

"How can you be so heartless?"

"I realize that everyone will blame me and call me heartless. But I refuse to make excuses. There are far too many things left undone in this world. It's not hard to catch hold of a young woman's shadow. Because I respect you as an artist, I wish you would create more meaningful works."

"Are you saying that painting your portrait would be meaningless?"

"Don't paint me. I'm just an ordinary person. Mine is but an ordinary life. I no longer swim in that sea of emotions that I knew when I was young. I have my work. Or perhaps I should say, I have my career. I'm willing to do more for others. It's as simple as that. I have nothing to hide. Think about it—what's the point of painting my portrait? Would such a painting change someone's life? Yuguo would sit all day staring at the portrait and talking to himself. His spiritual life would forever be locked in the past. You say you pity him, that I'm cold-hearted. But is it wrong to be cold-hearted toward such a stubborn, selfish person? I don't understand how I could have ever loved him. The mind of a young woman is a strange place. Now as I think back, how laughable a young woman's emotions seem to me."

"But young love is the most precious kind."

"You believe that too?"

"I even envy Yuguo because you loved him first and not me."

"Yiyang!"

Ziwei fell silent. It was obvious that she knew how to deal with such impasses. There was nothing left to discuss. She declined Yiyang's request; she refused to let him paint her portrait again. The portrait and the stories it told finally divulged that she, Ziwei, had been the cause of a series of tragedies. She despised those who lived in the past. She saw that the artist was destined to be another Yuguo, another Mushi. There was nothing to worry about. She had already made up her mind. She felt no regret over their meeting, although she now knew that Yiyang would never be able to wish the new her well.

And so concludes the final episode of the story of the portrait. Yiyang never again saw Ziwei. Both she and the shadow of her younger self disappeared into the crowd without a trace. Those foggy eyes were never to appear again. In Yiyang's recent memory, those eyes were now as bright and determined as the scorching sun. It was that pair of eyes that took Ziwei to a place Yiyang would never know. They left a lasting impression in the artist's memory. At one point he thought to reclaim the precious memory with his paintbrush, but alas, he was unable to bring that final impression back to life.

April 1, 1947

April Fool's Day

9
Lu Xiaoman

(1903-1965)

Remembered in modern Chinese literary history primarily in connection with Xu Zhimo (1895-1931), one of the most celebrated May Fourth poets, Lu Xiaoman had literary aspirations of her own. The well-bred socialite daughter of a distinguished family, Lu was born in Shanghai in 1903 but moved to Beijing when she was about nine years of age. There she attended the western-run Sacred Heart Academy and studied English with a private tutor. She was famous for her beauty. Her much-anticipated marriage was arranged in 1920 to Wang Geng, a Princeton and West Point graduate whose family was native to Wuxi. Several years later, now a married woman, she was introduced to Xu Zhimo, who reportedly fell madly in love with her, and their romantic affair soon erupted into one of the major society scandals of the mid-1920s. Xu fled to Europe, returning only when the dust had settled and Lu's divorce was firmly secured. When the couple eventually wed in Beijing 1926, with Hu Shi and Liang Qichao present as their witnesses, the event attracted coverage in the mainstream media. After the wedding, they moved to Shanghai, where Lu Xiaoman became quite popular for her amateur opera performances in benefit shows at such theaters as the Empire, the Olympic, and the Carlton. She was even featured on the front cover of the popular urban pictorial *Young Companion* in 1927. Their celebrity marriage would be short-lived: Xu Zhimo was killed in a plane crash in 1931, on his regular commute back from Beijing, where he had a teaching position, leaving Lu Xiaoman widowed at the age of twenty-nine.

Although Lu Xiaoman allegedly displayed an artistic flair from a young age, excelling in dance, opera singing, and Chinese painting, her relationship with Xu appears to have inspired a new interest in literary creation. In 1928, she co-wrote a five-act play, *Bian Kungang*, with Xu. According to the writer and literary historian Su Xuelin, Xu formulated the dramatic structure, while the story and the dialogue can be attributed entirely to Lu Xiaoman. The play is a tragedy that revolves around the

title character, a kind-hearted widower who remarries only to have his new wife become bitterly jealous of his memories of his late wife, with fatal consequences. The play was published under both of their names in *Crescent Monthly* magazine.

Lu Xiaoman's literary aspirations were also in evidence when, in 1935, amid the flurry of publications of love letters of famous literary couples, she published *Love Letters to Mei*, a fascinating collection of letters and diaries she and Xu Zhimo had written at the peak of their illicit romance. The volume appeared on what would have been Xu's fortieth birthday and seems to have been largely motivated by a desire on Lu Xiaoman's part to make her side of their legendary affair known. Above all, as she claims in the preface, she hoped to put an end to the vicious rumors that, even ten years later, continued to circulate about their controversial affair and subsequent marriage. In three parts, the book powerfully conveys the intensity of their mutual devotion but also the moral quandary Lu found herself in. The juxtaposition of Xu's diaries with her own also highlights quite distinct perspectives on love and literature, no doubt informed by their respective positions as a well-established poet and a young married woman bound by her upper-class, old-fashioned family. In the end, whereas Xu Zhimo comes across as rather selfishly submerged in his private emotional universe, Lu Xiaoman grapples with their relationship in terms of a need to balance desire with moral concerns, medical issues, and the mundane considerations of domestic duty.

After the founding of the People's Republic in 1949, Shanghai mayor and poet Chen Yi helped Lu Xiaoman secure a position at the Shanghai Institute of Culture and History, and later she taught at the Shanghai Academy of Chinese Painting. She died of a respiratory disease in 1965, and was thus spared the upheavals of the Cultural Revolution. Her final request to be buried next to Xu Zhimo was denied.

"The Imperial Hotel," the short story selected here, was commissioned for Zhao Qingge's edited volume *Untitled*, a major postwar collection of contemporary women's writing published in 1947. The story employs an array of modernist narrative techniques, including stream of consciousness and a fragmentary plot structure, to conjure up the decadent urban milieu of wartime Shanghai while depicting the difficult circumstances a young middle-class mother faces. The work thus offers a refreshing stylistic approach to social inequality, opportunism, and wartime hardship without the sermonizing that such themes often elicited.

The Imperial Hotel

(1947)

WANZHEN SAT ON the edge of the bed watching Erbao sleeping feverishly, his small face apple red, eyes shut, breathing labored, the sound of phlegm churning in his throat as though he wanted to cough it up but couldn't. From his condition it was obvious he was in pain even in his sleep. Wanzhen was beside herself, not knowing what to think because there was simply too much to think about.

Wanzhen was a young college graduate who had married her classmate Zhang Lisheng fresh out of school. A year later she had given birth to a daughter, and by the time she was pregnant with Erbao, China was at war with Japan. Lisheng couldn't just abandon them to follow the government to the interior, so he stayed on in Shanghai. But from that point on, life was uncertain. When Erbao was born, Lisheng had suffered the indignity of accepting a menial position with the puppet regime to support the family. Naturally, with five mouths to feed, relying entirely on his income was extraordinarily difficult, so Wanzhen took on the housework herself. She had her hands full all day long minding the two children. But Lisheng's mother helped out with the meals, so for all the hardship, the family actually got by just fine.

Now Erbao was three already, but ever since he had been weaned he had been a sickly child. During the winter he had come down with chills and a fever that lasted several months, and no sooner had he gotten better than he caught pneumonia. For the sake of this child they had sunk into debt, but lately it all seemed so hopeless. Each day as Lisheng watched the boy gasping for breath and sweating as he coughed, it pained him more than being stabbed straight through the heart with a knife. They could see that the child desperately needed an injection, but Lisheng had long since drawn an advance on his salary, western doctors were so terribly expensive, and the medication would not be easy to buy. So Wanzhen made up her mind to get a job herself to help make ends meet. However, nothing had come of friends' efforts to help her find employment. Then, the day before last she had been elated to see an advertisement in the newspaper for a female staff worker at the Imperial Hotel. After the two had talked it over that evening, Lisheng was of the opinion that taking a job like this was beneath her. But Wanzhen insisted on giving it a try. Besides, wasn't it better to rely on oneself than to rely on others? When it came

to survival, who cared what their friends and relatives might think? So off she went with the paper to apply.

The Imperial Hotel was a deluxe establishment with a ballroom patronized by foreigners and upper-crust Chinese. The ladies' lounge in the ballroom needed a female attendant fluent in English to oversee the sale of cosmetics and accessories.

Because she was so well educated, the manager had great respect for her, and she had been asked to begin work the very next day. However, yesterday, her first night on the job, she got the feeling she was not cut out for this sort of work after all. Never before had she encountered ladies of this breed, and within the space of just a few short hours it was as though she had been transported into another world. By the time the clock struck midnight and she returned home, she was in a trance, her head so bewildered she couldn't speak. When Lisheng saw her in such a state, he urged her not to go back. Wanzhen also sensed the inconvenience of night life and began having second thoughts. But today, seeing that Erbao's condition had not improved, that there was no way to fill the prescription that the doctor had written the day before, and that the child was running such a high fever that his cheeks were burning up and he had difficulty breathing, she couldn't bear to sit there watching him suffer and do nothing.

She sat at the foot of the bed transfixed. If she went back to work this evening, she could ask the manager for a small advance on her pay; otherwise, what hope would there be? So as she looked over at the child, she quietly made up her mind. Glancing at her watch, she saw it was nearly seven o'clock already; outside it was getting dark. She stood up, and when she felt the child's forehead to check his temperature it was so hot she couldn't keep her hand there. Her heart ached and she felt as though she might cry. Then, frowning and shaking her head, she stood up and walked over to the bureau, picked up a wooden comb and fixed her hair, turned around and reached for a short, rather worn-out coat from the clothes rack and draped it over her shoulders, went to the inner room, and said to her mother-in-law, "Ma, don't wait for me to eat. I've decided to go to work now, and once I get an advance on my wages, then first thing tomorrow morning we can go buy Erbao's medicine! Tell Lisheng later."

Without waiting for a reply, Wanzhen rushed out. As soon as she got out the door she hopped in a rickshaw and, not even bothering to settle on the fare, told the puller to hurry up and take her to the Imperial Hotel. As she sat in the rickshaw she was overwhelmed by sadness, and tears welled up in her eyes. She could barely control her emotions. Unable to fathom the depth of

her sorrow, she had put her own concerns aside, seeing only Erbao's small face, burning up as red as an apple, breathing feebly, looking as though he couldn't hold out much longer! For this reason, she was oblivious to everything and ready to do whatever it took to get some money to treat Erbao's illness. As for what she and her husband had discussed the night before, she didn't give it a second thought. Her sole concern now was that if she were late the manager would be angry and not want her to work there anymore, so she hurried the driver on: "Can't you go any faster? I have urgent business."

"We're there, can't you see it's right up ahead? What's the big rush?" The rickshaw puller was a bit surprised but figured that the lady didn't know the area well or else couldn't read, since right there in front of them was a neon sign flashing THE IMPERIAL HOTEL. She jumped down from the rickshaw and dashed inside, only now remembering that just as she was leaving the night before the manager had told her to come in early today, since business was always best on Saturdays and the place would be packed by early evening. As she remembered what he had said, she dreaded his reproach and her heart pounded in anticipation. And indeed, when she came in through the doors she could see the manager already there, scolding employees with animated gestures. When he saw her, he rushed up and said, "Hurry up, Miss Wang! How come you are later today than yesterday? Quite a few guests have arrived, and Little Hong has already asked for you twice, so hurry and get up there!"

Before the manager was done speaking, Wanzhen had already started up the stairs, and the minute she entered the lounge, Little Hong called out to her from across the room, "Miss Wang, here you are at last, the manager is frantic and wants us to get ready! We've been waiting for you to get out the face powder and rouge so we can set up. Why are you so late?"

Wanzhen didn't have time to answer as she rushed over to open the glass display case and take out the necessary items, which she handed over to Little Hong and Little Lan. She instructed them to put a small amount of powder in the powder box on each dressing table while explaining how they were to greet the patrons who came in.

Little Hong and Little Lan were both middle-school graduates who could speak some English. Because of the hardships during the war and because neither had any family, they had no choice but to quit their studies to find work. Even though Wanzhen had only met them the night before, she appreciated their spirit. She was especially taken by Little Hong, who was pretty and clever, and spoke Beijing dialect. Last night, as soon as they were introduced Little Hong had followed her around everywhere, and Wanzhen agreed to look after her like a younger sister. Therefore, today as Wanzhen handed the

items over and watched her take them away so cheerfully, she bowed her head and smiled to herself, feeling inexplicably relieved, even momentarily forgetting her own troubles. Only when she had tidied up did Wanzhen finally sit down, letting out a deep sigh. She looked around the room. The mirrors on the dressing tables reflected the pale yellow whitewashed walls, giving off a refined luster, and making the room appear all the more spacious and grand. Except for the merry laughter of Little Hong and Little Lan emanating from the inner rooms, now there was not even the faintest sound. The air felt rather thick, and Wanzhen thus once again began thinking about her sick child. All she hoped now was that the guests would hurry up and start arriving so the long night would pass by quickly and she could ask the manager for an advance to buy some medicine. Nothing else mattered. She supposed that by now Lisheng must have already gotten back home and would be taking care of Erbao. She remembered how excited she had been the previous night sitting on this very chair, and how intrigued she had been by all the brand-new sights and sounds. She had been like Liu Laolao, who was so utterly enthralled when she visited Grand View Garden.¹ She had even started to enjoy her job, and this elegant, spacious room that naturally was so much more comfortable than their cramped, poorly lit quarters at home. But later on, when she hopped in a rickshaw to go home, her mood again shifted and it occurred to her that what she had witnessed was a lot like the novels she occasionally read, with scenes she had assumed could not possibly be true, things she could scarcely imagine.

Thus she returned home with a perplexed and heavy heart, and not until she had told Lisheng all about it and mulled it over carefully did she conclude that to keep working there would be too risky. She made up her mind not to go back the next day.

Who would have thought that here she would be, sitting on this chair again today? Now that she thought about it, she grew uneasy.

Just then peals of laughter rang out outside, followed by four or five ladies pushing open the door, giggling and chatting as they burst in and proceeded into the inner rooms, all except one tall and slender young matron who changed her mind before going in. First, she glanced around the anteroom and peered over at Wanzhen, then sauntered up to a dressing table, where she stood in front of the mirror and gazed at her full, round face and her equally

¹Reference to a memorable rustic relative in *Dream of the Red Chamber* who is overwhelmed by the material grandeur of the Jia family mansion when she visits for the first time.

well-proportioned figure. She flashed a proud smile, stepped forward, then picked up a comb to straighten a few loose strands of hair. She inspected herself from side to side, then looked down to get a lipstick out of her pocketbook, which she reapplied, all the while softly humming a tune from the opera *Jade Hall of Spring*, as though no one else were in the room. Meanwhile, out came another woman in a long crimson gown, who had to be five or six years older than the young woman—clearly a seasoned socialite who could just smile without even saying a word and win a person over. Her charm was such that her white complexion seemed all the more tender and lovely. As soon as she saw the young lady there humming Peking opera, she immediately walked up behind her with a smile, and affectionately wrapped her arms around her shoulders. Looking at her in the mirror, she said, "Good gracious! You're gorgeous enough as it is, what are you doing putting on more make-up? Didn't you see how Jiaoqi couldn't keep his eyes off you at dinner? He didn't even notice when Mr. Zhu poured him more wine. If you get even more made up, he'll be completely entranced! Save the make-up!"

"Oh, nonsense! You never stop. Nothing from your mouth ever sounds nice. You fail to mention that you yourself spend hours doing your face, and who knows how long you spend admiring yourself from side to side when you get dressed?"

"Oh, I've thought of something! Stop fooling around, let's talk about something serious, okay?"

"What have you got to be serious about? You just want to learn some new opera, or design some costumes, or find some limelight." Having said this, the fat lady stood up in front of the dressing mirror and started shaping her eyebrows with an eyebrow pencil.

"Do that later, I have something to discuss with you," said the slender one, taking her hand.

Seeing her looking so anxious, the fat one realized that her friend really did have something important to say, so she put the eyebrow pencil away, sat down, and murmured, "Well, what is it?"

"It's Lin Caixia. Do you get the feeling she's been acting differently lately? The past few times we invited her out, she made all sorts of excuses, whereas she used to be so eager to go out with us. And when she does come she has to leave early, and she's even reluctant to teach us opera now. She's been teaching us that same allegro section of *Jade Hall* for ages now. Apparently she has to force herself, and she's not at all enthusiastic the way she used to be."

The fat woman listened and restrained her smile, keeping silent for several moments before looking up and replying in a low voice, "It's true. If you hadn't

said anything I would not have noticed, but now that you mention it, I agree she's changed a lot. Just now at dinner I overheard her saying something about some Mrs. Zhang whom she only met three times who gave her a Hunanese embroidered cushion. Then she brought up a Mr. Li somebody or other who gave her a feathered head ornament. It made me feel bad—it was as though our gifts weren't worth mentioning! It's rather insulting, don't you think?"

"Indeed. Actresses don't understand the first thing about friendship. So I wanted to run this by you now because they'll be back shortly and it won't be convenient for us to talk. From now on, we mustn't be so friendly with her, and if she wants to come out with us, that's up to her. If you get a chance, mention it to Mrs. Li and tell her not to be so doting. We can find something else to amuse ourselves with. Don't just throw your money down the drain. Do you know what I mean?"

Just as they were conversing, their three companions emerged from the inner rooms, one of whom was slightly older than the rest. She looked dignified and quite chic, as if she were an aristocrat, and even though she was well over forty, she was beautifully attired. If it hadn't been for the lines of wrinkles around her eyes, from afar one would never have guessed her age! Another one was dressed like a northerner trying to imitate Shanghai style, and at a glance it was apparent she was either a drum-song singer or an actress. Even the way she walked was like an actress on stage! And then there was one who couldn't have been more than thirty, who looked quite poised. Just watching her walk gave away her whole personality—so serene and haughty. She was still gazing blankly at the western-style landscape painting hanging on the wall when the older woman approached the dressing table.

"Just look at the two of you! The minute you're together you just can't stop nattering away. Wherever do you find so much to talk about? But nothing nice is ever said behind people's backs, so you must be whispering about me again, aren't you?" said the distinguished matron to the fat one, half in jest, as she took the slender one's hand. At that point the two pulled her over and whispered something in her ear.

As soon as Lin Caixia came out, she had spotted the long glass display case in front of Wanzhen. Because of the tiny electric lights inside the case illuminating the golds, silvers, reds, greens, and various other colors on top of the glass, everything seemed especially elegant and dazzling, and immediately caught her fancy. So without even pausing to chat with the ladies, she went over by herself. First she eyed Wanzhen briefly with a look of amazement, for this was the first time she had ever been to such a grand hotel. She had never seen cosmetics and accessories for sale in a ladies' lounge before and

she wasn't sure what tone of voice to take with Wanzhen, so she just stared at the merchandise in the case, longing yet not daring to ask about it. Wanzhen smiled slightly and said to her, "If there's anything you'd like to look at, please go ahead."

Hearing this, Lin Caixia was unsure how she was supposed to respond, so she looked around for reinforcements. "Mrs. Li, come over here quick, isn't this purse exquisite! And that gold brooch too!"

As Lin Caixia called out to her, she also beckoned the two other ladies over with her hand. Mrs. Li trotted right over obediently, happily instructing Wanzhen to show Lin the things she wanted to see. Wanzhen thus took them all out and spread them on top of the glass counter, turning on the small electric lamp on the counter as well, so that they glittered all the more brilliantly. Lin Caixia looked mesmerized, as though she would have stuffed them all into her own little handbag were it not for the fact that she knew it was quite beyond her means to buy them all. Thus an indescribably strange expression crept over her face, and she glanced at Mrs. Li, then turned to look at the two others who had just walked up, and, all smiles, asked, "Mrs. Li, Mrs. Wang, which do you think is the prettiest? I've been looking at them for so long that I can't tell. I've never seen such things anywhere else; they must be imported!"

At this point the slender woman went over to Lin Caixia and held the gold brooch up to her chest to see how it looked and, laughing slyly, said, "Why, Ms. Lin, on you it looks even prettier. If you don't buy this, you'll have passed up a good opportunity. I think you should buy them all. You mustn't think twice about it." Having said this, she shot a glance at Mrs. Li and the fat woman.

Mrs. Li looked at her with uncomprehending eyes, while the fat woman smiled and added coldly, "Indeed, it's as though they were made just for you, Ms. Lin, they wouldn't suit anyone else. Stop this nonsense and hurry up and get out some money to pay for them! You can put them on straight away."

Poor Lin Caixia. Clutching her pocketbook in one hand, she was at a complete loss. She certainly hadn't expected these two to act so uncharacteristically, and she was so mortified she was rendered speechless. Ordinarily when they all went out shopping together, she need only express the slightest interest in something and without even saying a word, they would fight to buy it for her. But not tonight. Even Mrs. Li was somewhat mystified. Wanzhen watched the expressions on each of their faces; it was truly more fascinating than a play. She even felt a little sorry for the actress, and thought her quite pitiful.

At this moment, Mrs. Li became somewhat embarrassed and walked over to put her hand on Lin Caixia's shoulder, saying, "Ms. Lin, have whatever

you like, my treat. It's getting late, so why don't you go back out and dance? And afterward, weren't you going over to my house to teach us the slow part of *Jade Hall*?"

As she heard this, Lin Caixia's expression immediately changed; she rolled her eyes and, with an indifferent and thoroughly artificial laugh, said, "Oh, I almost forgot, I still have to go to rehearsal!" With that, she spun around to leave, ignoring the merchandise on the countertop and not uttering another word. By now Mrs. Li was extremely concerned and at once caught up with her, asking, "But Ms. Lin, didn't you promise that after we went out dancing you would spend the rest of the evening at my house? How can you have rehearsal in a little while?"

The slender woman glanced at the fat one, and the two smirked knowingly at each other. They then excused themselves from Wanzhen, whispering as they walked out. Observing this scene, Wanzhen felt sad, reflecting on the fact that while they had the means to amuse themselves extravagantly, she could ill afford legitimate expenses, let alone frivolous amusements. They were all human beings, yet what disparities divided them.

She was just mulling this over when through the door barged a woman with a black cape draped over her shoulders. As soon as she came in, she threw it off and handed it to Little Hong, who was standing at the entrance, all the while humming the popular English tune "Merry Widow."² As she walked up to the mirror, Wanzhen examined her carefully in the pink hue of the lamp—how lovely. Wanzhen could scarcely believe that there was such a beautiful creature on earth! She was neither too thin nor too fat, not too tall or too short, and she was dressed in a western-style black velvet evening gown with a red back, and had on silver leather shoes. The collar revealed just a bit of snowy white skin. Her complexion was flawless, and her big, radiant eyes exuded intelligence and vitality. Slim and graceful, she stood in front the mirror combing the long hair cascading down her shoulders. How charming! She appeared to be slightly tipsy, and from the way she giggled at the faces she made in the mirror, she seemed quite pleased with herself. But from the expression in her eyes, one could also see that her heart was in turmoil. Just then, the hand that had been applying make-up abruptly froze as she stared vacantly at her wedding ring. An uncomfortable look came over her face and after a moment or so of struggle, she managed to pull the ring off and tossed it into her handbag with a snide smile. Before the bag was shut, another comely young lady came in through

²Famed comic operetta by Franz Lehár that was adapted for the 1934 film by the same name.

the door who, upon seeing her at the dressing table, at once heaved a great sigh of relief, clapped her hands together, and said, "You rotten girl! You just disappeared on us without saying a word, so we all had to go search for you. I guessed you'd be in here. And sure enough, I was right. What are you doing?"

"Ah, Linna!" the young lady in black turned around and said with affection. "I've had a bit too much to drink and my head is feeling rather dizzy, so I came in here to rest for a moment. I am sorry you had to come looking for me."

"Oh please, stop this nonsense. What's this about drinking too much? I know perfectly well that you're hiding in here plotting something. It's hard to say just what kind of wicked scheme you've come up with this time, but I've known for ages that whenever Xiao Chen's away, nothing is off limits as far as you're concerned. Fine, wait until he gets back, and I'll tell him all about the naughty things you've been up to. I saw that look in your eyes when you were drinking with Mr. Liu. Those looks you were giving him made him speechless—I found it terribly amusing."

"Okay, okay. But you're one to talk—what about you? What's the difference? And you thought I didn't notice. You're even better at it than me; even with Lao Jin at home, you've managed to slip out for some fun, and who'd have guessed how friendly you've become with Xiao Wang lately? Didn't he even give you a new purse last week? I've only met Mr. Liu twice, so how could there be anything between us? So don't talk rubbish."

As the woman in black teased her companion, she tapped lightly on the table with the big comb and looked in the mirror as though she were figuring something out. When the other woman heard this, her color changed immediately and she said, her smile gone, "Don't make such wild accusations. I have no choice. We've been friends for over a decade now, so neither of us needs to try to fool the other. I've always been perfectly candid with you and have never kept secrets, and if anything is the matter I've always been up front about it. You're the one who doesn't tell the whole truth! If you really want to know, Lao Jin's regular salary is abysmal, and the money he brings home each month isn't nearly enough to cover ordinary household expenses, let alone my personal expenses, so I have no choice but to scrounge around for a bit of extra income by coming out to 'amuse' myself. At the moment, practically everything I have on and am using were gifts from friends."

"Who would disagree with that? But here you are scolding me, and my situation is no different. I'm even worse off. You know that my marriage was arranged by my parents when I was too young to know any better. It was not until this past year that I came to fully realize that my husband only earns about as much as Lao Jin. And with such a huge family, it's never my turn

to spend any money. So all I can do is try to find out some way to get out. I, for one, am not about to sacrifice my youth. But you must on no account tell him, do you understand?"

"True, you are younger than me and you can indeed figure out some way out. But it's all over for me, what with the children and that old-fashioned family. It's hopeless, so I might as well make do with what I've got. But let's not talk any more about this now, Mr. Liu is waiting impatiently. He's not bad, that fellow; the two of you could be friends." With that, she quickly grabbed the young woman in black and skipped out.

As Wanzhen stared at them as they were leaving, she began to wonder whether she was actually watching a play. Could there be such odd characters in the world?

She was in a daze thinking this over when suddenly the sound of the door opening jolted her back to reality. All she saw was a young lady who looked to be about seventeen or eighteen years old, and certainly not old enough to be out of school yet. Frantic, staggering back and forth as though she were so drunk that she could barely walk, she hurriedly steadied herself against the back of the sofa before collapsing onto it. She covered her face with both hands, her shoulders heaving as though she were sobbing or gasping for breath.

Startled, Wanzhen quickly rose to her feet and went over and, after looking at her for a moment, asked, "Miss, are you feeling ill? Do you need anything?"

At this point, the young lady slowly put her hands down, revealing a face as white as a pear, and with eyes half shut, murmured, "Thank you for your kindness, could I have some water? I'm awfully dizzy!"

Wanzhen immediately went to the entrance to the inner rooms and instructed Little Hong to quickly pour her a glass of water. Then she went back over and perched on the edge of the sofa, and felt the girl's hands, which were ice cold, then her forehead, which was burning up. Little Hong brought over the water and Wanzhen held the cup in one hand while using the other to lift the girl's head. The girl drank a few sips of water, then slumped back with her eyes closed. Her chest rose up and down, as though she were deeply troubled. But before a few minutes had elapsed, she suddenly sat up and said to Little Hong, "Thank you! Could you please go outside and check whether there's a man out there wearing formal evening attire holding a shawl?" When she had finished speaking she leaned back again, closed her eyes, and clenched her fists, as though she were straining to overcome some pain. At this point Little Hong walked back in smiling, and with a look of surprise on her face, said that there was indeed a fellow of that description standing outside the door, pacing back and forth!

When the young woman heard this, she sat up at once, head drooping, and began randomly tugging on her hair, tapping the floor with her toes, not knowing what to do. Seeing this, Wanzhen was concerned, for she had no idea if the young woman were really ill or something else was troubling her.

"Are you feeling better? Can we get you anything else?"

"Thank you. I think I can manage now, just let me rest a moment and I'll be all right."

Wanzhen could only signal Little Hong to go. And she herself returned to her seat. She wondered, *What is wrong? What kind of trouble could the young woman be in? She looks so upset, it's as though she were being tortured, not out having fun! Then why bother going out?* At that, Wanzhen again felt uneasy, and the atmosphere in the room all of a sudden seemed to have changed and she had difficulty breathing. But she couldn't put the young woman out of her mind and kept her eyes fixed on her.

The woman was still sitting on the sofa with her chin cupped in her hands, looking down at the floor, tapping her foot to an irregular beat that betrayed her inner turmoil. Her body would stretch out, then draw back, as though she couldn't make up her mind whether to stand up or not. She was at a complete loss as to what to do with herself. Her poor face turned from red to white in distress, and she looked as though she were ready to burst into tears. Suddenly she glanced at her watch, and with a furrowed brow and clenched teeth, she stood up resolutely, as if she had reached some decision. She strode up to the mirror, picked up a wooden comb to tidy her disheveled hair, then went to open her purse. At this point she clearly felt too dizzy to stand up, so she had to steady herself on the dressing table, pausing there for a moment with her eyes shut. Then she staggered back out toward the door. Wanzhen wanted to catch up to help her, but by the time she was halfway across the room, the young lady had reached the doorway, and just at that moment a group of people came bursting in, the two parties nearly bumping right into each other. As soon as Wanzhen saw the group come in, she immediately spun around in alarm and scurried back to her station, for among them was the fat Mrs. Wang, who had come in the day before and chatted with her at length, as though she wanted to be friends. She had even invited her for dinner at her house this evening. At the time, she had casually accepted Mrs. Wang's invitation, afterward forgetting all about it; she was only reminded now that she saw Mrs. Wang again. She dreaded that Mrs. Wang might inquire. She feared that silver tongue and hoped that tonight she would just leave her alone. If only there were someplace to hide.

Other than the fat and somewhat older Mrs. Wang, the rest of the group

that had come in was young and gorgeously decked out, adorned with so much diamond and jade jewelry it was obvious they were all ladies of wealth. There was just one young woman who one could tell at a glance was fresh out of school. The clothes she wore were plain, and even her manner seemed at complete odds with theirs. She trailed behind them nervously, as though she felt totally ill at ease, with a panic-stricken look on her face. Seeing all these rich ladies surrounding her, she wanted to walk right back out, but they wouldn't let go of her hand, making it very awkward for her. As Wanzhen observed them she thought it quite unusual, and wondered what kind of game they were playing.

The fat Mrs. Wang appeared to be the commander-in-chief. As soon as she came in she grabbed the one woman who was slightly older, just a little over thirty, but who still dressed as though she were in her twenties. She was wearing a black velvet outfit with a bead trim, of medium length, not too tight. She had snow-white skin, and a pair of black eyes that didn't seem overly big when she laughed, giving the impression that she was quite agreeable. Mrs. Wang pulled her over to the dressing table, sat down on the chair in the middle herself, and told her to sit on the back of the chair. Smiling broadly as she watched the others go into the inner room, she said smugly to her companion, "Mrs. Zhang, do you think this Miss Li is pretty? One little remark from Minister Chen, and I've been running around all week long, and it was by no means easy. I managed to trick her into coming here with us, but I wonder whether he'll be pleased when they are introduced later? It certainly is difficult to be of service!"

"She's pretty, and as soon as you dress her up a bit she'll be prettier than us all. You, make a mistake? Your social skills are renowned. Everyone knows that you have a hand in everything your husband does! And I heard that he was promoted again! After you've taken care of this, I'm quite sure the minister will be most satisfied, just watch! Next month I expect your husband will be promoted yet again."

As Mrs. Zhang spoke, she stood up and faced the fat Mrs. Wang, leaning against the dressing table with a cigarette in one hand. On her face lurked an icy sarcasm and a strained smile, and she peered out of the corner of her eye at the smoke rings she was blowing, as though she were somewhat disdainful of her companion. The fat Mrs. Wang was a smart woman, and seeing her friend's attitude, she grasped immediately what was going on, so she rolled her eyes and with a smile on her face raised her hand as if to slap her, at the same time exclaiming in a charming voice, "Enough! Someone is trying to have a serious discussion with you, and all you can say is a load of rubbish.

You're one to talk. Look at how obedient Minister Liu has become—if you ordered him to head east he wouldn't dare head west, and the minute you say you want something, he does exactly as he's told. Tonight he even skipped that important meeting so he could come out dancing with you. Is this not your magic charm? And you go on about me! Hmm!"

The fat Mrs. Wang was apparently a little displeased by what her companion had said, so she immediately struck back, her barbed words causing Mrs. Zhang's cheeks to flush red. She was irritated, but there was no way to take it to heart, since they were accustomed to such banter, and anyway, just now, hadn't she been the one who had offended her companion in the first place? So she might as well calm her anger. She beamed and affectionately grabbed the hand that fat Mrs. Wang had extended as if to slap her, saying in a tender voice, "Look, I was just joking, but you are so short-tempered, you don't know how bad I feel! I am sympathetic about all your hard work. Aren't we in the same boat? It is not easy being a wife. We have to take care of household affairs and deal with the outside world, with our husbands trying to take advantage of every opportunity. If we don't handle a situation properly, or not to their liking, they call us stupid. And if you make things worse, who's to say they won't leave you at home and go out looking for someone else, right? Are we not busy from morning till night? And isn't all our running around for their sake? Sometimes when I think about it I get so annoyed!"

Meanwhile, Mrs. Wang sat perfectly still with her head down, listening to her companion, and felt so moved! Her own emotions had been stirred, so she fell silent and didn't say a word; however, time did not permit her to go deeper into thought, for those in the inner room had already filed back out, the first one being a woman dressed in pale blue with an embarrassed look on her face. She cried out, "Mrs. Wang! Hurry and come convince her! Even with all the nice things we have been saying, Miss Li refuses to change her clothes. Come over here! We want to see your skills at work."

The next one to emerge was that plainly dressed girl, accompanied by a relatively young matron. The girl's face hadn't a speck of powder on it, nor any rouge; only her eyebrows had been lightly painted, making her look all the more delicate. Nor had her hair been curled; it was only slightly wavy on top. She had on light gray cotton clothes and her demeanor was poised and gentle, though ever since she had come in she wore a strained smile on her face, one that concealed pain, as though she were deeply troubled. At this point, she walked over to Mrs. Wang and murmured, "Mrs. Wang, please forgive me, you've been ever so kind, but ordinarily I can't bear to wear other people's clothes. I had no idea that we were coming to a ballroom this evening, so I

didn't change, and I know that I'm dressed inappropriately for a place like this, so let me go back home! Next time, I'll be more prepared, all right? In any case, I can't dance, and just sitting there will look bad and people will laugh. I wouldn't want you to look bad either."

The young woman was desperate to find some way to extricate herself from the situation, loath to stay any longer, but had no choice but to go along with them. The fat Mrs. Wang was determined not to let her get away, so no matter what she said, she had a quick comeback. Mrs. Wang rushed up to her and clasped her hands affectionately, and said, "Never mind, Miss Li! It doesn't matter if you don't change, in those clothes you look all the more pure and dignified. Of course you can't get all dressed up the way we do. With your education, it is perfectly understandable. At any rate, you don't have to dance. We will wait until you've learned how. However, your hair is a bit of a mess! Come over and let me fix it for you, otherwise the foreigners will laugh at us Chinese for so lacking decorum that we don't even comb our hair! Wouldn't you agree?"

Before she could refuse, Mrs. Wang pulled her over to the dressing table and planted her down firmly in front of the mirror, picked up a comb, and began to do her hair. Miss Li was so anxious that her cheeks flushed; she sat there forlornly, but she couldn't cry. What a pitiful sight to behold.

Wanzhen watched all this with bated breath, resenting the fact that she couldn't go to Miss Li's rescue, for by this time she could see what the group was up to. She secretly rejoiced for not having fallen for their trap the night before, since Mrs. Wang's invitation to dinner at her house no doubt had been made with the same wicked intentions. She loathed them and felt sorry for Miss Li. She wished she had the chance to warn her, but how could she? In the midst of all her frustration, she could hear Miss Li pleading, "Mrs. Wang, you mustn't trouble yourself, my hair is most unruly and can't be fixed just like that. Your efforts are in vain! Anyway, since it looks terrible, I think I'd better just go home! My mother doesn't know that I'm here; she's waiting up for me, and if I'm late she'll worry. When we left, you just said we were going out to dine, and she even told me to make sure to be back by ten o'clock. You'd best let me go! Next time, we can make plans beforehand, and I'll come out with you to have fun, all right?"

"Don't worry, I can explain all of this to your mother. After we go dancing, I promise to take you back home myself and I will apologize in person. I assure you she won't blame you." Mrs. Wang combed the girl's hair as she spoke, meanwhile shooting a glance at Mrs. Zhang to hurry up and buy a hair clip, for with a clip it would be fine. Mrs. Zhang understood immediately

what she meant and went up to the counter and had Wanzhen get her one, as well as a lipstick and a gold silk purse, and inquired how much it came to, meanwhile taking out a thick wad of bills from her purse, which she counted out one by one.

Although Wanzhen did just as she was asked, her anger could no longer be contained. How she wished she could get away from this pack of demons right then! She knew they were up to no good. No wonder yesterday Mrs. Wang had been so friendly chatting with her; no doubt she had wanted to invite her over for dinner to set her up with someone too, and yet yesterday she had assumed Mrs. Wang was being sincere and actually wanted to be friends. Now she understood. They probably had some use for her as well. The more she thought about it, the more furious she became, and she didn't hear a single word of what Mrs. Zhang was saying. All she could think about was how to crush the demons. If only she could rescue the innocent young girl, but now all she could hear was Mrs. Zhang standing in front of her, shouting at her for all she was worth, "Miss, what has come over you tonight? Are you not feeling well? I have repeated myself several times, but you haven't heard a single word I've said!" Mrs. Zhang said this with a soft, perplexed laugh, looking as though she expected an immediate, satisfactory reply.

Wanzhen would have liked to have cursed her to her face but was unsure where to start, so all she could do was hold back her anger. Courtesy demanded that she respond politely, because this was what her job called for. Still, it was impossible to go through the motions submissively, and she could barely control the tenor of her voice as she said, slowly and frostily, "Fine, whatever you have decided on, I'll add it up."

Taken aback, Mrs. Zhang had no choice but to quickly hand over the hair clip and other items and settle the bill, and took them without even having them wrapped up. She could sense that something was wrong but, having no idea what was the matter, was tactful enough to know that the less she said, the better. And Wanzhen? At this point, her heart had gone out to the young lady, and she wondered whether or not she would be forced to go with them. When she looked over, all she could see was Mrs. Wang seeming very pleased at having combed the girl's hair. Naturally, it looked much better than before, but the young lady didn't take any notice whatsoever, lost in thought with her head down and a worried look on her face. Beside her, Mrs. Wang was murmuring all sorts of compliments, but she didn't seem to hear a word. After thinking for some time, she suddenly lifted her head and, with an imploring look on her face, said with urgency and regret, "Mrs. Wang! Please don't bother. You see, it's after ten already, nearly eleven, and if I don't get home my

mother will surely be furious. I may be all grown up already, but my mother still sometimes punishes me as though I were a child! My upbringing was very strict and old-fashioned: when my father was still in Shanghai he would beat my brother even though he was already in college. Daughters have even less leeway to misbehave at home, and if it weren't for the fact that my father is in the interior and can't send us money for household expenses, my mother never would have permitted me to go out to work. She has told me repeatedly not to socialize in public. If I don't obey her, she will not allow me to work. So you had best let me go home! I appreciate your kindness, and in a few days, once I have spoken with my mother, I can come out again with you."

Hearing this, the fat Mrs. Wang appeared somewhat moved and was quiet for a moment in thought; then suddenly her expression changed, as though she had made up her mind to definitely not let the opportunity slip by. She hastily took the girl's hand, like a loving mother cajoling her child, lowered her voice, and with an imploring look said, "That's enough! My dear girl, don't make this any more difficult for me. At least you should grant me some face, I've been bragging to the others that I could get you to come out even if they couldn't, so aren't you now putting me in an awkward position?" At this point she lowered her voice further and assumed a serious tone. "What's more, the minister himself is coming to dance shortly! If he finds out that you are putting on such big airs, that won't be good, and who's to say he won't get angry and report you for having committed some serious offense, or have you fired, how exasperating would that be! Just sitting with him for a while won't hurt, and once he's pleased he'll give you a raise, even getting a promotion won't be a problem. Think about it, some people would give anything to get close to him but never get the chance, while you've got such a wonderful opportunity but are giving him the runaround. What kind of fool are you?" Hearing this string of palaver, the young lady hung her head without saying a word, wavering.

Meanwhile, Mrs. Zhang had walked over to show them her purchases. Mrs. Wang snatched up the clip and put it in the girl's hair, the one protesting it, the other insisting. Just as this fuss was unfolding, two more women suddenly burst in through the door, the one in front wearing a western-style evening gown, loudly cursing as she strode in, the slightly younger one behind her in a *cheongsam* looking completely mortified, trying to catch up with her. At this moment, the atmosphere in the room suddenly grew tense, with all eyes riveted on the two of them. Wanzhen was already feeling dizzy, and as though she could barely breathe. How she longed to get away from this dreadful room and go someplace quiet to be alone for a moment! But now that these

two had come in, she forgot everything and just stared wide-eyed, wondering what kind of antics they were up to. She heard the first one, now sitting at the dressing table near Wanzhen, tapping a wooden comb on the table loudly, fuming to the young woman sitting to her left: "Splendid. Just splendid! So this is the good friend you introduced to me, the one who is so well mannered, the one who values friendship, the one who is so well educated? What a despicable thing she has done! What nerve does she have to face me! Just outrageous, what do you want me to say?" With this, she picked up the comb in rage and vigorously combed her hair, though from the look of it she was completely unaware of what she was doing. She was simply beside herself with anger. When the woman with her heard this, her face grew apprehensive and she was so nervous that she mumbled, "First, calm down, I still don't understand what exactly has made you so angry. We're all old friends, so you should forgive them if you can."

"Don't you sound calm! At any rate, it didn't happen to you; if you were me, you would be furious too."

"What dreadful thing did you find out about?"

"Just listen, and I will tell you! Just now we were all getting ready to go out after dinner at my house, right? We were all smoking and putting on our coats in the drawing room, right? It was me who asked Henry to go upstairs to lock the doors and to tell the maid to put little Peipei to bed early and that we would be home late. Not long after he left, Manli also went upstairs. At the time, I thought nothing of it, assuming she had gone up to the bathroom. But after we had been chatting for quite some time, they still hadn't come back down. You and Little Zhang were engaged in a lively conversation, so you didn't notice, but I already thought it curious, so I tiptoed upstairs without saying a word. On the way up I could already hear the faint sounds of two people laughing, so I tiptoed all the way up to the door, pushed it open lightly—luckily it wasn't locked, though they probably didn't hear me anyway, because when I walked in to take a look, what a fine sight, there they were in each other's arms kissing passionately! Tell me, what am I supposed to do, tell me!"

By this point, having quickly run through her account, she demanded that the woman beside her say something, as though she were the one who had done something wrong, so the woman didn't quite know what to say! Perhaps it was the incident itself that had caught her off guard, for she murmured, "Oh, no wonder you're mad," as though she were talking to herself.

"I was so mad then that I nearly wept, but I just turned around and went back downstairs without saying anything, and they came down right after me. We all waited at the door for the car, and I have been furious ever since."

"Oh my! Now I finally get it. No wonder you were so quiet in the car and ignored us all! I see!"

Although she responded to her friend in a low, calm voice, the color had drained from her face and her eyes peered down at her nose, as though she were reflecting on some terribly complicated situation and didn't like hearing what her friend had said.

"Well, look at you! Why don't you speak up? Tell me what to do. How should I deal with her? Shall I tell everybody? Or should I keep it to myself? I just don't know what to do anymore. Here I am discussing it with you and you're being so vague! Like you weren't even my friend at all!"

"You mustn't get too worked up. We are all people with social standing, and there's no point making a big scene. Figure out some other way to handle this. Anyway, now that Manli knows you know, she'll be too ashamed to stay friends with you, and as long as you warn your husband, I expect he won't carry on anymore either. Making a scene would be embarrassing for everyone, don't you think?"

After she heard her friend's calm speech, the woman's anger receded and she was less hysterical than before. She scanned her friend's silent face for a few moments, then slowly stood up and murmured, "Okay. I hear what you are saying, and you're right. There's no point making a scene. The thing I should remember is what type of person she is. Later on if she comes in you can have a word with her so that she knows. Even if I keep quiet, ask her if she has the nerve to face me. I don't intend to speak to her ever again." With that, she strode out, leaving the other there with her head resting in one hand, staring at the cigarette in the other, looking utterly dejected. By this time, the atmosphere in the room had grown extremely still. Only now did Wanzhen, who had not taken her eyes off the pair from the moment they came in, listening with bated breath, take a deep breath. By the time she looked up, she saw that everyone else was gone except the one sitting there quietly as though she were the only person in the room. Wanzhen did not know what to think.

All of a sudden Little Lan came rushing in as if something terrible had happened.

"Hurry—you have a phone call. It's probably your family looking for you. They said it's urgent and no matter how busy you are, you are to take the call. Hurry up." When she had finished speaking she pulled Wanzhen to go, but Wanzhen was so petrified she couldn't even speak and her body felt numb, as though she had just awoken from a bad dream. She had no idea where she was, but when she had heard the call was from home, she remembered everything,

she remembered that her Erbao was sick! A phone call now? *I hope nothing has happened*—she didn't dare think beyond that; she was so afraid she broke out in a cold sweat and her heart beat so rapidly she could barely stand up. Little Lan didn't pay attention to what she said but just grabbed her and ran inside, where she picked up the telephone receiver to say hello, but then couldn't go on. She could only hear Lisheng's voice saying, "Is this Wanzhen? What happened? Did you ask the manager for an advance? Baobao is completely delirious from fever, we must hurry and go buy some medicine to make his fever go down, otherwise it'll be too late. Do you understand? Hello! Why don't you say something?"

As Wanzhen listened to Lisheng's anxious cries, she lost her bearings and her heart ached, and her mind was so jumbled she didn't know what to do. The truth was, ever since she had arrived at work she hadn't had time to worry about any of this, and only now was she reminded of Erbao's little face burning up, apple red. It wasn't that she didn't want to get her hands on some money right away, but she . . . "Hello! Hello! Are you there? When can you come home? Can you come back early with the medicine? Why don't you say something? I'm so worried."

"Okay. I understand, I can be back in half an hour." She managed to force out this single sentence, then, without waiting for him to reply, hung up the receiver. She had started swaying, unable to stand up straight anymore, and looked as though she might collapse. Alarmed, Little Lan went over at once to help her walk back to the outer room. Leaning against her, as though in a dream, Wanzhen kept moving forward, but her heart ached so much she was on the verge of tears. At this moment, she needed some peace and quiet to clear her head, but circumstances would not permit it. Before she had even returned to her seat, she could already hear a woman there arguing vociferously with the one who a moment earlier had been sitting quietly at the mirror; one sentence after another pierced Wanzhen's ears, making it impossible not to listen. Meanwhile, the face of the woman sitting there had turned pale and, staring wide-eyed at the woman standing in front of her, she said harshly, "I'm telling you, stop dreaming! Henry will always belong to me. Even before he married Lily he was my lover, and the only reason he married her was that I couldn't marry him. I won't allow you to have a relationship with him, so hurry and give it up, otherwise I shall never let you get away with it. You'd better watch out!"

When the woman heard this, she threw back her head and burst out laughing, a laugh that was at once natural and perverse. Slowly and coldly she enunciated, "Ridiculous, you say this with no compunction, but Henry is not

your husband and you have no authority over him. I am free to like or dislike whomever I choose. It is nobody's business. I can do whatever I please, and I don't need you to interfere."

At this point, Wanzhen's head was spinning and she didn't know what to do, and listening to this meaningless chatter made her feel as though her heart were about to explode, as though she were suffocating, as though she were losing her mind. She glanced around at the dazzling lights and gorgeous colors in the room, a room that naturally was much more comfortable than any in her own home, but she now felt that there was something utterly dreadful about this place, and she could barely sit still. The serene atmosphere could no longer contain the fires raging in her heart. All she could feel was a burst of heat on her face, and her heart raced so fast that she could see stars spinning before her eyes, like a person being hounded to death. The sound of the two ladies there quarreling in front of her, word upon word relentlessly bombarding her ears, she didn't want to listen. . . . She couldn't squeeze one more thing into her brain, but with them sitting there in such close proximity, word after word struck her ears; how she wished she could curse them or shout at them to get out! She simply couldn't bear it any longer, so she rose to her feet and was going to berate them, but at that very moment she didn't know where to begin. She was so anxious her face flushed, and she gasped for breath and felt agitated. She had to get away, otherwise she would go mad. She could no longer control herself, all she could feel was the air in the room growing so heavy that it would crush her, she had to get away, she wanted to get away—she simply couldn't wait for anything else to happen, so she dashed out the door, not giving anything another thought. As she fled past the dance floor she seemed not to even see it, nor did she hear the music swirling around her. She looked straight ahead, as though she were all alone; she just looked ahead and walked quickly, oblivious to where she was headed, apparently having lost all sense of control. When she reached the second door, the manager happened to be there taking care of some guests, and when he saw her in this state he thought something must have happened inside, so he immediately went up and inquired, "Why, Miss Wanzhen, what's the hurry, what has happened?"

Wanzhen paid him no heed, scarcely hearing a word he said, and kept walking without the slightest expression on her face. The manager called out after her, but to no avail.

In a single breath she walked all the way from the front entrance to the grounds outside, which were lit up on all sides with neon lights. Since the open space surrounding the building was quite expansive, it was converted into a dance floor during the summer, and here and there shrubbery, flowers,

and trees had been planted. It felt quite peaceful, and in one breath Wanzhen had run to the lawns to the left, where she sat down at random on a stone bench. Only when she had lightly exhaled did she feel her chest relax. The evening breeze blew against her head, waking her up a little. She felt as though she were just waking from a dream, and she began to remember her predicament. She had to decide what to do.

She seemed to hear Lisheng's voice on the telephone, a voice thick with anxiety and resentment, and listening to it made her heart break. She was perfectly aware at this moment how desperately Erbao needed medicine to save his young life and how utterly crucial the money was. Little Erbao with his small apple-red face loomed there before her eyes. How could she not love her young son! With wave upon wave of grief, she wished she could just die on the spot! She stood still, alone beside the bench, then walked forward a few steps, then back a few steps, turning it over and over again in her mind. She should do her maternal duty: under no circumstance could she allow Erbao to die out of neglect. She should put the little one first. Thus she again began to make her way back, one slow step at time, toward to the main entrance, wanting to go in to ask the manager for an advance on her salary so she could ring Lisheng to come pick it up, then hurry to go buy some medicine for the child. But as she approached the entrance, she could already hear the undulating strains of music inside! Meanwhile, Erbao's little face had disappeared, and all she could see were the faces of those ladies from before appearing before her. She recalled everything about that room, and started feeling dazed all over again. She walked up to the entrance, wanting to go in, but her legs wouldn't carry her any farther, and already she felt as though she couldn't breathe as comfortably as she had outside. Again she felt short of breath, and that heavy, almost perfumelike aroma, she couldn't bear it anymore, so she turned around and headed back toward the lawns—thinking—thinking about that evening, about all she had seen and heard in the space of a few short hours, and then replayed it in her head all over again. It truly was too complex and too bizarre. She had never before read about such things in novels, let alone personally observed them. Was this really the true character of contemporary society? She simply did not understand, and if she were to work here every evening, how could she possibly bear it? Was she really meant to associate with such insufferable people?

After she had gotten back home the day before she was restless the whole night, for she had sensed that this was another world from the orderly life of peace and quiet to which she was accustomed, in which everything was simple and easy. But now all of sudden she was expected to become an entirely differ-

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)

Niece 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