

Northern Girls

by Sheng Keyi

Translated by **Eric Abrahamsen**

Secret's Out

I

This is Qian Xiao Hong, from Hunan.

Five foot plus, short wavy hair, roundish face – she's the very image of respectability, the type who'll marry a man and bear his children and never put a foot out of line.

Unfortunately for Hong, however, her bosom is too big. She didn't do it on purpose, but all the same it has banished her from respectability with no room for appeal, drawing the kind of gossip usually reserved for merry widows.

It must be said, though, Hong's bosom is a beauty! Even through her clothing its qualities are evident; it promises to respond terrifically to the touch; it's a real sight for straying eyes. But we all live within the crowd and must conform to the crowd's view; if you insist on doing things your own way, that's you being headstrong. And so Hong's bosom became something of a local eyesore.

Hong's mother died early, of cirrhosis of the liver. Certain busybodies have confirmed that the mother's chest was flat as a board, so Hong's bosom couldn't have been inherited. Hong was raised by her grandmother.

Her grandmother died at the age of eighty after fifty years as a widow. Only she knew the secret of Hong's body, and she never spoke of it. She carried the answer to that riddle with her into the coffin.

The year after her grandmother died, Hong turned sixteen. Since the fifth grade she'd been pointed at and slavered after; men trailed her like a cloud of flies. All the decent girls in the village wore loose clothing and hunched their shoulders – protecting their chests was the first step in protecting their reputations. Only Hong walked with her mounds thrust forward, as oppressive as thunderclouds, bearing down mercilessly. It was heaven's will that she should

grow such a pair of breasts, but it was sheer human courage the way she carried them.

By the age of thirteen Hong was fully ripe. She had no thought for her studies, and once out of middle school she packed it in and went to roam the countryside.

Hong's voice was high pitched and whiny. When her father came home every couple weeks she sat on his lap and whinged like a child, her cheek pressed up against his. It was unsettling, that closeness between them. Hong's father was the boss of a work gang, and after his fortunes picked up he build a two-storey house, all separate apartments, even more Western-looking than a city house. Hong chose a room on the second floor, with its own exterior staircase. Plenty of young fellows had their eyes on her family's money and wanted to be her man. People said she'd been going with boys since elementary school – first with older students, later with young men from the area. She brought them home to do it, and her bed was perpetually wet and stained; on summer nights she'd do it in the cool, or in the concrete outflow pipe of the power station in broad daylight. At any rate, she had quite a reputation.

They said Hong's breasts weren't for touching; they were like power switches; both toucher and touched would get an electric shock.

Hong only had one sister, eight years older. At the age of ten she slept in a room with her sister and grandma, she and her sister in one bed. After her sister found a fiancè she figured Hong was still a kid, and the three of them quietly squeezed in together.

Hong got along great with her brother-in-law; her brother-in-law got along great with Hong.

Most country rumors can't be trusted, but as for the business between Hong and her brother-in-law, you won't find anyone who wouldn't swear to it on their life. It happened the year after Hong's grandmother died. The fields ran wild and unimpeded that spring, the golden rape flowers stretching all the way to the horizon. Those flowers swayed like Hong's bosom as the wind pushed at them, broadcasting desire. Hong, her sister and brother-in-law were planting in a plot of land not far from the house when Hong said she was thirsty, and swung her rear end back home. That rear end was a signal; it danced before the eyes of her brother-in-law and muddled his thoughts. The poets sing of spring as the nuptial season, when the bees fly and warm sunlight caresses the body, and the brother-in-law was suddenly taken with the desire to lay down, to lay in a woman's arms. His own wife lay stiff as a corpse at night, submitting to him as the family plot submitted to the plow – even changing positions was a struggle. The more the brother-in-law thought about it, the less he felt like working. His eyes slid left to right, then rolled up and down, his brow clenched,

and after a moment of ferment he succeeded in squeezing out a resounding fart. His stomach hurt, he said to his wife, he couldn't hold it; his face was a picture of urgency. His wife giggled foolishly, saying "Lazy man, nothing works but your bowels. Go take your crap."

The brother-in-law went off at a trot.

One hole, one seedling. Hong's sister embroidered the earth with pepper plants, and when she was finished she looked over her land with a maternal eye and smiled in satisfaction, her face a dark flower. It was time to irrigate but those two still weren't back. The wind slid over the solitary sister, her dust-colored clothes spattered with yellow mud, her feet sunk in the earth so that she appeared shorter. After a while she climbed onto the ridge of earth beside the field and put her right hand to her forehead, squinting her eyes, just able to make out their parents' house in the distance. The glass fragments set into the top of the wall flashed and glittered, making the house shine in the sunlight. She could see neither Hong nor her husband – what could they be doing? She grew uneasy. Brushing the dirt from her clothes and washing her hands, she left the field, returning home quickly and quietly. She looked for her husband first in the bathroom but he wasn't there – perhaps in the kitchen getting a drink of water? But the kitchen was empty. Her heart began to beat more heavily and she sensed that something was wrong. As she mounted the stairs to Hong's room she pressed one hand her heart, the other to the wall, and panted open-mouthed. The sun dazzled and confused her.

The door was unlatched, and open an inch.

"Feng, get dressed and go, my sister will suspect."

"That stump, she knows nothing!"

"But what if she gets wind of us?"

"She won't get wind of us."

"You might have got me a little one this time..."

"You bear it, I'll rear it!"

Hong's sister's legs trembled; she kicked open the door with a bang and stepped into the doorframe.

The sun drew her shadow out along the floor.

On the bed, two faces parted in the shade.

A bee buzzed into the room; dust swirled in the sunlight; for a moment it was still as death.

Hong wasn't in the least embarrassed; she dressed herself slowly. At first she'd been afraid of hurting her sister, but now that it had finally happened and they were face to face, it was like a stone had settled into place inside her, and she felt relaxed. She said nothing. When she'd finished dressing she rolled to face the wall, her back to the door, and awaited her sister's scolding.

The brother-in-law stood, his bare body shivering with contentment, as if he'd just performed the most satisfying act of his life. Hong sister stuttered, her dark face like a bitter melon. She stared at her husband's naked body, then with a sudden "Wa!" she covered her face and fled. At the bottom of the stairs she stopped, feeling something was wrong here – it was those two curs who ought to be ashamed, it was those two curs who ought to flee. I'm no thief, why am I running? The thought restored her courage, and she cut loose a full-throated wail, pointing up at Hong's room, swearing in a drawn-out ear-piercing screech.

"Pig-fucking bastard! Stinking shameless slut! Whore! Rotten cunt! Wa... have you no shame!?" Contained in Hong's sister's denunciation was an appeal for her neighbors support, and sure enough neighbors from both sides came filing out like ants from a nest when they heard her earth-rending screams, gathering in a crowd at the foot of the stairs.

2

"You lay low now, I'll deal with your sister." The brother-in-law was attending to the aftermath, and it sounded as if he had his wife in hand.

"What about you? You're not laying low?" she asked sullenly.

"You haven't found a husband yet! I'm a man, what's a little thing like this to me?" he said loyally.

Hong pursed her lips, swallowed what she was going to say.

The next day, she left for a job in a small hotel in the county capital.

The hotel was on the edge of town. It looked a bit run-down: bare concrete walls and bare concrete floors, thirty-odd rooms spread over three floors. Hong forgot all about the ugly business in her village, telling herself that there was nothing unnatural about it if it was your brother-in-law. Plenty of fathers slept with daughters-in-law, or brothers-in-law with sisters, the whole thing was just a bout of bad luck. At first she worried he'd knocked her up, but then "Aunt Flo" showed up on time, and that meant a brand-new start.

Predictably, Hong's bosom was most prominent among all the hotel employees. Her behind was perky, too, and it swiveled like mad when she walked, like a dog beside itself with joy. Her behind spoke as it swiveled; it invited the men who saw it to mount her. Guests called the front desk from their rooms, asking to chat with Hong, and Hong was only too happy to oblige, giggling from time to time as though someone were tickling her armpits.

Hong made a habit of chatting with one guest in particular, a northeastern man. "Come to my room", he told her, "I've got some northeastern specialties for you to try."

She went to his room after she got off work at midnight that night. He

opened the door and pinched her as she squeezed by, saying, "What a waist!" Hong twisted away, her mounds colliding with the wall; by the time they rebounded the man had closed the door. The room was cramped and smelled of mildew; the lamplight a dim yellow; the bedclothes stained; the bed narrow. In an ashtray on the wooden shelf at the head of the bed a cigarette butt smoked. The northeasterner made some exploratory moves, to which Hong's body tacitly acceded, and he grew bolder. The man had apparently never seen such prodigious growths as hers, and he squeezed for all he was worth, as though he suspected a fake. It was almost more than he could take – he needed both hands for a single balloon-round breast, and he felt a current of energy buzzing in his palms. He went on squeezing, now rough, now gentle, until Hong was whining like a mosquito. Suddenly she thought of something. She pushed him away, giving him a coy glance, and asked, "What about your northeastern specialties?"

He brought his face close to hers, chuckling, and said, "Right here."

Hong giggled uncontrollably: "You're such a joker!"

His hand ventured boldly downward, but she stopped him. "Playing chaste?" he laughed.

"I'm having my period, can't do it!"

He didn't believe her, said, "I'll pay you!"

Hong said, "Look for yourself!"

She raised her skirt and dropped her underpants, showing the man a stain of blood. He said "That's not dirty, I don't mind. It proves I really like you, right?" Back in the village there was a taint on this business, Hong thought, no one there would dare look, let alone touch. City people really are different. She gave the man another coquettish look, thinking again what a fine figure he cut. She said, "You look like a teacher to me."

"Middle school teacher," he said.

Hong bit her lip and asked, "You don't have a wife?"

"Sure I do, that's why I'm here."

Hong didn't see the logic.

"You only have affairs if you're married; you only want other women if you have a wife. You wouldn't understand." That's what the man said.

"Who needs to understand that crap? I'm going to wash."

After Hong had finished splashing around in the bathroom she was still hesitant, but in the end she listened to her body, and went ahead. The man flipped her and flapped her like a fried salt fish, and when he was done he pulled up his pants and asked, "How much?"

Hong blinked at him. "How much what?"

He was even more nonplussed than she. "Haven't you ever sold it before?"

"Sold... what?"

“Sex!”

3

The cars dragged dust up in spurts; long-bodied buses squeaked by. Hong was wearing a light blue singlet and a miniskirt – most of her body was exposed but her expression was as guileless as a child in swaddling clothes. She peered around her aimlessly, cracking sunflower seeds beneath the bus stop sign. She was turning a few things over in her mind: her first time; the *xiaosheng* actor in the opera troupe who’d never sent word; her brother-in-law and the mess they’d made. All her thoughts were ground beneath the wheels of the cars and cast into the air in fluttering pieces, and to hell with all of it.

The cleft of Hong’s bosom formed part of an axis that began at her forehead and fell past the tip of her nose all the way down to the parting of her legs. Men and women waiting for the bus all cast sideways glances over her bosom, their teeming imaginations coming to rest at that most crucial of spots, as rivers converged on the sea. The women gazed with grudging envy, lifting their chins haughtily; the men’s bodies tingled with warmth as they indulged in bold fantasies. They imagined themselves as flower stalks, comfortably ensconced in Hong’s bewitching vase, then they fell into disarray, using their bodies to crush and rub her, as a dog rolls in the hay or crunches the dry stalks in its teeth just to hear the sound.

The bus staggered in like someone’s drunken grandfather. When it drew to a halt all eyes within swept together to a single point – Hong’s cleavage. In a small town like this it took real courage to wear something that revealing. The men at the bus stop took their last few reluctant peeps, then filed resignedly onto the bus. Hong hummed to herself, “follow your feelings, hold tight to your dreams”, her foot tapping out a lazy rhythm, and got in line behind them.

A gust of wind raised the dust around her. She squeezed her eyes shut, and when she opened them again all she saw was the back of the bus belching a cloud of gray smoke. “Pig-fucker”, she swore, and stamped her foot, causing her chest to tremble.

“Qian Xiao Hong, Qian Xiao Hong!” called a girl’s voice. A tall shadow loomed: she had a head full of fluffy curls – a fashionable bird’s nest – and two enormous silver loops swinging from her ears. Her scarlet lips were split in a smile.

“Yang Chunhua! Hong cried in answer. Yang Chunhua and Hong had once shared a table in class. Now she was made up so heavily she looked like an honest-to-God whore, though somehow she was still not sexy.

“So what are you doing now?” Yang Chunhua asked, glancing surreptitiously

at Hong's bosom.

"Working at the county hotel."

"How much?"

"150 *yuan* a month."

"Not enough! Come work in my friend's company." As Chunhua nattered on she took Hong's hand and led her away, as though she were leading away a chick.

The office was only a bus stop or so away. It was a good area of town, plenty of restaurants and bars nearby, not exactly prosperous but definitely lively. County towns were all like this: the streets narrow and uneven, the walls plastered with political slogans, tree leaves coated in dust, the ground littered with chewed-up betelnut, the marks of life strong and deep, the whole place a roiling potful of turbid water. People lived in this city the way you chewed a mouthful of betelnut – while you chewed the savor was strong, but when you spit it out it left your mouth dry and numb. Yang Chunhua's grip was tight, as though she feared Hong might fly away.

Through a wide revolving door and past a long reception desk they came to an office with black sofas and men chatting amid cigarette smoke. A girl clattered away at a desktop calculator. Yang Chunhua said, "Boss Tan, this my old classmate! Take a gander!" Yang Chunhua was suddenly speaking in a false voice, and it gave Hong a start. The man she addressed as Boss Tan stood up; he was around 40, balding, not particularly tall, running to fat. His gaze swept swiftly over Hong's chest, then he smiled and waved a cigarette-clenched hand, saying, "So what's your name?"

Yang Chunhua answered first: "Qian Xiaohong! The *qian* for 'money', the *xiao* for 'small', the *hong* for 'red'!" Then she sat down very close to a younger man, who wound his arm around her waist.

Qian Xiao Hong gave Boss Tan a radiant smile.

Boss Tan acceded swiftly: "Excellent! Come to work tomorrow morning."

Boss Tan treated them to dinner that night, in a private room at the "Yingchun Pavilion". Factory Head Liu of the Hongqi Chemical Factory, Manager Zhang of the Peach Orchard Shopping Mall, Director Li of the Import/Export Company... One by one, Hong toasted them all on behalf of Boss Tan. Factory Head Liu, his face shining red, was fat as an aging hog; his eyes rolled across Hong's chest in a way she didn't like. Hong didn't know how to decline the drink gracefully, and she finished it all obediently, not spilling a drop. She'd never really drunk before, and was feeling dull and sleepy, like she used to feel in the classroom in summertime, listening to the cicadas' numb roar. "You brought a real pro today!" the men said approvingly to Boss Tan, their eyes bloodshot. Hong knew an onerous task lay before her. She made a trip to the washroom, where

she puked and crapped and felt a bit more clear-headed. Glass after glass: from *wuliangye* to *erguotou*, from *erguotou* to red wine, from red wine to beer. She tossed it all down, as though her gut were a latrine and she were producing compost. At the exact moment required by protocol she stood and took another round on behalf of Boss Tan; even Yang Chunhua looked stunned.

The next day the bare crest of Boss Tan's skull was gleaming. Two diehard holdouts had finally folded, he said, and the money would soon be rolling in! Hongqi was a major factory, signing a deal with them meant a fat harvest year. "Come with me," he said, "and I'll get you acquainted with the goods." Boss Tan opened his warehouse. Hong saw only heaps of trash and junk metal. Boss Tan said they were valves; these flimsy little bits of brass were worth hundreds each.

"So what are they good for?"

"They're good for plenty!"

Boss Tan seemed to have brought her into the heart of his operation; Hong felt flattered, but also alarmed. She didn't understand – she'd only just arrived, had hardly done anything for the company, why had the boss taken her into his confidence?

Boss Tan seemed to know what she was thinking. "You can tell someone's character by the way they drink. You're a straight-shooter, and trustworthy, I'm never wrong about people." After a bit he added, "Starting tomorrow you sleep in this warehouse. There's a room through that door, you've got a bed, blankets, TV, everything."

"Whatever the boss says!" It was the first time Hong had really kissed ass. Boss Tan just chuckled, saying, "You learn quick."

A few days later Hong found out that Chunhua was someone's mistress; a man in the same line of work as Boss Tan, scrap and junk metal, and his name was Ma Xun – 'Boss Ma'. Everyone around here was a 'Boss'. You could call a betelnut-seller 'Boss' and he'd get so worked up he'd practically give away his betelnuts. Boss Tan said he and Boss Ma were blood brothers. Chunhua started out working for Boss Tan, but when she proved to be good with people, Boss Ma came fishing for her and Boss Tan let her go. "And look, I replaced her with someone better!" Boss Tan showed his smoke-yellowed teeth.

Her salary for the first month was 400. Chunhua invited Hong over for a few rounds of mahjong, to relax and talk things over. They bet small, ten or twenty *mao*, but Hong's luck was good and soon she'd won almost thirty *yuan*. Across from Chunhua sat Boss Ma, who was losing money but not his cool; he asked Hong about her work with a smile. Hong was honest, said she had to thank Chunhua, she'd earned 400 her first month. Boss Ma nodded, "Not bad, not bad, keep it up."

Chunhua gave Boss Ma a look; Boss Ma gave Chunhua a look. Hong knew the two of them were up to something. She figured it was something they couldn't talk about in front of her, and she pretended she hadn't seen anything. A moment later someone stepped on her foot; she guessed right away that it was Boss Ma, thinking he was stepping on Chunhua's foot.

"Something going on, Chunhua?" Hong couldn't hold back anymore.

Chunhua smiled furtively. "We've got a plan to make a pile of money, want in on it?"

Hong asked how it would be done.

"You've got the key to Boss Tan's warehouse, yeah?"

"Yeah."

"You know he's got plenty of valuable stuff in there, yeah?"

"Yeah."

"Boss Tan's got a lot of stuff, and I know for a fact he's not one for inventories. If you took a couple of valuable things out of there, say once a month, then we could take them off your hands, and split it thirty-seventy or forty-sixty, whatever you like. We do it for a few months, then get out. What do you think?"

Taken aback, Hong thought, Wasn't Boss Ma supposed to be Boss Tan's blood brother? She felt a little depressed, and said she'd go back and think about it.

But she didn't really think about it. Actually, the idea had occurred to her already, and once she'd even gotten halfway down the road holding some 500-*yuan* thing, the wrecked brass warming in her bosom. It had been the middle of the night, no one on the road, the rows of willows swaying gracefully as her heart thumped madly, a thief in the night. "Hong, what's the matter with you? Are you really that desperate for cash?" She'd cursed herself, and the more she cursed the nobler she felt, until her feet practically floated off the ground. She made a U-turn and went back, quietly returning the valve to its place. She said nothing afterwards to Chunhua.

Boss Tan trusted her, but she owed Chunhua a favor, and now she was caught in between them. Refuse, and Chunhua would suspect she was on the take herself, and would worry that she might give them away to Boss Tan. Accept, and she'd be letting Boss Tan down, and might get nabbed in the bargain. Chunhua seemed to think she was a mouse to be slipped into Boss Tan's granary. Qian Xiao Hong might steal glances, might steal kisses, might steal hearts, but she'd never stolen money! Hong felt a little moved by her own nobility. Trees have their bark, people have their face. Qian Xiao Hong, you've got a pretty lofty character!

Hong guarded the warehouse, laying in bed and staring at the stained white

walls all night long, and in the morning she made her tragic choice: she had to quit. She thought a restaurant near the station was hiring, she might as well go there and carry plates. She told Boss Tan the next day. Boss Tan, eternal cigarette burning between his stubby fingers, said, "Qian Xiao Hong if you've got a problem with me you just spit it out, don't go sulking."

Hong waved her hand hurriedly: "No, no, that's not it, Boss Tan has taken good care of me, I'm the one who's done poorly, how could I have a problem with you?"

Hong's expression became pained and her breath labored; one of the buttons from the front of her shirt popped off and rolled under the table. Her clothing was simply too tight, and her bosom too begrudging of restraint. Hong noticed nothing. She was determined to leave and there wasn't anything Boss Tan could do to stop her. He offered her an additional 300 *yuan*, but Hong refused it, asking, "Why are you giving me more money?"

Boss Tan said, "It's a bonus!"

"I don't want it, I didn't do anything to earn a 300 *yuan* bonus."

"Qian Xiaohong what are you trying to prove? Take the money and you're shameless, refuse it and you're virtuous, is that what you think?"

"I just don't deserve it. Boss Tan, are there people out there who'd swear a blood oath to your face, but then stab you in the back?"

"Of course there are. There's birds of all sorts in this forest, nothing strange about that."

Boss wasn't shy about his checkered past.

"You're my elder, Boss Tan, you understand all this better than me." Hong was dropping the smallest of hints.

"Oh I know."

"You know? You know what?" Hong's fox eyes opened wide.

"About your game of mahjong with Boss Ma, heh heh heh..."

"We played mahjong."

"And I know all about your little talk."

Hong's heart stopped.

"I should tell you, Qian Xiao Hong, all that was my idea. I hereby formally apologize to you, I now trust you completely."

So that's what was going on. Hong experienced a sudden swell of displeasure, and said in a measured voice, "But Boss Tan, now I don't trust you. Good luck with your business."

4

"Excuse me, you're hiring, right?"

After bucking Boss Tan, Hong had trotted directly to the Fumanlou Restaurant. The owner was a woman in her thirties, whose face looked like it had been whitewashed and her eyebrows and eyelashes drawn in with charcoal. Her lips were pig-blood red, and bus passenger rings appeared to be hanging from her ears. Hong was sure that the moment she smiled the walls would crack and the plaster come cascading down.

The boss lady looked Hong up and down several times, something like a smile on her lips. She stared at Hong's chest and asked, "Do you have experience?"

"What experience?" Hong didn't understand.

"Work experience, of course! Did you think I meant sleeping experience?" Her voice rose.

Hong knew that "sleeping experience" meant sex, and wondered why the hell she would ask about that. The boss lady didn't mean to hire her, obviously, she was just playing games. Just then a stubble-faced man emerged from the back of the restaurant and asked, "You here about a job?"

Hong snapped at him, "Yeah I am. I've got work experience, and sleeping experience too!"

The man blinked at her and said, "Little sister's got a temper... How old are you?"

"What are you asking for?" the boss lady glared at the man. "She doesn't look like much of a worker to me."

"I'm sixteen, I can work as well as you," Hong said to the woman. She knew the boss lady was afraid of what might happen if she hired her. Hong knew all too well how women thought; for better or worse, she already had five or six years of experience in love.

"Sixteen, hmm? That's not child labor. Have you worked in a restaurant before?" The man seemed very interested.

"Get! Get! And quit your babbling." The boss lady's face drew down and she shooed the man out.

Hong felt frustrated. The things that attracted men always repulsed women. Men's interests and women's interests seemed to be forever at odds. The man gave an exaggerated shrug and went out, his pants swishing loosely around his rear. On her way out Hong smacked the clear glass of the front door so hard her vision darkened.

The sun was high. Stepping on her own shadow's head, Hong nearly fell into a drainage ditch. She saw the red flesh of rotten watermelons below her, the flies crowded thick as melon seeds. As she passed they rose up buzzing, described a circle, and settled again. The tree leaves hung limp under the sun and her stomach gurgled; damn but she was thirsty. Hong fished out a coin and bought

a banana-shaped popsicle, slurping on it as she looked over the advertisements pasted on the walls and telephone poles. *STDs treated by a military doctor; good news for prostate sufferers; help for syphilis and gonorrhoea...* but no one seemed to need Qian Xiao Hong.

“Hey!”

Who was calling? This sun was enough make you delirious.

“Hey!”

The voice was right beside her. The man in the flapping pants had caught up with her, still shrugging his shoulders, a bit of a hunch in his back.

“Will you come work at my friend’s place?” It was as if he were asking “will you sleep with me?” Hong sucked viciously at the stub of her popsicle, then yanked it out of her mouth and said, “Lead the way.”

Hong had always eaten popsicles that way. The men would stare in a daze, their Adam’s apples working up and down.

“Are you thirsty?” She asked him. “I’ll buy you a popsicle.”

“No no, I’ll have some cold tea at my friend’s place. When we get there just say that you’re my cousin.”

Hong cast a sidelong glance at him, biting the bamboo popsicle stick and giggling.

“See? We’re here! That hair salon.” The man extended his finger.

Hong felt a little trepidation; she’d thought they were going to another restaurant. The salon was large, glass-fronted, with blurred figures moving back and forth within. A red notice was pasted to the door:

Hiring hair-washing girls, 16-20 y/o, experience not required.

“Let me see your hands.”

Hong spread ten fingers.

“Strong hands,” the boss said curtly after looking them over. “Cut your nails then train for a day.” He was twenty-something, rail-thin, with long hair. From the front he appeared neither male nor female; from the back he appeared both male and female. Hong thought he looked like a painter.

There were four hairwashers including Hong, plus a male hair stylist the boss had hired. Hong proudly began the third chapter of her professional life. Within an hour she was friendly with the other hairwashing girls; within a fortnight male customers were lingering around the shop on purpose, waiting for Hong to be free.

Qian Xiaohong was a born hairwasher. Clients came in and sat down in the chair, the backs of their heads at the perfect height, the perfect inclination, aimed straight at the fullest part of Hong’s chest. Their heads full of suds, the men chatted away with her. After the rinse came fifteen minutes of massage. They closed their eyes, their heads reclining until they were pillowed on Hong’s

bosom. Satisfied clients meant a happy boss, and he gave her bonuses on the sly.

Hong was most friendly with Li Sijiang, who slept in the bunk beneath her. Li Sijiang was a straightforward, good-hearted girl, pure as mountain spring water, and kind enough to melt the hardest of hearts.

Sijiang said to her, "Hong, you shouldn't sell your body."

Hong snorted with laughter and said, "Hey Sijiang, got rocks in your head? I sleep around for free, what's to sell?"

Sijiang was a year younger than Hong. She had a face like an apple, fair and clean.

"You're a virgin?" Hong asked?

Sijiang went silent. In the darkness Hong clambered down to the lower bunk and squeezed in with her.

"Don't be so secretive, tell me! Let it out and you'll feel better."

"It was... There was one year..." It sounded as if Sijiang held a radish in her mouth.

"Feel my chest."

Sijiang didn't dare lift her hand, so Hong grabbed it. Sijiang's hand brushed the side of Hong's bosom and stopped. She felt all the way around and said, "Wow, they're huge."

"Heh heh, that's thanks to my brother-in-law. From the time I was eleven he'd grab me and rub me and squeeze me, and then when I was fourteen he did it to me."

"They're so big, they must be heavy. Feel mine, they're like tangerines," Sijiang said enviously.

Hong felt them – it really was the difference between grapefruit and tangerines.

Later Hong cried, saying, "My brother-in-law's a real so-and-so."

5

The man in the flapping pants came twice to have Hong wash his hair, then never appeared again – the woman with the whitewashed face had locked him down. Since Hong and Sijiang's heart-to-heart they'd become fast friends – as the locals put it, if one lost her head they'd both show a scar. Sijiang's face got her into trouble – it carried off the heart of a kid in the shop next door. The kid was something of a mama's boy, he was completely dependent on his girlfriend, a rough fat woman who had him firmly under her thumb. A few times he snuck over to their dorm to visit Sijiang, and they watched a couple of movies together, and then the girlfriend found out. One day she appeared

at the hair salon and zeroed in on Hong. Her fat body trembled as she pointed and said, “You back off now, don’t think you can flash your ass on my doorstep!” She didn’t know which hair-washing girl it was, but she thought Hong’s chest looked awfully big, and awfully suspect. Hong understood what had happened but didn’t defend herself, only saying in a mock-mysterious voice, “Don’t blame the cow if it eats the seedlings, blame the cow-herd!”

The woman went silent with fury, then tried to pull Hong’s hair. Hong swayed back and slipped out of reach.

“Hey Sijiang, why’ve you got eyes for a guy like that? He’s a kept man, what’s the difference between that and selling sex?” Hong was thinking of what the northeastern man in the hotel had said – exchanging sex for anything at all was just another kind of prostitution.

Sijiang was deeply perplexed. “But he said he liked me, he didn’t like his girlfriend.”

“He was lying! A girl can’t be too passive, the men here are all suffering from their prostate!” Hong still didn’t know what prostatitis was, but if there were stickers everywhere offering cures it had to be pretty serious, and pretty common. Hong had her own brand of logic. The innocent-faced Sijing was slowly blooming beneath Hong’s edification. As she gradually came to understand certain things, she began to worship Hong.

One day, while Sijiang was washing a customer’s hair, she suddenly asked him, “Have you got prostatitis?” The man hadn’t heard her clearly and thought she was asking about his scalp. Sijiang was about to repeat herself when Hong poked her in the back. Sijiang swallowed her question. But the two of them were still deeply curious, and after work they went looking at all the *Good news for prostate sufferers!* stickers on the telephone poles. Some of the characters they only partially recognized, others they’d never seen at all, but after going over all the advertisements they put their heads together and more or less worked out where the prostate was located. Li Sijiang stuck out her tongue: “Men – they’re so complicated.”

6

Just like that it was winter, and everything looked dismal. The weather was cold; toes were chilly in shoes, and fingers suffered from being soaked in the hair-washing water. The days were long and dull and Hong found herself bored and restless; it was like always having sex with the same person in the same position. Without a break now and then, without a bit of variety or maybe a different partner, it became too monotonous to bear. Even the most wonderful things could become dull as chaff. As she washed hair Hong stared morosely at

the street outside the window, at the people on the street – they all seemed to be doing what they were meant to do.

A customer named Li Mazi asked Hong, “How about coming to play in Shenzhen? You could make ten times as much washing hair there.”

Hong replied lazily, scornfully: “I’ve seen Shenzhen on TV; all I know is that the skies are blue, the buildings tall, the people are stuck-up, and one man can have a bunch of wives. But I don’t know if they need hair washers.”

“Of course they do, not only to wash the hair up top, but also to wash the hair down below. The local girls are ugly, if you and Li Sijiang went you’d be top of the line.” Li Mazi flattered her, and indicated he could help. His words inflamed her, and soon Hong’s breasts were heaving with excitement, threatening to bound from her clothing like spooked rabbits. As Hong heard more about Shenzhen she saw before her a poetic vision of the city, with streets full of elegant young men. As she washed Li Mazi’s hair and loosened his bones Hong began to feel it was time she got out and saw the world. She had plenty of cash in her pocket, money wasn’t a problem, but she needed a partner. She talked to Li Sijiang in private. Sijiang wanted to know how far away it was.

“Overnight on a train.”

“How much?”

“I think it’s 80 *yuan*.”

“Who will we meet there?”

“Li Mazi said he’d take care of everything.”

“I’ll think about it.”

“What’s to think about? If you’re not going I’ll go by myself. Don’t blame me for being a lousy friend.”

Things dragged on to the end of the month and still Sijiang wavered. Hong began to lose her temper and said, “Sijiang you old hen, hurry up and lay an egg.” Sijiang worried the question as though it were one of life and death.

That night in the dormitory, Hong made arrangements for her departure. “Hey Sijiang, tell the boss I’ve quit tomorrow morning, I’m going to see Li Mazi at the train station tonight. You just keep on washing hair. Wash and wash until you’re the boss!”

This last seemed to sting Sijiang – her apple face turned red and she said, “I’m going with you!”