

FLOWERS IN THE ASHES

A Novel

LEO MAI

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A Novel of Youth, Ideals, and Betrayal

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A literary historical novel set mainly at Peking University and Tiananmen Square during the Beijing student movement of 1989. Through intertwined lives, it explores idealism, love, moral courage, betrayal, memory, and the human cost of historical trauma.

Written by a witness to the era, the novel brings private feeling and public history into a single narrative of remembrance and resilience.

THIS SAMPLE INCLUDES

Chapters 1-2

Chapter I

March 6, 1989 — Sunny

She said she was going back. Chu Guang only smiled—apologetically, almost helplessly—and made no move to stop her. She lifted her eyes and gave him a quiet, sorrowful look, then turned without a word. In that look he saw disappointment settled deep in her heart. He could only watch, a bitter smile on his lips, as her figure dwindled into the distance.

When her silhouette finally vanished at the end of the road, he stayed where he was, alone beneath a withered willow on the lakeshore, seized by a faint desolation. He knew the vague entanglement between them had run its course, though he had not expected it to end like this. He had invited her here to confess his feelings; for over an hour they had walked the rim of Weiming Lake. More than once she had cast him an expectant look, hinting in careful phrases. More than once he had steeled himself, the words rising to his throat—yet they would not cross his lips. It was not lack of courage, he knew, but too much honesty. He did not feel that kind of love for her, and so he could not say “I love you.” He would not deceive her, nor himself. Had passion overruled reason for a moment, the ending might have been different. He had long read the answer in her eyes. But between them there was nothing that could truly be called love. She had chosen him for lack of a better choice; had he not done the same? What bound them was not love but need.

He wandered along the water, replaying the muted reproach in her eyes, and could not help finding her pitiable. In truth there was little to fault. She was not beautiful, but neither plain; by any measure she was a fair match for him. Given his circumstances, he could not be sure of meeting someone “better.” Yet he felt no regret. He could not imagine, as so many did, spending a lifetime with a woman he did not love. He had long understood how hard true love is to find, and for now he had no wish to compromise with life.

It was early March: bright sun, a faint chill. The lakeside lay quiet; only the leaves murmured in the wind. He moved along the path, a solitary shadow trailing at his feet.

A young couple approached, arms twined. His lonely heart twinged. He turned his head, unwilling to look, yet they came straight on; as they passed, he caught the girl’s delicate face lit with contentment, and the boy’s unconcealed pride. From their faces he guessed they were freshmen, newly arrived at the university.

The contrast stung. He was twenty-six and—besides his mother—had never known a woman’s love. Fate, he thought, had been unkind. His parents had given him a quick mind, a warm heart, and a stubborn will, but not the height or bearing that seemed to charm women. Was fate mocking him, or testing him? Each disappointment had driven him to work harder—to success in study and work—while love stayed forever out of reach.

He knew he was not handsome, and his height—barely one meter sixty-five—was enough for many girls to turn away. Yet he believed a man's worth is not measured by looks but first by the quality of his soul. For a man, achievement comes first; success brings wealth or renown, and with them, love. In a vulgar age, money or fame can make even an ungainly figure gleam, while the nobility of the soul counts for little. Under the reign of power and money, character becomes redundant, and both love and life lose their poetry.

He, too, had once dreamed that a triumphant career might bring him love, and in his work he felt a certain confidence. But he also knew love bought with money is the cheapest kind. He would rather, at his lowest ebb, win one true affection. Two years of seeing that girl had once convinced him he could be loved; on that fragile belief he had propped up a man's pride. But now even she—who had never truly loved him—was gone. What remained was the wreckage of a dream.

He sat brooding on a bench by the lake. A burst of giggles broke the stillness. On the bench beside him the same couple had fallen into a fervent embrace, mouths locked, heedless of daylight or passersby.

He gave a wry smile, remembering his first weeks on campus. Fresh from a remote southern county, he had wandered here and stumbled upon just such a scene. His cheeks had burned, his heart raced; he had turned away in embarrassment, shocked by their boldness yet carrying away a secret yearning. Even as he hurried past, he had stolen one last look at their rapture.

Three years on this romance-soaked campus had made such sights commonplace, and he had nursed a simple hope—that one day he too might know a tenderness untainted by calculation. Only now did he see that dream had never been meant for him.

Three years had changed him in many ways, yet he had found no haven for his affections. In matters of the heart he remained a drifter with no place to call his own.

In that emptiness, a graceful figure flickered across his mind like a beam of sunlight through shade. He sat very still, eyes on the rippling lake, straining to hold the vision. Gradually the outline sharpened and a pair of eyes—limpid as autumn water—fastened on him.

"Li Hua," he breathed. Warmth flooded him, sweeping away the gloom that had weighed on his chest. When he glanced back at the couple, they looked suddenly coarse, the girl's exaggerated bliss almost unbearable.

Yet under those pure eyes—even in memory—his own heart faltered. The vision cooled, blurred, and was gone.

Another peal of laughter. Irritation rose. He cast the pair a look of distaste. They had broken apart; the girl now perched on the boy's lap, arms looped about his neck, her eyes brimming as she gazed at his foolish grin. He whispered something; she burst out laughing again.

"Enough," he muttered, rising to leave.

He pushed his bicycle along the water's edge. In the distance the tower and its quivering reflection drew his gaze. A film slid over his eyes; the world blurred.

With a heavy heart he left the quiet lake and headed for Zhongguan Garden, where his mentor lived. Thoughts of Li Hua—whom he had not seen in some time—drew a sigh. From the day they met, this girl, not outwardly beautiful, had stirred him by her unadorned presence and taken root in his thoughts. As time passed, the feeling only deepened. Yet between them stood an invisible barrier: at times near, at times impossibly far. He had tried to cross it; each attempt ended quietly in failure. With graduation near, even his self-confidence had begun to wilt.

“For what is truly beautiful, it is enough simply to behold it,” he told himself, reaching for a way to set his heart at ease.

He was on his way to discuss his thesis with his mentor, knowing Li Hua was usually there. She was Professor Yang’s niece; to look after the old man she stayed with him whenever she was not in class. The thought of seeing her made him nervous. Toward this much younger girl he had kept a feeling almost sacred, unwilling to profane it—even in thought.

Professor Yang Shen-zhi’s apartment was on the ground floor. Chu Guang knocked. The familiar footfall inside set his heart pounding. The door opened. A tall, slender girl stood there. Recognizing him, her clear features lit with delight. The lines on his brow eased.

“Is Professor Yang in?” he asked, smiling.

Li Hua nodded. “He’s inside—arguing with your ‘smiling fox’ Party secretary.”

At the name “Hu Kun,” he hesitated. “Then perhaps I should come back later.”

“It’s fine. Come in. If you don’t want to see him, you can wait in my room,” Li Hua said, stepping back.

Her tone was utterly natural; he was the one caught off guard. Though he often came here, he had never set foot in her room. Outside of rare chance meetings on campus, they had scarcely been alone. Faced with her offhand invitation, he didn’t know what to do.

“Come on,” she urged with a smile.

Her open gaze steadied him. He stepped inside.

To reach her room they had to pass the study. As they entered, the professor’s vigorous voice rang out: “There’s nothing to discuss! I signed the petition of my own free will, and I do not regret it!”

The study door stood half open; anger thrummed in his voice. Chu stopped, listening.

“Professor, you can’t be blamed,” came Hu Kun’s smooth reply. “You didn’t know the full situation. It’s clear now—Wu Jun, who asked for your signature, belongs to the counterrevolutionary Federation for a Democratic China. Their little petition was premeditated.”

“Premeditated? Spare me. I’ve already said—I will answer for what I’ve done. If you think I’ve broken the law, take me to court. But to make me betray my conscience by writing a confession? Impossible!” The old man’s voice rose, ending in a fit of coughing.

They were arguing about the recent petition by dozens of prominent scholars calling for a general amnesty of political prisoners. A few days earlier Song Yu had told him about it. He would never have guessed his own mentor—never much for politics—had signed. The petition, Song Yu said, had stirred waves at home and abroad and put the authorities in an awkward spot. Rumor had it the central leadership meant to punish the signatories as a warning. Now worry pinched at him.

“Let’s go,” Li Hua whispered. She stood close, watching him with concern. He nodded, and they slipped into her room.

He felt ill at ease. Standing in the middle of the room, he looked around. The furnishings reflected her: plain yet refined. A small wind chime hung by the bed; a doll rested on the pillow; a landscape print was on the wall. Everything bore her neat, quiet taste.

“Sit,” she said, gesturing to the sofa.

He obeyed, but sat stiffly, unsure where to put his eyes. He had not prepared for this, and now could not compose himself.

Perching on the edge of the bed, Li Hua frowned. “So tiresome.”

“Hu Kun?” he asked.

“People like him. Ever since Uncle signed the petition, someone knocks almost every day, demanding a ‘confession.’ They’ll drive him mad.” Indignation tightened her mouth.

Chu had little patience for political men. “But isn’t Hu Kun Professor Yang’s student? Why act like this?”

“You think he’s a good man?” she shot back. “Don’t let that Buddha smile fool you—he’s a climber through and through. Uncle despises his sort.” The cold curve of her smile held a trace of scorn.

He had rarely seen her angry; the sharpness startled him—and endeared her. He smiled despite himself.

“What are you laughing at?” she asked, tilting her head.

“Nothing,” he muttered.

She, too, looked abashed. Picking up the doll and studying it a moment, she asked with a smile, “Isn’t it cute?”

He found her childlike and nodded. “Very.”

Pleased, she looked up. “It’s been so long since I saw you. Have you been busy?”

Her gaze moved him. “Not too busy,” he said quickly. “I came by last week, but you weren’t here.”

“Really? Uncle never said.” Disappointment touched her voice.

Warmth passed through him, though one glance into her clear eyes kept him from imagining too much.

“What about after graduation? Do you plan to stay in Beijing?” she asked.

“Who doesn’t want to? Whether I can is another matter,” he said with a helpless smile.

“Is it that difficult?”

“It depends. They say this year is especially hard.” He sighed.

She studied him, then said softly, "I hope you can stay. If you're sent away, it won't be easy to see you."

Though he knew she meant nothing more, her words still touched him. "I'll do everything I can."

"I believe you will," she said simply.

A door clicked in the study, followed by footsteps—Hu Kun leaving. Once the secretary was gone, Chu knew he would face the professor, and perhaps not soon find himself alone with Li Hua again. Melancholy pricked him.

"Let's go to the study," she said, rising.

Professor Yang sat at his desk, smoking in silence. Chu stopped at the threshold.

The old man looked up, sighed, and motioned to the sofa. "Sit."

Chu obeyed, taking in the white hair and carved lines of that austere face. Remembering his mentor's fearless rebuke just now, he felt a deeper admiration. He was proud—profoundly proud—to call this man his teacher.

"Let's talk about your thesis," the professor said evenly. Chu's heart lurched. He had long wanted to begin, but the outline he had submitted was crude. The professor's rigor was famous; whether his proposal would pass was uncertain. The last thing he wanted was to anger him again—especially with Li Hua present.

The old man rubbed his eyes, put on his glasses, and lifted a sheaf of papers. Chu recognized his outline. His throat tightened as he watched those stern features.

"Your topic is not bad," the professor said at last. "You can proceed."

Relief washed through him.

Li Hua came in with two cups of tea—one on her uncle's desk, one beside Chu. She gave him a smile and sat nearby.

He smiled back, then forced his eyes to the professor. Yet he was distracted. Her nearness—those eyes, dark and bright—sent heat to his face; sweat beaded on his brow.

The professor seemed largely satisfied. After affirming the value of Chu's topic and ideas, he pointed out several flaws, then said, his voice grave, "Writing this well won't be easy. It will take hard labor. Remember: scholarship requires rigor. Don't chase what's flashy and hollow."

Chu knew the old man had placed hopes in him and nodded solemnly. When he turned, Li Hua was smiling at him. Warmth rose again.

Shen Hong yawned, then clapped a palm over his mouth, aware of the lapse. The woman walking beside him—known around campus as "Socrates"—seemed not to notice. She went on, savoring every word of her own philosophy:

"I believe philosophy is the greatest discipline, standing above all the sciences. Its significance to humankind equals—if not exceeds—the sum of the natural and social sciences. Only philosophy can furnish a complete soul. The decline of philosophy—that is the true tragedy of our age."

What a peculiar woman, Shen Hong thought. She had quit the steel-rolling program only to audit philosophy lectures at Peking University (Beida). And philosophy of all things—worth less than anything these days. Even those with

master's or doctoral degrees couldn't find jobs. Philosophy isn't something one storms and conquers. People spend their lives at it, rise to professorships even, and still can't say what philosophy truly is—let alone someone who wandered in halfway.

"I worship Nietzsche," "Socrates" continued. "He jolted my soul awake."

Shen Hong listened with patience and the occasional half-comment, but the talk wearied him. He wasn't a philosophy student and, by temperament, had little appetite for abstractions. With the campus craze for Western thought, Sartre, Nietzsche, Schopenhauer, and Freud had become fashionable names. At a place like Beida, one was expected to say something philosophical. He had skimmed a few books—enough to bluff among laymen, but beside anyone serious his ignorance showed. This "Socrates" was no authority, but she had clearly read more than he had; several of her references were unfamiliar. Still, as a man, he would not appear weak before a woman. Relying on quick wits and improvisation, he kept pace, though the effort was tiresome. Watching her speak with such fervor, he remembered with some amusement the dorm's nickname for her. Why "Socrates," anyway? She worshiped Nietzsche and Schopenhauer; she and Socrates shared nothing but a stance.

"How do you see life?" she asked suddenly, fixing him with a steady look.

Her solemnity struck him as faintly comic. He forced a dry smile. "Schopenhauer said our pursuits are like soap bubbles—no matter how big you blow them, they burst. That's life's tragedy."

"Is that truly your view?" She frowned, plainly dissatisfied.

"More or less. But honestly, talking about questions like this is useless. Even if life is as dull and painful as old Schopenhauer says, I'm not going to kill myself. I'm a pragmatist. I care about how to live a little better." His tone was light, edged with cynicism.

She tilted her head, tasting his words, then nodded. "That too is a choice of the self. In that sense you're close to Sartre's existentialism."

Shen Hong looked away from her face—so stripped of softness it bordered on severe. Whoever marries this woman will suffer for life, he thought with a flicker of disgust, wishing only to be rid of her. So he asked, deliberately, "How did you end up choosing philosophy? That took courage. You know the world has yet to see a truly great woman philosopher."

"Socrates" snorted and shot him a peculiar glance, as if pitying such a foolish question. "I know what you're hinting at. I've been asked it often enough. Listen: I didn't choose philosophy to make a living. Anyone who imagines philosophy can be eaten is either not very intelligent or doesn't understand philosophy at all. I'm not like that. I study philosophy to explore life's mysteries. I've never fancied myself some 'philosopher.'"

"Then what do you really want to do?" he asked, feigning interest.

"Perhaps I'm even more in love with literature. I'm conceiving a grand work." Her eyes brightened.

"A novel?" he said with exaggerated enthusiasm.

"One could call it philosophical as well. It will be richly metaphysical—my whole meditation on life. In both content and form, it will be unprecedented."

"That sounds earth-shattering. May I have the honor of reading it?" he said with mock solemnity.

"You will. That book is the hope of my existence. I've already given much for it and will give more, but I don't mind." Her tone and posture were almost those of a martyr.

He looked at her more closely. Beneath the plain features and unadorned clothes, something in her words rang true: pride masking a deep insecurity; loneliness crouched behind the eyes. Pity stirred in him, and the mockery dropped from his voice.

She seemed to catch the change in his gaze. "I know what you're about to say," she said coolly. "Yes, I'm lonely. Few in this world understand me. I know how I'm seen—including by you. I don't care. A genius ahead of her time is always misunderstood. Nietzsche was. Schopenhauer was. So am I. Genius is born in solitude."

She's hiding, he thought—dressing the private self in grand words so no one can really see. With studied indifference he asked, "And you believe you've transcended your time?"

"Of course. At least in thought. Our era breeds only slaves who've forgotten how to think. But I am always myself. I can only be myself." Her eyes narrowed with a small, sovereign pride.

"That only proves you have a strong personality. Transcendence is another matter," he said, unable to keep the scorn from his voice.

She ignored it and pressed on. "I often think—living in such an age is a misfortune for most, but an exception for me. This barren time has roused my passion for society and given me a field for thought. Yes—wisdom is born only in suffering."

"You count yourself among the suffering?" He looked at her with a mixture of pity and disdain.

"Of course," she snapped, glaring. "Why do you look at me like that—with pity, isn't it? Don't deny it. Others look at me the same way. I'm used to it. For me, solitude and suffering are treasures. My character, my pride, my thought were forged there. I've lost much, but I've gained more."

His half-smile dropped. "I'm a habitual cynic," he said, apologetically. "I talk to everyone this way. Don't take it to heart."

Disappointment crossed her face. With a cold smile she said, "People call you a man of thought, a man of individuality, someone who stood out in the student movements. I didn't expect... this."

The jab landed. He gave a thin smile. "Then you see me clearly. In truth, I'm nothing at all."

She shook her head. "That's not your true self. You're full of passion and responsibility. Reality has disillusioned you. You can't change it and can't find your place. That is your tragedy."

A wave of aversion rose in him. He sneered. "You seem to know me well."

“Better to say I know this society. You’re its product—one cell of it. People like you are typical of the age. To be frank, I’ve long wanted to make you an object of study—perhaps the protagonist of my book.”

“I didn’t know I warranted study. An honor indeed. But I imagine that in your great work I’d be the negative case: a young man gone astray who, under some immense force, finally awakens and becomes a firm revolutionary. Isn’t that it?” He spoke with open disdain, repelled by her self-importance.

“By the old models, yes. But I told you—my work will be revolutionary, in content and in form. In traditional terms, it would amount to a revolution of literature itself.”

He glanced at her freckled, unremarkable face. Abnormal, he thought: an embittered woman, long denied ordinary consolations, represses her feelings until they burst out as arrogance. The thought of spending time with her made his skin crawl.

“Why don’t you say something? You don’t believe me?” “Socrates” fixed him with a piercing stare.

Helpless, he sighed. “I was thinking—your temperament might suit politics. Or business. Better than literature.”

“Others have said that. It’s true, I like to live at the edge and I don’t fear challenges. As for business, I don’t want the stink of money clinging to me—that isn’t my pursuit. Politics, perhaps someday. But I believe only thought grants immortality. That’s where I’ll spend my gifts.”

He could no longer bear the self-inflation. Thinking of his plan to meet Li Na, he felt even less inclined to listen. He yawned openly, checked his watch, and let the impatience show.

She noticed. Her face cooled. “You have other business?”

“I promised my girlfriend we’d go out this afternoon. She’s waiting in the dorm,” he said, watching for a reaction.

Color rose, drained, then steadied in her cheeks. “Very well. I have things to do as well.”

At last—release. He exhaled, a private joy uncurling in his chest. He knew she was lying to save face, and didn’t care.

“I’ll come find you sometime,” she said with a forced smile, extending her hand with studied nonchalance.

He took it, feeling nothing.

Waking from the dream, Yifu heard his heart hammering. His face was damp; when he touched it, his hand came away slick with cold sweat. He lay still, staring at the ceiling, trying to salvage fragments of the dream: a boundless desert... a sky the color of ash. No stars, no moon. A lone figure trudged the wastes, before him only unbroken night. He stopped and looked about, bewildered. The silence was like death, as if all life had ceased. A knife of loneliness pierced him; he shuddered. The darkness pressed in from all sides. Terror widened his eyes. Driven back by the closing night, he stumbled; his foot met nothing—and he dropped into a bottomless void...

A brutal dream. His heart still beat unevenly. Why had nightmares beset him so often of late? As a child he had heard adults say dreams always meant the opposite. By Freud, the claim hardly held up. Still, experience told him such dreams were never a good sign.

A faded bed curtain screened his view, partitioning his cot from the outside. Within that narrow enclosure lay a world entirely his own. For three years he had spent most of his time here—sleeping, reading, writing. Cramped and cluttered as it was, the space comforted him. He was deeply attached to the bed and reluctant to leave it unless he had to.

He groped under the pillow for his watch: ten minutes past three. He rolled to his side and fixed his gaze on the Ingres portrait of an aristocratic lady tacked to the wall. He had no thought of getting up. And even if he did—then what? Nothing in this room pleased him more than lying in bed; lately, he wanted to do nothing else.

The dormitory was rarely this quiet. Where were Chu Guang, Shen Hong, and Jin Zhe? In the library hunting sources for their theses? Out looking for jobs? At least they kept busy. Only he drifted through life with such indifference. Graduation theses, job-hunting—how tedious. To finish graduate school and then scrounge work on your own! They called it “two-way selection,” but he had no family in Beijing, and in daily life he had been too inert to cultivate connections. Whom was he meant to “choose,” and who would “choose” him? Thinking of it exhausted him; not thinking of it was impossible—this was his future, and if he didn’t worry, who would? Jin Zhe liked to say the point of three years in graduate school was to land a decent job. A practical truth. Yet you still had to go catch the job yourself—what kind of system was that?

Yifu brooded, feeling wronged by life. Honestly, he had never asked much of it: a steady, undemanding job; a room of his own; the freedom to read what he loved and do what he enjoyed. Yet all of it felt impossibly remote, like an illusion.

Outside someone was declaiming English—Song Yu. Every day at this hour he recited in the hallway. Complaints had been many; but with a man so tone-deaf to others, what could anyone do? His accent was thick, his pronunciation often wrong, yet his voice grew louder and louder, flushed with self-satisfaction. Life was heavy enough—vexations stacked one upon another until a man could hardly breathe. In time they would crush him flat. Perhaps only then would he be free.

The voice faltered, as if someone had stopped him. A moment later the dorm door opened. Who was back? Yifu was still wondering when the gaudy red curtain around his bed lifted and Song Yu’s half-smiling face appeared.

“Up you get. A girl’s here to see you.”

“What girl?” Yifu stared. Aside from Lin Lin, he could think of no one who would ask for him at the dorm.

“Says she’s from your hometown. She’s waiting outside. If you don’t get up, she can’t come in.”

Something sly glinted behind Song Yu’s grin. Tricks were his specialty; Yifu didn’t dare take him at his word.

"I'm not kidding. Don't believe me? Stick your head out and look." The smile had a faintly lewd curl.

Yifu sat up and poked his head past the curtain. Sure enough, a girl in denim stood at the door—but her face was unknown to him.

"Come on, don't leave her there all day," Song Yu said, dropping the curtain and going over to speak to her.

With a sigh, Yifu flung back the quilt and sat up. As he dressed, unease gnawed at him. He could not recall ever meeting this girl.

He pulled on worn trousers, buckled his belt, forced his feet into scuffed shoes, and stepped out from behind the red cloth. Standing in the center of the dorm, he cast a lazy glance toward the door.

The girl in denim came in with a backpack slung over one shoulder. She was homely: high cheekbones, a pointed chin, lips thrust forward, a face pitted with angry red pimples. Her hair hung in disarray, as if long uncombed. The denim clothes and bag were both grimy, lending her a slovenly air.

"This is Yifu. His English is first-rate. Hand him the forms and there'll be no problem," Song Yu said, pointing.

At once Yifu understood he'd been duped again. He shot Song Yu a furious look; Song Yu only smiled in triumph and slipped out the door.

"My name's Huang Lu, Normal College, Department of Fine Arts," the pock-faced girl said, smiling and thrusting out her hand with an affected flourish.

Yifu didn't take it. Frowning, he asked, "What do you want with me?"

Her smile widened—uglier still. "Here's the thing. I'm going to study directing in America and they've sent me the application forms. Everyone says your English is good, so I'd like you to fill them out for me." Without waiting for agreement, she fished a sheaf of papers from her bag and pushed them into his hands.

Glancing down, Yifu asked lightly, "If you're set on America, how is it you can't even fill out a form?"

"If I could, I wouldn't have come," she pouted.

Her coyness sickened him. He lowered his head. "Have you taken the TOEFL?"

"No. Why should I?" she shot back.

"If you don't, who's going to give you a scholarship?" His tone turned dry with mockery.

"I don't need a scholarship. If I find a foreigner to be my financial sponsor, I can still go." She spoke carelessly, as if it were nothing.

"And have you found one?" he asked.

"No. By the way, do you know any foreigners? If you do, introduce me."

"No," he said, giving her a sidelong glance. With a face like that, what foreigner would even notice you?

"Just finish the forms first," she said, suddenly imperious.

Disgust rose, but he only wanted to be rid of her quickly. He sat down, bent over the papers, and began to fill them in.

She stood behind him; at once a sour odor drifted from her clothes. Yifu wrinkled his brow. "If you've nothing to do, sit somewhere."

"I want to watch how you do it. Next time I'll know myself." She craned over the table.

He had never met a girl so tactless. He forced a thin smile and kept writing. She leaned closer and closer, murmuring broken English; her hair brushed the back of his neck, her breath touched his ear. It was unbearable.

"Can you wait till I'm finished? Standing there, I really can't work." His frown deepened.

"I'm bothering you? Fine, I'll sit here and read quietly." At last she moved aside.

The forms weren't hard for him—only long. By dinnertime he still wasn't done. The thought of being seen with such a girl made him cringe, but with the papers unfinished he couldn't send her away. Irritation rose in him.

"Let's eat first and finish afterward," she said, coming up beside him.

Assuming she meant to treat, he said, "No need. I'll be done in half an hour."

"But I'm hungry. Here's the deal—you keep writing, I'll go to the canteen and fetch food." She stood.

Puzzled, Yifu asked, "Do you have meal tickets?"

"Don't you?" she said.

He gave a bitter smile, fetched his ration tickets, and handed them over.

Leaving the professor's apartment, Jin Zhe was gutted. He had gone in full of hope. These days few even wanted a doctorate, and classical literary theory was a niche field. The old man had failed to recruit for two straight years; by regulation, if no one enrolled for a third, the program would be canceled. Word was the department leaders were worried and had even spoken to him. Jin Zhe thought he had come at the perfect moment: the professor would be glad to see an applicant and accept him without hesitation. Instead, the old man dug in his heels and refused to give the slightest hint. He said his doctoral candidates must have published a scholarly monograph or influential papers. In other words: not you. If the professor wouldn't have him, what was the point of even sitting the exam?

"Just my luck to run into a crank," Jin Zhe muttered under the streetlamps, lifting his eyes to the tranquil night. The old man's words still stung.

"You need to work harder at your classical Chinese." He had said it earnestly enough, but the meaning was plain: Jin Zhe's foundation in the old language was weak. True, classical theory demands mastery of classical Chinese—but how did the professor know he was weak? Because his background was modern literary theory? That must be it. And when Jin Zhe mentioned his own adviser, Wang Xuwen, the professor's expression had turned peculiar. With an incompetent, ill-reputed adviser, a student was bound to carry the stain. It was his fault: when he applied for the master's he'd set his heart on Peking University and never thought hard about whom he would study under.

"All right, at least this fantasy can go," he told himself, though it stuck in his throat. This had been the best path left to him. Only yesterday he'd sounded out

an old fellow townsman at the Ministry of Personnel: under current policy, a doctorate meant he could bring his family to Beijing at once. In the department, few touched classical literary theory; after graduation, staying on at the university wouldn't be hard. To remain at Peking University, to do scholarship there—wasn't that the dream all along? In China, where was better for academic work than Beida? Yet with a few curt lines, the old man had smashed his carefully laid plan.

"Qian Li will be pleased to hear it," he thought bitterly of his wife. She, too, had a university degree, yet had always opposed his studies. When he applied for the master's, she fought him; when he tried to study, she made scenes that drove him to a friend's room. The last three years had not been easy on her—raising their child alone in a ten-square-meter room, quarreling often with his mother. On his last trip home she said she couldn't go on; if he didn't return after graduation, she would divorce him. Perhaps it was anger talking, but she might well do it. Each time he returned, the gulf between them felt wider. Small wonder: she was a woman, after all, and women cared about the practical. Worse, she had a brother-in-law to measure him against. Her younger sister, Qian Wen, was neither as pretty nor as educated, yet this poor scholar could hardly compare with her sister's husband, a military commander's secretary. Yes, Jin Zhe was a graduate student at a prestigious university, and Zhang Lei had only a high-school diploma—so what? Zhang had influence. Gifts piled up at his door. He had found a sinecure for Jin Zhe's wife—a paid post with no duties. Even his father-in-law, a former army commander, turned to Zhang for favors. To be fair, Zhang had been generous: he paid Jin Zhe's travel expenses during his studies and sent clothes and toys after the boy was born. But behind the generosity lurked condescension. Each gift struck his pride. What choice did he have? People said a scholar was useless once he closed his books. No wonder his in-laws despised him. In their eyes only money and power had value—and he had neither, and likely never would. So be it. How others judged him was their business; he was not living for them.

Campus was hushed, almost deserted. Pale mercury lamps cast a milky sheen on the roadside ponds. What am I going to do? At the thought of the future, Jin Zhe felt lost. For all that, he still longed for scholarship. Hadn't he abandoned a secure post and his family for it? He had once held a good job, with income and dignity. He could have lived comfortably; his work unit had even been preparing to assign him an apartment. He had given all that up to return to graduate school. Besides scholarship, what was he fit for? And if he was to devote himself to research, it had to be in Beijing. Peking University, the Academy of Social Sciences—those were the places for real work. Professors might have comparable learning, but status depended on where they were; everyone knew that. If the environment in Beijing was already this harsh, what hope was there for scholarship in the provinces? Yet staying in Beijing would not be easy either. Alone, he might manage; he could hardly abandon his wife and child again. Her ultimatum was firm: unless she and the child could move to Beijing within a year, he could forget about staying. Getting household registration (*hukou*) transferred

to Beijing now was like climbing to the sky. And who wanted to hire a man already burdened with a wife and child?

The more he brooded, the slower his steps. Reaching Shaoyuan, he thought of Mihoko. Tonight he was meant to meet her for language study, but the professor had delayed him. His mood was heavy, and he did not want to return to the noisy dorm. Looking up, he saw a light in her window. It was only eight. After a moment's hesitation, he turned toward her building.

At the entrance, a guard looked him over with a sullen face and wary eyes. Jin Zhe cursed his luck but kept going.

"Who are you looking for?" the man asked, eyes hard and bell-like.

The broad, pockmarked face made Jin Zhe bristle, but he forced a smile. "I'm here to see Miss Mihoko."

The man studied him for a beat, then jerked his chin. "Go on. Don't stay long."

Anger smoldered in his chest, but he relaxed a little, relieved not to be stopped.

"Jin Zhe-kun, you've come!" Mihoko greeted him in Chinese, her face lighting with a genuine smile.

At the sight of her gentle eyes, the cloud on his brow thinned. She was not especially pretty—this petite Japanese girl—and he harbored no improper thoughts about her. She was simply gentle, understanding. With her, he could breathe.

He stepped in and, as usual, sat cross-legged on the carpet. Foreign students lived far better than the Chinese; Mihoko's single room was larger than the dorm he shared with three others. The furnishings had the calm, neat air of a Japanese girl's room.

"Didn't you go to see the professor? Why are you back so soon?" Mihoko asked in Chinese as she poured tea.

He sighed and gave a bitter smile. "It didn't work out."

"Why?" She sat on the carpet too, eyes wide.

He briefly recounted the meeting.

She listened, puzzled. "But you haven't even taken the exam. How can you know there's no hope?"

"Isn't it obvious? He's not interested." He forced a smile.

"But so what? Isn't it supposed to be fair competition? If you do well, how could he refuse you?" She looked genuinely bewildered.

He let out a long breath. "You don't understand. In China, words and deeds part company. They talk about fairness, but there isn't any. Take the doctoral exam: even if I score higher than you, if you're close to the professor—or already his student—he'll take you, not me. He may even slip you the questions beforehand. Some professors choose their candidates long before the test; the exam is a formality."

"How can that be?" Mihoko whispered, frowning.

"That's nothing. Here everything runs on connections—school, jobs, business, officialdom. Without connections, talent counts for little." He sighed again.

"What will you do, then?" she asked softly.

Without meeting her eyes, he said, "First try to find work in Beijing. If that fails, I'll have to go home."

Mihoko lowered her head, thinking. "Jin Zhe-kun, you have real talent—and your Japanese is good. Why not try to study abroad?"

"I've thought of it," he said, lifting his eyes. "It's easier said than done."

"If you're willing, perhaps I can help. My uncle is a professor at the University of Tokyo. He's coming next month to lecture."

Warmth rose in his chest, yet he said, "Thank you. But that won't solve my immediate problem. Graduation is upon me. Going abroad takes a year—two, at least. And with my health, even if I went, I might not hold up."

"Don't be pessimistic, Jin Zhe-kun. Things may yet turn out well." Her gentle eyes rested on him.

He lowered his head, sighed again, and said nothing.

Chapter 2

March 21, 1989 — Sunny with intermittent clouds

Shen Hong eyed the foreigner across from him—one Professor Anderson—with a cool smile, idly plotting how to put him flat on the floor. Broad-shouldered, bull-necked, half a head taller—but easy enough: a quick kick to the groin, then an uppercut to the jaw. The mental image of the man sprawled helplessly made Shen Hong smile to himself.

Li Na was speaking to the foreigner in hesitant, error-strewn English. It made Shen Hong wince. With English like that, she still dares chat up a foreigner? He shot her a look and felt sour.

She looked awful—almost grotesque. He turned away. Li Na never cared for clothes, and after a bout of “makeup” she was worse: a black suit-dress from Xidan Department Store (five hundred yuan, no less), flesh-colored stockings below the hem, powder caked on her face, heavy brows and eyeliner, lips red as if bleeding. Paired with the mannered smile and fluttering side-glances, she looked like a streetwalker putting on a show.

She’ll do anything to get abroad, he thought. He’d always been cool to her plan—not, as she claimed, out of fear she’d dump him once overseas. If she were in some other field, he might have held his tongue; but she studied classical Chinese literature. What did that need from a foreign country? And her language skills were nothing to brag about. As an undergrad she had studied Russian; only when she set her sights on America did she switch to English. However hard she had crammed these three years, the idea of continuing literary studies in the U. S. was, frankly, far-fetched.

And this foreigner’s no better, Shen Hong fumed, noticing Anderson’s hawkish eyes fixed on Li Na’s prominent chest. Why must she cozy up to him? So he’s a Stanford professor—he’s still a stranger. Why should he vouch for you and ship you off?

Catching Shen Hong’s signal to wrap it up, Li Na ignored him, irritation flickering across her face. Turning back, she pasted on a smile.

“Professor Anderson, studying in the United States has long been my wish—one could even say my dream. In my view, America not only has a highly developed economy and advanced science and technology; more importantly, it is a country of democracy and freedom. That is what I yearn for,” she said in English.

To Shen Hong the words rang hollow. Democracy, freedom—from her lips they curdled. What she wanted was a doctorate and a decent life. Why cloak it? Who couldn’t see through that?

“Miss Li, you’re the third person in China to ask me this,” Anderson replied. “I honestly don’t understand why young Chinese are always thinking of going abroad. America is a great country, but in many respects it isn’t what you imagine. I’ve dealt with Chinese students there; many live very hard lives.”

"Many of our classmates have already gone overseas, so we know something of the situation," Li Na said. "We're not going for comfort. We go to acquire knowledge and return to serve our country. A little hardship is nothing."

She wrapped her purpose in noble words—promising to return rather than emigrate. But what use? The man hadn't shown the slightest inclination to help. How tone-deaf can you be? Where's that famous pride now? Shen Hong frowned.

"The Chinese are indeed a people acquainted with hardship," Anderson said, the irony obvious to Shen Hong.

Li Na missed it and pressed on: "I'm a woman; studying and living abroad will naturally be more difficult. But I believe I can bear it—I'm prepared."

Anderson shrugged. "I admire your persistence, Miss Li. But what exactly would you have me do?"

"I hope to study at Stanford, where you teach. Could you help make arrangements? If possible, I'd like to ask you to act as my financial guarantor," Li Na said bluntly.

"A guarantor?" Anderson shook his head. "That's impossible. You must understand: in America a guarantor assumes real responsibility. I don't know you. How could I assume responsibility for you?"

Li Na forced a smile. "In fact there's no real risk to you. As far as I know, the guarantee is largely a formality. I've never heard of any unpleasantness arising from it... Besides, you'll be in China for some time; you could get to know me better."

"Unfortunately, I won't have much time," Anderson said, spreading his hands. "I'm an economist. I came chiefly to study China's economy, and in a few days I'll head south for fieldwork."

"If you want to understand the economy, perhaps we can help," Li Na said, pointing to Shen Hong. "My boyfriend is a master's student in economics. His thesis is on state-owned enterprise reform. He could gather materials for you."

"Oh?" Anderson looked at Shen Hong with interest. "Mr. Shen, are you familiar with the current state of SOE reform in China?"

Shen Hong hadn't expected to be thrust forward and felt a stab of annoyance. But since he'd been addressed, he answered in English, "I've taken part in a departmental research group that surveyed several large and medium-sized enterprises, and I've attended related symposia."

"I'm surprised, Mr. Shen—your English is quite fluent. That will make this easier," Anderson said with a pleased smile.

Shen Hong returned a restrained smile and shot Li Na a furtive glance. She sat off to the side, face dark. He felt a private surge of triumph.

"Your view of enterprise reform?" Anderson asked.

"Here, 'enterprise reform' essentially means reform of the state-owned sector," Shen Hong said. "SOEs are the backbone of the national economy and the material foundation of the system. From another angle, they also concentrate the system's contradictions. Reforming them inevitably implicates comprehensive reform of the national system."

"When you say 'contradictions,' what do you mean specifically?"

“Chiefly this: under a highly centralized planned economy, firms lack autonomy and depend on government; fuzzy property rights mean diffuse accountability; egalitarian distribution breeds indolence.” He was pleased with his own summary.

“If those problems stem from the system,” Anderson said, “isn’t the logical cure to reform the system itself—in other words, privatization?”

“In theory, yes. In practice, it’s another matter.”

“I don’t follow.”

“At bottom, any reform is a reallocation of interests; vested interests inevitably resist. They’re caught in a bind. On one hand, the clear-sighted among them see the system has lost vitality and that reform is unavoidable. On the other, reform negates them. Think about it: if China truly privatizes, doesn’t that amount to admitting their ‘revolution’ produced historical regression? Then what was the revolution for?” Shen Hong’s voice had heated.

Anderson nodded. “That reality may be too harsh for your authorities. But thinking of the country’s future, they have every reason to face it.”

“They lack the courage,” Shen Hong said, smiling coldly. “They habitually place Party interests above the interests of the people and will never sacrifice Party interests for the common good. Hence their stance on reform is riddled with contradiction: they want growth but refuse to shake the system and surrender vested interests—of the Party and of individuals. The result is neither fish nor fowl. That, in essence, is what they call ‘socialism with Chinese characteristics.’”

“Then you believe China’s way out lies in privatization?”

“Frankly, I have little affection for it. Culturally, it mobilizes human potential by pandering to private desire—the ‘invisible hand’ at work. From the standpoint of human nature, it’s regrettable. But we have no other choice.” He had all but forgotten Li Na, left cooling on the sidelines.

“I’ve spoken with some of your professors,” Anderson said. “They seem wary of the kind of reform you describe. Generally they favor gradualism—for example, introducing a shareholding system to shift property rights step by step. How do you see that?”

“A choice of necessity—nothing more,” Shen Hong said curtly.

Anderson studied him, nodding. “Are there many in China who share your view?”

“So long as one honestly reckons with China’s realities, it isn’t hard to reach,” Shen Hong said, cutting a sidelong smile at Li Na.

“You’re candid and you think for yourself, Mr. Shen,” Anderson said. “My purpose in China is likewise to assess prospects and pathways for privatizing Chinese enterprises. I’m inclined to take your girlfriend’s suggestion seriously.” He glanced at Li Na.

Ignored so long, Li Na wore a stiff smile and a dazed look. Knowing she hadn’t followed the exchange, Shen Hong let out a quiet, derisive breath and asked Anderson, “What would you need from me?”

“If possible, I’d like you to serve as my interpreter and assistant and accompany me to the south,” Anderson said.

Shen Hong felt a sharp stamp on his foot—Li Na had understood as well. He ignored her and said, “I’m sorry. Much as the proposal interests me, I have a great deal of my own work to do.”

“In that case, I can only express my regret,” Anderson said with a shrug.

Shen Hong didn’t look at Li Na, but he could feel her staring, eyes wide. With a touch of malicious pleasure, he added lightly to Anderson, “My regrets as well.”

The sky was a flat, pale blue. The sun itself was out of sight, yet the light was a blinding white. Yifu shuffled across campus with Lin Lin, eyes half-squinted, a lazy look on his face.

“With sunshine like this, and you still spend all day in bed,” Lin Lin teased, slipping her arm through his and pressing her cheek to his shoulder.

Yifu gave a wan smile and said nothing. He hadn’t wanted to stroll at all, nor expected Lin Lin to come to the dorm at a time like this. When she knocked he’d been sleeping soundly; even now his body felt slack, as if he hadn’t fully woken.

“How beautiful the campus is. We haven’t been here in so long,” Lin Lin murmured, glancing up at him.

It was beautiful; Yifu could smell the spring he knew so well. In the hard white light, the palace-style buildings, the budding trees, and the grass just turning green all held a quiet, rough-hewn poise. But he knew this wasn’t about scenery. Lin Lin had said she had something important to tell him. What—another talk about his job hunt? He’d asked twice already; she’d only smiled mysteriously and refused to say. She loved such little games. Once they’d been charming; too often and they palled. Still, she didn’t look upset, so it likely wasn’t bad news.

They passed the North Pavilion and took the narrow path they always used. In the grove to their left they’d shared their first kiss; beyond it, the lawn... It felt long ago. Yifu had no mind for nostalgia. He just wanted her to say her piece so he could crawl back under his quilt.

Lin Lin fell silent, leaning more tightly against him. His arm felt as if a heavy sack were hanging from it; walking grew awkward. He meant to shift her off a little but couldn’t bring himself to. Lin Lin was gentle and kind—and very sensitive. She often said he no longer cared for her the way he once had. True, they saw less of each other lately, and he had told her he was busy with his thesis and asked her not to drop by without a reason. She’d said nothing then, but he knew what she must have thought. He wasn’t one for clinging romance. When he saw campus couples practically sewn together at the hip, he felt suffocated for them. Lin Lin, though, liked that sort of thing; she often said their love had never been romantic. But such romance was more than he could stomach.

They came out by the statue of Cai Yuanpei. Two low wooded knolls ringed the triangular patch of ground; over the rise lay Weiming Lake. Lin Lin pointed toward the small grove. “Let’s sit there.”

A bench stood on the slope where they often sat. As soon as Yifu settled, Lin Lin, as always, rested her head on his arm. Irritated, he said, “If you’ve got something to say, say it.”

She lifted her head and looked at him. "First, the good news: my father found me two positions—one at the Machinery Import-Export Company, and another at a foreign-funded telecom firm. Which should I choose?"

Lin Lin studied international trade at Renmin University; her father was a bureau director at the Ministry of Machinery—finding a post was no problem. Yifu had never thought her suited to business. Business required quick, hard choices, even ruthlessness. Lin Lin was gentle and soft-hearted. After hearing her describe the two units, he thought a moment and said, "Take the domestic company. A foreign firm will pay more, but the work will be harder. I'm not sure you'd like it."

"My father says the same. But honestly, I want to try the foreign firm," Lin Lin said, laying her hand over his.

He squeezed her fingers, absent. "Then try it."

She looked at him, disappointment in her eyes. Her lips moved. "Why are you so indifferent to my affairs?"

"How am I indifferent? I told you what I think. If you don't want to hear it, what am I supposed to do?"

"You could at least persuade me. I came because I can't decide on my own," she said, pouting.

He let go of her hand. "If I pushed you, you'd say I didn't respect your opinion. Besides, I don't know either unit. What do you want me to say?"

Lin Lin sighed. "Fine. Then come with me to see them sometime."

Yifu nodded, reluctant, and said nothing.

"What about your plans?" she asked, giving him a quick sidelong look.

"What else? Go out and hunt for a job," he said listlessly. Just saying it made him edgy.

"They all say Beijing is especially hard this year—especially for long-cycle fields like yours," Lin Lin said, glancing at him again.

Catching the meaning in her eyes, Yifu gave a dry laugh. "Nothing to be done. We'll take it step by step. If it doesn't work, I'll go back home."

"If you go, what about me?" Her eyes reddened.

He looked at her and said nothing.

She wiped her eyes. "I went to the hospital yesterday..." She lifted her face to him.

Something in her gaze made him ask, "What for?"

Head lowered, she whispered, "The doctor said... I'm expecting."

"Expecting... what?" He stared, a shadow crossing his brow.

She shot him a glance and, blushing, said, "The doctor says I'm pregnant."

Yifu gaped. "Pregnant? How?"

Seeing his panic, she sighed. "It's true. Three months already, the doctor said... Feel." She took his hand and set it on her belly.

He felt nothing. He had never imagined this. Three months ago her parents had both gone out of town; he had gone to her place with her... their first time. He'd never thought of the consequence.

"What should we do?" Lin Lin asked, lifting her eyes.

His thoughts scattered. He stared at her and threw it back: "What do you think?"

She laid her cheek on his arm and said softly, "We're graduating soon anyway. Why don't we marry after graduation, and then have the baby..." She tilted her face up.

"Marry?" He stared as if at a stranger. "Don't joke. There are still three or four months till graduation, and I don't even have a job. Even if I found one, we wouldn't have housing. Where would we live?"

"We could live with my parents. I'm their only child," Lin Lin said.

"I've said I don't want that—and your parents may not agree, either." The thought of marriage filled him with dread. Though they had been together more than two years, marriage had always felt far away; he had never seriously considered it.

Lin Lin thought awhile and got nowhere. She looked to him for help. "Then what do you say?"

Yifu sighed. "What else? We'll have to go to the hospital."

"Have it... taken care of? I'm scared. They say you need a certificate for that kind of procedure—where would we get one?" She clutched his arm, face anxious.

"I... don't know," he said with a bitter smile.

"Think—there must be some other way," she pleaded, gripping him tighter, as if to a lifeline.

He avoided her eyes and sighed. "At this point... what other way is there?"

Her gaze dimmed; her face went ashen. "We have to find some way. Otherwise, what am I to do?"

He managed only a helpless smile.

Her eyes reddened again and tears spilled.

Seeing she was about to cry, Yifu flustered. "What are you doing—no one's bullying you," he said, reaching to steady her shoulders.

She pushed his hand away. "Don't touch me. You don't care about me anyway!" And she broke into sobs.

"I do care," he said, weary. "I... just don't know what to do."

She lifted her tear-filled eyes, pained. "No—you don't care. Now I see it. Tell me—what have I ever asked you to do for me? I always thought you were someone I could rely on... and now, at a time like this, you're so cold, so heartless..." Her sobs grew harder.

He could only stare. His mind was a muddle. So this is how she sees me. Perhaps she was right. For all that Lin Lin came from a good family and had many suitors, she had chosen him—a penniless boy from the countryside. They had never had a love like in novels, but no other girl had moved him as she did. He hadn't imagined love would come with such weight—much less that this would happen so suddenly. And in such matters he had no experience. Chu Guang often said he had sloping shoulders, unfit to bear responsibility—whether to society or to the person beside him. Perhaps he was right. In real life, he was a helpless man.

Lin Lin was still crying. Guilt stirred in him. He stroked her trembling shoulder and said gently, "Don't cry. I'll go with you to the hospital."

She looked at him, stopped crying, and asked, "When?"

He reached to wipe her cheeks. "Any time."

She rubbed her swollen eyes and settled her head back on his arm.

He drew her close and kissed her gently on the forehead.

"Have you seen my girlfriend?" Gao Peng asked, eyes smiling as he planted himself in front of Jin Zhe.

In a suit, Jin Zhe was combing his hair in the mirror and barely registered the question. "The girl who was with you yesterday?" he said absently.

"That's her. Pretty, isn't she?" Gao Peng beamed, swollen with pride.

Jin Zhe hesitated. He had seen Gao Peng with a girl—Chu Guang had even nudged him to take note—but he was extremely nearsighted. He hadn't made out her eyes or nose, let alone judged her looks. Knowing what Gao Peng wanted to hear, he said diplomatically, "Looked very pretty to me."

Gao Peng smiled, still unsatisfied. "How does she compare with Dong Xue?"

Dong Xue was Huang Kai's girlfriend, widely acknowledged as a beauty. Gao and Huang were in the same field under different advisers. Outwardly cordial, they were rivals underneath. Gao was taller and more fine-featured; Huang was shorter but solidly built. Gao liked to dash off bits of doggerel; Huang's scholarship was steadier. In love, Gao had repeatedly come up short, while Huang had found a girl to be envied. The slight had weighed on Gao for a long time; now that he had met his ideal, he was understandably elated. Jin Zhe understood and, not wishing to contradict him, said vaguely, "She seems more refined than Dong Xue."

"Everyone says so," Gao said, satisfied. "But I think my girl's bearing is better. You know, Dong Xue comes from a petty-bourgeois family—there's always that trace of petty-bourgeois vulgarity. My girl's different: both parents are proper intellectuals; her father's a professor. A girl from such a family—of course she's different."

Jin Zhe smiled, shook out his long, thin legs, checked the crease in his trousers, and polished his shoes with a cloth. "So how are things between you two?" he asked.

"What do you think? Yesterday, when we were walking, she took my arm first. Later I put my arm around her waist and she didn't pull away. The feeling—wonderful!" Gao said, intoxicated by his own story.

He was exaggerating, Jin Zhe thought, but he didn't spoil the mood. "Good. Sounds promising. I have to see my adviser now. I'll hear the rest of your romance later."

Deflated, Gao muttered, "I'm going over to her campus now. I'll tell you afterward."

Leaving the dorm, Jin Zhe set off on foot for his adviser's apartment. The thought of seeing Wang Xuewen made him feel as greasy as a slab of canteen pork. Wang had called about his thesis. He'd turned in a first draft half a month earlier. In truth, the "thesis" was the introductory chapter to a monograph he was

writing, *A Phenomenology of Tragedy*. The book's theoretical base was Husserl's phenomenology; though he had made cosmetic adjustments and even forced in a few quotations from Marx and Lenin, that kind of sheep's-head sign over dog meat was unlikely to fool Wang.

He won't let me submit this. He may even make me rewrite the whole thing, Jin Zhe thought, irritation rising. Wang had already summoned him three times. Each time the man put on a show of openness and breadth, but who couldn't hear what he really meant? If he wrote it exactly as Wang wanted—what would that be? Wang's background was Marxism-Leninism.⁶ In recent years, bowing to fashion, he had dabbled in some Western thought and styled himself a "sky-patching" reformer, but in his bones he was pure Marx-Lenin. Academically he was laughably left; as a person, small-minded. A senior from the previous cohort had refused to bend and ended up without a degree at all. In a fury, he had walked away without even taking the completion certificate and gone into business; rumor had it he'd done well. A passionate, quick-tempered man—but still, three years of graduate school for nothing. That was something Jin Zhe would not do. Like it or not, Wang still held his fate. Head-on defiance brought no benefit. And for a thesis? Not worth it. The whole point of writing one was to get the degree. If he could just get it through, what did it matter how it was written?

Only it wasn't so simple. The defense committee wouldn't be decided by Wang alone. Wang's reputation in the department stank. The senior professors barely took him seriously, and even the newly retained lecturers clapped him on the shoulder and called him "Old Wang." With a supervisor like that, a student's days could not be easy. Others could lift their chins when naming their advisers; Jin Zhe was always ashamed to say Wang's name, and if he did, he hurried to add qualifiers to draw a line. Besides, every year at the master's defenses, Wang's students rarely passed. It was obvious—people looked down on them and didn't trust them—so he couldn't simply do as Wang said. Three years under him, and from Wang he had learned precious little. The man was forever urging him to read the Marxist-Leninist classics; who had the heart for that now? Those canonized texts had little market among students. If someone said, "Your Marxism-Leninism is pretty solid," it was a backhanded insult—meaning you were low-level and lacked class. This thesis set out to approach tragedy through Husserl—nothing to do with Marx and Lenin. As far as he recalled, their "theory of tragedy" boiled down to a single line: "the contradiction between history's necessary demands and the practical impossibility of fulfilling them." Scholars of Marxist literary theory treated that sentence as scripture and dared not step beyond it. Husserl and Marxism were worlds apart. To force his thesis into a Marxist frame, as Wang insisted—what would that be? Even if Wang contrived to push it through, the other professors would laugh.

Rotten luck, landing an adviser like this, he sighed, regretting both field and choice. Back then he'd been opportunistic: a niche specialty, an adviser without great renown—easier to get in. Who could have guessed the adviser's name would be so foul? Classmates joked he'd stumbled onto a pirate ship; he hadn't minded at the time, but now he had to admit it was true. And now what? How many

people in China still made their living off Marx and Lenin? Marx, Engels, Lenin, Stalin, Mao—none of them truly versed in literature and art; a few stray remarks in a few essays had kept tens of thousands busy for decades. Wang counted among the standouts of that tribe. Say what you will, to reach associate professor at Beida by forty meant he wasn't a complete fool. But what of it? Whatever happened, Jin Zhe would not take that road.

If scholarship has to be done like this, what's the point? He walked on, more dejected. He had always held scholarship sacred, yet sometimes it felt utterly pointless. In the current climate, serious work was nearly impossible. In the classroom and textbooks, it all resolved to the same catechism: "matter determines consciousness," "the economic base determines the superstructure"—the basic worldview from which every discipline could be deduced. Literature, ethics, politics, law—no different. A literary-theory textbook could become a decent ethics textbook simply by swapping out "literature" for "morality." In the social sciences, one formula fit all. Even if you had an original insight, you had to wrap it in a Marxist coat to get it accepted; otherwise the official press and the Marx-eaters would attack. The wisest path was: the road is broad; we walk separately. In fields far from current affairs—textual scholarship, classical literature—that wasn't hard. But literary theory and aesthetics were close to reality and strictly policed as ideology; there was no dodging.

But if not scholarship, what else can I do? He squinted at the photos in a display case and felt at sea.

Wang Xuewen lived in Building Seventeen opposite the Educational Technology Center, flanked by two identical blocks in a horseshoe. The three-story old buildings were meant for single or newly married faculty. Wang had long been an associate professor and long married; in theory he should have had a suite. For some reason he still lived in two old rooms inside; rumor had it one was borrowed. Each visit left Jin Zhe with the same impression: pitifully ineffectual and spineless—stirring in him a mix of contempt and pity.

Wang lived on the second floor. The stairwell was dim; both sides were cluttered with cartons, gas stoves, and odds and ends, leaving only a narrow passage to squeeze through. Jin Zhe tried not to come unless he had to. Every time, a nameless oppression descended, and his faith in scholarship wavered.

When Wang opened the door, Jin Zhe's face rearranged itself into a respectful smile. "Teacher Wang," he said, eyes drifting to the gold tooth in Wang's mouth.

Wang's bronze-dark face was expressionless. "Come in."

Jin Zhe was used to the neither-warm-nor-cold manner, though it always jarred. He steeled himself and followed into the room that served as both study and bedroom. It was small: a spring mattress, a desk, two ranks of shelves—most of the space gone. But it was tidy and bookish—no doubt thanks to the young, pretty wife.

"I asked you here to talk about the thesis," Wang said, lifting the draft and peering over it at Jin Zhe.

Jin Zhe swallowed, pasted on a smile, and gazed devoutly at a man he did not respect.

As Wang spoke, Jin Zhe's smile grew more and more strained, until even his facial muscles felt stiff. As expected, Wang rejected his views. Heidegger, Husserl—unscientific in their interpretations of tragedy, theoretically limited, essentially anti-Marxist. The thesis not only failed to take a critical stance; it treated them as classics and thus reached numerous erroneous conclusions.

"The Marxist classics contain many brilliant discussions of tragedy. If you want to study tragedy, how can you not read them carefully?" Wang said, displeased.

Jin Zhe's throat felt dry. "I have read much of that material," he managed. "Their understanding is profound, but countless others have already researched it. I'm not opposing them. In writing this piece, I meant to shift the vantage point—to confirm the classic Marxist theory from a new angle."

Wang cleared his throat. "I don't object to your studying tragedy, nor to your studying Husserl or Heidegger. But you know, in the social sciences the key is a correct point of departure—in the old terms, standpoint. Whether you take Marxism as your point of departure, or some other 'ism'—existentialism, Nietzsche, and so on—determines the success or failure of your research. There's a nasty trend on campus: some people bristle the moment Marxism is mentioned, branding those who study it as conservatives. In truth, they don't understand real Marxism at all—many haven't even read the originals. It's childish—ridiculous."

He means me, Jin Zhe thought, but he didn't argue. "I've gone through the reading list you gave me," he said instead. "I still feel my theoretical grounding is inadequate."

Wang nodded, satisfied. "Good. But the key is application. Learn to use what you've absorbed to tackle scholarly problems. That way you'll be invincible—and write work of real value."

Jin Zhe allowed himself an inward, sarcastic smile—Half a lifetime in Marxist studies and not one truly solid paper to show for it—but aloud he probed, "Teacher Wang, do you think I should scrap this and start over?"

Wang considered. "That's for you to decide. Tragedy is certainly worth studying. But your viewpoint needs a thorough change... Otherwise, it will be hard to get past the other professors as well." He shot a meaningful look.

Jin Zhe caught the hint. "I'll revise as you suggest. It's just—between job-hunting and the thesis, time is tight."

"There are more than two months before defenses. Enough time. If not, we can delay," Wang said.

Just then Wang's wife came in. Jin Zhe's impression of her was far kinder than of her husband; he couldn't imagine how she'd fallen for a man like Wang. She nodded. He stood and smiled back, eyes following her out.

"Any other questions?" Wang asked. He was frowning at Jin Zhe, who felt awkward and said, "I'd like to read more in this area, but I'm not sure what."

Wang thought, then took a book from the shelf and handed it over. "This is a new monograph of mine. There's a chapter on Marx's theory of tragedy. Take it—it may give you ideas."

Jin Zhe put on his best grin and accepted it. One glance at the cover and he knew which book it was. Wang had spent five years writing it, and no press would take it. He'd found one willing to print if he raised five thousand yuan and guaranteed purchase of five hundred copies. Somehow he'd managed, and the book had appeared. But it was stuffed with clichés. Beyond furnishing Wang with fodder for a promotion to full professor, what scholarly value could it have? Outwardly, Jin Zhe assumed an awed expression. "Wonderful news that it's out," he said.

Wang sighed. "Books of real scholarly value always find their way to print. This one was subsidized by the Education Commission's Social Sciences Fund."

"Would you sign it for me, Teacher Wang?" Jin Zhe asked with a smile.

"All right." Wang drew a pen and wrote carefully on the flyleaf.

Watching the solemn performance, Jin Zhe found him both pitiable and ridiculous. He received the book with a pious face, leafed through it ceremoniously, and put it away with care.

"The views in this book aren't necessarily all correct—treat it as a reference. Most important is to read the originals," Wang reminded him once more.

Jin Zhe nodded, rose, and took his leave.

Chu Guang handed his last five yuan to Song Yu—already in the queue—and went to claim a round table. The place was small, quiet, tasteful: white walls with sconces, a handsome chandelier, yellow curtains at the windows. He came often enough, but the faint, unfamiliar tang—halal cooking—still took some getting used to.

There weren't many in line; soon it was Song Yu's turn. Chu Guang joined him to carry back yogurt drinks, peanuts, and sunflower seeds.

"Fifty fen left—yours," Song Yu said, passing over a few crumpled notes.

"Why not just spend it?" Chu Guang didn't take the money.

"That's the cap here—what can you buy?" Song Yu set the change on the table and sat. "Next time we raise the stakes and hit Yanchunyuan for a proper meal. Dare you?"

"Why wouldn't I?" Chu Guang said, though he looked glum. He'd thought he had this bet in the bag. Song Yu was half a head taller, but his arms were weak; arm-wrestling, grip tests—no contest. Weightlifting, he'd assumed, was just another kind of strength. The dorm had said he'd win. Yet in the gym he couldn't even get the sixty-kilo barbell up. In the end he'd surrendered his last five yuan for the treat.

"Told you you couldn't beat me. You just wouldn't listen," Song Yu said, smug over his yogurt.

Unwilling to look at that smug face, Chu Guang turned away, glanced at two foreigners nearby, and said, "It's pleasant enough in here—nice atmosphere."

"Pity we didn't invite a couple of girls," Song Yu said, eyes already roving.

He fancied himself the handsomest man in the department and was forever bragging about his conquests, as if every pretty girl on campus were his for the taking. Chu Guang was unconvinced. True, Song Yu had a tall straight frame—though the legs were short; a square face with regular features—though the eyes were small and single-lidded; and that perpetual half-smile that leached any real edge from him. With that merely passable face he strutted on and off campus, light on substance. But girls liked his type—what could you do?

A few exchanges in and their talk was already misfiring; yet silence would be awkward. Chu Guang only wanted to finish his drink and go.

“What do you think of that girl?” Song Yu jerked his chin toward the door, grinning.

Following his gaze, Chu Guang saw a girl in a wine-red trench coat—tall and slender, glasses on her nose, a quiet, refined look. From the sly glint in Song Yu’s eyes, Chu Guang knew exactly what he was up to. He smiled faintly and said, offhand, “She’ll do.”

“How about I call her over?” Song Yu said, glancing at him.

He wanted to show off. “If you’ve got the ability, be my guest,” Chu Guang replied coolly.

“You think I don’t? Let’s bet on it.”

“How?” Chu Guang asked despite himself.

“If I get her to come, you buy her a yogurt—and treat me to a stir-fry later. If I fail, I’ll pay,” Song Yu said.

Chu Guang would have loved to see him face-plant for once, to puncture that swagger. But Song Yu looked so sure of himself that doubt crept in. “Maybe you already know her,” he said.

“Only an idiot would,” Song Yu snorted. “Well? Dare you?”

The challenge pricked Chu Guang’s pride. “All right—bet it is.”

Song Yu popped a peanut, grinned. “Watch me.”

As Song Yu headed for the girl, a thought jolted Chu Guang. He patted his pocket and felt a chill. He’d come out with only that five yuan; aside from the coins on the table, he hadn’t a cent. If Song Yu really brought her over, he’d make a fool of himself. He watched anxiously. She didn’t look cheap; those clear eyes were perhaps too guileless. Song Yu was an old hand; there was little he wouldn’t try. Let her not fall for it, he prayed.

Song Yu spoke to her; it was too far to hear. She started, shook her head—a refusal. Song Yu kept smiling and talking. She looked perplexed, shook her head again. Chu Guang exhaled—there was hope. But Song Yu still hovered, importunate. What a thick skin.

Just as his patience frayed, Song Yu came back leading the girl. Beaming, he winked furiously at Chu Guang. Another defeat. Disappointment settled—on the girl’s behalf and his own.

“This is my classmate, Chu Guang,” Song Yu said.

The girl smiled, showing neat white teeth. “I’m Li Dongmei, from East Languages,” she said with easy poise.

Her smile was natural and sweet. Flustered, Chu Guang managed a strained one in return, then turned to Song Yu. "I'll go buy a yogurt."

"Wait," Song Yu said, seating her. "Miss, what would you like?"

Clutching his few jiao notes, Chu Guang watched her, worried she might ask for more than he could pay.

She thought a moment. "Just a yogurt."

He breathed easier and was about to stand when Song Yu pressed him down. "I'll go," he said, and before Chu Guang could react, he was off.

It felt ignominious. Before a girl, Chu Guang wanted to be dashing too, but in such moments he always grew stiff. He disdained Song Yu in many ways, yet in this respect he had to concede him the field.

He stole a look at the girl. She seemed not yet twenty, with fine fair skin—like a southern girl. Not exactly pretty, but distinctive, with nothing frivolous or shallow about her. He must have tricked her over; it's not that she fancies him, Chu Guang thought. If she knew what he's really like, she wouldn't be here.

"What language are you studying?" he asked, mustering his courage—and immediately felt clumsy.

"Vietnamese," she said, glancing from Song Yu in the queue back to him, answering absently.

Seeing her attention elsewhere, he deflated and forced out another question: "And what will you do with it?"

She shook her head. "Hard to say. Whatever you learn, it's useful," she said just as casually, then turned back to watch Song Yu.

Her indifference pricked his pride. The little warmth that had stirred in him went cold. He set his face and bent over the peanuts, saying nothing more.

Song Yu returned not only with yogurt, but with beef jerky and two bags of sour plums. The girl's face lit up. Watching, Chu Guang thought, He really does have a nose for girls' tastes—and lays it on thick.

Then Song Yu launched into conversation—warm, intimate, like lovers well along. He was in his element: witty, glib, rakishly nonchalant. The girl seemed charmed, eyes smiling, laughter bubbling now and then.

Chu Guang sat on needles. Song Yu's animated mug and the girl's tender glances flashed before him; her lilting laugh pricked at his heart. It was all clichés—plus that body his parents had given him—yet somehow she was being swept along. Girls these days are so shallow, so vulgar—what can you do? They prize a handsome face, money, power. But what do they know of the soul inside that face and cash? If I were a millionaire with status today, then what? Would she still snub me for not being good-looking? Her tender gaze would swivel to me at once. Women are weaker; they stake their hopes on others and grow the more snobbish and shortsighted. But when success finally comes, a girl like this won't interest me anymore.

"Many things in this world are fated," Song Yu declaimed. "Some are born for scholarship, some to hold office, some to make big money."

"What were you born for?" the girl asked, curious, already halfway taken in by his odd philosophy.

"To make big money, of course! My ideal is to become China's Sir Yue-kong Pao," Song Yu said with a confident smile.

Chu Guang sneered inwardly. Boasting like that and not even blushing. He—Pao?

"When I am the next Pao," Song Yu went on, "the first thing I'll do is donate a library to Peking University! It won't be a whit less grand than the National Library. Ten billion yuan should do it—and by then that'll be pocket change to me. I won't even slap my name on it—that'd be vulgar. Our level is not something ordinary capitalists can match." He rambled on, as if his fortune were already made.

The more he preened, the more repulsed Chu Guang felt. He'd heard it all before and usually took it as a joke—laugh and let it pass. Today it grated. Watching the girl listen so earnestly, he almost pitied her.

"This fellow here was born for scholarship," Song Yu said, clapping Chu Guang's shoulder. "He's published in top national journals."

"Really?" The girl cast Chu Guang a brief look.

Heat rose in his cheeks. He thought to explain, then remembered she wasn't interested and felt a stab of anger at Song Yu's mischief—deliberately setting him up to look foolish.

Song Yu steered the talk elsewhere and left Chu Guang out. He couldn't wedge in—and didn't want to. They weren't his kind of people; there was nothing to say. He was superfluous here. Best to leave.

"Sorry—I've another engagement with a friend. I'll head off," he said to Song Yu, keeping his eyes carefully away from the girl.

"What engagement? You never said," Song Yu asked, puzzled.

Chu Guang forced a smile, offered no explanation, gave the girl a restrained nod, turned on his heel, and strode out of the restaurant.