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three souls

A NOVEL

JANIE CHANG



P.S.
INSIGHTS,
INTERVIEWS
& MORE...



three souls

JANIE CHANG

wm

WILLIAM MORROW

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Dedication

For my mother, Mao Lei

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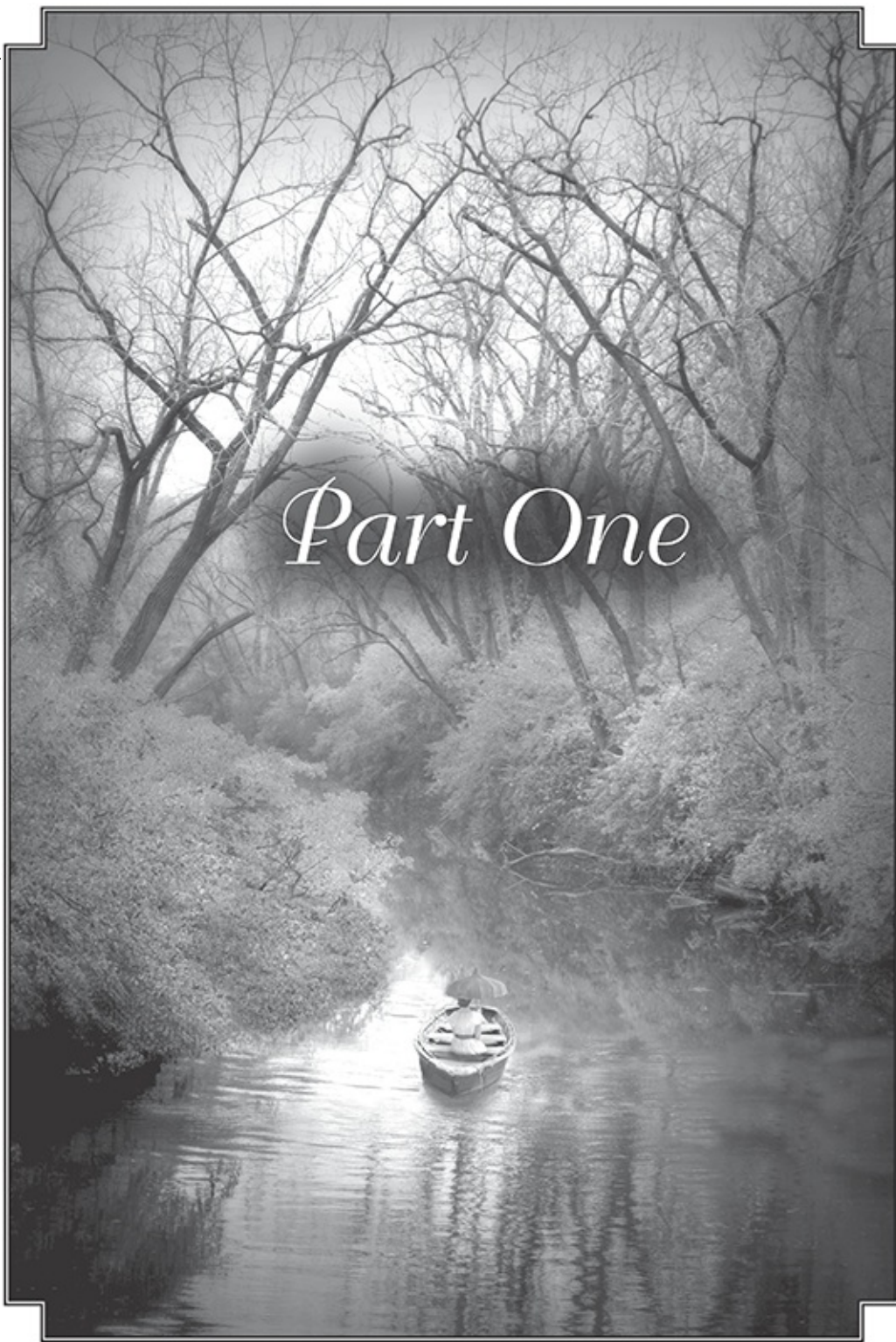
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Part One

Pinghu, January 1935

We have three souls, or so I'd been told.

But only in death could I confirm this.

The moment the priest spoke the last prayer and sealed my coffin, I awoke and floated upward in a slow drift of incense smoke, until I could travel no farther. I settled in the rafters of the small temple, a sleepy wraith perched in the roof beams. I had knowledge, but no memory. My first thoughts were confused, for clearly this was the real world. But surely I no longer belonged here. When would I take my journey to the afterlife?

Below me, pale winter sunlight from an open doorway illuminated the temple's dark slate floor. Men and women in white robes crouched in front of an altar stained by decades of burning incense sticks. Noise assailed me from all directions. The tapping of wood-block instruments, the wailing of paid mourners, the chanting of acolytes. On the altar, a wooden tablet gleamed, gold-painted characters carved into its newly varnished surface. An ancestral name tablet, carved for a family shrine.

Song Leiyin. Beloved Wife. Dutiful Daughter.

I recognized that name. My name.

It was when the priests had finished their chanting that I saw my souls for the first time, three bright sparks circling in the air beside me. They were small, shining, and red as embers, but I knew that the living they were as invisible as motes of dust.

One of the sparks floated in a lazy arc to rest atop the varnished tablet. A delicate rustling at the back of my mind said this was my *yang* soul. I could feel its presence, stern and uncompromising. My *yin* soul wafted down to settle on the coffin, a careless, almost impudent movement. My *hun* soul stayed beside me, watchful as a cat in a strange neighborhood.

I turned to my *hun* soul, a question forming in my still-sleepy mind, when a small, pale face in the crowd below caught my eye. A little girl in mourning robes of white, white ribbons woven through her braids. She knelt behind a man bent so low with weeping his forehead touched the slate floor. The girl shuffled on her knees and the elderly woman beside her put a warning hand on her back. Obediently the little girl stooped down again, her expression blank but for the slightest quiver of her lips. Her dark eyes were dull and rimmed with red. They should have been bright, alive with curiosity.

How did I know that about her eyes?

Memory flickered and I recognized the little girl. My daughter. Weilan. She was so still, so silent. I snapped into wakefulness and in the next moment, I was beside her on the slate, my arms around her thin shoulders.

Mama is here, my precious girl. I'm still with you. But I couldn't feel her. I drew back, suddenly cautious. I didn't want to frighten her. I was dead.

She took no notice of me and that made me weep, my relief struggling with disappointment, for although I longed to hold her, I didn't want to give her nightmares about her mother's ghost. I stayed kneeling beside her, whispering all the pet names I used to call her: *Small Bird, Sesame Seed, My Own Heart*.

I hoped for a tiny gap between our worlds, a crack that would allow my comforting thoughts reach her even if words could not. She was only six, so young to be motherless. Who would listen her chant her times tables now and rub her cold hands on winter days? Who would arrange a marriage for her and teach her how to embroider cloth slippers as gifts for her husband's family?

A restless, elusive tugging sensation told me I didn't belong in this world, but I vowed to resist for as long as possible. If there was any way I could take care of my child, even if I couldn't be seen or felt or heard, I wouldn't abandon her until it became impossible for me to stay.

Borne aloft on the sturdy shoulders of hired mourners, my coffin left the courtyard. I followed drifting beside my daughter as the funeral procession traveled through the streets of the town, my yin soul riding on top of the coffin. Beside my final resting place, I watched the ceremonies. The man who had been weeping arranged food offerings in front of the grave. Weilan lit a bundle of incense sticks in her small hands nearly blue with cold.

Tense and anxious, I watched as the coffin was placed in its grave. Surely once my body was buried I would be snatched away to the afterlife.

But nothing happened. I was still here.

I returned to town with the funeral cortège, but my yin soul remained behind at the grave, and in my mind's eye it shared with me what it saw. Workers were piling earth into a smooth mound on top of my burial spot.

When they finished, however, I didn't drift upward, nor did my consciousness fade into oblivion. When was I supposed to begin my journey to the afterlife?

At the front gates of the estate, fewer than a dozen people entered, all that remained once the mourners had been paid off.

"Come, Granddaughter," said the old woman. Her voice sounded tired, strained but kind. This was had been, my mother-in-law. She would be the one to bring up my daughter now. "I told Old Kwan to have some sweet-date soup waiting for us. Let's go and warm up in the dining room." She led Weilan away.

I stood waiting by the temple, my mind full of questions. Finally my yin soul returned, sliding along a thin shaft of winter sunlight. It joined the two other sparks in a slow circling above the altar.

I'm dead and buried, I said to them. Am I not supposed to leave this earth now? Or will the gods let me stay to watch over my child?

But they ignored me and I drifted among the rafters of the temple, silent and perplexed.

My souls spiral down and come to rest on the altar.

We are ready now, says a stern voice, and there is a taste of mustard at the back of my tongue. My yang soul. Although his red spark remains balanced on the wooden tablet, an elderly man wearing a round scholar's cap appears beside the altar. He resembles my grandfather as I've seen him in photographs, with steel-rimmed glasses and a goatee. He is dressed in a high-necked *changshan* gown.

of deep blue silk over loose black trousers.

Yes, let's begin. A new voice tinkles like wind chimes, accompanied by the scent of camellia. The bright ember of my *yin* soul dances in midair, circling the confines of the courtyard. She comes to rest beside the old scholar, a schoolgirl of fifteen with deep brown eyes below wispy bangs, a long pigtail thrown over one shoulder. Her ankle socks and navy uniform blazer match perfectly, her white blouse is spotless.

Leiyin needs to remember, says a third voice. My *hun* soul flies down from the beams overhead and I feel my hair being pulled, a light, playful tug. Its image joins the other souls. It manifests as a silhouette of light, shaped like a human, as brilliant as the morning sun and as featureless. *Before she can ascend to the afterlife, she needs to understand the reason for her detention in this world.*

This is punishment? This doesn't look like hell, I say, feeling a wave of panic. *Where is the underground maze? What about the fanged demons, the chambers of torture? What is this twilight existence if not the afterlife?*

This isn't hell, nor is it the true afterlife. My *yang* soul turns to me, a slight scowl on his seamed face. *You could say it's the afterdeath. And you're still here because in life you were responsible for a great wrong.*

I don't remember anything about a great wrong. Bewildered as much as indignant, I want to remember my life. Surely I was not, had not been, a criminal.

Soon you'll remember everything and so will we. My *yin* soul pulls the ribbon off her pigtail and shakes out her hair. She begins braiding it again. *Relive your memories. Only then will you understand what you must do to ascend to the afterlife.*

And why do I need to ascend anyway? I know I sound sulky, rebellious.

As soon as I ask this question, an eager swirl of emotions radiates from my souls. In my mind's eye I see them, three red sparks lifting into the air toward a portal that spills golden light over the horizon. Beyond the portal flicker tantalizing glimpses of grassy landscapes, mountain lakes, and eternal blossoming orchards. This vision makes me yearn to rise up toward that portal and join my souls. No longer do I understand the restlessness that invades my being, an upward pull I can't follow so long as the manacles of my sins weigh me down to this world.

We must ascend. Reincarnation awaits us in the afterlife. My *yin* soul spins so that her pleated skirt twirls up around her, a circle of navy blue. *There, we will have a chance for new lives, new hope. But we stay too long in this existence . . .* As her voice trails off, I hear in it a small tremor.

First, she must remember, my *hun* soul interjects. It reaches out a shining limb and pulls my hair again, this time a firm and peremptory tug. *You must understand the damage you did. Then you must make amends to balance the ledger. Only then can we ascend together to the true afterlife.*

So we will go together? You won't go now and leave me here? Relief.

We are your souls, we're part of you, my *yang* soul snaps. *We can't leave until you do.* He glares at me through moon-shaped lenses.

Don't mind yang, says my *yin* soul, who has finished braiding her hair. *He's not happy unless he's berating someone.*

Where should we begin? my *hun* soul asks. *On the day of the party?*

Yes, the day of the party, the other souls agree.

The day you first stepped off the path that had been paved for you, my hun soul says.

I have no choice. How else can I reclaim my memories, discover what to do next? At this moment I can't even remember what Weilan looked like as a baby.

My *yin* soul sinks to the floor and tucks her knees under her skirt, a child waiting to hear a story. My *yang* soul settles on a stool near the door and brushes a cobweb from his black trousers. My *hu* soul drifts to the altar, and with a single bright fingertip gently strokes my name tablet.

Suddenly I'm standing on a street lined with sycamore trees and high, whitewashed walls. I'm watching a schoolgirl climb down from a rickshaw. But in that same moment, I'm also that girl, my foot about to touch the curb.

I know everything about my life before that moment.

I know nothing of what is to come.

Changchow, 1928

*F*or once I had been eager to leave school and get home. I jumped off the rickshaw as soon as I stopped outside the walls of our estate and darted through the wicket gate, dashing past Lao Li, who sat on guard just inside the entrance.

“No need to rush, Third Young Mistress,” the old gatekeeper called after me. “The guests won’t be here for at least two hours!”

For the party, he would change into an immaculate house uniform of gray tunic and trousers. He would push open the huge front gates while other servants swarmed to the entrance to guide carriages and sedan chairs into the forecourt and out again, smooth and practiced as clockwork.

The party wasn’t my only reason for hurrying. Father had promised to give me his decision today. I sprinted through the courtyard, then past the formal reception halls, and through to the next garden. I had just turned seventeen and was trying to be mindful of my dignity. I hadn’t jumped the boxwood hedge in years, but on this day I hiked up the skirt of my *qipao* and prepared to take a shortcut.

Hold, I beg my souls. Hold this flow of memories and let me look at my home again.

I want to see the entire property as it was that day. The world of my childhood lies enclosed within its walls: recollections of bare feet on cool moss, a grove of green bamboo, my face pressed against tall windows, watching raindrops gather in pools on a marble terrace.

Obligingly, my *hun* soul halts the stream of memories and together we rise above the gray roof tiles to view my home as it was. I see myself below, pigtails streaming and skirt yanked up my thigh about to hurdle a two-foot hedge. I see my family’s estate, its perimeter bounded by whitewashed brick walls, the heavy wooden gates banded with brass studs. I catch glimpses of quiet streets outside lined with tall, leafy sycamores and other walls, other homes.

The Old Garden is at the center of our property, a huge private park with a man-made lake at one end large enough to contain an island of reeds and willows, home to families of ducks. Arranged around the Old Garden are a dozen courtyard houses, each nestled beside its own, smaller garden.

In that moment of suspended memory, one of my great-uncles is halted in midstep on his stroll around the lake, a servant boy behind him toting books and a canteen of water. Two of my aunts rest in the shade of the bamboo grove, admiring a stand of blue irises. On one of the terraces facing the Old Garden, my nieces skip rope, arms raised, motionless.

I turn my gaze across to my own home, built thirty years ago when my father returned from

university in Paris, in love with honeycolored stone and all things French. We lived in a villa surrounded by a green lawn that rolled down to rose gardens bordered by boxwood hedges. It was a straight lines and precise geometry, even to the clipped Italian cypresses lining the walls. The rose garden blooms in masses of color, extravagant and gaudy compared to the restrained serenity of the Old Garden.

Then my *hun* soul allows the stream of memories to flow again.

I watch my memory-self leap over the hedge, and at the same time, I feel boxwood leaves brush past my ankles and the giddy, unreserved joy of being seventeen again.

I ran into the villa and nearly crashed into Nanny Qiu.

“*Wah, wah*, Third Young Mistress! Why are you running inside the house like some mad animal?”

“I need to see Father. Right now. Is he in his study?”

“Yes, but the Master is with your brothers.”

That meant Father was discussing family finances.

“Oh. Has Eldest Sister arrived?”

“She is helping Second Young Mistress get dressed.”

My sister Gaoyin was home from Shanghai for the party. I nearly slipped on the cool marble of the circular staircase as I dashed up to the western wing of the house, where my second sister, Sueyin, sat at her dressing table. Gaoyin stood behind, pinning up her hair. They both turned to me, smiling to welcome.

How could I have forgotten their lovely faces, even for a moment, even in death?

Everyone agreed that my mother had been the most beautiful woman ever to marry into our family. I was four when she died, and retained only the haziest of impressions of her: a pale oval face, the scent of osmanthus blossom. Her exquisite features lived on, celebrated in family legend and preserved in a few sepia-toned photographs.

Before they turned sixteen, my two older sisters, near replicas of our mother, were famous already in Changchow. Their faces were perfect ovals, their eyes longlidded beneath delicately arched eyebrows. The most nuanced of details differentiated their features and those details bequeathed Sueyin an unearthly beauty. Her nose was just slightly longer, her mouth a little wider than Gaoyin's. I'm considered pretty, but beside my sisters, I was quite ordinary: my eyebrows heavy, my forehead a bit too high. But we Chinese like groupings of three, so I was lumped in with them and we were known as the Three Beauties of the Song Clan.

Thus when elderly aunts or servants chastised me, they might say, “Your mother, whose skin paled like white jade to shame, always stayed out of the sun,” or, “Your mother, whose graceful walk poised compared to the swaying of willows, never would have galloped down the hall like a demented mule.”

Their words never failed to remind me that I could only aspire to such perfection, for in addition to an excess of beauty, my mother had been blessed with a sweet nature and fertile loins, delivering two sons before both she and her third son died during childbirth. That she also bore three daughters was of little consequence.

“Let me look at you,” my eldest sister said.

But I was the one staring in admiration. Gaoyin’s long, glossy hair, once habitually twisted up in a knot, now grazed her jawline in soft waves, a modern and sophisticated hairstyle like those we saw on models in the Shanghai fashion magazines. But she was far more beautiful than any of them.

She hugged me, an embrace of bergamot and jasmine.

“How delicious, Eldest Sister. What’s that new perfume?”

“It’s called Shalimar,” she said, pleased. “Shen brought it back for me from France.”

“What does Father think of your short hair?”

She tossed her curls. “Shen likes it, and my husband’s opinion is what matters now. But tell my little bookworm, what are you reading these days? Is it something I would enjoy?”

“Probably not. But at least you wouldn’t need to read it in secret, since you’re married. It’s a translation, a Russian novel called *Anna Karenina*. It’s banned from the school library.”

“But you bought a copy anyway?”

“No, a classmate lent it to me.”

Gaoyin’s laughter sent her curls bouncing against her neck. She turned back to pinning up Sueyin’s hair, which she had arranged into a knot secured by jeweled combs.

Even barefaced and wearing the dowdiest of dresses, Sueyin turned heads. Gaoyin and I shared her pale skin, but our elderly aunts assured us that Sueyin was the only one who had inherited her mother’s lustrous complexion. I never understood the point of envying Sueyin. She was simply unattainably beautiful. Tonight her face glowed radiant as white jade against the high neck of her emerald green *qipao*. The dress was a modest ankle length but cut close to show off her slim figure.

“Well, Third Sister,” said Gaoyin, “what will you wear tonight?”

“I’ll just wash my face and go down in this.” My hand swept the front of my dress, a plain *qipao* in navy blue, its only ornament a row of turquoise cloth-covered buttons fastened across the bodice.

“Third Sister! This is Sueyin’s engagement party, not a family dinner.”

“All right, then. I’ll change into my formal school uniform, you know, the blue blazer and plaid skirt.”

Before Gaoyin could open her mouth to rebuke me again, Sueyin spoke up.

“Please, Little Sister. Wear something special.” Her perfect eyebrows drew closer in the tiniest of frowns. “Or you’ll look like a high school student.”

“I *am* a student.” But Sueyin, selfless as she was beautiful, hardly ever asked me for favors, and she relented. “For your engagement party, Second Sister, I’ll wear a nice dress.”

When Sueyin turned eighteen, a flood of matchmakers began arriving at our gates from as far away as Hangchow and Shanghai. Father had settled on Liu Tienzhen, the only son of Judge Liu, whose family was even wealthier than ours. The judge was famously traditional and hadn’t wanted the betrothed couple to meet before the wedding. But in deference to Father’s request, Judge Liu had agreed to allow Sueyin and Tienzhen to meet beforehand so they wouldn’t be total strangers on the wedding day. That was the reason for this evening’s party. Gaoyin insisted on calling it the official engagement party.

I hoped Father would put off any engagement or marriage for me until I’d finished my education. I sat up on the bed.

“I need to see Father. Right now.”

They both turned to me, with identical inquiring looks.

“Father said he’d give me his decision today. Whether I can attend teacher’s college. I’ve applied to Hangchow Women’s University.”

“His answer will be no.” Gaoyin’s self-confident tone made me want to stick my tongue out at her.

“Third Sister is always top of her class. There’s a good chance Father will agree.” Sueyin smiled in my direction.

At that moment old Nanny Qiu came puffing to the door.

“*Wah, wah*, Third Young Mistress, what are you doing? The Master wants to see you now. Then you must take a bath, you must be covered in sweat after the way you galloped up here. Your mother—”

“Yes, yes.” I got up hastily. “Nanny, will you come in later to fix my hair?”

But I had a parting shot for Gaoyin.

“Just because you didn’t go to university doesn’t mean Father won’t let me. For one thing, my grades are much better than yours ever were.”

She threw a pillow at me. I ducked and ran out, giggling.

The door to Father’s study was ajar and I could hear my eldest brother’s voice.

“Chiang’s army lost so badly to the Japanese in Jinan earlier this month. I’m sure it’s added to Japan’s certainty that China is theirs for the taking. The Japanese may be trying to downplay the whole thing by calling it the May Third Incident, but I’m sure it means war with Japan, sooner or later.”

“We need to consider both Hong Kong and Singapore. The Japanese wouldn’t dare invade British territory. Our assets would be safer overseas.”

“I agree, Father, but I still think we should buy property in Hawaii or San Francisco. America is even safer.”

The voices belonged to my father and my eldest brother, Changyin, who were both standing over Father’s big lacquered table, looking down at piles of paper. I knew the civil war was ruining many families, some even wealthier than ours. But with Father and Changyin looking after our investments, surely we would be all right.

Father was plainly clothed, as always. It was hard for me to reconcile this dignified presence, whom I had never seen in anything but a traditional *changshan* gown, with photographs of Father as a student in Paris, a grinning young man resplendent in striped shirts and embroidered waistcoats. Tonight, because of the party, his gown was silk, dark gray woven with a design of bamboo leaves. He wore shoes with cloth soles, a pair that Stepmother had finished making just the day before. His goatee was newly trimmed.

My eldest brother was the only one of us who took after Father, with his heavy, square face, heavy eyebrows, and square, solid build. Like Father, Changyin wore a *changshan*. But unlike Father, who wore loose trousers beneath his *changshan*, Changyin favored a half-Western look. Tailored gabardine trousers showed below his ankle-length gown, their cuffs neatly settled on polished black wingtip shoes. Changyin was only twenty-seven, but to me he seemed decades older. He shared with Father the work of managing our family’s wealth and I could already see the strain in his ruddy complexion. He

carefully trimmed hair showed signs of thinning and would be as gray as Father's before he turned forty.

My second brother, Tongyin, lounged in an armchair, staring out the French doors and not even trying to conceal his boredom. Tongyin had long since abandoned traditional dress. His summer suit of pale linen was brand new and his yellow paisley tie matched the hatband on his straw panama hat. His hair was shiny, slicked back. He had become even more of a dandy since attending university in Shanghai. Much as I detested him, I had to admit Tongyin was very handsome; he had inherited our mother's cheekbones and her long, delicate fingers. At the moment, the straw panama twirled on one of those fingers. He exhibited no interest in our family finances beyond what was deposited in his bank account each month, yet Father always included him in their discussions.

"Are you going to the party wearing *that*?" Tongyin had noticed me at the door. Although he was only two years my senior he always treated me as though I were a child.

"No. Are you going to the party smelling like that?" I couldn't help it. Tongyin was the vainest person alive. And he tended to dab on too much cologne.

"*Eh*. That's enough." From the other end of the table Changyin shook a finger at us. An order from Eldest Brother was as good as an order from Father and we held our bickering while Changyin and Father finished talking.

Dismissed by a casual wave of Father's hand, my brothers left the room. I stuck my tongue out at Tongyin, and then quickly composed myself.

"Father, how are you feeling today?"

He smiled, an indulgent and affectionate smile. Surely he had decided in my favor.

"Third Daughter. Sometimes I forget you are already a young woman. Where have all my little children gone?"

"There's still Fei-Fei, Father." He nodded, but I knew that Fei-Fei, who was the daughter of his concubine, my stepmother, held a smaller place in his heart.

"The house feels empty already when I think of Sueyin getting married. It would be even emptier if you went away to school."

My mouth opened, but I bit my tongue.

"Third Daughter, you do not need a career. So there is no point in spending tuition fees and boarding-school fees on more education."

I looked down at my lap, struggling to hide my disappointment. Hadn't I made it clear to Father how much I wanted to attend university? I had plans already to share a room with my best friend Nanmei. What would I tell her now?

He lifted my chin with a forefinger and tapped me playfully on the nose. "No sulking, little bookworm. You're a clever young woman with many interests. Tomorrow or next week you will find another pastime worthy of your intelligence."

"Father, I don't consider teaching a pastime."

"Leiyin, you will be a wife and mother. You won't need to earn a living."

His tone was mild, but he had used my name. There would be no further discussion.

I just had to convince Father that university wasn't a frivolous whim. Then I looked at the table, the stacks of paper, and the old abacus with ivory beads that had once belonged to my grandfather.

looked at Father. He had so much on his mind. But there had to be a way.

“Now go see your stepmother,” he said. “She wants a word before the party.”

I was dismissed.

Stepmother sat at one of the three round tables in the small dining room. Lu, the head house servant, stood beside her, as upright as a general on horseback, the pleats of his trousers as sharp as bayonet blades. He gave me the slightest of bows and continued addressing the house servants lined up along the wall. They stood at attention, shoulders stiff and straight, hands crossed behind their backs.

“Finally, if a guest asks for something and you don’t know where it is or what it is, just bow and say, ‘Right away.’ Then come and get me immediately. I’ll be at the side entrance of the dining hall. Now go wash up and put on your best uniforms. Girls, remember to pin up your pigtailed.”

They filed out under Head Servant Lu’s critical gaze. I counted sixteen. Stepmother had borrowed staff from other houses for the party. Lu made his bow to Stepmother and another, deeper one to me, and then joined the end of the departing troop.

Stepmother was thirty-three, only six years older than Changyin. From a distance, however, her old-fashioned gowns and matronly hairstyle gave the impression that she was a generation older. Her looks were comfortably plain, her smooth flat features serene as a Buddha’s and just as impenetrable. Her eyes were remarkable, large and deep set. Hers was a demeanor that soothed tempers and quieted arguments.

If we hadn’t been so fond of Stepmother, we would have called her by the lesser family title of Younger Niang, for she was only Father’s concubine and not eligible to be addressed as Stepmother. If she had given birth to a boy instead of little Fei-Fei, Father might have married her and she would be his first wife now. I knew that Stepmother, who was from a family of cloth merchants, had never expected to be made a wife, even after our mother died. If Father married again, it would be to a woman of our own class, but I hoped he wouldn’t. I’d hate it if a new wife proved unkind to Stepmother and little Fei-Fei.

“You wished to see me, Stepmother?”

“Yes, Third Stepdaughter. Once your second sister is married, you’ll be the only daughter of the house. You’ll have to take on hostess duties, so you could begin tonight if you’re willing.”

“Of course, Stepmother. Tell me what I have to do.” I sighed. I’d have to stay for the entire party. When would I find time to finish *Anna Karenina*?

“Leiyin. Your father expects it of you.” Her amused smile said she knew I wasn’t enthusiastic. “Just take this list and study it before you come downstairs to the party.”

I glanced at the list, then over at the door. The scent of Shalimar announced Gaoyin’s entrance.

“Stepmother? Ah, Third Sister, you’re here too.” For a moment, Gaoyin looked strangely shy. “It’s not important. I just wanted a few minutes with Stepmother.”

I stayed in my chair. Gaoyin indicated the door with the slightest tilt of her head.

I rose reluctantly. “Well, I’d better go upstairs and bathe before Nanny gets upset with me again.”

The party didn’t need my attention. I doubted the servants needed any supervision, given how

thoroughly they had been drilled by Stepmother and Head Servant Lu. I scanned the drawing room anyway, just to be sure.

Three crystal chandeliers, their prisms and beads polished to dazzling clarity, formed the centerpiece of the drawing room. Porcelain vases filled with flowers from the garden decorated every alcove. Framed by potted palms, a string quartet churned out popular tunes. They sounded rather dispirited, so I smiled to show I was paying attention, and the tempo picked up.

A maid moved through the crowd, emptying ashtrays almost as soon as they were dirtied. So silent and unobtrusive that they were nearly invisible, servants in cloth-soled shoes padded over the shining parquet floors carrying trays of shrimp toasts, tiny blintzes topped with caviar, and deviled quail eggs. The dinner itself would be Chinese, of course. It was fashionable to serve Western-style appetizers, but we couldn't inflict an entire meal of foreign food on our guests.

Gaoyin wore a cocktail dress of dark gray silk that would have looked matronly on anyone else. I knew she wanted to be sure Sueyin wouldn't be upstaged, but really, there was no need to worry. Sueyin looked like a heavenly handmaiden from the court of the Jade Emperor. Her fiancé hardly took his eyes away from her. Liu Tienzhen wasn't as tall as my brothers, but he was very handsome. He had smooth skin and the sleek features of a matinee idol. He inclined his head toward her with a gentle but slightly possessive air. The soft, dreamy look in his eyes when he gazed at her pleased me. Of course he adored her already, how could anyone not? They made an impossibly beautiful couple.

Tienzhen didn't quite take her hand, but he did touch her elbow as Sueyin led him outside to walk in the garden. The sky had turned cobalt blue, now dark enough for the moon to be seen, a shy crescent of silver. The evening air was heavy, it would rain before morning; but the peonies and early summer roses were in bloom, and the garden would be steeped in fragrance.

If the loud drone of conversation indoors was any indication, the guests were mingling very well. Father and Changyin had included several poets and writers on the guest list, regular attendees of Father's renowned weekly salons. Father always said one could rely on passionate literary types to liven up conversation. The party was going so well I wondered if I could slip away to finish *Anna Karenina*. I had to return it soon to Nanmei, for there was a long queue of girls waiting their turn to read this scandalous book.

Circling the room, I caught fragments of conversation. On the banquette, my father and Judge Lu were deep in a discussion about the legal system of the Song Dynasty.

"I put it to you, honored Judge, that despite the turbulence of the era, the Song legal code was essentially the same as the legal code of the Tang Dynasty."

"Both were based on the Northern Zhou codes, I agree, but you must admit the Tang adhered more strictly to the Confucian rules of social order."

Next I passed by Changyin and Gaoyin's husband, Zhao Shen, who were with a group of men engrossed in a loud debate about the conflict between the Communists and the Nationalist government.

"The Communists are recruiting college students as activists. Pay their tuition, let them finish school, then send them out to the countryside as teachers to spread Marxism."

"After the Nationalists carried out that purge last April, rounding up members of the Communist party and executing them like that, you can bet the Communists will never trust them again."

“The Reds are calling it the Shanghai Massacre, you know. I’d be nervous if I was a member of the left-wing faction of the Nationalist party. They’re next in Chiang’s line of fire, for sure.”

“That coalition of three factions was never going to hold together. Now they’re each claiming different capital city. Peking, Nanking, Wuhan—how do you think that makes us look to the rest of the world?”

It made my head hurt keeping track of our politics, but I did try. After all, I was born the year the Nationalists overthrew the Qing Dynasty and we became a republic. For a decade, Nationalists and Communists had been united, and some of the Communists had even joined the Nationalist party to form a left-wing faction. Then Sun Yat-sen died, the alliance fell apart, and I still wasn’t sure why each side accused the other of betraying Sun’s Three Principles of the People.

The one thing I did understand was that I had to do my part to bring our young nation into the twentieth century. Our class had studied an essay written by Madame Sun Yat-sen about women taking an equal role in building China. Ever since then, Nanmei and I had been determined to become teachers. I just had to make Father understand.

If I had a hard time keeping up with politics, Tongyin didn’t even try. Outside, a handful of young men lounged on the terrace, slouched in the wicker chairs, their fashionable shoes propped up on the coffee table. One of them flicked a cigarette butt into the peony shrubs. Half-finished drinks cluttered the marble paving. In the mild evening air their laughter rang noisy and raucous. Tongyin was the loudest of the lot, and even though his back was to me and I couldn’t hear his words, I knew he was telling a smutty story.

The scent of Shalimar told me that Gaoyin had come to my side. She swept her gaze across the terrace. The young men facing us noticed her scrutiny, and there were a few wolf whistles, quickly hushed. One of them bowed in exaggerated courtesy.

“Let’s go inside.” She pulled me around. “Come meet my friends.”

It was evident from the bursts of laughter and shocked gasps we heard as we approached that the women gathered in the corner were catching up on gossip.

“My goodness, is that Yen Hanchin?” A woman I knew only slightly, dressed head to toe in pink, asked the question, avid interest evident in both her tone and the gleam of her eyes as she gazed across the room. “That is him, isn’t it, Gaoyin? Over there, beside your brother? I’d heard he was back from Russia.”

Yen Hanchin. His name was on my copy of *Anna Karenina*; he was the translator. I stared in the same direction. Across the room a stout, slightly balding man leaned in confidently toward my brother, cigarette ash dropping on the Persian carpet as he spoke. So that was the translator of the forbidden novel. How disappointing. I had imagined someone more haggard, a starving writer and political activist. The Chinese version of Levin’s brother Nikolai. I’d heard Yen Hanchin harbored leftist sympathies, another reason why his book was banned from our library.

“Yes, Changyin knows Yen Hanchin slightly,” Gaoyin said. “They met at a poetry reading. Yen’s a very fine poet, apparently. But he’s only become famous since he translated *Anna Karenina*.”

“I suppose that’s better than being infamous for other things,” said the woman in pink.

It had been a mistake to stare for so long. Gaoyin noticed my curiosity. “Would you like to discuss *Anna Karenina* with Yen Hanchin, Third Sister?”

“No, Eldest Sister. Anyway I haven’t finished reading the book.”

I didn’t want to get trapped talking to some middle-aged scholar, infamous or not. He might drone on about prerevolutionary Russia and its depiction in the modern novel. Our headmistress had tortured us once with a lecture by just such an academic and Nanmei had had to pinch me every five minutes to keep my head from nodding onto my chest.

“Come.” Gaoyin took my arm. Her eyes glittered and her cheeks were flushed. When she drank wine, no amount of face powder could hide the effects.

“Oh, Eldest Sister, I’m supposed to be supervising the servants.”

But she pulled me across the room, her high heels giving her more purchase on the Persian carpet than I had with my slippery flat soles.

“Yen Hanchin, here is someone you should meet.”

One of the men turned around at her greeting. It was all I could do not to gasp.

Not the stout balding man. Not a Nikolai.

A Vronsky.

Tall, with hair just a bit too long. He was in his late twenties, perhaps as old as thirty. His shabby linen jacket made all the other men, in their tailored suits and silk ties, look merely ornamental. He was lean and lightly tanned. Beneath intense brown eyes his cheekbones were sharp, angled escarpments. He was both beautiful and intoxicatingly masculine. He was a poet. For several moments I couldn’t take my eyes away from him. Was this the feeling that swept over Anna each time she beheld Vronsky?

He smiled down at me, the smile of a man accustomed to the admiration of women.

As soon as the flow of memories reveals Hanchin’s face to me, my souls rustle in agitation, and somehow we know he’s the reason I remain trapped between worlds. We don’t know why, not yet, only that he’s important to my escape from this inadequate spirit world.

Say nothing, I command my souls. I don’t want your commentary right now. Just carry on with the memories.

To my surprise, they stop rustling and although I can almost hear them protest, they settle down quietly in the roof beams of the temple and the evening continues.

“Mr. Yen, this is my youngest sister, Song Leiyin. She’s a great admirer of your latest work although she isn’t supposed to be reading it.”

“So now I’ve met the youngest of the Three Beauties.” He gave me the slightest of bows.

Gaoyin beckoned us to follow her to some chairs by the French doors. She reached over to the low table and opened an enameled cigarette case.

“This little beauty has been neglecting her hostess duties and needs to compensate by entertaining you with clever conversation. She’s by far the cleverest of us all.”

“Not when it comes to conversation.” Under the high collar of my silk *qipao*, my neck was hot, and I badly wanted an iced drink. I also wanted very badly to keep this man’s attention.

“The secret to good conversation, Third Sister, is to ask lots of questions.” My sister leaned over

immaculately posed, so that Yen Hanchin could light her cigarette. "Thank you, Mr. Yen. Then the other person answers your questions, does all the talking, and thinks you're fascinating. Now, I must return to my friends."

We watched Gaoyin walk away, slim hips swaying. She was so elegant. Why had I instructed Nanmei Qiu to dress my hair in a single long braid down my back? I looked like a child, a high school student.

Yen Hanchin didn't seem at all uncomfortable in the silence. He gave me a slow, slightly amused smile that made me press my hands against my stomach. My mind groped for something to start conversation. "I hear you've just returned from Russia. What's Moscow like?"

"Bitterly cold."

"I see." More silence. I stole a look at his hands, elegantly shaped, tanned. I hoped I wasn't blushing. Changyin's friends treated me like a little sister. I didn't want Yen Hanchin to think of me as a little sister.

"I do have one question, Mr. Yen. Then you can return to talking politics."

"Maybe I prefer being fascinating to talking politics."

"Now you're making fun of me. I'm not a child, you know. I've nearly finished high school."

"My apologies. What's your question?"

"Why is *Anna Karenina* considered such a great novel? It's all about adultery and the unhappiness it causes, nothing unusual in novels, surely."

"Did you skip over the parts about life in rural Russia, industrialization, the Slavic campaign?"

Now I did blush. "Yes. But I borrowed the book and have to give it back soon. So I'm just following the love stories."

"Perhaps you could read it again when you're older."

When I was older. I groaned silently.

"The novel's about family relationships, class, and social change. It's important because it's considered the first realist novel, a true depiction of life, not romanticized or idealized."

"Is that why you translated it?" I wanted him to keep talking, so I could listen to his voice, watch his lips move.

"Partly. But also because it mirrors some of our own struggles to turn China into a modern nation."

"I don't know why people think it's so scandalous. Some of the classics, *The Scholars*, for example, are about courtesans and even allude to love between men."

Did he think it was daring of me to use such words? *Courtesans. Love between men.* Hanchin didn't seem shocked. But after all, he was a poet and an author. He considered every subject from a literary point of view. I couldn't wait to tell Nanmei about this evening, to say I'd been discussing *Anna Karenina* with its handsome translator.

"Well, I suppose they think that Western decadence is more corrupting than the Chinese kind," he said. "If you're interested in Russian literature, try Turgenev's *Fathers and Sons*. There's also *The Brothers Karamazov*. I found it surprisingly modern for a nineteenth-century novel."

He reached for the enameled case to help himself to a cigarette. "Tell me, Miss Song, what will you do once you've finished high school?"

I wanted him to keep talking, not turn the conversation to my suddenly inadequate life.

"I plan to go to teacher's college."

“Excellent. China needs more teachers. The college in Hangchow or the one in Peking?”

“Oh! Hangchow of course, the one affiliated with Zhejiang University.”

“That is indeed a good school.” He nodded, and a warm current flowed through my chest. I wanted to hear that tone of approval again, to know he considered my plans worthwhile. *China needs more teachers.* I would tell Father that my wish to attend university wasn’t just a whim, it was for our country.

My mind devoid of anything intelligent to say, I waved over a maidservant to offer Hanchin some shrimp toasts. She leaned down, the platter neatly balanced.

“My favorite,” he said, looking up appreciatively. He smiled his thanks and the maid blushed deep scarlet. Servants just aren’t used to guests paying them any attention.

When I handed a napkin to Hanchin, our fingers touched, his cool and dry, mine hot as melting candle wax. I turned to dismiss the servant and caught a glimpse of the woman in pink across the room, watching.

I hold on to this scene for a while. My *yin* soul and I shiver slightly with pleasure at this memory of falling in love for the first time. My *yang* soul isn’t so approving. My *hun* soul seems to be paying no attention at all, circling the drawing room inspecting flower arrangements.

You do realize it was lust, says my *yang* soul, stern as an ancestral portrait. He pulls a square of white cotton out of his sleeve and polishes his glasses.

Yang, I can’t believe you just used that word. My *yin* soul giggles.

I was seventeen and unmarried, I remind him. *I didn’t recognize those feelings back then, but now that I’m dead, why bother feeling ashamed? Yes, I admit to lust.*

How could you expect her to recognize such a tangle of feelings? says my *yin* soul, her brown eyes still fixed on Hanchin. *She was just a girl. She wouldn’t be the first person to confuse lust with love. Nor the last.*

No, no, I object. Not merely lust. By the time Tongyin interrupted our conversation, I knew I was in love. As certainly as Anna knew she couldn’t live without Vronsky.

My brother held his hand out to Hanchin. “Sir, I’m Song Tongyin, Changyin’s brother.”

I restrained a scowl. Second Brother and I were close in age, but we were not close in any other ways. When we were younger, he played little tricks on me, filling the toes of my shoes with small stones or hiding chunks of hot ginger among the pieces of fruit that Nanny put into my bowl. Now we merely ignored each other.

“Sit, sit.” Hanchin waved at the seat between us. “Changyin tells me you’re interested in Russia.”

“Sir, perhaps you could come out to the terrace and meet my friends,” Tongyin said, giving me a dismissive glance that made me want to kick him. “You needn’t bore yourself entertaining my little sister.”

“On the contrary, Leiying and I have become great friends. I hope to turn her to the Socialist cause.” He smiled at me, and again, heat rose from the center of my being.

“Ah. Ha, ha. A good joke, sir. A splendid joke. Yes, she’ll make a fine peasant rebel in that silk

dress.”

Hanchin turned to face me. “It’s been a pleasure. If you have problems finding those books, Mr. Song, write to me care of the *China Millennium Journal* office. I’m sure we have spare copies lying around.”

Tongyin looked startled. I gave Hanchin my widest smile. “Thank you so much, Mr. Yen. You’re very kind.”

I watched Hanchin stroll through the French doors with Tongyin. Then I walked as fast as decent possible out of the drawing room and ran up the stairs to the first landing. From behind the heavy silk drapes I peeked out the tall windows that overlooked the terrace. I watched him, drank in the sight of him. Outside, torches scented with citronella lit the terrace and their softly pungent fragrance drifted up. Hanchin was seated in a wicker chair, his long legs crossed, gesturing with his hands as he spoke. Hovering around him, an admiring circle of young men, their summer suits pale as moth wings.

The Liu family was the first to leave the party. We gathered to see them off at the front gate. After our repeated promises that we would visit their home very soon, they got into their motorcar and departed.

“A fine old family,” said Father, “with good habits. Early to bed and early to rise.”

“Well now, Second Sister.” Gaoyin slipped an arm around Sueyin’s shoulders as we returned to the villa. “Liu Tienzhen seems very nice.”

Sueyin said nothing but when we entered the front door, she darted up the staircase in a near run. My father and brothers, who had gone ahead to rejoin our guests, didn’t notice.

“What’s wrong with her?” said Gaoyin. We hurried upstairs and found Sueyin sobbing on her bed. Gaoyin knelt beside her.

“What’s the matter? We still have guests to entertain, Second Sister.”

“Second Sister, what is wrong?” I had begun to wonder at her fiancé’s early departure.

Sueyin turned to us, eyes red, expression bitter. “Didn’t you notice? Couldn’t you see?”

“Notice what?”

“Tienzhen left early because he missed his pipe. Father has betrothed me to a man who takes opium.” Her voice was low, trembling with the effort required to keep hysteria from creeping into her words.

“Are you sure?” Gaoyin was shocked. I slumped against the bedroom wall, my fingers running over the flocked surface, pale green leaves on vines.

“He asked me if I also took opium,” said Sueyin. “So yes, I’m sure.”

How could we not have noticed? The soft, dreamy gaze that we had thought was directed at her beauty, the languid movements that had seemed so refined.

Sueyin kicked off her shoes wearily and sank onto the bed, a crumpled swath of emerald silk. She turned her face away from us. “I’m not going down to the party again.”

I turn to my souls. *I should have stayed with Sueyin to console her, not left her alone. But I was seventeen and self-centered.*

Yes, look at you, my hun soul agrees. There you go to your room, to devour the rest of Ann

Karenina.

My two other souls say nothing, but my *yang* soul shakes his gray head and my *yin* soul gives me a shrug. I taste salt, catch the faintest whiff of pipe tobacco, and look at them. My *yin* soul shrugs again. *Taste is yang, the scent is mine*, she says. *We can't hide our feelings from you.* *So that's what it is*, I say. *And how does my hun soul show displeasure? Unpleasant noises?* *No*, it says with a shrug of its gleaming shoulders. *I would just slap you.*

When I lay in bed that night, Sueyin's predicament didn't occupy my thoughts for long. My brain seethed with schemes. Next time, I would be ready. Next time, I would have read all the books Hanchin had mentioned. Next time, my hair would be pinned up and I would look older. Next time, I would have read all the recent issues of *China Millennium* and know what to say to him.

The following morning I took my time waking up. Hanchin would wait for me to finish university before proposing. We'd give readings where Hanchin would recite his poetry, some dedicated to his muse, his young wife. He'd give lectures all over China and I would travel with him as his secretary and his helpmate.

Nanny Qiu's stage whisper cut through my drowsy daydreams.

"*Wah, wah*, Third Young Mistress. Get up, get up!" A firm hand shook my shoulder.

"Oh, Nanny, let me sleep some more."

"Your eldest sister and eldest brother are in the Master's study, arguing with him."

Immediately, I sat up and swung my legs out from under the covers. Changyin never challenged Father's decisions. Nobody did. I pulled on my dressing gown while my toes searched the floor beside my bed for slippers.

"What are they arguing about, Nanny?"

She held my feet still and pulled a slipper onto each foot. "It's about your second sister's marriage. But once they shut the door, I heard nothing. I have no reason to be in that part of the house." She looked at me very pointedly, her face bland and virtuous.

I hurried to the east wing of the house just in time to see Tongyin quietly pull open the balcony door. He glared but I held a finger to my lips. Our curiosity proved stronger than the animosity between us, and he shrugged, letting me join him. The long balcony ran nearly the full width of the house, sheltering the French doors below from all but the worst gusts of rain. We crawled along and crouched beneath Father's study window, which he kept slightly open even on the coldest days. Kneeling drawn up to our chins like children, we strained to listen.

"He would need to be a man of enormous willpower to overcome the habit, Father." Gaoyin's voice was shrill, agitated. "His mother gave him opium when he was only a child; he won't be able to give up."

"Father, he'll bankrupt his family. As all opium addicts do. What would happen to Sueyin then?" Changyin, reasonable and calm.

"He couldn't bankrupt that family's wealth in three lifetimes," said Father. "The betrothal has been official for years. The marriage will go ahead."

"Father, we beg you. Any man in China would give thanks to the gods for a wife like Sueyin." Gaoyin pleaded. "Please, don't marry our sister to a man who will only shame her."

“Enough!” Father’s voice, like thunder.

Although we were safe outside, both Tongyin and I winced. Inside, the silence was absolute. I had no doubt my brother and sister had dropped to their knees at Father’s bark of displeasure.

“Are you saying your father does not know what he is doing?”

There was no reply. He wasn’t asking a question.

“Are you saying your father did not think this through? These are dangerous times for China. We will see far worse turmoil soon. We must be well-connected to survive. The judge’s integrity is respected by even the most corrupt officials. Do you understand? Sueyin isn’t marrying the son of Judge Liu, she is marrying into his *family*.”

Another brief silence.

“Now let us go down to breakfast.”

We waited outside until we heard them leave the study. Tongyin slid to the balcony door to take a peek, but before he reached for the handle, I pulled him back.

“Second Brother, why would Madame Liu give opium to her own son?”

“Liu Tienzhen is an only child, you idiot. She doesn’t want him to leave home for a career or travel. The pipe keeps him docile.”

He slipped through the balcony door and ran silently down the staircase.

I shake my head. Father looked down on opium users. He scorned families who allowed opium in their homes. He said it was a certain sign the family would lose all their wealth and standing. He despised the drug.

So would anyone, my hun soul says, who understood how Western nations gained power by holding China ransom over opium.

Father told us about classmates and friends of his who had taken up the pipe and set aside ambition. I recall. I thought that surely once he knew about Tienzhen, he would have called off the marriage. But he didn’t.

No, he did not, my yang soul says. He looks a little uncomfortable. In unpredictable times, wealth and connections matter more. The Judge had both and his son was the price.

A price Sueyin has to pay. Her voice is sweet but there is a bitter note to my yin soul’s words, like the fetid, sweet opium smoke that drifts past my nose.

Once she’s married, Sueyin’s days and years will belong to her husband’s family, says my hun soul. Her husband’s opium habit makes it that much worse. Its bright silhouette glitters.

A woman’s life is never her own, my yin soul says. She puffs out her pink cheeks to blow incense ash off the altar. She depends first upon her parents and then upon the husband they choose for her.

I don’t need my souls to tell me that a young wife’s fate is set from the moment she crosses the threshold of her husband’s home. She addresses her in-laws as Jia Po and Gong Gong, Mother and Father. Her survival depends on a carefully serene, powdered face, her happiness on the way her in-laws treat her. Until she delivers an heir, her status is tenuous. If she proves infertile, concubines may displace her, family members will bully her. She will struggle to stay afloat in the fickle waters of the inner courtyard, buffeted by forces beyond her control. Her only salvation is to deliver sons. She waits for the older generation to die. Then and only then can she take her turn as matriarch, her every whim

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