

flamingo



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author of *The Voyage of the Narwhal*

The Middle Kingdom

'Andrea Barrett is in the front rank of contemporary novelists.'
Erica Wagner, *THE TIMES*

The

Middle Kingdom

ANDREA BARRETT



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I

THE OLD MEN

JUNE 1989

PATIENT: *I've experienced a feeling of general malaise for quite a long time.*

DOCTOR: *Since when?*

PATIENT: *For nearly one year.*

DOCTOR: *How is your appetite?*

PATIENT: *I have no appetite at all. I have a feeling of fullness in the upper abdomen – often I really feel very heavy. My gums bleed and my tongue is coated with a thin layer of whitish fur.*

DOCTOR: *Have you lost any weight?*

PATIENT: *Yes, I have lost ten pounds since last year.*

DOCTOR: *Let me feel your pulse. Lay your wrist on the little pillow, like this.* (Patient puts his right wrist on the pillow with the palm facing upward.) *Your pulse is deep and thready.*

PATIENT: *What does it mean?*

DOCTOR: *It means there is a deficiency of vital energy.*

—adapted from *A Dialogue in the Hospitals, English-Chinese (a handbook designed to help Chinese physicians care for English-speaking patients)*

ALL OF BEIJING was blanketed with smoke and rumors. From midnight on Friday, when we first heard that soldiers were trying to jog down Changan Avenue, through the chaos of Saturday and the horrors of Sunday morning, those of us still on the Qinghua campus clustered around radios and televisions and ringing phones, relaying whatever we heard and trying frantically to understand what was going on. We heard that the soldiers were unarmed, armed, armed and pumped full of amphetamines. We heard they were crashing through Tiananmen Square, crushing the demonstrators and mowing them down with machine guns; then that workers were ambushing soldiers in the streets. Someone said a soldier had been disemboweled and hung from his burning truck. Someone said snipers had shot out the windows of the Beijing Hotel. Deng was dead, we heard. The army was in charge. Li Peng had been shot in the leg and the statue of the Goddess of Democracy was down. There were two armies, six armies, the armies were fighting each other. Deng was alive and the armies were under his control. Ten thousand people had been killed, someone said. A hundred. None. In the square, someone said, the soldiers were burning bodies with blowtorches and flamethrowers. The students had captured some of the soldiers' guns and were shooting back. The soldiers were driving over the students' tents.

Jianming arrived wild-eyed on Sunday night and said she had seen the whole thing. Unbelievable, she said. A massacre. Worse than the worst days of the Cultural Revolution. She and a group of her friends had been huddled at the base of the Monument to the Revolutionary Heroes during the height of the shooting; at first the tracers had soared over their heads, she said, over the top of the obelisk, but then the ribbons of white light had moved lower, lower, until bullets were ringing off the granite. They'd fled then, she said; the streets were burning. She had ridden her bike north through the alleys and back roads, avoiding the columns of smoke. Smashed buses and trucks lay on their sides, and the intersections were blocked by barricades of twisted rubble. Troops guarded the square and were still firing at anyone who approached. A truck was making a mournful procession from campus to campus; in the back, Jianming said (and she was a thoughtful, quiet girl, not given to exaggeration), in the back the bodies of five students crushed by tanks had been packed on dry ice.

That night, on Beijing Radio, we heard the Mayor talking about how the brave soldiers had crushed the counterrevolutionary riot instigated by foreign influences and hooligans, but on Monday, a student from Beijing University arrived with an armload of posters and leaflets that contradicted everything the Mayor had said.

Jianming left Monday morning for her parents' home in Changsha, after hearing that the soldiers and security men were beginning to sweep the campuses for troublemakers. She hadn't been deeply involved in the movement, nor had the other students I'd been living and working with for the past few years. But all of them had participated – they'd gone to the square in the late weeks of April, when the mood was festive, almost joyful; they'd marched in the big parade on May Fourth and had returned to the square for the demonstration.

during Gorbachev's visit. But then they'd come back to campus, dismayed by the declaration of martial law and the growing rumors. And except for Jianming they'd stayed there, gathering in the courtyards and the empty rooms.

Now the professors left on campus urged the students to go home. Yan and Liren and Yuanguang left that afternoon; Yulong and Qingxin went on Tuesday. Wenwen was the last to go – Wenwen, who had tutored me in Mandarin after classes and who had proved to be the brightest of the students working in Dr Yu Xiaomin's lab. Wenwen and I had dissected hundreds of fish together, shared a rowboat when we went to sample the lake, cobbled together a paper chromatography setup for a demonstration.

'I have to go,' she said, after we'd heard that the student leaders had been ordered to turn themselves in, and after we'd seen some of the TV footage the government had spliced together from the tapes of the remote-control cameras mounted in the main streets and corners of the square. The military actions had been edited out; the images that repeated again and again were of protesters burning Army trucks, attacking soldiers, throwing bottles and bricks. Rioting, the voice-overs said. Threatening the city with chaos. Then we heard another rumor that those cameras had been rolling quietly throughout the six weeks of demonstration, photographing the ebullient marchers long before there was any trouble. The student who told us this warned that hundreds, maybe thousands of security men were combing through the tapes now, blowing up pictures of individual demonstrators. Mug shots of the student leaders were already pasted all over the city, he said. Hot lines had been set up, so that people could turn in protesters they recognized.

'What if my face turns up?' Wenwen said. 'I was carrying a banner when I was there on the eighteenth.'

In Xiaomin's absence – Xiaomin had been gone since Friday, and no one knew whether she was at home, or with her husband at the hospital, or caught somewhere in between; no one even knew where to hope she was, since we'd all heard that the hospitals were full of troops and that the area where Xiaomin's apartment was had been particularly hard-hit – in Xiaomin's absence, I knew Wenwen was hoping I'd have some advice.

I was Xiaomin's assistant – not a professor, but not a student either – and the students looked up to me. I'd brought books and equipment into the lab that they'd never seen before, castoffs from my friends at home, which had turned into treasures here. I'd lectured to Wenwen and the others in the halting Mandarin they'd taught me, and I'd listened to their stories of the Qing Ming demonstrations and the Democracy Wall movement. But despite those tales, and despite all Xiaomin had told me about the other crackdowns and campaigns she'd survived, I didn't know what to tell Wenwen now.

'Why would they come for you?' I said. 'You didn't do anything.'

'Why would they do any of this?' she said.

From the window of my room, we could see students milling around the latest batch of posters and the copies, faxed from Hong Kong, of photographs of the dead and wounded. Many were crying. Some stood frozen, as if they'd never move again. 'Where would you go?' I asked.

'To find my brother,' she said. 'And if I find him, I'll take him to some friends we have in the country. It's too dangerous here.'

She was the last person on campus that I knew well. 'You should go too,' she said, studying

my face. 'Home, I mean. You hear the radio – the government is blaming all this on foreign instigators. Americans are not safe here. Especially not women. Especially not a woman with a baby ...'

'Jody,' I said. 'I know.'

He'd been sleeping, but he woke when he heard his name – my son, whose second birthday had fallen on Friday, before our world collapsed. '*Muqin*,' he said then, smiling at me sleepily. Mother. He knew as many words in Mandarin as he did in English.

'*Juehan*,' Wenwen said, which was what she and the others called Jody – a rough translation of John, as close as we could get. Wenwen kissed Jody and me good-bye and we promised to keep in touch, although neither of us knew how we'd manage that.

'You'll go?' she asked.

'I'll see,' I said. 'I have to find Xiaomin, first.' We said good-bye again, and then I gave Wenwen most of the money I had and watched as she made her way from the building and through the crowd below.

I took my passport, a few clothes, some food for Jody; Jody's passport and birth certificate which Xiaomin and her husband had helped me get from the US Embassy a few days after Jody's birth; and the contraption I used to carry Jody on my back. I left everything else behind – I still thought I might be coming back – and then I closed the door to the tiny room that Jody and I had shared, which despite its size had been luxurious compared to the dorms where the students piled four or six to a room. From the window in the stairwell I saw four trucks filled with soldiers head for the main courtyard. I moved the sheaf of Chinese documents that certified my right to be here, to teach, to live, from my bag to my jacket pocket, and then I ran down the stairs and headed for my bicycle. And then I turned around spinning so sharply that Jody, on my back, giggled and cried, 'Horsey!'

I raced around the building toward our lab. Jody had his hands on my shoulders, and he greeted every person we passed with high-pitched cries of '*ni hau!*' – hello. People who hadn't smiled in days smiled at him, at me, as they had since the day I'd first brought him here – he was something of a mascot, at least in the science wing, and in better days he'd been much fussed over in the nursery. '*Ni hau, Grace*,' my colleagues said, after they'd smiled at Jody, and I tried to slow my steps and respond to them. But they were moving quickly too. The greetings came to us from heads turned over their shoulders as their bodies rushed away, and my responses trailed me like a tail.

The lab door was open, but no one was inside. The long wooden table was littered with equipment from the experiments we'd been running before the demonstrations. The pH meter a scientist visiting from California had brought, the micropipette and the precious pipette tip I'd had Page send me from Massachusetts, the jars full of lake water, the dissecting trays, the slides and the workbooks and the stained filters and nets – all Xiaomin and I had worked so hard to assemble.

'*Yu!*' Jody called, tugging at my hair. Fish. Along the wall the fish we'd kept as live specimens were still moving in slow circles through their murky tanks.

In the bottom drawer of Xiaomin's desk were the notebooks we'd kept for our project, and drafts of several papers we hadn't completed. Everything else in the lab could be replaced by these, the only records of our attempt to map the populations of the lake we'd studied in the Western Hills. A simple project – I'd worked on one similar to it when I was a student

Massachusetts, but then it hadn't meant anything to me. Then it had all been tied up with Walter, who had been my advisor; and after we got married I'd come to find the work tiresome and unimportant. But here I'd found the students' enthusiasm contagious, and I worked late into the night, trying to learn enough to stay ahead of them.

I slid the notebooks into the sack that held Jody, so that they were pressed between my back and his clinging chest. I fed the fish and stowed what I could in the cupboards, and then I tore off again and mounted my bicycle and pedaled along the edge of campus toward the north gate. Jianming had said that most of the fighting was concentrated along Chang'an Avenue and the areas south of it, and so I planned a circular, northern route. East on East Qinghua Road, I decided, studying my city map; and then south on Changping, east of Deshengmen, and south at the Lama Temple on Dongsì, which would turn into Dongdan and drop us – unnoticed, I hoped – east of Tiananmen Square and north of Changan, at the hospital where Xiaomin's husband worked.

Jody fell asleep on my back as I pedaled through the heat of the afternoon. Things were quiet up here, and the fields stretching along the road were green and soft. Only when we approached the northern end of Beihai Park did I begin to hear the occasional distant pop of gunfire. Jody woke up and tickled the back of my neck. I sang him a couple of songs. The soft popping might have been fireworks, rising into the air to celebrate a new year. The streets were empty, which seemed even eerier than it would have in Boston or New York; I'd grown used to bicycling as part of a moving wave of people, a particle massed so closely with the others that I almost didn't have to steer.

When we turned down Dongsì we began to see people again, clustered in knots around the posters and photographs pasted on trees and poles. They were crying, shouting, reading the posters out loud. I passed a burned-out bus and then a group of grim soldiers clearing away a heap of rubble at an intersection. The soldiers looked at us but didn't stop us; maybe Jody's smile disarmed them. I pedaled faster, toward the noise and smoke, and finally reached the gate to the hospital. The soldiers stopped me there.

'No admittance,' one of them said to me. We spoke in his language, which had become one of mine. 'And you are forbidden to be on the streets. Please return to your place of residence.'

'My baby is sick,' I said, but Jody, no help at all, reached for the soldier's cap and laughed. 'Not sick,' the soldier said. 'Go home.'

'He has asthma,' I lied. 'His medicine is all gone. I have to get some before tomorrow, or he'll be sick.'

Jody parroted me. '*You qichuan bing,*' he said gaily. Asthma. His accent was better than mine.

Despite himself, the soldier smiled. And then he looked at Jody's hair and eyes, which were nothing like mine. 'Chinese baby?' he said. 'Speaks Chinese.'

'He's very smart,' I said. 'He learned from our neighbors.'

'Nay-boors,' Jody said in English.

'Let her go in,' the other soldier said. 'The doctors are very busy, but maybe you will find someone to help you.'

They let me pass, and in a second we were in. I threw my bike on the ground and ran up the steps.

It took me twenty minutes to find Xiaomin, and in that time I saw more than I'd ever wanted to of what had been going on. Worse than Jianming had said, worse than the rumors we heard – I took Jody off my back and pressed him to my chest, both to shield him from the sights and to comfort myself with his flesh. There were people everywhere, in the lobby, the halls, the rooms, on the stairs, people lying on the doors and planks on which they'd been carried in, people draped across chairs and on the dirty floor. Some were unconscious. Some groaned and bled. Some, who'd been treated already, lay on make-shift pallets and beds outside the overflowing rooms. Others were dead.

A medical student pulled me away from the door I'd opened, which led into a room packed with shrouded bodies. 'The morgue is full,' he said tightly. 'Everyplace is full.' And then he looked at my face again, as if seeing it for the first time. 'Why are you here?'

Jody started crying; he'd caught my terror by then and was wailing and kicking in my arms, screaming at me to put him down. The medical student reached for him. 'Is he hurt?' he said. 'Even little babies ...'

I held Jody tighter. 'He's fine,' I said. 'He's just frightened.'

'Everyone is frightened,' the student said. 'The soldiers have been in and out of here since Sunday. They forbid us to allow the relatives of the dead to claim the bodies, to talk to reporters – are you a reporter?'

'No,' I said.

'Too bad. But you should go home. Go home and tell everyone what has happened here.'

The air was dense with the smell of blood and disinfectant, and beside us someone groaned. A girl, no older than Wenwen, was using her right hand to support her left, which was bound in a green strip of cloth and missing two fingers. The student turned away from me and began murmuring to the girl. 'Gunshot?' I heard him say. 'This morning? Where?' But when I moved toward the elevator, he looked back over his shoulder and said, 'You must go out.'

'Dr Zhang Meng,' I said. 'Do you know him? I have to find him or his wife. She's a biologist, Dr Yu Xiaomin ...'

The student nodded. 'I know her,' he said. 'I know them. Dr Yu has been helping her husband here since Sunday. Please – wait outside on the steps. I will send her to you.'

I picked my way back through the wounded people until I reached the fresh air and could close the door on the sights and sounds I'd never meant Jody to see. Jody climbed down and grabbed one of the posts supporting the railing. When he saw me begin to cry he started kicking the post with one cloth-shoed foot.

'Don't cry,' he said.

And so I stood silently. I had once spent a week in this hospital, which had been sleepy and quiet and clean. The halls had been empty except for the soft upholstered armchairs. The sun had shone on the smooth wooden floors. And when I'd returned the following June to have Jody, I'd had the same sun, the same quiet, and a roomful of smiling mothers for company. I'd had Xiaomin, who, as the door banged open now, stumbled into the light.

Jody looked up and called 'Minmin!' – his name for her – and then ran up to her leg and seized it. Xiaomin was pale and drawn and her hands were shaking, but she bent down and smoothed Jody's hair while she greeted me.

'You're all right,' she said. 'We were so frightened. And the baby ...'

'He's fine,' I said. 'He slept for most of our bike ride in.'

She smiled at that. 'You're fine,' she said. 'You're both fine. And the students?'

'They're all right,' I said. 'Some soldiers came to the campus earlier this afternoon, but almost everyone was gone by then. And then I thought I'd better come find you. I wasn't sure you'd be here, I was afraid you'd be at home ...'

'I've been here with Meng the whole time,' she said, and then she spread her hands in the air and turned them over and back, as if they were chickens at the market. 'I assisted him,' she said. 'All the wounded people – he cut and I held what he told me to.'

In the sun her hands looked transparent. 'Have you slept?' I asked.

'A little,' she said. 'Not much.' She looked down at Jody, who was fiddling with the hem of her pants.

'I brought our notebooks,' I said. 'And the drafts of the papers. What do you want to do with them?'

In the distance we heard a single sharp pop, which might have been a truck backfiring or another gun. 'What does it matter now?' she said, but when I dug them out of my sack she took them and pressed them to her chest. 'Thank you,' she said. 'But the important thing, the important thing is to get you out of here. Thank God Zaofan is gone.'

We looked at each other then, and Jody looked up at us. Thank God indeed – Zaofan, Xiaomin's oldest son, had left China in the fall of 1986, and that was what Xiaomin and I had said to each other the first winter he was gone, during the demonstrations that led to the downfall of Hu Yaobang. Those had involved a few thousand students, a handful of arrests, but both Xiaomin and I had been convinced that Zaofan would have been one of those detained. If he'd been here now, he might have been shot.

'He called Monday night,' Xiaomin said. 'From Massachusetts. Our phone was still working then. He was frantic – he'd heard that some doctors from our hospital had been killed trying to rescue students from the square. And he wanted to know if we'd heard from you. And then he said he was coming back – you know how he's been – and that I couldn't stop him. I had to put Meng on the phone. Meng told him no. No, absolutely. He said Zaofan could help me more by staying there.'

'I'll call him,' I promised. 'As soon as I can. I'll make him stay.'

She picked up Jody and carried him down the steps and onto the grass, where she gave him a length of rubber tubing she pulled from her pocket. 'You can call him from there,' she said, knotting the tubing into a sling. 'You can see him. You must go home.'

A gentle breeze blew, carrying with it odd hints of burning rubber and gasoline. 'This is home,' I said. I had never meant to stay here forever – three years, Xiaomin and I had decided. Maybe four. Just until we finished our project and Jody was ready for school. But she had no intention of leaving now.

'Zaofan begged us to come and join him,' Xiaomin said. 'I told him we might later on, but what will be left for us after this? We have to stay now, at least until this is over. But I promised him I'd send you and Jody.'

'That's ridiculous,' I said. 'We're staying here. I can help.'

Jody looped the sling around his foot and pulled against it. Xiaomin struck the railing with her hand. 'You have to go,' she said sharply. 'Now. Already there were soldiers this morning at Jinguomenwai, firing into the air around the British and American embassies. You

embassy is evacuating everyone. You have to go.'

'No,' I said, and I glared at her stubbornly. We had never argued. We had disagreed over many things, most of them having to do with Jody: she'd been appalled at what I'd let him eat, and at my failure to discipline him; I'd been annoyed that she'd sent pictures of him to Zaofan. But even our disagreements had worked out. Jody was at least as healthy and happy as the other children in his nursery, and as for the pictures – that hadn't been all bad. Zaofan had sent me a stilted, formal letter after he'd gotten the first one, congratulating me on Jody's birth. I'd sent another back, thanking him and avoiding any explanation of Jody's physical appearance. 'I've given Jody my maiden name,' I'd written. 'Doerring – Jody Doerring. My father is pleased.' And if Zaofan knew more about Jody's paternity than that, he never pressed it. Since then, we'd kept up an occasional correspondence in which I described how Jody was growing and Zaofan described his adjustments to life in Massachusetts.

'Think of Jody,' Xiaomin said. 'What if something happens to him?'

'No,' I said again.

'You'll hurt us if you stay,' she said softly. 'You'll make things worse for us – I can't afford to have an American working in my lab. And you can't refuse me, not after all that Meng and I have done for you.'

And that was the one argument I couldn't refute. She and Meng had done everything for me: arranged for me to stay in China, found me work in Xiaomin's lab, stood by me throughout my pregnancy and during my labor and then helped me through the awkwardness of registering Jody's birth when I had no husband. They'd helped me buy a bike. They'd taught me to find my way around the city. And, whether they'd meant to or not, they'd helped me discover how I fit into the world.

'I owe you,' I told her. 'I know I do. But don't make me repay you like this.'

'I can't let you keep Jody here,' she said. 'He's all we have.'

And so there we were. She sat down on the grass beside Jody and pulled me down beside her, and then she traced an imaginary map on the grass with her finger and explained how I should slip through the alleys to the back side of the diplomatic compound and the door to the American embassy. 'Turn here,' she said. 'And then here.' She couldn't look at my face.

'How can I go?' I said. Somewhere, I knew, Jianming was on a train or a truck, heading for Changsha. Wenwen was searching the city for her brother; parents were searching through morgues for the bodies of their children. People hid in their rooms and prepared to pull in on themselves again, shuttering their eyes, closing down their faces. Chinese students working abroad faxed photographs and articles across the air to machines here, any machines, hoping someone might pick up the messages. In Shanghai, a bus was on fire. In secret buildings in the Western Hills, the old men who ruled China huddled together, massaging their legs and avoiding each other's eyes as they drafted statements couched in a rhetoric they'd worn over decades earlier.

'Wenwen and the others,' I said to Xiaomin. 'What's going to happen to them?'

'I don't know,' she said. 'But the old men can't last much longer, and the rest of us will stay here after they're gone. You have your passport? And Jody's?'

'They're in my pocket,' I said. 'I didn't think I should leave them in my room.'

'That's all you need. I'll send you the rest later.'

I was going, then. To the embassy, to rooms full of people I didn't know and had avoided during my stay; to a bus full of terrified tourists eager to flee this alien place. To a plane, to Hong Kong or Tokyo, across the ocean: home. What had once been home. For a minute I thought of Zillah, my first, lost friend, and I wondered if I was repeating what I'd done with her. But then I heard Zillah's voice, as clearly as if she stood there on the steps.

Don't confuse the situations, she said.

'Juice?' Jody said, looking at me expectantly. It was time for his snack and his nap.

'Let me say good-bye to Meng,' I said to Xiaomin.

She shook her head. 'He's operating,' she said. 'You can't go in. He'll understand.'

When I rose she put Jody's pack over my shoulders and then picked him up and dropped him in. 'You have a good trip,' she said to him. 'Remember your Minmin.'

'See you later,' Jody said. 'Alligator.'

Xiaomin had been in my room when I'd taught Jody that phrase; she loved to hear it and Jody loved to say it, because it always made her smile. She smiled now, and then she said to me, 'Don't worry. I'll see you again.'

I knew she was right: that for the rest of my life, she'd be with me wherever I went. 'I miss you,' she said, and then we both ran out of words. As I wheeled my bike away from the steps, I turned and saw her watching, the breeze blowing her graying hair away from her face.

II

ENTERING CHINA

SEPTEMBER 1986

PATIENT: *Doctor, I've come to you because I think I have a strange disease.*

DOCTOR: *What is it?*

PATIENT: *I have been afraid of noise and strong light for two years. When I'm exposed to these, I feel tense and restless.*

DOCTOR: *Do you have other symptoms?*

PATIENT: *Yes. At times I suffer from palpitations and shortness of breath. I sleep poorly and am troubled almost nightly by frightening dreams.*

DOCTOR: *What sort of dreams do you have?*

PATIENT: *They are different. For instance, once I dreamed that I fell down from a precipice. On another occasion I was chased by a wolf, and in other dreams I have lost my way in a desert.*

—adapted from *A Dialogue in the Hospital*

THE FRAGRANT HILLS

We must learn to look at problems all-sidedly, seeing the reverse as well as the obverse side of things. In given conditions a bad thing can lead to good results and a good thing to bad results.

—Mao

WHEN I WAS nine I had scarlatina, which was something like being boiled alive. A huge burning fever. Scalded skin. And a delirium so deep that, always after that, I believed in the possibility of another world.

My mother packed me in ice every few hours to knock my fever down, and afterward she never tired of recounting her trials. In a room full of friends and relatives she would draw me to her, stroke my head, and describe my rigid and trembling form, my burned lips and my rolled-back eyes. She'd tell how she had labored over me then, cooling, stroking, soothing. For years she drew on that capital, reproaching me each time I failed her with tales of her sleepless nights.

Maybe she stayed awake all those nights. Maybe she kept me alive. That doesn't sound like her, but maybe it's true – all I know of those lost days is what she told me. All that remained of my own from then is a memory of the voice that came to visit my head.

Eat your peas, the voice said at first. My mother, inside my skull.

Don't put your elbows on the table.

Sit up straight. Hold your stomach in. Don't bite your fingernails.

I had caught the fever from a girl named Zillah, who lived in the projects by the riverside and who had the habit of making whole worlds out of pebbles and feathers and pinecones and rice. She laid these out on the sand at the base of the gravel pit, where we were strictly forbidden to play, and once she'd finished we peopled the streets and spaces with the beings we saw in our heads. Stones that grew out of the earth like trees. Trees that sang like birds. Stars that wept and talking dogs and wheat that acted with one mind, moving like an army. I was forbidden to play with Zillah, but she drew me like fire and when she got sick I followed her right in.

She died. I lived. And on the night she died, the voice that had nagged me throughout my fever – low and trivial, admonitory, hardly a voice at all – took a sharp turn and started bringing me Zillah's life instead. Zillah's voice, all that Zillah had dreamed and thought unreeling inside my head; Zillah's family, Zillah's home, Zillah's plans for our lives. She gave me a glimpse, when I was too young to understand it, of what it was truly like to inhabit

someone else's skin. And then she left.

I lost Zillah's voice as soon as my fever broke, and I didn't think about it for years – not until the fall of 1986, when I was on the last leg of a long journey from Massachusetts to China. I cried from Boston to Chicago: I was afraid of planes, I hated to fly. From Chicago to Seattle I'd slept. Some hours out of Seattle, the stewardess had woken me to point out the glacial wonders of the arctic waters below, and from then until we reached Japan I'd sat in a tranquilizer haze, trying to smother my terrors with facts.

I knew about China what any other earnest, middle-aged visitor might: rather more than a billion people lived there, elbow to elbow, skin to skin. Beijing lay in the north and its name meant 'Northern Capital.' Two-thirds of the country was mountain or desert or bitter plateau unfit for cultivation; the fertile plains were often flooded and famines were as common as snow. The names of Mao and Deng and Zhou Enlai rang a bell with me; also those of Sun Yat-sen and Chiang Kaishek, Marco Polo and Genghis Khan, the missionaries and the Opium Wars, the Taiping and the Boxer Rebellions, coups and terrors and insurrections, the Long March, the Great Leap Forward, the Cultural Revolution and the Gang of Four, Democracy Wall, the Four Modernizations. I knew dates and proper names and phrases so worn they came dressed in capital letters; which is to say I knew nothing at all.

We flew from Japan to Beijing on a CAAC flight, and it was then that Zillah's voice came back to me. The flight attendants wore blue pants and tight-buttoned jackets and open sandals, and because they couldn't speak English they greeted us with a videotape instead. The picture was grainy and the background music wavered and crashed.

The English title flickered, pale and ghostly, along the screen: *In-Flight Annunciation*, I read. The annunciations I knew about were the sort where the angel Gabriel comes and pronouncements are made, preparations undertaken. Voices are heard and taken seriously.

Pay attention, Zillah said.

I didn't recognize her at first. I jumped and looked at the cabin attendant, wondering where she'd found that English phrase, but she looked at me blankly and gestured toward the screen. 'For complete personal safeness,' the next line read, 'all lap belts securely fastened, please.'

I took the warning seriously. I fastened my seat belt so tightly I nearly cut myself in half and still I was so scared by our jerky, hesitant flight that I added another tranquilizer to the pair I'd swallowed at the airport in Japan. When the cabin pressure dropped over the Yellow Sea and the crew rushed down the aisle to pound the plane's rear door and make sure the seat was set, I took another pill and then I heard Zillah again.

Don't worry, she said. *You're safe. Remember the day we tried to fly?*

This time I knew who she was, and I acted accordingly. I shut my ears, I threw her out of my mind. I pushed her back to that place where I'd pushed everything for years. And I succeeded; we overshot the runway in Beijing twice, and by the time we landed I had driven Zillah away. That was how I existed then: push, shut, close, seal, deny, forget. Forget. My heart was a palace of sealed rooms and my mind was a wasteland of facts. I walked off the plane, shaken and limp, and entered a cold gray building dimly lit by unshaded bulbs. Men in green uniforms stood by the walls and stared.

I stared back. I had a phrasebook with me, full of sentences meant to be used in places like

this, but when I looked at the words they seemed hopelessly strange. I turned toward my husband, Walter Hoffmeier, hoping that he'd take care of things. But Walter wasn't there.

In the absence of someone to greet us Walter had taken charge of our group, lining us up, finding our baggage, assembling documents and patiently explaining who we were and what we were doing there. 'International Conference on the Effects of Acid Rain,' he repeated enunciating clearly. The puzzled customs officials shook their heads. Fifty Western biologists, experts on the effects of acid rain, come to meet with a hundred Chinese biologists in a country with the worst acid-rain problem in the world. Walter had visions of international cooperation, economic reform, restored ecological balances; and behind him, like an army, stood synecologists studying woodland microclimates, ichthyologists studying trout, geologists mapping the bedrock's differential weathering, and botanists analyzing ancient pollen, not to mention the limnologists, the entomologists, the invertebrate zoologists, and all those whom the Chinese politely referred to as 'accompanying persons,' but who were, with two exceptions, wives. Tired wives, our voices shrill with jet lag and the rocky flight.

Our dresses were rumpled, our hair was mussed. Eyes kept sliding toward us. I felt like a cross between a goddess and a whale – a goddess for my long, straight, pale-blond hair, which was streaming down my back in wild disorder, and a whale for my astonishing size. I had gained thirty pounds in the past nine months and hadn't been so heavy since I was sixteen. My arms quivered when I moved, and in that room full of short, slight men I felt as conspicuous as if I'd sprouted another head.

'Any radios?' the officials asked. 'Any cameras, watches, calculators? All must come out of which goes in.'

We listed our goods and promised not to sell them and cleared the last booth, and when we did we saw a small man waving a cardboard sign embossed with the name of our conference. We'd missed him; to our stupid eyes he'd looked like everyone else. He'd been waiting for us all along.

'Liu Shangshu,' the man said, pointing to himself and then pumping Walter's arm. 'You call me Lou, okay? I am assigned to you, from Chinese Association for Science and Technology. Your host unit. Anything you want, you ask me.'

And with that he herded us into a tiny bus and we headed for the Xiangshan Hotel in the Fragrant Hills. The hotel was half an hour northwest of Beijing, and I peered through the narrow bus windows as we rode into the city and out the other side, past block after block of concrete apartment buildings. Most of the roads had no streetlights and the city stretched dark and secret around us. The road narrowed to two lanes as we turned north, and the driver dodged platoons of bicycles that rose from the darkness like ghosts.

'Five million bicycles here,' Lou said, answering someone's startled question. 'Maybe six million in a crowded city.'

It was. We flew ignorant and air-conditioned through a dense mist of life, our headlights shining on horse-drawn wagons piled with hay and sometimes crowned with a tired person on two, small carts pulled by tricycles, rivers of people walking quietly toward unknown destinations. A man dangled a white goose from a basket on his handlebars. In the open back of an old truck, two camels stood placidly. The fields beyond the road were flat and planted with something tall, which might have been corn. Camels belonged in the desert, I thought. Corn belonged at home. I had no idea what belonged in China.

Farther out, the road was under construction, and men stripped to the waist stood shoulder-high in ditches lit by gas flares. Digging, lifting out stones, laying in drainage pipes. It was almost midnight, and when our bus passed by, the workers pointed and smiled and spoke to us. I pulled down my window to listen to them, but Lou reached over and pulled it back up.

‘Please,’ he said reproachfully. ‘Will be more comfortable with windows *closed*, air-cooling *on*.’

I got a whiff of the countryside and then it was gone. The road narrowed further and the traffic thinned as we entered the silent hills and finally came upon our hotel, which was white and set in a pool of light behind a tall metal fence. We’d been traveling for thirty-six hours and were frightened and weary and hungry and sore, and the sight of the glassed-in central atrium and jutting wings seemed pleasing at first, walling us off from everything. The night clerk was asleep when we entered, and the porters snoozed on straight-backed chairs. Lou moved like a sheepdog, herding us toward the desk.

My first week in China I saw almost nothing and misread everything I saw. I’d come reluctantly, although this trip had once been a dream of mine – events at home had left me sick and depressed and unreceptive, and it wasn’t until I first saw Beijing that something opened in me. Then I grew anxious to look, and then frustrated when I couldn’t; I couldn’t escape the hotel except in the company of Lou and the other wives. Around me were wires and dust and constant construction; pleated slipcovers that rendered the furniture female and squat; warm beer and flat orange soda and the thick smell of Chinese cigarettes; plants I couldn’t name and food I couldn’t recognize. Modern office buildings went up inside shells of hand-tied bamboo scaffolding: a picture any tourist might have taken; while inside a life I couldn’t imagine and yet yearned to enter went on without me.

Walter and his colleagues met with the Chinese scientists all day, every day, in a huge auditorium hung with banners and studded with microphones. He talked and arranged informal classes and paired his Western colleagues with Chinese scientists who had similar interests. He never left the hotel and I almost never saw him. I was packed in a minibus each morning with the other wives and taken on whirlwind tours of the Great Wall, the Ming Tombs, the Mao Zedong Mausoleum; I never took pictures because the images were frozen on postcards everywhere. We spent an hour or two at each sight before Lou herded us into the nearby Friendship Store, where goods the Chinese wanted but couldn’t have were exchanged for our precious foreign currency. Outside each Friendship Store, men with hooded eyes slurred past us. ‘Change money,’ they whispered. ‘Change money?’ Our pockets were stuffed with the crisp colored bills called FEC – Foreign Exchange Currency, not really money but tokens that allowed us to shop in the special stores and stay in our special hotels. Real money was forbidden to us; Lou chased the black marketers away.

My thrifty companions bought jade and ivory and lacquer boxes as though there were none tomorrow, but the constant pressure to shop made us all short-tempered. Swiss, German, English, Canadian, American, Italian, French – the foul, polluted air of the city wore us down and we wheezed and coughed and sneezed in grumpy concert. By the third day, I had a cough that quickly deepened to bronchitis, and something – maybe my rising fever – made me frantic with longing, tense with a desire I didn’t understand. Nine million people around me living wholly different lives, and each time I tried to talk to one of them, Lou hauled me

away. He rolled up windows, shut doors, hustled me across roads. He interposed himself between the people and me, and when I complained to Walter, Walter shrugged my words aside.

‘Grace,’ he said impatiently, ‘this isn’t Massachusetts. You go out on your own and you get lost or hurt or in trouble or something ...’ He winced when he saw my face and then he spoke again quickly, hoping to distract me from what we both knew he’d meant: the incident in the swamp back home. My proven inability to take care of myself.

‘It’s tough out there,’ he said. ‘That’s all I meant. You don’t understand the language, and it’s a different world – at least it’s comfortable in here.’

But I was tired of comfort. We had comfort at home, comfort in spades, our lives as safe as soap, and I couldn’t shake the feeling that somewhere in this swirling, gorgeous land lay the life I’d been looking for. I saw it in the children I glimpsed from the windows of our bus, who were so beautiful it pained me to look at them. I saw it in the old men airing their caged birds in the parks, in the girls holding hands on the street, in the students who crowded around Walter. I heard it in the Mandarin that I couldn’t understand, the calls and shouts and trills and whispers, the rising inflections that weren’t questions, the staccato barks that weren’t commands. I felt it in Zillah’s brief reappearance; she’d been missing for twenty-one years.

On our sixth night locked away in the Fragrant Hills, I made a break for it. After dinner when all the scientists filed into the meeting room for another presentation and all the wives returned to their rooms, I walked out the front door of the hotel and into the surrounding park. Expecting an adventure – a chance meeting with anyone, an overheard conversation, a glimpse through the windows of one of the buildings that lined the bordering road. But the park was closed, the lights were out, and the only sound was the hollow beat of a horse’s hoofs on the packed dirt road. I crept through the shrubs near the locked gate, and I caught a whiff of damp straw, green bamboo, horse manure. When I heard voices, I called ‘*Ni hau*’ into the darkness – hello. Hello, China, I thought. Hello, anyone.

Two men leapt up, terrified, from the pillars they’d been leaning against. They were eighteen or so, boys in uniform, and their English was no better than my Mandarin. They looked at my hair; they looked at each other; they whispered furiously.

‘Where ... *from!*’ one of them finally said.

I searched my mind for the words for our hotel and came out with *Xiangshan fandian*. The men whispered to each other.

‘Is un-allowed,’ the short one said, and then they politely, firmly, escorted me back. We had a small scene in the hotel lobby, where an embarrassed Lou vouched for me, and then I slunk off to bed in a storm of frustration.

Walter was furious. ‘I can’t *believe* you went out there alone,’ he said. ‘Are you *trying* to get hurt?’

‘I’m sorry,’ I said, but I wasn’t and he knew it. I thought I remembered a time when he might have made the same journey himself. He probably thought he remembered a time when I would have clung closer to him. We lay in our separate beds, the sheets drawn tight as skin, and when I said into the dark silence, ‘You hate me because I’m fat,’ he sniffed and said, ‘I dislike the way you act.’ Which may have been true – we hadn’t made love in months not since my last day tracking birds in the swamp back home, and in the absence of the

connection we'd grown as strange to each other as a raven and a cat.

Our windows opened out to a dark garden arranged in stylized shapes: Pavilion Amid Spring Greenery, Hibiscus on a Misty Hill, Azure Cloudless Sky. Somewhere a fountain murmured. The smells of trees and bark and wet stones drifted into our room, and in the silence I unwrapped a Hershey bar and fed my heart. By morning we'd decided we weren't speaking to each other, and we passed burnt toast across the table without a word.

The next night, we marched in silence through the halls of a university on the outskirts of the city, past guards who checked our invitations and into a large, worn lecture room which the science students had hastily decorated. The room had the feel of a high-school gym set up for a senior prom: folding chairs set in uneven rows around the edges, banners draped over tables, streamers and posters tacked to the walls, a piano and some sturdier chairs and a few microphones at the front. We were part of a small parade – Walter and me first, ignoring each other, and the others coupled behind us as if heading for an ark. Distinguished scientists, decorative wife, pair after pair; a few unmarried women linked for safety; one anomalous distinguished wife on the arm of her toymaker husband. Almost immediately Walter, guest of honor, was swept toward the front of the improvised banquet hall to be introduced to the Chinese scientists. I was funneled off with the rest of the parade. Chairs had been set for us amidst the sea of our Chinese hosts, all of whom seemed to be talking at once. A forest full of tree frogs, a classroom packed with cats; I couldn't make out anything and the hot smoky air set me coughing again.

'*Ni hau, ni hau!*' said the people as we passed. Hello, hello. I *ni-haued* back as I had all week and managed a *dui bu qi* when I stepped on someone's foot – excuse me. From the man's startled expression I knew I'd mangled his language again.

Half of Beijing seemed crowded into that room, all of us ricocheting off each other. Feet trod feet, elbows bumped elbows, shoulders and hips and thighs mashed together, glasses crushed noses, jewelry caught sleeves. My sleeves, especially – I was wearing blue, a soft heavy-weave cotton shift with dolman sleeves and a slit neck that set off my blue eyes and pale hair but could not conceal my size. I was the biggest woman there, and my vast, rippling bulk formed a dam in the river of guests. Chinese men bumped against me like reeds, stockpiled and puzzled in the eddy behind my mass, murmured apologies, moved away. I willed myself to stop streaming sweat and found a seat near the edge of our foreigners' island.

There were three rows of people behind me and one in front. To my left, thirty or forty Chinese scientists whispered together. To my right, Walter sat on a raised seat, his shoulder high above a sea of dark heads. The scientists with whom we traveled were well-enough known, but Walter was the acknowledged leader of the acid-rain world and so the Chinese, sensitive to status, shunned everyone else in his favor. Walter was who they crowded around during coffee breaks; Walter who they introduced to their students and families. On the first day of the meeting they'd fallen silent when Walter stood at the podium in the lecture hall and explained, in his soft voice, how the sulfur dioxide from the coal-burning power plant was killing their lakes.

The Chinese scientists had murmured among themselves then as if Walter were prophesying. I knew how they felt – we'd been married for six years and I'd felt that power before. When Walter explained how the acid rain altered the lakes' pH, killing first the snails then the tadpoles, then the bacteria, then the fish, hands shot up and questions flew

frantic, fractured English. Something in Walter's presentations had always made the possible, the probable certain, the future cataclysmic, and I could understand his listener's concerns. Walter's predictions were often right.

Walter stroked his nose as a small man with an overbite introduced him in Mandarin. I heard the name of the university where we were; I heard *Hoff-er-meiterr*; I heard some astonishing polysyllabic that may have been the Chinese rendering of Quabbin Reservoir where Walter had done his first, best work. That was all I could catch – despite my best efforts with my great-uncle Owen's old language books and the new ones I'd bought, I learned hardly any Mandarin. All week long, listening to the crowds, I'd heard only a rising, falling, yowling sound, like a river tumbling over broken glass. When I'd struggled to respond with a few words, everyone had laughed.

As the small man rattled on I scanned the room. Food, great lovely heaps of it; I'd been starving all week. The table to my left was crowded with bottles of sweet pink wine, which women in homemade jumpers were pouring into glasses for a toast. The table to my right was dotted with large green bottles of beer and smaller ones of orange soda. The table directly in front of me was spread with food, dish after dish, and behind a whole fish, drenched in brown sauce I saw a chocolate layer cake on which my name was written in icing. How had they known? I looked again – the icing said 'Greetings,' not 'Grace.' Across the room, the small man sat down and a pretty young woman moved to the microphone and clapped her hands twice. The shrieking and laughing and chattering stopped as if she had thrown a switch.

'I would like to make a toast, please,' said the woman in her careful English. She rolled her Rs with a Beijing buzz, almost a Scottish burr. 'To our var-ry distinguished guest of honor, var-ry far-murz Doctor Professor Wal-ter Hoff-er-meiterr.'

Everyone stood and clapped and cheered. Walter bowed and gave a speech, while I sat on my folding chair and felt my thighs overrunning the seat like a river. The head of the university spoke, some government official spoke, a visitor from the Chinese Association for Science and Technology spoke – all spoke and offered toasts, while I kept my eye on the chocolate cake. Someone kept filling my glass with sweet pink wine, and I didn't notice until the third or fourth toast that I was the only one draining my glass each time. I think I already had the fever then.

'Doctor Professor Hoff-er-meiterr has agreed to allow pictures,' the young woman said. A tidal wave of students and scientists flowed around and between the tables, leaving me more or less to myself. The German couple behind me mumbled; the Belgians talked to the Swiss. A young man with a bushy gold moustache was nattering on about some limnological problem. Katherine Omand, a British ichthyologist I'd come to dislike for her prim aloofness, spoke to one of the waitresses in Mandarin and watched to make sure the rest of us had noticed. One Chinese woman sat alone, a few feet to my left; she exchanged a few phrases with Katherine and then with another woman scientist, but didn't seem able to strike up a lasting conversation with either of them. When she saw me watching her, she slid across the folding chairs and smiled nervously.

'Good evening,' she said, with a heavy accent. 'I may practice my English with you?'

'Of course,' I said, wondering if this was how she'd approached the other women. I was lonely enough to want a conversation with anyone, and I was also flattered. At the meeting

the Chinese usually shunned me in favor of Walter.

‘Dr Yu Xiaomin,’ she said, tapping her chest. She had a small, sweet, delicate face, fine creases about the eyes. Her blouse was dove-colored silk, figured with small birds; her skin was tan and apparently homemade. Her stockings were flesh colored and almost opaque and her shoes, black and clunky, might have come from my grandmother Mumu’s closet. But she wasn’t old – she was forty, maybe forty-five, no older than Walter.

‘I am a lake ecologist, like your husband,’ Dr Yu said. A worried look crossed her face. ‘Walter Hoffmeier is your husband?’

‘He is,’ I agreed.

‘Mrs Walter Hoffmeier, then,’ she said. Her temples were damp, and I suddenly realized she was too shy to fight the crowd surrounding Walter and so had settled for the two women near me, and finally for me instead. I felt mildly insulted to be her last choice, but my curiosity was stronger than my hurt pride and I had no one else to talk to.

‘Grace Hoffmeier,’ I said. ‘I used to be a lake ecologist too. Sort of.’

‘Yes?’ Dr Yu said. Her face relaxed. ‘What does that mean, “sort of”?’

‘I worked as my husband’s assistant,’ I told her. ‘Years ago. Helped with his projects, gathered data, drafted papers ...’

‘Yes, yes, yes,’ Dr Yu said, nodding energetically. ‘That is nice for a wife. You have children?’

I fell into a fit of coughing and then said, ‘No.’ How had we gotten so personal, so fast? I didn’t think I’d ever see her again, and there seemed to be no point in telling her the whole history of our not having children, no point in going into who was to blame and why.

Dr Yu’s face fell and I softened my answer. ‘Not yet,’ I said.

‘No?’ she said. ‘You’re so young, you could have many ...’

‘Not so young,’ I told her. ‘Thirty. How about you? Do you have children?’

‘Three,’ she said proudly. ‘Two boys and a girl – was before the rule of one child only. Do you know this rule? My father had ten children, but now ...’

‘Sure I know it,’ I said. ‘It’s hard to miss.’ All over Beijing, I’d seen posters exhorting couples to sign the one-child pledge. ‘One Couple, One Child,’ the most striking poster had said. ‘Eugenical and Well-Bred.’

‘Hard to miss?’ said Dr Yu.

‘That’s an idiom,’ I said, already tiring of this conversation. I looked over at Walter and saw him lean toward a group of Chinese students whose faces were upturned toward his like hatchlings waiting for their pellets. Loving every minute, as he used to love it when I listened to him, when he couldn’t teach me fast enough and couldn’t believe how fast I learned. If I’d wanted to catch him I couldn’t have planned a better way. As I watched he raised his right hand and, with a gesture that still wrenched my heart, smoothed and smoothed again the thinning hair at the back of his head. His fingers were as gentle as if a child lay under them; as if, by his own touch, he could bring himself to life again. I could still hear his voice, teaching me in the old days: *There are two laws of ecology, he’d said. The first is that everything is related to everything else. The second is that these relationships are complicated as hell.*

Dr Yu cleared her throat and I finished what I’d been saying. ‘Short for “hard to miss,” I think – you use the phrase for something very obvious, right there in front of you

eyes.'

Dr Yu nodded sharply. 'Yes, yes,' she said. Her large earlobes were threaded with small pearls. 'That's a good phrase. I will use in a sentence: "Hard to miss that you are younger than your husband." Is that right?'

'It is,' I agreed; this woman didn't seem to miss much. Walter, lean and balding and lined, looked ten years older than his forty-two.

Someone gave a signal for the toasts to end and the eating to begin. 'Come,' Dr Yu said, plucking the sleeve of my dress. And although it had been wildly expensive, and was one of the few things I looked even passable in, for an instant I hoped she'd rip it. It was a wife's dress, a suburban dress. Something I never would have worn in the days before Walter, when my taste had run to black jeans and my brother's torn shirts.

'We should get some food,' Dr Yu said. She'd apparently decided to adopt me for the evening. 'Maybe you would introduce me to your husband?'

I nodded and followed her, steering my way around the Chinese string quartet who were clustered at the microphone and mangling some Mozart. Walter nodded coolly to me and then turned away. Dr Yu said, 'Here, try some of this. And this, this is good, and this, and oh, you must have some of this, and this is delicacy, sea-cucumber, you have had?'

My stomach rumbled and Dr Yu smiled. What she heaped on my plate could have fed several people if those people hadn't been me. Pork skin roasted in sugar and soy, chicken in white pepper and ginger, puffballs with bok choy, shrimp dumplings, deep-fried grass carp bones and cut to resemble chrysanthemums, marinated gizzards sliced fine, sea-cucumber with vegetables, roast duck. 'This is good,' Dr Yu said of each dish. Although she couldn't have weighed ninety pounds, half of me, she heaped her own plate too and then turned to look wistfully at Walter as we left the table.

With a full mouth and waving chopsticks, Walter was holding court.

'Maybe I could introduce you later,' I said, following her eyes. 'When he's not so busy?'

'Later,' Dr Yu agreed. 'You wish to sit with him?'

'Are you kidding?' I said, and then we had to pick that phrase apart. She made me feel useful, in an odd way – every bit of idiomatic speech I offered delighted her. She asked more questions and I explained what I could, until the music silenced us both. The string quartet played more Mozart, a girl sang some Mendelssohn, a man in a tuxedo sang arias from a revolutionary opera.

While the musicians performed, I watched Walter and considered how I'd ended up with him. I could hardly remember – something was thumping at me just then, something that made me want to plant a bomb in the midst of that civilized scene. I wanted to tip the table over, light a bonfire in the corner, burst out of the room and into the life that was streaming through the streets outside. I wanted to dance on the tables, screaming my lungs out all the while. Instead, I applauded loudly whenever Dr Yu did. Her plate was already empty, I noticed. I hadn't seen her take a bite.

Smiling, she picked up a conversational thread I thought we'd snapped, and she said, 'So why have you no children? Who will carry on your name?'

I shrugged and said, 'I don't know.' The burr-voiced woman appeared at the microphone again, laughing this time. 'Now,' she said, 'now, we have sung and made music for our various distinguished for-eign friends. Now, we ask they sing for us! Everyone, sing your own

country's songs!

The Chinese clapped; the rest of us laughed until we realized she was serious. Finally two good-natured Americans, surely small-town boys, made their way to the front of the room and sang a bawdy Irish tune off-key. Walter frowned, offended. Dr Yu said, 'This is a typical American song?'

'No,' I told her, laughing. 'It's a very bad song.'

Dr Yu agreed. A troll-like man got up to sing a Hungarian song I almost recognized, and a Swede sang a song I was sure Mumu had once sung to me. Everyone danced and the tuxedoed man sang a Viennese waltz that sent people whirling around the room. A band – electric piano, two guitars, violin, drum – assembled near the microphone and tried with mixed success to accompany the singers. A Japanese limnologist sang a festival song that seemed to have something to do with a shovel. Three German algologists sang a lullaby; two Israeli invertebrate zoologists sang a folk song. More beer, more sweet pink wine. My dress was sticking to me and my armpits were damp. Dr Yu, who seemed to think we knew each other much better than we did, said, 'You tell me if I am impolite to ask – how did you meet your husband?'

No point in going into that – I couldn't explain it even to myself. I gave her the simple answer, meaning to be polite. 'I was his student,' I said, remembering how he used to read to me for hours, so caught up in his work that he'd hardly pause to catch his breath.

'Ah,' Dr Yu said with a smile. 'Very good student?'

'Very good,' I agreed. 'Too good. Brownnose.'

'Brown-nose? What does that mean?'

'Someone who is too nice to teacher, tries too hard, always sucking up ...'

'Suck-up?'

'Never mind that one. Maybe you work with someone like this, someone who's always trying to be the boss's favorite – we call them "brownnose" from, you know – his face stuck to the boss's ... behind? Rear end?'

Dr Yu smiled, took a pen from her pocket, and quickly sketched two Chinese characters on her palm. She flashed them at me, rubbed them out quickly, and said, 'We have a word which translates in English as "ass-face" – is that close?'

'Very.'

'But you are not an ass-face.'

'Sometimes I am,' I said. 'Sometimes I've been an enormous ass-face. You wouldn't believe.'

Behind me, two Chinese scientists seemed to be discussing my new friend. I heard the word *yu* again and again, and I interrupted Dr Yu's protestations to ask her what they were talking about.

'Same old thing,' she said wryly. 'Work. All so very ambitious here. This is the new wage new reward-for-responsibility system made by Old Deng – you know?'

'I thought I heard your name.'

Dr Yu laughed. 'They are talking about what your husband does. They say *yú* with a rising tone – means fish, and *yú* with a falling-rising tone – means rain.' She wrote the words on her palm in pinyin and added their tone marks. 'Say after me,' she commanded.

I did, amazed at her singing language. Until she coached me, all my tones had sounded

exactly the same. Fish, rain, the effects of rain on fish, a rain of fish, a fishy rain – in my mouth there had been no difference. Dr Yu kept drilling me, passing the syllables back and forth, and I didn't care that people stared at us. I was slowly beginning to get the idea and I did I began to understand the men behind us, as if static had suddenly cleared from my ears.

There were four tones, said the books I had studied. Flat, rising, falling-rising, falling-four. The books had been clear. But without someone to talk with, the tones had never made it from the page to my ears. 'Yú,' said one of the men behind me, perfectly clearly. Rain. At the reservoir, Walter and I had worked even when it rained, even when the sky was so colorless, so gray, so bleak, that there seemed to be no boundary between the lake and the air, between night and day, between work and the rest of life.

As if we had conjured it up, rain began to fall outside. Dr Yu fetched some more beer and then, while people around us danced and sang and told each other stories, we began trading words in earnest, correcting each other's pronunciation, building sentences, muttering tones. She drew words on my palm, matching the characters she drew on hers and warming, finally, to her charm and persistence. She told me how she'd been sent off to raise pigs in Shanxi province during the Cultural Revolution – 'the blood years,' she said – and I told her how Mumu, my fat Swedish grandmother from whom I'd inherited my weight and my hair, had taught me to catch shad and bake them for hours until the bones dissolved. How I'd loved to catch fish but had never meant to study the creatures until Walter came along.

'What is he like?' Dr Yu said. 'I mean, in his privacy?'

What was the harm in telling her? I thought about the way he wouldn't eat unless the food sat correctly on his plate – peas here, potatoes there; no drips, no drops, no smears. How he couldn't sleep without the top sheet tucked in all around him; how he liked his women as neat as his mother. Smooth, groomed, no visible pores or swellings, no fat – my God, my father. How he dressed after the fashion of Einstein, in black socks, gray pants, shirts that varied slightly but were always subdued, jackets that were almost identical.

And how uncomfortable he was here in China, how much he disliked the steamy, crowded buses, the old clothes, the crowded sidewalks, the open-air markets with their unrefrigerated offerings, the smells, the dirt, the noise, and the absence of wildlife, which implied to him that everything had been eaten. I thought about that astigmatism of his, that twist which made him see the worst in anything, and about his ability to make others see the same way as if he'd etched their corneas with acid rain.

But I didn't say any of this. 'He likes a clean house,' I said instead. 'He likes things neat.'

'You live in a nice house?' Dr Yu asked, and I said yes but then, pressed to describe it, I found myself describing another house instead. Not our spacious, clean colonial so near the university, but the cramped bungalow where I'd grown up with my mother and father and brother and Mumu, who was stuck in a wheelchair and slept in the den. As I spoke I sketched the house's outline in the air, and I could see that it seemed luxurious to Dr Yu.

'Six rooms,' she marveled. 'We have three, very large apartment for just three people, not that our daughter and youngest son are away. Kitchen, sitting room, sleeping room separate. Plus a bath with running water. Plus central heat. You could come visit us, and see.'

I nodded. 'Someday,' I said. I thought this was only one of those conversations I'd had at a hundred cocktail parties. Vague promises, vague suggestions, all forgotten the next day and never followed up.

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