

ent kind of person. How could she not be upset? So after she and her husband talked it over she had planned to quit the job, for she'd rather be a little poor and wait for something else to come along. Then this afternoon when she had seen how high Erbao's fever was, and how there was no money at home to buy medicine, her emotions got the better of her and she was prepared to sacrifice herself, to give it another try, at most to work for a month for Erbao's sake, and borrow some money to bring home this evening. But now she made up her mind not to condone this sort of lifestyle, because even if she saved Erbao, at the very least her own spirit would be destroyed, maybe even her entire future. The more she weighed this, the more alarmed she became; she feared that when the time came she would no longer be in control of herself and her very character might be altered. And anyway, weren't life and death a matter of fate? Maybe Erbao's illness wasn't that all that serious, and even if she had the money to buy him medicine there was no guarantee he'd ever get better; even if he died, that was fate too. Besides, in the future she could always have another child. . . . With that thought, it was as though a great weight had been lifted from her heart, and she instantly felt relieved. She let out a sigh and looked up at the dark blue sky covered in golden yellow stars that made the dim light of night seem particularly serene. Around her the air was extremely refreshing. At this moment, there was not a single distracting thought in her mind, she only felt as quiet as the night, and she was happy. She was willing to give up on ever finding a job, because no matter what kind of work she might find, she would need to have several outfits made and to buy several pairs of leather shoes, and if you added all that up, her salary might not even be enough, much less enough to help out with household expenses. Her whole body relaxed considerably, free of worries, free of anxieties. She had it all figured out. She stood up and walked briskly toward the front gate, not turning back even once to look at the neon-lit dance floor. She went straight out the main gate and hailed a rickshaw. As she headed home, calmly facing the evening breeze, her mood was completely different from what it had been on her way here. Now she felt only that she was a rather fortunate person.

10
Zong Pu
(b. 1928)

Zoice of the renowned May Fourth "New Woman" writer Feng Yuanjun (1900–1974), Zong Pu (Feng Zhongpu) was born in Beijing but spent much of her youth in Kunming, where her family had evacuated in the wake of the Japanese invasion in 1937. Her father, Feng Youlan, was an eminent neo-Confucian philosopher trained at Beijing University and later under John Dewey in the United States. Schooled from an early age in classical Chinese literature, Zong Pu graduated from the prestigious Qinghua University in 1951, having earned a degree in English literature. It was around this time that she first began writing fiction, occasionally publishing short stories in the local periodical press.

In the years following the establishment of the People's Republic of China, Zong Pu landed a job at the state-funded Chinese Federation of Writers and served on the editorial staff of *Literary Gazette* and *World Literature*. Later, she was appointed as a research fellow at the Foreign Literature Institute of the Academy of Social Sciences, where she worked until her retirement in 1988.

"Red Beans," the story that brought her national literary fame, was first published in the prestigious magazine *People's Literature* in 1957 at the height of the Hundred Flowers Movement, a campaign that called on artists and writers to give voice to the darker and more contradictory facets of contemporary socialist society. Set on the eve of the Communist victory, the story revolves around two college sweethearts whose relationship painfully unravels as the young woman comes to realize how little their visions of the future share in common. While the author's sympathies clearly lie with the progressive female protagonist Jiang Mei, the psychological anguish the character undergoes as she weighs the merits of pursuing a fulfilling personal relationship and contributing to society highlights how individual desires and collective ideals are not always perfectly aligned. Unfortunately, at a moment of highly volatile cultural politics, no sooner was the story published than it was attacked by party

critics as inappropriate subject matter for socialist-era literature and labeled a "poisonous weed" for dwelling on the pull of romantic love.

Largely because of this controversial story, Zong Pu was branded a rightist and, like a great many others who had boldly voiced "dissident" views in the mid-1950s, she was obliged to make public self-criticisms. As further punishment, she was eventually "sent down" to Hebei province in the late fifties to undergo reform and reeducation through labor on a state farm, but the experience does not appear to have significantly shaken her commitment to current literary policy. The novel she completed during this period, *Peach Garden Maiden Marries Wogu*, upholds the prevailing precepts of socialist realism in narrativizing the theme of peasant participation in the collectivization campaign. Over the next decade, Zong Pu's literary output also included a series of lyrical essays that fuse her classical training with topical concerns.

The upheavals of the Cultural Revolution marked both a period of intense personal suffering and a long hiatus in Zong Pu's literary career, but she made a strong comeback as an award-winning practitioner of "scar literature" in the early post-Mao period with such soul-searching stories and novellas as "Melody in Dreams" (1978). Subsequent works, such as her Kafkaesque "Who am I?", also interrogate the vicissitudes of recent Chinese history, but are marked by more self-conscious formal innovation and thus exemplify the modernist trend that characterized Chinese fiction in the 1980s.

Red Beans

(1957)

The sky was overcast and snowflakes were swirling around; the cover of snow softened the winter's desolation. Jiang Mei was carrying a small case along a path that wound through the university campus. The artificial hills through which the path led were unchanged, and the wisteria trellis could still just be made out behind them. The maples in the little wood were now all heavy with the white snow. It was, in the words of the poem, "as if suddenly one evening the spring wind came and all the pear trees burst forth in blossom."

The snowflakes flying into her face refreshed and exhilarated Jiang Mei. She remembered the day six years ago when she had left the university to start

work: she had walked along the very same path. A smile crept over her thin lips; her pace quickened unconsciously and she soon reached the West Block, the dormitory that had been her home for four years.

On entering the building Jiang Mei put down her case, took off her scarf, and shook the snow from it. Everything was silent. She had heard that the building now only housed unmarried teachers and university employees, very different from the days when it had been a student dormitory. A sign on the door of the room where the old caretaker, Lao Zhao, used to live caught her eye: RECEPTION.

"Is there anyone here?" Jiang Mei called out as she looked around. It was all the same, so familiar: the broad staircase and the dim corridor lit only by a solitary globe. A sign on the notice board announced a Youth League meeting that night, and next to it there was a poster about a union election written on bright red paper. These were the only things that gave some life and color to the drab interior.

"Who is it?" a quavering voice asked from inside the reception room. The door opened and an old man dressed in a neat cadre's suit appeared.

"Zhao," Jiang Mei cried in delight. She ran over and hugged him. "You're still here?"

"Is that Jiang Mei?" Zhao rubbed his eyes in amazement and took a good look at Jiang Mei. "It really is you. A while ago the University Services Center told me that a new cadre had been assigned to the Party Committee, and told me to get a room ready.

"They did say that the new cadre was one of our graduates, but I had no idea it would be you. It's been six years now, but you haven't changed a bit. I don't know why, but young people today just don't seem to age. I'll take you up to your room. What a coincidence! It's the same room you lived in when you were a student here."

The caretaker chatted away as they walked up the stairs. As Jiang Mei listened, the feel of the banister under her hand brought her straight back into contact with her student days again.

Her old room was unchanged, except that one of the beds had been taken out and some other furniture put in its place. From the window you could see the little wood and even the small lake beyond it that was covered in lotuses in summer. When Jiang Mei looked around the room, her eyes fell on a crucifix hanging on the wall. The color of the cross was much darker now. The sight of it hit her hard. She felt dizzy for a moment but then steadied herself to ask Lao Zhao, "Why is that still here?"

"At first they said we should get rid of all superstition, so we started taking

them down. Later they said they should be regarded as works of art, so we just left the rest alone."

"Why? Why did you have to leave this one?" She gazed blankly at the cross and then sat down on the unmade bed.

"Another coincidence, that's all." Lao Zhao picked up the cleaning rag that had been left on the desk. "I've got the room ready. You just settle in and take it easy while I go and get some boiled water for your Thermos."

After Lao Zhao had gone, Jiang Mei stood up and stretched out her hand to feel the crucifix, but pulled it back as if scared that she might cause pain by touching the wounds. She just stared at the wall. Then suddenly she grasped the right hand of the figure on the cross and gave a pull. The crucifix swung open like a door to reveal a small hole in the wall. Jiang Mei stood up on tiptoe and looked in. Her face turned a ghostly pale. "It's still here," she muttered to herself. Carefully she lifted a little black velvet box that was sitting on an ivory base out of the niche.

She sat down on the bed and opened the box with a shaking hand. Two red love beans sat in the box on a delicate silver ring like two drops of blood. They were lustrous with a cool, fresh glow. The passing years had left no mark on them.

Jiang Mei knew how much happiness and sorrow was contained in this little box. She picked the two red beans up, and as she did the past seemed to float up in front of her like a cloud; tears blurred her eyes.

It had all started eight years ago. Jiang Mei had just turned twenty and she was in the second year of university. It was the unforgettable year of 1948: that bitter, exciting year of tears and decision. Before 1948 Jiang Mei's life had been just like a calm brook flowing undisturbed along a mountain valley, unruffled by strong currents. Her childhood had been comfortable at first. Her father had been a university professor before working for the government. One day, when Jiang Mei was only five, he had gone off to the office and never returned. She remembered being sent off to live with an aunt for a month and when she came back home, she discovered that her pretty mother had become haggard, with huge, sad eyes; she seemed to have aged at least ten years. They said that her father had died suddenly of acute enteritis.

Her father's death had not interrupted Jiang Mei's education. At high school she had a few very close friends and they would often chatter till the small hours. But when she got to the university, she found that the students only turned up for lectures and disappeared afterward. Unless you were involved in extracurricular activities, you would never even know the names of your fellow students apart from those who lived in the same dormitory.

Jiang Mei had spent her university days in the classroom and playing the piano, and her evenings reading in the library. On Saturdays she would go home, always being greeted by her mother on the steps with their pots of well-tended oleanders on either side. Life for Jiang Mei then had been as remote from the world's troubles as those pink oleanders.

She remembered another snowy day like today, just after the Chinese New Year of 1948. She was just leaving the practice studio, still humming the tune she had been playing on the piano. The snow made her feel buoyant, and she had an urge to shake the heavily laden branches of the pines that lined the path back to the dormitory and make the whole world dance in a whirl of snow. As she stretched out her hand, she felt embarrassed and stopped. Instead, she brushed her hair with her hand and made sure the old-fashioned hair clip that her mother had found in a clothes chest a few days before was in place. The clip was made up of two wires of black and white beads on which two red love beans were attached. Her new roommate, Xiao Su, liked it and made her wear it.

A young man hurried along the path toward the studio. He was tall and thin, dressed in a gray silk scholar's gown with a blue cotton jacket over it. He was looking down, his eyes were fixed a few feet in front of him; he seemed completely oblivious to everything. Perhaps it was the air of excitement and energy about Jiang Mei or her glowing cheeks that broke his concentration and made him look up at her. His face was delicate and ivory-colored, with clear and regular features. His eyes were large and had a mysterious, dreamlike quality about them. Jiang Mei thought that although he had looked up, he had not really seen her. It made her feel sad.

That night Jiang Mei lay sleepless on her bed. Images kept flashing through her head: she thought of her mother, of how they had kept each other going over the years, and of how little joy there had been in her mother's life. It was as though some unknown sorrow had swept over her, leaving her ebony hair gray and lifeless. Her mother despised officials and the rich, and Jiang Mei had inherited this feeling, and the aloofness it brought with it. This aloofness now seemed ridiculous.

She knew that the reason she found it funny had to do with Xiao Su. Xiao Su was Jiang Mei's new roommate, and though they had not been together for very long, they were already good friends. Xiao Su had said that Jiang Mei was like someone from another world. She had used the word "aloof," and said that it was both a good and a bad thing. Jiang Mei did not really understand what she meant. Now, for some reason or other, all of these thoughts were floating around in her head.

The room felt large and empty. Xiao Su still had not come back, and Jiang Mei was anxious to see her roommate's chubby pink face. She was always so comforting, giving Jiang Mei both knowledge and strength. People who studied physics were always clever, Jiang Mei thought, and Xiao Su was a fourth-year physics student now. Yet in Xiao Su's case it was not just that she was a fourth-year physics student. There was something more, something deeper, that Jiang Mei could not quite put her finger on.

Xiao Su opened the door and came in.

"What's this? Still awake, Little Bird?" "Little Bird" was Xiao Su's nickname for Jiang Mei.

"I can't get to sleep. I was hoping you'd come back soon."

"What's wrong?" As she spoke, Xiao Su cut a slice off the large radish that she'd brought back with her and gave it to Jiang Mei.

"I was waiting for the radish, and for you to tell me something." Jiang Mei looked into Xiao Su's open and honest face and thought of how taken her mother had been with Xiao Su when she brought her roommate home with her the week before. Later her mother had told Jiang Mei to do as Xiao Su said, and regard her as an elder sister.

"What do you want me to tell you? Do you want me to be like a kindergarten teacher and tell you a story? Here, I'll give you a little book to read instead."

Jiang Mei took the book that Xiao Su passed to her. It was called *Between Life and Death*.

The two girls sat down together and began reading in silence. Jiang Mei soon found herself in another world. The book described the sufferings of the people of China and their struggle for a new life—a life of material sufficiency and true freedom—the type of life that everyone needed.

"Everyone?" Jiang Mei hugged the book to her chest and thought about what she had just read. For twenty years her life had been like that of one of the pink oleanders on the steps at the front door of her home. Yet, like her mother, Jiang Mei detested the rich and the powerful. Sometimes her mother would comment sadly, "Everyone should be allowed a decent life, no one should be hounded to death." The "everyone" her mother spoke of was the same as the people being spoken about in the book. Yes, life should be for everyone.

"Xiao Su," Jiang Mei broke the silence as she leaned back on her pillow, "even an ordinary person like me wonders about the meaning of life. But I've never come up with any answers. You and now this book have given me something to think about."

"There's much more to learn." Xiao Su looked at her warmly. "You really are a good person. You've helped me forget all about how angry I was when I came in. That fellow Qi Hong in my class really makes me furious."

"Qi Hong? Who's he?"

"He lives in his own dream world, just practicing the piano all the time. He's completely self-centered; no one can make him give a damn about anything."

Xiao Su picked the book up and continued where she had left off. Jiang Mei looked at the book too, but could only see that delicate ivory-colored face as she tried to read.

The snow had stopped falling and the ice had begun to melt—winter was coming to an end. Jiang Mei wore a gray woollen overcoat instead of her black fur one, and with her favorite red scarf on, she looked like a picture of spring. She and Xiao Su were getting busier all the time. Jiang Mei had become involved in the "Everybody Sing" Choral Society, as well as the New Poetry Society. She loved the warm and happy sound of the songs they sang. The roar of the drums at the opening of the "Yellow River Cantata" so excited her that she could barely breathe. In her spare time she read Ai Qing's and Tian Jian's poems, and even wrote some of her own: "Fly, fly, fly to a place of freedom." She became known as "Little Bird" to all of her friends. She felt closer to Xiao Su than ever before, and every morning when she got out of bed she would go over and call out to her "Elder Sister Su" to get up.

Jiang Mei practiced the piano and saw Qi Hong every day, though they had yet to speak to each other. At first they had always passed each other on the pine-lined path. Then it was on the staircase. Later Jiang Mei would walk out after playing to find him leaning on the banister as if he had been there a long time, and always wearing that expression of indifference.

One warm spring day, Jiang Mei walked out of the studio to find Qi Hong standing outside as usual. She had been going through Beethoven's "Moonlight Sonata," but just could not get it right; so she had given up in frustration. Qi Hong was in an unusually amiable mood and he asked her, "Why did you stop?"

"I can't get it right," Jiang Mei replied, somewhat surprised.

"You're probably concentrating too hard on your fingers. Don't think too much about them, just keep your mind on the melody and you'll get it right."

When he sat down at the piano, the icy keys gave forth softness and warmth under his fingers. Anyone else's face would have shown a dreamy absorption in the music, but not Qi Hong's. His spirit seemed to flow in every movement and his eyes were as bright as if he were seeing it all in reality for the very first time.

What type of man is he? Jiang Mei asked herself. *A physicist who plays the piano with such an extraordinary expression.*

After a while Qi Hong stopped, stood up, looked at Jiang Mei, who had been standing by the piano, and gave her a slight smile. "Weren't you listening?"

"Yes, but . . ." She tried to explain. "I was thinking . . ." But just what she had been thinking she would not have said.

"Shall I walk you back?"

"Aren't you going to practice?"

"No, I don't feel like it. It's too nice a day."

That was how they took their first walk together. On their walks they looked at the tender sprigs of jasmine and the lotus leaves floating on the lake. Later they lost themselves in the delicate fragrance of the lotus flowers and the heavy aroma of cassia. Then it was winter again, and the snowflakes danced in the air. The snow and the somber winter days. . . .

They talked about music all the way back. Qi Hong said, "I adore Beethoven. Such a giant. His works are so rich but also so simple. Every note is full of poetry."

Jiang Mei's eyes showed that she understood he meant poetry in the widest sense.

"You like Beethoven too, don't you?" he continued. "They say Chopin couldn't stand Beethoven. He loathed his music."

"Yes, but I like Chopin too."

"So do I. The bittersweet quality of his music. . . . People have so much in common, yet so much separates them." The detached look returned to his face. "Physics and music can transport me to a real world, a scientific and beautiful world, not like the pointless, messy, and foul world we live in."

He saw her to the door of the dormitory, gave a nod, and was gone. He had not even asked her name. For some reason Jiang Mei felt once again the disappointment that she had experienced the first time she saw him.

That evening, when she was on her way back to her room from the library, a soft voice called out from behind her, "Jiang Mei."

"Who is it? Qi Hong?" She turned around and saw his tall, slender form in the shadows.

"How do you know my name?" Qi Hong asked, the moonlight revealing the warm expression on his face.

"How do you know mine?" Jiang Mei replied. She felt as though she had known him for such a long time that she did not need to answer him.

"I've known it all my life," he replied softly.

They stood in silence. The moonlight cast their shadows along the ground. Whenever Jiang Mei came out of the library alone there would always be that soft, warm call. They grew closer to each other, and their walks from the library to her room took longer and longer. Jiang Mei never asked why; she only wished that they could walk even farther, so that their discussions about Beethoven and Chopin, Su Dongpo and Li Shangyin, Keats and Browning would never end. They both loved the Song dynasty poet Su Dongpo's poem, "The River City":

Ten years have passed,
Who lives on, who has died
None can know.
Though not longing,
I can never forget.
A solitary grave so far away,
How can I speak of my sorrow?

They tried to imagine what they would both be like in ten years' time. They spoke of time, space, and the meaning of life. . . .

Once Qi Hong said, "Man lives for freedom. It's a wonderful word. The freedom to be oneself, to do what you want. . . . What do you think of my definition?"

His tone of voice was bantering, but in fact he was being serious.

"But I read in a book that recognition of necessity is the only real freedom." She had been reading *Philosophy for Everyone*. "A person can't just exist for himself. Could you survive if you were alone?"

"Ha!" he commented. "I'd forgotten that you're sharing a room with Xiao Su."

"Yes, and we're the best of friends."

A plum tree in blossom by the path caught his attention, and he said that the word "exciting" should be used to describe it. Jiang Mei agreed, and their discussion on freedom came to an end.

Jiang Mei half knew that on some questions she and Qi Hong would never agree. But she did not dwell on it; she just enjoyed being with him as often as possible.

One Sunday, instead of going home she went with Qi Hong to the Summer Palace. It was a beautiful spring day. The park was a mass of flowers and full of life. Everyone had shed their bulky winter clothes and looked delightfully unencumbered.

Jiang Mei and Qi Hong went walking beside Kunming Lake toward the south bank, which was almost deserted. The warm spring breeze was their only companion. The shiny new green of the weeping willows beckoned them as they talked about the beauty of the spring and life and they approached the Jade Belt Bridge.

"Look how clear the water is." Jiang Mei happily ran under the large arch of the bridge. She was laughing and was just going to run her hands through the water when Qi Hong caught up and put his arms around her on the bottom step.

"Watch it. One more step and you'd have fallen into the water." He brushed her bangs aside. "Don't you realize that I've just saved your life? Now you're mine, little girl."

"I'm yours." Jiang Mei felt as though nothing else existed in the whole world. She leaned on Qi Hong's chest. Deep down inside she felt a surge of tenderness swelling up that swept over them and dissolved them into one.

Qi Hong lifted her head with his hands.

"Are you crying?"

"Yes. I don't know why, but I feel so moved."

Qi Hong looked at her tenderly. Their reflections floated on the water of the lake.

"The first time I ever saw you was on that snowy winter's day. Do you remember? I knew then that I wanted to be with you forever, just as the two love beans on your hair clip are always together."

"I didn't think you'd even noticed me."

"I couldn't help it. You shine like the sun; who wouldn't notice you?" His tone was so passionate and his face looked full of life.

They walked along the lonely embankment, happy and free because they were alone. Jiang Mei looked into his eyes and said, "Qi Hong, if only we could go and live on a deserted island surrounded by the ocean, just the two of us."

Qi Hong shouted with joy and put his arm around her waist. "That's just what I want to do. I hate the whole human race except you."

Jiang Mei had only said that she wanted to be on a deserted island with him because she loved him so much. She could not understand why he had started talking of hate. She looked at him with astonishment. She could see the warmth he felt for her in his eyes, yet behind it there was something so distant and cold, it made her shudder.

Qi Hong noticed that there was something wrong and changed the subject. "Are you feeling cold, my little girl?"

"I'm just wondering, how can you possibly hate . . ."

"Your sweet love is so precious, I wouldn't even want to swap places with an emperor." Qi Hong started to recite some lines from one of Shakespeare's sonnets. His voice was full of emotion, but Jiang Mei suspected that he cared more for the poetry than he did for her. She simply said that she was feeling cold, and they held each other closer.

Jiang Mei's kindly and frail mother did not take to Qi Hong. Jiang Mei once asked her what was wrong with him, and, with a smile on her troubled face, her mother had said that though he was extremely clever and even quite handsome, there was something lacking in his character. Just what it was, she would not say. Even though Jiang Mei loved him deeply, she could not help feeling that there was something missing, something not quite right. It was not the type of feeling that a girl in love should have, but it was there, and it gnawed at her and haunted her nights. She wanted to see him, to hear him tell her how much he loved her, yet nothing could get rid of that feeling. Her mother's comments only made it worse. And there was Xiao Su.

May was a very busy month. There was something on every night. On the fifth there was a poetry recital. The last item on the program was Ai Qing's poem "The Torch." Jiang Mei was going to take one of the parts in it, that of the girl Tang Ni. She had wanted to avoid reciting poetry altogether, but she was the type of person who came out in goose bumps when she heard a poem being recited. Xiao Su knew she would not need too much persuading. She asked Jiang Mei, "Do you like this poem?"

"Oh, yes."

"Would you like even more people to be able to enjoy it?"

"Of course."

"Very well then, you can help recite it."

So that night she found herself on the stage. She heard her own clear voice carrying over the shadow-engulfed audience and then echoing in their hearts. She felt as though she really were the girl Tang Ni, marching in a demonstration with a torch in her hand. It was a feeling that she had never had before, something completely new and unfamiliar. Xiao Su was just like Li En, the girl's mentor.

Jiang Mei's excitement increased as she spoke, the blood rushing to her face. She felt as though she were one with the hundreds of people in the audience; they all seemed to breathe as one body, feel with one heart.

"The night makes off, wailing on distant plains." The chorus was spoken with such energy that she felt as though she were being carried along by a surging wave.

Back in their room when the reading was over, Jiang Mei said to Xiao Su, "Now I know what it means to be together with others, all sharing the same understanding, the same hopes, the same love and hate."

Xiao Su looked at her intently, and asked, "Do you have the same thoughts and dreams as Qi Hong?"

Jiang Mei was so surprised at Xiao Su bringing up Qi Hong that it broke her train of thought. Her expressions, smiling happily until a moment before, became serious.

"I don't know how to tell you, but I feel deep down that there are some things that Qi Hong and I will never agree on."

"I know, Little Bird. You're a good girl; though your world is limited, you're pure and good. Qi Hong hates everyone; he thinks that people always use each other. The only type of love he knows is a mad possessiveness, and the only person he really loves is himself. I've been a classmate of his for four years, and . . ."

"How can you say such things? I love him, I love him." Jiang Mei forgot all about the differences she had with Qi Hong; in a flaming temper, she slammed the door behind her.

"Come back, come back," Xiao Su shouted. She opened the door and found Jiang Mei weeping in the corridor.

"Are you going home this Sunday? If you're not, there is something I'd like you to do for me."

Jiang Mei always did whatever Xiao Su asked. She sensed that Xiao Su was working for some great and noble cause; her life seemed to be linked to the lives of millions of others; she was so warm she could have given life to a stone. Jiang Mei looked up as Xiao Su came toward her. "What do you want me to do?"

"You're not going home then?"

"I'd been thinking of going back. They say that flour costs three million a bag now. I just got paid for a few of my poems that appeared in *Dagong Bao* a few days ago, and I was thinking of giving the money to my mother." She suddenly felt exhausted and sank into a seat.

Xiao Su was going to make a comment that even someone as isolated from the world as Jiang Mei knew about the problems of inflation, but she checked herself and said, "I have the rough drafts of a few wall posters that have to come out on Sunday, and I'd like you to go through them for me. Edit out whatever you want to and try to make them more readable, then write them out clearly. As I'm going into town tomorrow, I can take the money to your mother if you want."

She gave the manuscripts to Jiang Mei and said thoughtfully, "Let's have a good talk in a few days."

After breakfast on Sunday, Jiang Mei sat down at her desk and started looking through the manuscripts. How was it that such short and carelessly written articles had such force? The call for democracy and freedom from starvation that ran through all of the pieces touched her deeply. The same excitement that she had felt on the evening of the poetry recital stirred her again. The figure of Tang Ni appeared before her.

There was a knock at the door. "Jiang Mei."

It was Qi Hong. She turned toward the door to see him standing there, gazing at her with adoration.

"Oh, it's you."

"I went to your place looking for you last night, but your mother said that you hadn't been back, so I came straight back to school without even going home." He walked over to the desk and took Jiang Mei's hand.

On hearing Qi Hong mention his home, Jiang Mei had a vision of a lavish parlor with Qi Hong's banker father counting his silver dollars. It was so different from the world of the articles she had been reading. Even Qi Hong, warm and cultivated Qi Hong, was from another world than theirs; but she was still happy to see him.

"What are you up to? Wall posters? I've heard you've been reciting poems too. Does all this mean that you've joined the democracy movement? My poetess!"

Jiang Mei did not really appreciate the tone of his voice, and she motioned to him to sit down.

"I came to see if you wanted to go out with me. It's such a beautiful day; it'll be summer before you know it. So I've come to take you to the world of Peter Pan to do some spring cleaning." They both loved the story of Peter Pan; their love was really built on fairy tales, on flowers that would have to fade, on clouds that would be scattered and on a moon bound to wane.

"I can't today, Qi Hong," she said apologetically. She pulled her hand out of his, and tidied the manuscripts on her desk. "Xiao Su has asked me to . . ."

"What, Xiao Su again? How come you're always at her beck and call?" Qi Hong asked impatiently.

"Because what she says is right."

"But you know how much I want to be with you, to go with you to listen to the newborn cicadas chirping and see the lotus leaves growing on the water. Remember, I get what I want." His good-humored tone had vanished, and he

seemed to be talking about Jiang Mei as though she were some book or object that he owned.

Jiang Mei stared at him in surprise.

"You might even go on demonstrations next. You're a real idiot. All you think of is Xiao Su." He was angry, and it had made his face dark and menacing. Then he suddenly softened his tone. "Come on, go out with me, little girl."

Jiang Mei bit her lip hard. Just then someone called out, "Jiang Mei, Little Bird. Come and see if these cartoons we've done are okay."

She wanted to go out, but Qi Hong was standing in front of her and would not let her pass. She walked around the desk, but again he moved to block her way. She was beginning to get upset but still could not budge him. It was not long before her hair was in a mess and the hair clip that she always wore was on the floor. Before she had time to pick it up, Qi Hong had trodden on it, scattering black and white beads all over the floor. Jiang Mei felt as though her heart had been crushed underfoot. Her strength deserted her and she sat down, weeping for her humiliation.

Her tears were just what Qi Hong wanted. He picked up the two love beans from the clip and caressed her shoulder.

"Forgive me, please forgive me, it is all my fault. I want to be with you more than I can say. I need you. . . . Don't cry, little girl, don't cry." But she did not stop sobbing, and he started to get worried. "I'll never make you angry again, I promise."

Jiang Mei felt that this was all pointless. She raised her head and wiped away her tears. Although she realized that she would not be able to finish the posters, she was determined not to go out with him. She sat staring out of the window.

"Come on, don't be angry with me. I'll make a box for you to put the beans in. They'll remind me never to upset you again. Where shall we hide them?"

Later on he put the beans in a delicate little box, which was placed behind the crucifix in Jiang Mei's room. Qi Hong had found the niche by chance one day, and after that whenever Jiang Mei lay on her bed she would look up at the figure of Christ and think how tired he looked, burdened with the worries of the world.

It was not the last upset they had. Arguments and tears became part of their relationship. Every time they met they would quarrel, yet they could not pass a day without seeing each other. Their love was like opium, for though it caused them both pain, neither of them could give it up. Jiang Mei became so thin and pallid that her mother could not help crying. Qi Hong's usual look

of indifference turned into one of anxiety and depression. His lack of faith in life made him mistrust his love as well. So he was always jealously guarding his love and happiness, and watchful of Jiang Mei.

As Qi Hong withdrew more and more from the life around him, Jiang Mei began to learn about the world. She had come to realize that the exploitation of the many by the few had to be ended. She felt in her goodness that everyone should have a decent life. The soaring inflation had begun directly to affect her own peaceful little world. The bank where her mother had been keeping her savings closed down, forcing them both to depend totally on her uncle. Jiang Mei hated being a burden. She yearned for a new life and a new society. For her, the Communist Party had become a beacon lighting the way to freedom and happiness. Though that beacon was still dim and distant, it was visible.

Jiang Mei's mother was plagued again by her old illness, anemia. The doctor advised emergency medication and daily injections of liver extract. He warned that delay could be fatal. But where would the money come from?

Jiang Mei's uncle could barely meet his own expenses now, so they could not possibly turn to him. One word to Qi Hong would have solved everything, but she could not bear to ask him. The situation made her feel constantly depressed, and she could no longer sleep at night. Xiao Su quickly noticed that there was something wrong, and it did not take her long to find the reason.

"You can't put off the treatment any longer," Xiao Su protested with that look of determination that Jiang Mei saw on her face so often. "I'll let them give her my blood. You can see how fat I am, Little Bird, I can afford to give away quite a lot." Jiang Mei embraced her emotionally.

"It's no use, Xiao Su. Your blood type is the same as mine; we can't help her."

"What can we do to get some money together?"

One evening a few days later, Xiao Su burst into the room excitedly.

"Look, Jiang Mei!" she shouted as she waved a wad of notes in front of Jiang Mei's face.

"Su, where did you get all that money?" Jiang Mei asked.

But before waiting for a reply, she started laughing. She laughed out of happiness and relief. It was the type of laugh that Qi Hong longed to hear, but never did.

"Never you mind. Take it and get your mother treated." Xiao Su gave her a mysterious wink.

"No, you have to tell me where you got it, otherwise I just won't feel right."

"Forget it, I'm going to bed." She stopped laughing, took off her blue jacket, and sat down on the bed. She looked exhausted. Jiang Mei noticed a piece of

sticking plaster inside Xiao Su's elbow. She went over and took Xiao Su's hand, looking first at the plaster and then at her face.

"What are you looking at?" Xiao Su asked as she pulled her hand away and snuggled under the quilt.

"You've been giving blood."

"Sure," she replied casually, "I sold some blood. Not just me though, several of us did it."

It often happens that just an expression or a gesture can wound deeply, or even destroy a friendship in an instant. In the same way, even a needle mark can cement an undying friendship. Too moved to speak, Jiang Mei knelt down by the bed and covered her face in her hands.

That Saturday, Jiang Mei wanted Xiao Su to take the money to her mother personally. She agreed, and they went home together. Jiang Mei was made to promise not to tell where the money had come from. They arrived to find Jiang Mei's mother too ill to get up; a relative had been sending meals over. As she stood by the bed looking down at that frail figure, Jiang Mei could not hold back her tears. Xiao Su also began to cry: for her it was not just Jiang Mei's mother who was lying ill in front of them, but one of the millions of suffering mothers of China, their hearts heavy with sorrow, crushed by oppression.

That evening the two of them made some noodles and ate them at Jiang Mei's mother's bedside. Their presence made the older woman feel much better, and she sat up and ate with them. When she had finished, she said, "This illness has really made me into an addle-minded old fool. When your aunt came today she asked me whether I had a stove. I thought she'd asked if I had a dog. So I told her yes, we used to have a dog called Fifi. . . ."

The two girls burst out laughing. As they laughed, Jiang Mei thought of Qi Hong: there was no way he could ever understand this way of life or these emotions; and she knew that there was no way she could ever tell him.

In June the movement to oppose American support for Japan reached its climax. Jiang Mei was far more interested in politics than she had been before. She had a feeling that America was plotting something new. It was self-evident that any attempt by the Americans to prop up Japan, a country that had oppressed China for eight long years, would arouse massive hostility among the Chinese people.

One day she was sitting in front of the window with Xiao Su, reading with growing indignation a statement in the paper made by the American ambassador to China: "If the Japanese become a hungry and unsettled people, then they will continue to be a threat to peace. This is just what the Communists want. If we really want to work for the majority of people, then we must elimi-

nate all possible factors that could give rise to communism." It was obvious what the Americans were up to. When they had read it, Jiang Mei said angrily, "It's our business whether we are going to have communism or not."

Xiao Su smiled. "Do you know what communism is?"

"No, I don't," Jiang Mei replied honestly, "but I'm sure that it means a better life than the one we have now. People will all be . . . well, they'll all be like you."

Xiao Su laughed. "What's wrong with things as they are now? You get good white rice to eat, you wear colorful *cheongsams*, what's so bad about that?"

Jiang Mei leaned on Xiao Su. She was thoughtful as she spoke.

"This is a dog-eat-dog society, not just materially but spiritually as well." She stopped for a moment and then continued, "Xiao Su, you don't have any idea of just how lonely I am."

Xiao Su patted her shoulder kindly.

"The road of life is never smooth. You always have to struggle with bad people and with yourself."

Later on, whenever things became difficult she would remember these words.

On the ninth of June, Jiang Mei took part in an anti-American demonstration organized by students of Beijing University.

On the morning of the ninth, she got out of bed when it was still dark and put her medical kit together; she was in the first aid team. She looked over at Xiao Su's bed, which had not been slept in. What had she been doing all night? Perhaps, Jiang Mei thought, she would soon be using the bandages and gauze in her kit on Xiao Su. She felt uneasy about her friend and the others in her group. As her hands grasped the medicines in the kit, she felt both excited and disturbed.

"Come on, Little Bird, let's go," someone called to her from outside.

Jiang Mei ran over to the sports field just as the red morning sun was rising over the rooftops of the village to the east. Xiao Su was in the crowd. She looked awake, but the pallor of her face showed that she had not slept all night. When she saw Jiang Mei and the others, she smiled in satisfaction.

"Jiang Mei."

"Xiao Su." Jiang Mei returned the greeting as she slipped a large apple into Xiao Su's hand. Qi Hong had given her the apple the day before. An occasional piece of fruit or sweet was all she ever accepted of the endless stream of gifts that Qi Hong bought or had sent to her room in the West Block.

The long ranks of demonstrators started out. They walked silently along the street in the direction of the city, holding all types of placards. It gradually be-

came lighter as they went. A male student looked over at Jiang Mei and asked, "Is your medical kit heavy? I can carry it for you."

She replied with a smile, "Would a soldier let someone else carry his gun?"

He looked at her from head to foot. She was wearing blue trousers and a white shirt with a red woollen waistcoat over it. He asked, "Do you want to be a soldier for always?"

She opened her eyes wide, and after a moment of thought said earnestly, "Yes, always."

The marchers reached the Xizhimen Gate of the city wall at seven o'clock. It was closed. Someone shouted out, "We won't go back to the university until the gates are opened."

Someone else yelled, "Come on, let's break it down."

The banners bobbed up and down as a feeling of excitement passed through the noisy crowd. Xiao Su was moving through the lines calling out, "Stop shouting, and don't break rank. A delegation has already been sent to get the gates opened."

Jiang Mei wished that she were a fairy with a magic wand who could make the gate open. She realized how ridiculous this was, and knew that she would have to wait for the return of the student representatives; they would be far more effective.

At nine o'clock, the gate finally opened and the demonstrators poured into the city, joining up with the students from the universities in the city who had been waiting for them. Warm welcoming shouts could be heard on all sides. Jiang Mei felt tears well up in her eyes, and she looked down at her feet so that no one could see her face.

The demonstration began. Everyone shouted the slogans, "Down with American involvement in Japan," "Freedom," "Independence," in unison as they marched. The slogans exploded in the air, leaving the military police who were standing on the pavement looking fearful and uneasy. Jiang Mei was so excited that she could barely concentrate on shouting. With each footstep she felt a little bit closer to the light of that distant beacon.

They walked along Xisi and Xidan and then along to Tian'anmen, after which they went through Nanchizi and to the Democracy Square of Beijing University. As they passed by the Tian'anmen Gate, Jiang Mei looked up at the magnificent structure and felt a pang of pity and shame. How many insults, how much defilement had Tian'anmen suffered from its unworthy children. She even felt that the crumbling vermilion wall was waiting and hoping that a new society would soon appear so that the people of China and Tian'anmen could be proud once more.

At Democracy Square they held a rally, at which some teachers addressed the crowd. Whether from fatigue or some other reason, Jiang Mei's earlier exhilaration had passed, and she could not concentrate on the speeches. She was thinking of the university campus, deep in the shadows of the early summer dusk. She thought of the West Block, and of the young man who was waiting below her window. She held the medical chest that hung over her shoulder tightly and felt slightly dizzy.

Xiao Su walked over and asked her in a whisper, "Are you feeling all right?"

"Yes, yes, it's nothing," she replied cheerfully. She cursed herself for thinking of him just then.

By the time they got back to the school, all the lights were on. Jiang Mei dragged herself back to her room, her legs feeling like blocks of stone. There was a knock at the door and she felt a tightness in her stomach, as though something bad was going to happen. She leaned against the bedstead, sipping hot water. The door opened, and in came the caretaker, with a frown on his forehead and a squashed box of sweets in his hands. He put the box on the table and said, "Well I never, Miss Jiang, well I never! Never saw a man in such a temper in all my days. Did they raise your Mr. Qi on rooster's blood or something? When he dies he'll go straight to the Ice Hell to cool off, otherwise he'd burn down the King of Death's palace."

"What do you mean, 'your Mr. Qi'? Don't say that. What happened?"

"He came looking for you this afternoon. When I told him that you had gone in the demonstration, he hurled the sweets that he'd brought you down the steps. The box broke open and the sweets all fell out. I reckoned that he could have bought a sack of flour for the money he spent on them, so I couldn't bear to see that waste. I said to him, 'Mr. Qi, Miss Jiang isn't here. You could just leave what you brought her, why fly off the handle?' That really set him going. His face went white and then red, then he threw a tea mug through the window. Look! There's broken glass everywhere. I think he was off his head. Then he took off without another word. Threw three million on the steps as he went, too. Suppose he did that to pay for the window and the mug. What do you think?"

"Don't say any more." Jiang Mei waved her hand feebly. "Just get the window fixed and buy a new mug."

"I thought it was a real waste, the sweets, I mean. So I picked them all up and put them in the box for you."

"Take them home. I don't want them, they're not mine." Xiao Su had come in a few seconds earlier and had overheard some of the conversation. She

washed her face and feet, tidied things up, and sat down at her desk to write. Jiang Mei sat leaning against the bedstead in silence.

After a while Xiao Su stopped writing and looked up. "What's up, Little Bird? If you keep on like this you'll destroy yourself. Don't you realize that? Deep down Qi Hong is just selfish, violent, and cruel. Why make yourself suffer like this? Break it off with him. Come over to us, we all welcome you, love you . . ." She walked over and put her arms around Jiang Mei's shoulders.

"But, Qi Hong . . ." Jiang Mei had not really taken in everything Xiao Su had said.

"Forget him." Xiao Su cried out, almost losing her temper. "You're a good girl, kind-hearted, clever, and capable. The type of love you have for him will only poison you. Forget him. Promise me that you'll forget him, Little Bird."

Jiang Mei had never even thought of breaking off her relationship with Qi Hong. She did not really know how he had marched into her life in the first place, and she could not imagine how she could possibly chase him out of it now. "Forget him?" she said weakly. "Yes, I'll forget him when I die."

This made Xiao Su really angry. "What a thing to say! What are you doing talking about death? I want to go on living, and live a life that means something."

For some reason Xiao Su seemed sad as she said this. Jiang Mei noticed that there was something wrong, something out of the ordinary; it made her forget her own pain. Xiao Su stood gazing out of the window for a moment, deep in thought. Then she turned to Jiang Mei and said, "It's dangerous, Little Bird. After I'm gone you'll still want to come our way, won't you? Whatever you do, don't stay with Qi Hong—he'll destroy you."

"Go away?" Jiang Mei took Xiao Su's hand. "What do you mean? I want you to stay with me."

"I'll be graduating soon, and my family wants me to go back to Hunan to teach." Although she was from Hunan and her father was a teacher there, Jiang Mei had the feeling that there was something not completely true in what Xiao Su said.

"Graduate?"

"Yes, graduate."

Xiao Su did not graduate, nor did she return to Hunan. She went off one day to take the last of her exam papers and did not come back. Jiang Mei was just finishing writing a book report for her English literature course when some students came rushing in to tell her what had happened. The book she had been working on was Emily Bronte's *Wuthering Heights*. She had discussed the book with Qi Hong; he had such profound views on it that Jiang Mei felt

he should understand more about life than most people. Yet for some reason he did not.

The news that Xiao Su had been arrested soon jolted Jiang Mei back to reality. She rushed out of her room without a thought for her essay, which had fallen to the floor when she had jumped up. A number of other students ran out of the building with her toward the school gate. But the long, straight road that led to the city was empty. There was only a delicate fragrance from the trees along the road. Jiang Mei leaned against one of them as she muttered to herself, "Where is she? Where's she gone?"

A classmate told her sadly, "They shoved her into a paddy wagon. She'd be at the police headquarters by now."

Everything was whirling around, and the strength had completely drained from her legs. She sank to the ground helplessly. The others gathered around her and someone helped her to her feet. "What's wrong?"

"Pull yourself together, Jiang Mei."

In a second everyone was talking, offering advice and encouragement. Suddenly someone shouted angrily, "Blood, tears, and arrests only make people see things clearer."

It was true, Jiang Mei thought. All they had done by arresting Xiao Su was make more people determined to be like her.

Jiang Mei did not know where everyone went, for the next thing she knew, she was walking along, supported by Qi Hong. He was speaking to her: "When I heard from the radicals in our department that you'd fainted, I guessed that it must have been because of Xiao Su, so I came straight over."

"That's right; weren't you taking the math exam together? They said she was arrested in the classroom." Jiang Mei only felt like talking about Xiao Su.

"Yes, it was during the exam. Just goes to show what trouble being in the democracy movement can land you in. I warned you time and time again, but you insisted on seeing so much of her . . ."

"What? What are you saying?" Jiang Mei cried out, her eyes flaring angrily. "You're heartless." She pushed his arm away and ran back to the dormitory as quickly as if a devil were chasing her.

She rushed into her room and threw herself on the bed. After a while she felt Qi Hong's hand on her shoulder. He had been shocked and mystified by her sudden fit of temper, and he knelt down beside the bed cautiously.

"Have I upset you again, Mei? It's just that I'm jealous of Xiao Su, you care too much about her. Where do I stand? Sometimes I really hate her. I feel that she's the one who is keeping us apart . . ."

"No, it's not her. Our paths are different, that's all."

"What? Different? How? Sure, we don't always have the same views on things and we argue a lot, and I've got a bad temper. But none of that matters. I know that I couldn't live without you. Mei, I haven't said anything to you, but with the political situation going from bad to worse, my family has decided to move to America. They want me to go too, to study."

"America?" She sat up.

"Yes, and you too, Mei. I've told my father all about you, and though you've always refused to go home with me, he feels as though he already knows you. I often show my parents your picture and tell them about you."

He took out his leather wallet and showed her the picture that he had stolen when he had gone to her home. It was a photo of Jiang Mei when she was seventeen. Her eyes seemed to be smiling though her dark lips were slightly turned up at the corners, making her look as though she were angry with someone.

"I told them that you are like a beautiful poem, or a lovely melody."

Nobody could say nice things about Jiang Mei as well as Qi Hong.

"That's enough." She stopped him tearfully. "Nothing will keep you here in your own country, then."

"Mei, if you go with me you can continue your studies at a university there, and we'll be together forever. Nothing will ever keep us apart."

"That's enough, don't say any more." She could not say anything further.

Jiang Mei felt crushed and did not know what to do. She could not bear to see Xiao Su's empty bed; the white sheets hurt her eyes. She went home before Saturday. There was a blackout that evening, and she found her mother sewing in the flickering light of a candle. She looked old and frail in the dim light. Jiang Mei felt a pang of sadness and wanted to call to her; tears sprang to her eyes.

"Mei!" Her mother looked up and put down her work.

"Mom, they've taken Xiao Su away."

"Arrested?" She knew her daughter's friend well and felt a deep affection for her. But she seemed half indifferent to the news and sat silently in the shadows as if she had not heard.

"Mom, Xiao Su's been taken away." Jiang Mei sobbed again.

"As I expected," Jiang Mei's mother murmured.

Jiang Mei threw her bag on the table and ran over to kneel and put her arms around her mother's legs.

"You knew?"

"No, but I had a feeling that it would come to this." She sighed and put her thin and bony hands over her face. She paused a moment before continuing. "It is time that I told you: your father disappeared just like that fifteen

years ago. He was never sick; they said that there was something wrong with his thoughts. He was a stubborn man who wouldn't play their games. He had some other ideas too, but I never understood quite what they were. He never did anything violent, never hurt anyone. But he just disappeared mysteriously." With these last words, she started sobbing.

So he had not died from a disease. No wonder Mother always kept saying that people should not be unjustly killed, as he had. Jiang Mei wanted to shout it out loud. As she sobbed, her mother stroked her hair, wetting it with tears.

Jiang Mei had seen her mother weep before, but never so passionately. How much pain and hate she must have felt over the years. Her mother's tears falling on her hair gradually calmed her down. She wanted no more of this murderous society. The pain of hesitation and inner struggle disappeared, as if some powerful force had helped her choose her future path. She pressed her mother's rough hands against her tear-soaked cheek and sobbed, "Father . . . my father."

Behind them, the door opened softly. The candlelight threw Qi Hong's tall, thin shadow against the wall. Her mother gave him a startled look, but Jiang Mei did not raise her head although she recognized him. He addressed Jiang Mei's mother with conventional courtesy and then said to Jiang Mei, "Why did you come home today? I've been looking for you everywhere."

Jiang Mei continued to ignore him as she raised her head and said to her mother, "He's going to America."

"Yes, aunt, and I want to take Jiang Mei with me," Qi Hong hurried to add. "Might you go?" The trembling hand brushed Jiang Mei's head.

"I'll do whatever you tell me to do, Mom." She clasped her mother's knees and looked up at her tearfully.

"You decide, Mei."

"Then you agree to let her go?" Qi Hong asked, confident that, as always, things were turning out as he expected.

"No, my mother knows that I'll make the right decision. She knows that I'd never go." Jiang Mei stood up and faced Qi Hong. He was soaked in sweat, but was aware only that Jiang Mei was crying.

"Let's not have another upset, Mei," he said, wiping her eyes. "Why should we always quarrel?"

"You two talk it over," Jiang Mei's mother said, picking up her needlework. "But Mei, don't forget your father."

Qi Hong's gaze was fixed on Jiang Mei and he did not notice the old woman leave the room. Jiang Mei returned his stare blankly, letting him wipe away her tears with his handkerchief.

"It looks as though we'll have to part," she said. "The love between us just isn't strong enough to make us throw away our lives."

"But we'll be able to be happy and comfortable together. . . . We won't be throwing away anything. There's no need to part." He took her hand and started passionately kissing her fingers.

"If you want to be with me, stay in China." She was still looking at him without emotion.

"Stay here? Come on, little girl. Do you want me to run around sticking up posters and going in demonstrations with you, is that it? We're different from the rest of them. You can't really want me to give up my physics, my music, my whole way of life. You want me to abandon wisdom so that I can wallow in the mud with the herd? Silly girl. You don't understand what life's really about. Wait until you are a little older, then you won't be so naïve."

"Silly, am I? Better to be silly."

"No, you must come away with me."

"If I go with you then I'll be throwing everything away—my country, my mother, and even my own father." Her voice was so low that even she could just barely hear what she was saying until she startled herself with the vehemence with which she spoke of her father.

"But Mei, you've got me," Qi Hong cried like a spoiled child. Yet, seeing the strange look in Jiang Mei's eyes, he unconsciously let go of her hand. Then with uncontrollable yearning and anger he grabbed her by the shoulders and spoke in a low, deliberate voice: "I wish I could kill you and take you with me in a coffin."

"I'd rather be told that you were dead than know you were living in such a cowardly way."

The wind was howling outside and it was raining hard. Suddenly in the storm came the sound of something breaking. Qi Hong held Jiang Mei to him, and in the flash of the lightning she could see the pot of oleanders lying shattered on the steps. She felt a pang in her chest, as though her heart had been broken like the plant pot.

Although everything had seemed so final that night, Qi Hong and Jiang Mei were still inseparable. Their long walks by the lotus pond and in the woods continued, yet there was no end to the arguments and tears.

In October, the situation in the northeast became very tense. The People's Liberation Army was sweeping down toward Beijing, liberating many cities as it advanced. In response, Chiang Kai-shek formulated a new policy: "Maintain the status quo in the northeast, protect north China, and clean up central China." Although this was supposed to ensure stability in the north, all the

well-to-do people there began streaming south. Qi Hong's family had flown to Nanjing at the beginning of autumn, from where they went to Shanghai and then America. Qi Hong was left in Beijing by himself. He had told his family that he had to finish his thesis before he could get his degree, but he was staying on in the hope that Jiang Mei would have a change of heart. He could not believe that she would not go with him, and wished he could abduct her. He became paler and touchier as time went on; his eyes took on a malevolent look.

Qi Hong's strained features and broody expressions haunted Jiang Mei's dreams. They were no longer the simple and untroubled dreams of a young girl. The tense political situation, Xiao Su's arrest, Qi Hong's love for her, and her own confused feelings had made her understand many things. At a demonstration against the Guomindang's slaughter of students in the northeast, Jiang Mei did not take her first aid kit but walked proudly in the front ranks holding a large banner that read, END THE SLAUGHTER, GIVE US LIFE, LET US PROTEST! She led the others in calling out the slogans as they marched. She felt that she was protesting on behalf of her dead father as well as her mother and Xiao Su. She wanted to fight for the liberation of humanity, for a completely new life.

After liberation, when Xiao Su was released from jail and became a radio announcer for Radio Beijing, Jiang Mei learned that the underground had wanted her to join the Democratic Youth Union, but because of her relationship with Qi Hong they felt they could not be sure of her true position, so they let the matter drop. When she heard this, Jiang Mei let out a sigh but did not say anything.

The winter of 1948-49 was the eve of liberation for Beijing. Throughout the city people were saying, "The lanterns hung in every house are to welcome Mao Zedong." All the high officials and rich people made their escape. Qi Hong was getting daily telegrams urging him to leave from his family, who had booked him a flight. Jiang Mei spent most of her time discussing with her fellow students how to protect the school and prepare for the liberation of the city. She was in a state of constant excitement. It was as though she was waiting to receive a generous gift, and she dreamed about what life would be like after liberation. Yet at the same time her decision not to go with Qi Hong was gnawing at her. She felt both exhilarated and depressed at the same time.

One evening, Jiang Mei was sitting in the library trying to read. Qi Hong had gone into the city earlier that day and still had not returned. She could not concentrate and looked up expectantly at everyone who came in. He still had not reappeared when the library closed. Only then did it occur to her that

he might actually have left Beijing. If so, then she would never see him again. But she had to see him one more time, just this last time. She felt like calling out his name, hoping that somehow it would bring him to her. But she bit her lip to stop herself and walked out of the library quickly.

Outside, the first snow of the year had fallen. It had not yet frozen over, and the light from the lamps along the path made the ground sparkle. Jiang Mei walked straight over to the male students' dormitory. She wanted to see if the light in his window was on; although she had never been in his room, she knew the window very well. There was a poplar tree outside the window, and Qi Hong had told her how the rustling of its leaves had kept him company through many sleepless nights. Peering through the swirling snowflakes, she found first the poplar and then the window behind it. It was dark. Her heart sank as she stood there, her legs too weak to move.

Perhaps he was so tired after getting back from the city that he had gone straight to sleep. Maybe he still had not returned. She walked into the building and went up to Qi Hong's room. She knocked at the door, but it was locked. He was not there.

Will I really never see him again? The question tormented her as she left the building. She did not notice a friend who was in the New Poetry Society when he walked past, nor did she hear his greeting, "Hello, Little Bird."

She was barely able to get back to the West Block. She was so drained of strength that she decided to lean against the wall for a rest before negotiating the stairs up to her room. Then she noticed that her light was on. The room had been empty and cold since Xiao Su had left. Now whenever she came back it was always dark. But tonight the light was on; it made her feel warm all over. She rushed upstairs, calling Qi Hong's name as she went.

He was inside waiting for her. The worried expression on his face made him look much older. He rushed to take her hand. Weary and a little relieved, he said, "Thank goodness you're back. I thought I'd never see you again." Jiang Mei was silent. She knew that if she spoke he would realize how worried she had been and how much she needed him. But he was going to leave her forever.

"I'm catching an early flight tomorrow morning, so I have to go to the airport tonight." He continued anxiously, "Well, is everything decided? Do we really have to separate?"

"Separate . . . ? I'll never see you again?" She was looking at the crucifix on the wall, and thought she could see the two red beans in the little box behind it.

"We don't ever have to part, Mei. Just say you'll go with me. Just one word, my little girl."

"No, I can't."

"You can't? You can't make this small sacrifice for me? You said that all you wanted in the whole world was to be with me."

"What about you?" she asked, her eyes accusing.

"Me? What I'm doing is the right thing. I couldn't bear to see the woman I love become one of the 'masses.' You have to come with me, you know that. I've never begged for anything as I'm begging you to go with me now. Mei, please, do as I say."

"No, I can't."

"Is that really true? You could watch a person dying in front of your very eyes and do nothing to save him? Once dead and gone, he'll never come back. Once I go, I'll never come back. You'll be sorry. Oh Mei, my Mei." He was shaking her hard by the shoulders.

"No, I won't regret it."

He looked into her eyes, still illuminated by that strange flame, and sighed. "Very well then, at least come downstairs and see me off."

She helped him put on his scarf and straighten the collar of his overcoat. They walked down the stairs in silence.

The snowflakes were floating in the vast night sky. It was very still. As they came out the door, a small car drove up and a hefty chauffeur jumped out. Qi Hong motioned for him to wait, and he walked over to a lamp with Jiang Mei. He looked at her and shook his head. "Do you know that I was going to force you to go with me? See, I've got a car and two plane tickets. But I realize that if I made you come, you'd hate me for the rest of your life, wouldn't you?"

He took an airplane ticket out of his pocket and hesitated for a moment, perhaps in the hope that Jiang Mei would suddenly change her mind. Then he tore it up, letting the pieces disappear among the snowflakes. "Good-bye Mei, my poetess, my revolutionary."

Qi Hong spat the words out bitterly. She looked at him. His face was twisted with pain, his eyes were red, and a drop of blood was swelling on his lower lip. Somehow his disturbed expression made her think of the indifference in his face the first time she had met him.

She wanted desperately to say something but could not. It was as though her throat were full of knives. She cried inside, *I must endure this minute, just this last minute.* She felt Qi Hong's icy lips touch her forehead, and then heard the sound of the car starting up.

In a moment all that was left was the whiteness, a swirling whiteness that filled the sky and buried the whole world.

The last words she had said to Qi Hong were, "I won't regret it."

Jiang Mei did not regret it. Qi Hong was being sarcastic when he called her a revolutionary, but later she actually became a worker for the Communist Party. Her mother, whose health improved greatly after liberation, declared proudly, "Jiang Mei's father did not die in vain."

It was snowing. The red love beans in Jiang Mei's hand were wet with tears.

"Jiang Mei, Little Bird," the caretaker was calling to her from outside the door. "You've got lots of visitors. Party Secretary Shi, Lao Ma, Mr. Zheng, Comrade Wang, and Little Rat. . . ."

He was cut short by the sound of laughter. Jiang Mei's eyes were full now not of tears but of laughter. She put the beans and the little box down and stood up.

11
Ru Zhijuan

(b. 1925)

Born in Shanghai in 1925, Ru Zhijuan was raised by her grandmother in relative poverty after her mother died and her father abandoned her and her four siblings. Circumstances did not permit her to start primary school until she was ten, and she had only enjoyed a few years of formal education when her grandmother passed away and Ru was temporarily placed in an orphanage in Shanghai. According to her own account, she was largely self-taught and read whatever she could lay her hands on, citing in particular the influence of *Dream of the Red Chamber*; the fiction of Lu Yin, who was then one of the more popular "New Women" writers; and the works of Lu Xun. In 1943, she followed in the footsteps of an older brother and enlisted in a theatrical troupe attached to the New Fourth Army of the Communist Party. Later she was assigned to a propaganda team and spent the next several years working on a variety of literary and cultural projects to mobilize audiences for the cause of national resistance. She was formally accepted into the CCP in 1947.

After the founding of the People's Republic, Ru was transferred back to Shanghai and appointed editor of *Literature and Arts Monthly* in 1955. Her short story "Lilies" brought her literary acclaim in 1958, winning high praise from veteran writer and critic Mao Dun. Above all, he was impressed by the story's rhythmic pace and well-crafted narrative structure. Set during China's civil war in the late 1940s, "Lilies" is told from the perspective of the I-narrator, a female propagandist assigned to a first aid post, who observes the developing rapport between a courier in the People's Liberation Army and a newly married peasant woman. Typical of Ru's work, the story's interest lies in the author's subtle characterization and psychological insight into her subjects rather than the development of an intricate plot. This story and much of her early fiction appeared in leading journals such as *Harvest*, *Shanghai Literature*, and *People's Literature* as well as in her collected volumes *Tall Aspens* (1959) and *The Quiet*