

Li Yung-p'ing

Translated by
Howard Goldblatt
and Sylvia Li-chun Lin

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RETRIBUTION
The Jiling Chronicles



Retribution
THE JILING CHRONICLES

Modern Chinese Literature from Taiwan

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*Translated from the Chinese by Howard Goldblatt
and Sylvia Li-chun Lin*

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Book One



White Dress

In Great Blessings Lane

Everyone who saw her said she was good-looking, but no one could have foreseen how such pure, unaffected beauty would one day turn into a curse. Changsheng married at the tender age of sixteen, but why she chose Liu Laoshi, the coffin maker, was a puzzle to all. Years later, a story made the rounds that a cholera epidemic had broken out in Jiling Township when she was just a girl, and had wiped out her family. Some thoughtful neighbors had hastily brought over straw mats to wrap the corpses of her father, mother, and two brothers. But just as they were hauling them out the back door for burial outside town, Liu Laoshi's mother, Granny Liu, came rushing over. When she saw the girl sitting in the doorway weeping, she donated two large coffins and two small ones, then took little Changsheng back to the coffin shop in Great Blessings Lane, where she looked after her for six or seven years as a future daughter-in-law.

Great Blessings Lane wasn't called that at first. Back when the county granary was newly built, the muddy lane running along the eastern wall was called Frog Alley. It was home to a row of motley establishments, in the middle of which was the coffin shop run by Liu Laoshi. At first it was just an ordinary carpentry shop that sold a few coffins on the side, but a few years after the county granary

went up and Jiling turned into a boomtown, Liu Laoshi's father stopped making furniture to concentrate on the coffin business. At any given time five or six large, red-lacquered coffins with up-turned heads stood at the ready. The family custom, passed down from their ancestors, was that, since they eked out a living at the foot of Yama, the King of Hell, it was important to accumulate merit by performing good deeds. So in times of peace, they made it a point to give away four or five good coffins every year. Then one day the adjutant to a warlord came to town and quartered his troops in the county granary, converting the buildings in Frog Alley into his headquarters. The local residents often saw dark, bloody water flow through the stinking ditch beyond the wall, which always drew swarms of bluebottle flies. For several years after the warlord's men moved on, the lane was filled with a loud buzzing, which quietly drove one proper merchant after another from the area as business declined. Before long, rumors flew that the county granary was haunted. Over the next couple of years, the only other resident who chose not to move away was the middle-aged fortune-teller, a bachelor. Liu Laoshi's mother went from door to door all over town, but no one was willing to let a coffin shop into their neighborhood, so she, her son, and her daughter-in-law had no choice but to stay put. Every evening at six o'clock they closed up shop. Then one day, Fourth Mama Luo arrived from somewhere with several prostitutes and quietly rented one of the vacated buildings. Over the next few years, the railroad came through town, on which carloads of goods from the south were shipped up north. The price of chili peppers rose three times a day, putting extra money into the pockets of hayseeds from nearby valleys. Behind the backs of their wives and children, they came to town looking for a good time, and before long, Frog Alley was home to ten brothels. The wealthiest family in town, the Caos, owned all the buildings in the lane, and Old Master Cao, unhappy

with the name Frog Alley, petitioned the county government to change it to the better-sounding Great Blessings Lane. Thus the new name was born.

Every day found Liu Laoshi bent over his workbench in the dark, gloomy shop, planing wood over and over for his coffins, not even looking up when someone walked by. More and more people were strolling up and down Great Blessings Lane after dinner, where red lanterns hung from the eaves of the ten establishments. The prostitutes, all rouged and powdered, smiled as they walked outside and stood in the doorways to pick their teeth and gaze seductively at men in the lane who were gawking at them. Without a word to anyone, Liu Laoshi, a cigarette dangling from his lips, would close up shop and slowly and methodically fit one door plank after another back into place. At cockcrow the next morning, when all was quiet in the lane, one or two overnight guests would slip out through the brothel doors, red-eyed and haggard, shying away from the moist red sun as they scurried along the wall on their way out of Great Blessings Lane. Then, as Liu Laoshi unlatched the door and took down the boards in front, one after another, he'd pour a cup of hot tea, light a cigarette, and recommence planing his coffin boards—*gua gua gua*.

Smoke would begin rising from kitchen chimneys all over town.

The nineteenth day of the sixth lunar month. The fortune-teller, who had opened up shop early in the morning, carried a cup of tea slowly over to the coffin shop, where he watched Granny Liu paste two sheets of red paper on the porch posts. "Old madam," he said with a broad grin, "time for another good deed, I see." Liu Laoshi, a cigarette dangling from his lips, didn't even look up as he placed his foot on a coffin board and began to plane it. The fortune-teller watched him work awhile, then coughed once or twice and walked out into the middle of the lane, where he spat a gob of phlegm into the stinking ditch at the base of the granary wall. After

rinsing his mouth with tea, he walked slowly back to his own doorway, where he turned and looked up at the words written in white:

I am down from the mountain
To tell what the years will bring

He shook his head and stood there dully for a long while before turning and stepping through the door. He sat down behind a table, adjusted his reading glasses, and began reading his well-thumbed copy of *Journey to the West*:

Moon and snow turn plum blossoms white three
nights running
Wine and lamplight turn the people's faces red

To the left of the coffin shop, the red-lacquered doors of Fragrant Court creaked open. A woman with unruly, bird's-nest hair stepped through the door carrying an enamel basin. A loud *bua-la-la* announced the deposit of half a basinful of bloody water into the middle of the lane. Knitting her brow and grinding her teeth, she gazed up at the moist red sun topping the tiled eaves and walked slowly to the shaded wall, where she bent over the ditch and had a spell of dry heaves. With her breasts cradled in her hands, she squatted dully for a while, her face red from the strain, before standing up by pressing her hands against her knees. "He'll be the death of me!" she said. The red doors of Fragrant Court creaked again and a middle-aged man, apparently from the valley, slipped out with his head lowered. A small Goddess of Mercy altar stood just inside the main hall, enveloped in the faint red glare of two little Buddha lamps. The woman picked up her basin and rushed up to the man, blocking his passage with a scowl and a mass of quivering flesh.

"Leaving so soon?"

“Red Spring, I’ll come fuck you again next time I’m in town.”

With a seductive look, Red Spring gave him a smile that wasn’t quite a smile, her gold teeth flashing. The man grinned awkwardly, took a quick look around, reached out and, without a sound, grabbed a handful of pale, pudgy flesh on her arm and twisted it hard.

“Damn you, you sex fiend!” Red Spring shrieked through clenched teeth and the hint of a smile.

The man lowered his head and, seeing his chance to escape, ducked under her arm and ran out the door. Quickly crossing the lane, he hugged the wall as he scampered toward the intersection. Red Spring looked down at her arm, where a bruise was already forming, and stood there dully for a moment. She spat in her hand and rubbed the spot. By the time she’d picked up her basin and had one foot in the door, Liu Laoshi had finished his tea and was hard at work planing a board for one of his coffins. Red Spring’s face twisted into a scowl that mirrored the annoyance swelling inside. She gave him a sidelong glance.

“Hey you black-faced angel of death, can’t you do anything but scrape away at coffins?”

The sun hadn’t yet climbed directly overhead; it was eleven o’clock, but already its blazing rays were streaming into the lane, turning the bloody ditch water to steam, through which bluebot-tles swarmed, circling and circling as they filled the air with a persistent drone. From one end of the lane to the other, brothel doors creaked open as pimps, bent nearly double under the weight of the garbage they were lugging, emerged. They dumped their loads under the eaves, spat a couple of mouthfuls of smoky phlegm into the lane, turned, and slipped back inside. A mule cart clopped slowly into the lane. The scrap dealer shooed the flies away as he climbed down, picked up the grimy bamboo baskets, and wordlessly tossed them into the cart. The driver cackled as he caught them.

“Hey, brother, take it easy, will you? All those whores’ ass-wipes are flying right into my face.”

Red Spring stepped through the door with a yawn and began brushing her gold teeth with water from a mug. Hearing the driver’s comment, she clenched her jaw and stood alluringly in the shade of the eaves. Casting a seductive look at the driver, she said with a coquettish giggle, “Last night, your sister here was indisposed, my monthlies, you know, and I didn’t feel like working. But some sex-crazed valley hayseed said I was the only one he wanted. He didn’t care if it was a little messy. But you, a scrap dealer, think your sister’s dirty, don’t you, little brother? Well, you’re the one I want, so come over and get a taste of your sister’s spit.” A gusher of foamy water sailed from her mug straight at his face—*po-la-la*. Liu Laoshi’s mother, Granny Liu, having heard the clapping of the mule cart, walked slowly out, bent at the waist from the basket of trash in her arms. After a glance heavenward, Red Spring hitched up her pale, oily flesh, spun around, and headed back to her house. With a robust laugh and a loud crack of his whip, the cart driver turned and rode out of the lane.

After refilling her mug, Red Spring reappeared in the doorway. All ten houses in the lane were now open for business. The prostitutes, with their ratty hair coiled high on their heads, yawned loudly and emerged from their rooms, hips swaying as they leaned against their doorways. All those painted red mouths opened as the women brushed their teeth and began gossiping with their neighbors. Changsheng had a basket over her arm. Her plain, floral cotton top and pants sparkled in the bright sun as she emerged from the coffin shop. The women in the doorways immediately stopped their coarse talk. Liu Laoshi, who was hard at work planing his coffin boards, looked up, his bright eyes like a pair of will-o’-the-wisps. Changsheng’s progress was followed by a dozen pairs of eyes as she walked out of Great Blessings Lane.

Autumn Begonia, a sixteen-year-old prostitute from Fragrant Court, dazzled by the sight of Changsheng, bit down hard on her toothbrush and sighed.

“Look at that fair skin.”

“Not even the sun can darken it,” a middle-aged prostitute emerging from Green Silk Garden added as she finished brushing her teeth with a mouthful of water, which she then spewed into the lane.

A third giggled and said, “Every nineteenth day of the sixth month, Granny Liu donates coffins.”

“She’s accumulating merit . . .”

“And she got her son—”

“—a good wife.”

“The fortune-teller—”

“—said she has a good face, brings good fortune . . .”

“What a shame!”

“She’s so frail . . .”

“Not like—”

“—someone meant to have babies.”

Liu Laoshi, straddling a coffin board, heard it all. Without a word, he brushed the ribbons of fragrant juniper shavings off his bench and lit a cigarette. Outside her door, Red Spring said with a snicker, “A piece of charcoal that lies on top of her.” The two prostitutes outside Green Silk Garden, having brushed their teeth three times, gargled and said in tandem, “Miss Red Spring! I say . . .”

“Your skin is just as fair . . .”

“The only difference is—”

“—her skin—”

“—is fresh.”

“But the men . . .”

“How they love the white flesh of our Miss Red Spring.”

“Last night, that valley hayseed . . .”

Red Spring ground her teeth and, with a flip of the wrist, splashed rinsing water into the two prostitutes' faces. Liu Laoshi shot a glance at them, climbed back on his coffin board, tossed away his half-smoked cigarette, picked up his plane, and started in on the wood again, back and forth.

Changsheng came home, shopping basket in hand, the watery green flowers on her dress shimmering in the bright sun. Having finished lunch, the prostitutes and madams were standing in their doorways again, picking their teeth and cocking an eye toward the street. From inside the coffin shop, Liu Laoshi looked up to watch his little woman walk into the lane. Under the lanterns at the entrance to Fragrant Court, Red Spring sat in a wicker chair, sipping a cup of hot tea. Without even raising her eyelids, she said icily, "You're always following her. Why's that?"

Sun the Fourth came and stood in front of her, hands on his hips. With his eyes on the Liu woman as she stepped into the coffin shop, he said brashly, "I drank half a bottle of acanthus liquor at lunch, and the heat's building up inside me. I can hardly stand it!" He laughed lewdly as he pulled out a flowery silk handkerchief to wipe the greasy sweat off his forehead.

Red Spring ground her teeth and, without a word, flung the remaining half cup of steaming jasmine tea into the middle of the lane. "If you're drunk, why not stretch that corpse of yours out?"

Momentarily taken aback by this sudden outburst, Sun laughed and leered at a sixteen-year-old whore through bloodshot eyes. "It's no fun doing it alone."

Red Spring looked up. "That one over in the coffin shop is waiting for you."

Sun the Fourth laughed, but his face darkened. With a flip of his wrist, he grabbed the prostitute's arm and yanked her out of the wicker chair. "You need a good fuck, you stinking whore! I've only

been away three days, and that foul mouth of yours is already filled with maggots.”

Red Spring recovered her balance and glared back at him with a smirk. Pushing his hand away, she rubbed her arm and said, “You’ve got a short fuse.” Sun the Fourth taunted her with a wink. Red Spring frowned and giggled, revealing her gold teeth. Pointing at the coffin shop across the way with pursed lips, she said, “Be careful! That black-faced angel of death over there will steal your soul away.”

Sun the Fourth wiped the smile from his face, moved forward, grabbed the prostitute’s breasts, and pinched them hard. “All I want is to give you a good fuck.”

Red Spring’s face reddened. She spat out the toothpick in her mouth. “Drop dead! What do you think I am?” She turned on her heel and took her milky white flesh inside.

In about the time it takes to burn half a joss stick, sweat-soaked Red Spring, a scowl on her face, saw Sun the Fourth out the door. She was carrying her enamel basin. It was past three in the afternoon, and Liu Laoshi had climbed off his coffin board, put away his plane, and, with a cigarette in his mouth, swept the juniper shavings to one side. Sun the Fourth slipped out the door, eyes to the ground, until he reached the lanterns by the eaves, where he stood dully, staring at the dusty gray-tiled rooftop of the granary across the way.

Red Spring looked up at the white ball of fire in the sky and began seeing double, two suns swirling in the sky—*di-liu-liu*. Momentarily dazzled, she clenched her teeth and cursed: “That damned sun is lethal!” With a scowl, she flung the basin full of bloody water—*bua-la-la*—into the middle of the lane. Then she turned and looked at Sun the Fourth out of the corner of her eye. “You shouldn’t be drinking on such a hot day,” she said. “You’re pale as a ghost.”

Sun the Fourth reddened and, with a grin, pulled out his floral silk handkerchief to wipe the cold sweat from his brow. He watched as Liu Laoshi next door began to close up shop, putting the door planks back in place. "That crazy coffin man is closing up shop in the middle of the day," he said.

Outside Green Silk Garden, the middle-aged prostitute hugged herself with her rail-thin arms as she leaned against the door, drenched in sweat. "Don't you know what today is?" she said. "It's the nineteenth day of the sixth month. All the valley hayseeds will be coming to town. Liu Laoshi's afraid they might see his wife, and he knows what those looks can do."

Sun the Fourth stood there dully before shuffling over to the wall across the way. There he squatted down in the shadows and threw up, emptying his stomach of all the liquor he'd drunk during lunch. "Red Spring, you whore, you'll be the death of me!" Shaking as he took a couple of drags on his cigarette, he struggled to his feet and walked back out into the sun, head down.

A fat woman with a fair complexion, who looked to be in her forties, walked quietly through the doors of Fragrant Court. She was dressed in red satin, despite the heat. Carrying a bowl of steaming glutinous rice balls, flavored with osmanthus and lard, she offered it to Red Spring with a broad smile.

"Ah, Fourth Mama, this must be a day of joy!" Red Spring took the bowl and leaned up against the door, giving the woman a sideways glance. Fourth Mama's slanted eyes glistened with water as she stared at the red and purple scratches and tooth marks on Red Spring's neck. "Old Sun's a damned vampire!" Fourth Mama turned her head and snickered as she swore.

A young fellow, not much over twenty, paced from one end of the lane to the other, twice altogether. "Hey, little brother, your big sister's pining over you!" The youngster shuddered at the invitation and stood indecisively in the middle of the lane for

a moment before lighting a cigarette and, with it dangling from his lips, walked slowly toward the red lantern of Fragrant Court. Red Spring lifted the bowl of rice balls to her mouth and clanged her teeth against the rim as she sipped a mouthful of the hot liquid, her dark, smiling eyes fixed on the young man. He looked up and gazed dopily at her, his dark face turning bright red. As his mouth fell open, ash from the cigarette fell onto his freshly starched clothes, which he'd put on especially for the visit to town. Red Spring giggled. With a flash of her gold teeth, she spat two snowy white rice balls into the middle of the lane, followed by, "Little brother, big sister has her heart set on you!" Then, with a twist of her hips, she pounced on him, plucked the cigarette from his mouth, took a couple of quick puffs, and blew the smoke in his face. The youth shook his head as his knees turned rubbery and he stumbled over to the entrance of Green Silk Garden next door.

"So, you're a young valley hayseed stepping out into the world for the first time!"

Red Spring stomped her feet and swore, tossing the half-smoked cigarette to the ground and crushing it under her heel. The scrawny middle-aged prostitute from next door yawned loudly as she stepped out of the doorway, wordlessly grabbed the youngster by the arm, and pushed him inside. As she stepped back across the threshold, she stuck her head outside, glared at Red Spring, and said with a grin, "This little brother's too green for you, sister Red Spring. Spare him, won't you?"

"At least I'm in it for the money. You're a smelly slut."

Red Spring spat, ground her teeth, and sat down in her wicker chair to dully finish the osmanthus-flavored soup. The old caretaker at Fragrant Court, who was over seventy, walked out the door, his back bent under a load of firecrackers. "This weather! Blistering." He squinted up at the sun hanging above the county granary

rooftop and sighed. Then, taking out a long strand of firecrackers, he tied them to the end of a bamboo pole.

Red Spring scowled in the bright sunlight and rolled her eyes. “You old deadbeat, can’t you do anything but set off firecrackers?”

The old man cocked his head and took in every word without saying a thing. Then, moving slowly toward the door, he turned as he was about to step inside, stuck out his clawlike hand, and left four bloody scratch marks on Red Spring’s neck. “Fuck you, you whore! Nothing but hot air comes out of that mouth when your belly’s full!”

The coffin shop doors opened silently, and Liu Laoshi, dressed to fit the joyous occasion, appeared on the threshold. Red Spring saw him out of the corner of her eye. She flung the bowl to the ground—*huo-lang-lang*—rolled her eyes, and gazed off at the granary, where a valley hayseed was standing, his back to the whores in the lane, his pants undone as he pissed noisily against the wall. “Who does that savage think he is, pissing in front of a coffin shop?”

Liu Laoshi looked darkly at her, laid his basketful of golden oranges on the ground, and pulled his door shut without a word. The fortune-teller, with a pot of hot tea in his hand, sauntered by, eyeing Liu Laoshi.

“Off to get a drink, are you?”

Liu Laoshi merely glanced at him before picking up his basket and walking out of the lane with his head down. Red Spring froze momentarily, then pulled a silver clasp from her hair and began picking her teeth with it, stopping to spit in the lane.

“You black-faced angel of death! Hunkering down there in your coffin shop all day long, working your plane on those coffin boards until I get a creepy feeling!”

“Quiet, Red Spring, don’t taunt him.” The fortune-teller gave her a long, hard look.

“That coffin man can drop dead!”

“Sooner or later King Yama will summon you, Red Spring, and that man will carry you off.”

“What would Yama want me for? To set up a whorehouse in hell?”

“Say there, Red Spring.”

“What?”

“You’re how long here?”

“Did you say whoremonger?”

“What I mean is, Red Spring, how old are you?”

“Guess.”

“Twenty-eight.”

“Ha! I should be so lucky!”

“I can’t tell then.”

“Thirty-three.”

“Thirty-three?”

“Getting old.”

“Red Spring.”

“What?”

“Thirty-three, beware the killing spree!”

The scrawny prostitute from Green Silk Garden stepped outside to see the young man off. Spraying a basin of clear water into the middle of the lane, she cackled and said, “Don’t go scaring people. This lane’s been haunted for years. Late last night, when I was with a client, the damned guy insisted he’d heard someone in the granary singing ‘The God of War Finds His Lost Brother’ at the top of his lungs.” Turning around, she spotted the red paper pasted on the porch posts of the coffin shop next to Red Spring’s place. “Tell me, old-timer, what do those two words say?”

“Free Coffins,” the fortune-teller replied as he strolled out into the lane, hands behind his back, and gazed intently at the black characters scrawled on the red paper. “For more than forty years

the family has given away coffins every year, starting on this day through the nineteenth day of the seventh month, a whole month!”

“And of course there are skinflints who’ll pick this month to die in.”

Red Spring snickered icily. Meanwhile, the old man from her house, after hanging up two strings of firecrackers, bent over, grunting softly, and took out a two-stringed *buqin*, which he began to play as he sat in the doorway. He reacted to what she had just said by spitting in her face.

“Do you even know what day this is?”

“A good day.”

“Is that a curse to hasten my death?”

“Don’t worry, old turtles like you live forever.”

“You fiend-fucking slut! Here they come, whore, go sell some ass.”

Red Spring’s face flushed crimson. Grinding her teeth, she stood up unsteadily and, without a word, grabbed the arm of one of the valley hayseeds who was poking his head in the door and dragged him, stumbling, inside.

A busy afternoon turned into evening. Across the lane, the sun, now a red ball, fell reluctantly behind the dusty gray-tiled roofs, filling the sky with a red glow. Smoke rose from kitchen chimneys all around, and the stench of urine enshrouded Great Blessings Lane, as excitement rose with the increasing number of idlers. The suntanned faces of valley hayseeds, flushed with wine, merged with the locals as their eyes darted this way and that. The scrawny prostitute from Green Silk Garden, a little round mirror in her hand, stood in her doorway immersed in the business of painting her eyebrows. In the mirror, she caught sight of the valley hayseed Red Spring had snagged earlier, running out of Fragrant Court as if he’d seen a ghost. “Hey, what’s the rush, little brother? Is the little woman at home waiting to be serviced?” The crowd in the lane had a big laugh over that.

The man swung around and spat angrily into the lane. “A blood-dripping tiger, that’s what she is!” With an ashen face, he ran into the crowd and disappeared.

“Drop dead!” Red Spring fired back through clenched teeth as she walked out the door, soaked with sweat, though her cheeks had been touched up with rouge and were now nearly purple. Next door, the prostitute who was painting her eyebrows looked over and said with a grin:

“I think you need a few days off, Red Spring. Look how you’ve frightened that hayseed half to death.”

“Paint your eyebrows and mind your own business!”

Red Spring scrunched up her face, turned, and flung a basin of water at the crowd around her door—*po-la-la*; then, spinning around, she pranced back inside. A prostitute from next door emerged with a client. Once she’d seen him off, she mopped her brow and said with a snicker as she buttoned up her blouse:

“That’s quite a belly on Red Spring.”

“She had a womb scraping at the end of the year.”

“And by the time the new year rolled around, she had another one in her.”

“Is she pregnant again?”

“Already been taken care of.”

“Ah.”

“Fourth Mama Luo got hold of a potion from somewhere and forced it down her throat. She bled all day and aborted the fetus. Like a man possessed, the old caretaker at their place poked at it with a pair of tongs to get a good look at the bloody thing. It was a boy.”

“Fate.”

“That’s for sure. Just look at the Liu woman. Her mother-in-law has taken her to pray to every god and bodhisattva she can think of over the past couple of years, and she’s swallowed plenty of incense ashes. But that’s fate. She hasn’t so much as farted.”

“That Changsheng’s a pretty thing. Too bad she’s so frail.”

“Hard to say.”

“What?”

“Hard to say. Who’s the one who can’t make a baby?”

“You mean . . .”

“Just look at Liu Laoshi, straddling those coffin boards day in and day out, planing and scraping. We can’t be sure about him.”

All the brothels in the lane had hung long strands of red fire-crackers on two green bamboo poles at the entrances, through which the madams and pimps dashed in and out. Before long, each place had an offering table set up in front, with two plates of fresh fruit and two cups of rice wine neatly arranged on top. The western sky was awash in red until, little by little, darkness took over. All the light red waxed-paper lanterns along Great Blessings Lane were lit up, swinging under the eaves, the lamplight quivering in a dry wind that had risen with the evening. “Looks like rain,” the scrawny, middle-aged prostitute from Green Silk Garden remarked as she saw a client out the door. Chewing on the neck bone of a chicken, she sighed and smeared chicken grease and red lipstick onto the back of her hand when she wiped her mouth. She smiled at a prospective young client just outside her door. People had crowded into the lane.

Fourth Mama Luo, dressed grandly in red satin, came out with a bundle of joss sticks. She went down on her hands and knees before the offering table in her doorway and solemnly kowtowed. Then, patting her hips and rising by pressing her hands against her knees, she stuck the joss sticks into the incense holder. Her face clouded as she looked up.

“Have you been drinking again, Brother Sun?”

A smiling Sun the Fourth, his face flushed with alcohol and hands clasped behind his back, walked up with four young toughs in floral shirts, like a pack of wolves. “Fourth Mama, how devout

you are.” One of the toughs, a grinning, handsome boy of seventeen or eighteen, stepped out from behind Sun with a six-pack of acanthus liquor. Holding it in the palm of his hand and looking at Mama Luo, he hefted it a bit before laying it gently on the offering table. The old man at Fragrant Court, who had been reciting sutras, came running out, scooped up the six bottles and, holding them to his chest, ran back inside, muttering, “They’re drunk, and that means trouble!” Sun the Fourth shook his head, laughing and wiping his hands on his floral silk handkerchief. Then, eyes sparkling, he walked slowly toward the coffin shop and peered through a crack in the door. An old prostitute, sitting alone in the doorway of Spot of Red, the neighbor to the right of the coffin shop, laughed.

“Liu Laoshi has gone out to do some drinking.”

“Oh?”

“It’s a special occasion, after all.”

“He’s a coffin yokel.”

“All day long, he’s got his arms around a coffin, scraping away at it with his plane, his eyes looking like will-o’-the-wisps, haunting, always glued to his woman, following her everywhere, as if we smelly whores of the lane might stink up his little treasure!”

“Been drinking again, Fourth Brother? Your face is pale as death, and covered with cold sweat.”

Red Spring, her face flushed, as if she’d been drinking, released an after-dinner belch and smiled as she stepped out the door, cooling herself with a rush fan. Sun the Fourth turned to look at her and froze, but only for a moment. His face burned red. With a smile, he reached out and clutched Red Spring’s fair, sweaty arm, drew her to him and, with a grunt, kissed her twice on the mouth.

“Whenever I’m drunk, all I can think of is fucking that fleshy white body of yours.”

“Drop dead!”

“Hm?”

“People are watching,” Red Spring chirped as she wrenched her arm free, spun around, and walked off. As she stepped through the door, she turned and gave him a dewy-eyed, seductive look. She smiled. The five or six young toughs crowded around her, laughing loudly, and staggered as a group into Fragrant Court.

The smell of burning incense in holders on table altars filled the lane from one end to the other. Madams and pimps from all the brothels, joss sticks in hand, knelt reverently under the eaves and kept a silent watch over the entrance to the lane. In the darkening sky, wisps of incense smoke drifted up and down the silent lane. After seeing off their clients, prostitutes stood dully for a moment, then flung the water in their basins into the lane—*bua-la-la*—wiped their hands, and, taking joss sticks from the offering tables, hiked up their skirts and knelt behind their madams. The lane was black with kneeling figures, eight or nine in front of each house, crowded together under the eaves and raising joss sticks to their brows. The sound of exploding firecrackers drifted over from South Market Street. People who had come to watch began crowding up to the brothels, pushing and shoving as they craned their necks and looked toward the entrance to the lane. Firecrackers exploded—*pi-pi pa-pa*—as if a huge fire raged out on the street. Bits of paper filled the sky, drawing ever nearer and ever louder, and in no time at all had flown up to the lane entrance.

The sixteen-year-old prostitute from Fragrant Court, Autumn Begonia, scurried out from behind Fourth Mama without a sound, reaching the middle of the lane in two or three steps. Holding joss sticks high above her head, she went limp and fell face down on the cobblestones. “Fuck you, you little whore!” the old man from her house screamed angrily through clenched teeth as he ran out from under the eaves, his back bent; grabbed Autumn Begonia by the hair; jerked her head from one side to the other; and slapped her

twice. Valley hayseeds and townfolk milling around the lane watched dumbfounded. "I'll fuck you right into your grave!" The old man gnashed his teeth and savagely kicked her twice in the rear, then dragged her back inside Fragrant Court like a corpse. A swarm of barefoot street kids no more than twelve or thirteen came clamoring into Great Blessings Lane, setting off firecrackers along the way.

"Here comes Guanyin, the Goddess of Mercy!"

At that instant, an explosion of fireworks—*pi-pi pa-pa*—filled the sky with blood-red sparkles as six black-lacquered palanquins with glittering gold inlays, each borne by eight strong men, appeared at the entrance to the lane. Forty-eight bare-chested bearers came reeling in like drunks, leaping and prancing, humming and chanting. Strings of firecrackers rained down from everywhere, bursting into radiant red blooms on top of the bony, sun-blackened shoulders of the forty-eight men. A star-studded sky! Onlookers, young men and old, who had stepped out to watch in stunned silence, let loose a loud roar. An old Taoist priest named Yu, a man well into his sixties, his face painted white, garbed in a black satin, blood-spattered Taoist robe, staggered and stumbled over himself as he circled the palanquins. Then, without warning, he somersaulted onto the first palanquin, heaved a long, drawn-out sigh under the starry sky and, baring his chest, plunged a glittering, steely cold Seven Star sword into his chest. The onlookers gasped, their heads tilted to the side, stunned to see fresh blood gush from the open wound. A moment later, a roar of approval shattered the silence:

"Hooray!"

The forty-eight palanquin bearers continued their increasingly frenzied leaping as if nothing had happened, eyes to the ground as they crushed the remnants of firecrackers under their feet. With the six palanquins resting on their sweaty shoulders, each one hard

on the heels of the one in front, they wove their way down the lane like an enormous speckled black snake, writhing and shuddering as it slithered into the middle of the lane. The row of lanterns under the eaves of the brothels became a red undulation in response to the thirty glass lanterns on the six sacred palanquins that swayed from side to side and bobbed up and down in the smoke and haze from firecracker explosions all through the lane.

The door of the coffin shop creaked open and Changsheng emerged, dressed in white cotton with small green flowers, carrying three joss sticks. She walked out under the eaves and, alongside her mother-in-law, stepped out into the middle of the lane to kneel before the palanquin of Guanyin, the granter of sons. Raucous just moments before, Great Blessings Lane suddenly fell silent under the starry sky, and at this hour of the night, the five or six water-mills on North Market Street could be heard creaking with each turn, *ka-la-la ka-la-la*. The rubbernecker's eyes lit up, stunned, and as word spread from person to person, a crowd formed in front of the Liu coffin shop. Granny Liu began reciting sutras, trembling as she waited for the six sacred palanquins to pass by, so the older woman and her daughter-in-law could finish their vows to Guanyin, head back into the house, and lock the door behind them.

More red firecrackers appeared on bamboo poles in front of the brothels, and the sky was once again filled with a blaze of explosions—*pi-pi pa-pa*. Outside Fragrant Court and Spot of Red, neighbors on either side of the coffin shop, somber looks appeared on the faces of the prostitutes, who gathered around their madams to kneel and raise joss sticks in solemn prayer. With a cadenced shout, the forty-eight bearers hunched their shoulders, bowed their sun-blackened bodies, and hoisted up the six palanquins. Then, staggering and stumbling, they carried Guanyin's palanquin quickly into the middle of the lane. Yu, the old Taoist priest, had whipped himself into a frenzy alongside the palanquin. Tearing off

his blood-spattered black robe, he twirled it like a ghostly shadow. Bursts of “Hooray!” exploded from the crowd as he drew his glittering sword and turned to face the white-clad Guanyin. Then, without a word of warning, he deftly thrust the bloody tip straight into his navel. For a long moment he just stood there, before his eyes rolled upward and, with two powerful spasms, he crumpled to the ground in front of the palanquin opening. With a collective shudder, the procession moved as paper rained from the sky. Beneath the eaves, a figure clad in liquid green stood up and turned to enter the coffin shop. There, standing in the doorway, was a grinning Sun the Fourth.

Red Spring stepped outside with a basin of water, her cheeks flushed with wine. Breathless and drenched in sweat, she leaned against the door, her light red nightgown clinging to her body.

“Drop dead, all of you!”

Catching her breath, she lurched over to the lanterns beneath the eaves and flung the water into the lane. The gawking men leaped to avoid the water and cursed her good-naturedly:

“You old whore.”

“Not getting enough these days?”

“Tonight after we greet the bodhisattva—”

“—I’ll give you the fuck you’re looking for.”

Ignoring them as if they weren’t there, Red Spring tossed her basin noisily back into the house. Then, reaching up to part the sweaty bangs stuck to her forehead, she picked up a joss stick and knelt beside Mama Luo. As she ground her teeth, a deep sadness rose up inside her and hot tears formed ridges on her cheeks. The four young toughs, in their colorful shirts, emerged from Fragrant Court, buttoning their pants and wiping away sweat. Grinning broadly, they walked over under the eaves. A handsome boy of seventeen or eighteen brushed something off his clothes and, with a wink and a grin, looked over at Sun the Fourth.

“Fourth Brother!”

“What?”

“Thanks.”

“Did you all get a piece?”

“We sure did.”

“How was it?”

“Great.”

“How great?”

“She’s a great piece of ass!”

“That whore Red Spring will suck the life right out of you.”

“You’ve had too much to drink, Brother Sun.”

Sun the Fourth, who had been drinking all day, suddenly paled and went soft in the knees. He stumbled up against the coffin shop door, where he wiped his sweaty face and tried to catch his breath. An hour had passed since the bodhisattva-greeting procession had come to the lane, and the night had deepened. Gusting winds from the center of town swept down the lane with a hollow whistle. For a long while, the row of moist red lanterns at the brothels swayed with each gust, flickering weakly. Great Blessings Lane was engulfed in smoke and the *pi-pi pa-pa* of firecrackers, littering the night sky with what looked like twinkling stars. Half of the strands of firecrackers on bamboo poles outside the houses had already exploded. Sun the Fourth looked back and winked.

“I’ve been longing for you, little Mistress Liu.”

Changsheng’s face turned ghostly white.

Old Mrs. Liu, who was standing under the eaves, ran up with a curse and, without warning, jabbed her three burning joss sticks right between Sun’s eyes, throwing him into a drunken rage.

“How dare you, you old coffin hag! Get me riled, and I’ll screw that little daughter-in-law of yours.” With a swift kick, he sent old Mrs. Liu reeling back under the eaves, then wrapped his arm around Changsheng and jerked her head up to gape, en-

tranced, at her face in the light of the lanterns. "My pretty little thing, since your old man can't give you a son, why not borrow some of my seed? What's the use of praying to Guanyin?" Old Mrs. Liu scrambled to her feet and lunged forward again, but was kicked back down by Sun the Fourth, who dragged Changsheng into the house.

The coffin shop door slammed shut. The four young toughs grinned and stood in front of the door to block the way.

"Ah, that Brother Sun—"

"He's great."

"This is a good day."

"He got himself a good piece to plane away on."

The forty-eight palanquin bearers, heads bowed and eyes closed, staggered about like drunks, leaping and prancing, humming and chanting. Guanyin, dressed all in white and cuddling an infant in her arms, smiled ambiguously as she sat primly in the rocking, bouncing palanquin, her eyes cast downward. Old Mrs. Liu crawled up to the shop door, looked up into the starry sky, where shards of firecrackers continued to flutter, and was confronted by a line of gaping faces. The old woman rubbed her eyes and searched the faces in the crowded lane—idlers, prostitutes from the ten brothels, and the fortune-teller.

With a screech, the Taoist priest Yu jerked the Seven Star sword out of his navel. Blood gushed and splattered in all its redness onto the sweaty shoulders of the two bearers in front of him. Suddenly wracked by spasms, his withered old body crumpled in front of the palanquin opening with a violent shudder. The young prostitute from Fragrant Court leaped out from under the eaves again. Wrenching her arm free of the old man from her brothel, she ran barefoot into the middle of the lane, as if crazed. Red Spring looked on spellbound, rubbed her eyes, and, without a word, tossed away her joss sticks and hiked up her skirt. In a flash,

five or six members of the lane sisterhood ran out and threw themselves onto the cobblestones. The eight palanquin bearers at the head of the procession heaved a low, mournful cry—*ai-yo*—bent over at the waist to lift up the white-clad Guanyin, and walked on the bodies of the prostrated women. Onlookers who had come to welcome the deity stood stunned beneath eaves, watching in red-eyed wonder. Suddenly there arose a loud cheer from the onlookers, followed by more exploding firecrackers, filling the lane with sparks and bits of torn paper. The second palanquin, black lacquer inlaid with gold, forged ahead, its bearers leaping and prancing, humming and chanting as they too walked on the silent bodies of the prostitutes lying prostrate in the middle of the lane. By the time the sixth palanquin, with its eight bearers, had walked past, all Great Blessings Lane was at fever pitch. The excited onlookers cursed and shouted as they watched the thirty glass lanterns on the palanquins flicker and sway in the hazy night sky, like will-o'-the-wisps, until they disappeared at the end of the lane.

On North Market Street, firecrackers were already popping—*pi-pi pa-pa*.

The next day was the twentieth of the sixth month.

It was two in the afternoon before the dilapidated mule cart clopped slowly into Great Blessings Lane. The foul-smelling ditch at the foot of the county granary wall, steamy after a morning's exposure to the blazing sun, had hatched swarms of bluebottles. The lane swelled with the droning of these flies as they swarmed from one end to the other, driven mad by the smell of blood. The scrap dealer climbed down off his mule cart, broom over his shoulder and dustpan in hand, rubbed his eyes, and stared blankly at the ground littered with firecracker confetti. Up and down the lane, brothel doors finally creaked open in the early afternoon. Sticky,

light red nightgowns hanging from their shoulders, the prostitutes stepped out, yawning grandly, leaned up against the doorframes, and began brushing their teeth and gossiping.

“Those damned valley hayseeds.”

“Gaping at the greeting ceremony.”

“Started getting the itch—”

“—like a bunch of rutting pigs.”

“Always wearing me out—”

“—didn’t sleep a wink.”

“And how they stink!”

“Makes you sick to your stomach.”

“Scum!”

The fortune-teller came strolling along, reading his dog-eared copy of *Journey to the West*. He stopped in front of Spot of Red, where he looked up, stole a glance at the coffin shop, and shook his head. The scrap dealer swept up a basketful of fire-cracker confetti and dumped it into his cart, sending bits of paper flying. His partner, the driver, cursed as he wiped his face, “Fuck your old lady!”

“What?”

“You’re throwing that whore’s ass-wipes at me again!”

The man below stopped sweeping, stuck the broom under his armpit, and stared dully at the coffin shop door. “That’s strange. It’s past two o’clock, and Liu Laoshi hasn’t opened up shop yet.”

The man on the cart spat and said grudgingly, “First thing this morning his woman hanged herself.”

The man below swung around and stared at him. “Buddha help us, don’t say that!”

The driver’s face reddened and he began to laugh. “I tell you,” he said after a while, “after the greeting procession last night, I felt like I was on fire, so I ran over to Fragrant Court to cool off on top of that little whore Autumn Begonia. When I came out early this

morning, I saw old Mrs. Liu wailing and crying to heaven as she ran into the lane screaming for help.” The man below listened in rapt attention.

The third day: the twenty-first day of the sixth month.

At around noon the mule cart clopped into the alley. The scrap dealer climbed down with two packets of gold spirit money. He walked unsteadily up to the coffin shop, where he knelt under the eaves and lit the paper money, one gilded sheet after another. Tongues of red fire, a blazing white sun.

“What’s the idea, burning paper on such a hot day?” the driver spat. Then he jumped down off the cart. Rubbing his face, he faltered, then headed slowly toward Fragrant Court, where he stood beneath the lanterns and peeked inside.

“Haven’t seen that old whore, Red Spring, standing in her doorway for at least two days.”

“You miss her?” the scrawny prostitute from Green Silk Garden said as she emerged with a client and a basin of water. She looked at the driver out of the corner of her eye. He blinked.

“It’s been two days.”

“So?”

“Well, did some client fuck the life right out of her?”

“Fuck her? That’s nonsense.”

“Huh?”

“Be careful. Liu Laoshi will hear you.”

“Oh, sorry.”

“Red Spring, she . . .”

“Can’t get out of bed?”

“Poor Red Spring, they really did her in this time.”

“What?”

“Remember how crazy drunk she was the night of the procession? Her nose was running and tears were flowing. I don’t know what she was thinking when she ran out into the middle of the lane

and let those forty or fifty palanquin bearers walk across her back! She's not made of steel, is she? So she's been laid up in bed the past two days with blisters all over her body."

"What could have made her do a thing like that?"

"Fate."

"That nice fleshy body of hers."

"Nearly stomped to death."

"What a pity!"

The fourth day arrived: the twenty-second of the sixth month.

The two scrap dealers tore into Great Blessings Lane like a gale, their whip snapping in the air—*po-la-la*. The lane was in an uproar. Sun the Fourth had been arrested.

The driver spat into the lane and shook his head.

"No big deal. For raping another man's wife, all he'll get is three to five years."

"Are you sure?"

"Just you wait and see."

"What do you mean?"

"By this time next year, Sun the Fourth will be back in town."

Liu Laoshi had opened up shop early that day and, as usual, was straddling his coffin board, his plane moving back and forth on a piece of wood; a cigarette dangled from his lips as he worked silently, head bowed. But Granny Liu ran out into the lane at daybreak and stood there, bent at the waist, her white-capped head tilted upward; her eyes narrowed in a squint, she pointed a finger at every passerby and shouted:

"Lightning will strike you down!"

"Lightning will strike you down!"

She stood there cursing all day.

As evening fell, the lane gradually filled up with idlers; excitement rose. Liu Laoshi kept his door open. Chimney smoke rose all over town.

Liu Laoshi climbed down off his coffin board, flipped away his cigarette, put away his plane, and swept the aromatic juniper shavings off the plank. Then he straightened up and stood dully for a moment before lighting another cigarette and squatting on top of a newly made coffin board to smoke, hugging his knees. A pair of valley hayseeds passed by and, with a laugh, poked their heads in. After a while, Liu Laoshi abruptly opened his eyes, jumped to the floor, and called the two hayseeds back to help him lug two large, freshly painted red coffins with raised heads out under the eaves. Then, in a flash, the dazzling blade of a cleaver appeared in Liu Laoshi's hand; the cigarette still in his mouth, he disappeared noiselessly into his neighbor's doorway. A group of idlers beneath the swaying red lanterns stood bewitched, unable to believe their eyes. The lane was deathly silent. Then, someone somewhere let out a muted, pitiful cry, "Ai-yee," like a heavy, drawn-out, nightmarish sigh. The crowd surged forward in clamorous waves, blocking the entrance to Fragrant Court. The two valley hayseeds pressed up against the door, craning their necks to see inside; the sight turned their swarthy faces white. A flash of blood in the mist, as a shadow leaped out through Red Spring's door, under the moist red lanterns. It was Liu Laoshi, a cigarette still dangling from his lips, cleaver in hand, a blank look in his bloodshot eyes. The scrawny middle-aged prostitute from Green Silk Garden emerged with her basin of water, doing up her buttons as she saw off a client. She was about to dump her basin of water into the lane when she turned around and was face-to-face with him.

"Murder!"

Liu Laoshi, a blank stare in his eyes, gripped his bloody cleaver and, without looking back, pushed his way through the throng of idlers and began walking to the end of the lane. His seventy-year-old mother was still standing at the three-way intersection, pointing and cursing at passersby. When she saw her blood-spattered

son emerge from the lane, she gasped and began to wail. The old woman fell to her knees and wrapped her arms around his legs. "Don't kill anyone!" she cried out. "Don't go killing anyone!" Liu Laoshi heard her out, heaved a sigh, and, with wide, staring eyes, stepped back to break his mother's grip, sending her reeling. Bleary-eyed, the old woman looked up and saw the open-mouthed stares of the idlers behind her son.

"Don't let him kill anyone! Don't let him do it!"

Liu Laoshi had already reached busy South Market Street. He hacked open the door and dragged Sun the Fourth's wife out from under the kitchen stove. After plunging the cleaver into her heart, he pulled it out, dripping with blood, and, without a word, crossed the street and ran into Crown Prince Lane, where forty or fifty impoverished households lived in dilapidated hovels. In the settling darkness, two or three families were squatting in their doorways eating dinner. Cleaver in hand, Liu Laoshi staggered past them, his eyes red, and turned toward North Market Street. Curious bystanders, in the grip of upheaval, took out after him, following this demon all the way to the precinct station, where he collapsed in a heap. Brought up short, they fled in all directions.

Liu Laoshi had gone mad.

Granny Liu locked up the coffin shop and tore down the two red posters alongside the door. She scared up six or seven feet of red fabric and threw her best clothing and valuables into it. Then, tossing the bundle over her shoulder early one morning, she walked out of Great Blessings Lane into South Market Street and all the way out of town.

Sun the Fourth was in the provincial jail for a year before he could bribe his way out. By that time, both his legs were crippled from beatings. The four young toughs and their colorful shirts were never seen again. The silk establishment on South Market Street owned by the Sun family for four generations had become a

commercial pariah. Sun the Fourth reopened it for a couple of days, but no one came, so he locked it up and bought an old house by the dam at the edge of town, to live a quiet life. Around noon each day he would hobble past his old silk store to the Zhu Family Teahouse next door. He'd sit at a table near the door, staring silently across the street toward the county granary, where a solitary, lean chinaberry tree stood under the blazing sun. One day, before he had finished half a cup of tea, he looked up and, to his surprise, saw a man sitting beneath the tree, bare-chested, turning a tattered shirt inside out and back again, as if looking for something. Sun the Fourth was dazed, and then, just as he was about to get up, a crash of thunder broke through the sunny sky and a sun shower fell—*di-di da-da*. The man beneath the tree opened his eyes, picked a flea out of his armpit, and, after studying it carefully in his hand, crushed it beneath his foot. Sun the Fourth slowly drained his cup of tea and pushed himself to his feet. Borrowing a bamboo-leaf hat from the Zhu woman, he hobbled out of the teahouse. Hunching his shoulders and lowering his head, he headed toward the watery sun and down the long stretch of South Market Street toward his old house by the dam.

On the afternoon following Sun the Fourth's return to Jiling from prison, the woman Zhu watched him limp into her teahouse. She greeted him with a smile and a cup of hot tea. "Brother Sun, you're back. How are you doing?" As Sun the Fourth settled into his seat, he heard a splashing sound as the hot tea was pushed up under his nose—*jian-jian po-po*—spilling all over the table. "Ghosts have returned to Great Blessings Lane." Raising her eyelids, she coldly studied the three burn marks between Sun's eyebrows left by Granny Liu's red-hot joss sticks the night they greeted the bodhisattva. After a moment, she said, "According to Fourth Mama Luo in Great Blessings Lane, Changsheng arrives just before daybreak, dressed in a white cotton top and pants with a green floral

pattern, a market basket over her arm. She emerges from the coffin shop all alone and paces up and down the lane! Even some of the men who come out at daybreak, after spending the night, have seen her." Sun the Fourth sat in stunned silence and took a sip of his tea before turning back slowly to look at Mrs. Zhu. He then turned and gazed at the sun-baked street, where people strolled back and forth in the white heat. Mrs. Zhu shook her head; a broad smile creased her fair, round face.

"She's waiting for someone."

"Hm?"

"Changsheng."

"Her?"

"Early every morning, she waits for someone."

Sun Showers

Xiao Yue, his gaunt chest bared, walked home beneath the scorching sun, cursing the heat under his breath. His mother was sitting in the doorway with her head down, lost in thought as she picked husks out of a pan of rice. When she heard him kick open the gate of their bamboo fence, she said without even looking up, “Xiao Shun’s wife from next door just came by with news. Liu Laoshi is back in town.”

Xiao Yue stood in the shade of the doorway and glanced at his mother, then turned to stare at the white glare on the pond in front of the house. “Mother, you’re missing two of your buttons.”

She put down the pan of rice and closed her blouse over her aged breasts, fastening it with a pin she took from her hair. “Stay inside the house for the next couple of days,” she said. “If you have anything more to do with that demon, I’ll smash my head against this door and die right before your eyes!”

Xiao Yue sat in the doorway beside his mother. “Damn this heat! It’s enough to turn your sweat cold. It hasn’t rained in a month!”

His mother turned and silently studied his face for a long moment. “Don’t go cursing heaven like that, or one day lightning will strike you dead!” She reached over and laid her hand against his

chest. "You shouldn't have cold sweats on a hot day like this. Go inside, make a bowl of ginger tea, and drink it."

Xiao Yue went into the kitchen, filled a ladle with water, and poured it over his head. His mother followed him inside with her pan of rice and saw him hunch over the half-full vat, holding onto the edges with both hands and gazing into the murky water with a vacant stare. "Look at you!" she scolded. "Your face is pale as death!" She banged the pan down on the stovetop and went to the cupboard to look for raw ginger.

Xiao Yue raised his head and yanked off the undershirt draped over his shoulders to wipe his face. He walked out into the courtyard, where he kicked a sleeping bitch in the chest. "Mother, I feel nauseous. The smell of that ginger makes me want to puke. Fix some for me later tonight."

The old woman shook her head. "Up to your evil ways again!"

The smiling young wife of Xiao Shun, their neighbor, walked into the kitchen, a baby at her breast. Looking at Xiao Yue's mother, she said, "I was passing by, and when I looked in on you, I heard your poor dog yelping." The bitch, which was tied up in the courtyard, lay whimpering in the shadows, curled up as she licked her chest and kept a wary eye on Xiao Yue.

With a shake of her head, the old woman tossed a pig's-foot bone into the courtyard. "Who knows what kind of underhanded dealings he's been up to this time!" Xiao Yue picked up the pot used for cooking pig slop and lugged it over to the stove, where he added a dozen or so ladlefuls of water. Then, without a word, he filled the stove with kindling. Xiao Shun's wife watched as he took a cold, glinting dagger from a compartment in the cupboard. She carried her little son out into the courtyard and, with a smile, said to Xiao Yue's mother, "What a fine-looking bitch. Her coat's so black and shiny! Looks young, too. Hasn't had any pups yet." The old woman heard her but said nothing.

She carried a tiny stone mill outside, where she sat down and began to grind the rice.

Xiao Shun's wife looked up at the sky. "It hasn't rained in a month, and nothing but a lethal blue sky for days. It's a little better today, with some gray clouds up there." Raising her voice, she shouted out the door, "Aunty, I think we're in for a change of weather!"

Xiao Yue's mother kept grinding the rice. Without turning her head, she muttered, as if to herself, "It's about time. Heaven should open its eyes instead of letting a whole town die of heatstroke!"

Xiao Yue heard the comment and, clenching his teeth, ladled some water over his whetstone. Then he crouched down with his dagger. Xiao Shun's wife stood in the shadows and watched him sharpen it. Her child, sucking greedily at her breast, giggled with delight and bit down on her nipple. "You little demon. Only a year old, and already you have teeth! You'll grow up to be another scourge of your mother!" she scolded, opening her eyes wide and slapping the child lightly on the cheek.

The old woman outside heard this comment and said, "What about this good-for-nothing in my family? When I was carrying him, he never stopped kicking and thumping me. And during the lying-in month, he bit and gnawed on me every time I fed him. By the time he was two, he had a mouthful of razor-sharp teeth. You'd have thought I was an enemy from some previous life, and that he was getting even with me."

Xiao Yue stuck the sharpened dagger into his waistband and turned to his mother. "I was a bad seed from the start, born with a worm in my brain. Sooner or later it'll eat up my soul and drive me crazy, and then you can rest easy, Mother."

His mother kept her head down as she continued grinding the rice. After a while, she looked over at Xiao Shun's wife. "See what a wonderful son I've raised! He's got sharp teeth now, and his arms

are thick and brawny. Even his own mother can't keep him down. Running after that hoodlum Sun the Fourth all day long, calling him brother, even adopted father, and tagging along wherever he goes, whoring and gambling. The night of the Guanyin procession in Great Blessings Lane he was with Sun the Fourth carrying out his evil deeds. And now Liu Laoshi's back, so let that demon settle accounts."

The stove began to crackle as the water in the pot boiled. Sweat glistened on Xiao Yue's sun-blackened, naked back as he mopped his forehead with his undershirt. He bent down and fed more wood into the stove.

Still holding her baby in her arms, Xiao Shun's wife walked lazily up to the kitchen door, fanning herself, her face flushed, and looked at the old woman. "Strange, isn't it," she said. "There was a sun shower the day Liu Laoshi made his way back to Jiling, and it hasn't rained since, a whole month."

Xiao Yue's mother picked up her millstone and went back inside, where she dried her hands before lighting three joss sticks and placing them before the altar. "Lots of men from town went to Great Blessings Lane that evening to watch the procession. But when Sun the Fourth did his evil deed, not a single one of them raised a finger to stop him. They turned into a flock of gaping geese and just stood there gawking. If they're not punished by heaven, I don't know who will be!"

Without a word, Xiao Yue found a length of hempen rope and tucked it into his waistband as he clenched his teeth. Avoiding his mother's glare, he picked up a burlap sack and shambled into the courtyard. The four o'clock sun sent its rays into the house and cast his long, thin shadow across the courtyard and onto the opposite wall, where the outline of his head and neck hung at an angle. It resembled the image of the Death Messenger in the temple procession, swaying on stilts, its long tongue hanging down, as

it waved its big rush fan. The pot of water on the stove was at a full boil, filling the kitchen with steam. Xiao Shun's wife, sweaty from head to toe, pulled her nipple from her son's mouth, coaxing him to turn and watch Xiao Yue play with the dog. With wide-staring eyes, Xiao Yue bared his teeth and shook the sack at the dog. The bitch cowered at the base of the courtyard wall and watched him with gleaming eyes. The baby had nestled his cheek against his mother's breast and was watching Xiao Yue, when suddenly he opened his mouth and burst out crying, clawing at his mother's breasts. "Stop teasing it," Xiao Shun's wife pleaded with Xiao Yue as she tried to calm her child. "It's disgusting." Xiao Yue took another step toward the dog, gave the sack a hard jerk, and stamped his foot. Reacting to the provocation, the bitch struggled to her feet and snarled at Xiao Yue. This drew a grin from Xiao Yue, who sprang forward and, in two swift moves, swung the sack over the bitch's head. A quick yank and the sack was closed. Then he took the rope from his waistband, wound it around the top of the sack, and knotted it tightly. His mother stuck her head out the kitchen door and saw what her son was doing. "The bodhisattva has eyes!" she scolded. The baby had stopped crying and had wrapped his white pudgy arms around his mother's neck. He giggled as he watched Xiao Yue fling the heavy sack to the ground and give it a kick.

"Finish her off with a club. One good blow will do it! See how she's struggling in there. If you want to suffocate her, you'll have to wait forever." Xiao Shun's wife carried her son over to the sack and nudged it with her foot.

Xiao Yue laughed as he took a half-smoked cigarette from behind his ear and lit it in the stove. Then he went back outside and squatted at the edge of the courtyard, smoking leisurely as he watched the sack twist and turn in the sun. Xiao Shun's wife frowned as she stood looking at him.

“You’d better stop your evil ways,” she said icily. “Didn’t your mother tell you? Xiao Shun returned home a while ago and said that a stranger came to town at noon. His dark face is covered with a full beard, and he looks like a wild man from the mountains. When he came into town he went straight to the chinaberry tree in front of the county granary and sat down with his bundle. He hasn’t moved all afternoon. As soon as they heard that the demon, Liu Laoshi, was back in town, some of the men who had a guilty conscience rushed home and hid out, afraid of their own shadows. But then they got restless sitting around doing nothing, so they all crowded into the woman Zhu’s teahouse across the street from the granary. Xiao Shun says you shouldn’t go out for the next couple of days, because—who knows?—that cleaver might be hidden in the sack.”

“A bad seed like me is bound to be struck down by lightning sooner or later, so what do I have to fear from a cleaver?” Xiao Yue flipped away his cigarette and stood up. He grabbed a pole they kept for carrying buckets and walked into the middle of the courtyard. His mother called out from inside, “With lightning above and the King of Hell below, there’s no sense worrying about him.”

Only then did Xiao Shun’s wife shut up and press her baby’s head up against her breast and move off to one side to watch Xiao Yue feel around the outside of the sack. Then he raised the pole over his head and swung down hard. The bitch moaned as her hind legs jerked the sack taut twice. Aiming at where the head was, Xiao Yue swung the pole again. Xiao Shun’s wife took her hand away from the baby’s face and sighed.

“Those two whacks did the job! The last time Xiao Shun killed one, he pounded a dozen times without aiming, only to find that the dog was still alive and kicking in the sack.”

The sack lay in the courtyard, a lifeless lump. Xiao Yue went up and nudged it with his foot. Blood began to seep out. He squatted

down, quickly untied the knot, and dumped the bloody corpse of the little black bitch out. Her skull was split open. His mother poked her head out of the kitchen door again and said, "What kind of mother are you, watching such evil with a baby in your arms?"

Xiao Shun's wife hugged the baby to her breast and watched as Xiao Yue drew the dagger from his waistband. "It's already dead!" she shouted back without turning her head. "My son didn't see him kill it."

Standing there dully, Xiao Yue held the dagger in one hand and grasped the dog's neck with the other. He ran the cold tip of the dagger over the throat a couple of times, then slit open the artery with a single stroke, stepping back to watch for a while as a stream of blood oozed out. Then he returned to the stove and got several ladlefuls of boiling water, which he poured onto the dead dog. The bitch lay on her back, her legs pointing toward the bright red sun. Nothing but white showed in her staring eyes. Xiao Yue felt the tip of the dagger and ran the edge of the blade over his whetstone a time or two, then slit her belly open from the throat down. Tossing his dagger aside, he wedged his fingers into the opening and ripped it open so he could reach in and dredge out the innards. Everything came spilling out: heart, liver, intestines.

Xiao Shun's wife walked up with her hand covering her son's face, crouched down, and ran a finger over the dead dog's belly. Looking up at Xiao Yue, she giggled and said, "The little thing already had teats! Another six months and she'd have found a mate to make her a mother."

Xiao Yue, a dark look on his face, fetched a basin and filled it halfway with hot water. As he was cleaning out the bloody carcass, he said, "I'm going to stew a pot of dog meat tonight. Come over and I'll give you a bowlful."

She giggled again and stood up, putting her mouth to her baby's cheek to give it a couple of hard pecks. "None for me,

thanks,” she replied, cramming her nipple back into the baby’s mouth as she walked out of the kitchen. She stopped abruptly, and looked back. “That bastard Xiao Shun forced me to eat a whole bowlful once; it made me sick for days. Every time I went out I felt like all the dogs on the street were glaring at me.” She giggled and added, “Dog meat really does something funny to you! It makes you feel hot all over, hot and uncomfortable.”

Xiao Yue chopped the dead dog into pieces and dumped it into the pot of boiling water on the stove. All of a sudden, a fit of dizziness seized him; his legs turned rubbery and his eyes blurred. He felt everything falling away. His legs were wobbly. Steadying himself by grabbing the edge of the stove, he sat down shakily on a nearby stool. After lighting a cigarette, he stared at the sun-baked pool of blood in the courtyard and shuddered. He couldn’t shake the image of Liu Laoshi holding his blood-spattered cleaver.

That evening, Liu Laoshi had gone crazy. Cleaver in hand, he ran out of Great Blessings Lane in search of his mortal enemy. Xiao Yue hid in the thatched privy behind the Zhu woman’s teahouse opposite the county granary. Peering over the wall, he watched the demon burst silently into the kitchen of the Sun family silk shop next door, grab Sun the Fourth’s wife and, without a word, slice off her nipples. The woman Zhu quickly closed up shop, dragged Xiao Yue out of the privy, shoved him inside, and made him stand behind the door to watch through the cracks. The street seethed with people. A crowd of idlers gathered in front of Sun the Fourth’s house. With nothing better to do after dinner, they crowded round, mouths agape in disbelief, and watched Liu Laoshi spring out of the house holding a bloody cleaver. Without a word, he ran down South Market Street, and they all fell in behind him, pushing and shoving, as if afraid to lose sight of the demon. After a while the clamor died down, leaving only Liu Laoshi’s mother,

on her hands and knees in the street, gaping at the retreating backs of the crowd and sobbing loudly. Xiao Yue ran out of the teahouse and fled home, where he lay under his quilt, suffering from the dry heaves most of the night. His mother made him drink two bowls of ginger tea, but he threw it up right into her old face.

“If you don’t clean up the courtyard, the neighbors will notice the bloody water and think this has turned into a murderer’s den.”

After sending Xiao Shun’s wife away, his mother returned to the kitchen, where she saw her son staring blankly into the courtyard, drenched in cold sweat. She went up and felt his chest. “You’re all clammy. You shouldn’t break out in a cold sweat on a hot day like this! I told you to fix some ginger tea, so don’t expect me to listen to you moan and groan all night.” She felt for some raw ginger in the cupboard and looked back at her son. “Now stay home for the next few days. If you run into that demon, he’ll chop you into pieces with his cleaver.”

“Stop nagging, Mother.”

Xiao Yue clenched his teeth as he took the wet undershirt off his shoulder and pulled it over his head. “Vengeance will fall on the evildoer, debts will fall on the debtor. I’m just going to take a look at him. I don’t believe he’ll hack me to pieces!” He turned his back to the old woman and secretly slipped the dog-butchering dagger under his shirt. Then he extinguished the fire in the stove and put a lid on the pot.

“I’ll be right back, Mother.”

Xiao Yue walked out the door and looked up at the blinding sun in the western sky. It was a red fireball hanging above the riverbank, seemingly reluctant to set. A hot, dry wind rose up, causing him to shudder as it cut through the wet, foul-smelling undershirt that clung to him and sent a shiver up his spine. Next door, Xiao Shun’s wife sat in her doorway, her breast exposed as she suckled

her son. She blinked and smiled at Xiao Yue as he walked past, the sun at his back. He felt a wave of nausea. Ignoring the three or four pairs of eyes on him, he clutched at his chest, squatted down beside the ditch, and threw up the bile in his stomach. The lane was quiet. Women in thin white cotton clothing sat in their doorways, the young ones suckling their babies, the old ones husking rice. Cooling themselves with big rush fans, they looked listlessly up into the sky from time to time to watch clouds gather overhead. Dogs sprawled silently in the shade, their red tongues jerking as they panted in the heat.

Neither the women nor the dogs stirred as Xiao Yue passed by. They just stared at him with lazy, vacant eyes.

It had been as oppressively hot on Guanyin's birthday—the nineteenth day of the sixth month—as it was today. Xiao Yue had drunk so much at noon, he'd had to hold his hands to his chest to keep from throwing up. But in the end, he took his hands away and sprayed the street with all the liquor and meat in his stomach. In the noonday heat, altars had been moved out in front of shops on both sides of the street. Women emerged carrying incense urns. With the sun blazing overhead, they lit three joss sticks reverentially to appease the bodhisattva as she passed through the area to protect and bring peace and prosperity to every household in Jiling. All up and down South Market Street, spirit money burned red in blackened iron pots under the eaves. Xiao Yue was mesmerized by the sight for a moment before moving a bench out from the woman Zhu's teahouse to sit under the eaves and fan his chest as he watched the street fill up with the men from the valley. They had come in for the festivities and were scurrying up and down Great Blessings Lane, poking their heads in here and there.

“Lecherous louts. Coming into town and making a beeline for Great Blessings Lane on today of all days!” Sun the Fourth

staggered over with a bottle of acanthus liquor, cursing the heat with every step. As he pulled off his undershirt, he lurched and fell against the woman Zhu. “Why don’t you go home and sober up!” she snapped, hugging the incense burner in her arms. “This place stinks of your vomit!” Just as she said this, she turned and looked down Great Blessings Lane. “Well, well,” she said with a little laugh. “This *is* a special day! Liu Laoshi has let his woman out.” Sun the Fourth froze, then waved his hand and shuddered. “What a fine piece of white meat! A good fuck wasted on a coffin maker!” The woman Zhu set her incense urn down gently on its stand and gave him a meaningful look. “Don’t cross that coffin maker, Fourth Brother. You know what they say about him—he’s slow to boil, but when he does, he cracks the pot.”

Xiao Yue felt another surge rise inside his chest. He ran over to the ditch and vomited until his stomach was empty. This sobered him up a bit, and when he looked up, he saw Changsheng come out of Great Blessings Lane, walking in the glare of the sun down South Market Street with a basket on her arm. She wore a blouse with a small flowered pattern on a plain white background. Her eyes narrowed against the blazing sun. The men from the valley all turned to gape as she passed, sizing her up. Four grinning young street kids, twelve or thirteen years old, appeared at the entrance to Great Blessings Lane and stole up behind Changsheng, following her all the way to the chinaberry tree in front of the county granary. With a whistle as their signal, they surrounded her. Pantomiming the men who bore Guanyin’s palanquin through town, they leaped and pranced, hummed and chanted. At the height of their excitement, they spotted Xiao Yue bearing down on them like a demon, and they scattered.

Xiao Yue stood dully in the street for a moment, then drew a crumpled bill out of his pocket and shook it in the air. Walking up to Changsheng at a crouch, he said with a little laugh, “Mistress Liu, you dropped this.” Changsheng’s face flushed red, but she

kept walking with her eyes down. Xiao Yue trailed dopily behind her. Noticing all the women lighting joss sticks in sun-drenched doorways on both sides of the street, he stuffed the bill back into his pocket, his face reddening. Slowly he caught up with Changsheng. "This is a special day, a day of piety! So why is Brother Laoshi still squatting in his shop making coffins?" Changsheng turned to look at Xiao Yue, who felt his heart skip a beat, sobering him up even more. He retreated, taking a slow step back to look at her. With a gentle smile, he said, "Mistress Liu, there's nothing to be afraid of on a busy street in broad daylight." A string of red firecrackers flew out noiselessly from under the eaves and fell at Changsheng's feet, where it erupted in a burst of *pi-pi pa-pa*. Xiao Yue's head shot up. He saw one of the four street kids hiding behind a post under the eaves. He was peeking out and grinning at Changsheng, grasping a joss stick, the tip glowing fiery red. "You filthy little runt! I'll yank out all the hairs on your prick!" With the curse still on his lips, Xiao Yue ran over to the boy, fists clenched, as another string of firecrackers arched out into the street. Changsheng stood with the basket on her arm, not knowing what to do. Xiao Yue chased after the boy, cursing loudly; what little liquor remained in him surged to his head. He tore off his undershirt, baring his gaunt chest, and, with wide, staring eyes, ran up and down the street, wildly chasing after all the young punks. As the uproar reached the shops, a bunch of young toughs poured out, carrying firecrackers and sticks of burning incense. A dozen half-grown boys filled the street, tossing firecrackers this way and that and goading Xiao Yue with shouts of "Greet the goddess Guanyin, greet the bodhisattva!"

"Xiao Yue!" Xiao Shun, sweat-soaked and carrying a sack of rice over his shoulder, walked up to him and shook him hard. "Has the angel of death snatched your soul away?"

Xiao Yue raised his head and gaped at him.

“What are you doing out here all by yourself? Look at you! Your face is as pale as death!” Xiao Shun loosened his grip and gazed up at the sky. “The weather is changing. If it doesn’t rain soon, let’s just die and be done with it.”

Xiao Yue began laughing idiotically.

“Has Liu Laoshi come back?”

“He’s sitting under the chinaberry tree in front of the granary, dozing off.” Xiao Shun walked a few steps toward his door, but then turned and eyed Xiao Yue ambiguously. “That night when you and Sun the Fourth got drunk, why didn’t you go home and sleep it off? Why did you go running into Great Blessings Lane?”

That day, Sun the Fourth had got drunk on acanthus liquor. At first, his face flushed bright red. As he drank into the evening it turned pale, and a stream of curses poured from his lips at the sky. He led five toughs of varying ages staggering into Great Blessings Lane, cursing and coughing. “What’s the world coming to when a bunch of pimps and madams lead their whores in worshipping Guanyin, choking the street with their incense smoke?” After fucking Red Spring, Xiao Yue emerged from Fragrant Court and leaned against the door. The liquor in his stomach was acting up, and he felt his bloodshot eyes fill up with water, unable to focus. Then he heard the popping of firecrackers—*pi-pi pa-pa*—as Great Blessings Lane seemed ablaze.

“Greet the goddess Guanyin! Greet the bodhisattva!” The four barefoot young toughs came running into Great Blessings Lane raising a commotion. “You little bastards, you fucking—” The curse was only halfway out of Xiao Yue’s mouth when the liquor surged to his head again. He spun around a time or two, then sprawled in the middle of the lane, raising howls of laughter from all the valley hayseeds crowded under the eaves. A rocket shot up into the black, starlit sky. Xiao Yue craned his neck to watch it. The

sky was aglow with an umbrella of gorgeous, glittering red petals. Seconds later they burned out like meteors in the eternal night. He struggled to his feet, but his legs gave out and he fell to his knees in front of the goddess Guanyin, his eyes glazed. There, seated in the darkness of the pitching, tossing palanquin, he was sure he saw the smiling face of Changsheng, her eyes closed. The four young toughs came running wordlessly up to Xiao Yue and dragged him over under the eaves like a corpse. “You drunken stiff! Two lousy bottles of cat piss, and you go spewing filth in front of everyone. You’ve got a nerve, blocking the Guanyin Bodhisattva! You’re lucky we don’t flay the skin off your hide!”

Changsheng, dressed in her bright blouse and trousers, a flowered print on a white background, knelt gracefully alongside her mother-in-law under the eaves of the coffin shop, holding three joss sticks above her head. The bodhisattva, clad in snow-white robes, was holding a rosy-cheeked infant, her face aglow with compassion. Sun the Fourth slouched against the door of the coffin shop, muttering curses, his sweaty face pale as death.

“Guanyin has revealed her magical powers!” cried Xiao Yue, ripping off his undershirt to expose his pale, gaunt chest. Out in the middle of the lane, an old Taoist priest stood soaked in blood, a sword gripped tightly in his hand. His eyes were half shut, as if in a trance. His black, blood-spattered robe was dyed a deep crimson. He displayed it, dripping, before Guanyin’s eyes. “Guanyin has revealed her magical powers!” groaned Xiao Yue as he staggered out into the middle of the lane, laughing idiotically, and reached out to smear blood from the man’s navel all over his own face. The idlers watching the excitement cried out, “Guanyin has revealed her magical powers!” Xiao Yue stood up in the lane with his hands on his hips. His eyes blurred from liquor, he glanced over at the crowd of faces under the eaves, and was suddenly overcome by the rank stench of blood. His heart faltered and everything went hazy as he

crumpled into a ball on the ground in front of Guanyin's palanquin. The four toughs pounced on him without warning and dragged him away, spitting, "You drunken stiff, interfering with the bodhisattva's palanquin again. Wait till we undo our pants and take turns pissing on you!" The sky whirled, the earth churned. Xiao Yue could feel the worm gnawing at his brain turn around and around within him. The din of firecrackers and the crowd no longer reached his ears. His lids twitched with spasms as he tried to open his eyes. Vaguely, he saw Changsheng's mother-in-law sprawled in front of Red Spring's door, the three joss sticks in her hand burning bright. The staring faces under the eaves began to bloat and balloon before his eyes, spinning around him, crowding forward as if they were going to devour him. "Guanyin has revealed her magical powers!"

A light went on in the brain of Xiao Yue, who stood glued to the spot for a moment before leaping up and butting his head against the red-lacquered door of Fragrant Court. He somersaulted into the main hall, where, perched on her tiny altar, sat the silent statue of Guanyin, her eyes lowered. The light from two red Buddha candles shone on her compassionate face, smiling, red, incomparably peaceful yet mysterious. The door to Red Spring's room was open. The red embroidered quilt on the bed was covered with slime. The dark figure of Sun the Fourth was sprawled atop Changsheng's snow-white body. He was biting her in wild abandon. A final surge rose inside Xiao Yue's chest as he fell in a crouch beneath the altar. Vomit rose up in one rush after another, as if his insides were being dredged out. He stared up at Guanyin as his violent retching echoed in the room. The noise of the crowd and firecrackers outside Fragrant Court rose to a clamorous din. All of Great Blessings Lane seemed to have lost its soul. And like the turtledove's bloody mourning cry deep in the midnight woods came Granny Liu's shrieks: "Heaven will send down thunder and lightning!"

Four or five street kids were shouting as they ran up and down the street. They watched from afar as Xiao Yue walked toward them with glazed eyes. After coming to a halt, they slowly jostled each other across the street to the front of a woolens shop, where they stared at Xiao Yue, choking with mischievous laughter. Granny Lu came out of the shop and glared at them angrily. "Vengeance will fall on the evildoer, debts will fall on the debtor. Liu Laoshi's back, so who needs you to run around spreading the news?" She glanced up at the sky, then bent down to pick up a basket of orange peels that had been left drying in the sun. "The bodhisattva has eyes," she muttered as she carried the basket back inside. The boys tiptoed up behind Xiao Yue and followed him a short way. As the chinaberry tree in front of the county granary came into view, an eight- or nine-year-old kid drew up to Xiao Yue and tugged at his pants.

"Brother," he whispered, "don't go there. That demon Liu Laoshi is waiting for you."

Xiao Yue looked over his shoulder. At the end of the cobblestone South Market Street, the sun hung heavily above the riverbank. The street was bathed in red. Over by the granary everything was quiet, except for the cawing of crows wheeling above the chinaberry tree. Scorched by the sun for the past month, it stood gaunt and lonely, a thin veil of golden dust hanging over it. Bent at the waist, it hunched toward the sinking sun, staring at it vacantly. Beneath the tree sat the napping man, his arms wrapped around his knees, hugging a sack to his chest.

Crimson clouds filled the sky.

The woman Zhu came out of the teahouse, all sweaty, and stood under the eaves complaining loudly about the heat. She craned her neck to look at the sun hanging over the street.

"The weather had better turn. If it doesn't rain soon, we might as well put a torch to the town and burn it down." She emptied the basin of water she was carrying. She'd spotted Xiao Yue standing

in the middle of the street, looking as if he'd lost his soul. His blurred eyes were glued to the man beneath the tree. "So, you know what vengeance is all about!" she scolded as she looked over her shoulder and saw the men huddled inside her shop gawking out into the street.

"What a bunch of brave men you are! Your conscience is finally bothering you over your evil deeds. We women can't stand to look at you."

The middle-aged fortune-teller who had carried on his business in Great Blessings Lane for ten years walked slowly across the street with a cup of tea. He gave the man sitting beneath the tree the once-over.

"That man doesn't look crazy to me."

"Whether he's a demon or not, there's nothing to be afraid of so long as your conscience is clear." The woman Zhu laughed coldly. "Can it be, sir, that you too were watching the procession in Great Blessings Lane that night?"

The fortune-teller's face stiffened. He looked at the woman Zhu and said gravely, "I watched them greet the Bodhisattva Guanyin from my doorstep. Not a drop of blood touched me. I'm pure as snow, and my conscience is clear!" He dumped the tea in his cup on the ground and pointed to Xiao Yue. "The little tough got drunk and lost his head. He went into Great Blessings Lane with Sun the Fourth and his gang, where they did their evil and brought us disaster. They're the ones who summoned the pestilent demon to scare every person in town, so we're all concerned about him."

The old man's words brought the two customers in the teahouse shuffling to the doorway, where they craned their necks to look at Xiao Yue, then peered over at the county granary.

At the entrance to the town, the sun grew redder as it sank. Seen from the doorway of the teahouse, the deserted cobblestone street in front of the county granary was paved with a thin layer of gold dust. The shadows of the man and the tree slanted across the street to just

under the eaves. Women from the shops next door carried out stools to sit under the eaves and cool themselves with large rush fans. The young ones bared a breast to suckle their babies. Their listless eyes were fixed across the street. A dry wind gusted suddenly. The steep shadow of the chinaberry caressed the heart of Jiling town. The women looked up at the dark, heavy clouds gathering overhead and listened to the ceaseless cawing of crows on the granary roof.

One of the teahouse customers stood in the doorway, holding a porcelain teacup he'd brought from home, and peered outside for a long while before blurting out, "Vengeance will fall on the evil-doer, debts will fall on the debtor. That cleaver of Liu Laoshi's will not fall on an innocent body!"

The other man shook his head. "The day Liu Laoshi went crazy, the twenty-second day of the sixth month, and took to the street killing people, those of us watching the goings-on wanted to see every one of those toughs chopped down. Who'd have imagined that the two women—the whore Red Spring and Sun the Fourth's wife—would lose their lives instead?"

The woman Zhu snorted.

"You're hoping to see Liu Laoshi come back and wreak his vengeance. Well, don't tell me you two didn't watch us greet the bodhisattva in Great Blessings Lane that night!" She went into the shop with her enamel basin, which she filled with water and then dumped outside under the eaves. Looking up, she saw Xiao Yue's lone shadow stretched across the street. She went over and grabbed him by the arm. "Don't you know what's good for you?" she spat. "Standing out in the middle of the street attracting attention! If you could only see how wretched you look! If that were really Liu Laoshi, he'd have hacked you to pieces long ago!"

Without a word, Xiao Yue followed her into the teahouse and sat at a table near the door. The fortune-teller casually walked out from under the eaves, sipping his tea. With a squint, he peered across the street and studied the man sitting beneath the tree, then

turned back to study Xiao Yue with a somber expression. The woman Zhu brought out a cup of steaming tea and set it in front of Xiao Yue. She looked down at him.

“Why don’t you stay home? Why come running here to create a spectacle for these men?”

Clenching his teeth and staring, Xiao Yue drew the dagger out from under his shirt. He placed it softly on the table and sat staring at the half-dried dog blood smeared on its blade.

One of the valley hayseeds sitting behind him heaved a sigh. “This weather! If it doesn’t rain soon, I’m going to drag my wife and kids over to the temple tomorrow and chop them to pieces. That’ll open the bodhisattva’s eyes!”

The other man replied, “If she won’t open her eyes, there’s nothing you can do about it. You could torch the main temple on North Market Street, and she wouldn’t open her eyes if she didn’t feel like it.”

The woman Zhu walked over and filled their cups with hot water.

“You two can forget about slaughtering your families and burning down the temple. If your consciences are clear, you don’t have to worry about the ghost of Changsheng going out to the valley to look for you.”

Suddenly thunder rolled overhead. The woman Zhu stood in the middle of her shop, holding herself very still, her head tilted to listen. It seemed to come from above the nine heavens, rolling and grumbling like someone being throttled. All of Jiling paused as if its heart had stopped. In front of the county granary the street lay empty, veiled in silence. No one stirred. Crows perched on the chinaberry tree flew up in confusion, flapping their wings and cawing with mounting urgency. Lamps inside the teahouse had not been lit. The glow of the setting sun in the street, heavy and silent like molten gold, fell upon the shadowy faces of the men inside.

The townsmen and the hayseeds from the valley all set their cups on the tables as they looked out and saw the red sunset grow deeper and dimmer. They cocked their ears, gauging the sounds from the heavens. A streak of lightning slithered out through the crimson clouds north of town like a long, white snake. A moment later, they heard more muted thunder roll across the sky. Soon, the sky above the granary was crisscrossed with streaks of lightning, finally splitting the heavens open. Waves of thunder chased each other across the sky, churning above Jiling town.

“The weather’s turned!”

The woman Zhu laid down her brass kettle and walked out under the eaves. All up and down the street, from east to west, not a soul in sight. At the town entrance, the setting sun ignited the sky. It hung above the vast stretch of riverbank, a drunken red, staring at the chinaberry tree in the center of town. A gust of dry wind wheeled silently down the street, sending yellow leaves in front of the granary rustling in the air. The woman Zhu shuddered twice and turned to look at Xiao Yue. He had lifted his fathomless eyes to stare heavenward as a bolt of lightning split the sky like a glinting knife. One by one, the men inside the teahouse walked slowly outside and stood under the eaves to sip their tea, squinting as they watched the white snakes slithering in the sunset. Another gust of wind wheeled down the street. Fat drops of rain splattered—*di-di da-da*—against the ground.

On either side of the teahouse, the women rose from their stools to stand under the eaves of their shops. The younger ones were still suckling their babies; the older ones held their rice pans closely to their bosoms. Quietly they watched the boundless rain fall to the earth.

Xiao Yue felt for his dog-butchering dagger. He slipped out of the teahouse and rushed out into the street like a kite broken loose from its string.

The two men stood in the middle of the street. The other man slowly raised his head to look at Xiao Yue. The wind howled past the granary. The chinaberry hunched toward the sun beyond the village. Crows scattered in the sky like an explosion of little black dots. They wheeled and headed toward the ominous sinking ball of red in the western sky, their caws mingled with the sound of the wind and the rain. The man hoisted his heavy bundle over his shoulder and, heedless of the rain, started walking down the long street, his head tucked down between his shoulders. Xiao Yue stood alone in the street, staring blankly at the man's retreating back. He looked over his shoulder. The woman Zhu was standing in her doorway, lantern in hand, casting an ambiguous look at Xiao Yue through the rain, which was falling more and more heavily—*hua-la hua-la*. Beneath the row of rain-spattered eaves across from the granary, men and women stood lost in a trance, hypnotized by the great torrent of rain. Xiao Yue felt a vast emptiness in his heart. Finally, he slipped the dagger back under his shirt and turned to the misty red sun at the edge of town. Then, scrunching his head down between his shoulders, he hobbled off toward home. The cobblestone street glistened with the rain and the sunset, deserted but for the gaunt, lonely shadows of two men.

Red Sky Ballad

The old man began to doze off, the pipe in his hand lazily knocking against his knee, his eyes half closed under a ninth-month sky as he sat beneath the dried-up old chinaberry tree in front of the county granary. The long stretch of South Market Street was misty, murky, a carpet of billowing dust creating a haze from one end to the other, and not a soul in sight in the center of town. Two sickly yellow mutts were coupled beneath the fireball overhead, panting, their red, slobbery tongues lolling from the sides of their mouths. A broken tile came sailing out with a whoosh. The animals bared their teeth. A street kid squatting in the shade of the granary wall, stripped to the waist, chortled mischievously as he probed and searched, finding a dozen or so broken tiles to fling into the street. Without looking up, the old man glared straight ahead and swore, “Fuck you—” He knocked the ashes out of his pipe, put in some fresh tobacco and lit it, then stuck the pipe in his mouth and recommenced smoking absentmindedly.

All Jiling town hung tremulously beneath the late afternoon sun; over there, the sky was dusky and overcast. What a wonderful sun shower! A loud crack split the blue sky. The old man, wakened from his dreamy sleep, looked up abruptly and felt the patch of cold sweat on his chest. The fiery sun hung above the edge of town,

still shimmering, reluctant to set below the riverbank. On this red-sky evening, all the doors of the shops opposite the granary were wide open; women brought out stools to sit under the eaves. The older ones came out with basins, their heads drooping as they picked husks from the raw rice. A half dozen gaunt, frowning young women sat on the doorsteps, cupping their breasts to nurse the babies in their arms. Every so often they looked up and, lost in thought, stared blankly at the two yellow dogs in the street. The clapping sounds of a fortune-teller rose from the sprawling countryside at the far end of the street: "*Puk—puk—puk.*" Even on such a sweltering day, the fortune-teller, a stranger from out of town, was dressed all in black. With only the whites of his eyes showing, he stared blankly into space as he beat a rhythm on a jet-black ox horn. With their eyelids raised, the woman watched him grope along with a bamboo staff: "*Dob—dob—dob.*" Stepping cautiously, he made his slow way into Jiling, from the far end of the street all the way to the center of town. The Zhu woman walked out of her teahouse with an enamel basin, squinting as she looked up into the sky at the fireball above the river at the edge of town. "Damned animals! Doing that in broad daylight!" Blushing, she ground her teeth and spat twice before flinging the basinful of dirty water into the middle of the street—*bua-la-la*.

As soon as the fortune-teller passed the granary, the street kid scurried out from the base of the wall into the street, giggling as he kicked the male dog twice in the rump. The two yellow animals, still coupled, howled forlornly at him, their fangs bared.

"It's too hot to be doing that."

The old man's eyelids slid upward as he sighed and looked at his pipe; it was no longer lit.

The kid stood lethargically in the middle of the street with his hands on his hips, craning his neck to search the far end. He began singing a children's song popular in town.

Black Idiot
Black Idiot
No father, no mother
No brother, no sister
Squatting in the privy
Taking a dump

The fortune-teller had already tramped off a long way.

Holding an old calico cat and grinning, Black Idiot merrily trailed the figure in black under the hot sun, following him from one end of town all the way to the center, then to the town entrance. Every time the fortune-teller beat his ox horn, Black Idiot jumped up and slapped the cobblestones on the long street with his bare feet, skipping past the languid eyes of the women. A dozen children from the missionary school, dressed in white and carrying book bags made of khaki canvas, streamed out of the church like a military drill team. They were singing a hymn they'd learned from Father Yue, the bearded foreign priest, as they strode past the old chinaberry tree in front of the granary. *Blessed Virgin, full of grace.* The glow of the setting sun out beyond the edge of town burned its way into town like a raging fire. At evening, a black carpet of crows settled over the tip of the chinaberry tree, idling, circling, and cawing atop the granary. The street was getting murky, vibrating with the shifting shadows of crows. Having been holed up inside all day, the men ambled out of their shops, shirts open, each carrying a rush fan. They stood behind their women, fanning themselves and eyeing the riotous flocking crows. "Caw—caw—caw." Five or six valley hayseeds were sipping tea in the teahouse, having sat there blankly the whole afternoon. Seeing that it was getting dark, they picked up their mugs and crossed the threshold to stand under the eaves. Each of them stuck his head out to stare at the men in flowery shirts as they ducked in and out of Great Blessings Lane across the way.

The Zhu woman took up her basinful of water and, just as she was about to fling it into the street, looked back and saw the sunset at the entrance of town come quietly washing down on her. Staring blankly for a moment, she laid the enamel basin down and ran out from under the eaves to stand in the middle of the street. Facing that magnificent sun, she wiped her eyes with the backs of her hands and stared spellbound at the end of the street.

Black Idiot
 Black Idiot
 After eating shit
 Happy as a clam

Granny Liu returned to town.

Crimson water raged and roared beneath the stone embankment at the town entrance, a river of sparkling ripples. Beyond the other bank, the red sunset splashed down over the vast open space. Under the sun's glare, two human shadows, one behind the other, moved quietly out onto the street. Her brittle gray hair fluttering, Granny Liu, a red-cloth bundle on her back, her head lowered and her back bent, slowly turned up to the rocky bank from under the stone embankment at the town entrance. Walking along South Market Street, she entered town slowly, Black Idiot following her and giggling nonstop. Still holding his calico cat, he walked barefoot, alternating between leaping and stepping, as if suffering from epilepsy. On both sides of the street, many pairs of eyes stared blankly from under the eaves. Smoke rose from kitchen chimneys in every house in town. The Zhu woman was standing alone in the middle of the street, watching Granny Liu stumble into the center of town with the sun at her back, the red-cloth bundle on her shoulder ragged and discolored. "*Dob—dob—pok—pok.*" The fortune-teller, beating his ox horn, was returning. The lingering,

repetitive sound echoed, hollow and empty, in the center of Jiling on an evening when the sky was filled with raucous crows. The Zhu woman went back into her shop and emerged a moment later with a cup of tea; she stood in the middle of the street, facing the sun. Granny Liu walked over to her slowly and looked up, revealing an old face, weathered and wrinkled. The old calico cat was still curled up in Black Idiot's arms, rolling its green eyes. Lifting her eyelids, Granny Liu looked straight at the Zhu woman, then lowered her head and shuffled off toward Great Blessings Lane, minding her own business.

No father, no mother
No brother, no sister
Black Idiot
Black Idiot

The little street kid was crouching beneath the chinaberry tree; with a stack of tiles in his hand, he chortled as he watched Granny Liu walk past the granary. Then he leaped to his feet and jumped into the middle of the street, singing something as he threw one broken tile after another at Black Idiot's back. Black Idiot pursed his lips, hunched his dark shoulders, and giggled as he held his old calico cat tightly and tucked his head under the red-cloth bundle on Granny Liu's back. Eight little toughs, all about thirteen or fourteen years old, who had been lurking nearby, sprang up and jumped out into the street. Yelling and hooting, they kicked the two yellow dogs and sent them yapping down the street, tails between their legs, as if chased by ghosts. Ignoring them, Granny Liu kept walking, head down, back bent as she shuffled into Great Blessings Lane. Shouting in chorus, the toughs stripped off their shirts, exposing their bellies, and started heaving broken tiles at Black Idiot's back, all the while running around and shouting:

Hanging ghost
Hanging ghost
Middle of the night
Summoning lives
Black Idiot
Black Idiot
After eating shit
Happy as a clam

The old man was startled awake; after staring blankly for a moment, he gazed out at the chaotic scene in the street. With a shake of his head, he stood up, stuck his pipe into his belt, and walked slowly out to the middle of the street. The Zhu woman, all smiles, was standing in her shop doorway, a basin in her arms. As she watched the old man draw closer, she sent the water splattering into the street.

“A hot day!”

“Oh?”

“You fell asleep under that tree.”

“It’s hot!”

“I bet it’s cool under the tree.”

“That bunch of little bastards!”

Cursing with his teeth clenched, the old man walked into the shop and sat down just inside the threshold. The Zhu woman, enamel basin in hand, leaned against the door and gazed at him without saying a word.

“Old Uncle, how long has it been since Fragrant Court opened in Great Blessings Lane, ten years? Do you recall who wore funeral garments for Red Spring when she died that year?”

The old man’s head jerked up. His eyes were wide. The owner of Wen’s Pottery next door overheard the comment and came over, pointing to the entrance of Great Blessings Lane:

“I recall it was the twenty-second day of the sixth month, when Liu Laoshi went crazy and committed murder. Two red coffins with upturned heads were carried out of his coffin shop. Fourth Mama, the madam at Fragrant Court, was so scared she couldn’t move. Afterward, she paid two valley hayseeds to go into Red Spring’s room. One look, and they rushed out, vomiting, their faces white as sheets. Two or three days later, after the autopsy, Red Spring’s bloody, chopped-up body was brought out. It was daytime, but they acted as if they were being chased by ghosts as they bundled her out of town and buried her on the outskirts.”

“That day, the streets and alleys were filled with people sneaking over to gawk at the sight!” one of the teahouse customers interjected. “Someone draped white hemp funeral clothes all over Black Idiot, who held an incense burner and walked behind his mother’s coffin. Those little bastards from Great Blessings Lane followed him the whole way, laughing, cursing, throwing stones—”

“Black Idiot must have been five that year, right?” the Wen’s Pottery shopkeeper said, staring at the old man.

Looking over at the entrance to the lane, the old man took five or six puffs on his pipe before saying slowly, “Red Spring was sold to my family as a child. She died after being a prostitute all her adult life, leaving only a son.”

From the teahouse door, much of Great Blessings Lane could be seen as it turned red, shrouded in sunset. Smoke rose from a dozen kitchens. The doorways of a row of dusty gray-tiled houses were lined with prostitutes leaning against the door frames under the low eaves, arms crossed, mustering up the energy every once in a while to reply to the men who walked back and forth, sizing them up. The foul ditch in the lane was a breeding ground for buzzing flies after a day of bright sunlight. Granny Liu, head still down, the bundle on her back, walked slowly into Great Blessings Lane, followed by Black Idiot, who pranced and leaped with the old calico

cat in his arms, his shoulders hunched, his mouth cracked in a smile. The barefoot group of toughs threw stones and broken tiles at him along the way, running up and down the lane and singing, "Black Idiot, Black Idiot, squat down in the privy, take a big dump—" Suddenly, the curses of forty or fifty prostitutes resounded in the quiet evening lane; mixed with men's shouts, they created an uproar. Granny Liu returned to her own doorstep and, after standing there awhile, opened the large, rusty lock. Then, without a backward glance, she and the red bundle disappeared behind the door. The door was closed and bolted.

A teahouse customer picked up his white porcelain lidded teacup, came out from under the eaves, and stared blankly at the entrance to Great Blessings Lane for a while before turning to look at the old man. "Poor old Granny Liu," he said. "She's been a good woman all her life—"

"In the end, her daughter-in-law hanged herself, while her son went crazy and committed murder!" The Wen's Pottery shopkeeper continued the thought.

"Her daughter-in-law hanged herself in the middle of the night."

"Early the next day, old Granny Liu stumbled out of the lane and pointed at passersby—"

"Lightning will strike you down!"

"Lightning will strike you down!"

"She cursed the whole day."

"Neighbors for twenty or thirty years."

"An old woman like her, where's she been these past few years?"

"Who knows?"

The Zhu woman walked out, steaming with sweat and carrying a big copper kettle; she sneered when she heard what they were saying. She turned to the old man. "Why don't you say something, old man?"

"What?"

“I said, you may be over seventy, but you’ve got sharp eyes and good hearing. You’ve lived in Great Blessings Lane for ten years now, and nothing escapes your eyes.”

The setting sun above the stone embankment at the town entrance had by now congealed into a cold red ball in a sky filled with crows. In an instant, the long stretch of South Market Street darkened, leaving behind only stilled reflected light. In Great Blessings Lane, light red lanterns were lit and hung from the low eaves of each house. Prostitutes dumped basins of water after sending off their clients; drenched in sweat, they picked up rice bowls and wolfed down mouthfuls of steaming rice. With darting eyes, they seduced the men who were ogling them in the doorways. The lane teemed with shadowy figures. Seven or eight street kids chased Black Idiot up and down, laughing and singing amid the crowd of idlers, who cursed them angrily. Autumn Begonia, the sickly young prostitute from Fragrant Court, next door to the coffin shop, tossed down her bowl and hurried back to her room. A moment later, she came out again, carrying a basin of water; after taking five or six steps into the middle of the lane, she flung the water in the kids’ faces. They were momentarily stunned. Then, drying their faces with their hands, they went into a frenzy, dragging Black Idiot over to the granary wall and dumping him and his cat into the foul-smelling ditch. With a loud whoop, they ran across the street, where they cursed and spat at the row of light red lanterns outside the brothels, shouting to each other and throwing broken tiles and stones.

Hanging Ghost, hanging ghost
Middle of the night, summoning lives

Beneath the eaves of the Zhu Family Teahouse, a valley hayseed lifted his muddy legs and squatted on a bench to stare blankly at the entrance to Great Blessings Lane.

“Old Uncle, can you believe it?” He looked back at the old man and spat two gobs of tobacco phlegm into the street. “On the nineteenth day of the six month, after I’d been drinking, I felt dry heat rise up in my chest. I ran over to Great Blessings Lane in the dark of night. When I came out of your place at daybreak, my eyelids were so heavy I had trouble opening them. Autumn Begonia, that white-boned demon at your place, a real terror, fucked me all night long and even forced me to drink double cups with her. She said something about how once a man and a woman sleep together one night, they share a lifetime of feelings, like a husband and a wife—” He giggled. After a while, he said, “That Autumn Begonia, she walked me, her bridegroom, right out the door. When I reached the entrance to the lane, I opened my eyes, only to see it was barely light out. When I turned to look back, I saw the little daughter-in-law of the Liu family, dressed in green from head to toe, walking silently and all alone, up and down the lane, with a basket hanging over her arm.”

“Maybe it was barely dawn, but somebody saw Black Idiot squatting at the entrance to Great Blessings Lane, giggling and holding a cat in his arms,” the Zhu woman said coldly as she lit the lights in her shop.

The valley hayseed, having nothing more to say, picked up his stool, carried it out from under the eaves, and sat down at the edge of the street, hugging his knees. The street was deserted except for the cawing crows, perched on the tree by the granary as if hastening the arrival of dusk, which, no longer contained, was spreading wide. The vast open spaces outside of town were painted red.

“Black Idiot—Black Idiot—After eating shit, happy as a clam—” The ruffians’ whoops and hollers rose, faster and faster, from the center of Great Blessings Lane out to the street.

“Little bastards! Fuck you all!” the old man cursed.

A fiery red rocket shot into the sky from the middle of the lane. The little toughs roared as if drunk, stumbling around in a wild

frenzy. They circled Black Idiot, who was laughing and giggling, and kept moving toward the entrance to the lane, leaping and prancing, humming and chanting. Great Blessings Lane was thrown into noisy chaos. The prostitutes put down their rice bowls and chopsticks and began picking their teeth, moving over to stand under the light red lanterns and point at the toughs, laughing and spitting at them. Idlers in the lane scurried away, staying out of sight but continuing to laugh and curse.

“Remember, old man?” the valley hayseed asked from where he sat outside the teahouse.

“Hm?”

“That day, Red Spring died—”

“Died.”

“And this Black Idiot—”

“Oh?”

“Running out of Red Spring’s room.”

“Mother and son.”

“Blood all over them.”

“Liu Laoshi, ruthless.”

“Black Idiot was crying and running from house to house, screaming for help, throwing the whole lane into a panic, sending chickens flying and dogs running.”

“Poor thing! Only five years old when he saw his mother carved up by Liu Laoshi, one slice after another, until she was drenched in blood.”

“The shock—”

“—turned him into an idiot.”

Firecrackers exploded in Great Blessings Lane—*pi-pi pa-pa*. From out of nowhere, another group of half-grown kids, about fourteen or fifteen, rushed into the lane excitedly, carrying firecrackers and joss sticks. Barefoot and shirtless, the little ruffians mingled with the idlers, prancing and leaping and tossing flaming

red firecrackers into the brothel doorways. The idlers, choking on the smoke, cursed them. In a flash, blood-red sparks flew all over Great Blessings Lane, as if it were on fire. "Greet the Guanyin Bodhisattva! Greet the Guanyin Bodhisattva!" A scrawny middle-aged prostitute jumped out from Green Silk Garden into the middle of the lane and stood there blankly for a moment before growling, "Lit—tle bas—tards!" Her madam stumbled across the threshold on crippled bound feet and pointed at her, mumbling and cursing something, which immediately angered the scrawny prostitute. Cursing, she shook her broom at one of the little toughs who was setting off firecrackers and chased him from one end of the street to the other. The other seven or eight kids, ignoring all this activity, continued crowding up to Black Idiot; as if possessed, they stumbled along, whooping and hollering, their heads down and their backs bent. The leader, only sixteen or seventeen years old, brandished a sharpened bamboo pole on his tattooed arm, stumbling and leading his pals on.

One of the teahouse customers walked quietly out from under the eaves with a cup of freshly brewed tea and took a few sips. "Do you recall, old man? The year that Red Spring died, at your place, Fragrant Court, late one night—"

"An out-of-town client died."

"Went crazy."

"Jumped down a well."

The valley hayseed, squatting on his stool, was lost in his thoughts as he stared at Great Blessings Lane. "Old Uncle, you've got a great memory," he blurted out.

The old man muttered something and spat mouthfuls of phlegm from under the eaves.

The Zhu woman came out again with half a basin of dirty water to toss into the street. With her hands on her hips, she looked into the lane, where Black Idiot, blinking back tears, gig-

gled as he was being crowded and chased by the little toughs, stumbling toward the lane.

“Little bastards!”

“Oh?”

“Why don’t you stay in the room of your whore-mother, out of the heat?”

As soon as she said that, a little prostitute appeared under the red lantern at Spring Comfort Garden, which was located at the entrance to the lane; she was seeing a client out, holding a basin in her hands and drenched in sweat. As she stepped over the threshold, she reached out and pinched her young client’s earlobe, then laughed and cursed loudly. Half a basin of water splashed noisily on the ground just outside the door—*bua-la-la*—drawing curses from the idlers, who jumped out of the way. The little prostitute didn’t even look; pulling over a rickety rattan chair, she sat down, picked up a rush fan, and lit a cigarette while she watched the toughs scurry up and down the street like a pack of dogs or wolves and silently fanned her chest. The other group, clustered around Black Idiot, were humming and chanting as they hopped past the door of Spring Comfort Garden. The little prostitute tossed down her fan and pointed a finger at Black Idiot, cursing and hissing at him through clenched teeth.

The leader of the toughs walked up slowly and stopped in front of her with a silly grin on his face. Opening wide his bloodshot eyes to size her up, he shouted, “Hanging ghost! Hanging ghost!” The group of ruffians darting down the street seized the opportunity to start booing and hooting. In a flash, broken tiles and stones were flying across and hitting the ground with a *peng-peng pang-pang*. The old madam ran out from Spring Comfort Garden and grabbed the little prostitute by the hair, dragging her back inside, mumbling and cursing at the same time. The leader of the toughs paid no attention; he stood dully in the middle of the street, staring blankly at the

moon, wanton yellow, lewdly yellow, as it quietly floated up from behind the low eaves of the brothels, as if he'd been blinded by the sun earlier that day. After a long while, his rawboned body began to jerk, faster and faster, twitching and shaking without end. "The spirit is coming! The spirit is coming!" the idlers cursed after standing there frozen for a moment. The little tough closed his eyes and slowly, smilingly, began waving his long bamboo pole; stumbling and staggering, tottering and bumbling, he danced around Black Idiot. The noise of firecrackers and curses died down. After walking out with their clients, the sweaty prostitutes crowded beneath the eaves, the light red lanterns dangling and swaying in a dry wind that came up after dark. Flickering red candlelight cascaded down on faces marked by wide-open, blank stares. All of a sudden, the little tough let out a yell: "Fuck you!" Ripping open his pants and clenching his teeth, he stuck the sharpened bamboo pole into his navel. His pals, eyes closed and backs bent, paid no attention; they just kept stumbling along with Black Idiot, humming all the way, "Black Idiot—Black Idiot—After eating shit, happy as a clam—" The old calico cat curled up in Black Idiot's arms, its quiet round eyes opened to reveal green lights, like will-o'-the-wisps, shining through the sinking darkness and deepening redness of Great Blessings Lane.

"Such a hot day! Are you crazy?"

The old man squeezed a curse from his throat, looked at the valley hayseed, and shook his head as he got up and walked into the shop.

The Zhu woman was boiling water in the kitchen, bent over as she added firewood to the stove. She was humming, thinking her own thoughts:

Heart of a flower, vegetable flower
 Ungrateful little sweetheart
 Ai!

She put down the firewood, straightened up, wiped her hot, sweaty face, and listened to the sad moans of the toughs across the way in Great Blessings Lane. Walking through the shop and looking outside, she saw dying light reflected off the empty street in front of the granary.

“Why is it so quiet all of a sudden? It’s spooky—” The Zhu woman turned her head and saw the old man, his back to the kitchen door, as he slowly tied his pants and stepped out of the toilet. The Zhu woman had a big fire going; patting her waist, she sighed and walked swiftly out past the eaves of her house.

“What bad karma—”

As soon as the curse left her mouth, a malarialike chill wracked her body. Jerking her head up, she saw sickly women quietly nursing infants on benches under the eaves of houses on both sides. Their men were standing behind them, cooling themselves with large rush fans, paying no attention to them. Twenty or thirty dark faces seemed to melt into the dying sunset, their eyes fixed on Great Blessings Lane across the way.

The lane stood in absolute silence. Looking over from the doorway of the teahouse, she saw heads all up and down the lane, trembling silently beneath the rows of swaying red lanterns outside the brothels. The sounds of firecrackers were long gone. The little toughs, joss sticks in their hands, were standing around dully as if bewitched, gasping for air with wide-open mouths. A misty light fragrance hung over the dozen or so houses lining this dark little street. Prostitutes with no clients emerged from under the eaves to mingle with the gawking idlers. Sweaty men and women craned their necks and held their breath as they stared at the entrance to the lane. Half the sky was a clear dark blue, a backdrop for the rising moon. Caught in the glare of all those blank stares, the little toughs, backs bent and heads lowered, clustered around the giggling Black Idiot, still happy as a clam, and reeled their way out of Great Blessings Lane.

—Summoning lives in the middle of the night
Black Idiot, Black Idiot
After eating shit
Happy as a clam—

The leading tough, all bloody, his head lowered and his back bent, sucked in his belly and shouldered his bamboo pole as he led his pals out onto the nearly deserted street. They walked toward the redness at the town entrance, staggering along as if sleepwalking.

The old calico cat was impaled on the end of the bamboo pole, which had pierced its heart.

“That year, Red Spring died—” the old man blurted out.

Book Two



Empty Doors

Worldly Affairs

Who knows how it all happened? When the toughs stormed the Qin house, a clutch of twelve- and thirteen-year-old street kids was filling the air outside with catcalls and demands to nab the adulterers.

Granny Lu, who owned the embroidery shop opposite the War God Temple, went to the market to buy six strings of sesame candy and fifteen sugar-covered plums. After returning home, she baked some flour cakes, which she wrapped in a piece of blue cloth to take to her daughter's house in Fish Nest outside of town. As soon as she stepped out the door, she saw a dozen ruffians prowling the area like a pack of wolves or aroused dogs. She spat fiercely out from under the eaves, cursing, "What kind of trouble are you making this time? Who asked you to be the neighborhood broadcasters on a blistering day like this!" Narrowing her old eyes, she looked up dully at the fireball in the sky for a moment before tightening her grip on the blue bundle and turning her head to give her son, Baolin, some last-minute instructions. Then she hobbled forward, limping slowly down the main street, heading toward Cao's Oil Mill.

The Qin house was located in a deep lane off a back street. The stretch of dusty gray-tiled houses of Cao's Oil Mill seemed piled

upon one another. Two stone houses for milling oil rose into the radiant sky and blocked the glare of the noonday sun. Facing the back wall of the oil mill was a row of brick houses with low eaves; not a sound emerged from the thirty or so impoverished families within. The narrow alley let in no more than two hours of sunlight a day. Granny Lu reached the alley entrance and was immediately assaulted by a sour mildew smell that seeped into her old bones. She put down her bundle. Groping at a green stone stool, she sat down and blinked as she gazed at the murky white light filling the street, immersed in her own thoughts. She reached down with bony fingers and scratched the patchwork of blue veins covering her calf. Someone in the alley set off firecrackers. With a shake of her head, she pressed her hands against her knees to stand up, and then, bundle in hand, hobbled slowly into the dark dampness of the alley.

Rubbernecks were already crowding under the eaves of an oil shop behind the oil mill.

The proprietress of the shop clapped her hands after all the firecrackers had exploded and then, thrusting out her ample breasts, hobbled back inside the shop. A moment later, she returned holding a broom, with which she forced the gawkers to back away from her door. She then stood beneath the eaves, pointing a finger at the Qin house across the street and spitting five or six times into the street, "Shame! Shame! Shame!" Some of the gawkers laughed, others cursed. Her husband, a little man with thin eyebrows and tiny eyes who smiled at everyone he met, stepped quickly over the threshold and, with a fawning smile, said, "Let it go! Why get your dander up on such a hot day?" His woman flew into a rage, stamped her feet, and pushed him back inside the door. Then she held up the broom and began waving it at the door across the street.

Granny Lu felt a slight pain in her rheumatic knees. Since there weren't many people in her family, she only needed to buy a

bottle of oil every seven or eight days. Once she was back home, she'd move her stool out from under the eaves and massage her calves in the bright sunlight for the rest of the morning. On this hot afternoon, a crush of rubberneckers stood shoulder to shoulder under the low eaves of the Qin house, as if waiting for the Guanyin Bodhisattva's palanquin to leave the large temple. One after another they craned their necks toward the door of the Qin house, searching and waiting for two naked bodies to be carried out on door panels and paraded, amid the *huang-dang huang-dang* of brass gongs, out of the alley and onto South and North Market streets, where heads were bobbing to the shouts of:

Adulteress—Qin Zhang Baokui

Adulterer—Qin Tieshu, her brother-in-law!

Puzzled by the sight of Granny Lu entering the lane, the woman in the oil shop put down her broom and told her husband to take the bench outside so the old woman could sit down, and, while he was at it, to take the bundle from her. Patting her knees, Granny Lu blinked and sighed.

A tall, skinny tough darted into the lane, a soaking-wet undershirt draped over his shoulder. With a cigarette dangling from his mouth and a pair of brass gongs in his hands, he shoved the idlers out of his way and asked the tough guarding the door:

“Has the brother-in-law been caught yet?”

“The dogfucker slipped through our fingers.”

“You mean he got away?”

“As soon as he saw how bad things looked, he jumped over the rear wall and ran home to cradle his kid.”

“So send someone after him!”

“Eleven took five people along to pen him in from all directions—he won't get away.” The guard giggled and shook his head,

his eyes fixed on the brass gongs with their red silk tassels. "I saw those gongs in the Hall of Musical Instruments at the temple last night while I was hanging out with Eleven on North Market Street."

The tough who'd just arrived looked down at his hands. "Damn!" he cursed with a little laugh. Offhandedly, he spit on the gongs, took the undershirt off his shoulder, and wiped them dry.

The guard yawned and took a pocketknife from his belt, with which he began lazily scraping the black-lacquered door of the Qin house, while he cast a sideways glance at a young woman in a colorful print blouse in the crowd. With a giggle, he said:

"Who's that girl? She'll have to tighten her sash when she gets married."

"Fuck your old lady! How can you have such dirty thoughts at a time like this?"

The tough holding the gongs laughed.

Granny Lu, who was massaging her legs on the bench, heard the smutty bantering between the two toughs and let out a couple of muffled curses. She looked up at the sky, then picked up her bundle and stood up slowly by pressing her hands against her knees.

"Excuse me! Let me by!" She pushed through the crowd and walked across the lane to stand under the eaves of the Qin house. Narrowing her old eyes, she squinted at the double-hung black-lacquered door, which was ajar. She peeked inside, but the only sounds she heard were the *ge-ge* clucks of sleeping hens in two backyard cages. On that late morning, the interminable *ka-la-la ka-la-la* of a waterwheel in a distant field behind the alley drifted over.

"That shameless slut is having an affair with her own brother-in-law! She was making a scene a while ago," the oil shop woman shouted into Granny Lu's ear. The young guard smirked, and stole a glance at her sweaty, oily breasts. With a roguish wink at the idlers, he smiled broadly, revealing a mouthful of yellow teeth. The other tough, the one with the gongs, spat out some tobacco phlegm,

stretched lazily, and squatted on the Qins' threshold to look out at the lane entrance.

"Oil shop sister-in-law, you need to tighten your sash too."

"Don't think your husband, sitting at the counter all day long—"

"Flicking the beads of his abacus—"

"Never saying a word—"

"Always smiling when he meets people."

"He's got a ledger in his head—"

"—mostly accounts receivable!"

"He remembers every detail of every account."

The oil shop proprietor stormed out of the shop and stomped his foot as he eyed the two toughs. "Why don't you try talking a little nicer? Just a little nicer, okay?"

"Poor Zhang Baokui was widowed at such an early age!" A middle-aged idler walked slowly into the lane, picked up a small white porcelain teapot, and took a leisurely sip straight from the spout. "I saw her sitting on her doorstep every day, stitching something or doing needlework, and told myself that sooner or later something was bound to happen."

"All she did was have a little sex. A widowed woman can't be picky. She takes what she can get!" Another man standing idly nearby, cooling himself with a big rush fan, took a look at the Qin house and continued:

"As the saying goes, a hungry person can't be choosy about food."

She customarily dressed all in black, except for a white cotton mourning flower pinned to one of her temples. With her legs to one side, knees together, she sat alone on a bamboo stool outside her door, like a fetching black moth that has landed on a low tiled eave to rest. A square piece of snowy white silk was stretched over

an embroidery frame; with her brow crinkled in concentration, she stitched and embroidered with multicolored threads, taking advantage of what little light there was in the lane. It was an illustration of immortals. The back street and deep lane were quiet, perfectly still, gathering a permanent smell of mildew. Every once in a while, she looked up to stare blankly at the two naked stone mills towering over Cao's Oil Mill and cocked her ears. After a while, she looked down, rubbed the needle against the hair at her temple, and continued working on the square of snowy white silk.

"Shameless!"

The oil shop proprietress, after her afternoon nap, swept the floor and aimed her comment at the opposite door. She yawned twice, then stood under the eaves and crossed her arms, watching Granny Lu stumble into the lane with an oil bottle.

"Granny, look, across the street!"

Leaning the broom against her door, she ran out into the lane, her heavy breasts bouncing up and down, to take the bottle from the old woman and press her lips up against her ear.

"Ever since her husband died, after she sends her son off to school in the morning, she sits in the doorway with her needlework and watches people, attracting those toughs every day. They're like young bulls ready to mate. They're out there squatting or standing, blocking my door and trying to provoke her with smutty comments. The way they flirt, they must think I'm blind."

"Everybody knows that no-good bunch of street kids," her husband, who was sitting behind the greasy counter, said with a grin.

Instead of replying, his wife stuck the funnel into the bottle and filled it with two ladlefuls of oil. Granny Lu sighed, patted her waist, and reached out for the bench by the door to sit down and massage her legs.

"I hear the Qin woman makes wonderful embroidered pictures of Guanyin."

“Why don’t you ask her to do one for you to hang in your meditation room? It would be a lot better than those modern color prints you get at the market.” The woman walked out with the bottle and handed it to Granny Lu, then cast a contemptuous look across the street while she wiped her hands on her clothes. “Granny, would you look at those darting eyes!”

“No matter how they tease her, she never pays any attention,” the man flicking his abacus beads inside the store blurted out.

Granny Lu looked up at the sky; it was three or four in the afternoon. The sun had fallen behind the oil mills, turning the sky above them a patch of dusty gray. The damp smell of mildew in the back street and deep lane suddenly grew stronger. The old woman picked up the oil bottle and stumbled along on her rheumatic legs, but turned and walked back after passing two houses. She stood under the eaves of the Qin house, narrowed her eyes, and bent over to look at the white silk, which displayed a colorful crisscrossed shower of flowers.

After a while, Granny Lu straightened up and saw, in the shadows of the Qin house, two lighted white candles alongside a bowl of rice in which a pair of black-lacquered bamboo chopsticks had been stuck.

Seven or eight days later, when Granny Lu returned to the lane for oil, she saw from a distance four or five neighborhood women sitting on the bench outside the oil shop.

The red-faced oil shop proprietress ran over and pulled Granny Lu into the store the moment she saw her walking up with her oil bottle.

“Granny, tell us what you think. Does she act like a widow? From dawn till dusk, she dresses in mourning clothes and sits outside her door just looking at people. The bowl of white rice offered to her dead husband was left in the front room for three whole days! Her own mother tramped five *li* of wilderness from Fish Nest

to see her. As soon as she walked in the door, before she even put down her bundle, she picked up the bowl of rice and, after a quick sniff, dumped it in the backyard without a word—”

The man came out from behind the counter, squinted with a smile, and took the oil bottle.

“You shouldn’t be meddling in other people’s affairs.”

A young neighbor woman called Eryu walked in with a smile on her face and a baby at her breast. “Her own mother told her to remarry! She said she’d found her a man whose wife had just died, the owner of a tofu shop on North Market Street—”

“You mean Old Wang at the tofu shop?” The oil shop proprietress turned to glare out the door. “How could she be interested in someone like that? You won’t know if I don’t tell you, but ever since her husband died, her brother-in-law comes over every two or three days with food and other daily necessities. He sneaks into the house and into her bedroom, a single man and a widow!”

The middle of the night
 Watch gongs are struck
 Cold and cheerless
 Lonesome and all alone!

Two toughs swaggered into the alley. Their undershirts unbuttoned, they walked up to the oil shop, shoulder to shoulder, humming and singing. One of them leaned against the door while the other squatted down under the eaves, cooling himself with a black oilpaper fan and leering at the house across the street.

Granny Lu walked out with her oil bottle. Under the eaves across the street, the Qin woman was sitting on a bamboo stool in front of her door. Her head bent, with two fingers she held a red thread above the white silk, like a dragonfly skimming over the water. Rays of late-afternoon sun, like liquid gold, filtered into the

lane. The Qin woman's mother sat on the threshold, her stubby mud-spattered legs spread out, as she dully cooled herself with a rush fan. Granny Lu nodded and walked across the lane. The Qin woman looked up abruptly and rubbed the needle against the hair on her temple as she looked at the old woman, the creases on her brow smoothing out. The sides of her straight nose, set on a serene face, were beaded with sweat.

“If beauty is the quest, a woman in mourning is best!”

The tough squatting beneath the oil shop eaves was mesmerized; after a long moment, he cast a sideways glance at Eryu on the bench, his lips parting in a grin that exposed his yellow teeth.

Ten days or so later, Granny Lu heard a rumor circulating among neighborhood women that Old Wang of the tofu shop had had a change of heart and backed out of the marriage agreement, which by then was nearly completed. Old Xie, the matchmaker, had shuttled back and forth among three families for two weeks and talked so much that calluses had grown on her tongue before the Qin family finally agreed that the woman could take her son with her into the new marriage.

“That Zhang Baokui isn't such a heartless woman after all!” The women gossiped among themselves. “She wouldn't leave behind, wouldn't let go of, the heir to her dead husband's family line. She'd rather endure the bad reputation of remarrying with a child than send her son to in-laws to spend his life toiling in the fields.”

Unfortunately, one evening after Old Wang closed up his tofu shop, he went off happily to have a few drinks near the Guanyin Bodhisattva Temple, where he heard gossip about her. He returned home and lay in bed, but the gossip bothered him so much that he forfeited his chance to marry a young widow lovely as a white lily.

“Blind old turtle spawn, changing his mind three times a day. How dare he think he can send me away with twenty pieces of

dried tofu?” The disappointed matchmaker cursed and stomped her way out of his shop and onto North Market Street, where she flew into a rage. Walking back and forth under the bright sun, she held high the pile of dried tofu to show passersby the gift Old Wang had so respectfully given her. Old Wang cowered inside his tofu shop, not daring to make a sound, except for the *ka-la-la ka-la-la* of his millstone as he concentrated on grinding his soybeans.

“I had misgivings about this marriage the first time Old Xie mentioned it.” The oil shop woman stood outside with her broom, showing everyone who passed the whites of her eyes. “Just think. Old Wang is a simple man. Could he really take that shameless woman into his home? She may have pulled the wool over your eyes, but not mine. I know everything, because I can watch from across the street! Sitting by her door all day long, dressed in mourning clothes, just waiting for her brother-in-law to pay a visit, bringing food and drink. Who knows what goes on behind closed doors?”

That afternoon, Granny Lu was dozing in the shadows outside her embroidery shop. When she opened her eyes, she saw the Qin woman, a bundle over her arm, her eyes slitted, as she slowly walked over from the main street in black cotton mourning slippers. She was dressed all in black, a white cotton flower behind her ear shimmering in the blazing white sunlight.

“Sister-in-law Qin, you picked the right day to come. We just got in a box of colorful new thread.” The old woman rose from her stool by pressing her hands on her knees. “Are you sending needlework to the second wife of the Cao family? I wonder if an old woman like me might have a look.”

What a fairy maiden! Look at her, a flower basket woven of green willow branches over her arm, standing on the tips of embroidered shoes, flying and twirling above layers of clouds, colorful ribbons flowing behind her as she smilingly sends a shower of flowers down from the bright sky above South Market Street.

Granny Lu's old face, pressed near the white silk, wrinkled as she narrowed her eyes into a smile.

That night, when Granny Lu groped in the dark to the backyard latrine, she slipped on a loose brick by the door. Her son, Baolin, carried her on his back to the Heaven's Will Pharmacy and banged, teary-eyed, on the door until it was opened. The chiropractor, Ji Xingshan, massaged the old woman's back with a medicinal ointment for about an hour, then sent her home on her son's back. She lay in bed for a month before she was able to get up and walk around in the doorway of her shop.

Seeing that it was a clear, sunny day, Granny Lu picked up her oil bottle and walked slowly to Cao's Oil Mill.

"Granny, we haven't seen you for at least a month!"

The young Eryu was sitting on a green stone block at the entrance to the lane, dully nursing her baby and narrowing her eyes to watch the passersby. She stood up and smilingly called out to the old woman, who had just turned into the alley from the gate of the War God Temple.

The two women, one old, one young, sat shoulder to shoulder on the stone block. Granny Lu reached out to play with the little boy, who was flailing his legs in his mother's lap.

"Granny, you haven't heard, have you?" Eryu pressed her lips close to Granny Lu's ear and whispered, "The whole lane has been in a turmoil this past month. Ever since Old Wang of the tofu shop rejected the marriage arrangement, the worst of the street toughs have gotten cocky. You should see the way they carry on! They get up early in the morning and saunter into the lane, yawning and scraping their sandals on the ground. Five or six of them gather in front of the oil shop door, some squatting, some standing, and all of them staring longingly across the street like bloodhounds. The brother-in-law is so scared he stays away during the daytime. What business is it of theirs if a brother-in-law

and sister-in-law talk behind a closed door? But those toughs keep saying, ‘The Little Widow and her brother-in-law are unrepentant adulterers.’ So five or six of them watched both the front and back doors, just waiting for the brother-in-law to come so they could catch them in the act, strip them naked, tie them to door panels, and parade them out on the street. They waited for days, but he never showed his face, which infuriated them. Now they’re determined to get what they want. Over the past few days, they’ve come into the lane late at night to throw bricks or tiles at her house. They even sent a thirteen-year-old street kid to sneak over her back wall and set off firecrackers inside her house. The *pi-pi pa-pa* of firecrackers and shouts for people to catch the adulterers scared her son so much he took sick. Yesterday her mother sent Priestess He to pacify the boy with incantations—”

Granny Lu narrowed her eyes in the blazing white sunlight. A little idiot, his head cocked to one side, giggled and made faces as he ran and jumped barefoot over the scalding cobblestones in the road. She turned and looked into Eryu’s little round face.

“Has anyone actually seen what goes on inside her house?”

“Big sister-in-law at the oil shop swears she once saw the two of them hugging behind the door and stealing kisses.”

Eryu ended her revelation with a giggle, then gave her son a slap in the face. “What are you listening to, you little brat?” Momentarily dazed, the little boy quickly began clawing at his mother’s chest and let out a piercing “Wah.” Eryu lifted up her breast and stuffed the nipple into his mouth. She played with the boy for a while to calm him down before pressing up to the old woman’s ear again:

“Thirty-three, hacked like a tree! That’s what the fortune book says.”

“What do you mean?”

“That Qin woman, she’s thirty-three this year.”

“Really?”

“The so-called year of wolves and tigers, when a woman is most sexually active.”

With a smile, Eryu handed the oil bottle back to Granny Lu before looking down to button up her blouse. She wrapped her arms around her son and stood up. Then, side by side, the two women walked slowly down the lane.

It wasn't long before the rumors in Oil Mill Lane quickly spread through all of Jiling town like a raging wildfire in August.

Adulteress—Qin Zhang Baokui

Adulterer—Qin Tieshu, her brother-in-law!

Their bellies exposed and their feet bare, the entire den of twelve-and thirteen-year-old street kids banged on chipped enamel basins, shouting and hooting as they scurried up and down North and South and Market streets to alert the town. Along the way they picked up broken tiles, bricks, and stones before excitedly hurrying back to Oil Mill Lane.

Idlers laughingly dodged and cursed them.

“Look at that pack of little pigs dancing on a hot tin roof!”

“Did someone set off firecrackers in their sty?”

“You cuckolds and adulterers, bastards all of you, get out of the way! Get out of the way!”

The leader of the street kids kicked and stomped his way into the crowd.

When the tough squatting near the Qins' threshold saw them, he rolled his eyes, yawned grandly, spit into his hands, and rubbed the brass gongs dully for a long while before raising his eyes and smilingly sizing up the tattered cap on the little street kid's head.

“You little devils, you want a part in this?”

“Go home and cool off!”

“The brother-in-law—”

“Got away!”

The two toughs bantered back and forth.

The one watching the door was carving a picture on the black-lacquer door of the Qin house with his pocketknife. Then he began to chuckle, reaching down to rub the head of a little street kid.

“Get your filthy devil’s hand off my head!”

The little street kid brushed the hand off and kicked the tough in the calf. Then he stood there dully before finally cocking his pockmarked face, glaring openly, pulling up his shorts, and, with a cracked enamel basin in hand, stepping through the Qins’ door and craning his neck to look around.

Eryu, holding her baby and helping Granny, also craned her neck to look inside.

“The adulterous brother-in-law, did he get away?” the little street kid asked, turning his head and blinking at Granny Lu.

“How old are you?” Eryu spat on the ground. “Adulterer! Adulterer!”

“Such a quiet widow, who barely says anything to anyone, who’d believe she could do something like that! Who’s got a full belly and time on their hands? Raising a stink on such a hot day, sending chickens flying and dogs running, ghosts crying and gods wailing!”

A fat woman from the Wu family in the lane, dripping-wet hair piled up on her head, her fat jiggling, pushed the idlers out of the way and, with a flurry of shouts, ran into the Qin house. She was holding a basin, which she tossed to the floor as she reached out to grab the little imp. Then, spreading her fingers, she slapped him—*pi-pi pa-pa*. He saw stars, but she kept slapping him until he fled through the door.

“It takes quite a woman to curse without using dirty words!” The woman at the oil shop was swinging her broom out in the middle of the lane, talking and spitting at the idlers milling there. She was just getting started when she saw the Wu woman slap and curse the little street kid, so she turned and rolled her eyes at Granny Lu.

“Granny, you be the judge. Who’s got a full belly and time on her hands? And who’s raising a stink on such a hot day, sending chickens flying and dogs running, ghosts crying and gods wailing?”

“I’m beating and cursing my own son, so it’s none of your business.”

“You think I’m blind?”

“Who’s blind?”

“Open-eyed blind, that’s not me!”

“Oil shop sister-in-law, tell me, who’s open-eyed blind?” The red-faced Wu woman picked up her basin and rammed it into the little rascal’s arms before running up in her wooden clogs, soap bubbles quivering on her head.

“In a big town like Jiling, there are lots of people who aren’t blind!” With a snicker, the oil shop woman jerked her head toward Eryu. “You pretend you don’t know anything! Who was it that sneaked over to tell me last time when that Qin Tieshu came to see his sister-in-law with a basketful of food and drink! And who was it who said that shameless woman dropped her needlework and rushed out to welcome her brother-in-law as soon as she saw him coming, and that the two of them hid behind the door, rubbing against each other, hugging, even kissing in broad daylight!”

“I say it’s too hot. You two fat aunties ought to go home and rest.” The tough squatting on the threshold yawned again before picking up his gongs and starting to get to his feet; but he stopped short when he saw that the other tough at the door had carved a pornographic picture on the Qin family’s door. “You dumb fuck! At a moment like this, your dirty mind is working overtime!”

“Eleven must’ve fallen into the toilet.” The one guarding the door giggled, exposing a mouthful of yellow teeth. Then he stepped back to admire his carving.

His pal looked at his red-tasseled gongs and stared blankly, his dark face pulled taut.

“This is fucking boring—”

“So we stop waiting?”

“Waiting for shit.”

“Oh well, we’ve got nothing to do anyway.”

“Six street kids, and still they couldn’t catch up with a little brother-in-law.”

By then the lane was filled with idlers, men and women rubbing shoulders. Some formed groups of two or three to whisper among themselves, their faces flushed with excitement, while others just craned their necks to look around and stood on tiptoes to gape up and down the lane.

From behind a door next to the Qin house emerged half a face and a small hand pinching the braid hanging down in front.

“What a cute little thing!” The tough guarding the door smiled broadly when he saw the face, then, with a wink, loudly expressed his admiration. A giggle was heard before the face and hand abruptly disappeared. A glimmer lit up the darkness behind the door, revealing an old man sitting in a chair and puffing on his pipe, his shirt unbuttoned to cool himself off.

The middle-aged man at the Qins’ door paced back and forth the whole afternoon with a small teapot in his hands.

“Granny, do you still remember?” The man took out a white silk handkerchief to wipe his forehead before picking up the white porcelain teapot and taking a tiny sip from the spout. Then he looked at Granny Lu and said, “That year in Crown Prince Lane, when the young beauty running the candle shop was having a fling with the son of Old Zhao, who owned the straw mat shop next door. They were caught in the act in broad daylight and carried out onto the main street on separate door panels. The candle shop woman was stripped naked and wrapped in a big red silk blanket on a blistering day. She was lying face up like a corpse, her eyes shut. She was ashen from fear. The two people clearing the way banged brass gongs along North and South Market streets, shouting out

the names of the adulterer and the adulteress. That went on the whole afternoon. The husband of the candle shop beauty set off two strings of firecrackers at his door and spilled a basinful of water to drive away the gods and the spirits, expelling his woman out the door at the same time—”

Granny Lu jerked her head around and picked up her blue bundle before gazing up at the sky and blinking. This back-street lane was submerged in dampness all year round; now, late in the day, it was saturated with the rancid sweat of the idlers, male and female, to which was added the foul smell of urine from donkeys and horses at Cao’s Oil Mill. Mixed together, they were a clammy stew, waves of sour chill that assaulted Granny Lu’s sickly body. “Excuse me! Let me by!” Granny Lu stood up on rheumatic legs, thumped her lower back, and yelled out, just as she caught sight of a black mourning shoe lying face down by the ditch under the eaves of the Qin house. She bent down to pick it up and scrutinize it closely. A small white sunflower was embroidered on the tip.

“What a delicate piece of work!” Eryu, one of her breasts exposed to nurse the baby, quietly sneaked up to look. “I saw her sitting by the door yesterday afternoon, doing needlework—”

Wordlessly, Granny Lu pushed the idlers away and quietly laid the black mourning shoe inside the Qin house. Pressing her hands against her knees to get up, she came face to face with a sudden movement of shadows inside the Qins’ tiny front room. The wick of a shaded kerosene lamp flared up with a pop and illuminated the snowy white face of the Guanyin Bodhisattva enshrined in the alcove. Quiet reigned throughout the house; two dim white candles flickered in front of the shrine, revealing a pair of black-lacquered bamboo chopsticks stuck at an angle in a bowl of white rice. The old woman stood there dully for a moment, then turned her head to spit angrily in the face of the tough guarding the door before softly pulling the two black-lacquer doors closed.

Lamp

The night before, for no obvious reason, the wick of the front room lamp suddenly flared up nearly half a foot. As if caught in a passing breeze, the two white candles in front of the shrine flickered, bright one moment and dim the next, suffusing the room with dark, quietly swaying shadows. A pair of bamboo chopsticks, black and at an angle, was stuck in a bowl of white rice on the altar. But everything was quiet for a while.

Zhao'er was sound asleep in the bedroom. Although only eight years old, he wasn't afraid of the dark. She moved her needlework up to the lamp to sew a white jacket to burn at the grave on an auspicious day; that would bring her peace. In the autumn, when the auspicious day arrived, she'd leave this house, taking nothing but a suitcase.

“Please don't be angry with me.”

Outside, the lane was shrouded in darkness. Every door was shut tight. The howling of wolves in the wilderness far beyond the end of the lane came on the river breezes to trouble her heart. There had never been any bad blood between her and the woman at the oil shop across the way, but on this dark night the woman opened her door and stood under the eaves, her ample flesh jiggling as she pointed and scolded loudly, “Shame on you! Shame,

shame, shame!” She shut the windows tight and sat alone in the shadowy room near the bowl of white rice and an oil lamp, doing her needlework and waiting silently. After finishing her tongue-lashing, the woman at the oil shop brought out a basin of water used for washing feet and splashed it noisily into the lane—*hua-la-la*—before she was dragged inside by her husband. The town fell back into silence, devoid of human sounds. She worked the needle in her hand, but her eyelids grew heavier and heavier, until at some point she put down her needlework and slouched in front of the lamp, beginning to doze off. Outside, the wind chimes hanging from the eaves went *ding’er-dang, ding’er-dang* in the wind. She was startled awake, eyes wide open; the sacrificial lamp before the Guanyin Bodhisattva, which had burned all night, was now reduced to a dim flame the size of a pea. She watched moonlight stream in through the cracks around the windows. It was probably not yet past the fourth watch. South Market Street, beyond the lane, was stirring with human voices.

She got up, struggling to keep her eyes open, and sat on a bamboo stool in the doorway, taking advantage of the natural light in the lane to continue with her needlework, her mind preoccupied with her own thoughts. The white ball of a sun rose high in the sky. The first days after the summer solstice, and the dark, dank backstreet lane was permeated with a sour urine smell, even in the early morning when the sky was barely light. At noon, the odor turned rank and sticky, and spread throughout the lane. Once dawn had broken, she sent Zhao’er to school and then went back to her room to rest, but she’d barely closed her eyes before the heat woke her. It felt as if a steamer had been placed upside down on her chest, yet her back was drenched in cold sweat. The house was quiet at noon-time except for the scattered *ge-ge* clucks of sleeping hens kept in the two cages in the backyard. The window facing the courtyard was covered with a layer of lush green ivy that had sprouted new

shoots after he died. The cobblestones in the courtyard reflected the blinding light of the noonday sun. She groped in the dark for a match to light the bedside lamp and carried it over to her vanity, where she stared blankly for a while until she heard the toughs arrive outside and begin to sing a little ditty about the five night watches. “The wind blows at the first watch, sending the chimes under the eaves clanging, *ding-dong!* At the second watch, night gongs are struck, cold and cheerless, lonely and all alone—” At the moment, she was sitting by the door holding a red silk thread. The toughs were still hanging around, some squatting, some standing, and all crowded around the oil shop. When she opened the door with her needlework in hand, she came face to face with a little street kid. He was a twelve- or thirteen-year-old little rascal with a pockmarked face, still emitting the sour smell of his mother’s milk, but he couldn’t wait to run over with the other toughs to press his bleary eye up to the crack in her door, straining to see something inside. When she yanked the door open, he abruptly fell back two steps and sized her up.

The woman at the oil shop awoke from her afternoon nap. Yawning, she picked up a broom and swept aside the toughs squatting by her door, then stood under the eaves, looking up at the sky and rolling her eyes several times before starting to curse again. Inside the shop, the little man who sat behind the long counter from dawn to dusk squinted, shook his head, and ticked away wordlessly on his abacus. Some years back, she had moved into the lane from North Market Street. Since there was no enmity between them at the time, she was puzzled by how she might have wronged the oil shop woman, who couldn’t even look at her without showing disgust. Each time she came outside to do needlework by her door, the woman at the oil shop across the street would watch her out of the corner of her eye, and it took only a few days for her to start flinging curses all up and down the alley: “Shame, shame.” As if worried she wasn’t being

heard, she dragged her customers over to the doorway and pointed: “See how she holds on to that tubercular cadaver. She’s only had one child, but her breasts are swelled up like buns fresh from the steamer. Sooner or later, she’ll suck dry her man’s blood and marrow as nourishment to become an alluring white flower. That way she can seduce a bunch of ignorant young toughs!”

Inside the house, he heard everything the oil shop woman said but never uttered a word in response as he wrapped himself in a blanket in the middle of the day and produced hacking coughs. She stood at the bedroom door with a bowl of medicine and watched his eyes sink deeper and deeper.

She was only nineteen when her first husband died. After the required hundred days of mourning, she was told to change out of her mourning clothes. Escorted by Old Xie the matchmaker, she was sent back to her natal family in Fish Nest, with only a trunk full of clothes and two red satin quilts.

People said she was doomed to die in her natal family because she’d been born facing the ground. Her mother scoffed at the talk, not believing a word of it. At home her mother made her sit by the door to do needlework every day. The widowers in town, after hearing that a newly widowed, fine young woman had recently been sent back to Fish Nest, fought to send matchmakers to her family. That went on for six months, before someone began spreading rumors about her; after that, no matchmaker set foot in her house again. She continued with her needlework at her parents’ house for another half year, until one day Old Xie, holding her trademark red umbrella, dropped by on a sunny day to tell them excitedly that one of the local elementary school teachers, named Qin, had just returned from out of town and was in the market for a wife. “This teacher, Mr. Qin, was originally from Fish Net, too. You were neighbors as children. He went away to school and only returned late last year. As he passed by the river yesterday, he saw you doing needlework by the door and was interested—” Three

days later, dressed in new clothes from head to toe and freshly shaved, he came to propose marriage, followed by two of his students carrying four pieces of flowery fabric he'd brought back with him and two sets of pigs' feet stamped with red seals. "He was educated in the new system and has a mind of his own. He doesn't care that you're a widow who supposedly cast an evil spell on your former husband. All he cares about is a healthy body and an upright personality. He considers all that talk about doubled karmic evil as superstitions held by foolish country folk!"

On this morning, during the fourth watch, she had the same misty dream as she kept her vigil at the bier. Dressed in clothes bleached white, he was waving his straw hat and standing under the bright sun on the other side of the river, watching her with a broad smile on his face. Ripples on the river flickered in the reflected sunlight as they spread out in concentric circles.

It was such a hot afternoon, but the hens in the backyard cages suddenly began clucking loudly, which might have meant that a snake had slithered into the yard. She put down her needlework to listen closely, but detected nothing out of the ordinary. Dully she looked up at the sky; it was not yet four o'clock. Across the street, the stone mill houses of Cao's Oil Mill stood naked under the sun. The sour mildew odor seemed suddenly to hang wet in the air. Even on such a bright day, the lane, which faced west, got fewer than two hours of sunlight. So every afternoon, while Little Zhao was at school, she came out to sit in the doorway with her needlework to take advantage of the little natural light and the meager bit of coolness during this hottest time of the year.

The toughs who congregated at the oil shop across the street were probably bored after all this time. So now they began walking toward the entrance to the lane, arms around each other and hunching their shoulders as they sang the ditty of the five watches. "At the

third watch, cursing back and forth—” She’d done nothing to deserve such hostility, but these toughs stuck to her like ghosts, coming to sing their ditty morning, noon, and night. It had been barely a year since he died, but every man in town knew about the white cotton flower in this back-street lane. They were waiting to see, one of these days, her naked body, wrapped in a red satin blanket, being carried outside on a door panel in broad daylight. The two men leading the way would be banging their brass gongs and shouting the names of the adulterer and the adulteress along the way: “Adulteress—Qin Zhang Baokui! Adulterer—Li Fourth or Zhang the Second, whoever it might be—” Amid the *huang-dang* of their gongs and the loud shouts, they would parade out of Oil Mill Lane and turn onto bustling North and South Market streets. Over the past few days, as soon as they saw her on the street, every one of the pink-eyed men in town, fire raging in their eyes, could hardly wait to strip off her black mourning clothes so they could have a good lustful look at the fair body her mother had given her, up one side and down the other, then screw her savagely under the white-hot rays of the sun.

“What a joke that Old Wang of the tofu shop was, his head smeared with lard! He thought he was getting a bargain. He figured that when the summer was over he’d get a little lilylike widow to help him cool off,” said the woman at the oil shop.

“Those no-good street kids, stuffed with rice and nothing to do!” The wife of Old Wu the vendor was sitting in her doorway frowning as she held up a bowl of rice and coaxed her son to eat. She snickered when she caught sight of the toughs out of the corner of her eye as they sauntered slowly out of the lane. “With nothing better to do, they come into the lane to taunt women from good families and give everyone an earful of their nasty ditties!”

When the woman at the oil shop across the street heard this, she crossed her arms, looked up at the sky, and snickered. These

two fat women, normally bitter enemies, had seemed like loving sisters on this early morning as they stood in the middle of the lane, whispering back and forth. But now, inexplicably, they'd changed again and were glaring at each other across the narrow lane. Sitting in her doorway embroidering, she listened to the two of them, afraid that the heat might put them in a foul mood and, using her as their target, they would begin arguing. If that happened, there was nothing they wouldn't say.

"You little bastard! Your mother's trying to feed you, and all you want to do is claw at her breast!" Old Wu's woman slapped her son. "When you grow up you're going to be one of those toughs who stuffs himself with rice, then runs over to squat in front of the oil shop to bicker with the oil seller's woman and sing that 'Fifth Watch' ditty to the widow across the street—"

"I say, little blockhead!" The woman at the oil shop clapped her hands. "Your mother's words are pearls of wisdom. You should keep them in mind. When you grow up you should become a tough. You have to follow in the footsteps of Sun the Fourth, that good old fifth uncle of yours who got drunk on the day we greeted the bodhisattva and ran into Great Blessings Lane, where he raped that innocent little woman, who then killed herself."

"That night, when we were greeting Guanyin, wasn't that man at your house, the one who smiles at everyone with his tiny eyes, also poking his head out from the brothel to watch the procession? So long as your heart's at peace, there's nothing to fear!" Putting down her son, Old Wu's woman got up slowly and stood under the eaves.

The oil shop woman quivered as she scooted into the middle of the lane and pointed across the street. "Lots of men watched the procession that night. That teacher across the way, Mr. Qin, who later coughed up blood and died, wasn't he one of them? And he was an educated man!"

The quarrel between the two women, with a lane between them, heated up. She clutched her needle and continued to stitch

the piece of white silk, but was reminded again of the dream she'd had during the fourth watch that morning.

She recalled that it was the nineteenth day of the sixth month, a sweltering day. Some of the families in the lane had set up incense offering tables around noon. With the sun blazing overhead, women carried incense burners outside and piously lit bunches of joss sticks. The woman at the oil shop across the way had been quiet all day, a rare occurrence for her. Around two in the afternoon, she and her husband carried out a table, on which she neatly laid out two plates with fresh fruit and two cups of wine. She burned incense under her eaves until nightfall, and not a single curse emerged from her all that day.

That day he too got out of bed and sat in the front room, quietly spending the day resting with his eyes closed.

At sunset, some of the families on South Market Street began setting off firecrackers to greet the deity. Even before it was completely dark out, firecrackers were popping from one end of town to the other. He put on a black felt hat and pulled the brim all the way down to his eyebrows. Without telling her, he dragged his ailing body out of the house. She'd been observing him the whole day and knew he wanted to watch the procession in Great Blessings Lane. So, as soon as he stepped over the threshold, she picked up Zhao'er and followed him to the lane entrance.

As if on fire, Great Blessings Lane was ablaze with people, noise, and firecracker explosions, thunderous, deafening noises. Mother and son joined the crowd of gawking women at the entrance to the lane.

"Things have certainly changed. Now pimps and madams are taking their girls to worship the Guanyin Bodhisattva. Incense is burning in a whole row of brothels!" a woman with a long, pock-marked face said, shaking her head.

"The bodhisattva could have been greeted anywhere, so why this lane—" an old woman with a full head of white hair continued.

“Granny, you must be about seventy. When was the last time you saw men eagerly run over to Great Blessings Lane as soon as they finished dinner?” The pockmarked woman spat on the ground. “Rubbing shoulders with the whores, but they say they’re watching the Matron Guanyin.”

With Zhao’er in her arms, she stood on her tiptoes to look over the sea of black female heads. She saw that in the lane a bunch of men, young and old, were already squeezing beneath the low eaves of the brothels. They were craning their necks and, as if tipsy, shouting toward the middle of the lane.

“Granny, look at those men. This procession has them acting as if they were possessed!” The pockmarked woman watched for a while with her neck stretched out straight, and spat.

Zhao’er climbed onto his mother’s shoulders and also craned his neck to try to find his father in the crowd. He was blinking and choking, tears flowing from his smoked-filled eyes.

“Mother, look, they’re playing with blood.”

“Missus, where are you from? You must be out of your mind, taking your little son to watch something like this!” The pockmarked woman took Zhao’er, set him down on the ground, and turned to say to an old woman behind her, “The old priest Yu has been doing the sorcerer’s dance for half his life, and now he’s got a houseful of grandkids. But every year on this date, he paints his face in red and white, then flashes his Seven Star sword like a lunatic, stabbing his belly over and over. Granny, would you look at all the blood!”

“Possessed by demons. Someone’s family is suffering an injustice! When I got up early this morning, I heard that the second daughter-in-law of Old Wen’s family in Reed Pond Village, west of the river, jumped down a well—”

The pockmarked woman was momentarily at a loss, and, before she could say anything, Eryu, the young woman from Oil Mill

Lane, pushed through the crowd and walked up smiling, holding her breast up to her baby's mouth. She pressed her lips right up against the old woman's ear.

"Today must be an auspicious day. Liu Laoshi let his wife come outside."

Hearing this news, all the women crowded around the lane entrance, stood on their tiptoes, and craned their necks to see.

"The coffin shop door is open."

"Changsheng's kneeling by the door alongside her mother-in-law to burn incense."

"They're worshipping Guanyin, the goddess in white who delivers babies to women."

"Over the past few years, those two have traveled far and near to pray for a baby."

"And she's swallowed pounds of incense ashes."

"But nothing in her belly to show for it."

"Just look at those men with their wandering eyes!" The pock-marked woman spat on the ground. "The minute they see Changsheng come out to burn incense, they all crowd around her door, sizing her up out of the corner of their eye!"

The old woman stared dully, thinking her own thoughts for a long moment. Then she said slowly, "Changsheng is a sad case."

"I see her sometimes out on the street," Eryu said. "She's always got a shopping basket on her arm, walking quietly all alone under the sun on South Market Street—"

The sky was completely dark by the time Great Blessings Lane had greeted the bodhisattva. Red lanterns hanging beneath the eaves of the brothels swung back and forth every once in a while in the hot breezes that had started up at dusk.

All of Great Blessings Lane was in an uproar, roiling and noisy, like a big steamer when its lid is removed. Long strings of red fire-crackers hanging from green bamboo poles had burned down

halfway. In the misty, dusty street, shiny gilded statues of the bodhisattva were being carried around in six sacred palanquins, the dark serpentine figures weaving up and down the street. Their naked backs arched, the forty-eight palanquin bearers pranced and leaped, humming and chanting the whole time. Firecrackers thrown into the air from all sides blossomed into fiery flowers on the black, sweaty shoulders of the bearers.

The sight captivated the women at the entrance to the lane.

Her neck was sore from standing on her tiptoes to watch, holding Zhao'er for nearly an hour. The lane was filled with moving shadows; she couldn't spot him. The rank smell of sweat on the women around her was making her dizzy, so she decided to take her son home to wait for him to return from the procession. But as soon as mother and son started elbowing their way through the crowd, she heard an old woman next to her curse, "What evil is he up to?" Turning her head, she saw the emaciated body of the old woman shudder twice, as if she suffered from malaria. "That damned Sun the Fourth—" The pockmarked woman cursed; her mouth was wide open, but not another word emerged. The women watching the procession at the entrance to the lane craned their necks to stare blankly and silently at Great Blessings Lane, as if possessed. After mother and son had squeezed their way out of the crowd, she turned back and watched as the glazed lamps on the sacred palanquins jumped wildly amid exploding firecrackers, green flickers rising and falling, moving left and right, forward and backward, like will-o'-the-wisps.

With Zhao'er in her arms, she walked slowly back to Oil Mill Lane. After putting her son to bed, she stared at the lamp, lost in her own thoughts, until he staggered home, black felt hat in hand.

The next morning, before it was completely light out, the woman at the oil shop came out to the middle of the lane and announced shrilly that Changsheng had hanged herself during the

fourth watch. "Mr. Qin, the teacher across the way, an educated man, didn't he also sneak over to Great Blessings Lane to watch the procession last night? Did ghosts seal that mouth of his, which he uses to teach, to lecture people, and to eat? The idiot! He just stood there and watched in a daze!" The woman at the oil shop pointed heavenward and spat, her body filling the doorway of her shop, cursing up a storm all morning. He spent the day curled up in bed, wrapped in a blanket, and heard every word, but said nothing. She stood quietly by the bedroom door, watching his sunken eyes stare at the dim yellow light of the bedside lamp, while outside the sun was shining.

She was stitching and thinking; her thoughts were like the threaded needles in her sewing kit, a tangled mass of blue and red, gold and purple. Sitting on a bamboo stool by the door for a good part of the day, she kept her head low as she worked her needle, and at some point, a patch of colorful flowers appeared on that square of white silk. It took her less than twenty days to finish four panels of fairies. One of the wives of the Cao family had ordered twelve panels for an embroidered screen, each containing a flower-strewing fairy maiden, all competing with each other for beauty, but each with her own charm and personality. This one, with a mischievous look, was wearing a phoenix headdress as she laughingly flew into the sky with a flower basket over her arm.

For some reason, the dozen or so hens in the backyard kept flapping their wings noisily. She put down her work to listen, wondering if a snake had come into the courtyard. Sitting there dully for a while, she then turned back and saw the two white candles behind the threshold flicker in the dark, gloomy front room. After composing herself, she picked up a needle with light blue thread and passed it through the hair near her temple. When she looked up, she saw Zhao'er's uncle, his head bowed, hurrying into the lane with a basketful of food. He brought a message from his father: "As

long as Old Wang is good to Zhao'er, she can take the boy along when she remarries. Separating mother and son would be hard on them both. The house can be set aside to keep the spirit tablet of Zhao'er's father. Just tell the boy to come over in the mornings and the evenings to offer a bowl of white rice to his father, so his lonely spirit will rest in peace." The sister-in-law and brother-in-law were standing by the door talking when two persistent toughs came up and squatted beneath the eaves of the oil shop, humming and singing that never-ending ditty, "Fifth Watch." "In the fourth watch, a bright moon shines on the screened window, churning up shapeless longings! In the fifth watch, the rooster crows the arrival of dawn, as, reluctantly, I fold the red silk blanket—" In the evening, women from both sides of the street came out to sit in their doorways, lazily waving their rush fans as they took care of odds and ends. She quietly sent her brother-in-law home. A basinful of water splashed into the middle of the lane from the oil shop, whose woman was now looking at the sky and cursing. "That little brother-in-law is up to no good, dropping in on his own sister-in-law every day!" Four young neighbor women sitting on a bench outside her shop, hoping for a bit of cool air, heard her cursing; they turned to look and laughingly told the man ticking away at his abacus to call her inside. But the oil shop woman had just gotten started; she took this opportunity to step out from under the eaves and say to the women, "Last night that white-boned demon had a lamp burning all night long! What a flirt! Look at those swollen breasts nearly bursting out of her mourning clothes. Ever since her husband died after spitting up blood, her breasts keep swelling for no good reason, like two newly risen buns in a steamer—who knows, maybe there's something in her belly!"

Two newly risen buns in a steamer! After a noon nap, feeling hot and stuffy, she unbuttoned her undergarment in front of a dressing mirror and quietly held her breasts in her hands to exam-

ine them in the lamplight. Then she let go, twisted a lock of hair tightly around her little finger, and sat lost in thought for a while. The woman at the oil shop must have been a karmic enemy from a previous life. It had been four years since she'd moved into Oil Mill Lane from North Market Street, and every morning she saw the woman stand in her doorway, just waiting for trouble to erupt. It was around the fifth watch that morning; the sky was barely light. He had been breathing with difficulty all night, then he stopped altogether when some bloody phlegm got stuck in his windpipe. On this side of the lane, as soon as she and Zhao'er began to wail, the woman at the oil shop raised the alarm outside. She banged on one door after another, informing the whole block, "Dead, he's finally dead this time! That white-boned demon finally sucked Mr. Qin's blood and marrow dry. I've been watching by my door for four years, and I knew that sooner or later even a man of steel would be ground into watery pus by that woman. What chance did the teacher, Mr. Qin, have? Over the past few days, I could hear him coughing in the middle of the night, around the third watch, like he'd seen a ghost. Such a good man, and a teacher, no less!"

Beginning on the day the daughter-in-law of the Liu family hanged herself, the woman at the oil shop stepped onto the street whenever she was unhappy and pointed at the sky. "A man, a real man, a teacher, no less!" He heard every word in the house, but didn't say a word. His suffering turned his eye sockets into bloodshot holes, which, shining bright, like two will-o'-the-wisps, were fixed on the window day and night.

That evening, her mother came from Fish Nest to visit him. As soon as she walked in, she saw him clutching a large blanket and smiling as he sat on a reclining chair by the window, but no sound, not a sound emerged. Thinking he had lost his mind, the old lady went up and closed the window before telling her to go to

the Guanyin Temple on North Market Street and ask Priestess He to come over. It was the last day of the seventh month, the birthday of the Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva. In the afternoon, every household in town put incense and a bowl of water by the door. The entire town was quiet, except for flock after flock of noisy crows chasing the afternoon sun and cawing without letup. Little sparks of incense lit up Oil Mill Lane all the way to North Market Street. When she saw her, Priestess He opened her eyes wide and nodded before putting down the wooden clapper she had been beating. Priestess He then put together a small bundle, which she slung over her shoulder, and followed her out onto the main street, where they came face to face with a red sun hanging low at the entrance of the town, reluctant to set below the horizon. The two women, one old and one young, walked single file through the swirling smoke enshrouding the town and quietly arrived at the corner of Oil Mill Lane and South Market Street. The street was deserted, not a soul in sight. The old woman squatted down at the three-way intersection, where she opened her bundle and took out two packs of gold-edged spirit money, two sheets of yellow spirit paper, and a bundle of incense, all of which she burned. Flaming red tongues of fire shone on her wrinkled old face, from which sorrowful incantations and chants emerged to ask for deities to come and drive away the demons. While she was praying and chanting, she took out a rice bowl, held it in her palm, and made circles in the air under the burning incense to heat the lip of the bowl. In the lane, three joss sticks and a bowl of clear water were being offered at the door of each house. Women with children in their arms came out from under the eaves to silently watch Priestess He as she walked slowly backward, her back bent, her gray head rising, continuing to rotate the rice bowl. Still chanting and praying, she slowly backed into the patient's house from the lane.

He was sitting by the window, dozing, his sunken black eyes closed. When he opened his eyes, in the light of the lamp he saw Priestess He's old face pressing close to his nose, and he shuddered twice. The woman was still chanting as she held up the rice bowl and circled it three times in front of his face. Then she tore off the black gauze covering the rice bowl, took a look, and nodded before throwing the raw rice out the window. "Mr. Qin! Come back!" Priestess He called out as she stripped him to the waist. She turned and told the woman to go borrow half a bowl of rice wine from next door. That done, she took out another stack of yellow spirit paper, selecting one sheet to burn in the wine. Green sepulchral flames flickered at the rim of the rice bowl; tremblingly picking it up with her talonlike fingers, the old woman cupped it over his heart without a word of warning. His eyes snapped open and he glared at her with the look of a cannibal. His body in the grip of spasms and twitches, he was gasping for air. "Mr. Qin! Come back." All in all, Priestess He branded him twelve times on his chest and back with the ghostly red light burning across the rim of the bowl. She followed Priestess He outside, where the old woman again squatted at the intersection to burn two packets of gold-edged spirit money and chant more sutras. Finally, Priestess He slung her bundle over her shoulder and walked off through the dense incense smoke.

When she returned home, he was half lying and half sitting in bed, blue and purple welts all over his bony chest, which brought tears to the eyes of her mother, who wet a piece of cloth in half a bowl of soy sauce and sponged his chest all night, mumbling and muttering the whole time. At around the fifth watch, roosters began to crow and streaks of daylight filtered in from the courtyard. When she turned up the light, she saw blisters all over his body; his face was scarlet, as if feverish, which prompted her to ask Dr. Qi from Crown Prince Lane to come over. During the next

few days, he sat in his reclining chair by the window, back bent and eyes closed, resting quietly. She sat by the door doing needlework and silently watching pus ooze from the festering wounds on his chest and back. He was also coughing up more blood.

It had been nearly a year now, but she still missed him. During the third watch the night before, the oil lamp in front of his bier had flickered several times. It was dark outside and the wind was howling, but he would always have a place here, no matter how late he returned from his wanderings, a haven with a lamp and a bowl of rice.

During her nightlong vigil she finished the white jacket. Roosters signaled the fifth watch and people began to stir out on South Market Street. She put away her needlework, blew out the lamp, and dragged her weary body over to quietly open the front door. The sky above was blackish blue. Early risers in the lane were opening their creaky doors and dumping basins of dirty bathwater from the night before. On this early summer morning, the sun had barely risen, but the back-alley street was already steaming with the age-old smell of urine.

Another scorch.

She closed the door and went back to sit in the shadowy room and wait for Zhao'er to wake up, while making plans to take the white jacket to burn by his grave on the anniversary of his death. Morning was just breaking outside. The woman across the way opened the door of her oil shop; she heard her dump water and walk outside with a string of loud yawns. Standing in the middle of the lane, she said good morning to Old Wu's wife across the way. The two fat women were soon engaged in loud gossip, like loving sisters. As they prattled on, the morning lit up the sky; threads of light streamed in through the cracks in the doorway. After sending Zhao'er off to school, she'd gone in to refill the oil lamp for the

Buddha before she'd had a chance to close her eyes for a while in her bedroom. Now she'd been sitting by the door for an entire afternoon; her eyes were sore and her eyelids heavy. The light in the alley suddenly dimmed, while a patch of red sunset burned above the roof of Cao's Oil Mill. In a dry, stifling wind that rose up toward the evening, the wind chimes hanging from the eaves clanged noisily—*ding'er-dang, ding'er-dang*—noisily, as if summoning errant souls. The matchmaker, Old Xie, dressed all in red, walked excitedly into the lane holding an ancient parasol. She was carrying a large piece of red cloth under her arm; she must have just returned from a matchmaking trip, for her face was crimson with the effects of alcohol. Seeing her sitting by the door from a distance, Old Xie crinkled her old face with a broad smile. Oblivious of the oil shop woman rolling her eyes across the street and the watchful women in the lane, the matchmaker plopped down on the threshold and pressed her lips close to quietly relay a message from Old Wang at the tofu shop: "Let's set a date after the autumn solstice. In a few days, you take Zhao'er to stay with your family at Fish Nest for a couple of months. On the wedding day, you and your son will be escorted to his house. Put your mind at ease. Old Wang won't mistreat Zhao'er. After you're married, he'll let Zhao'er bring a bowl of rice over every morning and evening to offer to his real father—" Old Xie rattled on, while she gathered her needlework. She looked up at South Market Street at the entrance to the lane, thinking that Zhao'er should be home from school pretty soon. On that evening, the sky was completely lit up, as if embroiled in a raging fire.

Eleven's Mother

Inexplicably, over a two-day period it started getting dark earlier than usual. At around six o'clock, a few men in the alley were still squatting by their doors eating dinner. When they looked up, the sky above them had darkened before they were aware of it. Maybe a thunderstorm was on the way. A group of neighborhood kids, boys and girls, formed a circle, dozens of pairs of eyes fixed on a top that was twirling and wheeling, spinning and gyrating on the ground in front of them. Clapping their hands, they started singing:

Went to Auntie's house in the first month
Auntie hadn't planted melons
Went to Auntie's house in the second month
Auntie was planting melons
Went to Auntie's house in the third month
Auntie's melons were sprouting
Went to Auntie's house in the fourth month
Auntie's melons were flowering
Went to Auntie's house in the fifth month
Auntie's flowers were turning into melons
Went to Auntie's house in the sixth month
Auntie was picking melons

The little imp Eleven had barely stepped across the threshold when his mother's voice rang out behind him: "You little bastard, you're my son, how dare you not come home tonight! I'll run you and your father out of this house with my broom."

Without turning his head, the little imp Eleven rolled his eyes and smiled as he spit into the middle of the street.

"Turtle-spawned little bastards, little whores, fuck you! What are you singing?"

The kids scurried away. Eleven stood dully in the doorway with his hands on his hips before shuffling his large, splayed, duck-like feet toward the alley entrance. His poor, shrewish mother, unable to do anything about her own flesh and blood, vented her anger on her husband.

"You sit right there! The young one's feet are barely out the door before the old one grabs his undershirt to follow him, as if chased by a ghost—to do who knows what?"

"Now what would I want to do?" the man responded softly, compliantly. "It's so stuffy in here, I just wanted to go outside and cool off, get some fresh air."

"What do you think I am, a corpse or something? A stage has been erected by the Guanyin Temple on North Market Street."

The man bowed slightly and grinned, his eyes darting toward the door.

"So, you really want to watch the show, do you?" The woman blocked the door with her body. "The last time that immoral troupe came to perform *Wang Zhaojun Leaving for the Huns*, the actor who played Wang Zhaojun, with a stage name of Little Flower Yang or something like that, kept hiking the skirt of his costume all the time he was singing and weeping on stage."

"It wasn't like that—"

"All the men in town squatted under the stage, craning their necks to gawk at his hairy legs."

"We did not."

“You didn’t? The father and son of the Hu family squatting in front of the stage, shoulder to shoulder, ogling the actor’s hairy legs, with everybody in town laughing their heads off!”

“What do you mean, father and son? Stop trying to make a laughingstock out of us.”

Catching her by surprise, he lowered his head and darted out of the house by ducking under one of her fat arms.

Eleven’s mother was stunned; feeling sorry for herself, she dragged out a bench from the oil shop and sat glumly under the eaves, lost in thought.

Across the street, once again the lamps were not lit in the Qin house, a rough adobe brick building weighed down in the darkness by low-hanging eaves. The peeling black lacquer of the closed doors made the house look like a small, remote mountain temple. It had been nearly a year since the toughs had broken down the doors and stormed into her house in broad daylight. The Qin woman had not shown her face in public since. On that steamy afternoon, gawkers had filled the block. Although barely seventeen, Eleven had been quick-witted and gutsy. Goaded on by only the slightest dare, he’d leaped over the Qins’ back wall, followed by five or six toughs. With loud whoops, they’d spread out to chase the depraved brother-in-law. To everyone’s surprise, before he caught his prey, Eleven had stumbled and fallen headlong into someone’s cesspool. He’d run home, dripping and stinking, a sight that had prompted his mother to pick up her broom and drive him back out the door without a word. The brother-in-law had gotten away. Since they hadn’t caught him in the act, the drama had failed to play out. The gawkers had clapped their hands and walked off. It had been a steamy afternoon!

Eleven’s mother shook her head and sighed.

“Say, oil shop sister-in-law, why are you sitting all alone in your doorway in the dark, not even lighting a lamp? Who are you angry at?”

The Wu woman, who lived next door to the Qins, had finished dinner and sent her husband out with their two excited sons. When she saw Eleven's mother sitting in her doorway, lost in thought, she came over to say hello, wearing a smile. These two women were karmic enemies; one minute they'd be as close as sworn sisters, and the next, a falling-out would have them bawling and cursing at each other across the lane, making all sorts of oblique accusations. This evening, for some reason, the Wu woman felt that everything was fine; she was in such a good mood she was beaming even before she spoke.

"Sister-in-law, just look at that sky. It's so dark it chills the heart!"

Still choked with anger, Eleven's mother turned her head away without replying.

"Are you angry at that man of yours?" The Wu woman waved her rush fan in front of her mouth, eyeing Eleven's mother and smiling. "This Jiling town of ours may seem large, but it's no bigger than the palm of your hand. As soon as it gets dark, it turns into a wasteland. The men are dying of boredom! It's no big deal for them to take in a free show."

"Are they doing *Zhaojun Leaving for the Huns* again?"

"That's the one the men like to see."

"Is that Little Flower Yang playing Wang Zhaojun again?"

"He's the one!" the Wu woman said as she quietly moved up to Eleven's mother and sat down on the bench beside her. "What a beautiful man! Bright red rouge on his cheeks, and a pair of limpid eyes, moist and shiny—"

"No wonder the men in town all went to leer at him!"

"The last time Little Flower Yang came to perform, about six months ago, I didn't have anything to do, so I went with Old Wu to take a peek. From way in the back I watched him walk on stage, carrying a balloon guitar, with unbelievable charm and beauty.

Men who'd come from neighboring towns to watch the performance felt their hearts ache as they listened to his songs and soliloquies." The Wu woman waved her fan dully, then burst out laughing. "Old Wang, who runs the tofu shop on North Market Street, had been out drinking somewhere and squatted at the foot of the stage, drunk as a lord. He was so aroused by the performance he yelled out, 'Fuck you! Fuck you!' before jumping onto the stage and grabbing the powdered Mo Yanshou, Wang Zhaojun's nemesis. Old Wang yanked the fake beard off the actor's face, scaring the wits out of all the other actors up there."

"Did that really happen?"

"It sure did."

"This weather!"

"So muggy."

"And so dark."

"We can expect thunder."

"That's for sure."

"Our elder brother at the oil shop seems so innocent. He sits behind the counter ticking away at his abacus every morning as soon as he gets up. He always greets people with a smile and a bow, and he never gossips," the Wu woman said as she gently fanned the chest of Eleven's mother. "But that boy Eleven's a different story altogether. He's not a child any more. Must be twenty."

"Eighteen."

"He's still pretty muddle-headed. Yesterday, he sneaked up and stuck a three-foot tortoise shell in Old Wu's vendor basket."

"Tortoise shell?"

"A venomous snake."

"That vile creature!" Eleven's mother sighed. "Just think, I swallowed six months' worth of incense ashes and prayed to the Guanyin Bodhisattva just so I could have him."

"Doesn't his old man have anything to say about his behavior?"

“That slippery old carp doesn’t let himself be bothered with things like that. Every evening, as soon as it gets dark, the wheels in his head start spinning for him to find a way to sneak out of the house.”

“To take a stroll in the moonlight?”

“To go over to Great Blessings Lane to look at the whores!”

The Wu woman edged up closer. “The elder brother at your oil shop looks so innocent, with his thin brows and tiny eyes. Is he involved with one of the girls?”

“Just looking to satisfy his itch, that’s all.” Eleven’s mother snickered. “That castrato—”

The Wu woman fell silent for a moment before saying, “Look across the street. She’s left her light off again tonight.”

“A few days ago, I woke up in the middle of the night and went outside for some fresh air,” Eleven’s mother said. “I heard a baby crying across the street.”

“A baby?”

“Newborn!”

“Do you mean it?”

“Really.”

“How—”

“Mama Dong, in the house behind hers, also heard it.”

“Sister-in-law—”

“If I’m lying, may lightning strike me and my whole family!”

“No wonder.”

“What’s that?”

“Those tough kids out on the street are dead set on catching them in the act.”

“You count the days and you’ll see that she was about two months pregnant at the time.”

“By her brother-in-law?”

“Who knows?”

“It’s almost a year now, and I haven’t seen her since.”

“Women were born to a hard life and get through it by being careful. She needs to avoid doing anything that will give men a handle to grab her by.”

“Those toughs aren’t going to let them get away.” The Wu woman shook her head. “Even her in-laws were shamed. They rushed two people over to take her son Zhao’er back to Fish Nest.”

“No waves without wind.”

“Now she’s all alone.”

“This weather! So muggy it puts you in a bad mood.”

“It’s pitch dark from the sky all the way down to the ground.”

“It’s going to rain.”

The two women sat on the bench in the doorway, quietly gazing up at the sky above them.

“Say, sister-in law!” After a long silence the Wu woman pressed her lips up close and whispered: “Was your man happy when you were pregnant with Eleven?”

“Was he happy? He was beside himself! He grabbed me by the neck and forced incense ashes down my throat for six months so I could give him an heir!”

The Wu woman smiled.

“Elder Brother over at the oil shop is such a soft-spoken person. Think he could be rough?”

When she heard this, the mother of Eleven’s oily, dark face started to burn. “Sister Wu, who do you think I am? I was so shy when I was a girl at home that whenever I saw a man, my face would turn the color of pig’s liver and I’d run into my room. Later, that devilish matchmaker, Old Xie, arranged for me to marry Hu the Fourth from this oil shop. His mother, eager for a grandson, came over every day, nagging us so much that he went to ask for a packet of incense ashes from the Guanyin Temple, and he made me swallow a mouthful of them and kowtow to the bodhisattva

altar three times a day. I was a newlywed, what did I know? He used trickery and he used threats, and I was so confused I let him have his way. That went on for six months, but all in vain. That castrato wanted a son so badly he nearly went crazy. Then one night he came home from a drinking binge with a bachelor friend. He said he was a sworn brother he hadn't seen in years, and he wanted to take a look at his sworn brother's bride—"

"No wonder Eleven is so muddle-headed!" The Wu woman smacked her fan against her knee. "This is what people call retribution."

Eleven's mother sighed. A chill ran through her heart when she heard the word *retribution*. She sat there dully, unable to say a word.

"It's getting late! I have to go home and make sure there's tea ready for Old Wu when he and the two boys get home after the show." The Wu woman stood up and stretched leisurely. "Sister-in-law, why don't you go inside and get some rest?"

Eleven's mother nodded, her heart thumping wildly, as she watched the Wu woman clomp—*qiong qiong qiong*—across the lane in her wooden clogs. All around her, dead silence, as the residents of the lane had all gone to watch the show. She sat alone outside the oil shop, staring at the Qin house, which was shrouded in darkness across the way. Thoughts were spinning through her head, one on top of the other, like a lantern with revolving images.

Retribution—

That night, her man, who had left earlier in the day, came back in the company of a big man with a full beard, so sweaty the room filled with his stink as soon as he walked in the door. Her man's tiny face was flushed from the effects of alcohol. At the time they'd been married only a year. Her face, round and glossy, made her look like a bride whose downy facial hair had just been

plucked. The night before the wedding, her teary-eyed mother had taken a piece of red thread and told her in a soft voice to raise her face so she could pluck each fine hair under red candlelight. “Smooth faced—the grown-up girl’s face is smooth. Tomorrow the bridal chamber will be warm, and a plump little baby will be born next year!” The roomful of women looking on giggled and cheered. Who could have guessed that not even the shadow of a baby would appear in her belly after a whole year? Her mother had her suspicions and furtively interrogated her several times. Blushing, she said nothing, and her mother gradually lost interest. That night, when her man returned with his sworn brother, he dragged her into the bedroom as soon as he walked in the door. He coaxed her and pleaded with her, eventually wearing her down with his persistence, until she had no choice but to hand over the key. Brimming with joy, he opened her dowry trunk and picked out a radiant red blouse and a light blue skirt, which he clumsily helped her put on. Then he brought her makeup kit over and told her to make up her face, turning it into a mixture of red and white. Blankly standing in front of her dressing mirror, she saw herself wrapped in red, like a ripe, juicy peach. Her man was also dazed for a moment before jumping to his feet and going into the outer room to have his sworn brother take a leisurely hot bath, while he went into the kitchen to chop and dice, preparing a sumptuous meal for them. He then pinched her mouth open and forced two cups of acanthus liquor down her throat, which had her reeling and turned her limp. When she opened her eyes, she saw a red brocade curtain hanging around the bed and a pair of red candles lighting up the room, like a flower garden. Or a pool of blood. At the end of nearly eleven months, she gave birth to a baby boy with a huge head and big ears. As she took the baby from her mother and put its mouth up to her breast, she felt that her heart was sour and bitter, like an unripe plum. “Eleven,

Eleven, during those eleven months your mother carried you in her belly, you never stopped punching and kicking. You'll never know how much I suffered. So when you grow up, don't become the cause of my death." Ten tables of food were laid out in the lane outside the oil shop on the first-month anniversary of the baby's birth. Her husband, dressed in new clothes, his eyes smiling, ran in and out with the baby in his arms, bowing to each guest, beaming with joy.

For the next two years, her husband paced back and forth in the doorway each and every morning, carrying his son in his arms.

When the idlers in town first heard that the spineless Hu the Fourth had married a young and pretty wife, the news spread quickly, and within ten days, all the young men in town had turned green with envy. They came over every morning in groups of three or four to squat by the oil shop doorway or out in the lane; dozens of crafty eyes searched for the bride like bloodhounds. The man sat inside, ticking away at his abacus. Only when things started to get out of hand did he walk slowly out from behind the counter and, squinting his girlish eyes timidly and clasping his hands in front of him, plead with the young men. Her face burned bright red whenever that happened, for as a newlywed, she'd never seen anything like that before. After the birth of Eleven, her body suddenly flowered. When the young men heard about that, they showed up at the oil shop early every morning to sing suggestive folk songs—"Ah, big brother, oh, little sister"—around her doorway. Their behavior frightened customers away over a period of several months. One gloomy, overcast day, she opened the shop door feeling extremely agitated. Her expression changed abruptly at the sight of the young men; she spun around, picked up a dripping, smelly broom, and attacked the idlers nearest her door. Caught by surprise, the young men were slow to react, but after a moment, they ran off shouting. From then on, no one dared come over to the oil

shop to torment her. By the following day, her reputation as “that shrew at the oil shop” had spread all over town.

Two years after Eleven was born, her husband suddenly became a sex maniac. At night, as she was getting ready for bed after nursing the baby and buttoning her blouse, he would turn his back to her, open the trunk, and take out her radiant red blouse and light blue skirt.

“Orchid Brother! Orchid Brother!” He would press his glossy lips up close to her, softly and seductively calling her by her nickname. As she lay in bed, stiff as a corpse, his humping movements would make her break out in a cold sweat. When she was agitated, she’d roll over and kick him out of bed. With a smile, he’d pick himself up slowly, grab his undershirt from the headboard, and shuffle out of the room.

Then the little imp Eleven turned five.

On the nineteenth day of the sixth month, the bodhisattva’s birthday, a small out-of-town drama troupe was hired for a one-day performance at the Guanyin Temple on North Market Street. The man got up early, woke his son, and hoisted him onto his shoulders. Father and son left in great excitement. That night, an older man, a total stranger, bounced into the oil shop with Eleven in his arms, carrying a message from her husband, which he delivered with a grin: “Eleven’s tired, so I’m sending him on ahead. I’ll be home right after the performance of *Monkey Raises Hell in Heaven*. The fight scenes are starting to heat up, and I don’t feel like leaving quite yet.” She flew into a rage, since she’d been busy all day at the shop, with no one to help. After leaving her son with a neighbor, she stormed down two streets, her hair a mess, her face not washed. But the grounds in front of the temple stage were deserted; the matinee was over and the evening performance hadn’t begun. A local scalawag asked with a grin, “Looking for your husband, Sister-in-law? Go check out Wen’s

Brothel in Purple Wardrobe Lane.” After asking the way, she could hear men and women drinking and flirting in the building; it was obvious they were having a great time, even from a distance. A female entertainer was playing a two-stringed fiddle and singing a sorrowful tune:

Holding a piece of heartless paper
Tears streaming down my face
Hurriedly
I take my case to court
To sue my parents
Who love only money
Sold me into prostitution
Forsaking their conscience—

Her heart was beating out of control as she listened at the door. Peeking through the window, she saw her husband seated facing the door, a thirty-something prostitute on his left, and on his right a dumb-looking kid with a shaved head. Wasn't it that boy actor? He was barely ten years old. She had no idea how much her husband had had to drink, but his pallid, waxy face was turning green; yet, in a strange, pinched voice, he was urging the prostitutes and actors to drink more. Having finished her song on suing parents, the blind entertainer received tips with a grin. “Master Hu, thank you so much for the tip.” Overcome with joy, her husband pulled the shaved-head little actor over and poked violently at the place between his brows, which had all the men and women around the table roaring with laughter. Her husband sat there dully for a moment before taking advantage of his drunkenness to pick up the boy and put him in his lap. Then, without a word, he turned the little actor's face toward him and planted two noisy kisses on the boy's little red mouth.

Pressed up against the window, she was racked by a chill, for she'd never seen a man do anything like that. Without a sound or warning, she kicked open the door of the Wen establishment, picked up a club leaning against the door, and charged the table. Her husband flinched before raising his hand in a sort of wave. But the club caught his fingers in the air before a word could escape his lips. An uproar broke out among the clients, prostitutes, and actors, who were either trying to get away or ducking. "What's going on here?" they shouted. "Whose wife is this, coming here to attack us in broad daylight?" A husky actor in his forties, who played martial roles, was the sole exception. Smiling foolishly, he shambled up to her, pulled down his black silk pants, and let that big, black thing of his hang there for all to see. The blood drained from the poor woman's face; she threw away the club and covered her eyes with a corner of her blouse. Then she fled in terror, all the while cursing herself: "I'm a married woman who's given birth to a son. It's not something I never saw before, so why are my cheeks all red and burning hot?"

There are three ugly types in this world: bastards, actors, and musicians!

She holed up in her room after locking father and son out of the house. First she lit a bright red candle, then climbed into bed, where she shook and moaned all night long.

Over the next two years, she watched her husband like a hawk. Each day she made sure he dutifully sat behind the counter. But there was always a smile on his face as he wordlessly ticked away at his abacus from early morning on. Eleven grew and grew. Thanks to his mother's attentions, he was the size of a calf when he was barely ten years old. He had powerful arms, but was slow-witted and showed no interest in books. Not until he was four years old could he say "Daddy" and "Mommy." One day, at the age of six, he said, "Mommy, my tummy's swollen. I have to pee." With tears of joy streaming down her face, she helped him pee before prostrating her-

self in front of the family altar, where she wept for a long time. But after his twelfth birthday, Eleven suddenly became glib, picking up all the dirty words uttered by toughs out on the street. "Fuck you, fuck you," he'd curse at nothing in particular and for no particular reason in front of his mother whenever he came in from outside.

That New Year's Eve, her husband took Eleven to West River Village to buy a piglet. After returning home, father and son squatted in front of the stove, happily preparing the New Year's Eve dinner. She busied herself in the shop, smilingly taking care of poor customers who'd come in from outlying villages to buy oil on credit. When she looked into the kitchen, she saw her husband open the cupboard and take out a butcher's knife, which he handed to their son. He then squatted off to the side and, with a grin on his face, watched the boy plunge the knife into the piglet's throat. She dropped the oil ladle and rushed into the kitchen to pull out the knife. The freed piglet leaped into the air and ran out into the backyard, where clothes were hung to dry, dripping blood all the way. Eleven sat there spellbound for a long moment before glaring through his tiny eyes, as curses oozed out through the spaces between his teeth: "Fuck you, you fucking pig! Stop running, or I'll skin you alive to make a pigskin jacket for New Year's." One little pig and one little devil ran around the backyard, dumping newly washed clothes all over the ground. After the holiday dinner that night, the woman dragged her husband into the bedroom by his ear, clenching her teeth in anger. Her husband turned into a different person after the New Year's holiday. Day in and day out, he'd keep his small, squinty eyes on Eleven, a sinister smile frozen on his face. Not being able to tell what he was thinking frightened her. One day her anger rose to the surface: "What are you doing, watching your son in that shifty-eyed manner?" He continued to tick the abacus for a long while before he said, without even looking up, "The kid's got guts."

That night, her husband inexplicably fell into a strange malarial state. Bringing over her bright red blouse and light blue skirt with trembling hands, he held her and called her by her nickname in a piteous voice. Not knowing what else to do, she sighed and lay down on the bed, motionless, corpselike. While letting him do what he wanted on top of her, she stared at the rainwater seeping into a corner of the wall, one drop after another slipping down onto tiles already eroded by rain. In the middle of the night her husband got out of bed and, without a word, draped a piece of black oilcloth around his shoulders and walked outside, shaking all over. She followed with an umbrella. When she reached the entrance to Purple Wardrobe Lane, far up ahead she saw father and son, the man in front and the boy ten or so paces behind, duck into the Wen house. Still holding the umbrella, she stood at the lane entrance until dawn.

Two days later, she took the bright red blouse and the light blue skirt out to the backyard and quietly burned them.

During the days that followed, she felt like a camel on two separate bridge planks—shaky on both ends. With a sense of desolation filling her heart, she moved in and out of the house as if she'd lost her bearings. One day after Eleven turned fourteen, she was busy in the shop when she looked up to see five or six screaming toughs storming down the lane toward an empty lot at the end. She thought she heard Eleven's name. She stood there dully for a moment, then finally threw down the funnel and ran after them in a panic, after telling her husband to watch the shop. By the time she reached the lot, more than a dozen rubbernecks were already gathered around the Chens' latrine. Shoulder to shoulder, they were peering inside. After shoving them out of the way, she saw a little girl in braids, pants off, being pressed down on the edge of the latrine by her son. Two of the toughs standing off to the side were giggling and yelling, "Fuck her, Eleven, you little rascal, fuck her!"

As stars swirled before her eyes, her legs buckled and she quietly swooned in the latrine doorway. Afterward, holding a bunch of joss sticks over her head and kneeling every ten steps, she bowed her way down North and South Market streets and three lanes, all the way to the little girl's house. Two jade hairpins and a pair of silver earrings, which she gave them for the girl's dowry, were hardly enough to compensate for the shame the family had endured. That day, the neighborhood swarmed with rubbernecks. Her husband sat in the shop, his face dark and taut, wordlessly tending the accounts. The Wu woman from across the way led some neighborhood women over to ask about the incident, but he just raised his head slowly and said with a sad smile, "Evil spawn from a previous life—karmic enmity!" Some time later, the Wu woman told her what he had said, staring at her with a ready smile the whole time. She was dumbfounded; her oily face began to burn as she tore open her blouse to expose her full breasts there in the lane. As her knees weakened, she knelt in front of the oil shop and howled mournfully for all to hear.

Time passes and people change. Great Blessings Lane opened for business, good business. As soon as it got dark, a dozen bright red lanterns were lit beneath the low, dusty gray-tiled eaves.

When men from all around heard that out-of-town girls had arrived, they came eagerly, for reasons of their own or for no reason at all, streaming in and out of Great Blessings Lane like revolving images on a lantern. Her husband had been a frequent visitor to the Wen brothel in Purple Wardrobe Lane, but several months after Great Blessings Lane opened for business, on one cold, rainy night he had a sudden change of heart. Slowly draping his black oilcloth over his shoulders, he walked out the door with his eyes downcast. "Just look at you, you're drooling. What kind of man are you? Now I suppose you want to try something different with those sluts." She snickered when she saw him walk out the

door, but didn't try to stop him. After all these years, she'd given up on him. Her only concern was Eleven, who was now sixteen or seventeen, with the long arms of a monkey and the thick waist of a bear. The fortune-tellers all said he'd been born under a lucky star, which would guarantee him sixty years of easy life.

Who could have guessed that Eleven would hook up with the gang of toughs on South Market Street? He became a sort of adopted son to Sun the Fourth, the younger brother of the Wu woman across the way. The close-knit "father and son" came and went as a team, raising hell in Jiling, a town with over five thousand families. The prostitutes on Great Blessings Lane would hike their skirts and flee inside with loud squeals as soon as they saw Eleven charge into the lane with his "Fuck you! Fuck you!" attitude, like the paper image leading a funeral procession. Rumor had it that one day a valley hayseed unfamiliar with the situation was having a heart-to-heart talk with a prostitute under one of the red lanterns when he saw Eleven bullying his way down the lane. He flew into a rage and cursed, "Who's that little bastard? How dare he come here raising hell and chasing the girls around like that!" Eleven didn't say a word. He simply walked up quietly and tripped the guy with a leg sweep, sending him face up on the ground. He then jerked down the guy's pants and began plucking his black hairs one at a time. The pimps, the madams, the prostitutes, and their clients crowded behind their doors, giggling at the sight.

One day, when Eleven was still a boy, he brought home a pair of white butterflies he'd caught in the vacant lot and tortured them to death. His mother said that the butterflies were a star-crossed couple, and now that Eleven had killed them, heaven would strike him down with thunderbolts as punishment.

When he heard this from his mother, the thirteen-year-old delinquent beamed as he rolled up his sleeves to show off his pale, muscular arms.

“If the sky falls, I’ll use it as a blanket!”

As predicted, on the nineteenth day of the sixth month three years before, when Eleven was eighteen, a disaster occurred on the night given over to greeting the deity. It was the bodhisattva’s birthday, and people from all around came to town early in the morning. Even before noon, all of Jiling was bubbling with excitement, as if on fire. In the evening, after a day of binge drinking, Eleven, in company with his adopted father and adopted brothers, burst into Great Blessings Lane. The palanquin with the image of the bodhisattva was carried into the lane, accompanied by the humming and chanting of the bearers. Sun the Fourth, possessed by wanton desire, snatched the young bride of the Liu family in front of the bodhisattva, and screwed her in the brothel. Someone saw Eleven standing guard for his adopted father. Afterward, the woman’s husband went crazy and brandished a cleaver all over town looking for the culprit.

When she heard at the oil shop that her son was an accessory to the crime, her knees buckled and she knelt in front of the family altar, where she kowtowed to the image of the bodhisattva until her forehead bled. Eleven was a born delinquent! Unaware that he’d abetted a murder, he came home as if nothing had happened. His mother gave him two savage slaps before he could open his mouth to ask for dinner. Her husband looked on, but just shook his head and continued to tick his abacus. “Heavenly retribution—heavenly retribution.” She was speechless, as if choking on acanthus liquor that had been poured down her throat, and it took a long time before she could demand of him: “Where did you go that night? Don’t be so smug—it’s too early for that.”

“Retribution—”

Eleven’s mother sighed sadly.

Thoughts spun around in her head, one on top of the other, a lamp with revolving images, and all she felt inside was emptiness.

After standing there dully for a long time, she finally straightened up and walked out into the lane to look up at the sky. She was getting on in years, and rolls of fat had emerged around her waist. She sat on the bench for the longest time, until she was sore all over.

“It’s black as pitch. That means rain.”

Layers of dark clouds blocked out half the sky to the west, like a vast sheet of blue paper splashed with thick black ink.

The lane, with its twenty or thirty families, had never been so quiet. Men had taken their wives and children to watch the show at the Guanyin Temple. From one end of the lane to the other, only half a dozen houses had lights on, and not a soul was outside. From distant North Market Street the sound of gongs and the screeching voices of actors knifed through the dark sky.

“It’s already the second watch. The performance should be over by now.”

She stretched lazily before returning to the eaves and taking the bench into the shop, where she lit a lamp and prepared a pot of hot tea.

The next time she walked outside, something flickered in front of her eyes, and she thought she saw candlelight flutter in the darkened Qin house across the way. Paint on the partially closed doors had already begun to peel, making them look like the doors of a remote mountain temple. A silent wind blew over from the vacant lot at the end of the lane and sent the chimes tinkling under the eaves of the Qin house—*ding’er-dang, ding’er-dang*. They were still tinkling as Eleven’s mother tiptoed across the narrow lane and stopped at the Qin threshold. Narrowing her eyes, she peered through the crack in the doors. Then, on impulse, she pushed gently. One of the black-lacquered doors creaked open. In the light from her own house across the way, she could see a bowl of white rice in the tiny, shadowy room, a pair of black-lacquered bamboo chopsticks, and a spirit tablet. The house was deathly silent. Eleven’s mother looked

around quietly. It had been months since anyone had lived here, and no one knew when the Qin woman had been taken away.

“Retribution—”

Standing in the doorway, Eleven's mother shivered, and it took a while to compose herself and pull the door closed. She heard human noises at the entrance to the lane. The neighbors who had gone to watch the show were returning.

Ge'er-long-dong clang

Ge'er-long-dong clang

That little imp Eleven, now a fully grown twenty-year-old, was walking in front, excitedly banging an imaginary gong. His father followed, face flushed with alcohol; he pinched his throat and sang something in a shrill, high-pitched voice, imitating the actor who played the female lead.

“Father and son, quite a pair!”

The Wu woman, next door to the Qin house, opened her door and stepped outside to watch her out of the corner of her eye, a smile on her face.

Eleven's mother felt her face burn. Without a word in reply, she spun around and went back into the shop, quickly returning with a broom. The lane was filled with revelers, young and old, who had just returned from the show. Still savoring the excitement of the performance, they were brought up short by the sight of a shrewish woman with a puffy, purplish face, as if drunk, blocking the lane with her dark, oily, shiny body.

“It's the middle of night. Who brought bad luck by provoking Hu the Fourth's shrew?”

Book Three



Chaos in Heaven

Snake Enmity

It's cold and we've nothing to do, Jin the Fifth. Let's light a charcoal fire and open a bottle of sorghum liquor, and I'll tell you a story about snakes.

My elder sister's mother-in-law said—my grandfather died with a troubled heart. He was carried back home from town, where the whole family was waiting to bury him on the mountain as soon as possible after his death. People like us, who live and plant peppers in the valley, rarely go overboard on weddings or funerals. My elder sister was married to someone from Stone Dragon Ditch at the age of seventeen. On her wedding day, ten tables were set up in our pepper-drying yard, where our barefoot neighbors and their children had a feast. After fortifying themselves with liquor, the twenty hired porters carried her dowry, which consisted of a set of redwood furniture, a gilded trunk, and a carved bed frame, and, humming and chanting to the accompaniment of horns and drums, delivered my sister across the river.

Ha, how did I start talking about that? Anyhow, Father knew that things looked bad when the three of us—my father, my brother, and me—carried Grandfather to the missionary hospital in town that night. We sat in the hallway through the night. Early the

next morning, after sending my brother home, Father walked over to Great Blessings Lane and banged on Fourth Mama Luo's back door to borrow some money. Then he returned to the lane to get me before walking out onto the street, where he hired four porters to carry a large six-plank coffin with an upturned head from Liu Laoshi's shop back to our house.

Three days later, when Grandfather was carried home, his tongue was stiff as he lay in bed, his mouth twisted to one side, dry eyes staring straight ahead. My sister, carrying her ten-month-old daughter, rushed over with her mother-in-law when they heard the news. No sooner had she set foot in the house than she started to wail. A wife and mother at twenty! She'd been married for three years. Now, dressed in white, she knelt before she even reached Grandfather's bed and, turning to her mother-in-law, said, "Look, the old gentleman doesn't even recognize me."

"What did he, your grandpa, say?" my sister's mother-in-law asked me.

"Snake! Grandpa said snake." My kid sister, who was only seven, cut in, pointing at the overhead beam with a grin. "Snake!"

My sister's mother-in-law followed Grandfather's gaze up to the beam. "Deranged!" She shook her head and walked out of the room. "Your grandpa has something on his mind and can't let it go. He's thought about it and thought about it, until he's become deranged—when was there ever a snake in this house?"

My mother was barely out of the kitchen with a cup of hot tea when she heard the comment from my sister's mother-in-law. The teacup fell to the floor with a loud crash. The mother-in-law hurried over to help my mother to a chair. "Dear, you—you—rest, rest for a while. Why—why busy yourself with tea?" Her normally glib tongue began to fail her in her anxiety. "You—you—you're eight months into your pregnancy, so try not to move around too much!"

The third night after my sister came home, our old dog Blackie barked all night. At daybreak we heard rattles in Grandfather's throat for a moment, then he passed away.

My sister's mother-in-law took charge of every detail of Grandfather's funeral, big and small, indoors and outside. Once Grandfather breathed his last, my father didn't know what to do, except wear a hangdog look and sprawl on the floor wearing hempen mourning clothes and grasping a mourning club as he wailed piteously. My sister's mother-in-law just shook her head at the sight of him. She bathed Grandfather and dressed him in fine clothes before having him moved into the main room, where he was laid out on door panels that had been taken down for that very purpose. A bowl of white rice and a pair of chopsticks were placed in offering, along with two burning white candles at his feet. She said that sooner or later the old man would be coming back because he hadn't died in peace. When my brother heard this, he ran into town, where he found Yu, the old Taoist priest, drinking at a little food stall by the Guanyin Temple. He dragged the drunken priest home and had him circle Grandfather's coffin while reciting chants. Our family hog was slaughtered to provide a funeral meal for our barefoot neighbors and their children, before sending them back up the mountain.

Seven sevens make forty-nine days. An argument broke out between my father and my brother even before my poor grandfather's body had turned cold. My brother stood in the drying yard with his hands on his hips, coldly watching my father run into the kitchen and return with a cleaver. Shaking from head to toe, he cursed, "Unfilial son—unfilial son!" He leaped at my brother, stopping a couple of paces in front of him. But as he stood there clutching the shiny cleaver, he didn't know what to do with it. My mother, who was a full nine months into her pregnancy, stepped over the threshold, holding her swollen belly. She looked up at the

sun before her legs buckled and she collapsed to the ground. Father threw down the cleaver and ran over; accepting what he could not change, he said:

“Fine, go then!”

My mother lay unconscious until two in the morning, when she woke up screaming that her insides were being ripped apart. In the dark Father groped his way into the kitchen to look for Grandfather’s brass gong, which he carried over to the three-way intersection and banged loudly—*buang-dang buang-dang*. Our old neighbor, Uncle Tong the Sixth, and his wife, both in their fifties, who lived half a *li* away, rushed over with their two husky sons. But by then my mother had given birth to a stillborn infant.

After sighing for two days, my father took his hoe and winnowing pan out into the field, but returned before noon; for days the sun had been burning red, like a raging fire. The peppers in the drying yard were fully ripe. Father sent me to my sister’s place to ask her mother-in-law over for some advice. But she couldn’t come for at least a week, since her third daughter had just given birth. She said that Father should go into town and hire temporary workers to pick the peppers right away. Otherwise, if it rained in the next few days, the harvest would be ruined. And how would we, a family of half a dozen adults and children, survive then? My sister’s mother-in-law, feeling somewhat awkward, walked me to the ferry landing, where she poked me between the brows and said quietly:

“Kesan! I hear your father kicked your brother out of the house. Everyone says that father and son were fighting over a woman called Fourth Mama Luo in Great Blessings Lane. When your brother-in-law came home yesterday, he said that people in town were laughing their heads off over this outlandish incident in the Xiao family. Your sister was so upset she refused to eat and wouldn’t talk to anyone—”

My sister's mother-in-law was still shaking her head as I boarded the ferry.

"Sooner or later, the pus will flow from this canker sore!"

When Father heard the message I brought home from my sister's mother-in-law, he took me with him to Jiling without a word.

The two of us, father and son, one in front and the other trailing behind, shuffled our way to the entrance of Great Blessings Lane, where something caught my father's attention and brought an immediate change to his expression. There in the lane, the leader of the toughs, Sun the Fourth, his face flushed with alcohol, along with two of his flunkies, was stalking a pretty young woman. With a jerk of his head, my father dragged me into a teahouse opposite the lane entrance. The teahouse owner, a man named Zhu, had been sent to prison for murder a year or so before. His wife had soon after begun an affair with someone, but didn't mind that the news got out and busied herself at the teahouse as her belly began to swell. After all, her husband had received a life sentence and probably wouldn't leave prison alive. When we entered the shop, the Zhu woman was sitting there looking bored, but her face lit up with a smile when she saw my father.

"Mr. Xiao! It's been a long time. Sun the Fourth was just asking about you. He said that you had kicked his adopted son out of the house. That would be your oldest son. He took that as a public slap in the face. You know how important face is to him!"

Another customer was sitting off in a corner, staring blankly at the wall. He giggled when he heard what the Zhu woman said. As his face turned steely green, my father ordered a pot of tea and a bowl of wontons for me, before lowering his head to read a newspaper that was two weeks old.

When I finished the wontons, my father looked up and down the lane before leading me through a narrow back alley, where he knocked at the back door of a house.

Inside the house was a corpulent, fair-skinned woman dressed in red; in her lap sat a pretty girl, about thirteen years old, who blinked and smiled at us. A bowl of fragrant hair dye sat on the tea table beside the woman, who was combing the girl's unbraided hair with a comb dipped in the dye. This went on until two shiny, black rings like those on a grown-up woman appeared above both ears. Finally the woman laid down the comb and cupped the girl's pretty face in her hands. After staring at it for a while, she nodded and sighed, then slowly turned to face my father.

"Mr. Xiao! It's been long time."

My father was captivated; her greeting made him blush, so he sat down bashfully in a lounge chair across from the woman and stared at the girl.

The woman watched with a knowing smile.

"My girl here, Autumn Begonia, is fourteen, Mr. Xiao."

My father blushed even more and his hand trembled, spilling some of the tea. The woman smiled again, as my father lowered his eyes and said slowly:

"Fourth Mama! So much has happened at our place over the past few days. Kesan's grandfather passed away, you know that. Kesan's mother had another baby, stillborn. My poor wife has been acting so strange I couldn't get away. That's why I haven't been by. Then the day before yesterday, that unfilial son of mine, Dasan—"

The woman smiled. "I don't meddle in other people's business!"

She pulled me close to look me over and took me to her bosom along with the girl.

"You're Kesan?"

"Yes."

"Call me Fourth Mama."

"Fourth Mama."

"This is Sister Begonia."

"Sister Begonia."

“Good boy! When you grow up, you can marry Sister Begonia and light two red candles, all right?”

“All right.”

“Good boy!”

She cupped my face in her hands and inspected it, smiling broadly. But then she frowned abruptly and gave my forehead a loud rap with one of her knuckles.

“You little rascal! How old are you? Twelve? You’re too young to tag along everywhere behind your father. Do you know what this place is?”

“No.”

“It’s a brothel!”

My father, who had been listening quietly, realized that things might be taking a bad turn, so he stood up bashfully and took my hand. Fourth Mama kept her arms around Little Begonia and continued combing out her tufts. Then she picked up some hair clips from the tea table and clipped them onto the girl’s hair, one after the other. After inspecting the girl from all sides, she turned back to us and smiled faintly.

“Leaving already? What’s the hurry? Mr. Xiao, I’m glad you dropped by today. That way I won’t have to take Autumn Begonia to your house in the valley for my money. I’d rather not talk about these things in front of Kesan’s mother.”

Fourth Mama dug through the pocket of her undergarment and removed three small slips of paper, which she tossed onto the tea table.

“Mr. Xiao, these are your IOUs. Recognize your signature?”

The door curtain was lifted aside and in walked a bruiser in his twenties, chewing on a toothpick. He had a big, shiny red bald patch above his forehead. He fixed his gaze on the two of us as soon as he entered, rolling up his sleeves to show his muscled, tattooed arms.

The blood drained from my father’s face.

My grandfather was the first generation of the Xiao family to come to the valley, where he bought a piece of land. My grandmother was a quiet little woman who bore him four sons. But when he died, only one son survived him. The day after he turned twenty, the eldest son was on his way home from the pepper farm when he saw a nest of little snakes. He stabbed at them with his hoe, unaware of the mother snake, which slithered out of the hole and bit down hard on his calf, not letting go. By the time he made it home, his face had turned black, and he soon died. My second uncle lived a dissipated life. One day he simply disappeared. Grandfather's third son was a good boy who was willing to stay in the mountains and turn wasteland into a pepper farm. But one year, during a religious insurrection, hundreds of believers wearing white headbands went on a murderous rampage, storming into Jiling in broad daylight. He was watching the greeting procession for the deity outside the Guanyin Temple when he was stabbed at least twenty times. After the insurrection passed, my grandfather went into town to identify his body and carry it back to the mountain, where he wordlessly buried him. Then, late one dark night six months later, he unsheathed his sword and assembled men from dozens of pepper-growing families in the valley. They drove ten mule carts into the believers' village, where they put the people to the sword and their homes to the torch.

My father was my grandfather's pet. When he was seven, he was sent to school in Jiling. After elementary school, he was sent to the provincial capital. My father spent ten years in school away from home, but Grandfather never knew if he actually graduated from high school. And he never asked. The year my father turned twenty-one, he returned to the valley in a flashy student uniform, his lean, white face shiny from a new shave. Four years earlier, my grandfather had arranged a marriage for my father. After my mother was married into the family, Father spent four idle years at home. He

slept until the sun was directly overhead, then lit his first cigarette before parting the door curtain and emerging from his room, rubbing his sleepy eyes. After lunch, he ambled into town to spend the afternoon in a teahouse, reading newspapers and drinking tea. Over those years, my mother presented him with two sons and a daughter. Some time later, thanks to someone or other, my father got a desk job at the township office and became a clerk, a job that earned him the honorific title of “Mr. Xiao” from the people in town. From then on, this Mr. Xiao, my father, lived alone in town, coming home only over holidays to look around and spend two nights in my mother’s bed. During those years, my mother presented him with two more daughters and another son, some of whom lived, some of whom didn’t. Rumors of my father’s involvement with Fourth Mama Luo spread throughout the town, and when they reached my poor grandfather’s ears, he came to town to secretly give my father a teary lecture. Later, when he heard that my father was sneaking in through Fourth Mama Luo’s back door, he took matters into his own hands, standing in the middle of Great Blessings Lane, pointing and cursing at Fourth Mama Luo’s house the whole afternoon for all to see. When he returned to the valley, he did nothing but sigh for two whole days before throwing up his hands in defeat. When I started school at the age of eight, I set out for town early in the morning with my book bag and lunch box over my shoulder. I had to walk several miles through the mountains all by myself, and it would be dark when I reached home. My grandfather wouldn’t let me stay with Father in town. During my third year, for some reason, my father’s involvement with Fourth Mama Luo galled the leader of the toughs, Sun the Fourth, who roughed up my father pretty badly. They carried him back to the mountain, where he spent two months recovering from his injuries.

That was the year my mother gave birth to her first stillborn infant.

I remember spending the Dragon Boat Festival with my mother and kid sister at my maternal grandfather's place in Fish Nest. On our way home, my sister saw two small green snakes copulating in the grass. As my mother, who was six or seven months pregnant at the time, watched, she felt light-headed and fell hard to the ground. That night she woke up with excruciating pains and went straight to the toilet, where she bled profusely. My father ran into the kitchen, grabbed a pair of coal tongs, and, with the aid of a lamp, poked around until he determined that it had already taken the form of a baby girl.

From then on, my mother often heard the cries of her baby daughter late at night. During the daytime, with the sun blazing outside, she'd see two small green snakes on the roof beams, sometimes slithering, sometimes chasing each other, sometimes copulating.

People said that my brother was among the gawkers that day when Sun the Fourth and some roughnecks stormed Fourth Mama Luo's back door. My brother never expected the person dragged out of the house to be my father. He burst into tears at the sight and ran back to our valley. Staring blankly, he was lost in his own thoughts for two days, as if possessed. Later, when he learned the date of Sun the Fourth's birthday, he stole two hens from our house and went into Jiling, where he kowtowed to Sun the Fourth in the celebration hall and became his adopted son. My father, after licking his wounds in the valley for two months, could no longer bear the boredom, so he sneaked out of the house. As soon as he entered town, he ducked into the alley behind Great Blessings Lane and entered Fourth Mama Luo's house through the back door. One day, my brother, at the head of half a dozen toughs, tore down Great Blessings Lane, overturning beds and blankets along the way, shouting over and over that he'd avenge my mother and return home with justice in his grasp. My father's knees turned to jelly, and Fourth Mama Luo had to drag him out to the back alley

and into a neighbor's house, where she stuffed him into a big oven used to cook pig slop. The town was in stitches when they got wind of this. Some busybodies made up a little ditty for the kids in town:

Fourth Mama
Good at catching shrimp
Catches one
Lets go of the other
One is old
The other is young—

Before many days had passed, the ditty was being sung all over Jiling and quickly reached the valley. My grandfather was in a daze after hearing it and didn't eat for two days. On the third day, he got out of bed and slurped down a bowl of congee. Then, shouldering his hoe and winnowing pan, he took me with him out to the field. The poor old man nearly broke his back when he slipped on a pile of dog shit just outside the door, after having gone without solid food for two days. The sun was blazing hot that day, and after weeding two rows, the old man squatted down and wiped his sweaty face as he stared at me.

"How old are you, Little Three?"

"Eleven."

"Eleven?" He nodded. "You'll take charge of the household in a year or two, all right? I'm afraid these old bones of mine won't survive that long."

He laid his hand on my forehead and rubbed it for a while before looking up at the sky.

"The sun's blistering today. We won't do any more weeding. Let's go home for lunch."

Grandfather rested the hoe on his shoulder and walked ahead of me when we reached a narrow path lined by bristle grass.

“Grandpa, can I sleep in your room tonight?”

Instead of answering, he stopped abruptly, raised the hoe over his head, and swung it down. I walked up to take a look and saw two halves of a foot-long green snake squirming in the grass.

“Kesan, remember, when killing a snake, do not stay your hand at the last minute. You must be ruthless, spare nothing.”

Grandfather bent down to pick up the two halves of the dead snake and threw them back into the bristle grass.

One day the year before, the fourth son of Chen Shanren, who grew peppers north of the valley, walked into their pigsty and killed a tortoiseshell snake as thick as the mouth of a teacup. He dragged it up the mountain and dumped it into a ditch. To everyone’s surprise, one night six months or so later, the snake crawled into Chen Shanren’s house and crept into his fourth son’s bed. At daybreak, the boy woke up with a scream and jumped out of bed. When he pulled away the covers and shone the lamp on the bed, he saw the snake coiled up on the bamboo mat. His brothers rushed into his room, still rubbing their eyes, having heard his scream. When they saw him sitting on the floor by the bed in a daze, they ran outside for hoes and axes, which they used to reduce the snake’s head to a bloody pulp. Then they dragged out the yard-long body to dry in the yard for three days. After that, the Chens’ fourth son knew no peace of mind, and no one in the family dared say the word *snake* in front of him.

“Grandpa, if a snake isn’t killed, will it really come back as long as there’s breath in its body?”

Grandfather didn’t say anything until we neared the end of the patch of bristle grass.

“I’ve been growing peppers in the valley for forty years, and I’ve killed well over a hundred snakes, some big, some small. I never stayed my hand, except for that day just before New Year’s last year, when I ran into a tortoiseshell on my way back from the

pepper farm. It was eight or nine feet long, and even though I was carrying a pitchfork, it gave me such a fright, I didn't kill it."

I quickened my steps to catch up with him when we were out of the bristle grass.

"Grandpa, you worry too much. I'm sure the snake's bones have rotted away by now."

Grandfather rubbed my head.

"I couldn't get that snake out of my mind at home. So I returned the next day to take another look—but it was long gone by then."

I'd been sleeping with Grandfather for as long as I could remember. When Grandma was still alive, my kid sister slept with her in the next room. I remembered once a few days before the winter solstice, when Grandfather came home from the field looking deeply troubled. He woke up several times that night and was sitting up in bed before dawn staring blankly at the roof beams.

Two days later, my sister came home with her mother-in-law. When the woman saw me acting strangely, she grabbed me and pulled me outside to quietly ask what was going on. She shook her head as she listened. "Your grandpa is old and deranged! When did a snake ever get into this house?" She poked her finger violently against my forehead, scolding, "My little demon, you're ten this year! Are you going crazy like your grandpa?" She started to stammer as her anxiety mounted. "You—you—your brother becomes a tough, and you—your sister is married to my son. You're the head of the family now! In a year or two, you'll be in charge." When she finished, she rubbed my head before going back inside, where she asked my mother for a piece of sulfur, which she ground into fine powder and sprinkled around the house. Then she lit three joss sticks before the Guanyin altar and knelt down to kowtow reverently. I slept well that night.

The next day was the winter solstice. My sister went home with her mother-in-law. That evening, I spiked a fever and ranted and raved like a simpleton. With tears streaming down her face, my mother boiled a pot of ginger tea, then pried open my mouth and forced it down my throat. Seeing my face burning red, like a hot ember, she carried me to her room, where she rolled up my father's bedding and threw it onto an old bamboo bed in a storage room. My father, reeking of alcohol, didn't come home from town on that winter solstice night until after midnight. He was humming a sad little ditty as he walked in, and I heard the door curtain to my mother's room being flung open. The day hadn't broken yet, and in my sleepy state, I thought I heard something unusual. Startled awake, I felt my chest with my hand; it was damp with cold sweat. I rolled over and, without warning, my father gave me a savage, burning slap. "Turn around!" Covering my head with the blanket, I sobbed until dawn. My fever eventually broke, but my mother said I still looked woozy and wouldn't let me go back to sleep with Grandfather.

"Grandpa, can I sleep in your room tonight?" I begged him again on the way home.

Laying down his hoe, Grandfather sat on a roadside boulder. Under the blazing sun, he blinked and stared at the white bristle grass for a long time before he finally said:

"Little Three, do you know why I missed killing the snake that day?"

I shook my head.

"I'd just gotten over being sick, and I was afraid, because I lacked strength."

Looking at me, Grandfather smiled and rubbed my forehead again.

That day when the two of us, Father and I, fled through Fourth Mama Luo's back door, we not only failed to borrow any money

but were humiliated to boot. Ashamed and dejected, and unable to hire any temporary help, we returned home. But my father was in no hurry, even though acres of red peppers were ripening under the bright sun, a mountain of peppers so red they seemed to be bleeding. My father still slept till noon every day, before parting the curtains and walking out smelling like mildew. After lunch, he'd pull over a long bench and sit in front of the house with his legs crossed, smoking and patiently waiting for the arrival of my sister's mother-in-law. But, unexpectedly, it rained heavily twice on our fourth day back from town. Around dusk, after the rain stopped, he told me to grab two winnowing pans and go with him to the pepper farm. After raking up a pile of red peppers, he stood there staring dully at the blood-red ground.

On the way home, we passed through the bristle grass. Lowering his head, my father walked ahead, poking at the grass with a bamboo staff. In the aftermath of the rain, the expanse of white bristle grass looked desolate at dusk.

"Your grandpa—when he was still alive, didn't he stab a tortoiseshell snake around here?" Father stopped abruptly and said as we walked into the growth of bristle grass.

The bristle grass stretched all the way to the foothills; when I turned around, that's all I saw.

Silently I walked close behind my father, until we were out of the bristle grass, before asking, "Dad, have you ever killed a tortoiseshell?"

"I left home to go to school as a child. I never saw a small grass snake, let alone killed a tortoiseshell!" He turned to look at me, then continued walking with his head down.

When we got home, nothing was left in the rain-drenched western sky but a patch of red. The lamps hadn't been lit in the house, where Mother sat in the dark, thinking her own thoughts. Father lit a lamp and hung it from the rafter, then turned to look at Mother as he sighed and said tenderly:

“Why don’t you go into your room and stop sitting here just thinking?”

My mother got up slowly and, with a whoosh, threw open the curtains and went into her room. My father sent my kid sister into the kitchen to put on some rice before giving me a meaningful glance. I hesitated, not making a move for a while, which angered my father.

“Is your ass stuck to that bench?”

A lamp was lit in my mother’s room, where she sat on the edge of the bed, staring blankly at a lizard on the wall. I squatted down beside her, sort of absentmindedly; a subtle sweaty smell mixed with perfumed oil emanated from her body. My sister had chosen the bottle of perfumed oil from her dowry to bring back to her mother on the day after her wedding. She was in tears when she gave it to her, but then she laughed and said, “Mother, you’ve never used any make-up before. Why don’t you keep this for yourself? Brush it into your hair morning and evening, and it will be smooth and glossy.” She said it in such a thoughtful, serious manner that Mother smiled as she took the bottle from her and put it on top of her dresser. “I’ll save it for your kid sister. When she grows up and finds a husband, this will be her dowry.”

“Mother, are you still thinking about the stillborn baby girl?”

My absentmindedness returned as I squatted there dully for a long time before quietly standing up and opening the curtains.

It was raining again. Father was squatting on the threshold, smoking and watching the rain come down. After two downpours during the day, the evening rain just sort of dripped down, as if there weren’t much left. I squatted on the other side of the threshold. Father glanced at me and asked:

“Is your mother resting?”

I nodded. For some reason, I thought back to the time at school when I had a fight with a little tough in my class. Feeling over-

matched, I rammed into him and kicked him savagely in the groin. His face turned ashen, and he rolled around on the playground, grabbing his groin with his hands. "Fuck you! Fuck you!" I ran home, not even stopping to pick up my book bag. As I passed the Guanyin Temple, I saw Father squatting by a smelly ditch off in the distance, smoking and talking to someone. I spun around, crossed through the temple's main hall, and got out of town through the back door, fleeing like a ghost all the way. I was crying the whole time. My father had lost his position as a clerk in the township office and had returned to the valley, where he sat around idle for two months, growing bored. He borrowed some face-saving money from Fourth Mama Luo and bought some liquor, which he asked someone to take to Sun the Fourth. Thinking that the hush money had made everything fine, he returned to Jiling and became a real estate broker. Every afternoon, he'd make the rounds of the markets and teahouses, earning some tea money by negotiating with buyers and sellers of property. I didn't want to go to school anymore, which angered Grandfather so much that he slapped me twice. Then he picked up my book bag and lunch box and took me to school. That was the day I kicked the little tough in the groin; I ran back home, crying and laughing at the same time, and told Grandfather what had happened. He sighed before bursting out laughing and rubbing me hard on the forehead. He told me to stay in the valley to grow peppers with him. Shaking his head, he said, "Don't be like your old man. Reading all those books!"

Staring dully at the rain for a long time, Father turned to look at me and said kindly:

"After the peppers are picked this year, you'll go back to school."

"I don't want to go to school anymore!" I shook my head. "Grandpa said that studying isn't useful."

Father took a slow puff on his cigarette and fell silent for a while before saying:

“Kesan, not everyone with schooling turns out useless like your father.”

We two, father and son, sat on the threshold, quietly watching the rain fall from the dark sky.

My kid sister was only seven years old, but she'd been busy in the kitchen in the back of the house producing a tableful of food, with a pot of stewed chicken, a nutritious dish for Mother. My sister appeared to be salivating over the chicken, for she was gulping as she brought it out. When Father saw her drooling, he ran over and snatched the pot away from her. After putting it on the table, he turned and gave her a vicious slap.

“Greedy girl! Now how do you feel?”

My poor sister was shocked; holding her cheek and staring at Father, she backed slowly into the kitchen. Just then my mother opened the curtain and glared at Father before taking my sister by the hand and leading her back to the table. She pushed the pot of chicken soup under my sister's nose, took a pair of chopsticks, picked up a piece of chicken, and fed it to my sister. Father picked up his rice bowl and stared at mother and daughter for a while. He wanted to say something, but my mother's face turned hard as she laid down her chopsticks and glared at him in silence.

The meal took over an hour, even though there were only the four of us. My mother ate nearly half a bowl of rice with some vegetables, then put down her chopsticks and watched my sister slowly finish a bowl of stewed chicken. As my sister got up to clear the table, my mother sat there; Father told me to make a pot of strong tea. Taking slow sips of the tea, he searched for things to say to my mother, but she paid him no attention, just staring dully at the rain outside.

“Go back inside and rest. It's nearly ten.”

Father had finished the pot of tea.

Wordlessly, my mother pushed away Father's outstretched hand and continued to stare blankly. That went on for a long time

before she sighed and stood up by steadying herself with the table. Her sigh was like a soft, tortured murmur emerging after a nightmare in the middle of the night.

At midnight, the rain stopped, turning the place perfectly silent. But then Blackie, that old dog of ours, suddenly started to bark; his sad, lone barking stretched longer and longer, and soon barking rose up throughout the pitch-black valley. Father got out of bed, lit a hurricane lantern, and unlatched the door. The hundred or so hens in the chicken coop immediately started to cackle—*gua-la-la*. Father's face paled; wordlessly, he ran into the kitchen to get the gong, which he took through the back door to bang—*huang-dang huang-dang*—at the three-way intersection. My mother parted the curtains and stumbled out of the room, but her knees buckled and she fell before she crossed the threshold.

My kid sister ran silently out from the dark and wailed at the crescent moon overhead.

“Grandpa’s back, Grandpa’s back.”

At the intersection, the sounds of the cracked gong stopped. My father was running ahead of Uncle Tong the Sixth and his wife, followed by their two sons. Auntie Tong walked up as soon as she saw my kneeling mother and coaxed her into going inside. The Tong brothers, grinning from ear to ear, walked into the chicken coop with their father, carrying a glass hurricane lantern and a pitchfork. Guarding the door, my father was adamant about my sister and me staying inside the house. Less than two hours later, Uncle Tong and his sons came out drenched in sweat, holding a patterned snake, eight or nine feet long, which they threw down on the drying ground in front of the house. The moonlight shone on the bloody body of a tortoiseshell. Carrying my sister in one arm and holding me by the hand, my father walked up slowly.

“Dead?”

The Tongs' second son grinned and cast a sideways glance at my father before aiming a violent kick at the snake's head, which was as big as a teacup.

"Still causing trouble? Fuck you! Mr. Xiao, don't you worry. Go home and get a good night's sleep."

"You two take the snake away and dump it in the mountain ditch," Uncle Tong told his sons as he wiped his sweaty face.

"Don't leave it here to scare the kids," Auntie Tong said.

It was nearly dawn when the clamor died down. My mother couldn't sleep anymore, so she came out of her room when it was barely light. She sat in the front room and stared quietly at the rafter. My father had just closed his eyes when he was startled awake in a cold sweat. He got out of bed and sat with Mother until the sun was up. Roosters in the valleys were crowing loudly before the two of us, father and son, walked into the chicken coop with a pitchfork.

At least ten dead chickens were strewn across the ground.

My mother sat in that dazed state for two weeks, during which time my sister's mother-in-law didn't come once. Helplessly watching the red peppers rotting away, my father quit worrying. Every morning he'd squat by the door and smile as he awaited the arrival of my sister's mother-in-law, who would, on his behalf, hire some temporary help to harvest the peppers in two or three days. After dinner, he'd sit by the dining table, drinking tea and talking to my mother in a solicitous tone. She didn't even look at him.

There was, I recall, a cold rain early that morning. My mother stayed in bed until daybreak. With an unwashed face, she sat wide-eyed in the front room, staring blankly at the rain. She stayed that way until eleven o'clock at night. My father, who was squatting quietly on the threshold, kept stealing a glance at her out of the corner of his bloodshot eye; he obviously wanted to say something. Then Blackie, that old dog of ours, started to bark piteously at the valley again. My kid sister jumped out from somewhere and

ran under the eaves, where she smiled and called, “Grandpa! You’re back again.” The expression on my mother’s face changed when she heard that and, without a word, got up and started to walk out of the house.

“It’s the middle of the night, where are you going?”

My father’s face paled.

“It’s eleven o’clock and it’s raining. Mother, where are you going? Wait till tomorrow morning, and I’ll go with you, all right?”

I grabbed one of her arms as tears filled my eyes. Father gave me a meaningful wink before he wrapped his arms around my mother’s waist to hold her back. She thumped him resoundingly in the chest with her elbow. Then she slowly turned her head, her face cold, and looked Father up and down for a long time. I was confused; my knees buckled and I knelt before my mother, who sighed and gritted her teeth. She pulled me to my feet and turned to take a long look at my father before walking back to her room.

Father held up my kid sister and gently slapped her face as he told me, “Tonight, you—stay with your mother. I’ll sleep with your sister in Grandpa’s room.”

I parted the curtains and saw Mother sitting on the edge of the bed, lost in thought. A yellowed dressing mirror hung on the wall. My mother stood up with a smile and examined herself in the mirror for a while. Then she poured two drops of perfumed oil into her palm and slowly rubbed it into her gray hair, a few strands at a time. I tiptoed over to the window, where, with my back to her, I pushed the window open to let cold drops of midnight rain flow quietly into the room. My mother shook, a chill running through her body; I closed the window.

“Mother, go to bed! Get a good night’s sleep. Tomorrow we’ll go see my sister.”

I blew out the lamp before quietly climbing into bed and crawling under the covers. Dawn hadn’t broken when I rolled over

and sat up, my chest clammy with cold sweat. My mother had been up for a while and was making herself up in front of the mirror. Holding a comb in her hand, she scraped her scalp savagely. Her gray hair, thanks to the perfumed oil, was nice and glossy.

“Mother, it’s not light out yet.”

I tossed aside the covers and squatted on the bed, my heart thumping fast.

My mother slowly combed her hair into a small bun. Then, after taking a good look at herself in the mirror, she threw open the curtains and walked into the front room. I hopped out of bed with clenched teeth and grabbed her around the waist.

“Mother, it’s still early.”

My father, drenched from the rain, ran in wild-eyed from the chicken coop, still carrying the pitchfork. He grabbed Mother around the waist to restrain her.

“Bring me some acanthus liquor!”

I groped my way into the kitchen, where I lit a lamp and found the half bottle of acanthus liquor left behind by Grandfather. I took a big swig as Father yelled for me to bring a thick rope. We tied my mother’s rail-thin arms behind her back. Then Father sighed as tears slipped down his face. He pushed my mother down on a bench while he told me to get a spoon to pry open her mouth and pour the liquor down her throat. For a while, tears squeezed out of her closed eyes, then she gurgled and spewed her meal from the night before into my father’s face.

“Pour in some more,” Father said.

My mother opened her eyes and looked up at me.

“All right, good, one more mouthful,” Father said.

After an hour of this, Mother finally went limp.

“Good, fine. She’s drunk.”

With one hand propped against the table, Father stared blankly for a while before he steadied himself against a bench and

sat down, panting heavily. “Your grandpa left another bottle of acanthus liquor in the kitchen. Bring it to me,” he finally said to me, touching the two long, bloody scratches on his cheeks. I watched him take one swig after another until he’d finished the whole bottle. He then threw open the curtains and entered my mother’s bedroom, reeking of alcohol. I quietly unlatched the door and squatted down on the threshold. It was quiet all around, not a sound. I didn’t know why, but my heart felt totally empty. Blackie, that old dog of ours, had dug a hole under the eaves and now lay curled up in it to doze off. The rain had stopped.

When day broke, my father suddenly went berserk. With his hair standing straight up, he bounced into the kitchen, grabbed a cleaver, threw open the curtains, and stormed back into my mother’s room. My knees buckled at the sight, and I slumped against the door. My kid sister, who had woken some time earlier, walked out onto the drying ground, where she smiled up at the sun and stretched as she sang the ten-flower ditty:

We said one
We counted one
The pea blooms
So dense in the sun!
We said two
We counted two
The leek blooms
On one single stem new!
We said three
We counted three
The orchid blooms
On the roadside, see!
We said four
We counted four

The cucumber blooms
 Thorny a'roar!
 We said five
 We counted five
 The pomegranate blooms
 Their beloved red, sakes alive—

I propped myself up and shuffled across the front room. When I drew the curtains back, I saw a dead snake coiled in a pool of blood on my mother's bed. Still drunk, she was breathing heavily with her mouth open. My father let the cleaver drop to the floor as he slumped down on the bed in a daze. The sun streaming in through the window brightened the blood on the mat.

"Dad, let's get rid of that snake."

So the two of us, father and son, one in front and one behind, dragged the seven- or eight-foot-long patterned snake out of my mother's room and dumped it on the shiny white drying ground. With his pitchfork, Father savagely stabbed at the snake's head. His face, drenched in cold sweat, shone green under the eight-o'clock sun, the bloody scratches on his cheeks like red earthworms.

"Dad, you don't look so good."

"I'm fine."

"Go back inside and get some more sleep."

"Your mother's bed—"

"I'll take care of it, Dad."

"Make sure you don't disturb your mother."

Father went into Grandpa's room, wrapped his arms around the covers, and fell into a deep slumber, his body curled.

The sun was about to set when my mother awoke from her drunken stupor. She parted the curtains and walked unsteadily over the threshold to stare at the tortoiseshell under the blazing sun.

"Dad killed it this morning," I said.

My mother walked back inside, where she wordlessly lit three joss sticks and kowtowed twice at the Guanyin Bodhisattva's altar. As she was struggling to get up, she tripped and fell. She sobbed sadly for a long time before getting up and going into the kitchen to steep a bowl of ginger tea for my father, when he woke up.

In the evening, my sister happily returned home with her year-old baby girl. Her mother-in-law shook her head when she saw the rotting dead snake on the drying ground.

“So snakes did crawl into this house, after all.”

A Wonderful Spring Rain

A wonderful spring rain! Nothing but falling rain filling the vast expanse of sky.

It was past five in the afternoon, and the sun, a misty red ball, was low in the west. Carrying a bamboo basket over her arm, Autumn Begonia walked alone on a country path, slowly, her heart filled with indescribable peace and happiness as she listened to the delicate sound of raindrops caressing her oiled umbrella. Here and there a hushed thatched hut rose above the unbroken panorama of lush rice paddies on both sides of the path. A row of indistinct mountains, like a woman's eyebrows, poked through the rainy mist on the horizon. A wind rose up, sending willow trees rustling, like rolling waves, on the outskirts of distant foothill villages. The boundless, misty April rain fell quietly on the vast, empty field, turning it into a lush green water world.

—Ai!

Autumn Begonia sighed at the sight of her bare feet as she walked along. She reached up with one of her tiny hands to touch the floral silk kerchief on her head, soaked from the rain. She removed it, shook off the water, and laid it across the top of her basket. That morning her mother had stewed some sweet-and-sour pig's feet for her to take to her aunt in Reed Pond Village, who had

just had a baby. Now, on her way home, her basket was filled with acorns she and Fifth Sister, her cousin, had picked at noon. The two of them had also made a cloth boy doll whose nose and eyes they'd painted in ink. But for some unknown reason, it lacked a mouth. Now that she thought back, she instinctively lifted the kerchief to take another look at the little doll in the basket. It had a protruding belly and a sad face with triangular eyes and downward slanting brows, like a full-term pregnant man. The more she looked at it the more it made her laugh. Autumn Begonia bit her lip and took a look around her. The rain was falling even more heavily; she didn't see a soul anywhere on this long, narrow path. The silly little girl raised her head and shook her braids—*ba ba ha*, she laughed heartily. A curtain of pattering rain all around the fancy umbrella framed her little world. The sandy ground beneath her feet was soft and damp, sending a cool sensation from her feet up to her heart.

She had left at half past three. Before she set off, her aunt had walked her out of the house, carrying the pink baby, its large head and big ears wrapped in a small floral satin blanket. Her aunt's eyes were red; she wanted to say something but didn't. At the village outskirts, the reed pond was blanketed with white water beneath the gloomy, overcast sky. She paused, then had a change of heart, bending down to roll up her pants legs and take off her shoes, which she put in her basket. When she raised her head, the sky suddenly lit up with countless startled egrets soaring up all around her, like whirling snow. Autumn Begonia was dazed by the sight. Before she could open her umbrella, the fine rain enveloped her.

—It's all Seven's fault, that drop-dead good-for-nothing. That thick-skinned brat pestered me so long I'll get an earful from Mother when I get home.

She blushed and abruptly turned her thoughts to other things. There wouldn't be any more curses from that mouth. No one but

her, not even a ghost, was on the path. Was she afraid of making a fool of herself? Without knowing why, she felt her face burn from embarrassment; even her ears were hot. Don't think such thoughts, Autumn Begonia chided herself as she continued on her journey, the fancy umbrella twisting and twirling in her hand. The thoughts of a young girl had been stirred up, like the willow branches on the riverbank on the outskirts of home that swayed in the breezes and drizzling rain.

Earlier that day, at noon, the sky had been blue, like a piece of blue-happiness satin. The pond on the village outskirts dazzled under the blazing sun. The two cousins, Autumn Begonia on one side and Fifth Sister on the other, had carried a big basket of dirty clothes and bloodstained bedding to the pond. Fifth Sister stuck out her tongue at Autumn Begonia and made a face like a Ghost Festival demon. After making sure they were alone, she undressed down to her underwear and slipped into the reeds by the pond. With her hands on her hips, Autumn Begonia looked up at the moist, moist blue sky, then down at the water in the pond. With a laugh, she also took off her clothes and threw them down on the ground by the pond. The April warmth of the water immediately rose up to Autumn Begonia's chest. Suddenly came a flapping sound as the water rippled, followed by two snow-white egrets flying up from the pond. "*Ha ha ha!*" Someone on the bank was roaring with laughter. Autumn Begonia shivered as she spun around and settled into the water. A moment later she raised her head. By then Fifth Sister had already heaved a stinky mud clod toward the bank.

"Damn you, Seven, who said you could watch us take a bath?"

A tall tree on the bank formed a canopy over the pond. Little Seven Zhu sat on a limb with crossed muddy legs; from under the straw hat that blocked his face came the sound of muffled snores.

"Playing possum?"

"Little Begonia, my little bride! Don't pull a long face on me."

Little Seven Zhu giggled as he turned his face to avoid the muddy water splashed at him by Autumn Begonia. He removed his straw hat and threw it down on the ground as he opened his eyes.

“Who’s your little bride?” Autumn Begonia brushed her face with her finger to shame him. “You think you’re handsome, don’t you!”

With a sigh, Little Seven Zhu somersaulted off the tree, brushed the mud off his body, picked up his hat, and put it on his head. Then he strode off, singing to himself.

Little Seven Zhu
At fourteen or fifteen
Had no wife
Holding a pillow
As his woman—

Autumn Begonia waited until he was far enough away before emerging from the water, wringing out her dripping braids.

“Fifth Sister, would you look at the way Little Seven sneaks around. Doesn’t he look like a knight-errant to you?”

“Him? He’s a little flunkie, a future tough!”

“Fifth Sister.”

“Yes?”

“Let’s go back.”

“What’s the matter?”

“It’s so quiet, I’m scared.”

“It’s noontime, there’s no one here.”

“Look.”

“Look at what?”

“Over there in the bamboo grove.”

“What’s there?”

“Someone’s squatting there.”

“Nonsense.”

The two cousins found a big flagstone and scrubbed the dirty clothes until they were clean. Then, with one taking each handle, they carried the basket home.

Relationships were extremely complex in Autumn Begonia's aunt's family. Fifth Sister's and Little Seven's mothers jabbered from dawn till dusk, so no wonder their husbands ran out of the house in the morning before even finishing their tea. Take this particular day, for instance: Autumn Begonia had come to Reed Pond Village to see her aunt, who had just given birth. As soon as she walked into the backyard, she heard Fifth Sister's father say sarcastically from his room in the east wing, “As for Two, the money he lent to the shipping company is gone, and he'll never get it back. Now how can he lick his own face and call himself a hero?” Knowing they were talking about Little Seven's father, Autumn Begonia walked over under the window to better hear what was being said. “At least he's got a face to lick,” a woman said with a chuckle. “How about you? You've already taken off your face to wipe your ass! I think all you Zhu brothers, including Three, are gutless cowards.” Autumn Begonia spat viciously at the window when she heard Fifth Sister's mother join in to curse her aunt's husband. Then, carrying the pot of sweet-and-sour pig's feet, she walked off to look for her auntie.

Now they were returning with the laundry, which they hung out to dry. As they passed the backyard, they saw a pile of stripped reeds. Fifth Sister's and Little Seven's mothers were sitting shoulder to shoulder on a low bench, each with a tender white reed wrapped around her finger, flopping around in her lap. On the ground beside them lay a large reed mat, which made it appear as if the sisters-in-law were sitting on a patch of white snow.

“This morning I saw Third Brother crawl out of bed with dark circles under his eyes.”

“Even a man of steel can be worn out by a woman and turned into a puddle of pus.”

“That Third Brother and his wife!”

“Oil mixed with honey, and even before her lying-in month is over—”

Little Seven’s mother stopped bashfully in midsentence when she looked up and spotted Autumn Begonia standing angrily at the base of the wall. Fifth Sister’s mother picked up the thread of conversation, tossing a meaningful glance at Seven’s mother:

“Young lady, have you been playing in the water? Just look at all the mud and grass on your face and head. Go draw a bucket of water and clean yourself up!” She turned and yelled toward the house, “Five! Hey, Five! You lazy girl, where have you sneaked off to?”

A venomous feeling welled up inside Autumn Begonia and stuck in the middle of her chest. As she slowly walked over to the gate, she heard Seven’s mother say:

“That niece of Third Sister-in-law’s is clever and quick-witted, smart as a whip.”

“She likes to look pretty too! Her aunt gave her a pretty silk kerchief, and she’s happy as a clam.”

“The only thing is, she’s got a temper and a sharp tongue.”

Autumn Begonia turned to glare at them before scooting through the gate. The garden was quiet, and Fifth Sister was nowhere to be found. Without saying a word to Autumn Begonia, she’d simply disappeared like a specter. Feeling agitated, Autumn Begonia ambled toward the well, where she yanked off the kerchief and tucked it under her arm. She was turning the pulley to draw a bucket of water when she spotted a pair of twinkling eyes in the water looking back at her. Two bright red hair ribbons tied around the braids were dangling against a background of puffy white clouds floating by like catkins. Then a leaf drifted over and

shattered the bright surface, creating rippling green circles that made the bright blue sky above wink again and again. The cracked reflection of her face gradually, silently, came back together. As she leaned against the edge of the well, captivated by the sight, her kerchief slipped out from under her arm and floated down into the water. “Aiya!” Someone clapped and yelled. Autumn Begonia looked up to see Little Seven Zhu squatting like a little monkey on an old acacia tree by the well.

“Brother Seven.”

“Yes?”

“Do me a favor.”

“What?”

Autumn Begonia pointed down into the well.

“I can’t see anything.”

“Please, Little Seven!”

Seven sighed, slowly stretched, and then swiftly turned around. He hooked his muddy legs around the trunk and leaned over to look down the well. He reached up to scratch his ear and rub his cheek.

“Kinda hard.”

“Help me out.

“Then you’ll have to call me ‘wonderful brother.’ ”

“Wonderful brother.”

“I didn’t hear you.”

“Wonderful brother!”

“My good bride, wait for me over there.”

Seven rolled his eyes and, with a sly smile, pointed with his pursed lips at the kindling shed by the back door. Autumn Begonia blushed and lowered her head, holding her braids and fingering the ribbons as she shambled over toward the kindling shed. In the meantime, Seven flipped over like a sparrow hawk, slid down the tree, and lowered himself down the well by the winch rope.

There was no one in the pitch-black shed. Autumn Begonia hesitated before pushing the door open and walking inside; then she hid behind the door, her heart thumping, as if at least fifteen buckets were hanging from it. A long time passed before she heard a whistle and saw a small head poke its way inside.

“Anybody home? Hmm, my wife must have stepped out.”

Seven walked in, scratching his head. Stifling a giggle, Autumn Begonia sneaked out from behind the door and said, “Peek-a-boo!” as she blew a couple of puffs of cold air on his neck.

Seven leaped into the air, his face ashen. “Woman, are you trying to kill your own husband? You heartless woman, look what I brought you from the city.” He held up the embroidered bluish white kerchief.

“I won’t do that again. Thank you, Brother Seven.”

“We’re an old married couple, so there’s no need to thank me.”

He nodded and wrung out the wet kerchief before opening it with a flick of the wrist and wrapping it around Autumn Begonia’s head, tying the two ends under her chin.

“Wife!” he called out after seeming spellbound for a moment.

Autumn Begonia’s face reddened as she felt a blast of heat rise up inside. She looked down at the floor for a moment before biting her lip and making up her mind to answer him.

“Yes.”

Spellbound again, Seven rolled his eyes and turned to quickly close the door.

“Wife, let’s make a baby.”

“I don’t know how.”

“I’ve seen people do it. I’ll show you.”

Her heart racing, Autumn Begonia closed her lips tightly, shut her eyes, and raised her head. Feeling her cheeks turn red, she quietly opened her eyes to see Seven staring at her with something like a smile on his face.

“Brother Seven, I can’t. You’ll have to teach me.”

They fell into each other’s arms and kissed in the dark.

Thump! Autumn Begonia gave him a loud crack on the head with her knuckle in less time than it takes to relate. “Who’s your wife? You really think you’re something, don’t you!” She shrugged out of his arms and, giggling, tore off the floral kerchief and ran out of the kindling shed like a whirlwind.

Now, as she was walking home alone, she was enraptured by the thought of him.

—Ai.

The boundless rain was still falling; Autumn Begonia’s heart began to drift and float with the light rain. She’d been on the road for over an hour, which meant she’d be home soon. A frequent traveler on the country path, she knew she was nearing the small creek, which was filled with cobblestones that made the flowing water sing in April. Her hometown of Green Willow Village was just beyond the wooden bridge and the lush green paddy field. From a distance through the rain, a thin, watery green mist seemed to rise from the willow groves at the foothills. Her mother would be restless by now, picking up and putting down her needlework over and over as she went to check the door. “That silly girl, why isn’t she home at this hour?” The thought that her mother wouldn’t stop screaming at her once she got started made Autumn Begonia shudder. She changed the basket to her other arm and quickened her steps.

The rain was falling more heavily now.

Autumn Begonia looked up at the sky. The setting sun, shrouded in misty rain, had become a bright red, gelatinous ball hanging in the air, reluctant to set. It was getting late. She drew her neck in and shivered twice, then bent down to roll her pants legs higher.

“Hey, little barefoot girl with braids, wait up!”

Autumn Begonia turned to see someone draped in a dark green oilcloth raincoat breaking through the blinding white rain and

rushing up to her, as if being chased by a ghost. His leather boots tramped through the mud, each step a loud crunch, splashing water all over the place.

“Little girl, is this the road to Jiling?”

He quickly caught up with Autumn Begonia and tipped the oilcloth hat hanging low over his eyebrows.

“Jiling? I don’t know.”

“Where are you headed?”

Autumn Begonia finished rolling up her pants legs, straightened up, and pointed to the green willow grove in the foothills.

The man nodded and cast a sideways glance at her. He wiped his face twice as he pulled down his oilcloth hat before resuming his tramping journey in the heavy rain without looking back.

Autumn Begonia paused for a moment before picking up her basket and continuing on her way home, her head down. As she walked she listened to the melodic dripping of raindrops on her umbrella, and blushed, thinking about Seven, that little monkey.

Kitchen smoke was rising from the thatched roof of a little roadside farmhouse in the pouring rain. A hundred or so ducks swam amid the lush green duckweed covering a pond, a light coat of red from the sunset staining their watery white bodies. It was very still in the fields, watery and indistinct. Autumn Begonia walked through the cool mud in her bare feet, twirling the umbrella in her hand; at that instant, it seemed that she was the only person in the vast space between heaven and earth.

Cross the bridge and the paddy field, and I’ll be home.

—Oh, no.

The torrential rain had washed away the wooden bridge over the creek. As Autumn Begonia drew near, she heard the roar of water washing over the cobblestones. The rain was getting heavier. She couldn’t go home today—a chilling thought.

“Hey, little girl!”

Autumn Begonia looked across the creek and saw that man run out of the pouring rain, his dark green oilcloth raincoat flapping in the wind. “Be careful, it’s a torrent!” She shouted amid the splashing sounds he made as he waded through the waist-high water. It only took him five or six steps to reach her side. “Little girl, let me carry you across.” He picked her up by the waist and slung her, umbrella and all, over his shoulder. After another round of wading and splashing, she was on the other side.

“Thank you.”

“How old are you?” The man put her down, shook his raincoat, and turned to look at her.

“I’ll be thirteen after the Dragon Boat Festival.”

“A young girl traveling alone, you should be more careful. Why didn’t your mother send someone out to meet you?”

“My father went on a trip two days ago. I have two brothers at home, but they’re too young.”

The man blew some warm air on his hands, then wiped his forehead.

“Let’s go. It’ll take a while for this rain to stop.”

He nodded and smiled before he continued on, but slowly so Autumn Begonia could keep up. They resumed their journey together.

A wind rose.

Gritting her teeth, Autumn Begonia tucked her head down between her shoulders and held the umbrella under her arm. She squinted into the wind and saw red clouds rolling over from the western sky. The scene looked like a dozen crimson patches splashing over a vast green sheet of paper for ink paintings. The evening sun, which had been a moist, moist red ball, had quickly lost its luster and turned into a red bruise. The rain was really coming down now; suddenly the sky seemed to have burst a seam, as torrents gushed down. Autumn Begonia sucked in the cold air and trembled; she hugged the basket to her chest.

The man kept on tramping along in his leather boots—*ke-la ke-la*—his head scrunched down between his shoulders, as he trudged forward, shielded from the rain by his oilcloth raincoat. After they'd been on the road a while, he turned around abruptly and shouted:

“Let's find a place to wait out the rain.”

“Isn't that a pavilion with a well at the three-way intersection ahead?”

“What?”

“A pavilion with a well!”

The man looked up and saw a small bamboo pavilion by the paddy field not far away.

It took him no more than a few strides to dash through the rain, duck under the curtain of water cascading off the eaves, and leap—*bua-la-la*—onto the pavilion with a loud splash. There he removed his raincoat, shook off the water, and hung it over the railing before turning the winch to draw a bucket of water. Tilting his head backward and putting the bucket to his lips, he drank a dozen mouthfuls of water. As he came up for air he looked at her out of the corner of his eye and said with a broad grin, “Have some water.” Laying down her basket and closing her umbrella to set it down in a corner, Autumn Begonia shook her braids before taking the bucket from him and drinking from it. With a smile, the man sat on the railing to take off his boots and pour out the muddy water. He also took off his rain hat.

“This rain!”

“Really heavy.”

“April weather.”

“It sure is.”

Autumn Begonia looked at him as she responded. He turned out to be a young man with a round, simple, smiling face. In his twenties, he had a large, shiny bald spot above his forehead. Autumn Begonia stood there dully for a moment, then took another look at

him in spite of herself. She smiled and squatted down to remove the floral kerchief covering her basket and dumped it into the bucket to scrub it clean.

“That’s a beautiful kerchief.”

“My aunt gave it to me.”

“Your aunt, where does she live?”

“Reed Pond Village.”

After grunting a reply, the man fell silent for a while. Then he fished a small pewter flask out of his pocket and, as he stared at the pouring rain, took several drinks. With his free hand he groped in his pocket for some broad beans, which he began popping into his mouth.

Autumn Begonia wrung out the kerchief and shook it, then hung it over the railing to dry before turning to take another look at the man.

After finishing off about half the liquor in the flask, the man stretched and stood up.

“It’s hot!”

His breath reeking of alcohol, he stripped off his jacket and shirt and draped them over the railing. Some jingling objects fell out of his pockets. Autumn Begonia looked down; there were children’s lucky charms, some medallions inscribed with the words “Good Luck,” some gold foil, and some necklaces and bracelets. His muscular arms were bare. On the right arm was the tattoo of a shark’s head with a row of white teeth; a bewitching tattoo of a red peony decorated his left arm. Such pale rippling muscles! Autumn Begonia blushed and quietly turned her eyes away.

“Little sister!”

“What?”

“How old are you?”

“Thirteen.”

“Oh—”

Two people appeared out of the curtain of rain.

The man bent down to gather the gold and silver jewelry on the ground and cover it with his shirt, giving Autumn Begonia a wink before walking slowly to the pavilion entrance. The water curtain was still cascading noisily off the eaves.

“Excuse me, old uncle, how do we get to Jiling?”

It was an old couple from some village. Both were wearing bamboo hats and rain capes made of palm bark. Heading south, they slowly passed the three-street intersection before the old man looked back in response to the man’s question.

“Where?”

“Jiling!”

“Where?”

“Jiling, Broken River Bay!”

The old man pointed at the road to his right before tucking his head down between his shoulders, pulling down his straw hat and continuing on his journey in the rain with his wife, who, like him, walked with a bent back.

The man muttered “Thank you” as he stretched and yawned, then crossed his arms. Standing under the eaves, he rubbed the bewitching red peony on his left arm with the thumb of his right hand absentmindedly. Following the old couple with his eyes, he tilted back his head and let out a loud belch. The alcohol had turned the mark on his bald spot shiny red. “It sure is hot!” He sat down on the floor, leaning against the well to put his muddy legs up on the railing before taking two more swigs from his pewter flask and stealing a glance at Autumn Begonia.

“Jiling, ever been there?”

“No.”

Autumn Begonia shook her head as she emptied the bucket over the railing—*hua-la-la*. She turned the winch to draw another bucket of water.

“It’s a bustling town with five thousand households. They say: a lewd party every day, and each night is like the Lantern Festival. Listen, there’s a street in the red-light district in the middle of the town with a terrific name: Great Blessings Lane. Over a hundred working girls live there. On the nineteenth day of the sixth month, Guanyin Bodhisattva’s birthday, hundreds and thousands of lanterns are lit up and down the street. There’s a peach banquet given by the Queen Mother of the West, with all kinds of fairies, immortals, and bodhisattvas invited to Great Blessings Lane to drink and sing and play finger-guessing games. All the festivity—”

“Liar!”

Autumn Begonia tossed out the water she’d used to wash her face, wrung out her wet braids, and picked up her basket.

“I’m going home now.”

“What’s the hurry?”

The man suddenly reached out for her. Autumn Begonia flicked his hand away, picked up her umbrella, and started off.

“Little sister, it’s still raining.”

He raised his legs to block her passage.

“Little Seven!”

“Who are you calling for, little sister?”

The man looked around and, with a grin, easily snatched the basket from her. “Who’s Seven? Is this him?” He plucked out the little cloth doll, a boy with triangular eyes, downward slanting brows, a protruding belly, and a sad face minus the mouth. The man paused for a moment before studying the doll in his hands. He wore an indescribably creepy look, a smile, but not quite.

“Fifth Sister and I made it for fun and we forgot to give him a mouth.”

“Fifth Sister? Who’s she?”

“Seven’s cousin.”

“Oh—how old is she, your Fifth Sister?”

“Sixteen.”

The man paled as he threw down the doll, which landed on the edge of the well, its belly sticking out. Yet he continued to scrutinize the doll for a while. “Would you look at that!” He suddenly burst into laughter as he fell upon the pile of clothing, felt around, and produced a bloodstained silver necklace, which he placed around the doll’s neck with clumsy fingers.

Autumn Begonia’s face turned ashen.

“What did you do to her?”

“To who?”

“Fifth Sister!”

“Oh—”

“This is her necklace, I can tell.”

The man was laughing, but then his eyes narrowed and he looked at Autumn Begonia with the piercing glare of a snake.

“Don’t ask so many questions. I’ve roamed all the way here from Yellow Stone Town, passing through Stone Pile Village, Chess Board Village, Green Bamboo Pond, Ocean Lotus Temple, Falling Gate Grove, Stumbling Horse Shop, and Reed Pond Village, five whole days. Look here!” He deftly slid over the pile of gold medallions, gold foil, necklaces, and bracelets with his foot. Fixing his eyes on Autumn Begonia, he placed the lucky charms on the doll one by one. Then he picked up the pewter flask, took a couple more drinks, and flung it out of the pavilion. Finally he got up and rubbed the red peony on his arm again as he belched loudly. “Let’s get going. The rain’s easing up.” He put on his shirt, stuck his muddy feet into the leather boots, draped the oilcloth raincoat over his shoulders, picked up the doll, and tucked it into his shirt.

“Where to?”

“To Jiling!”

“I’m not going.”

“Fuck you!”

Autumn Begonia looked up to see that the rain was in fact easing up. A desolate mist between heaven and earth. Looking out from the pavilion at the three-way intersection, she could see that, beyond the paddy field, which was blanketed with green water and misty rain, smoke was rising from her hometown, the farm village with its red roof tiles. Autumn Begonia felt a chill rise up in her heart. At that moment, her mother must be holding onto the door and craning her neck to see if she was on her way home. A wind rose up in the foothills. Off in the distance she heard a roar in the lush green willow grove at the village outskirts—*bua-la-la*—like a raging river.

Night in a Desolate Town

I

Kesan didn't make it home before dark.

It took all night for the messenger to travel the sixty *li* of mountain road in order to bring the bad news to the College of Foreign Languages dormitory. Kesan rolled over and sat up in bed, not realizing that his dream had drenched him in cold sweat until he touched his chest.

After spending the Dragon Boat Festival at his maternal grandfather's place that year, they'd seen two little green snakes copulating in the grass on their way home, so shocking his mother that she'd fallen to the ground, suffering a severe wrench, late in her pregnancy. At midnight, after arriving home, she'd lost the baby in the toilet. His father had lit a lamp to poke around; it had already taken the form of a baby girl. From then on, his mother had often heard the cries of her baby daughter late at night, and had seen two little green snakes slithering on the roof beam, either chasing each other or copulating.

"Your dad died around midnight last night."

Uncle Tong the Sixth was sitting on a low bench at the foot of the bed, not looking up as he rubbed the mud off his feet.

“Was it a snakebite? Because we live in the valley, we’ve had a problem with snakes ever since I was a kid. My mother—”

The messenger shook his head.

“After getting drunk in town, he groped his way home in the dark and cracked his skull open when he fell into a rocky ditch.”

Uncle Tong stared dully at the floor, lost in thought.

“Your father, his whole life—”

Before he could finish, Kesan climbed off the bed and banged his head twice on the floor. Momentarily stunned, Uncle Tong got to his feet.

“I have to go over to Stone Dragon Canal to tell your sister.”

After sending the messenger off, Kesan got down on his knees to grope under the bed until he found a half bottle of sorghum liquor. Once a couple of mouthfuls had reached his stomach, he felt his heart lurch, so he went ahead and dug up a rice bowl and filled it with the liquor. Holding his breath, he downed it in several gulps, then put down the bowl and opened a window. Dawn had broken, sending sunlight streaming into the room. The fire in the brazier on the floor had long since died out.

“Damn it, Xiao the Second, shut that window!” Jin the Fifth, a homeless student who slept in the upper bunk, ground his teeth and turned to the wall, reeking of alcohol. Kesan carried a washbasin into the kitchen and filled it with water, which he ladled over his head. A while later came a muttering noise. An early riser from the east wing had walked out into the yard with an English book; holding it behind him, he began reciting from Scott’s *Ivanhoe*. Kesan returned to his room to pack an overnight bag and leave a note on Jin the Fifth’s desk. “Hey, Xiao the Second, where are you off to so early in the morning?” Paying no attention, Kesan covered Jin the Fifth with his blanket. After pausing for a moment, he turned and walked out of the dormitory. A blinding ball of fire shone down so brightly that he staggered, feeling like a guttering candle flame. He steadied himself, took a deep breath, slung the

bag over his shoulder, and was about to set off down the long, deserted street.

“Kesan!”

“Sixth Uncle, you’re still here?”

The messenger stood by a wall outside the school gate, looking around.

“Been drinking?”

“Sixth Uncle, if you have something to say, please say it.”

“I don’t really have anything to say—” The old man picked up a dead twig and bent down to scrape the mud off the soles of his straw sandals. “You’ve been away at school for several years and haven’t gone home once. You’re grown up now and shouldn’t be hung up on the past.”

Tong the Sixth straightened up and squinted at him.

“There’s livestock for sale at Eastgate. The shop owner, Duan the Third, is an old friend of your dad’s. Go borrow a mule to save travel time. You could be in Jiling by noon; after a short rest, you can make it back to the valley before dark to wail at your father’s bier.”

Shouldering a small bundle, Tong the Sixth turned and disappeared behind the wall.

Kesan took a few steps after him, but stopped at the gate and stared at the dazzling, early morning red sun rising above the wall.

“Little Cabbage between the desolation of heaven and earth!”*

His father, reeking of alcohol, parted the door curtains and stuck his head inside. His mother was sitting on the edge of the bed, lost in thought. His father paused and, leaning against the door, cast two glances at them, a sad smile on his face. “Only two or three years old, and already no mother or father!” Kesan curled into a tiny ball under the covers. With his eyes closed, he threw up

*This and the line in the following paragraph are arias from the Peking Opera *Yang Nairwu and Little Cabbage*, sung by the father.

the ginger tea his mother had fed him. He'd had a bad dream just before dawn, but his fever had broken, and now he recalled that his mother was sleeping next to him; he rolled over to snuggle up to her. Suddenly he felt a violent, burning slap as his dad shouted, "Little devil, go back to sleep." His mother murmured something, which sounded to him like a sad, nightmarish sigh. He rolled over and buried his head under the blanket, cold sweat dripping from his forehead onto his pillow.

It was around seven in the morning; local women had already opened their doors and were out on the main street. As he walked along, Kesan heard one basinful of water after another splash onto the street from under the eaves. A pretty young woman was sitting on a bench outside a modest-looking house. With the hint of a smile on her face, she stared at Kesan, the hairbrush in her hand attacking her unruly hair.

"You slut! What are you doing, sitting by the door people-watching so early in the morning?" Rubbing his eyes, a man shambled noisily out the door in wooden clogs and cursed the woman. When she heard him, she stuck the brush in her mouth and bit down hard before looking up to give Kesan another flirtatious glance. It was getting busy on the street, with a mixture of noise from people spanking their sons, vendors selling oil fritters, and quarreling husbands and wives, all careening around in Kesan's head like exploding firecrackers.

The sky was clear and bright as he passed through Eastgate. Kesan opened his eyes wide, only to have the brightness glare down like a bucket of water splashing over him. He felt dizzy; the half bottle of liquor churning in his stomach rose up to his throat. He squatted and clutched his chest. After swallowing and choking for a while, he finally recovered and forced the liquor back down. He looked up into the sky, but was so bleary-eyed he couldn't tell if

there was one sun or two. When he looked around, smoke was rising from kitchens all over town. Rows of young beanstalks on the path outside of town were wet with dew. Gleaming green sparrows were jumping about on wild mulberry trees, creating a noisy spring scene. “The little birds on the tree branch are also my friends”—wasn’t that a favorite line of his pedantic childhood teacher, the one who kept bobbing his head as he recited the line? Yuniang, Yuniang, is your wandering soul still at peace? He remembered the little girl who was always tossing her braids. After school, she’d sneak over to the county warehouse to wait for his return. Later, after her desk had been vacant for three days, her family sent a message saying that Tian Yuniang had died of malaria two days before. At noon one day, eighty students from the elementary school followed the funeral procession all the way to the edge of town. He walked along the main street, staring blankly at the sun. After that, when he passed her house on the way home from school, he often saw Granny Tian squatting outside her door burning stacks of paper money. Nanmu Buddha, nanmu Buddha, relieve our suffering and distress. Omnipotent and merciful Guanyin Bodhisattva.

Mother—why is the sun so bright it hurts my eyes? “It’s still dark outside, and it’s raining. Mother, where do you think you’re going?” Mother had quietly gotten out of bed and was making herself up in front of the mirror. “Bring some acanthus liquor!” Father ran in, dripping wet, and grabbed Mother around the waist. He told Kesan to get some thick rope, then father and son tied the mother’s skinny arms behind her back. Once that was done, his father pushed his mother down on a bench, pried open her mouth, and poured down the remaining liquor—*gu-du-du gu-gu-du-du*. Tears squeezed out of her closed eyes before she looked up and fixed her gaze on Kesan. “More liquor,” his father said.

“Kesan, I hear the baby crying every night, and it upsets me so. Last September, when I returned to Fish Nest, I asked the abbot at

Stone Buddha Temple to select six monks of high virtue to recite a thousand rolls of the Saddharma Sutra, the Guanyin Bodhisattva's universal portal, for the baby. Don't tell me your baby sister hasn't been reborn and is still at home."

"All right, good, one more mouthful!"

If all the living souls suffering vexations heard the bodhisattva's name and worshipped her, she'd hear them at once and set them free. In the name of the Guanyin Bodhisattva, if one enters fire one will not be burned. Thus is the power of the Guanyin Bodhisattva—I built a temple for you, I spent so much money on you—I raise my fists to beat you!

"Good, fine. She's drunk."

2

A bright light flashed before Kesan's eyes and peals of thunder seemed to split the sky. It was a long time before he sensed a coolness, as pea-sized raindrops fell on his head and face. He opened his eyes and saw dark clouds gathering above him; then came the downpour.

"The weather has changed."

As his heart skipped a beat, Kesan jumped to his feet, only to lose his footing and fall back down on the pile of straw. It took him a moment to regain his composure. Once his legs were steady, he shouldered his blue cloth bundle and, with his head lowered, stumbled toward a small earth god temple in a bamboo grove.

As he entered the temple, a bolt of lightning knifed through the sky. Kesan looked up to see a small, soot-blackened altar, in which sat the smiling figures of the local deity and his wife, both holding canes with carved dragon handles. "Sorry to bother you two." After a moment's hesitation, Kesan bowed with his palms to-

gether, then tossed away his bundle and sat down heavily by the altar table. Thunder rolled across the sky as the rain came down in buckets. Kesan sucked in his breath, opened his bundle, and took out a towel. But a nauseous feeling rose up from his stomach; he ran out the temple door and began to heave, over and over. No longer as drunk as before, he sat down on the threshold to rest and noisily drink rainwater out of his hands, which he cupped under the eaves. He looked up into the sky, where the sun was off in the west, beyond the misty bamboo grove. But the rain kept pouring down.

By nightfall, Kesan had crossed two small hills and arrived at the ferry landing at Broken River Bay. All he could see was a stretch of black water.

“Crossing the river, sir?”

The barefoot boatman squatting on the bow of his ferryboat looked up and smiled at Kesan. A fire was burning in a patch of dreary white reed catkins near the water. As he spoke to Kesan, the boatman added two bundles of paper money to the fire, piece by piece.

“The river flooded this morning. The bay is a raging torrent. If you’re not in a hurry, why not spend the night at the inn over there and cross tomorrow morning?” The boatman pointed to a hillside inn.

“Get to bed early, sir.” The innkeeper walked in with a basin of hot water. “A Buddhist rite will be performed at the ferry landing tomorrow afternoon. If you have urgent business, you should cross the river early, since lots of people will be coming to watch the ceremony later.”

Kesan took off his shoes and dumped out the muddy water before rubbing his feet and immersing them in the hot water. The innkeeper turned back at the door.

“A few days ago a man crossing the river late at night went apoplectic in midstream, beating his face and chest and cursing

himself. Then he plunged into the river. He drowned in the dark, so his family has hired twelve monks and twelve Buddhist nuns to perform a three-day sacrifice to the Dragon King at the ferry landing tomorrow. You're lucky to be here to witness it."

The innkeeper closed the door behind him.

After washing his feet, Kesan stripped off the wet clothes, spread out the comforter, and crawled in. But as soon as he closed his eyes he saw, high above the clear blue sky, two bright suns circling and chasing each other, twisting and twirling like white foaming eddies. Rolling over, he was about to fall asleep when he experienced alternating attacks of hot and cold, as if he'd been brought low by the tremors of malaria. His stomach had been empty all day. Now it was approaching the second watch and the inn was deathly silent.

Peng. Peng. Peng.

"Open the door, innkeeper, open up."

"Coming, I'm coming."

Kesan jumped out of bed, turned up the lamp, and put on some dry clothes before rushing out of his room to stand in the passageway and gaze across to the other side of the yard. The innkeeper, hurricane lantern in hand, opened the door of the inn to admit a small, underfed old peasant, who removed his straw hat and shook off the rainwater as he stepped in.

Kesan crossed the yard in the rain.

"Sixth Uncle, it's me."

"You—you're still here!"

"You've had a hard journey, Uncle."

"You!"

"Come in to rest and wash your feet, then we can talk."

"Your father's body is lying at home."

"I know."

"Kesan!"

Uncle Tong the Sixth followed Kesan into his room, shaking his head. He removed the little cloth bundle from his shoulder and sat down on the edge of the bed. "I've delivered the news to all your relatives who live nearby. Your sister and her mother-in-law will be home by tomorrow noon." Without waiting for the innkeeper to bring in hot water, he stuck his feet in Kesan's basin and started to wash his feet.

"You don't look good—have you been drinking?"

"It's a cold night."

With a copper brazier and two cattles of charcoal borrowed from the innkeeper, Kesan lit a sizzling fire in the room. After Sixth Uncle Tong had changed into dry clothes and taken out his pipe, Kesan shut the window and sat down by the old man on the edge of the bed. The two of them, one old man and one young one, stared at the fire that was burning brighter and hotter, both lost in thought.

"Your brother, he wanted to sell the land."

"My brother—he's back?"

"Didn't you know? He's been back for six months. He got involved with Fourth Mama Luo in Great Blessings Lane and used her money to open a silk shop on South Market Street."

"Fourth Mama Luo!"

Uncle Tong the Sixth fell silent, staring at the brazier as he puffed on his pipe.

"What karmic evil—" Kesan poked the fire with some tongs. "Way back then, my father must have been possessed to be interested in that Fourth Mama Luo. He visited her twice and drank a few cups of tea. But her old patron, that fellow named Sun, led some men over to break down her back door and storm into her place, overturning chairs and chests along the way. My brother had tagged along to watch the excitement! My father was dragged up to kneel in front of Sun. When he saw this, my brother ran home and

hid in the kindling shed, where he cried and cried, and thought about all that had happened for two whole days. Then on Sun the Fourth's birthday, he stole away from home with two of our hens and went to the birthday banquet in town, where he kowtowed to Sun in the celebration hall, called him Daddy, and became his adoptive son. After that, he was a big shot. On my mother's birthday, he returned from town with a gold ring weighing ten grams, which he gleefully stuffed into my mother's hand, saying he won it at a game of Pai Gow. My mother looked at it and, without a word, tossed it into the toilet. So my father went into town to ask around, and discovered that my brother had become one of the toughs, drinking a lot, screwing prostitutes, and treating the brothels of Great Blessings Lane as his home."

"In the end, that got him into big trouble." Uncle Tong yawned.

Kesan poked the fire some more, put down the tongs, and looked up at the small skylight above him. The rain was still pouring down.

"It was the nineteenth day of the sixth month." Kesan paused. "My brother came running home, his face white with fear. My mother asked him what was wrong, but he just stared at her and smiled. Frightened, my mother touched his chest, only to discover that he was drenched in cold sweat. She didn't know what to do, except to take him over to the outhouse, where she made him kneel down and empty his stomach, one mouthful after another, of the liquor he'd consumed over three days. At noon the next day, my father returned from town, his eyes bloodshot. He said nothing when he entered, heading straight for the kitchen instead, where he grabbed a cleaver and went after my brother with it. My mother fell to her knees on the spot and asked my father what had happened, why he'd flown into such a rage. Stomping his feet, my father sighed and sighed before he finally said, 'A murder was com-

mitted in Great Blessings Lane. The town's been turned upside down. Go ahead, ask this good-for-nothing son of ours who he was drinking with last night and what kind of evil he caused in Great Blessings Lane.' It took my mother a long time to get anything out of him. It turned out that there was a decent family in Great Blessings Lane with the surname of Liu, who had a daughter-in-law called Chang something-or-other—"

"Changsheng."

"She hanged herself one early morning. My father said that Changsheng lived in Great Blessings Lane and didn't go out much. On those rare occasions when she took her basket to the market, she kept her head down, very charming. On the night they greeted the deity, it so happened that after her husband, Liu Laoshi, foolishly went out drinking, Changsheng and her mother-in-law sneaked out to burn incense to the bodhisattva to pray for a son. It was her bad luck that Sun the Fourth saw them, which gave rise to lustful thoughts. He dragged her into the brothel called Fragrant Court, where he raped her. The violated Changsheng was so distraught that she went home, closed the door, and hanged herself from the kitchen door with her own sash. When my mother heard this, she glared at my brother, not saying a word for a long time. Then, after dinner, she squatted on the drying ground, with no one else around, and burned two stacks of spirit money for the young woman in the Liu family. She also recited the Saddharma Sutra over and over until dawn. Three days later, when I walked up Great Blessings Lane on my way home after school and looked in, I heard people shouting, 'Liu Laoshi killed somebody!' I ran over to North Market Street but missed all the excitement; the rubberneckerers had left, except for a dozen people who had gathered outside the Township Office. One of them was a traveling medicine man who had a stammer. He was ringing his brass bell—*ding-ding dang-dang*—and saying, 'The cul—culprits either hid out or ran away. That—that Liu

Laoshi's cleaver ended the lives of t—two innocent women. Sun—Sun the Fourth's wife, and a pro—prostitute in Bless—Great Blessings Lane that Sun had been seeing, a girl called Red Spring or something like that.' I ran home to the valley and told my brother what the man had said. That night, he packed a cloth bundle and asked my mother for some money before he crossed the stony hill behind the mountain and fled to my uncle's place in Fish Nest."

"The times sure have changed. Now the madams take their prostitutes over to greet the Guanyin Bodhisattva. Why couldn't they greet the deity somewhere else?" Uncle Tong shook his head as he emptied his pipe by banging it on the floor. "Remember Gui the Second, who grew vegetables in Ruined Pass? On that day, the twentieth of the seventh month, he took his produce to town before dawn. When he neared Great Blessings Lane, he saw a pretty young woman pacing at the intersection, as if waiting for someone. After leaving the marketplace at noon, he went straight home and told his mother about it. She was delighted. 'The bodhisattva is watching over us!' She slaughtered a chicken and then bought two stacks of spirit money and a bottle of liquor. With Gui the Second carrying the offerings, she hobbled into town. The two of them, mother and son, squatted at the entrance to Great Blessings Lane, burning paper money and reciting sutras in broad daylight. Prostitutes all up and down the lane came out to watch the peculiar sight. Later, after Gui the Second married, his wife presented him with a pudgy baby the first year. His mother was sure that the baby was a present from Liu Laoshi's wife. Even now, the Gui family maintains a longevity tablet for the Liu family."

Kesan got up, stepped over the brazier, and pulled open the door.

At some point, the rain that had fallen all night had stopped. Clumps and clusters of deep red flowers were blooming on a five- or six-foot camellia tree in the middle of the yard. Dew settled into

the night; the inn was shrouded in darkness. The rustling of bristle grass on the riverbank was the only sound anywhere.

Kesan breathed in the cool air. He was about to close the door when something stopped him. A man and a woman were arguing in the north wing of the inn.

“Slut!”

“How dare you call me that?”

“I’ll slap you!”

“Go ahead.”

“I am your dad.”

“Dad.”

“I am the father who brought you into this world and raised you to adulthood.”

“Dad.”

“Come home with me.”

Kesan closed and bolted the door before turning to look at Sixth Uncle Tong.

“Ever since Changsheng hanged herself, my mother has been burning spirit money and reciting sutras for her on the first and fifteenth of every month. Could she still be around after all these years?”

“It’s late. Go to sleep.”

Uncle Tong stretched and yawned. He added two lumps of coal to the brazier and stirred up the fire.

“Tomorrow morning, after we cross the river, we still have to travel across the mountain.”

3

Kesan slung the bundle over his shoulder and pulled a blanket over Sixth Uncle Tong before he left the room.

The night was cool as water when Kesan walked out of the inn. He breathed in some cold air and shivered as he looked up to see a new crescent moon hanging in the sky. It was the third watch. The shiny black river coursing down from the north made a sudden turn, skirted the city wall, and rushed over randomly strewn rocks on its eastward course. A wind blew across the river, sending snowy white reed blossoms whirling into the sky. Kesan felt the same whiteness blanket his mind as he stood by the inn door to watch the river. It was a town with five thousand families, dusty gray-tile houses crouched beneath the moonlight above the stone embankment by the river, like unclaimed tombs scattered in a graveyard. One lone old tree stood in the center of town. The sky seemed very high amid the vastness of the dark night. From somewhere came the howling of wolves.

“How do I cross the river in the middle of the night?”

Not knowing what to do, Kesan just stood there. Then he heard a creak, as someone sprang out of the thatched shed by the ferry landing. When he looked closer, he realized it was the boatman who had been squatting on the bow late the night before, burning spirit money. As he walked along, his back bent, the boatman kept turning to size up the woman behind him.

He walked down to the ferry landing and untied the rope before standing aside with a grin and inviting the woman to board the boat. He waited until she was seated up front before jumping onto the stern. He picked up his bamboo pole and prepared to push off.

“Hey, boatman, wait up!”

Kesan ran up to the ferryboat and jumped aboard.

Even before Kesan sat down, the boatman pushed his pole against the bank and, with a splash—*bo-la-la*—moved the boat toward the center of the river.

“Couldn’t sleep, sir?”

“What?”

“I said, couldn’t you sleep?”

“It was cold.”

“It’s the third month.”

“Yes.”

“Couldn’t sleep, right?”

“Right.”

“So you got up to watch the moon?”

As Kesan settled down, the boatman shook his head and muttered to himself:

“Times sure have changed. A young woman traveling alone in the middle of a dark night! She banged on the door so loud my old mother thought that Sister Tong the Fourth was giving birth again, and her husband wanted to cross the river for a midwife.”

Kesan took a look at the bow.

The woman, who held a green cloth bundle in her arms in a winsome manner, had two plain braids. Kesan wondered if she’d heard what the boatman said. The moonlight shone on her light blue clothes.

“That Sister Tong the Fourth!” the boatman said. “She had three babies in the first five years of marriage. No one would have believed it if they’d seen how skinny and sickly she was as a child. It was barely five in the morning when she was ready to deliver. Her husband took down a doorframe and, with his brother, carried the big-bellied Sister Tong up onto my ferryboat. She started moaning in midstream, which threw her husband into a panic. He begged me to stop while he and his brother squatted down up front, where they dug and poked until a bloody little boy was dragged out with a loud wail. When she got home, Sister Tong said that when she was giving birth to this third child, she saw a woman dressed all in white holding a baby on the far side of the river. She was frightened and pleased at the same time. When the baby was a month old, Sister Tong dressed up and, carrying the

newborn in one arm and holding the hand of her four-year-old daughter, crossed the river to the Guanyin Temple in town with a hired porter shouldering offerings to burn incense and show her gratitude. Later she told her husband to sell a piece of paddy field so she could gild the image of Guanyin and make a red satin cape for the deity.”

The female passenger sitting in the bow turned sideways and looked up as if engrossed in the tale. Her shiny eyes were staring at something in the vast, blackish, moonlit water. Then she dipped a finger in the water, twirling it with lazy gentleness. Kesan felt something tug at his heart; then, as he noticed a platinum ring on her finger, he jerked his head around to ask the boatman:

“Why didn’t the second kid go to burn incense with Sister Tong?”

“The baby died of diarrhea at the age of one,” the boatman said.

The female passenger let out a soft cry. Kesan turned and saw that the boat was approaching the landing.

The female passenger stood up and untied a kerchief to take out a coin, which she tossed onto the deck before hiking her skirt and walking onto the riverbank.

“Watch your step, sir.”

Kesan thanked the boatman, picked up his bundle, and stepped onto the stone embankment.

South Market Street was deathly quiet from one end to the other; not a shadow to be seen anywhere. Kesan turned to look across the bend in the river, where boundless reed blossoms blocked the view of the little riverside inn. On his side of the river, with a loud splash—*bo-la-la*—the boatman pushed his boat away from the ferry landing with his bamboo pole; standing at the stern, he looked up with a grin and waved at Kesan.

Kesan turned to see his own shadow stretched out long on the ground. The crescent moon, already setting in the west, cast patch-

es of moonlight on the street. The female passenger, the green cloth bundle on her arm, was walking ahead of him, her moist blue figure moving down the empty, green, cold flagstone road. Standing at the ferry landing, Kesan looked down at the end of the street, where the mountain road leading home began. Taking a deep breath, he followed the retreating figure into Jiling.

Some two hundred shops crowded both sides of the street, as far as the eye could see. He remembered that on the fifth and twentieth days of the month, the shops opened early in the morning, bringing the street alive with shoppers and vendors. It would stay busy even as it got dark and the night watchman sounded the signal of the first watch. But now, the third watch had passed, and the shop doors remained closed; not even the barking of dogs could be heard, let alone people moving around.

As Kesan walked onto the street he stepped on the undulating shadows of eaves, suddenly feeling the vastness of heaven and earth. He unbuttoned his shirt and shifted the blue cloth bundle from his hand to his shoulder. SCHOLAR BAKERY. FIRST BANK. FULL MOON FABRICS. JADE PAWNSHOP. GOSPEL BOOKSTORE—UPSTAIRS PLEASE. PEACE AND PROSPERITY RICE SHOP. An old store with a run-down, narrow storefront had hosted a big wedding that night. A piece of red satin was draped over the blackened, ancient sign above the door, like a red veil covering the face of a swarthy bride. Under the eaves hung two palace lanterns, whose dim light shone on the door to reveal a piece of red paper inscribed with gilded words: DOUBLE HAPPINESS. Remnants of exploded firecrackers littered the ground. The store was closed—quiet and dark. Pricking up his ears, Kesan heard the soft sobs of a woman. Then came a creaking sound—someone opened a door and walked into the courtyard to draw water. He heard splashes; someone was washing something. Kesan's heart skipped a beat, so he took two steps forward. He saw the moist blue figure walk quietly into the

clear light of the intersection. The soft hairs on the nape of her neck were noticeably fine and shiny under the moonlight. BAO FAMILY SALVATION ALTAR. PEACE HOSTEL. HEAVEN'S MANDATE PHARMACY. OLD FRIENDS AND NEW ACQUAINTANCES, WE'RE MOVING.

His sister was seventeen the year she was married over to Stone Dragon Canal. Dressed in new clothes from head to toe, he sat on a little mule, proudly following the bridal sedan and the musicians who were tooting their horns and beating their drums. The dumb little brother sending his sister off, all the way to her in-laws' house. First, bow to heaven and earth. Second, bow to the ancestors. Third, bow to the parents. Then the newlywed was sent into the bridal chamber. Little brother, wake up! Rubbing his eyes, he saw the little boy from the in-laws' family standing by his bed, blinking and smiling sheepishly. *Bong-bong*, the foreign clock in the front room struck twice. The village was shrouded in darkness; the guests, sated with food and drink, had left after teasing the bride according to custom. He and the little boy walked through the house, crossed the yard, and came to a room in the west wing, where they stood on their tiptoes. Prying the window open a crack with fire tongs, he felt his heart thumping as fast as a frightened deer. When they lifted the red silk curtains from the bottom, they saw two bright red candles, whose faint light turned the room into something looking like a flowerbed. It was nearly dawn; his sister, dressed in red and carrying a tea tray, walked out of the bridal chamber and entered the front room, where she trembled and knelt down. Her snowy white neck, like a tender spring bamboo shoot, was exposed, as her long hair was combed into the two shiny, black buns of a married woman. The sight captivated Kesan. When he finally looked up, he noticed that a watery, silky mist had suddenly veiled the crescent moon. Stars in the Big Dipper glittered cold and clear in the pitch-dark sky. TEN BEAUTY BANK,

JADE FOREST SILK AND BROCADE BOUTIQUE, ZHU FAMILY FURNITURE SHOP. Father personally picked out the mahogany furniture, the gilded trunk, and the black carved bed. The day after the wedding, his sister returned on a home visit wearing a radiant red blouse and a light red skirt. She headed straight for their mother's room, where she cried her eyes out. Father called his brother-in-law outside and, without a word, slapped him hard—twice. The dumbfounded bridegroom's face turned red and puffy. His sister ran out and took him in her arms, crying and laughing as she said, "I can't bear to part with my mother." Standing off to the side and looking at his brother-in-law, their mother smiled and said, "I see you can't part with your new husband either." Can't bear to part with Mother.

Uncle Tong the Sixth had already delivered a message to his sister that she should be home by noon the following day. "Your brother has been back for six months, and now he's borrowed money from Fourth Mama Luo of Great Blessings Lane to open a silk shop on South Market Street," Uncle Tong had said. Fourth Mama Luo! Kesan's heart skipped a beat at the thought of the woman. He looked down the long street as he stood at the intersection. It was littered with scraps of paper and fruit peelings. Yesterday was the fifth day of the month, a market day for folks from the countryside. A cool mountain wind blew over the cold, dark cobblestone street with a hollow echo. A figure in light blue with two simple black braids floated into the intersection. She looked up at the sky, thinking her own thoughts. He walked past two more shops before he was greeted by another mountain wind that picked up scraps of charred spirit money, along with raindrops, and swept them into the middle of the street. SUPPORT HAN RULE WITH UNSWERVING LOYALTY. INCENSE IN THE ALCOVE LIGHTS UP THE AUSPICIOUS STATE. RIGHTEOUS AIRS REACH HEAVEN—in-scriptions on the door of a small temple for the God of War. In the

moonlight, a lone figure squatted on the threshold, hands hugging his knees. Kesan walked up to see saliva dripping from the mouth of the snoring, dark-faced, bearded man. The temple's main hall, which faced the street, was blackened by years of incense smoke. Two red Buddha lanterns shone brightly, oh so brightly, on the alcove holding the image of the God of War, who was reading with a candle brightening his old red face, which now looked like that of a drunk. The small temple courtyard outside was also littered with the ash of spirit money. Kesan turned to look at the man with the grimy beard; he squatted there motionless, still snoring. A bundle of clothing lay at his feet. A wanderer who'd traveled many miles. LU EMBROIDERY SHOP. DAILY AROMA RESTAURANT. CINA. YU FAMILY TILE SHOP. A strong wind blew, making the clouds roll.

Mother mixed a bowl of fragrant hair dye and told his sister to untie her thick braid under the window, where Mother combed dye into her hair. He sat on a small bamboo stool near them, dozing off as he watched his mother take the hairpins out of her mouth, one after another. It took a long time to comb his sister's hair into two high rings above her ears. It was a quiet afternoon, interrupted by a pink magnolia flower falling from the tree outside. Putting down her comb, Mother turned his sister's face around and took a long look before nodding and unknitting her brows. "What a lovely little woman! Ah-rou ought to get married soon," said his father, who had returned from town reeking of alcohol and stuck his head in the room to look at mother and daughter, with a smile. Your sister has received the message and should be home by noon tomorrow. Noon tomorrow. A bright sun, directly overhead. He walked out of East-gate as a blazing white light splashed abruptly into his face. Guanyin has mysterious knowledge and the power to alleviate all suffering in the world. Sister, Sister Begonia, look! The glittering dew covering the field suddenly turned to a cold drizzle falling everywhere.

"Wait up, Miss."

Kesan breathed in the cold air; he was visited by an inspiration as the moist blue figure disappeared at the Great Blessings Lane intersection. He froze momentarily, then shifted the bundle to his other shoulder and quickened his pace to catch up with her. Cold rain was falling again.

Great Blessings Lane was deserted in the rain. Sandwiched between low eaves was a narrow alley lined with a dozen doors, each decorated with a lantern stamped with the name Tang's Emporium, which drenched the alley in a glimmering, blood-red light.

"Little Brother, it's raining. What are you doing standing on the corner like this? Don't you mind the rain?"

A woman in her thirties was leaning against the second door from the street corner. She was eating a bowl of steaming sweet rice dumplings with osmanthus and lard as she smiled at Kesan.

Kesan turned to look at the vacant lot in the center of town. Another mountain wind blew across the main street, bending the old chinaberry tree by the door of the county granary. Across the street, on the corner, was the Zhu Family Teahouse. The shabby doors were flung open with a thump. Cold, clear moonlight shone into the shop, to reveal five or six stools piled upon a red lacquered table near the door. Ash from burnt spirit money rustled loudly on the street. The cold, quiet rain was falling more heavily.

"Little Brother!"

The woman at the door waved, her smiling eyes winking at him.

"Hurrying home in the middle of a dark night? Look at your pale face, like a wandering ghost. Come in for a cup of hot tea and let your big sister warm up your chest. Won't that be nice?"

Standing at the corner with his bundle, Kesan didn't know what to do.

"Go ahead, Little Brother!" The woman glanced into the alley and signaled with pursed lips. "That white-boned demon Autumn Begonia is waiting for you to be her husband."

Spring Comfort Garden.
Penglai Pavilion.
Four Happiness Hall.
Sleeping Fragrance Court.
Three Beauties.
Green Silk Garden.
Fragrant Court.

The plum flowers in snowy months whiten the night three times.

The liquor and the lamps turn the guests' faces red.

"Foolish Autumn Begonia, you little slut! You can't bear to part with your mother, so go on, leave. Why did you come back in the middle of the night then?"

A plump madam in red, with soft, fair skin, fuming and cursing, and carrying a pair of tongs, walked outside.

"My mother's sick, she's dying."

"Aiyaya!"

"I'm going home to be there when she departs this world."

"Aiya."

"Is that illegal?"

"You sharp-tongued, good-for-nothing girl."

"My mother's dying."

"Autumn Begonia!"

"Dying."

"Autumn Begonia! I'm your mother too."

"Mother."

"Autumn Begonia, my good daughter."

"Mother, when you pass on and go to see the Queen Mother of the West on the back of a fairy crane, I'll wear mourning clothes for you, all right?"

"Ungrateful girl, fucked by an evil man! Are you putting a curse on me?"

The madam rolled her eyes, looked up into the sky, and cried out for the bodhisattva.

On an ancient rattan chair under the red lantern sat an old man in his late seventies, playing sad tunes on his two-stringed *huqin* in Great Blessings Lane on this rainy night. “You’re not from around here, are you, sir?” The old man looked up at Kesan with a smile as he took sips from a cup of hot, strong tea that was sitting on a bamboo stool beside him.

The madam stuck her head out the door.

“You followed my Autumn Begonia all the way and now you’re drenched, you poor thing. Come inside, young man, and let Fourth Mama warm you up with some hot porridge.”

She took his bundle from him after he entered. Then she turned up the Buddha lamp in the alcove and stoked the fire in a brazier, to which she’d just added two pieces of charcoal. “Autumn Begonia! Autumn Begonia!” As the fire burned brighter, Fourth Mama Luo made a pot of hot tea and shouted to somewhere inside the house.

Su San left Hongdong County
and came to the main street—

Outside, the old man cleared his throat and spat out some phlegm before he started in again with a stylized song from Hubei on his *huqin* to accompany his hoarse singing.

Book Four



Raining Flowers

Flood

The rain stopped as dawn was breaking, but the river was flooded. Slipping into his worn-out shoes as if they were sandals, Little Seven Zhu shambled out of the inn, yawning grandly.

Dark clouds blotted out the sky. He looked across the seventy or eighty yards of river to the opposite shore and saw, above the stone embankment, a large but absolutely quiet town, where not a soul could be seen at the moment. Black raging water washed down from the north and made a sharp turn at Broken River Bay, sending up torrents of white foamy spray. A roaring black dragon, howling its way over the city wall—*bua-la hua-la*—through the river rocks and reed blossoms, and roiling eastward.

“Look at that flood! It’s March,” Little Seven exclaimed as he stood by the inn door, shuddering against the wind.

“Get out of here, you little bastard, or I’ll give you a good beating!”

After a frozen moment, Little Seven tucked his head between his shoulders and bared his teeth before bounding out the door. He turned to see the inn proprietress emerge from the kitchen, a pair of tongs in her hand, and run up to the door. Little Seven shuffled slowly off to a spot under the eaves, where he squatted down next to the wall.

The night before, he'd traveled in a cold rain, arriving at the ferry landing in the dark.

He'd sneaked into the kitchen in the inn, where he'd intended to spend a free night before crossing the river in the morning. He'd then go the Mercy Chapel on North Market Street, and eke out a living by doing odd jobs for the bearded foreigner, Father Yue. He didn't know the nationality of Father Yue, who had moist, very moist blue, marblelike eyes. Whenever Father Yue saw him, he'd shake his head and say, "Child, Child." "Father in Heaven!" Seven sighed as he lowered his head and crossed himself.

Who'd have guessed that this morning, when he woke up, the darkness around him would be suddenly lit up by the woman walking into the kitchen with a hurricane lantern? She filled a basin with water before squatting down by the oven and pulling down her pants. He heard splashing water and had no idea what the woman was washing, but he was captivated by the sight. "Where did this mutt come from?" The woman held up her lantern and shone it on Little Seven's face.

"Slut! What are you up to so early in the morning?" Little Seven jumped up with a shout. As her face turned white with fear, the woman threw down her lantern and fled from the kitchen.

Now he was squatting under the eaves, watching the woman enter the inn, her hips swaying. Rubbing the back of his head, Little Seven Zhu rolled his eyes and spat on the ground.

"Fuck you, slut!"

A mist rose from the surface of the river. Amid the *bua-la-la* of raging water and the mist, dozens of black-sailed ships crowded a small lagoon beneath the stone steps out of the wind. Rows of dusty gray-tiled houses lined the stone embankment, looming in the dark like unclaimed tombs. A ferocious wind began to blow, whipping up black clouds above the city and sending white reed blossoms flying into the sky. It looked as if Guanyin had died and all the deities and bodhisattvas were choking with sobs in heaven.

“Can’t cross the river now!”

Chased out by a horrible woman early in the morning, like a stray dog, now he could only squat in the wind, trembling from hunger and the cold. Gritting his teeth, Little Seven sighed again. Resigned to his miserable state, he closed his eyes, hugged his knees, and dozed off.

Our Little Seven, he had a dream.

It was a sunlit day. He clomped along the riverbank—*tuu-tuu*—and entered town on a deserted flagstone street. He walked down South Market Street with a pouch over his shoulder, his shirt open to show the thick black hair under his arms. After leaving South Market Street, he came to Great Blessings Lane in the center of town, where two old women selling flowers were squatting on the corner. Dozens of girls in red leaned against doors, all those pairs of eyes fixed on him. “Pretty girls, I’ll come fuck you later.” With this exclamation, Little Seven took the cigarette from his mouth and flicked it into the street before striding into the Zhu Family Teahouse across the street. “I’m here to play.” He pushed the idlers out of the way. A dozen sweaty, odd-looking faces crowded around the counter in the smoke-filled room. Little Seven Zhu choked on the smoke as he tossed down a bundle of money. The banker looked up without a word before picking up the three dice and rolling them with a clatter into the bowl. Two twos and a five. “Five monkeys, hard to beat!” Little Seven Zhu smiled, lit a cigarette, and stuck it in his mouth. Then he rolled up his white sleeves and, with a flick of his hand, sent the dice rolling. “Leopard!” The onlookers roared their approval as three lovely plum blossoms, like spots on a leopard, bloomed in the dark green bowl.

Little Seven suddenly felt a chill on his chest. “Leopard!” he shouted out as he opened his eyes, only to find his head drenched by a basin of water used to wash feet the night before. Shocked, he looked up to see a small bamboo-framed window closing with a creak under the eaves. Who was that woman with such white arms?

When he awoke from his dream, a dozen passengers were already waiting at the ferry landing.

“Ah-choo!”

Seven crouched at the door of the inn and felt the dirty water on his head. A prickly sensation rose in his nose; he sneezed loudly twice and felt the emptiness in his stomach. He sighed and, as he was about to get up and walk to the ferry landing, a strong gust of wind blew across the river and rustled the reed blossoms on this side. Golden rays broke through the stone embankment on the other side of the river bend. Suddenly tens of thousands of golden snakes frolicked, as if drunk, on the roaring torrent as morning light glistened on the surface of the water.

The sun was up.

Sixteen porters, humming rhythmically, came up to the ferry landing carrying a dowry: eight trunks, four large and four small, all painted a shiny red.

Seven stretched lazily and, “Ah-choo!” sneezed again. Shuffling along in his worn shoes, he walked toward the moist red sun and down to the ferry landing.

The porters had already put down their poles and were squatting at the landing, smoking.

“Say, old brothers, hard work, eh?”

Seven ambled over and greeted the porters with clasped hands and a smile. The leading porter was a skinny fellow with a long, horselike face.

“No big deal.”

“Old brother, which girl’s happy day is it?”

“The eldest daughter of the Lian family west of the river, Miss Lian, Snow Lian.”

Little Seven paused when he heard the name, then squatted down by the horse-faced fellow and yawned. Five or six more passengers arrived at the landing. Little Seven fixed his furtive eyes on

a young woman of eighteen or nineteen. A lovely thing in white, she was standing by the river looking at the water. She carried a dark green cloth bundle; a white ribbon decorated her braid.

“Ah-choo!”

The girl turned to look at Little Seven, unspoken words filling her eyes.

“Wrong person, sorry.”

Seven lowered his head and continued to “ah-choo, ah-choo,” sneezing and spraying mucus. The girl looked at him and turned back to stare blankly at the water. She wore a white cotton flower behind one of her ears. Seven was saddened as he thought about someone else. A startled flock of egrets flew up out of a reed-covered pond in Laojia Village. Someone was singing a ditty at the ferry landing:

Over twenty years old
Had no wife
Holding a pillow
As his woman—

Little Seven jumped to his feet to look around, but couldn't find the singer. The girl in white had already turned her head back, her expression cold as water. Someone at the landing was cursing impatiently:

“Fuck! This damned rain means we can't cross the river!”

“Ah-choo!”

“Someone was murdered last night in West River Village,” the horse-faced fellow said abruptly after finishing a pipeful; he rubbed his eyes and yawned. A white-haired porter squatting nearby and dozing off jerked his head up and pointed at his ears.

“What did you say?”

“A murder.”

“What?”

“A murder!”

“Why?”

“An age-old feud, who knows?”

“Who was murdered?”

“An old woman.”

“Who?”

“An old woman!”

“The murderer, where is he?”

“Ran away.”

“Why murder?”

“Who knows?”

The horse-faced fellow knocked his pipe on the rock, added a pinch of yellow tobacco, and lit the pipe. He resumed smoking as he looked at the river with a gloomy face.

A wind blew over the river and drove the fog away. Little Seven shivered as he scrunched his head down between his shoulders and sneezed twice. When he looked up, he saw the smiling ferryman emerge from the inn with a tall, robust middle-aged man. As they walked along, the ferryman bowed and said:

“Look at this water, sir. How are we supposed to make it across?”

The man, dressed in sapphire blue, looked up at the sky and down at the river, rubbing his hands, his face red with anxiety.

“An auspicious time has been picked and the bride has arrived. What are we going to do, just waste our time here at the landing?”

“Master Lian, we can’t get across.” The ferryman threw out his hands with a solicitous smile.

It was getting late. The sky was a clear blue; it was past seven. The sun atop the city wall across the river had broken out of the red clouds, through which golden sunbeams streamed. People were walking on the street in town, across from the roaring water with its frolicking golden snakes. Smoke was rising from kitchen chim-

neys all over town. On the ferry landing, ferocious winds still howled.

“Let’s go see the bride!” someone yelled out, and as Little Seven stood there blankly, twenty or so ferry passengers at the landing took off running toward the inn. Left on the ferry landing were the reed blossoms, an old farmer with a small cloth bundle, and sixteen porters. “Ah-choo!” Little Seven jumped to his feet and hobbled in his worn shoes after the gawkers.

“What are you, ghosts rushing the Gate of Hell? Stop crowding! You’ll break down the door!”

A woman came out of the inn and blocked the door with her body.

“Sister Tang the Second.”

“Bean Curd Wang, what are you doing?”

“We want to see Miss Lian.”

“The bride’s resting in her room, don’t bother her.”

“A look from outside will do just fine.”

The woman snorted as she moved away. Little Seven, his head scrunched down between his shoulders, sneaked up behind Bean Curd Wang and crowded into the inn along with the other gawkers. They crossed the courtyard, where a dozen bright red camellias the size of rice bowls bloomed on a rain-drenched tree. A door in the north wing was slightly ajar. In the hallway two out-of-town men, teapots in their hands, pressed their eyes up against a crack in the door.

“Damn! Look at that tender white skin, so soft you could fuck water out through her pores. The guy is gonna die and go to heaven on his wedding night.”

“Pity, she has a pair of bewitching eyes, the sign of lust.”

“Women are naturally fickle—”

“Assholes, what kind of rubbish is that?”

A matchmaker threw open the door and ran out.

“Ah-choo!” Little Seven sneezed.

“What are you doing here?”

“Madam Xie, lust is one of the seven deadly sins of the foreign religion! Miss Lian, she—”

“What nonsense is that?”

“It isn’t nonsense, Madam Xie. That’s what the bearded foreigner, Father Yue, says.”

“Are you one of those toughs who’s come to cause trouble?”

Little Seven felt his face burning; he was seeing stars. Matchmaker Xie had slapped him across the face. Scrunching his head between his shoulders, he stumbled off, holding his face, sneaking a look inside the room like a little monkey.

“Father Yue also said, ‘Those who sow in tears will reap in joy—’”

“Aha!”

Little Seven lowered his head and cursed, “Damn,” as his ear was pinched. He looked up to see that nasty woman from the inn grinning at him, her eyes shining.

“You bastard! You still hanging around here?”

“Slut, what did you do last night behind your husband’s back? Do you think you can shut me up just by getting rid of me?”

“Fuck your mother! What did you say about my woman?”

The owner of the inn leaped over, his teeth bared, reached out, and clawed at Little Seven’s throat.

“Turtle spawn, let go of me.”

“Only if you kowtow three times and call me Daddy.”

Little Seven stuck out his tongue, his face red from struggling, as he thought to himself, “I already have a dad. If I call you Daddy, wouldn’t that be an insult to my dear mother? I won’t do it, I can’t.” He clenched his teeth and shook his head.

“You’re not going to call me Daddy?”

“Ah-choo!”

“Say Daddy, say it!”

More than twenty men and women, those who'd come to gawk at the bride, Miss Lian, circled Little Seven and laughed.

Then, with a loud snap, Little Seven Zhu broke off his own belt and, holding up his pants with both hands, shouted:

"Bastard, are you going to let me go or not? If you don't, I'll drop my pants."

"Turtle spawn! Fuck your mother."

The innkeeper let go of Little Seven's neck, spread his clawlike fingers, and gave him a series of slaps that sent him reeling out of the hallway.

As he rubbed his face, Little Seven shuffled into the courtyard, where he pointed at the gawkers.

"Let me tell you, you should love your enemy and treat those who hate you with kindness. You should—ah—ah-choo! should—ah-choo!—should bless those who curse you and pray for those who slander you. If someone—ah-choo!—someone slaps you, turn the other cheek, if someone takes your coat, don't stand—ah—ah—ah—stand in his way—"

"What nonsense is that?"

Bewildered by this farce, the seventy-year-old matchmaker frowned as she turned and went inside, slamming the door behind her.

"There's a boat on the river." An errand boy from the inn bounded in with the news.

"Let's cross."

The gawkers, male and female, cleared the hallway in an instant, leaving only the two out-of-town early risers standing outside Miss Lian's room. They took one last look and then picked up their teapots and returned to their rooms.

"Ah-choo!"

Little Seven, trembling, blew his nose after a moment. Still holding up his pants, he stood alone in the middle of the flagstone

courtyard, squinting as he surveyed his surroundings. There was nothing in the yard but a camellia tree. He felt lost, his heart empty. “Slut, turtle spawn, fuck your whole family!” he cried out with tearful anger as he put on his belt and tightened it around his waist. Then he shambled out of the inn alone.

The white water spread out before him. What a clear sky! The water shimmered under the blazing white sun.

“Fuck!”

Little Seven stretched lazily and sighed before he dragged his feet slowly down to the ferry landing. Seven or eight additional passengers, male and female, were waiting to cross the river, but the ferryman was nowhere in sight. The sixteen porters were squatting under the shadows of reeds by the river, smoking and yawning lazily. Eight bright red dowry trunks were still piled along the roadside.

“Elder brothers, we’re going to cross.” Little Seven greeted the porters with clasped hands and squatted down by the skinny horse-faced fellow. He picked up a dead twig and listlessly stirred a mass of soggy spirit money ash by the river. Someone must have burned the paper money the night before. *Hua-la hua-la*. The water roaring over the rocks glimmered under the bright sun.

“Sounds good to me,” the horse-faced fellow muttered as he quietly stared at something upstream.

“A boat’s coming.”

Under the moist blue sky, far off to the north, a small black-sailed boat emerged from upstream. Sending waves to the shore, it filled its sails and bore down on the landing like a reeling drunk.

“Ah—” someone on the ferry landing shouted.

The horse-faced fellow puffed on his pipe and raised his eyelids to take a look.

“Another boat’s coming.”

“A boat?”

The white-haired porter squinted to look upstream.

“A bamboo raft.”

Something flickered under the sun like the reflection of a knife and, sure enough, behind the black-sailed boat, a green bamboo raft skimmed atop the glimmering water some forty yards away. Like a reed leaf floating on the water, it seemed to be chasing the black-sailed boat carried along by the swift current. Whitecaps rose on the bright surface. A gaunt, swarthy madman stood on the raft; stripped to the waist and bent over, he held a bamboo pole in one hand and a long, shiny cleaver in the other. The raft beneath him was bobbing up and down in the iridescent water, like a swallow flitting across the surface, and in no time, it had followed the boat to the landing at Broken River Bay. A young couple was standing shoulder to shoulder on the small black-sailed boat, one handling the oars, the other the scull. Two children about three years old squatted quietly, hand in hand, in the stern by the feet of their parents. A white wave rolled up and—*bua-la-la*—splashed onto the deck. Across from the landing, beneath the stone embankment, where the river made a sharp turn, raging foam surged under the bright sunny sky.

“Ah-choo!”

Seven jumped to his feet, kicked off his shoes, pushed through the passengers and gawkers, and ran onto the ferry landing, his heart thumping.

Across from the river bend, both flagstone main streets of the town were bustling with people. A group of happy women in colorful red and green clothes had gathered at the levee. A man jumped onto the levee, waving and craning his neck as he shouted urgently at the ferry landing.

“Who’s that?”

“Hu the Fourth, the one who’s supposed to greet the bride.”

“Who?”

“Hu the Fourth, Tight-Lipped Hu.”

“The one from Oil Shop Lane?”

“Who else?”

“Greeting the bride for his son?”

“Eleven, that asshole!”

“Who?”

“Hu’s son.”

“What’s he shouting?”

“Who knows?”

“Ah—”

The madman on the bamboo raft had by then caught up with the black-sailed boat. He threw down his bamboo pole as his swarthy figure leaped onto the other boat’s bow, where he raised his cleaver and chopped down the mast with two or three whacks. The sails came crashing down. The little boat was now whirling round and round in the shiny, foaming water beneath the stone embankment. It was like a masked actor playing the God of Happiness during the Spring Festival, stumbling and reeling around the stage as cymbals crashed and drums thudded intoxicatingly, with no thoughts for anything but his dancing.

Still holding the cleaver, the man stomped on the sails and then leaped to the stern.

“Ah—”

On both sides of the river bend, everyone—the waiting passengers, the man greeting the bride, more than a hundred people, male and female—all shouted at once.

A white wave sneaked up quietly and crashed into the boat. In the blink of an eye, the boat and its people broke free and headed downstream in the rapid current of the rock-strewn river, like a kite with a broken string.

“A family of four!”

It was a long time before the horse-faced fellow spat out the words. The white-haired porter squatting next to him looked up and blinked at the sun.

“Who?”

“A family of four! What a calamity!”

“What?”

“I just told you!”

“Why?”

“Who knows?”

“A family of four, did you say?”

Frowning, the horse-faced fellow stood up, stuck the pipe into his waistband, and spat.

“The boat’s ready to leave. It’s ready.”

“The bride’s come out.”

Little Seven turned to see the grinning ferryman walk out of the inn, his back bent, followed by the man in sapphire blue. They came down to the landing as Xie the matchmaker led a group of bridesmaids, who were leading the flowerlike bride, out of the inn. On the other side of the river, the greeter lit off strings of fire-crackers—*pi-pi pa-pa*.

“Ah-choo!”

Standing all alone on the landing, Little Seven stared blankly at the shining river in the sunlight. Then, for some reason, he was overcome by sadness. He bent down to pick up his worn shoes and put them on before parting the reed blossoms by the river and slipping away on his northbound upstream journey, singing a sad ditty as he walked along:

Little Seven Zhu
 At twenty-eight
 Has no wife
 Holding a pillow
 As his woman—

Yearning

A rowboat splashed its way through clusters of lotus leaves. It was the ninth month; the sky was clear blue, and so was the water in the pond.

Yanniang sat up front working the oars, lotus seed pods filling the pouch fashioned out of her blouse.

“Hey, you!”

With a stern look on her face, she tossed a large seed pod toward the man on the bank. Looking up, he reached out and effortlessly caught it. He frowned and said:

“Our little ancestor’s asleep again.”

“Wake him up.”

“What?”

“He won’t be able to sleep tonight, which means we won’t either.”

He smiled and pinched the seed pod open, then squeezed out twenty seeds, popping one into his mouth. As he chewed, he thought of something that made him smile.

“What are you smiling about?”

He just shook his head and sat beneath a willow tree by the pond to cool off, their son in his arms. The month-old pink-faced

baby was wrapped in a little satin blanket, fast asleep in his father's arms. Such a big man holding such a tiny baby! Yanniang couldn't help but laugh at the sight.

"Now what are *you* laughing at?"

"Nothing."

"I know what you're thinking even if you won't tell me. Last night—"

Yanniang blushed as a warm current flooded her heart. It was dusk, and the big pond on the village outskirts was still, not a person in sight, the only sound the *ka-la-la* creaks of the watermill next to the pond.

"Hey, you, go home, it's getting late."

"I'll wait for you."

"You—aren't you going to go tell my mother?"

"You go! My mother-in-law doesn't like me."

"But you're a terrific son-in-law."

"Yow—"

"What's wrong?"

"A sparrow shit on my head!"

The shout rang out under the clear sky. Yanniang laughed aloud as she turned the rowboat around and rowed noisily into a green patch. Abruptly she turned her head back, forcing herself not to laugh, and took a floral kerchief out from under her arm. She tied it into two knots and tossed it across the pond.

"Wipe your face."

The young couple was on their way home after a visit to her family. The sun was about to set, and the sky was filled with homeward-bound crows whose shrill caws set up a heartrending din in the clear blue sky. Carrying a bundle over her arm, Yanniang walked quietly beside him, enjoying indescribable peace and happiness.

The tall man was walking ahead of her, holding the baby in his arms, frequently patting the little blanket as he looked up at the sky. She wondered what he was thinking.

She was, she recalled, a girl of sixteen when she first saw him, walking by the pond outside her family's house, his shirt unbuttoned as he playfully slung a blue cloth bundle over his shoulder. It was the third month. The willow grove by the pond was in bloom; the road was covered with willow floss, which soared in the wind like snowflakes that brushed his face and stuck to his clothes. Holding onto the gate, Yanniang was so enraptured she kept staring at his retreating back. There was talk that he'd been an infamous tough in town. His mother, Granny Lu, was nearly fifty when he was born, the only boy in the three-brother family. He'd been a smart, gutsy kid. During a temple festival one year, people said, he'd had too much to drink on the night they greeted the deity and rounded up four or five local toughs to storm Great Blessings Lane. They'd turned the place upside down, creating such terrible havoc that he'd had to hide out for a year. He returned a new man, one who helped out in his mother's embroidery shop and stopped drinking altogether. So his aunt had made a match for him with Yanniang, a distant cousin, when he was twenty-six. Now they were returning from a visit to her family. Yanniang walked with contentment beside her husband. As she reflected on the past, she looked up and stole a glance at the handsome profile of his raised face. He'd become a father, but still looked somewhat childish. A while back, without telling her, he'd grown a moustache of sorts—a few dozen black whiskers—which made him look like a warlord's footman.

“Hey, you!”

“Yes?”

“You haven't said a word. Is there something on your mind?”

“What? No, nothing.”

“When we get home, how about shaving off that moustache?”

“I want to keep it.”

“All right.”

Yanniang sighed. He turned to look at her, then his eyes lit up as he smiled and patted the baby. As her face reddened, Yanniang lowered her head and quietly shifted her bundle to the other arm while moving closer to him. They continued their journey in silence. It was around five o'clock when they crossed the river and reached their home as chimney smoke rose up all around, filling the sunset.

Granny Lu moved a small millstone out to the roadside, where she sat down to grind rice. The millstone, which was the size of a bucket, turned round and round in her hands. Wearing a frown, she kept looking up the street as she freed one hand to rub the varicose veins on her calf. She looked at her son with thoughtful eyes.

“You're back.”

“Are your legs hurting again, Mother?”

“That man came looking for you again. He's been waiting all afternoon at the furniture shop across the street.”

He handed the baby to Yanniang and blinked as he slowly sat down beside his mother on the threshold. Under the setting sun, the street was deserted except for the little bastards from Great Blessings Lane who'd come out to raise hell. Five or six of them, about twelve years old and barefoot, were shouting and jumping on the hot flagstone street as they stormed around the corner. Granny Lu looked at them and shook her head before putting down her work to take the baby. She unwrapped the blanket and folded it twice to lay across his belly.

“He's still sleeping. Take him inside to nurse him.”

Taking the baby, Yanniang sighed and glanced at mother and son before turning and going inside. After nursing the baby, she moved a small bamboo bed over by the door for the baby to catch a breeze.

“What did your mother say to you?”

“My second sister needs me to help out for a couple of days.”

“Are you going to leave right away?”

“That’s what Mother wants.”

With a smile, he got up from the threshold and gently rocked the bamboo bed as he looked down at the baby.

“Our little ancestor. Sleeps all day. Sleep and eat, eat and sleep.”

“Have something to eat before you go.”

“No.”

Yanniang walked under the eaves to stare out at the street. She felt a pang of sadness and turned quietly to look at her husband before walking over to stand in front of him. She looked up and patted her chest.

“I won’t feel right if you leave on an empty stomach.”

“All right, I’ll eat something before I go.”

Yanniang nodded and her frown was replaced by a smile. Leaving the baby by the door, she followed him across the threshold into the dark, unlit front room that served as the shop. He spun around, took her by the hand, and ducked behind the door. They stood in the dark for a long while in each other’s arms.

“Yanniang.”

“Yes?”

“Be careful at night when I’m away.”

It was getting late. Yanniang held onto the doorframe and stuck her head out to look at the darkening sky. A yellow crescent moon shone down on the long, bleak flagstone street. The stores on both sides of the street were already closed; light streamed out from gaps in the doorways. The group of toughs from Great Blessings Lane, who’d caused such havoc earlier that afternoon, had moved on to somewhere else. The shuffling of worn shoes echoed in the desert-

ed street; someone was shambling along, singing and crying as if drunk. Then it was quiet again. A few young women sitting in doorways with their children were cooling themselves with rush fans. Houses, high and low, cast undulating shadows on the street.

Yanniang breathed in some fresh air as she removed her headband to shake loose her hair and let it fall across her shoulders. She was about to close up shop and return to her room when she looked up and spotted a lone figure squatting on the threshold of the little War God Temple across the street, in the shade of a banyan tree. The dark figure was curled up with his head on his arms, motionless. A vagrant! Two nights before, Yanniang had come out to sit by the door after waking from a dream and had trouble going back to sleep. In the dark foggy night, she saw the man sleeping by the temple door, using his black oilcloth bundle as a pillow. Inside the temple were a small altar and two bright red Buddha lamps. Now she was reminded of that scene. She saw the man grab his bundle and look up, staring at her with eyes that pierced the moonlight. Yanniang froze. Shivering twice, she spun around and closed the shop door behind her. On the small bamboo bed, the baby was fast asleep with a smile on his pink face.

From the next room came the sound of her mother-in-law coughing.

“Having trouble sleeping again, Mother?”

“Your husband’s not home. So leave a lamp on and go to bed.”

Yanniang woke from a dream in the middle of the night. As she felt her chest, she heard a knock at the door. Her mother-in-law was calling from outside:

“Yanniang! Yanniang!”

It took her a while to get her bearings. A dim light was burning in her room. The moon outside the window indicated that it was the third watch. She paled when she looked at the baby.

Quickly sitting up, she smoothed her clothes, turned up the lamp by her bed, and took it along to open the door.

“Mother!”

Her mother-in-law stuck her gray head into the room.

“What’s wrong with the baby, crying in the middle of the night like that?”

“I was sound asleep and didn’t hear a thing.”

The old woman took the lamp and shone it on the bamboo bed as she held onto the bed with her other hand.

“See, he’s cried so hard his face has turned white.”

“He must be hungry.”

Yanniang picked up the baby, kissed his tiny face, and held him in her arms before sitting on the bed and unbuttoning her blouse under the lamplight. Her mother-in-law sighed and shook her head. She looked at her daughter-in-law as she brought over a stool to sit by the bed, patting her own chest. The two women watched the baby suck. It was quiet outside at this time of night, except for the waterwheel creaking in the field behind the house two blocks away—*ka-la-la ka-la-la*.

“Mother!”

The old woman, who was dozing off, her gray head lolling to the side, looked up and opened her eyes when she heard her daughter-in-law call her.

“Eh?”

“The baby isn’t eating. He’s crying again.”

“Crying again?”

“He was fine earlier in the day.”

As her eyes reddened, Yanniang looked up and fixed her eyes on her mother-in-law.

The old woman took the baby from Yanniang and, gently prying open one of his eyes with two bony fingers, blew a puff of air in it. She looked inside.

“He’s been frightened.”

“But he’s been inside all night.”

“When a baby cries at night, it’s mostly because he was frightened during the day and his soul has strayed.”

“But nothing like that happened at my mother’s place today.”

“See there, he’s not sick. But he’s cried so hard he can hardly breathe.”

The old woman glanced at her daughter-in-law and shook her head as she looked at the baby under the light, before putting him back into his bamboo bed. Then she turned and produced a small knife from somewhere, which she quietly tucked under the baby’s pillow.

“Don’t be afraid, don’t be afraid.” As she said that, she opened a drawer in a bedside dresser and took out two pieces of toilet paper. She lit the paper with the lamp and waved it near the baby’s face. With a sneeze, he started to wail.

“All right, everything’s fine now.”

“Mother, what’s happening?”

“His soul has returned.”

“Whose?”

“The baby’s.”

“What are you saying, Mother?”

“Everything’s fine now.”

“I’m still afraid.”

“Everything’s fine now. Go back to sleep.”

The field was abloom with rape.

Yanniang dreamed that she was running barefoot in the golden field of rape. She was seven or eight years old, bright red headbands dangling from her braids. Suddenly a thunderclap sounded in the clear blue sky and it began to hail. The sky was filled with magpies circling the tips of trees. The sight astounded Yanniang. Then a

gusty wind began to blow over the row of lush green poplars in the field, crashing like pounding waves—*gua-la-la gua-la-la*.

Somewhere far away a baby was crying in the dark.

Yanniang pushed open her mother-in-law's room door in the dark.

"Mother, wake up."

The old woman mumbled as she climbed out of bed and groped noisily in the dark until the lamp by her bed lit up. The two women looked at each other across the threshold. Holding the door with one hand, Yanniang stared at her mother-in-law, patting her chest with the other. The old woman looked at her through her gray hair before squinting and taking up the lamp, then walking into the front room, where she shone the light around. The shadowy house was quiet; two longevity oil lamps still burned bright in the alcove.

"Is the baby crying again?"

"He's crying his eyes out, and it breaks my heart."

"What's wrong?"

"He's been crying all night."

Yanniang followed her mother-in-law to the door, where she stopped abruptly and said:

"Mother!"

"Yes?"

"I had a bizarre dream."

The old woman turned back, shone the lamp on her daughter-in-law's face, and stared at her.

"Your husband's away, so don't let your imagination run wild."

When they walked into the room, the bedside kerosene lamp was still bright, filling the room with a desolate happiness. Supporting herself on Yanniang's shoulder, the old woman bent down to look at the baby in the bamboo bed. Outside, the moon was nowhere to be seen in the foggy darkness. It was the fourth watch.

“Your husband’s not home. A young woman shouldn’t go to bed with the window open!” With a shake of her head and a sigh, the old woman blew out the lamp she was holding and took the lamp by Yanniang’s bedside over to shine outside the window. People in the dozen or so houses in the back alley were fast asleep. Someone from next door let out a long, deep, dreamy sigh.

“The sun will be up soon.”

The old woman stuck her gray head out the window and looked around. Then she gently closed the window and returned to the bamboo bed, where she pried open the baby’s eyes under the light and looked again.

“Look! The little thing isn’t sick or anything. But he’s been crying so hard he can’t catch his breath. He’s struggling for air. His face is turning yellow.”

“He was all right during the day.”

“Is he hungry?”

“I tried to nurse him, but he wouldn’t let me. He just kept crying.”

“He must be frightened.”

The old woman put down the lamp and, with her hands on her knees, eased herself down by the bed. For a while she just sat there, a frown on her bowed head as she scratched her calves. One dark night a few summers earlier, before Yanniang was married into their family, the old woman had gone to the outhouse and tripped and fallen. She was laid up in bed for nearly a month before she could get up and walk around. Each day, after lunch, she’d sit on a stool under the eaves, dozing in the blazing sunlight, frequently rubbing her calves throughout the afternoon.

“Mother, do your legs hurt again? Why don’t you go back to bed?”

“What?”

“The sun will be up soon.”

“Is the baby still crying?”

“Never mind, let him cry.”

The old woman looked up.

“Yanniang, I want you to think real hard. Has the baby seen any strangers over the past couple of days?”

“Why?”

“The baby’s constitution is weak, so when he’s frightened by a stranger he’ll cry all night.”

“Strangers? I don’t think so.”

“Try harder.”

“This evening, when I took him out to sit by the door, I saw a group of toughs yelling and shouting something. Then there was a blind fortune teller—oh, now I remember. This afternoon, on my way back from my parents’ house, I was carrying the baby down the street when I saw a family preparing for a funeral. The coffin was right in front of the shop door. Neighbors on both sides had red paper pasted on their doors—”

“That’s it. He must have come in contact with something unclean.”

With a nod of her head, the old woman stood up and walked out of the room with a lamp. She returned with a blackened iron wok and two stacks of spirit money. Squatting down by the door, she began burning the money. When the fire was glowing bright red in the wok, she walked out to wash her hands in the front room, where she lit three joss sticks before the Buddha. Then she came back and circled the incense around the baby’s bamboo bed while reciting an incantation to summon the infant’s wayward soul. Heaven and earth. Three souls meet and return together. Seven spirits meet and return together. Don’t take a sip of water from the Yellow Spring. Bring back souls from ten thousand *li*. Heaven and earth. Three souls meet and return together.

“Little baby, come home!” the old woman shouted as she circled the incense around the baby’s face twice more before flinging

the incense sticks toward the door. Yanniang watched dully for a while by the window, then was reminded of something.

“Mother!”

“What?”

“That man!”

“Who?”

“The wanderer. The bare-chested man, carrying a bundle, with eyes like a madman.”

The old woman froze for a moment, then stuck the incense sticks in a crack in the door. It was a while before she finally turned to fix a thoughtful gaze on Yanniang.

“Did you see him?”

“Over the past two nights, he’s been squatting by the door of the God of War Temple and watching our house.”

“The baby—did he see him too?”

“I don’t know.”

“Evil karma.”

“Mother—”

“He’s crazy, ignore him.”

“The baby—”

“The enemy has called in the debt.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about, Mother.”

The woman’s aged face paled as she walked over to open the window. She looked around, then her knees wobbled, and she returned to the bedside, where she slowly sat down.

“Your husband did an evil thing when he was eighteen or nineteen. On the night of the nineteenth day of the sixth month, he got together with a group of toughs and caused the death of a young woman—I sent him to his sister’s house tonight.”

“That madman—”

“The grieved.”

Her mother-in-law blinked and looked toward the window. She fell silent for a long moment before bending down to pick up

a hair clip and turn up the light in the lamp by the bed. Patting the bed, she said:

“Yanniang, sit down. Let me tell you a story.”

It was barely dawn when the two women walked out, one in front of the other.

With a small bundle over her arm, the old woman opened the shop door. She raised her hand to gather her frazzled gray hair as she looked out. A cool morning wind echoed on the long, cold, green flagstone street.

“Mother!”

“What?”

“That madman, he’s squatting by the temple door—”

“Ignore him.”

Yanniang shuddered. She turned and went inside for a blanket to wrap around the baby. Hugging him close, she followed her mother-in-law out the door. All the shops were closed; not a soul was stirring at this time of day. Across the street, beneath the banyan tree, a stack of charred paper was blown out of a beat-up incense burner by the temple door and eddied down the middle of the street with a whistle. The two women, one in front, one behind, stepped outside and slowly ambled along South Market Street toward Great Blessings Lane. Yanniang looked up to see the dull outline of a crescent moon slanting westward.

With her head down, as the old woman walked along she took handfuls of rice out of her bundle and sprinkled it on the street.

“Little one, come back.”

“The little one is back.”

On this early morning, the two women, one calling and the other answering, walked by one shop after another on South Market Street until they arrived at the corner of Great Blessings Lane, where the old woman stopped and sprinkled a handful of rice

around her. It was nearly daybreak, the fifth watch, and the sky was shrouded in a dim grayish blue. The old woman caught her breath and, holding onto Yanniang, squatted down to rub her calves. After resting awhile, she reached into her bundle and took out two stacks of spirit money, which she burned at the three-way intersection.

Heaven.

Earth.

“The baby’s not crying anymore.”

Yanniang held the baby tightly and squatted down by her mother-in-law. The two women leaned against each other, burning paper by the intersection for a while. When it had nearly burned out, Yanniang shivered. Moving closer to her mother-in-law, she took out a hair clip and gently stirred up the sizzling cinders. Her mother-in-law’s head jerked up.

“Yanniang!”

“Yes?”

“Never stir up burned spirit money, or it won’t be received in the underworld.”

Yanniang froze, then turned to look back at Great Blessings Lane. Something flickered before her eyes.

“Mother!”

“Don’t turn around.”

“Someone—”

“Let’s go home. The sun’s almost up.”

It was dawn by the time they reached home. After the exhausting night, the old woman could hold out no longer and went straight to her room. Yanniang sat by her bed and unbuttoned her blouse to nurse the baby.

In the neighboring house, someone was snoring—*bu-lu bu-lu*—sounding like muffled thunderclaps. Yanniang stared at the baby in her arms, whose small round mouth sucked in one mouthful of milk

after another. Reminded of something, she looked up to see a New Year's picture that had been pasted on the door in hopes that she'd produce a fair, plump little baby in the spring; her mother-in-law had bought the picture the year before, just after Yanniang was married into the family. In the painting a large-headed, fleshy-eared, laughing baby boy in a red embroidered vest held a red thread tied to a rainbow-colored carp. Yanniang had been married for more than a year. A red curtain still hung over the large bed; in the lamp-light it lent the room a desolate happiness.

She missed him, but she was also unhappy with him.

Yanniang sighed as she gently laid the baby in the bamboo bed and tucked the blanket around him. Watching him sleep soundly, she felt her eyelids grow heavy; leaning against the bed frame, she dozed off. She didn't know how much time had passed when she heard a loud pop from the lamp that annihilated the silent space between heaven and earth.

The footsteps of the man echoed down the long, deserted street outside, his shoes making the flagstones sing out on this quiet morning. Yanniang woke from a dream and realized she was drenched in cold sweat when she touched her chest. Finally composing herself after a while, she blew out the bedside lamp and opened the window. It was radiantly sunny outside! She sat down by the bed to watch over the baby, rocking the bamboo bed while softly reciting:

Heaven is anxious
 Earth is anxious too
 We have a baby who likes to cry at night
 Gentlemen who pass by, please recite this
 three times
 So the baby will sleep peacefully till bright
 daylight—

Flowers Rain from the Sky

It was the nineteenth day of the sixth month.

The ferry landing was suffused with a religious aura. It was barely nine in the morning. The sky was clear blue, the river white and vast. Men and women from all over, carrying baskets of incense and candles or shouldering food boxes, crowded the landing. On such a day of great joy, when people met, were they acquaintances or strangers, they smiled and said, "Blessings." Someone had collected enough money to put up two mat tents and fill them with ten tables and dozens of benches. An idler was given a brass gong to strike by the tent entrances to summon passersby. "Hey there—come in and rest a bit." As soon as the pilgrims entered the tents, they were handed a bowl of hot tea. After finishing their tea and resting their feet, they clasped their hands and expressed their gratitude, "Blessings," then went outside to wait for the ferry. A long red paper list was posted by the tent to announce the names of believers who had given money for tea. Those at the top of the list were all from the Cao family, the wealthiest in Jiling town.

Yanniang accompanied her mother-in-law to the landing.

"Mother, take a rest."

Yanniang patted her waist and sighed. She mopped her sweaty face as she untied the floral pouch and held the baby in her arms.

As soon as the two women sat down, a man in sapphire blue, clearly the person in charge, wiped his hands, smiled, and brought over two big bowls of hot tea.

“Blessings, Ma’am.”

“Blessings to you too.”

“Where are you from?”

“The Guo village, west of the river.”

“That’s far. You must have left early in the morning.”

“Yes. We came early to visit some old neighbors.”

“Oh, so you used to live in town?”

“Yes indeed.”

It was a bright day out there. On the river, the shiny water dazzled with expanding ripples. The ferryman, plying his long bamboo pole, delivered boatful after boatful of incense-burning pilgrims to the town across the river. The tinkling waters of the river—*ning-ning ding-ding*—flowed across the stacked stones of the embankment in this sixth month.

After drinking half a bowl of tea, Yanniang picked up the baby and gave him a kiss before holding him against her chest. She turned sideways and unbuttoned her blouse to nurse the baby. It was early summer, and sweat beaded the infant’s forehead. “It’s getting hot!” Yanniang glanced at her mother-in-law as she unbuttoned the baby’s collar, then took a dark green handkerchief from under her arm to fan his face. A wind blew over the river, churning up the shiny white bristle grass at the edges. Bloody specks flew over the ferry landing to the loud *pi-pi pa-pa* of firecrackers.

“The ferry’s about to cross the river.”

Someone stuck his head into the tent. Yanniang buttoned her blouse and stood up to let her mother-in-law tie the baby on her back. She blushed as she tidied her clothes. The old woman took a sip of tea to rinse her mouth before picking up her basket of incense, candles, and paper money and thanking the man in charge.

“Blessings.”

The two women walked single file out of the tent into the sunlight.

A dozen or so people were waiting to cross the river. The shirtless ferryman, his skin blackened by the sun, squatted at the stern, smoking and greeting the passengers with a smile.

“Make way for the indisposed young lady, please.”

Yanniang felt her face burn as she held onto her mother-in-law and stepped on the gangplank. Sitting in the bow was a plump woman in her forties, dressed all in bright red, with an eight- or nine-year-old girl in her arms. As soon as the woman in red saw Yanniang, she pulled her over to sit by her and whispered:

“How far along are you?”

“Seven months.”

“It looks more like eight months.” The woman in red reached out to touch her. “Today is the bodhisattva’s birthday. You should think happy thoughts and pray for a plump little baby girl.”

“The boat’s leaving,” the ferryman shouted as he pushed his bamboo pole against the riverbank and swung the boat out toward the middle of the river.

“I say, Fourth Mama Luo, you ought to have a baby yourself before the year is out.”

“Ferryman, I don’t need your curses.”

“Today’s an auspicious day, so don’t take offense.”

“Offense at what?”

“Fetus offense.”

The five or six male passengers winked at each other and started to giggle.

The ferryman looked up and rolled his eyes. With a long face he stared blankly at the dazzling sun above the embankment across the river. He slowly pushed the boat out to the middle of the river with his bamboo pole. The vast white water roared—*shua-la-la*

shua-la-la—as something flickered upstream to the north. Then a boat with a shiny black sail flew down with the current. The ferryman looked at the boat and said abruptly:

“The times sure have changed—”

“Old Xu, there you go again,” a male passenger said with a smile.

Stopped short, the ferryman fell silent.

“Go ahead, Old Xu. I won’t interrupt you again.”

“The times sure have changed. Prostitutes and madams have started to worship the Guanyin Bodhisattva, and with such piety. Take this year, for example. The bodhisattva’s birthday was more lavish than in the past. The girls in Great Blessings Lane took a grand vow and donated the money they earned with their bodies to make new clothes for the Buddha. They used nothing but gold and silver threads, red silk, brocade, and satin, with great piety and reverence. Then they picked an auspicious date to dress the bodhisattva. That day, the Guanyin Temple was bustling with action and excitement, lively and festive. All seventy or eighty girls got up earlier than usual. The lovely Guanyin Bodhisattva didn’t so much as raise her eyelids as she sat on the gilded altar. Men weren’t allowed a peep at the statue, which was shielded from view by two layers of red silk curtains. The temple supervisor had already chosen two twelve-year-old virgins born in the year of the dragon. After bathing and fasting, they changed into clean, simple clothes. At the auspicious moment, bells were rung and wooden clappers were struck—*ding-ding dang-dang*—what a festive religious scene. The two virgins were sent behind the red silk curtains to cleanse the bodhisattva and dress her in the new clothes. Good old Guanyin now became a bride. At that moment, the temple hall came alive with the bobbing heads of incense-burning and worshipping girls from Great Blessings Lane—”

“Were you there, Old Xu?”

“The place was packed with gawking men. As if crowding around the devil’s gate, they just about tore down the temple door.”

The matron Luo frowned and interrupted with a snicker.

Yanniang turned to see the ferry nearing the dock.

The matron Luo picked up her floral bundle and gave Yanniang a hug. Then she stood up, untied a red handkerchief, and took out a copper coin, which she tossed onto the deck. “Blessings,” she said as she raised her head to look the male passengers in the eye. Then she smoothed her clothes and took the hand of the little girl beside her.

Yanniang watched as mother and daughter daintily walked up the riverbank without looking back.

“Mother, who’s that matron Luo? I’ve never seen her before.”

Her mother-in-law shook her head, then gathered her gray hair and mopped her sweaty brow before picking up her basket of incense and candles. The ferryman overheard her and giggled as he bent down to pick the coin up off the deck.

“That matron Luo? She’s the famous Fourth Mama Luo of Great Blessings Lane. The Madam Luo, Broken Wheel Luo.”

“Who?”

“A madam!”

“Ah!”

“Can’t tell, right?”

“With her soft, creamy skin, she looks like a woman of good fortune.”

“She’s well into her fifties.”

“Doesn’t look like it.”

“Fourth Mama Luo has been in the flesh trade ever since Great Blessings Lane opened for business.”

“The little girl—”

“Which one?”

“The one by her side, the eight- or nine-year-old.”

“She bought her.”

Yanniang was shocked. Fourth Mama Luo, hiking her skirt and holding the little girl’s hand, had already walked up onto the stone embankment. In a flash, they vanished into the crowd on the street. Yanniang shivered twice as she put the baby on her back. It took her a moment to steady herself before taking her mother-in-law’s arm to leave the boat. The old woman threw down a coin and turned to thank the stooped ferryman, who grinned. “Blessings.”

“Blessings to you too, ma’am. Watch your step.”

Holding onto each other, the two women carefully walked up onto the stone levee.

What a beautiful June day! Dazzling sunlight greeted them like a bucket of ice water—*bua-la-la*—splashing into their faces. Yanniang tightened the knot on her bundle and regained her composure as she stood at the edge of the town, squinting to look down South Market Street, which glistened in the bright, flowing sunlight. Dusty gray-tiled houses on both sides of the street crowded up against one another. They all looked unfamiliar, because it had been six months since she last came to burn incense. New Spring Festival couplets had been pasted on every door, which seemed to paint red stripes all over the decrepit gray town. Here and there, women carried smoke-blackened sacrificial tables out into the sun and began to burn incense outside their shops. Today was the birthday of Guanyin, who would be carried around town to hold an inspection. If she was pleased, she’d bless the families of Jiling with an abundant and peaceful year. Raging red fires burned in black iron woks beneath eaves, incinerating golden spirit money. The streets were packed with people who had come early from all over to watch the festival of greeting the deity. Suddenly, from the far end of Great Blessings Lane stormed a group of barefoot, teenage toughs, jumping and shouting as they lit firecrackers along the way. The onlookers crowded

into one another, ducking, hiding, laughing, and cursing all at the same time. A fat woman dressed in red satin, half her face rouged, quietly emerged from a riverside bakery. She waddled out onto the street, picked up a pair of fire tongs, and pointed them at the toughs as she railed:

“Fuck you! You turtle-spawn sons of whores!”

“What are you doing on such a hot day? Come back here!”

Her husband, carrying two baskets of incense, candles, gold spirit money, and cooked chicken and goose, stepped across the threshold to follow her with his eyes.

“Do you know what day this is? Wailing like ghosts and crying like gods, sending chickens flying and dogs running, getting me so upset—”

“What does that have to do with you? Let it go, just let it go.”

“All right, then, let’s go.”

“Go where?”

“To the temple.”

“Look at your face!”

A splashing sound rose from the riverbank. Yanniang turned to watch the ferryman, still grinning, pole his boat with two passengers out from the landing in the blinding light reflected by the river. On the other side of the vast white water, another group of passengers was waiting at the landing. Granny Lu looped her arm through the handle of her basket, with its incense and candles, thumped her hip, and walked into town, followed by her daughter-in-law.

“Mother!”

“Yes?”

“The baby’s fallen asleep on my back.”

“Let him sleep.”

“He sleeps all day.”

“You’re lucky he can sleep.”

“Mother!”

“Yes?”

“I had a bizarre dream last night.”

“What about?”

“I dreamed that the one in my belly was taken away right after birth—”

“Your husband’s out on a boat somewhere. Since he’s not home, keep your mind free of wild thoughts.”

Yanniang blushed and fell silent, quietly following her mother-in-law past a dozen or so shops.

By Heavenly Benevolence Pharmacy, a woman in her thirties, carrying two stacks of gold spirit money, stuck her head out from under the eaves to look around listlessly. Her eyes suddenly lit up; she put down the paper money and darted out under the blazing sun into the street, where she reached out a bony hand to pull the old woman quietly over to her shop. Then she turned to wave at Yanniang and smiled as she dragged over a long bench.

“Granny Lu, it’s been at least half a year since I last saw you.”

“Sister Ji?”

“Yes.”

“Blessings, blessings.”

“Blessings to you too, Granny.”

After bringing out two cups of hot tea, Sister Ji wiped her hands and squatted down in the sun to slip gold paper into the iron wok, one sheet at a time. She chatted with the old woman as she did so.

“Does the baby still cry?”

“He’s been pretty good since we moved to West River.”

“When children cry at night, that means they’re frightened.”

“Yes, indeed.”

“After all these years, the old shop in town is mired in overpowering *yin*.”

“Definitely.”

“But everything is fine, now that you’ve moved.”

“Yes, he’s been very good.”

“Where’s Baolin? Why didn’t he come to burn incense with his wife?”

“He bought a black-sailed boat to sell silk.”

The old woman rubbed her calves, drank some tea, then picked up her basket and tried to stand up.

“What’s the hurry, Granny? Sit a while. The bodhisattva will be out at eleven to make a turn around town. It’ll be nearly one o’clock when she returns to her temple. It’s still early.”

“It’s been so lively this year.”

“She’s going to circle the town one more time tonight. It’ll be even livelier then.”

Sister Ji slowly finished burning the stacks of money under the blazing sun. Then she stood up, thumped her hip, sighed, and picked up a bunch of joss sticks to bow with toward the eaves. She went into the shop and emerged a while later with a plate of melon seeds. With a smile, she sat down by Yanniang and cast a sideways glance at her belly.

“Will the baby be here soon?”

“Not quite yet.”

“You’re so lucky!”

“Sister Ji, it’s time for you to have one too.”

“I wasn’t born with that sort of good fortune.”

The three women sat on the bench outside Heavenly Benevolence Pharmacy, looking at the street. A sunlight-drenched street.

The sun was now overhead; it was eleven o’clock. Tired from sitting with the baby on her back, Yanniang quietly untied the floral wrapping and held the baby in her arms as she unbuttoned her blouse to nurse him. Strings of large sun-dried red peppers hung from the eaves of a shop across the street. The bustle seemed to have quieted down suddenly; the group of toughs had shouted their

way to somewhere else. Yanniang looked up and saw an old woman in her sixties or seventies, a red bundle on her bent back, shuffling across the street, followed by a happy, jumping, and stumbling idiot. Yanniang was reminded of something, but by then the fluffy white-haired head had disappeared in the crowd. The women on the street were burning incense, sending sandalwood smoke up to obscure the undulating eaves. Under the bright sun, red tongues of fire flickered in iron woks along the street. It was nearly noon. The waterwheel was still creaking in the field two blocks away—*ka-la-la ka-la-la*.

Distant sounds of firecrackers echoed from the far end of the street.

Sister Ji froze for a moment before setting the plate of melon seeds on the sacrificial table and shuffled her slippered feet noisily out from under the eaves. Women burning spirit money up and down the street craned their necks and squinted in the bright sunlight toward the middle of the street. A gang of toughs ran out from under the solitary chinaberry tree at the corner of Great Blessings Lane beyond the county granary. Dressed only in shorts, they stormed around like a pack of wolves or dogs, tossing lit firecrackers at shops along the street as they shouted:

“Greet Matron Guanyin! Greet Matron Guanyin!”

The old woman blinked at the sun overhead, put down her tea, and stood up.

“Let’s move along.”

Yanniang nodded as she thumped her hip and put the baby on her back. The old woman helped her tighten the wrap, then picked up her basket and turned to thank Sister Ji:

“Blessings.”

The two of them stepped out onto the noisy street and walked into the center of town. The corner of Great Blessings Lane was already packed with women who had come to watch the greeting of the deity.

Bobbing heads of black wherever you looked! The lane was misty with smoke and filled with the clamor of exploding firecrackers and people's shouts and shrieks.

"Granny Lu, blessings."

From a teahouse across the street, out walked a pretty woman in her forties, who splashed a basin of water on the street. At the sight of the old woman, she walked over with a smile and tugged at her sleeve. Granny Lu turned around, momentarily lost.

"Sister Zhu, blessings, blessings to you."

"Look at those men, Granny! They seem possessed by demons as soon as this bodhisattva business starts. And there's no end to it."

"Yes, indeed."

"I haven't seen you for half a year at least."

"My little grandson wouldn't stop crying at night. He's fine now, so I've brought him out to kowtow to the bodhisattva."

Yanniang looked into the teahouse, which was filled with men from the valley, dozens of pairs of bright eyes glued to the opposite corner of Great Blessings Lane. Yanniang felt her face burn as she followed her mother-in-law down the street. When she turned around, she saw the Zhu woman under the eaves, a basin in her arms, patting her belly with a tender, bright smile:

"Congratulations, little sister."

The two women walked past a dozen shops along South Market Street before turning into dark, damp Crown Prince Lane.

The sound of firecrackers on the street immediately faded into the distance. The lane, with its forty or fifty poor families, was quiet at this time of the day. A few women came out of their doorways to stand beneath their low eaves and bow to the sky, sticking burning joss sticks into the cracks in the wall. Light smoke began to curl skyward, permeating the street. A middle-aged man with a long face, red from drinking, came out of his house and stood by the door, where he stared blankly at a couple of girls playing hopscotch in the

middle of the lane. The bright red bands on the tips of their braids swung back and forth. He watched for a long while before taking a small flask from inside his shirt and drinking from it. When he saw the old woman and her daughter-in-law approach, he stared at Yan-niang, cracked a smile to reveal yellow teeth, and nodded.

“Blessings, little sister.”

The old woman looked around to find a small, run-down nunnery at the foot of a scholar tree. She stood outside and sighed before pushing open the creaking door. Crisp, clear, *kong-kong-kong* hollow sounds of a wooden clapper emerged from the front room. In the dim light before a small alcove knelt a middle-aged woman who didn't raise her head, even though she'd heard someone cross the threshold and enter the nunnery. She was dressed all in black, with a white cotton flower at her temple. The old woman, lost in thought, sighed as she quietly moved two bristle-grass cushions over to sit with her daughter-in-law. The old woman rubbed and massaged her calves for a while as she stared at the woman on the rush mat, who, with her head lowered, continued to strike the dark, cold wooden clapper in front of her. The yard was quiet, not a human sound to be heard. A long time passed before the old woman sighed again, patted her daughter-in-law, and pushed herself up. The woman beneath the Buddha lamp suddenly looked up at the old woman with teary eyes.

“Granny Lu!”

“Yes?”

“I hear there's a Granny Meng on her way to the nether world. After you drink her soup you'll forget everything in this world.”

“Sister Qin, you're still young. Please take care of yourself.”

The old woman picked up her basket, but her knees gave out. Leaning against her daughter-in-law, she took a deep breath before slowly crossing the threshold and closing the door behind her.

“Mother, that lady, who was she?”

“A member of the Qin family.”

“I don’t remember seeing her before.”

“She used to live in Oil Mill Lane.”

“She’s quite young, pretty too.”

“Her husband died, leaving her a son to take care of. One day, a dozen or more people broke into her house and raised hell.”

“Why did they do that?”

“To catch an adulterer.”

“Who was that?”

“Her brother-in-law.”

“What happened then?”

“Both her sons were sent away and her heart died.”

“Both sons?”

“She had another later on.”

“Who was the father?”

“Heaven only knows.”

“I’ve never heard any of this.”

“It happened many years ago.”

The two women reached the corner of Crown Prince Lane, where they were greeted by turgid sunlight. A small Christian chapel stood across the street in a rose garden. The bearded foreigner, Father Yue, walked up to the belfry and struck the large bell twelve times. On the river end of North Market Street, store owners had begun setting off firecrackers to greet Guanyin.

“Mother, the bodhisattva’s going home.”

Carrying her baby on her back and holding her mother-in-law’s arm, Yanniang stood at the corner of Crown Prince Lane and squinted in the direction of the ferry landing. In an instant, the whole street seemed to be engulfed in a raging fire, accompanied by the *pi-pi pa-pa* of exploding firecrackers flying skyward.

“Greet the holy Matron!”

“Greet the holy Matron—”

Under the blazing sun, the gang of teenage toughs from Great Blessings Lane leaped into the street again, a dozen of them, each naked but for their red shorts. They scurried down the street, pushing and shoving the pilgrims under the eaves amid the clamor of shouts and howls.

At the other end of the street, six huge palanquins, each carried by eight men, suddenly emerged from the smoke of firecrackers.

The forty-eight bearers were stripped to the waist, their glistening black bodies stumbling and jumping with the palanquins. A long string of firecrackers had been set up in front of a shop at the intersection. The toughs, carrying lit sticks of incense, hopped barefoot on the baked flagstones, choking and cursing as they made their way up the street.

“Light the firecrackers! Light the firecrackers! Light the firecrackers!”

Clusters of firecrackers instantly flew into the sky with a loud *pi-pi pa-pa* that echoed up and down the deserted middle of the street. The pilgrims crowded against each other under the eaves, craning their necks and watching in a daze. Women holding joss sticks ran out from their doorways into the sunlight, permeating the street with a subtle fragrance. The palanquin bearers were intent on lowering their heads and bending their backs, stomping and stamping, humming and chanting, as if drunk, carrying Guanyin Bodhisattva into the intersection with loud chants. The noon sky was washed a shiny blue.

“Mother! Look, isn’t that Sister Ji?”

“Who?”

“Sister Ji! From Heavenly Benevolence Pharmacy.”

“Blessings!”

Holding onto her daughter-in-law, the old woman stood on her tiptoes to look out at the intersection from the corner of Crown Prince Lane. A tall, skinny figure ran out into the sunlight

from under the eaves. Holding a sheaf of joss sticks, Sister Ji stormed into the street, where her knees buckled and she fell in front of the first palanquin. The Guanyin Bodhisattva, dressed in her new red silk and brocade clothes, sat in the stumbling, heaving palanquin. She squinted, her snow-white face now reddened with rouge. In the middle of the street a seventeen- or eighteen-year-old Taoist priest, stripped of his robes to reveal a skinny white body, stood naked but for a red embroidered vest. Clearly in a trance, he walked in mincing steps, stumbling and circling the palanquin. Then he stopped abruptly and smiled, staring at the blinding white sun above through bloodshot eyes. With a frown, he raised his Seven Star sword, which glinted as he drove it into his navel. He then turned and climbed onto the first palanquin. He was sprawled against the blackened, gilded door of the palanquin, where he shuddered and panted. His face was ghostly white. A long time passed before he let out a long, sad moan and, facing the Guanyin Bodhisattva, removed the bloody sword before leaping off the chair onto the street, where he curled into a lifeless ball. The palanquins rocked spasmodically; the bearers let out a cry as they leaped, jumped, stumbled, and lurched on the street, looking both crazed and dazed. Five or six toughs ran out from under the eaves with a bottle of sorghum liquor. They sprayed mouthfuls of the liquor on the little Taoist priest's belly. Meanwhile, blood-red firecracker confetti spread in the sky like blooming flowers. Instantly, the odors of firecrackers, sandalwood incense, liquor, and sweat permeated the Jiling intersection.

Women crowded the corner of Crown Prince Lane. An older woman with dripping hair coiled on her head held a basin as she tiptoed to watch in a daze. Pinching her nose, she sneezed—ah-choo—then blurted out:

“Karmic evil.”

“Look at those men!”

“Who’s that religious master? He looks so young.”

“He’s the grandson of the Taoist priest, Master Yu.”

“Where’s Master Yu?”

“Too old.”

The middle-aged man from Crown Prince Lane clip-clopped out in his clogs, still drinking from his flask. He smiled when he heard the women.

“Master Yu? He’s dead. Went crazy last fall and jumped down a well in the middle of the night.”

“Ah-choo!”

The old woman sneezed and stood dully for a moment before letting out a cry, tossing her basin down by an old scholar tree at the corner, and running out into the middle of the street.

Out on the street, Master Yu’s grandson slowly pushed himself up and raised his eyes to look around before taking off in pursuit of the toughs. A figure in red silk flashed beneath the eaves as a young neighborhood woman ran into the sun barefoot to kneel with her joss sticks. The eight bearers of the first palanquin yelled as they arched their waists and bent their backs, slowly stomping along, carrying the bodhisattva over the woman’s back. Her husband ran into the street, cursing and laughing. He grabbed her by her unruly hair and slapped her twice to get her back under the eaves. The woman flew into a rage; throwing up her hands, she knelt by the side of the street and cried out for justice. At that moment, a chorus of shouts sounded from shops on both sides of the street as women, young and old, ran out. Firecrackers flew all over the place, cluster upon cluster exploding in the middle of the street. The sun was blindingly white. The six palanquins, each with eight bearers, rushed through the intersection like a fire dragon. The flagstone street was covered with the black heads of fifty or sixty neighborhood women, each with her head down and raising joss sticks up to her brow before the bodhisattva.

“Fourth Mama Luo, blessings.”

The middle-aged man from Crown Prince Lane was drinking and looking on blankly; then he snickered and spit out a mouthful of liquor. The older woman with dripping hair picked up her basin and was about to return to the lane when she heard the man. She froze.

“Fourth Mama Luo?”

“The famous Madam Luo of Great Blessings Lane, Broken Wheel Luo, Fourth Mama Luo. That soft, tender, plump one kneeling in the middle of the street. She’s brought her girls out to display in broad daylight.”

“Blessings. A whole clutch of them kneeling on the street in the sweltering heat.”

“Fuck her! Damned flesh peddler!”

The middle-aged man bared his teeth and cursed before turning to wink at Yanniang.

With a shudder, Yanniang looked at her mother-in-law, who had fought her way through the crowd and found a slab of flagstone by the old scholar tree. She was sitting on it alone, rubbing her calves. On a low bench by one of the doors in the alley sat a woman in her thirties, humming to herself, her head lowered, as she nursed her baby. From somewhere came the *kong-kong-kong* of a wooden clapper. Yanniang tightened the wrap and walked over to stand by her mother-in-law. The old woman looked up, blinking her watery eyes as she coughed and patted the baby on Yanniang’s back.

“Good boy.”

“Mother, are you crying?”

“I’ll be fine after I sit here a while.”

“Mother?”

“The bodhisattva is returning to her temple. Let’s go burn incense so we can cross the river and be home before it gets dark.”

The two women looked out at the street.

The intersection was now deserted, except for a white-haired woman with a red bundle on her back, quietly kneeling all by herself under the sun, facing the retreating palanquins. The gawkers, as if drunk, chased after the leaping and lurching palanquins, seemingly mesmerized, lighting firecrackers along the way to send the Guanyin Bodhisattva back to her temple.

It was a smoke-blackened, brightly gilded, large temple. From a distance, one saw the gilded carving of a cypress altar in the main hall, incense smoke curling around a red silk curtain. Fifty or sixty eternal Buddha lamps flickered their dim red light, sending shadowy figures through the hall.

Out in the sunlight, a bonfire burned in the courtyard beyond the temple gate.

A sudden black wave raged on the street outside the temple. Yanniang held her mother-in-law tightly and, with the baby on her back, caught up with the pilgrims, who had sent the bodhisattva home and were now crowding around the temple gate, bumping and shoving one another.

On the temple gate were four large gilded characters, now blackened by smoke:

MERCIFUL SHIP FERRIES ALL

“Damned whoremonger! Stop shoving!”

Yanniang blushed and stood on her tiptoes to see what was happening. Fourth Mama Luo, dragging the eight- or nine-year-old girl behind her, had elbowed her way into the male crowd and was standing by the temple gate, a smile on her face. Seven or eight girls in gaudy attire were on her heels, like a nest of chickens.

“Sorry! Blessings, blessings.”

“Fuck you!”

When he heard the pilgrim’s curse, the middle-aged man standing near Yanniang took another drink from his flask and cracked a smile to reveal a mouthful of yellow teeth.

“Hey, you men, are you crowding at the Gate of Hell? You’re breaking down the temple gate.”

Yanniang held her mother-in-law’s arm and looked around, suddenly feeling nauseous. She turned to look behind her at the middle-aged man, whose body was right next to hers. His alcohol-darkened face was pressed up against her neck; he was breathing hard. When their eyes met, the man stared at her and smiled, then took another drink. Stunned, Yanniang felt her heart thump wildly and her face burn; she shuddered.

“Old lecher!” The thought chilled her.

Charcoal burned bright in the temple courtyard.

Little Taoist Yu had torn off his red embroidered vest; now he was stark naked and oblivious to everything. With his head lowered and his eyes closed, he turned round and round the charcoal fire like a spinning top. He was like the drunken New Year’s God of Happiness, stumbling and lurching as he danced amid the sound of drums and gongs.

The group of teenage toughs ran out from the crowd and chased the little Taoist, spraying sorghum liquor on him. The crowd at the temple gate erupted in a chorus of howls and shouts, curses and laughter.

The little Taoist raised his head and halted his steps. He swayed before rolling his eyes and staring at the little temple on the stone steps. Then he was wracked with shudders. On that hot day, at high noon, he was shivering as if standing naked and buffeted by a cold, late December north wind. His sword glinted in the sunlight as he flicked his wrist and thrust the Seven Star sword into his chest. He turned toward the bodhisattva as blood dripped from his gaunt, ghostly white body. The forty-eight palanquin bearers groaned as they hunched their shoulders to lift the bodhisattva high in the air. Six palanquins, the bearers leaping and prancing, humming and chanting, passed through the sizzling red charcoal in

the courtyard. The pilgrims, male and female, were all quietly prostrated beneath the blackened, gilded main gate of the temple, joss sticks raised over their heads. Kneeling by her mother-in-law under the sun, Yanniang thought she heard five or six waterwheels creaking away in the mill behind the temple, *ka-la-la ka-la-la*.

Forty-eight sweaty black bodies arched and bent to pick up the red bodhisattva in her palanquin, and then slowly walked up the temple's stone steps.

The open temple door revealed a gilded carved altar with red Buddha lamps flickering in the darkened interior.

Yanniang sensed movement and jerked her head around. Something flickered before her eyes and she thought she saw a wanderer staring at her from the crowd. In the sunlight, his eyes shone like will-o'-the-wisps, the eyes of a madman. She froze. On the stone steps, the bearers were panting, lurching, and stumbling; they finally let out a groan as they entered the temple. All the chairs jerked spasmodically as the bearers shuddered and stopped abruptly. They took a dozen stumbling steps and lurched back outside the temple. A long, sad moan rose from their mouths, breaking the silence. The palanquins lurched in and out of the temple three times before finally settling inside. At that moment, a series of crisp *ding-ding, dang-dang* sounds emerged from the main hall, followed by chanted mantras. The hall filled with the ringing of bells and the rapping of wooden clappers. Outside, firecrackers exploded on the blindingly white flagstone streets—*pi-pi pa-pa*; all of Jiling seemed to be on fire. It was a bright, sunny day; dazzling flowers seemed to be raining down from the sky.