

Lonely Winter

Chi Chi

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with Jocelyn Ford, Alice Fung, and Jane Tao

Translator's Preface

A translation of Chi Chi's 季季 "Lonely Winter" is presented here to introduce a native Taiwanese woman writer whose place in contemporary Taiwan literature deserves to be recognized. In the past twenty years, women writers in Taiwan have contributed substantially to the literary renaissance that has taken place there. However, perhaps due to lack of translations and scholarly attention, they are scarcely known among American students of contemporary Taiwan literature. The three women writers from Taiwan who are known in the U.S. are Yu Li-hua 於梨華, Nieh Hua-ling 聶華苓, and Ch'en Jo-hsi 陳若曦. In all three cases, their reputations as writers were established after they had left the Taiwan milieu. Each has a unique set of personal circumstances and has produced writings with unique characteristics. For this reason, as admirable as their writings are, they cannot be taken as representative of contemporary Taiwanese literature. In many ways, Chi Chi's writings have more in common with those of the representative writers of Taiwanese literature in the past twenty years, who happen to be all men (Ch'en Ying-chen 陳映真, Wang Chen-ho 王楨和, Huang Ch'un-ming 黃春明, Yang Ch'ing-ch'u 楊青矗, and Wang T'o 王拓), than with the well-known women writers.

Chi Chi is the pen name of Li Jui-yueh 李瑞月. She was born in 1945 — the year Japanese occupation ended, into a rural farming family in southern Taiwan. She demonstrated an interest in literature early on, and began publishing fiction and essays when she was still in high school. She did not pursue a college education, but instead went to Taipei after high school and became a writer there.

"Lonely Winter" is set in an environment thoroughly familiar to Chi Chi from her childhood. Two prominent tendencies in contemporary Taiwanese literature figure prominently in this story. One is the tendency to be concerned with indigenous Taiwanese issues: the plight of little people eking out an existence amidst harsh conditions, social problems that arise from modernization, industrialization, and commercialization, and so on. More recently, beginning in the seventies, this concern with indigenous issues has taken on an increasingly political overtone. The potential of literature as an instrument of social and political change has again come to be recognized. The other tendency is for this literature to incorporate certain universal, timeless concerns basic to all humanity. The two tendencies may seem contradictory at first glance. However, if we recognize the commonality among all human beings, then it is easy to see how concerns for local and universal issues can be integrated. The local is a concrete, realistic manifestation of the universal. The possibility of merging the local with the universal was expressed eloquently by the Taiwanese writer Ch'en Ying-chen. He wrote in 1967:

In fact, the literature of a people, or a nation, should strive first to address itself to its own people; only then will it be possible to become an art for the world and the whole human race. Only those works written and loved by their people will be accepted and appreciated by other peoples. The works which are disapproved and rejected by their own people are bound to be disapproved and rejected by all mankind.*

Chi Chi's "Lonely Winter," written in 1971, exemplifies the above statement well. It addresses itself to its own people, and at the same time has the possibility of becoming an art for the world.

The story takes place in a small rural town in Taiwan. Dr. Wang, who was blessed with an ideal, solicitous wife, a flourishing career, financial security, love and respect of the whole community, came to a personal crisis when a brothel was established right across the street from his clinic. He became aware of what was missing from his marriage. Like the wholesome food his wife prepares and the clear pastel decor of their bedroom, his wife's feelings toward him were correct and "ideal," but antiseptic and flameless. Outside of carrying out her wifely duties — and in this she was beyond reproach — she had built herself a world from which he was excluded, her garden and her soap operas. The bacteria-laden foodstands

* From "Song of the Exiled," originally appearing in *Wen-hsueh Chi-kan* 文學季刊. This translation is taken from Joseph Lau, "Native Taiwanese Writers," *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 32: 4 (August, 1973), p. 637.

and the red hot contaminated women across the street were tantalizing to him, yet he could not free himself from his physician's hang-up with sanitation and "propriety" to enjoy what everyone else enjoys with great gusto. For a period he was able to contain his frustration through vicarious experience, but when winter came and the women moved indoors, his loneliness set in and his frustration exploded, as in his explosive reaction to the discovery that his hired hand was carrying on with one of the women. He was well aware of his duty as a healer to cure and prevent people from ills that arise from the brothel: venereal disease and birth deformities, and by extension societal ills: domestic disharmony, poverty, and so on. His role as a physician became the conscious and overt noble motive for his wanting to close down the brothel. This was a desperate way to resolve an unbearable personal conflict. By using a political bribe, he was able to get the brothel closed down. The day the brothel closed as a day of mourning for him. The story continues with his wife pleading with him to accept his son's marriage to a nurse of the same age, a marriage that he disapproved of. This interlude provides the vehicle for his reflection on his own marriage, but otherwise, to my mind, detracts from the main theme. The story ends with the deepening of winter's cold.

Here is more than just a story of Dr. Wang in the small town by Muddy Creek (濁水溪). The same story might have taken place in mainland China, or colonial America, or Main Street, U.S.A. for that matter. It is an authentic exploration of the "ideal" marital relationship and an individual's psychological conflict. The vision is as universal as that in Ibsen's *An Enemy of the People* or Sinclair Lewis's *Main Street*.

I

Christmas had long come and gone. Lining the streets, still standing erect in the wind, were the poinsettias flaunting their magnificent beauty of the winter season. A few women carrying grocery baskets, their chins tucked in and their heads bound in scarves, passed in front of Dr. Wang's motorcycle on their way to market. Every winter, this little town overlooking Muddy Creek had to endure in silence the inevitable wind and sand that blew over from the dry river bed.

Dr. Wang had on a coffee-colored leather jacket, and a pair of woolen gloves hand-knitted by his wife. On his head was a leather hat with flaps over his ears. His face was protected by a pair of goggles and a mouth mask. It was unusually cold that morning — eight degrees centigrade — just about as cold as it ever gets in this area. As he was leaving, Yu-hsiu was in the back

yard watering the flowers.

"Yü-hsiu, I'm going to town. I'll be back in a bit."

"It's so cold, why do you have to go?"

"Dr. Liu called and said he had something he wanted to talk over with me."

"Uh huh." Dr. Wang turned his face away, his eyes were now on the orchid on the wall. "It's probably something about a patient."

"Will you be back for lunch?"

"Probably."

Dr. Wang had never lied to his wife before. He was afraid now of the innocent purity of her eyes, afraid that they would see through him.

The black sign which read "Dr. Liu's General Clinic" flashed past Dr. Wang. When he reached the end of the now deserted short street, he turned onto the highway going south. The asphalt on the highway reflected the sunlight. On either side of the road were dark yellow rice paddies, already cut and harvested. Here and there were plots of mustard green, their light yellow blossoms swaying in the wind. All the highway buses had signs like "To Taichung" or "To Chiayi." As for the trucks, private cars, and taxis, though they had no signs, they too must have had their destinations. "What is my destination?" This aimless anxiety over not having a destination, like the sharp cold of the wind blowing across his face, assailed him all along the way. The physical and mental whipping combined to make Dr. Wang feel increasingly weak and feeble, to the point that he almost couldn't control even his own hands. The hands that could treat illnesses and give injections were now trembling feverishly. He felt them already perspiring in the gloves that Yu-hsiu had knitted. These hands no longer seemed to belong to him — they were like a sleepwalker's feet, leading him to a strange place that he himself did not know of.

"No, too fast," muttered Dr. Wang, as if he were talking to someone else. The motorcycle was going so fast that he felt he was on the verge of destruction.

"This is too dangerous. I'm not ready to die yet." He could almost hear his own voice calling out for help.

As if the fear at the threshold of death shocked him out of his trance, Dr. Wang became aware of his own hands again. He let up on the accelerator, and cruised to a stop by a tree at the side of the road.

"Ahh — what's happened to me?" Dr. Wang shook his head and let

out a long sigh. The wind that had been whipping his face died down. The plots of mustard green were a dazzling and seductive yellow under the sunlight. He took off his gloves, letting the cold wind cool off his sweaty hands. "Have I gone out of my mind?"

Wearied, Dr. Wang sat down under the tree. If he had not stopped the motorcycle, he could, at that very moment, be already lying in a pool of blood, or perhaps have entered the twilight zone between life and death. "Well, I don't have high blood pressure, heart disease, or cancer; fifty-two is still too young to die, isn't it? Besides, I told Yu-hsiu I was just going over to Dr. Liu's in town. Now if I'm found dead in an accident on the highway, what great bewilderment and grief I would be leaving behind for Yu-hsiu?"

His hands felt iced by the cold wind, so he put the gloves back on. There were hardly any farmers in the fields, only the mustard green blossoms gently and warmly waving. "Should I go home, or is it too early yet? Those women probably haven't moved out yet. When I left the house a while ago, that light blue wooden door still hadn't opened." The image before his eyes floated back and forth between the yellow blossoms and the blue wooden door. Yu-hsiu probably wouldn't have realized that he had gone to town because of that door. Or perhaps she did know, but just pretended not to? Whether she knew or not, just the same, Dr. Wang felt he was deceiving her. True, he had uttered only one lie, but that struggle in his heart, hadn't he concealed that for a long time now?

Dr. Wang felt a vehicle coming to a stop on the road behind him. He looked back over his shoulder and saw it was a police jeep. A pudgy faced policeman stretched halfway out of the jeep, and called out, "Hey mister, is anything wrong?"

"Nothing, nothing." Dr. Wang stood up and smiled awkwardly.

"Is there anything we can do to help?"

"Oh no, I was just a little tired, so I stopped here to rest for a while."

"Oh, is that all? In that case, sorry we disturbed you."

"No, not at all. No bother."

The jeep pulled away. Only as he watched the police jeep disappear into the distance did he become fully aware of himself. He realized that his behavior must have seemed bizarre and suspicious to passers-by.

I'd better be going, he thought to himself. Might as well go over to Liu's place and kill some time.

Almost two years ago, Liu's wife took a tour around the island. The tour bus had an accident on the Su-hua Highway,* and she was killed on the spot. It was only this summer that Liu remarried a spinster type gynecologist who worked in some public hospital in Taipei. Not long after, at his new wife's suggestion, Liu built a four-storied clinic, hired a surgeon and a lab technician, and bought some X-ray equipment. Thus he changed his operation from "Liu's Internal Medicine and Pediatrics" to "Liu's General Clinic."

Liu's new wife Chen-hui was said to be from Tainan, the only child of a wealthy business family. Her dowry included a bank account of \$200,000 and a mass of jewelry of indeterminate value. Chen-hui was slight in stature, and when she had on her white smock, her chest was so flat that you couldn't see any trace of feminine curves. But her bespectacled pale face was always smiling when she greeted people, and there was a warm air about her. If Liu himself hadn't said that she was thirty-five, Dr. Wang would have thought she was no more than twenty-six or seven.

The motorcycle came to a stop in the driveway of the clinic. Dr. Wang put on the lock, pushed open the glass door, and walked in. Dr. Liu was in the pediatrics room, his head bent down as he wrote something on the patient's record. Dr. Wang walked over to his door without bothering to announce himself. Dr. Lin was in the surgical room, cleaning a wound on a patient's head. Chen-hui was not in the gynecology department, nor in the lab either. The patients sitting on the bench waiting to be seen all sized up Dr. Wang skeptically. A creepy sensation fell on his whole body, as if it were crawling with caterpillars. "What is wrong with me today? Could it be that my innermost turmoil is plainly written on my face?" He stroked his face, feeling a bit apprehensive. His face was by now somewhat warmer than moments before.

Dr. Wang finally went into Dr. Liu's examination room. This time Dr. Liu spotted him immediately.

"Hm, are you giving yourself another vacation today?" asked Dr. Liu.

"What's wrong with giving myself a vacation now and then?"

"Well, I don't know about that. The flu epidemic has been rather fierce lately. Sometimes I'm so busy I don't even have time to eat. In the infirmary there are now three children with pneumonia, all cases that arose from the

* A narrow winding two-lane highway carved into the steep mountains on the edge of the ocean.

flu. Why, hasn't it hit your area yet?"

"Oh sure, but not so severely."

Dr. Liu gave the prescription and the patient's record to the nurse standing next to him, and sent her to the dispensary to fill the prescription.

"Even Chen-hui has come down with it," said Dr. Liu.

"The flu too?"

"Yeah, she's expecting too, you know. I'm making her rest up on the fourth floor for a few days. I don't want her to come down and be in contact with the patients.

As Dr. Liu listened to a stethoscope, his face betrayed a contented smile. His former wife gave birth to four girls in a row. Now that his new wife was pregnant, he was probably hoping for a boy.

"Old Liu, if it's a boy, you'll have to give a big party."

"Of course! of course!"

The noise from the window exhaust fan mingled with the patients' coughing. As Dr. Wang stood there amidst the noise, he felt more and more pointless. "Everyone else is so busy, why am I just standing here, amidst all these busy people, wasting time?"

Just then the phone on Dr. Liu's desk started to ring. Dr. Liu was in the middle of writing out a prescription, so Dr. Wang picked up the receiver.

"Is this Dr. Liu?" It turned out to be Wang's wife Yu-hsiu calling.

"It's Dr. Wang speaking," he said playfully.

"Oh, so it's you Te-hou? Have you finished discussing the problem yet?"

"What's up?"

"A lot of patients came, and then left again. When can you come home?"

"By noon for sure, all right?"

"All right, then I'll wait for you to have lunch."

Yu-hsiu hung up. As Dr. Wang put down the receiver, he congratulated himself for having been the one to pick up the phone.

"Why did Yu-hsiu call, to check up on you?"

"Heh, heh," he laughed half-heartedly. "She wants me to come home for lunch."

"Why don't you eat here? I heard Chen-hui say that she bought a chicken today."

"Well, I guess not today. I told Yu-hsiu I'd be home for lunch. Besides

you're busy here. I'll come another day."

"Okay, let's see about getting together when this flu epidemic is over. Chen-hui has been thinking for a long time about going over to your pond to fish. But we just haven't been able to find the time. Now that she's pregnant, we don't know when we'll ever be able to go."

"Whenever you have time, just pop over. I can always accompany you anytime. Yu-hsiu's pretty good with the knife. She can slice up some sashimi from fresh carp for us. It's delicious."

"You sure know how to eat. How come you're still skin and bones?"

"What's wrong with being a little thin? I'm tough and that's what counts. If you don't believe me, let's have a little contest. So you're plump and I'm skinny — we'll see which one will out-live the other."

"Ai, Wang, forget it. These days, good health doesn't guarantee longevity!"

Dr. Wang could sense right away that Liu's remark was intended to be another reference to the horrible turn of fate that killed his former wife. Even those who have the power to cure illnesses can't help but concede that there exists in human life a fate over which we have no control.

Although he had remarried a younger wife and more able woman, Dr. Liu still harbored a special love for the first wife who died two years ago. Dr. Wang remembered the period right after he had lost his wife. Dr. Liu went to his fish pond almost every day to while away the time. He would stare vacantly at the emerald green pond as he held the fishing rod. Absorbed in his own thoughts, he wouldn't even notice that the fish had eaten all his bait. He had been a very good fisherman, but during that period, Dr. Liu could only come up with empty fish hooks. He never talked about his grief, but it was clearly etched in his lonely and glassy expression.

After he married Chen-hui, perhaps due to the sweetness of new married life, or to the hecticness of expanding the clinic, Dr. Liu hadn't been fishing any more. Now if he were to come with Chen-hui, he wouldn't be pulling up just empty fish hooks any more, would he? He had probably forgotten all about pulling up empty fish hooks, but to say he had completely forgotten his wife . . . that Dr. Wang could never believe. How could a person with whom he had shared twenty-two years of life, and together raised four daughters be completely forgotten?

After leaving Dr. Liu, Dr. Wang emerged from the clinic. It was only 11:10. It took no more than twenty minutes to ride from town back to the

village. It's a little too early to go back yet, he thought. So he rode over to the food stands at the market place. He sat down on a bench and ordered a bowl of meat soup and some clam broth. The doctor ate slowly, just to while away time. Even though the taste was delicious, Dr. Wang couldn't help thinking of the millions of germs squirming inside. He had never gotten used to the idea of eating at food stands. The food Yu-hsiu prepared wasn't terrifically tasty, but at least he knew it was absolutely safe. Her food was very much like her person: even though she wasn't the most alluring woman, she had an air of purity and warmth about her. He seemed to have dissolved into that atmosphere of hers, so that for twenty-some years he had contentedly abided by all that she had given him. But when she could no longer give him fully what he wanted, he sank into an abyss of loneliness and turmoil. Yet, he maintained his patience. Dr. Wang looked around at all the food stands: the bright colorful fish, meat, and vegetables arranged in rows the greasy bowls, cups and chopsticks, and the flies that couldn't be driven away.

"Aiee—" He really couldn't swallow it anymore. The clam broth was very tasty, but it still had sand in it, and there was bound to be a big spoonful of MSG in it. Dr. Wang stared at the huge pot of steaming meat soup in front of him. At that moment he hated himself. Why couldn't he be like everyone else and enjoy the delicious food outside the home! "They all say it's fun to go out for a change. Why couldn't I be like that?"

"Eh, Dr. Wang, so you've come to have a snack too?"

Dr. Wang turned his head and saw a grey-haired man, sitting at the next food stand, where they sold meatballs and fishball soup.

"So you've come to town too, Uncle Ch'ing-he?"

The grey-haired old man began coughing, and when he finally stopped, he spat out a mouthful of spittle on the ground.

"Ai, it seems I've got an infection in my throat. I went over to your place, but your wife said you weren't home. So I came to town to look for you."

"Oh, I'm sorry. I had some business to attend to."

Dr. Wang stared at the steam rising from the big pot. He had a guilty conscience and didn't know what to say next. It was obvious that he was just sitting at the food stand killing time, yet he had to nerve to say he had some business.

"I'll tell you something, Dr. Wang. You weren't home so you probably

don't know."

"What's that?" Dr. Wang was so nervous he nearly jumped to his feet.

The grey-haired old man began coughing again. After some time, he spat out another mouthful of spittle.

"It's those women in that House of Joy across the street from you. They were still cursing you as they were moving out." As he spoke, he gesticulated with his hands and feet.

Even the owner of the food stand, who was busy cutting meat, raised his head and gave Dr. Wang a searching look.

"Uh, really?" He forced a smile on his face.

"Huh! Those women are unbelievable. They can come out with the vilest curses. Those bitches, they truly have no sense of shame!"

The scar that had been covered up for so long was finally exposed. Dr. Wang was so pained that his face flushed red, and he was speechless. Silently, he stood up to pay the bill, then he walked over and paid the old man's bill too. It was only a small courtesy, but it seemed to be Dr. Wang's way of stopping up that talkative mouth.

"Well, I'll go on ahead, Uncle Ch'ing-he."

"It doesn't matter any more, they've already moved. From now on our village will be peaceful and quiet again."

The old man unwittingly stabbed at that old wound again. Dr. Wang hurriedly walked off, pushing his motorcycle along. From a distance, he could still hear the old man coughing.

Coming out of the market place, Dr. Wang started up the engine. The poinsettias were still swaying in the cold wind. The time didn't matter anymore, in any case those women had moved. Despite the fact that the old man had exposed his wound and caused him embarrassment, Dr. Wang still felt grateful toward him. After all, it was he who brought the long-awaited news—those women had moved.

Yet it was out of fear for those women's curses that he had come to town. Who would have thought that in his heart Dr. Wang actually felt mournful and forlorn? And who would believe that Dr. Wang, the one who insisted on evicting those women, was in fact the one who could least bear to see them leave?

The doctor arrived home just as the clock struck twelve. He turned off the engine and walked straight in, without turning even once to glance at that light blue door. There were still three people there waiting to be treated.

"So you're back, Dr. Wang?"

"Ah, I'm sorry to have made you wait so long."

He put down his hat and gloves, then washed his hands and began examining the patients. Yu-hsiu was still cooking lunch. The delicious smell of fish frying wafted over from the kitchen.

But when it came time to eat Dr. Wang lost his appetite entirely. Yu-hsiu kept giving him a blow-by-blow account of those women moving out, only her descriptions were even more detailed than Uncle Ch'ing-he's. The pain he'd experienced earlier returned. At first he had hoped very much that they would say something as they left; but now that he was hearing it, no matter what they said, it all seemed as if each of them were clutching a sharp blade and ruthlessly stabbing at his chest.

As if to mock him, by coincidence, Yu-hsiu also made clam broth that day, though of course hers was absolutely clean, with not even one speck of sand in it. But after just one bowl of broth, Dr. Wang set down his bowl and chopsticks. Yu-hsiu was still going on and on with her narration. When she saw that he had only drunk one bowl of broth, and hadn't even touched the other dishes, she said with surprise, "Eh? Te-hou, what's wrong?"

"Oh, the strong wind and sand outside have tired me a little."

"Do you think you might have gotten the flu?"

"No, I don't think so, just a little tired, that's all. I also had a snack at the Liu's, so I don't have much of an appetite."

"Oh, is that it?" Her brow knitted slightly as she looked at him.

Dr. Wang rubbed his face with both hands. Could Yu-hsiu have seen through his lie? He couldn't help trying to cover up his flushed face by rubbing it with his hands.

"I'll go lie down for a while. Wake me up if any patients come."

Dr. Wang stood up, and walked toward the bedroom. As he lay down, with all his clothes on, he heard Yu-hsiu walk into the examining room and tell the pharmacist Ah Hung to go in for lunch. Then he heard the sound of the television burst on. Dr. Wang absent-mindedly opened his eyes to look at the four walls of the bedroom. Through the golden yellow curtains a soft gentle light floated up. On the dressing table were two white chrysanthemums, like two mute beauties, beckoning him with their silent gaze. A slightly ethereal romantic atmosphere permeated this perfectly clean bedroom. "How could I walk out of this room and go seeking from those bargain-price women and their 'communal' mats?"

A faint fragrance filled the room. Dr. Wang could not tell whether it came from the chrysanthemums or from Yü-hsiu's cosmetics. He closed his eyes and fell exhaustedly into a peaceful sleep.

II

The flu epidemic seemed to be in its final stage. In the afternoon, things returned to their usual slow pace. After the last patient was dispatched with, Dr. Wang set out a cushioned wicker chair and sat on the veranda of the clinic.

The winter sun fell lazily on the tarred pavement. The street was deserted. The only sound coming from the houses on the street was of female opera singers on television singing the woeful tales of sending off their men. Dr. Wang sat with crossed legs, his folded hands lying on his chest, and his eyes levelled at the light blue wooden door across the street. It had taken him so much effort and determination to finally close down that door, but now that it was closed, why did it still possess a type of magnetism for him? He wished he could just stride across that sunlit road, yank open the door, and see what had been left inside. The odor of cheap make-up perhaps? Old tattered bras and bikinis? Pieces of flimsy boards that partitioned the cubicles?

Dr. Wang once again experienced that inner struggle he had encountered many times in the past few years. "Should I go over or not? And what if I went? Would it just be for the few moldy remnants?" Even though there was no particular reason for going over, he still didn't have the courage to cross that sunlight and open that door.

"Eh, Dr. Wang, what's the point of going over there now? There's probably nothing left but a sultry odor about the place..." Dr. Wang imagined this to be the type of questions his neighbors would ask, and he couldn't stand the thought of it. "Even if I mustered up my last bit of courage and ignored what other people thought or said, I would only be able to get as far as outside that door now. It has already been locked up. As much as I might want to go in, I couldn't." That door, once open to everyone, no longer held any attraction. Passersby didn't even bother to give it a second look any more.

They had been gone four days. The sign "House of Joy" was still

hanging from the eaves. "Why didn't they take it down?" Painted on the sign was the upper torso of a woman with flowing scarlet hair, still smiling provocatively. Under the eaves was the pink granite floor, now lying vacant in the shadows. "That veranda is like my own heart — it became desolate with winter. Perhaps it will be desolate forever now. And what about me?"

The glare of the sun was gradually getting to his eyes. Dr. Wang felt sleepy. Just as he closed his eyes, the shadows of mid-summer all flashed into his mind.

This simple rustic village was quite the opposite from the street in town by Dr. Liu's. Branches of the phoenix trees, withered in winter, were laden with flaming blossoms in summer time. From the thickest cicadas burst forth with their unrestrained chatter. The shade of the luxuriant trees formed a shield against the merciless hot sun. The tarred street seemed always to lie in the cool shade. Dr. Wang could look up from his examination desk any time of day and see the clamorous reds and greens of summer. The clear summer sky seemed to have been set off by the thick shades at a faraway place. When he looked out, all he could see were the flaming blossoms, and underneath them several pink shadows floating in the veranda of the teahouse.

When those images first appeared in Dr. Wang's vision, he was so dazed he seemed not to know what the patient in front of him just said. Then after the patient left, he fixed his gaze earnestly at those images. But those weren't just imaginary figures. After he had gazed upon them for a long time, the different faces and bodies, with their different complexions, some plump, some thin, had taken on reality. They almost forced their way to the front of his eyes, to tempt him with their evil. Was it really that hot? All those girls were clad only in bras and bikinis . . . white, pink, soft yellow, bold red. The nails on their fingers and toes were painted blood red, their faces done up with thick bright make-up. Good God, that was really like a flower bed! Yu-hsiu's garden had flowers of all kinds and colors too, but how different it was from this one! Yu-hsiu's garden exuded a refreshing and pure fragrance, but the breezes from those colorful girls across the street brought a sultry and stagnant air to Dr. Wang's sensitive nose.

Having clarified his perceptions, he then deliberately shifted his line of vision, as if out of annoyance. He returned to his custom of reading medical journals whenever he didn't have any patients. But that day the words rolled back and forth in front of him; his eyes couldn't rest on a single

word. Feelings of blinding confusion and anger gripped his heart. "How could such women appear in this village of rustic simplicity? Where are they from? Who let them come?" Dr. Wang was aware of himself becoming flustered; what about the other folks in the village? They too must be flustered. Dr. Wang realized that the hardworking simplistic habits of these country folks which had been maintained for decades in this village were about to be destroyed. The lascivious conduct and sultry air of those women, didn't they hold beneath the surface a destructive force? Why didn't I detect the prelude to this danger in the first place? And to think all this unfolded in a house just twenty paces away!

Dr. Wang felt that, as a former chairman of village council, he had already unconsciously committed an unpardonable sin. At least his sense of responsibility would not let him rest easy.

Dr. Wang finally learned from one of his patients that the teahouse was operated by a woman named Ah T'ao.

"Who is Ah T'ao? She's not from our village, is she?"

"Aiya, Dr. Wang, you mean you haven't heard? Ah T'ao is the ladylove of Liao Ta-yu, the current chairman of our village council. She moved here from Chiayi."

"Oh, really? I had no idea," Dr. Wang said dejectedly.

Dr. Wang's thoughts turned to this newly elected council chairman. He was thirty-six or thirty-seven, and quite a tall and husky young man. He lived in one of the villages, and his family was frugal and hardworking, like the rest. In his younger days Liao Ta-yu had made a small name for himself as a boxer. After graduating from agriculture middle school, he travelled all over competing in boxing matches. In the last election, all the older councilmen of Dr. Wang's generation had to pull out because their terms had expired. All the new councilmen were the young tough types from the villages. Many had been Liao Ta-yu's so-called brothers that had practiced boxing with him. They were young and had no financial backing. All they had was a pair of fists that punched harder than others, that's all. Granted, the older councilmen had their shortcomings: some were illiterate; during meetings, some would doze off, or idly scratch their feet, or bring their radios and listen to opera; they didn't make any contribution to the community and were there just for a little bit of empty political power. But these types were not in the majority, and besides, they were at least loyal honest folks. Compared with those young toughs who became councilmen through the strength

of their fists, the simpleminded illiterates seemed in contrast much more virtuous and lovable.

That afternoon, Dr. Wang felt compelled to call the village council at Ta-i. It was Secretary Li who picked up the phone. He recognized Dr. Wang's voice right away.

"Ai, Dr. Wang, what can I do for you?"

"I haven't seen you in quite a while! I'd like to invite you over for lunch or dinner sometime."

"Fine with me, just name the day."

"How about tonight? I'll tell Uncle Ta-ch'eng to catch a couple of fish, and have Yu-hsiu cut them up into sashimi for you to down your wine with."

"Fine. After work I'll go home and tell my wife, then I'll be over."

Secretary Li was about five years older than Dr. Wang. He had put on a few pounds with his years. Other than enjoying a little wine, he didn't have any vices to speak of. He was casual and easy going. Though his work was a little slow, he was quite earnest. He wasn't the kind to form little cliques, get into in-fighting, corruption, or anything of that sort. Dr. Wang thought of him as a very good public servant.

After he hung up, Dr. Wang sent Ah Hung off to ask Uncle Ta-ch'ing to catch two carps and to buy half a dozen bottles of beer and chill them in the refrigerator. He also asked Yu-hsiu to pick out a tender hen to cook up.

At dusk, Secretary Li arrived according to appointment. The red glow of the early evening light passed through the tips of the phoenix trees and splashed onto the tarred road. The whole street radiated an indescribable romantic air. The peasants were on their way home with hoes hoisted over their shoulders. Those women in their low cut dresses were still sitting on their veranda chatting and selling smiles.

"Mr. Li, you see the teahouse that opened across the street from my clinic?" The doctor got right to the point, communicating his ire in his first words.

Mr. Li turned his head around and took a glance at the girls, then turned back to Dr. Wang. He sat there rubbing his hands together for a while, smiling. He couldn't help feeling uncomfortable and embarrassed.

"What? You think it's something to be happy about? So you laugh!" Dr. Wang said, slapping Li on his wide shoulders, as if joking.

"Uh . . ." Mr. Li sighed "maybe some people think it's something to be happy about."

"I heard the proprietress is Liao Ta-yu's mistress, did you know that?"

"I know," Li had to admit.

"It's gone too far!" Dr. Wang said as he poured the soda. "Ninety percent of our village people farm for a living. They work hard in the fields every day. For generations no one ever dreamt of having a teahouse here. We didn't even have a movie theater! Now all of a sudden our very own council chairman has prodded his lady friend to open this teahouse . . . it's preposterous! How can somebody elected to represent the people lead the village to debauchery and destroy our traditions!"

"Ai! Young people nowadays, you never know what they can come up with. You may not have heard, but Liao Ta-yu and his gang all call me an old fuddy duddy behind my back."

"Heh, heh, that's funny, how did you get to be an old fuddy duddy?"

"They say my ideas are outdated, that I'm not with the times."

"What does one have to do to be with the times? Open a teahouse? Get into boxing?"

"You must realize, Dr. Wang, these new young councilmen are not all like your generation. In the meetings they talk on and on about promoting the villagers' welfare and it all sounds so convincing. But underneath it all, they're just trying to put more money into their pockets. Councilman Chang has just opened a construction firm, whose specialty is to take over all the construction work in this area. And then you have Councilman Hsueh, who bought an old truck to haul all the building materials for these construction projects. On the surface these look like Mr. Chang and Mr. Hsueh's private enterprises, but every councilman will share a bit of the booty."

"Heh, so this is what they call up-with-the-times!"

"Now, let's get back to this Councilman Liao. At first he hadn't thought of any enterprise for himself. Besides, being chairman, he didn't want to stoop to competing with the others for business. Then later, the idea of the teahouse came to him. At the time I advised him not to, but he had his alibi all worked out. He said that since our village had no place for entertainment, all the villagers have to go elsewhere for recreation, and it's a pity to fill others' villages' coffers with our money. He said a teahouse here is sure to make a profit. Our own folks wouldn't have to go far for their entertainment either. It would benefit everybody."

"So they've even thought of a fancy rationale for the ruination of our

community!"

"What? Didn't you know any of this?"

"No, I was on a trip to Taipei. An old college professor of mine from Japan was in Taipei attending a conference, so a few of my classmates and I went to get together with him for a few days. I didn't find out about this until I got back. Secretary Li, what do you think we can do about closing down the teahouse?"

Secretary Li again rubbed his hands together for a long while.

"Well, it won't be all that easy," he said. "A few weeks ago I overheard Chairman Liao boasting to a couple of the other councilmen about how he had overcome a lot of hurdles and gotten through to a few influential friends to get the license. As you know, Dr. Wang, that kind of license isn't within our local jurisdiction. If Chairman Liao managed to get by all those hurdles, what say do we have?"

The street lined with blooming phoenix trees exuded a romantic atmosphere at dusk. It had already gotten dark inside. Although the fan kept whirring, Dr. Wang felt the muggy heat continuously expanding. It felt so oppressive that he couldn't get up and turn on the light. Besides, as he imagined, the expression on both their faces must be terribly awkward under the light.

"If no one went to the teahouse, then one day it would close of its own accord. If there's no money to be made, those girls wouldn't stay around." Secretary Li's words seemed to have been uttered only to soothe Dr. Wang and to melt his anger.

"Do you really believe that's possible? Secretary Li, if a piece of meat is set out in the sun, you think it won't attract flies from all around? Even if they can't get to eat it, they'd swarm for the excitement."

"Heh, heh," snickered Secretary Li lewdly. "But what's inside the teahouse isn't just one piece of meat."

"How many women are there actually, do you know?"

"I've heard somewhere around half-a-dozen. Naturally Ah T'ao isn't counted as one of them." Just then Yu-hsiu walked into the room and turned on the lights.

"Hey, what are you two doing sitting in the dark talking about women?"

"Secretary Li wants to introduce one to me to be a concubine," Dr. Wang glibly joked. It was a ridiculous joke, and he felt sorry and stupid for

having said it.

"Really? Secretary Li, what kind of girl is she? You know my husband won't look at anyone unless she's an absolute beauty."

"We were only joking, Mrs. Wang," stammered Secretary Li.

"Come to the dining room, the sashimi and chicken are ready."

They drank a little and chatted a bit about nothing much. Dr. Wang was so disturbed that even his appetite had gone. He felt as if he had been down-graded from host to a guest who had to stay just to be polite. Fortunately, Yu-hsiu chatted warmly with Secretary Li about mundane matters — the children, Mrs. Li's health (she was suffering from rheumatism), and so on. It was enough to ease things for Dr. Wang. He really didn't feel like saying anything anymore, since nothing he could say would be able to turn back the tides of defeat. That teahouse stood in front of his eyes like an immovable hunk of steel, radiating a piercing glare like the phoenix flowers. He was oblivious to the sashimi and the chicken. Nothing had any taste for him anymore.

This is how his turmoil began.

The earthy simple ways of village life were being destroyed rapidly. Those women, who sat on the pink veranda all summer long, flaunting their naked sexuality, were indeed like pieces of meat in the sun. They attracted swarms of flies ravenously gnawing and flying madly about. The teahouse was like a bustling market place. And Dr. Wang was the most immediate observer of this scene. From the first day when those pink images floated before his eyes, Dr. Wang couldn't avert his gaze from those women blatantly and shamelessly selling their wares. They sat on that veranda, parading themselves, waiting for the men to make their choices. First they would smoke their cigarettes, sing some popular tunes, chatting and laughing loudly with their meat customers. These men would squeeze their shoulders and fondle their breasts, or pat their fannies. The whole sensual prelude would proceed publicly. Afterwards, the meat customer would drag the piece he had selected and go inside to cook and devour it. Dr. Wang often timed the exchange. It never exceeded half an hour, and sometimes they finished in just fifteen minutes. The woman, wearing only a bra and bikini, would stroll out and start promoting business again. The man would look satiated. His hands would no longer be fondling the girl's shoulders or breasts. He would have a vacuous expression on his face, as if the meal's over, and there's nothing more to do but to pay the bill and leave.

"Come again!" The woman would send him off with this customary platitude.

He didn't know how or when, but Dr. Wang found his initial disgust for the teahouse fading away. Soon he discovered that he had fallen into the vicarious enjoyment of watching others' secret pleasures. He was no longer concerned that the girls were Chairman Liao's money tree, or that the simple earthy traditions were being eroded. To resist would have been useless and frustrating, so Dr. Wang lost his will to fight and decided it was pointless to raise a fuss anymore. He rationalized to himself: "You're not in charge of licensing this kind of business, and you're not a parent or wife of those meat buying men. So what say do you have? You're just a past council chairman. But more basically, you're the only doctor in the five nearby villages. Granted you don't have an operation room or a lab, but you're practically the doctor of a general clinic. Internal medicine, pediatrics, gynecology, cut in the arm or leg, swollen eye; all come under your charge. You can't turn them down. They'd say 'You're supposed to be doctor.'" To those who only understood how to toil on the land, the doctor was like an omnipotent savior. He was supposed to be able to cure any illness that might befall them.

It won't be long before patients with venereal disease would start coming in seeking treatment. If one day it was discovered that half the men of these villages had contracted venereal disease, and that the blight had extended even to their wives, that would not be surprising. What would be surprising would be if the men had contracted the disease and still didn't know it.

"And yet all you do is to treat their diseased bodies. Aside from that, what more can you do for them? Even you yourself have sunken into that kind of vicarious pleasure. You can't even do anything to help yourself. The only thing that has kept you from joining the ranks of those meat-buying men is your concern for sanitation. It's just like when you see food in food stands, you immediately think of the squirming germs. So you won't allow yourself to eat that kind of food, even though you're tempted to taste that fresh flavor so different from Yu-hsiu's."

Those women who had been defiled by the embraces of every kind of stinking men, weren't they the most rotten kind of flesh? Yet if one didn't get deep inside of them, their bodies appeared to be fresh. Their kind of lewd chatter and smiles, and their exposed flesh had never existed before in Dr. Wang's life. Yu-hsiu had always silently accepted Wang's caresses in the dark.

For twenty some years Dr. Wang had been satisfied with a sex life of modesty and mystery. Since those women had emerged however, this perfect wall of contentment seemed to have developed a small crack. In moments of rational contemplation, this crack could automatically seal up by itself. But in moments bordering on heated passion, it would rupture thoroughly.

In this endless struggle, the pleasure derived from watching others' gratification gradually turned to inner turmoil. Almost every day, Dr. Wang felt an urge to stroll across the deep shade of the phoenix trees to sit on the pink veranda opposite, and to hug and fondle those girls like other men. But what he was capable of would not go beyond that. Just hugging would not transmit those putrid germs that lay inside. Yet, even that limited sexual desire remained an extravagant dream that could not be realized, for Dr. Wang could never muster the courage to take those few steps. The neighbors on both sides would see him, how could he ever face them again? To think that a doctor who had been council chairman would sit on the veranda flirting with the teahouse girls! How hurt Yu-hsiu would be! A husband who had gone through twenty some years of stable marriage, and who was now approaching advanced age, could suddenly covet women who sell their flesh! What if the grown children's friends saw him in the act, and passed the news on to the children, how could they have any respect for him anymore? His authority to impart moral teachings to the children would be lost. These layer upon layer of concerns made Dr. Wang's courage wither and shrink, like seeds left under the fierce sun without nourishment — they had no chance to sprout.

As always, that year the flaming blossoms of the phoenix trees finally subsided and died. The weather gradually turned cold, and on the phoenix trees, only withered dried branches were left. Those teahouse girls lost the courage to expose their flesh in the open. They all donned heavy clothing, and moved their display and flirtation to inside the blue door. The pink veranda lay silent in the cold shadow, forlornly facing the withered branches of the phoenix trees. And so the desolate chilly winter set in.

That year seems to be when it all started. Dr. Wang began to experience the deep loneliness of winter. During the leisure times between seeing patients, Dr. Wang would just look across the dull white sunlit street and stare vacantly at the empty pink veranda. The light blue door that faced north was always shut now, but frequently someone would go in and someone would come out. The girls seeing the customers off would hold

the door half-opened, stretch their bodies half-way out and call out the same "Come again!" before they closed that door again. That door, just like the veranda, made Dr. Wang feel lonely, and made his turmoil writhe ever more intensely inside of him. He really felt like disregarding everything and running over recklessly to push open that door, charging into the rooms in which those girls pass their days and nights; he wanted to see just how they sell their flesh, to see if they weren't just a little bashful when they sell themselves.

During the years when Dr. Wang served as council chairman, he couldn't avoid the customary practice of being invited to fancy winehouses. Though the bar girls had some crude attractiveness in his eyes, never did they arouse his desire. He knew of other councilmen buying their flesh. They teased him for being a solitary lofty fool. There was a councilman nicknamed "Loudmouth" who even said that Dr. Wang had a physiological problem that he was just covering up with a kind of saintly image.

"Your wife won't know, an occasional good time doesn't matter. You've been husband and wife for a long long time, try a fresh one for a change!"

"Oh, the old one is good enough for me. I'm not interested in any fresh ones."

Every time Dr. Wang responded in this way straight-forwardly, from the depth of his heart. At that time he truly didn't have any interest, but now his heart had been stirred to a fiery flame. This transformation had been brought about by precisely those girls challenging him every day in front of his eyes. Their temptation had overwhelmed him, and had finally brought on the turmoil in his heart.

The seasons followed their cycle: in the flaming red summer, while secretly nursing his internal torment, Dr. Wang continued his hidden vicarious enjoyment of watching others seeking pleasure. When winter came the phoenix blossoms died, and the women disappeared indoors. The desolate scene again plunged him into loneliness, and into an abyss of irrepressible erotic longings.

The only encounter he had ever had with a woman of that kind happened in the loneliness of winter.

He would never forget that winter. It was the day after Dr. Liu's wife had been killed on a tour bus. He and Yu-hsiu went to town first thing in the morning to help put things in order. As if gravely ill, Dr. Liu lay speechless

on the bed. His eyes stared vacantly at the ceiling, staring . . . staring until tears flowed out. His mouth quivered and trembled as he softly called out his wife's name; she was called Ts'ai-wei.

Yu-hsiu took responsibility for looking after Dr. Liu's tearful daughters. When Dr. Wang urged Liu to restrain his grief for the children's sake, he could only say, "Ai, I'm already numb." That was all he said that day.

When it started getting dark, Yu-hsiu told her husband to go on home, she said she would stay to take care of the children.

"Should I go home by myself?" the doctor asked, hesitating.

"Yes, and come back tomorrow morning."

"Well, O.K."

The mercury lights that lined the road were on already. The poinsettias swayed with an eerie beauty under the glaring white lights. Dr. Wang had been affected by his friend's grief and felt very tired. At the same time, he realized how fortunate he was to be still sharing his life with Yu-hsiu. This feeling of good fortune almost rekindled the passion of his youth. That night he really needed Yu-hsiu; but wasn't this passion a little too selfish? Dr. Wang gently reprimanded himself: how can you be so preoccupied with your own happiness when someone else is grieving?

As soon as he got out of town, there were only pitch black fields. The road home passed by three villages. Dr. Wang had just passed through the second village when he suddenly spotted the silhouette of a woman's back on the dark road. As soon as he flashed past her on his motorcycle, he heard a woman's voice. "Dr. Wang! Dr. Wang!" she called urgently and sharply.

Dr. Wang stopped his motorcycle. As soon as he heard the voice, he recognized it to be one of the teahouse girls. He remembered people calling her Ah Feng.

"Can you give me a ride home, please, Dr. Wang? There aren't any more buses tonight."

"Eh . . . you . . . how come you are going home this late?"

"You wouldn't know, girls like us aren't worth anything. People just treat us like playthings."

Ah Feng got on the back of the motorcycle and put her right hand around Dr. Wang's waist. He felt as if an electric pulse had just run through him for an instant. After he recovered from the shiver, he finally started up the engine.

"That creep Huo-yen-tsai! Next time he comes by I'm going to turn the spittoon over his head!" Ah Feng muttered to herself.

Dr. Wang knew about Huo-yen-tsai. He was the only son of Chang Chu-chia from the end of the village. He was a small sickly kid. After he graduated from an agriculture middle school, he hung around Liao Ta-yu's gang, practicing boxing with them. People said he lost every match, but he would always put up a bluff. He rode a big 2500 cc motorcycle, and hung out with his ne'er-do-well drinking buddies. Dr. Wang often saw him on the veranda of the teahouse boasting to the girls, talking endlessly about how much land his family had, about what a great boxer he used to be, about what a noble spirit he and his sworn out-of-town brothers shared, and so on and so forth.

"Was Huo-yen-tsai bullying you?"

"Humph, he's a real jerk. He took me to Taichung. We went to that horribly expensive I-wen Restaurant. Then after we ate he said he didn't have any money, and wanted me to pay. I told him that when a guy takes a girl out, the guy is supposed to pay. He said what could he do, he didn't have any money? I cursed him out for taking me out when he didn't have any money, and especially for going to such an expensive restaurant! We could have just had a couple of bowls of noodles at a roadside stand. Then he got mad and ran out, so I ended up having to pay. Afterwards he took me to visit his friends here and there, and didn't take me home till it was almost dark. Just now I had to go to the bathroom real bad. Since it was dark and no one could see, I just squatted by the road. That damned beast, he just dumped me and took off by himself. I yelled and yelled but he wouldn't come back. That bastard! The Road Devil should make him run into the river and get killed!"

"Ugh, that Huo-yen-tsai really has an evil heart."

"That's right, Dr. Wang, he's a real hooligan."

Ah Feng held on to Dr. Wang's waist tightly, occasionally even squeezing him with her fingers. He couldn't tell if it was intentional or not, but every time her fingers dug into his waist, he felt as if they were pressing into his heart. His sense of loneliness and his lustful desire were aroused by each small squeeze. If something were to happen in these dark fields, no one would ever see it. Dr. Wang's hands started trembling at this vision that suddenly rose in his mind.

"Dr. Wang, you're so busy you never come around to our teahouse."

"Eh . . . yes . . . yes, that's true, there are so many patients I never have time."

These insincere words made even Dr. Wang himself feel annoyed. Hadn't that step which he never had the courage to take been now shrunken to the shortest distance? At this moment all he had to do was to stop the motorcycle, and he could immediately turn around and embrace the flesh of that teahouse girl called Ah Feng. He certainly would not be refused. That kind of girl had no prerogative to refuse men.

A gusty wind was blowing. The field under the clear cold starlight looked dark and dreary. How could the cold wild fields be the warm bed of desire?

"Dr. Wang, were you making a house call?"

"No, I have a friend in town whose wife just died. I went over to help."

"Really, how old was she?"

"Forty some, almost fifty."

"Aiyō, still so young. How could she die?"

"She was on a tour bus, she died in an accident."

"Ah, what a shame!"

Dr. Wang felt Ah Feng's hands giving his waist a squeeze now and then. She looked not much over twenty. "Perhaps her hands are merely driven by a childish playfulness? But then again, isn't she engaged in the business of enticing men? Perhaps her hands are intentionally trying to entice you, to give you a hint."

He tried and tried, but he still couldn't figure it out. Dr. Wang unconsciously let out a long sigh.

"Dr. Wang, are you upset or something?"

"Uh, . . . y-es . . ." He had to admit that she guessed right.

"But you are a very fortunate man. You have a beautiful wife."

"Nah, she's getting old."

"Someone beautiful will always be beautiful."

"She's staying at that friend's house tonight."

"Did she go over to help out too?"

"Uh-huh."

The doctor didn't know why he had let that out, letting Ah Feng know that his wife wasn't coming home that night. Could he be trying to hint at something? But how could that be? How could that bed which he had

shared for over twenty some years with Yu-hsiu accommodate another woman? The quilt, the sheets, and the pillow cases that Yu-hsiu had made, washed, and ironed with her own hands simply couldn't be contaminated by another woman.

It couldn't be done in the ice cold fields; nor in Yu-hsiu's bed either. He dared even less to step through that light blue door. The situation seemed hopeless. At this realization, Dr. Wang's desires gradually cooled down. He could see the village lights in the distance. What if he were seen riding down the street with Ah Feng on the back of his motorcycle? To bring a teahouse girl home with Yu-hsiu away for the night — how would he be able to face anyone in the morning? No matter how he explained it, who would believe that the two of them had only bumped into each other on the road?

"I have to go over to the fish pond to take care of some things. Why don't you get off here and walk back by yourself?" the doctor said in a cold stiff tone.

The motorcycle came to a halt, and Ah Feng obediently got off.

"Thank you, Doc! Come see us when you have time."

"Certainly, certainly. Sorry I can't take you all the way."

"No problem, it's just a few more steps."

Ah Feng swung her hand bag as she sauntered along, seemingly oblivious to why the doctor had let her get off just before the village. It's just as well that she didn't know, thought the doctor. Even though she said herself that she's worthless, that she's just a plaything for men, she still deserves a basic sense of dignity.

The fish-pond gate was locked from the inside. The doctor called Jung-fa two or three times but nobody came to open it up. Dr. Wang reached in to turn the lock around and opened the gate with his key.

The light was on in Jung-fa's bamboo cottage. Under the starlight, the fish pond looked like a giant dark green gem. Why not go chat with Jung-fa for a little while, he thought.

"Oh no, someone has come in!" the doctor heard a woman's voice saying.

"Naa . . . silly woman, that's just the wind. The gate is locked."

Dr. Wang stood quietly outside the cottage door. All the windows and doors were tightly shut; nothing could be seen through them. But the voices leaked through clearly. The doctor heard a stranger's voice but at once recognized the all too familiar character in that voice. This time, it wasn't

lustful desire that he felt but an uncontrollable rage. Through his long unmitigated struggle with desire, never had he imagined that his own hired-hand Jung-fa would be so comfortably enjoying himself by the fish pond.

Jung-fa was from the next village, a man with a wife and three kids. His wife had to go out every day for odd jobs in order to help make ends meet. The fish pond was surrounded by an open field. Dr. Wang let Jung-fa raise some vegetables there, so he could sell them to supplement his income. His job was simply to look after the pond, and to make sure people didn't trespass and fish from it.

Jung-fa seemed perfectly honest and plain, the kind that had a sense of responsibility and worked hard every day. Who would have thought that he would secretly carry on with someone other than his own wife?

The doctor never saw Jung-fa going over to the teahouse. But he did hear there was a back door. If this woman was willing to come to the fish pond with Jung-fa, their relationship must have gone beyond a few exchanges. Dr. Wang immediately realized that Jung-fa's wages and income from selling vegetables must have all been wasted on the body of this woman. Recently, when Jung-fa's wife brought their sick kids to see him, she asked that the charges be put on account and deducted from Jung-fa's wages. Previously Dr. Wang had only thought that life was difficult for them, and he never deducted the charges from Jung-fa's wages. After all, the kids only had the typical minor ailments like flu and diarrhea, and the medicine he gave them didn't amount to much. Never in his wildest dreams did he realize that their financial straits stemmed from Jung-fa's folly.

Jung-fa's wife had a slight build, and a round dark face, the type that showed kindness and perseverance. She had never complained in front of the doctor and his wife about Jung-fa. Perhaps she had no idea that Jung-fa had done anything behind her back.

The voices continued in the cottage. The dark green pond shimmered with rings of ripples under the starlight. The doctor felt that his anger was no longer mere ripples. It had turned into the wrath of a billowing sea.

He could no longer resist letting out a dry cough.

"Oh no, there really is somebody!" This time, it was Jung-fa's voice.

"I told you so, and you said there wasn't. Now somebody's heard everything!"

"Shut up. Get up quick and put on your clothes."

The doctor quietly followed the path in the vegetable garden and

reached the gate, then climbed onto his motorcycle and rode home. He really didn't want to confront Jung-fa and that woman in their embarrassment. It was enough to know the truth. Why bother to tear off their masks?

When all the bustling over the death in Dr. Liu's family was over, Dr. Wang dismissed Jung-fa. Jung-fa protested, with a sense of guilt, that he hadn't done anything wrong, and that without this job, the family would really have a hard time.

"Your own conscience knows whether you've done anything wrong."

Jung-fa's eyes were staring at the vegetables in the garden. Biting his lips, he was lost for words to explain himself.

"That woman is from the House of Joy, isn't she?"

"Eh. . ."

"You'll just have to go home and do odd jobs for people, you'll still get by. It seems work here was too leisurely for you. If you really run into hard times, you can come see me. I can help you and your family with your real needs, but I can't help you in doing anything that betrays your wife and children. You understand?"

After Jung-fa left, the doctor hired Uncle Ta-ch'eng to look after the fish pond. Uncle Ta-ch'eng didn't have any children. He lived with his old wife in a straw hut at the end of the village. They made a living from gathering cow manure and doing light odd jobs. Dr. Wang allowed the old couple to move into the bamboo cottage and to raise vegetables in the garden. The old couple were terribly grateful, as if fortune had finally come to shine on them in their old age.

However, what had happened that winter did not calm the restlessness in the doctor's heart, especially since Ah Feng continued to intrude into his consciousness. Whenever she saw a customer off, she would stand on the veranda gazing long and hard over at the clinic. Could it be that she was waiting for something to happen? But whether or not she was waiting for that something, Dr. Wang knew that he could never give her anything nor seek anything of her. He had already lost his closest chance; what hope was there left?

And the mouths of those women were probably just as casual as their bodies. Before long, rumors began to fly, and they reached even Yu-hsiu who didn't visit with people often.

"How come people are saying that you were out with Ah Feng from the House of Joy? Is it true?"

"Well, it was that day when you stayed over at the Liu's. I bumped into her on my way home, so I gave her a ride as far as the fish pond. That was the day I caught Jung-fa in the act."

"With that type of woman, it serves you right for giving her a ride!"

"It was so dark, and there weren't any more buses. Since she asked me for help, I didn't have the heart to refuse."

"That's just great! You got yourself into so much trouble for just helping her out once. I wonder what other more dreadful rumors they're going to come up with!"

"Let people say what they want. After all, I have nothing to hide."

He could say that nonchalantly, but the rumor that Yu-hsiu overheard naturally disturbed him. If Ah Feng had made up a story, saying that he had done this and that with her, who would believe that he was actually innocent? Even though Yu-hsiu didn't say anything much, she was probably upset by this rumor too.

This fine reputation that he maintained for over twenty years could actually be ruined by helping out a teahouse girl. "Does one actually have to be selective about the people one helps?" Dr. Wang realized for the first time in his life that charity could lead to injury. Only those who had suffered this type of injury could understand what he was feeling.

"And to whom could you explain your innocence and your plight? It's the words of one against the words of a multitude. Trying to explain would only attract more interest in the gossip."

When Dr. Wang again saw Ah Feng standing at the door of the teahouse, anger replaced desire within him. "She has no reason to injure me!" His anger compelled him to charge across the street, and with both hands on his hips, blast her in front of all the neighbors for starting this asinine gossip. He even felt like lashing out at her with all his fury, "With a malicious tongue like yours, you deserve to have Hua-yen-tsai abuse you."

His anger was stirred up to a fiery pitch, but like his lust, it too was dissipated by his timidity. He always ended up by cautioning himself, "You must never do that. Don't people all enjoy watching others make fools of themselves? Why bother to defend myself against some silly rumor? It would only increase the satisfaction of those gossip mongers!" Dr. Wang then came to see his prudence as having stemmed not from weakness, but actually from ultimate staunchness. He who could hold firm this last line of defense must be a man of strength.

Fortunately, he didn't hear any more of those nasty rumors. His anger subsided as the days passed.

On the phoenix trees, fresh young leaves pushed forth. The lush green of spring returned once more. After Dr. Wang's anger subsided, it was immediately succeeded by his old desires. Lust, like an undying enemy, was raging a relentless attack on the doctor's last stronghold!

This attack could never be stopped; there was no way out but just let it die a slow death.

Yet could the attack on mundane everyday life ever be stopped?

One by one, the doctor's past worries became realities. The simple and hard working ways of the villagers had truly been disrupted. Those fellows who could not withstand temptation — the single men as well as those who were married and had children — they had almost abandoned their work, and their time and money were now being poured into the teahouse girls. The labor of the vigorous able-bodied young men, the major source of energy for the villages, went to only those women. The single young men went as far as to steal money from home to ingratiate those women, or they demanded to take those women home to be their wives, thus driving their aged father insane with anger, and making their aged mothers cry their eyes out in sorrow. Some of those with wives and children would batter their wives for scolding them, sometimes even involving the police in their domestic quarrels. The more meek and docile wives were helpless as they watched their husbands go seek pleasure; they would hide their tears as they went to the fields and picked up the work that their husbands had left undone. Another type of wives would run over to the teahouse and unleash their curses at those girls. When such an occasion occurred, the girls would always retreat into the house and have Liao Ta-yu's mistress Ah T'ao come out to present their defense in her charming, nonchalant manner.

"Your husband? No, . . . he's not here. If he were I would say so. Missus, why would I lie to you?"

"Only a dumb fool would believe your bullshit! I'll go in and see for myself."

"Oh goodness, missus. This place is not fit for you! This god-forsaken place is only for women of our wretched fate. A fine and fortunate woman of your type should never enter a place like this. It'll only ruin your reputation!"

This quarreling scene was always the same: one insisted on going in,

the other refused to let her. Push led to shove, to the point where sometimes neighbors had to intervene. It always ended the same way: the "unfortunate" woman would stalk inside with vengeance on her face, and the "fortunate" one went home crying and wailing.

These various quarrels and deteriorations were plain for all to see, but no one had the power to stop or eliminate them.

When one is unable to withstand, is acceptance the only alternative then?

There was yet another horrid development which only the doctor could see and understand.

When women in the villages gave birth to stillborn children, or deformed infants without hands or sight, the ignorant villagers always superstitiously described them as "ghost-conceived." The affected men all knew how to seek treatment for their ailments. But the poor blameless women had no idea what they were infected with. When their ailment started to torment them, they didn't dare discuss it with people nor seek medical help. That traditional, simple, submissive endurance of village women is at times sustained to an astonishingly absurd degree. It was amidst this blind endurance that the so-called "ghost-conceived" were born one after another.

So, what the House of Joy brought to the villages was not merely destruction of the existing conditions. Of greater misfortune than the stillborns, the majority of the deformed children lived on. When these lives gradually came of age, perhaps they won't realize the roots of their deformities. But one could well imagine the inferiority complex they experienced as they grew up, and the various daily obstacles brought about by their deformities.

Each time Dr. Wang treated one of these deformed children the hand which held the stethoscope couldn't help but tremble. In the moments when he came face to face with them, all his worries and sense of guilt over his inability to help them rose to the surface. But who could understand this kind of feeling in him? The short-sighted villagers did not seem to realize the destruction that had been deeply planted in the next generation.

"When will this destruction cease? If the destruction were passed on generation after generation, perhaps one day, a great-grandchild of my blood line would be deformed?"

As wave after wave of these overwhelming and far-reaching worries rose to his mind, Dr. Wang's lustful desires were demolished. His will to resist

was suddenly awakened. He realized that he had committed a major error in being too weak-willed to resist in that first summer when the teahouse girls moved in. Although he might not succeed in resisting now, where there was action, there was hope.

III

"Doctor, doctor, there's a patient here to see you!"

Dr. Wang in his dream heard the voice of the pharmacist Ah Hung. He opened his eyes and realized that he had actually fallen asleep in the front veranda.

"Uh. . . mmm!"

The doctor stood up, stretched his shoulders as he yawned. He went into the bathroom and wiped his face with cold water. His consciousness slowly came back.

It was a female patient, a pregnant woman wearing a loose jumper.

"Sorry to have kept you waiting."

"That's okay," she replied in a hoarse voice.

The doctor sat down to look through her chart. Name: Lin Ts'ui-feng; age: twenty-two; address: Seventeen, Hui-feng Village; temperature: 38.5C . . . new patient.

The doctor put on his stethoscope. As soon as he raised his head, he recognized the familiarity in that face in front of him. The woman had already unbuttoned the sweater underneath her jumper. Without thinking twice, he pressed the stethoscope against her chest. Even though her breasts were not completely exposed, he could tell that they were very full. Perhaps it was due to swollen glands during pregnancy.

He put down the stethoscope and asked the woman to open her mouth. She had a set of straight white teeth. Her breathing carried a heavy mucous sound, and her throat was all red and swollen.

"You've had this flu for a while now, haven't you?"

"Hm . . ." she paused for a moment, then said, "I've been taking a lot of medicine but it doesn't help."

The woman suddenly began to cough. She coughed so violently that her face turned red. She then spat into the spittoon beside the chair.

"How many months along are you?"

"Let me think . . ." The woman wearily supported her forehead with her left hand. It took her a while to remember. "It must be over five months now."

"When you're pregnant, don't take just any medicine, you understand? It's not good for the baby."

The woman covered her mouth and began coughing again. She kept coughing as she nodded.

Dr. Wang wrote a prescription and handed it to the pharmacist. The diagnosis over, Dr. Wang once again searched his memory for the face of the woman. Her hair was short, and she wore no make-up. The hands over her mouth were the work-worn mud-colored hands typical of village women.

The doctor thought and thought, but he was still unable to find from his memory the face that matched the woman in front of him. Just when the murky silhouette was about to emerge, his memory was again chased away by those hands.

The woman had her back toward the doctor as she stood at the dispensary window waiting for her prescription. When Ah Hung had it ready, she paid, wrapped a printed scarf around her head, then turned to thank the doctor and left. She rode away on a very old bicycle. The doctor stood at the door, watching her heavy clumsy body get on the bike. From a distance he could still hear the sound of her cough vibrating in the wind. To get back to Hui-feng Village from the doctor's clinic, it would take half-an-hour riding against the north wind. The village was on the bank of Muddy Creek. Most of the villagers still made their living from growing watermelons in the dried river bed every summer. In the past two or three years, just when the melons were about to ripen, typhoons came. The melons were either all washed away or rotted in the flood. Folks in this village lived a very hard life.

When the last trace of the woman's back had turned onto a little road leading north, the doctor once again sat down in the wicker chair on the veranda. Just in that instant, the face of that woman fell into place with his memory. What, that was Ah Feng. Wasn't her name Lin Tsui-feng? Why couldn't he think of it before!

* In Chinese, an informal, sometimes endearing appellation is derived from prefixing "Ah" to one of the syllables of the full name.

“Haven’t seen her for a long time, so she got married!”

The Ah Feng in his memory was so different from the Ah Feng today.

His patients usually chattered endlessly in describing their illnesses to him. But Ah Feng was exceptionally taciturn. Was she afraid to say too much, afraid that the doctor would recognize her?

It wasn’t too late to recognize her. But the doctor didn’t feel any differently towards her than he did towards other patients. He wasn’t aroused by having finally touched her breasts, nor did he harbor ill feelings over the injury that her tongue had caused him. She was no longer the teahouse girl Ah Feng. She was now someone’s wife, and her breasts belonged to him. He wondered what type of man she married. It was obvious that she didn’t live a comfortable life. Her face and hands told of her acceptance of a harsh reality. From teahouse girl to farmer’s wife; which life did she love more?

The doctor thought of the teahouse girls who moved back to Chiayi with Ah Mei a few days before. He knew very well that a lot of those women were sold or mortgaged by their parents. So perhaps their daring and shameless seductive smiles had come from the acceptance of a tragic reality. Doctor Wang recalled Ah Feng telling him, “Girls like us aren’t worth anything. People just treat us like playthings.” Her words were perhaps spoken from the naked voice of her soul.

Ah Feng didn’t have to say she’s worthless any more. But what about the rest of the teahouse girls, those who moved away? They had only taken their seductive smiles and bodies elsewhere to hawk.

Maybe it was a little too cruel to have forced them out. But what other alternative was there? Staring at the light blue wooden door, hot tears suddenly formed and rolled out of the doctor’s eyes! He recalled how the teahouse girls had cursed him as they moved out. “Well, let them curse. Why quibble over words that only flash through momentarily, then die into emptiness?” Now he could finally forgive them, because they had already left. “They will no longer tease you in front of your eyes, nor will they sprinkle their bane over the innocent villages again. They moved here from Chiayi and now they have moved back. Won’t they make a living there just the same? Let the people in Chiayi take on their ruination. Perhaps it doesn’t matter as much to city folks.” When it came to the issue of loss or gain, Dr. Wang could not help but think in such selfish terms.

Those women must have thought that Dr. Wang had single-handedly

driven them out. Even if they knew all that had happened, perhaps they still could not comprehend that what really forced them to move out was actually a little, hypocritical game of politics.

Dr. Wang had long ago lost his strong interest in the title of councilman or chairman. But in the days of his lone struggle, he could think of no way to counter the inroads made by the teahouse other than through politics. It would have been out of the question to work out a solution through Liao Ta-yu. Finally, Dr. Wang thought of using a little game of politics to carry out his counter-offensive.

There was to be another village council election the next year. When Dr. Wang posed himself as a potential candidate and began to make preparations for his campaign, Liao Ta-yu and his "brothers" finally fell into the doctor's scheme and came forth to negotiate.

It happened during the teahouse girls' last summer in the village. When Liao Ta-yu and his "brothers" rode into the village on their motorcycles, they were as rowdy as if they were about to have a boxing match. And the teahouse girls were like suspected criminals about to be put on trial (even though they themselves did not realize that they were to be on trial). Lined in a row, they stood on the veranda across the street, watching Liao and his gang go into the clinic.

Dr. Wang cordially invited them into the living room, and sent Ah Hung out to buy a case of soda pop for the guests. Yu-hsiu disapproved of her husband getting enmeshed in politics again, so she stayed in an inner room sulking, unwilling to come out to meet the gang.

Liao Ta-yu's gang were all young robust fellows with sturdy builds. In earlier days, they had the habit of expressing themselves with their fists, but now they had learned to sit down and talk things out. That at least is a turn for the better. If they had wanted to use their old method to negotiate, Dr. Wang would have been outnumbered. Dr. Wang trusted them to have a modicum of intelligence. He reasoned that they should at least understand their present status and behave more like councilmen than boxers. But more importantly, there were certain matters that could not be won with even the most powerful fist.

Liao Ta-yu went straight to the point immediately, saying that he hoped Dr. Wang and his cronies would stay out of the next council election. His approach was as swift and decisive as in boxing.

"Dr. Wang, we know full well that you've got plenty of money, so

we're not here to buy any favors, we know we can't afford your price. Here's what we're really here for: we were hoping that with your experience and knowledge as former council chairman, you'd have some suggestions for us. We'd be happy to follow them." As he spoke, Liao Ta-yu's hands waved in the air as if he were boxing.

"That's right. That's exactly what we have in mind," Liao's brothers echoed in unison.

Now that his chance was at hand, Dr. Wang seemed to have lost his nerve. He thought in silence for a long while, not knowing how to begin. He could feel his heart burning and his body sweating. At that moment, suddenly he felt extremely alone. If only Yu-hsiu would come out and make some pleasantries, even just say a few meaningless words, he would not be so flustered. It was as if he were on the podium but had forgotten his speech. The harder he thought the less the words came.

"So, what do you think, Dr. Wang? Whatever ideas you have, just bring them out. No need to be polite, we won't mind anything."

"Eh, well, it's like this . . ." Dr. Wang stuttered and stumbled for quite a while before he finally came out with what was on his mind. As he spoke, his own ears kept tuning into the lascivious and raucous laughter coming from across the street.

The young toughs were stunned by the doctor's words. This was not at all the kind of suggestion they had in mind.

"But, for the sake of benefits to this village, is this a suggestion that could be reconsidered?" Liao Ta-yu punctuated his words with gesticulations, and stretched out the word "benefits" as though this were necessary to make its importance absolutely clear. But it was precisely this that knocked the doctor out of his timidity and aroused the anger in him.

"What benefits? Your personal benefits? As I see it, you are not worthy to talk about the benefits of this village . . ." The doctor's voice became shrill. The whole speech that had been held back a moment before gushed forth like a mountain torrent. He enumerated in great detail all the conflicts and disruption wrought on the village by the House of Joy. The young councilmen sat there wide-eyed, as if they needed to really tax their rational powers in order to comprehend the disruptions the doctor spoke of. (Naturally, the doctor omitted the turmoil that he suffered personally.)

"Now you should weigh things out. Are your own benefits more important? Or are the villagers' benefits?" The doctor was so agitated he

almost banged on the table. His anger had never been aroused to such a pitch before.

They looked at each other for a while, no one could respond to the doctor.

"But, Dr. Wang, since you are so opposed to the teahouse, how come it's rumored that you've taken a fancy to the teahouse girls?" one of the councilmen, the one with a knife scar on his face, piped up sarcastically.

"Hey, Scar-face, how dare you be so rude to the doctor!" Liao Ta-yu intercepted.

"Well, it came from Ah Feng herself, how could it be wrong?"

The doctor stared coldly at the one nicknamed Scarface in silence. Regardless of what Ah Feng might have said, the doctor decided that he would not deign to argue about it.

Just then, Ah Hung came in and said that an emergency patient had just arrived. It was a seven year old girl, with a 104 degree fever, and apparently in convulsions. Dr. Wang hurriedly went out. The emergency was actually a welcome break for him.

The girl was suffering from advanced pneumonia. The doctor gave her an injection to reduce the fever, then advised the girl's father to take her to Dr. Liu's place to be hospitalized. He wrote a note to Dr. Liu for the man to take along, hoping that Dr. Liu would charge him a little less.

As Dr. Wang came back into the living room, Liao Ta-yu rubbed his hands and spoke up immediately. "Dr. Wang, your time is precious. As I see it, let's get down to business and settle it."

"Eh, all right."

"I'll be frank with you, Doctor. My brothers and I are all young folks who are eager to serve the people of our villages. In the next election, we hope that you will give us your support."

"That's right," Liao's brothers again echoed in unison.

The doctor did not respond, but just coolly swept his eyes across these boastful young toughs.

"Dr. Wang, if we close down the House of Joy, will you promise to stay out of the election?"

"Well, I've got to talk it over with my friends."

Actually the matter had been settled right then and there, there was nothing more to talk over. So Liao Ta-yu was willing to close down his flourishing enterprise. But it wasn't clear whether he just coveted the empty

title of council chairman, or perhaps he had another scheme up his sleeve? The doctor wouldn't bother to bicker about it anymore. Whatever they might do next, the damage could not be worse than the teahouse. Perhaps this wasn't a smart way to do politics, but at least he had satisfied his conscience as a doctor.

IV

"Te-hou, Te-hou, how come you've fallen asleep here?"

He felt someone tapping him on the shoulder, and realized that it was Yu-hsiu speaking to him.

"Eh, really? How did I fall asleep again? Oh, how long have you been back?"

"I just got back." Yu-hsiu was still wearing her dark blue coat, with a scarf around her head, and a package in her hand. After lunch that day she took the bus to town to buy some fabric to make a new outfit for New Year's. She also wanted to make new quilt covers, so the kids would be surprised when they came home.

The sun on the tarred street had dimmed. Dr. Wang began to feel a little cold.

"Come inside. I've got something to tell you," Yu-hsiu said in a low voice, as if she had a secret to tell.

Ah Hung was still sitting on the veranda reading some romance novel.

Dr. Wang followed Yu-hsiu into the bedroom, and lay down on the bed with all his clothes on. Yu-hsiu took off her coat and scarf, then sat down on the edge of the bed. The faint glow of the setting sun came through the tightly closed window. Yu-hsiu looked at the doctor for a long time, biting her lips. Finally she said, "Cheng-ch'eng has come home, did you know?"

Cheng-ch'eng was their oldest son. He was doing his internship at a public hospital in Taipei.

"What! He came home and didn't even bother to come to say hello?"

"He hasn't arrived yet. What's the big hurry?"

"Then how do you know he's come home?"

"It was such a coincidence. I ran into him at the bus stop. We came back on the same bus. But he headed for the pond as soon as he got here."

"He didn't write or anything. How come he came home all of a

sudden?"

"He said he asked for a couple of days off."

"What for?"

"Of course it's for something, or he wouldn't have asked for the days off. Te-hou, as I see it, you might as well give him your consent."

Dr. Wang sat up abruptly on the bed.

"You mean the business about him and Miss Teng?" he roared.

"No need to get upset, Te-hou. It won't do any good to disagree anymore now. Cheng-ch'eng says Miss Teng is already expecting a child."

As if all his bones and tendons had been suddenly pulled out of him, Dr. Wang's entire body went limp. He lay back on the bed and, in a daze, stared at the faint glow of light on the window, utterly speechless.

"Cheng-ch'eng wants to just go to a courthouse and have a civil ceremony. But Miss Teng's family won't have it. Those city people all love to have it elaborate. They want to have a big party at the Ambassador Restaurant. Cheng-ch'eng came home to talk that over with you."

"I have nothing to say," the doctor said angrily. "It's all been decided already. What is there to talk over? Anyway, if they want to have a wedding, they'll have to find their own way. I'm not going to give them even a penny."

"He didn't come to ask you for money. Te-hou, think of the time when we got married. Who gave us any money? Both of them are working, and they have a steady income each month. They are in much better shape than we were. It's not money that he needs from you."

Dr. Wang remained speechless, his eyes fixed on the setting sun on the window.

"Besides, there's nothing wrong with Miss Teng. Why do you keep thinking she's not good enough?"

Miss Teng was the same age as Cheng-ch'eng. She was a graduate of a nursing school, now serving in the hospital where Cheng-ch'eng was interning. Every time Dr. Wang went to Taipei, Cheng-ch'eng always brought her to the hotel to see him. Sometimes they even took him shopping or to a nightclub. Although Miss Teng was from the city, her complexion was rather dark. She had a well-defined face and a tall robust figure. She never used make-up, but she had dark eyebrows, big bright eyes, and a sweet smile on her lips. She looked like a very warm, good-natured girl.

"When Cheng-ch'eng gets here, you'd better not yell at him anymore.

Whatever you have to say, just say it nicely. Just think, he will soon become a father himself."

Yü-hsiu spoke in a happy tone of voice, as if she was feeling proud to be a grandmother soon.

"Te-hou, what's the matter with you today? I'm trying to talk to you, and you're not saying a word."

"They're about to have a baby already. What more is there to talk about? Let them do whatever they want. I can't do anything about it anyway."

"Aw, what are you so angry for? Te-hou, now you're being unreasonable. Remember how we got married? You don't want to force your child to go through what we did, do you?"

Yü-hsiu stood up, and changed into a pair of black slacks and a house jacket.

"Well, you think about it some more. I'm going to fix the chicken."

Yü-hsiu seemed peeved. As Dr. Wang watched the black silhouette of her back disappear out the door, he was again struck by an unfulfilled loneliness.

It was true. There was nothing wrong with Miss Teng. He had always objected on the pretext that her skin was too dark, or that she was too tall, but these were not reasons that could convince Cheng-ch'eng. If he admitted candidly that the real reason was that they were the same age, Cheng-ch'eng would be even less likely to be convinced. He would certainly say in retort, "But look at you and Ma, Ma's two years older than you." If Cheng-ch'eng said that, what could he say in reply? He couldn't very well tell Cheng-ch'eng that his own torment was due precisely to his being younger than Yü-hsiu, that would really break Yü-hsiu's heart.

When he had insisted on marrying Yü-hsiu, both sets of parents objected on grounds of their age. Yü-hsiu's parents went as far as to secretly match her up with someone else. For a period, they even kept her confined and forbade her to see him. At the time, he couldn't understand why his parents were so sensitive to the fact that Yü-hsiu was two years older, and reacted so vehemently to it. By the time he realized why, his own loneliness had become rooted. And it was precisely at that time that Cheng-ch'eng came home to announce that he wanted to marry Miss Teng. Without giving it a thought he rejected her right away.

When he and Yü-hsiu eloped, they sneaked away from their homes in

Hsinchu without even a change of clothing. They went to Dr. Liu's place in town and stayed there for a couple weeks. Then Dr. Liu's father helped them rent a three room bamboo hut in the village, where they set up a practice. Cheng-ch'eng was born the very next year. Seven years later they bought the bamboo hut along with the land around it, and built a brick house. At that time, he and Yü-hsiu made a trip to Hsinchu with their three children, but their parents had all passed away (some said they died from anguish caused by their elopement). The relatives gave them the cold shoulder, almost as if they despised them. They didn't even ask them to stay for a meal. From then on, they had never returned to that windswept city of their childhood, but had come to regard this little village as their home.

Theirs was the ideal family, two sons and two daughters. The second son, Cheng-i, had gone abroad to study chemical engineering. The two daughters that followed were both in home economics colleges. Yü-hsiu had raised all four children single-handedly. After they grew up and left home one after another, Yü-hsiu then turned all her time to the flower garden in the backyard.

If it weren't for Yü-hsiu's decline in sexuality, their entire married life was as perfect as a fine piece of porcelain, with not even the slightest flaw in it. Yü-hsiu was very good natured, and she managed the household extremely well. She was frugal, diligent, and very considerate. Yü-hsiu took such good care of the doctor, that sometimes he felt she was like a doting older sister. She had never lost her temper with him, and had always yielded to him. Therefore, when she first began rejecting his approaches, he was alarmed to discover that the perfect piece of porcelain was not perfect, that there existed in it a certain flaw after all. It was only then that he saw what their parents had seen a long time ago.

"Aiya, I've gotten old." Yü-hsiu often rejected the doctor's caresses with these words. She even hid herself from him when she changed her underclothes.

"That's strange, how come you're getting more and more shy?" he asked.

It was much later that Yü-hsiu explained that it was because she was ashamed of her breasts. They had suckled four children, and had now shrivelled into layers of sagging skin.

"I can't let you see them, they're too ugly," she said with shame. "Just think, these breasts of mine have raised four healthy strong children."

Of course the doctor remembered those well-formed full breasts. If Yü-hsiu hadn't said that they had withered, he was naive enough to suppose that they were like two hills that would remain luxuriant forever. Perhaps it was because he never felt himself declining that he never noticed the decline in her. It was only when she shamefully and reluctantly revealed her condition that he realized with alarm how numb his one-sided feelings had been. From that time on, he forlornly accepted the whole reality of her decline. That came about in the same summer that the House of Joy opened up across the street. The bra-clad bodies of those teahouse girls contrasted brutally with Yü-hsiu's, and made her seem all the more withered. Those breasts were certainly not hills that would remain luxuriant forever. Forever luxuriant hills may exist in a person's mind but certainly not on a person's body.

A gentle affection still flowed from Yü-hsiu's face, but her skin had already become like wilted petals. Throughout their home — living room, dining room, dressing table, examination room, dispensary, even on the wash stand, always there were displayed fresh flowers cultivated by Yü-hsiu's own hands. Every time the doctor looked at the dainty flowers overflowing with youthful spirit, it occurred to him that Yü-hsiu's face was no match for them at all. From the color, poise and fragrance of the flowers, he could sense the beauty arising from a combination of nature and human ingenuity. The physical space of his everyday life was filled with that kind of beauty. But later the doctor had the disturbing realization that perhaps Yü-hsiu was using that kind of beauty to veil her own decline. So perhaps gardening was not only a hobby for her, perhaps she was motivated by something else? Yet this subtle psyche was not something that anyone would reveal openly.

What was even more difficult to endure was Yü-hsiu's indifference, which seemed to deepen with the passing of years. Dr. Wang often felt that she was avoiding him on purpose. Before, after she prepared his bath water, she would stay around to scrub his back and help him get dressed, but now she would turn away as soon as she was done preparing the bath water.

"I watch this program every day, so if I miss it for even one day, it doesn't feel right."

Yü-hsiu always used watching television as the reason. The doctor knew very well that it was only an excuse. Even television had become a thing that deepened his loneliness. In the past, he often took her on his motorcycle to see movies in town. Ever since they got a television, Yü-hsiu no longer wanted to go. She complained that the old wooden seats in the

theater snagged her stockings, that the fleas bit her legs, that the accumulated rancid sweat and body odor nauseated her, so on and so forth. So now every day after lunch she would sit in front of the television, absorbed in whatever program was showing. "Te-hou, aren't you going to watch?" Yü-hsiu would sometimes call while Dr. Wang was reading in the examination room. But her voice would be routine, sterile and hollow, without even a trace of emotion. Yet it wasn't only because of that tone of voice that he rejected television. He never had any interest in those song and comedy routines, and in fact found them extremely tedious.

Aside from watching television, Yü-hsiu spent all her time on the flower garden in the backyard. After the television program, if she didn't take a nap, she would spend the whole afternoon in the garden: working the soil, fertilizing, weeding, cutting, watering, setting up trellises. She had never asked him to help her in the garden, perhaps because she enjoyed the solitude, or perhaps she thought that the doctor belonged in the easy chair in the examination room, that he should always be there waiting for patients. In any case, she spent all her time enjoying the fresh air and beautiful flowers under the sun, while Dr. Wang was always having to face the yellowed, withered countenances of the sick and to breathe the turbid, germ-filled air which even a mouth mask could not fend off. Sometimes he really wished that Yü-hsiu would call him to the garden. Even if she didn't ask him to do anything, or say anything to him, if the two of them could just gaze quietly at the various flowers together, that in itself would be some kind of unspoken pleasure and comfort. But Yü-hsiu was parsimonious with even this kind of warmth. The doctor gradually succumbed to feeling abandoned and forlorn. And yet in his melancholy, he also felt that this was perhaps not a deliberate failing on Yü-hsiu's part. Perhaps she herself was suffering the abandonment brought on by the passing of time, and couldn't help but withdraw into isolation. Dr. Wang remembered he once mustered up his courage, and like an uninvited guest intruding on a banquet, almost went into the garden to do a little something with Yü-hsiu, digging soil, weeding, or whatever. After all, he was capable of these chores. But that courage lasted only a brief moment and he lost it again. In the end, his hand was powerless to push open that little gate to the garden, just as his feet could not take the step to cross over to that light blue wooden door.

He stood outside that little gate. Amidst the fragrant air, he felt an overpowering sense of loneliness and melancholy.

That was at sunset on a spring day. The garden was already half in the shadow, the other half bathed in the gray-white evening light. The deep red hibiscus, pink morning glories, zinnias, begonias, irises and carnations of every color, all swayed enchantingly in the spring breeze. Yü-hsiu was sitting on a smooth rock, with her back to him. The rock was dug up from the fish pond three years ago. Its dark smooth surface gleamed slightly under the sun. If it were just a bit more polished, it would look like a piece of fine marble. Yü-hsiu was wearing a short-sleeved blue sweater, black slacks, her hair done up in a bun with a pearl-studded hair clip. Her elbows rested on her thighs, palms holding up her chin. What could she have been thinking of? Perhaps nothing. She was humming a song, over and over. The doctor listened; it was a most familiar tune, but he could not remember where he had heard it before. Just then, as if his head was struck by a tempest, he felt himself falling in a faint.

"Come help me, Yü-hsiu!"

But Yü-hsiu went on humming her tune, with her back to him. Did she often sit in the garden, just humming, doing nothing else? Dr. Wang dejectedly walked back to the living room and sank onto the sofa. Through the window, the faint golden sun hung in the sky. Sunset on a spring evening looked really warm and beautiful, yet his heart was so lonely and cold! He tried to understand Yü-hsiu. The only explanation he could come up with was that her own decline had made her withdraw into isolation, and in that frame of mind, she had unwittingly abandoned and hurt someone else. He couldn't imagine that Yü-hsiu, at her age, would have come to love another man, and he couldn't imagine that she didn't love him anymore. It was just that her love had become like the wine with all its spirit evaporated, it had lost all its poignancy. This was precisely what the doctor felt was missing in his life. His heart was still youthful and passionate, but like a flaming stove with no one to add firewood to it, it couldn't help but slowly die down. If Yü-hsiu were younger, it would not come to this, would it? Dr. Wang finally hit upon the source of their trouble. If she were eight or ten years younger, surely she would not decline earlier than her husband and withdraw into isolation as a result.

But the unfortunate reality was established long ago when they were young and in love. Its roots went back more than twenty years. The reality was surfacing only now, but what could one do? If he could do like some other men and "partition" himself off to other women, then perhaps he

would not feel the frustration of being abandoned? But he insisted on holding loyally to Yü-hsiu's loveliness. And this loveliness had faded like the setting sun, and soon it would fall into the darkness of night. Still, his heart would not budge from its stubborn loyal feelings. He had weathered the storm stirred up by the House of Joy, and yet he stood firm in the end.

It was only two or three days later that Dr. Wang recalled that tune he heard Yü-hsiu humming in the garden that afternoon. It was a lullaby. When their children were young, Yü-hsiu always sang it to them when she put them to bed.

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Those children who were lullabied to sleep have all grown up; now they have learned to sing their own favorite songs. The phonograph that normally sits silently in the study is hauled out whenever the children come home on vacation. Then the tunes that make Dr. Wang jumpy and uncomfortable blare out from that machine.

He has never heard them play the lullaby.

Perhaps they've grown tired of listening to it; more likely, they probably forgot it long ago.

They've reached an age when they have their own choices, even their own offspring.

This matter of Miss Teng getting pregnant can't be an accident. If it's not a fabricated lie, then it must be a deliberate act. How can an experienced nurse not understand the fundamentals of contraception? They must have done it as a tactic to force Dr. Wang to give in. Compared with the route of eloping which Dr. Wang and Yü-hsiu chose, this tactic is much more sophisticated. At this point, what alternative is there but to accept them? No amount of persuasion will have any effect on that *fait accompli* now. And this lonely feeling of rejection will simply have to wait for Cheng-ch'eng to experience himself some day. If and when he is plagued by this loneliness, perhaps he will remember his father's well-meant disapproval. If, on the other hand, he never experiences any deficiencies in his marriage, then that will be his good fortune.

The sky has now grown completely dark. The lights have not yet been turned on. The fragrance of narcissus permeates the room. Every year at New Year's time, Yü-hsiu used to send a bowl of narcissus over to Dr. Liu's

family. This year, since Dr. Liu has a new wife, perhaps Yü-hsiu will forego even this little expression of friendship. Dr. Wang remembers clearly, the winter that Dr. Liu's first wife Ts'ai-wei died, Yü-hsiu wore black at New Year's time. During that period, she went to town to visit Dr. Liu and his children every three or four days. When Dr. Liu remarried, Yü-hsiu only went there for the wedding, and that was just out of courtesy and curiosity to see just what kind of woman Chen-hui was. Since then she hasn't been to visit them again. She has always blamed Dr. Liu for remarrying, saying that he was a heartless old rat.

"His coffin is already two-thirds into the ground, and he still wants to take a new wife. What a shameless old rat! We've been friends with him for over twenty years, and it's only now that I realize what a heartless person he is!"

"Haven't you seen those ads in the paper? There are men in their seventies advertising for wives. Why, their coffins are buried even deeper than Dr. Liu's"

"Ha, so you're taking his side? If anything should happen to me, you'll probably want a new wife too!"

"Hey, what's the matter with you? Don't say unlucky things like that."

"What does it matter, once in a while? Seriously now, if I should die, would you remarry?"

Dr. Wang smiled at Yü-hsiu for a long time before he said, "What a silly question. Of course I wouldn't."

"Hmph, you sure talk sweet now. When the time comes, who knows what you'll do."

"Don't you believe me? Well, never mind then."

Not long after Ts'ai-wei passed away, many friends and relatives began to urge Dr. Liu to remarry. But Dr. Liu always rejected the idea, saying that Ts'ai-wei's place in his life could never be replaced by any other woman. But perhaps old sentiments can be eroded most easily by loneliness? Didn't Dr. Liu take on another woman after all? So this question of remarrying which Yü-hsiu put to Dr. Wang is not one that he can answer decisively. Perhaps he would remarry, Dr. Wang thought to himself. But of course he would not let Yü-hsiu know this, otherwise she would be even more distressed and withdrawn. The only thing he could tell her honestly to reassure her is that at least he would never betray her in her life time. Even

though he suffers the loneliness of being rejected by her, and even though his heart has been shaken like a tottering high rise, he has nevertheless stood fast to his loyal feelings toward her.

"Te-hou, Te-hou, how come you've fallen asleep again?"

He opened his eyes with a start, but the bright lights coming on so suddenly gave him a piercing pain, and he closed his eyes again immediately.

"Cheng-ch'eng's here. Why don't you get up?" Yü-hsiu helped him sit up, and draped his leather jacket over his shoulders.

"Doesn't he know enough to come in?" the doctor growled indignantly.

"He's afraid to. He's still very nervous that you won't approve."

"The baby's practically here. I have no choice but to agree to it," the doctor said with a dejected sigh.

"Hurry up and go talk to him about the wedding. He's waiting anxiously in the living room."

"All right. I'll go right away."

"Cheng-ch'eng caught a big silver carp, more than five pounds! Dinner will be ready as soon as I have finished making the fish head soup. Come quickly, okay?"

Yü-hsiu turned and went out. Dr. Wang was still sitting on the bed, staring distractedly at the narcissus on the dressing table. His head slowly cleared up, and he began to feel a little hungry. He stood up, and heard the desolate sound of the wind blowing outside. He turned out the light and groped his way through the darkness toward the lighted kitchen.

The weather is getting colder and colder. Might as well ask Yü-hsiu to heat up half a jug of wine to help warm up a bit.