pulled out his key. He opened the door and strode out.

The air was heavy with the smell of a scallion and garlic stir-fry, mingled with various spices. The sun hung limply in the sky, and Wen was unsure if it was nearing midday or sinking toward dusk. He looked at his watch and saw it was five minutes until five o'clock and must be afternoon. Next door to the salon there was a state-run cafeteria that had converted into a private restaurant. Several fish swam back and forth in a large jar of water next to its entrance. Not far down the street, another salon had opened, its windows plastered with headshots of Deng Lijun, Ling Qingxia, and other celebrities from Hong Kong and Taiwan. Inside, a lanky, but stylish young man stood behind a high-

back chair. He wore tight pants, and his head was covered in waves of small curls. He clamped a cigarette between his lips as he put plastic rollers in a female student's hair.

Wen's whole body ached as he rode his bicycle. Instead of entering the south gate, he rode around to the west gate, where various stalls made up an open market. Some of the vendors were already packing up, while others were still beset by small groups of students. Just as he was entering the gate, he saw Beanpod standing in front of a porcelain vendor. Wen braked to a stop behind him and watched as he haggled with the vendor, holding a metal pot with a handle in one hand and several food coupons in the other. He gave Beanpod a pat on the shoulder, and seeing who it was, Beanpod handed over the coupons, took the pot, and hopped up on the rear rack of the bicycle.

“Did you come back to the dorm last night? There was no one in the room when I went to bed and no one when I got up. I was afraid I slept in the wrong room. Where'd you go? You didn't come back at all, did you?”

“Oh, I wasn't on campus,” Wen feebly demurred.

“Did you go home?”

Wen grunted ambiguously in response.