



CHAPTER 1

HIDDEN JADE PATH

*Shanghai*

*1905-1907*

*Violet*

When I was seven, I knew exactly who I was: a thoroughly American girl in race, manners, and speech, whose mother, Lulu Minturn, was the only white woman who owned a first-class courtesan house in Shanghai.

My mother named me Violet after a tiny flower she loved as a girl growing up in San Francisco, a city I have seen only in postcards. I grew to hate my name. The courtesans pronounced it like the Shanghai word *vyau-la*—what you said when you wanted to get rid of something. “*Vyau-la! Vyau-la!*” greeted me everywhere.

My mother took a Chinese name, Lulu Mimi, which sounded like her American one, and her courtesan house was then known as the House of Lulu Mimi. Her Western clients knew it by the English translation of the characters in her name: Hidden Jade Path. There were no other first-class courtesan houses that catered to both Chinese and Western clients, many of whom were among the wealthiest in foreign trade. And thus, she broke taboo rather extravagantly in both worlds.

That house of flowers was my entire world. I had no peers or little American friends. When I was six, Mother enrolled me in Miss Jewell's Academy for Girls. There were only fourteen pupils, and they were all cruel. Some of their mothers had objected to my presence, and those daughters united all the girls in a plot to expel me. They said I lived in a house of "evil ways," and that no one should touch me, lest my taint rub off on them. They also told the teacher I cursed all the time, when I had done so only once. But the worst insult came from an older girl with silly ringlets. On my third day, I arrived at school and was walking down the hallway when this girl walked briskly up to me and said within hearing distance of my teacher and the younger class girls: "You spoke Chinese to a Chinese beggar and that makes you Chinese." I could not bear one more of her insults. I grabbed her ringlets and hung on. She screamed, and a dozen fists pummeled my back and another bloodied my lip and knocked out a tooth that had already been loose. I spit it out, and we all stared for a second at the glistening tusk, and then I clutched my neck for dramatic effect and shrieked, "I've been killed!" before collapsing to the floor. One girl fainted, and the ringleader and her pack scampered off with stricken faces. I picked up the tooth—a former living part of me—and the teacher quickly put a knotted kerchief to my face to stanch the blood, then sent me home in a rickshaw with no parting words of comfort. Mother decided on the spot that I would be tutored at home.

Confused, I told her what I had said to the old beggar: "*Lao huazi*, let me by." Until she told me that *lao huazi* was the Chinese word for "beggar," I had not known I was speaking a hodgepodge of English, Chinese, and the Shanghainese dialect. Then again, why would I know the word *beggar* in English when I had never seen an American grandpa slumped against a wall, mumbling with a slack mouth so that I might have pity on him? Until I went to school, I had been speaking my peculiar language only in Hidden Jade Path to our four courtesans, their attendants, and the servants. Their syllables of

gossip and flirtation, complaints and woe, went into my ear, and came out of my mouth, and in conversations I had with my mother, I had never been told there was anything amiss with my speech. Adding to the mess, Mother also spoke Chinese, and her attendant, Golden Dove, also spoke English.

I remained troubled by the girl's accusation. I asked Mother if she had spoken Chinese as a child, and she told me that Golden Dove had given her rigorous lessons. I then asked Mother if I spoke Chinese as well as the courtesans did. "In many ways, yours is better," she said. "More beautifully spoken." I was alarmed. I asked my new tutor if a Chinese person naturally spoke Chinese better than an American ever could. He said the shapes of the mouth, tongue, and lips of each race were best suited to its particular language, as were the ears that conducted words into the brain. I asked him why he thought I could speak Chinese. He said that I studied well and had exercised my mouth to such a degree that I could move my tongue differently.

I worried for two days, until logic and deduction enabled me to reclaim my race. First of all, I reasoned, Mother was American. Although my father was dead, it was obvious he had been an American, since I had fair skin, brown hair, and green eyes. I wore Western clothing and regular shoes. I had not had my feet crushed and wedged like dumpling dough into a tiny shoe. I was educated, too, and in difficult subjects, such as history and science—"and for no greater purpose than Knowledge Alone," my tutor had said. Most Chinese girls learned only how to behave.

What's more, I did not think like a Chinese person—no kowtowing to statues, no smoky incense, and no ghosts. Mother told me: "Ghosts are superstitions, conjured up by a Chinese person's own fears. The Chinese are a fearful lot and thus they have many superstitions." I was not fearful. And I did not do everything a certain way just because that was how it had been done for a thousand years. I had Yankee ingenuity and an independent mind; Mother told me that. It was my idea, for example, to give the servants modern forks to use

instead of ancient chopsticks. Mother, however, ordered the servants to return the silverware. She said that each tine was more valuable than what a servant might earn in a year, and thus, the servants might be tempted to sell the forks. The Chinese did not hold the same opinion about honesty as we Americans. I agreed. Now if I were Chinese, would I have said that about myself?

After I left Miss Jewell's Academy, I forbade the courtesans to call me *Vyau-la*. They also could no longer use Chinese endearments like "little sister." They had to call me Vivi, I told them. The only people who could call me Violet were those who could say my name precisely, and they were my mother, Golden Dove, and my tutor.

After I changed my name, I realized I could do so whenever I pleased to suit my mood or purpose. And soon after, I adopted my first nickname as the result of an accident. I had been racing through the main salon and bumped into a servant carrying a tray of tea and snacks, which clattered to the floor. He exclaimed that I was a *biaozi*, a "little whirlwind." A delightful word. I was the Whirlwind who blew through the famed house of Hidden Jade Path with my nimbus of fluffy dark hair and my cat chasing the ribbon that had once held my hair in place. From then on, the servants had to call me Whirlwind in English, which they pronounced "woo-woo."

I loved my golden fox cat. She belonged to me, and I to her, and that was a feeling I had with no other—not even my mother. When I held my kitty, she kneaded her paws on my bodice, snagging the lace and turning it into fishing nets. Her eyes were green like mine, and she had a beautiful golden sheen over her brown-and-black-splotted body. She glowed under moonlight. Mother gave her to me when I told her I wanted a friend. The cat had once belonged to a pirate, she said, who named her Carlotta after the Portuguese king's daughter he had kidnapped. No one else had a pirate's cat, whereas anyone could have a friend. A cat would always be loyal, unlike a friend. Mother said she knew that for a fact.

Almost everyone in the house feared my pirate cat. She scratched

those who chased her off the furniture. She howled like a ghost when she was stuck inside a wardrobe. If she sensed fear in people who approached her, she bristled and let them know they were right to be scared. Golden Dove froze whenever she saw Carlotta prancing toward her. A wildcat had badly wounded her when she was a little girl, and she had nearly died of green pus fever. If anyone picked up my kitty, she bit, fast and hard, and if anyone petted her without my permission, her claws flew out. She murdered a seventeen-year-old boy named Loyalty Fang, who came to Hidden Jade Path with his father. I had been looking for Carlotta and spotted her under the sofa. A boy was in the way and he started jabbering to me in a language I could not understand. Before I could warn him not to touch Carlotta, he reached down and grabbed her tail, and she dug her claws into his arm and peeled off four bloody ribbons of skin and flesh. He turned white, gritted his teeth, and fainted, mortally wounded. His father took him home, and Golden Dove said he would surely die, and later, one of the courtesans said he had and that it was a pity he had never enjoyed any pleasures of the boudoir. Even though it was the boy's fault, I was scared that Carlotta would be taken away and drowned.

With me, Carlotta was different. When I carried her in my arms, she was tender and limp. At night, she purred in my arms, and in the morning, she chirped at me. I kept bits of sausage in my apron pocket for her, as well as a green parrot's feather tied to a string, which I used to lure her out of hiding from under one of the many sofas in the salon. Her paws would poke out of the fringe as she batted at the feather. Together we raced through the maze of furniture, and she vaulted onto tables and chairs, up curtains, and onto the high lips of the wainscoting—to wherever I wanted her to go. That salon was Carlotta's and my playground, and that playground was in a former ghost villa that my mother had turned into Hidden Jade Path.

On several occasions, I heard her tell Western newspaper reporters how she secured the place for almost nothing. "If you want to make money in Shanghai," she said, "take advantage of other people's fear."

## Lulu

This villa, gentlemen, was originally built four hundred years ago as the summer mansion of Pan Ku Xiang, a rich scholar and a renowned poet, for what lyrical merits no one knows because his inscribed thoughts went up in smoke. The grounds and its original four buildings once stretched over one-half hectares, twice what it is now. The thick stone wall is the original. But the west and east wings had to be rebuilt after they were consumed by a mysterious fire—the same flames that ate the scholar's poetic thoughts. A legend has been handed down over four hundred years: One of his concubines in the west wing started the fire, and his wife in the east wing died screaming in a circle of flames. Whether it is true, who can say? But any legend is not worth making up if it does not include a murder or two. Don't you agree?

After the poet died, his eldest son hired the best stonemasons to carve a stele that sat on a tortoise and was crowned by a dragon, symbols of honor reserved for a high official—although there was no record in the county that he had ever been one. By the time his great-grandson was the head of the family, the stele had fallen and was nearly obscured by tall prickly weeds. Weather wore down the scholar's name and accolades into unreadable indentations. This was not the eternal reverence the scholar had had in mind. When his descendants sold the place a hundred years ago for a cheap price, the curse began. Within a day of receiving the money, his descendant was seized with a firelike pain and died. A thief killed another son. The children of those sons died of one thing or another, and it was not old age. A succession of buyers also suffered from unusual maladies: reversals of fortune, infertility, insanity, and such. When I saw the mansion, it was an abandoned eyesore, the grounds a jungle of choking vines and overgrown bushes, the perfect haven for wild dogs. I bought the property for the price of a Chinese song. Both Westerners and Chinese said I was foolish to take it at any price. No

carpenter, stonemason, or coolie would ever step across that haunted threshold.

So, gentlemen, what would you do? Give up and count your losses? I hired an Italian actor—a disgraced Jesuit with the dark looks of an Asiatic, which became more pronounced when he pulled back his hair at the temples, the way Chinese opera singers do to give the eyes a dramatic slant. He donned the robes of a feng shui master, and we hired some boys to pass out leaflets to announce that a fair would be held on the grounds just outside of the haunted villa. We had stalls of food, acrobats, contortionists, and musicians, rare fruits and a candy machine that pulled saltwater taffy. By the time the feng shui master arrived on a palanquin, along with his Chinese assistant, he had a waiting audience of hundreds—children and amahs, servants and rickshaw men, courtesans and madams, tailors and other purveyors of gossip.

The feng shui master demanded that a pan of fire be brought to him. He pulled out a scroll and threw it into the flames, then chanted a concoction of Tibetan gibberish while sprinkling rice wine over the fire to make the flames leap higher.

“I shall now go into the cursed mansion,” the actor told the crowd, “and persuade Pan the Poet Ghost to leave. If I don’t return, please remember me as a good man who served his people at the cost of his own life.” Forecasts of mortal danger are always useful to make people believe your fabrications. The audience watched him enter where no man dared to go. After five minutes he returned, and the audience murmured excitedly. He announced he had found the Poet Ghost in an inkwell in his painting studio. They had a most enjoyable conversation about his poetry and his past renown. This led to the poet’s laments that his descendants had cast him into early obscurity. His monument had become a mossy slab where wild dogs peed. The feng shui master assured the Poet Ghost he would erect a fine stele even better than the last. The Poet Ghost thanked him and immediately left the once-haunted mansion to rejoin his murdered wife.

So that took care of the first obstacle. I then had to overcome skepticism that a social club could ever succeed when it catered to both Western and Chinese men. Who would come? As you know, most Westerners view the Chinese as their inferiors—intellectually, morally, and socially. It seemed unlikely they would ever share cigars and brandy.

The Chinese, by the same token, resent the imperious way foreigners treat Shanghai as their own port city and govern her by their treaties and laws. The foreigners don't trust the Chinese. And they insult them by speaking pidgin, even to a Chinese man whose English is as refined as a British lord's. Why would the Chinese conduct business with men who do not respect them?

The simple answer is money. Foreign trade is their common interest, their common language, and I help them speak it in an atmosphere that loosens any reservations they might still hold.

For our Western guests, I offer a social club with pleasures they are accustomed to: billiards, card games, the finest cigars and brandy. In that corner, you see a piano. At the end of every night, the stragglers crowd around and sing the anthems and sentimental songs of their home countries. We have a few who imagine they are Caruso's cousin. For our Chinese guests, I provide the pleasures of a first-class courtesan house. The customers follow the protocols of courtship. This is not a house of prostitution, which Western men are more accustomed to. We also offer our Chinese guests what are now the expected Western amenities of a first-class courtesan house: billiards, card games, the finest whiskey, cigars in addition to opium, and pretty musicians who sing the old Chinese chestnuts and encourage the men to join in. Our furnishings are superior to those in other houses. The difference is in the details, and as I am an American, that knowledge is in my blood.

And now we've come to where East meets West, the Grand Salon, the common ground for businessmen of two worlds. Imagine the buzz of excitement we hear each night. Many fortunes have been made

here, and they all began with my introduction and their exchanging their first handshake. Gentlemen, there is a lesson here for anyone who wants to make a fortune in Shanghai. When people say an idea is impossible, it becomes impossible. In Shanghai, however, nothing is impossible. You have to make the old meet the new, rearrange the furniture, so to speak, and put on a good show. Guile and get. Opportunists welcome. Within these doors, the path to riches is revealed to all who have a minimum of ten thousand dollars to invest or whose influence is worth more than that. We have our standards.

APPROACHING THE GATE of the mansion, you would know at a glance that you were about to enter a fine house with a respected history. The archway still held the carved stone plaque befitting a Ming scholar; a bit of the lichen had been left on the corners as proof of authenticity. The thick gate was regularly refreshed with red lacquer and the brass fittings polished to a gleaming richness. On each of the pillars was a panel with the two names of the house: HIDDEN JADE PATH on the right side, and THE HOUSE OF LULU MIMI in Chinese on the left.

Once you entered through the gate and into the front courtyard, you would think you had stepped back into the days when the Poet Ghost was master of the house. The garden was simple and of classical proportions, from fishponds to gnarly pines. Beyond it stood a rather austere house: the face a plain gray plaster over stone, the lattice windows showing a simple cracked-ice pattern. The gray-tiled roof had eaves that curved upward, not excessively so, but enough to suggest they were the wings of lucky bats. And in the front of the house was the poet's stele, restored to its rightful place, sitting on a tortoise, topped with a dragon, and proclaiming the scholar would be remembered for ten thousand years.

Once you stepped into the vestibule, however, all signs of the Ming vanished. At your feet was a colorful pattern of encaustic Moorish tiles, and facing you was a wall of red velvet curtains. When they

were drawn back, you were borne into a “Palace of Heavenly Charms,” as my mother called it. This was the Grand Salon, and it was entirely Western. That was the fashion in the better courtesan houses, but my mother’s sense of Western fashion was authentic and also daring. Four hundred years of cold echoes had been muffled by colorful tapestries, thick carpets, and an overabundance of low divans, stiff settees, fainting couches, and Turkish ottomans. Flower stands held vases of peonies the size of babies’ heads, and round tea tables were set with lamps that gave the salon the honeyed amber glow of a sunset. On the bureaus, a man could pluck cigars out of ivory humidors and cigarettes out of cloisonné filigreed jars. The tufted armchairs were engorged with so much batting they resembled the buttocks of the people who sat in them. Some of the decorations were quite amusing to the Chinese. The blue and white vases imported from France, for example, were painted with depictions of Chinese people whose faces resembled Napoleon and Josephine. Heavy mohair curtains covered the lattice windows, weighted with green, red, and yellow tassels and fringe as thick as fingers, Carlotta’s favorite toys. Chandeliers and wall sconces illuminated the paintings of rosy-cheeked Roman goddesses with muscular white bodies, who cavorted next to similarly muscled white horses—grotesque shapes, I heard Chinese men say, which depicted, in their opinion, bestiality.

On the right and left sides of the Grand Salon were doorways that led to smaller, more intimate rooms, and beyond them were covered passageways through courtyards that led to the scholar’s former library, painting studio, and family temple, all cleverly transformed into rooms where a businessman could host a dinner party for friends and be entertained by ladylike courtesans who sang with heart-breaking emotion.

At the back of the Grand Salon, my mother had installed a curved carpeted staircase with a red-lacquered wooden banister, which took you up to three curved, velvet-lined balconies modeled after those found in opera houses. They overlooked the Grand Salon,

and from them I often viewed the festivities below as Carlotta strolled back and forth on the balustrades.

The parties began after sundown. Carriages and rickshaws arrived throughout the night. Cracked Egg, the gatekeeper, would have already memorized the names of those who were coming, and they were the only ones allowed to enter. From my perch, I saw the men burst through the red curtains and into that palatial room. I could tell if a man was a newcomer. He would gaze at the scene before him, scanning the room, incredulous to see Chinese and Western men greeting each other, speaking with civility. The Westerner would have his first glimpse of courtesans in their habitat. He might have only seen them passing by on the thoroughfare in carriages, dressed in their furs and hats. But here, they were within reach. He could speak to one, smile with admiration, although he learned quite emphatically that he was not allowed to touch. I was delighted to see my mother inspire awe in men of different nationalities. She possessed the power to render men speechless from the moment they walked into the room.

Our courtesans were among the most popular and talented of all the girls working in the first-class houses of Shanghai—elegant, seductively coy, tantalizingly elusive, and skilled in singing or the recitation of poems. They were known as the Cloud Beauties. Each had the word *Cloud* in her name, and that identified the house to which she belonged. When they left the house—whether to marry, join a nunnery, or work in a lower-class house—the cloud evaporated from their name. The ones who lived there when I was seven were Rosy Cloud, Billowy Cloud, Snowy Cloud, and, my favorite, Magic Cloud. All of them were clever. Most had been thirteen or fourteen when they arrived and would be twenty-three or twenty-four when they left.

My mother set the rules over how they would conduct business with the guests and what share of their earnings and expenses they would pay to the house. Golden Dove managed the courtesans' behavior and appearance and ensured they upheld the standards and

reputation of a first-class courtesan house. Golden Dove knew how easily a girl's reputation could be lost. She had once been one of the most popular courtesans of her time until her patron knocked out her front teeth and broke half the bones in her face. By the time she mended, with her face slightly askew, other beauties had taken her place, and she could not overcome speculation that she must have greatly wronged her patron to have incited violence in such a peaceable man.

As comely as those courtesans were, every guest, whether Chinese or Western, hoped to see one woman in particular—my mother. From my perch, she was easy to spot by the springy mass of brown curls that graced her shoulders in a careless style. My hair was very much like hers, only darker. Her skin had a dusky tinge. She told people proudly that she had a few drops of Bombay blood in her. No one would have ever honestly described my mother as beautiful, neither Chinese nor foreigner. She had a long angled nose that looked like it had been roughly sculpted with a paring knife. Her forehead was tall and wide—the telltale sign of a cerebral nature, Golden Dove said. Her chin bulged like a pugnacious little fist, and her cheeks had bladed angles. Her irises were unusually large, and her eyes lay in deep, dark sockets, fanned by dark lashes. But she was captivating, everyone agreed, more so than a woman with regular features and great beauty. It was everything about her—the smile, the husky and melodious voice, the provocative and languorous movement of her body. She sparkled. She glowed. If a man received even a glance from her penetrating eyes, he was enthralled. I saw that time and again. She made each man feel he was special to her.

She was without peer in style as well. Her clothes were of her own witty design. My favorite was a lilac-colored gown of near-transparent silk organza that floated above pale pink tussah. It was embroidered with a winding vine of tiny leaves. At her bosom, two pink rosebuds climbed out of the top of the vine. And if you thought the rosebuds were silk as well, you would be only half right, for one

was a genuine rose that loosened its petals and released its scent as the night wore on.

From the balcony, I followed her as she crisscrossed the room, the tail of her skirt swishing behind her, the admiration of men in her wake. I saw her bend her face one way to speak to a Chinese man, then at another angle to speak to a Westerner. I could see that each felt privileged that she had selected him for her attention. What all those men wanted from my mother was the same thing. It was her *guanxi*, as the Chinese called it, her influential connections, as the Westerners put it. It was her familiarity with many of the most powerful and successful Westerners and Chinese in Shanghai, Canton, Macau, and Hong Kong. It extended to her knowledge of their businesses and the opportunities they held, as well as the ones they did not. Her magnetism was her ability to put men and prospects together for profit.

The envious madams of other courtesan houses said that my mother knew these men and their secrets because she slept with all of them, hundreds of men of every shade of skin. Or, they said, she blackmailed them by learning of the illegal means they had used to gain their money. It could also be that she drugged them nightly. Who knew what it took to get those men to give her what she needed to know?

The real reason for her business success had much to do with Golden Dove. Mother said so many times, but in such a roundabout way that I could gather only bits and pieces, which were as a whole too fantastical to be true. She and Golden Dove supposedly met about ten years ago when they lived in a house on East Floral Alley. At the beginning, Golden Dove ran a teahouse for Chinese sailors. Then Mother started a pub for pirates. So Golden Dove made an even fancier teahouse for sea captains, and my mother made a private club for the owners of ships, and they kept outdoing each other until my mother started Hidden Jade Path, and that was that. Throughout that time, Mother taught Golden Dove English and Golden Dove taught her Chinese, and together they practiced a ritual called *momo*, which

thieves used to steal secrets. Golden Dove said *momo* was nothing more than being quiet. But I did not believe her.

I would sometimes wander down from my perch with Carlotta and wend my way through a tall labyrinth of dark-suited men. Few paid attention to me. It was as if I were invisible, except to the servants, who, by the time I was seven, no longer feared me as a Whirlwind but now treated me more like a tumbleweed.

I was too short to see past the clusters of men, but I could hear my mother's bright voice, moving closer or farther away, greeting each customer as if he were a long-lost friend. She gently admonished those whom she had not seen in a while, and they were flattered that she had missed them. I watched how she guided those men into agreeing with whatever she said. If two men in the room held opposite opinions, she did not take sides but expressed a view somewhere above, and like a goddess, she moved their opinions into a common one. She did not translate their exact words but altered the tone of intention, interest, and cooperation.

She was also forgiving of gaffes, and they were bound to happen, as is the case between nations. I recall an evening when I was standing next to Mother as she introduced a British mill owner, Mr. Scott, to a banker named Mr. Yang. Mr. Scott immediately launched into a story about his winnings at the racetrack that day. Unfortunately, Mr. Yang spoke perfect English, and thus my mother was unable to alter the conversation when Mr. Scott talked excitedly about his afternoon betting on horses.

"That horse had odds of twelve to one. In the last quarter mile, his legs were slashing the air, gaining steady speed all the way to the end." He shaded his eyes, as if seeing the race once again. "He took the race by five lengths! Mr. Yang, do you enjoy horse races?"

Mr. Yang said with unsmiling diplomacy, "I have not had the pleasure, Mr. Scott, nor has any Chinese I know."

Mr. Scott quickly replied: "We must go together, then. Tomorrow perhaps?"

To which Mr. Yang gravely replied: "By your Western laws in the International Settlement, you would have to take me as your servant."

Mr. Scott's smile vanished. He had forgotten the prohibition. He looked nervously at my mother, and she said in a humorous tone, "Mr. Yang, you must bring Mr. Scott into the Chinese Walled City as your rickshaw puller, and encourage him to make haste like his winning horse to the gate. Tit for tat."

After they shared a good laugh, she said, "All this talk of speed and haste reminds me that we must work quickly together to secure approval for the shipping route through Yokohama. I know of someone who can be helpful in that regard. Shall I send a message tomorrow?" The next week, three gifts of money arrived, one from Mr. Yang, a larger one from Mr. Scott, and the last from the bureaucrat who had greased the way to the approvals and had a stake in the deal.

I saw how she entranced the men. They acted as if they were in love with her. However, they could not make any confessions of ardor, no matter how true. The warning went around that she would not view them as genuine feelings of love, but trickery to gain unfair advantage. She promised that if they tried to gain her affections, she would banish them from Hidden Jade Path. She broke that promise with one man.

BEHIND THE BALCONIES were two hallways, and between them was a common room, where we took our meals. On the other side of a round archway was a larger room we called Family Hall. It contained three tea tables and sets of chairs, as well as Western furnishings. Here my mother met with the tailor or shoemaker, the tax official, the banker, and others who conducted boring business. From time to time, the occasional mock wedding took place between a courtesan and patron who had signed a contract for at least two seasons. When the room was not in use, more often than not, the Cloud Beauties drank tea and ate sweet seeds, while chatting idly about a suitor no

one wanted, or a new restaurant with fashionable foreign food, or the downfall of a courtesan at another house. They treated one another like sisters, tied by their circumstances to this house and this moment in their brief careers. They comforted one another, gave encouragement, and also bickered over petty matters, such as their shared expenses for food. They were jealous of one another but also loaned one another pins and bracelets. And they often told the same stories of how they were separated from their families, culminating in all sharing a good long cry of mutual understanding. "No one should have to bear fate this bitter" was the common refrain. "Fuck that lousy dog" was another.

A hallway led to a courtyard flanked by two large wings of the house, laid out as quadrangles around a smaller courtyard. To the left was the southwest wing, where the Cloud Beauties lived. A covered walkway ran along all four sides, which was how each courtesan reached her room. The lowest-ranked courtesan had the room closest to the hallway, which afforded her the least privacy, since all the other courtesans had to walk past her door and window to reach their rooms. The highest-ranked courtesan had the room farthest from the hallway, which gave her the most privacy. Each long room was divided into two parts. On one side of a tall lattice screen, the Cloud Beauty and her guest could have an intimate dinner. Behind the screen was her boudoir. It had a window facing the inner courtyard, and this was ideal for moon watching. The more popular a beauty was, the more well appointed her room, often lavished with gifts from her suitors and patrons. The boudoirs were more Chinese in style than the furnishings in the salon. No patron wanted to puzzle over which divan to recline on for a smoke, where he could relieve himself, or where he might sleep when he had exhausted himself, or was about to do so.

My mother, Golden Dove, and I lived in the northeast wing. Mother had separate rooms on two sides of the building. One was her bedroom and the other her office, where she and Golden Dove met to discuss the evening's guests. I always joined her during her

late-midday meal, and also remained with her as she readied herself in her bedroom for the evening. This was the happiest time of my day. During that lean hour, she would ask me about the subjects I was learning, and she often would add interesting facts. She would ask about my reported transgressions: what I had done to cause one of the maids to want to kill herself, whether I had been sassy to Golden Dove, how I had torn yet another dress. I offered my opinion on a new courtesan, or on a new hat Mother was wearing, or on Carlotta's latest antics, and other similar matters that I thought were important to the management of the household.

Mother had another room adjoining her office. These two rooms were separated by French glass doors with thick curtains for privacy. That room was called Boulevard, because its windows faced a view of Nanking Road and it served several purposes. During the day, I took my lessons there with my American tutors. However, if Mother or Golden Dove had guests from out of town, the visitors were given that room as their accommodations. On occasion, a courtesan showed poor planning or excessive popularity by booking two clients for the same night. She would entertain one client in Boulevard and the other in her boudoir. If she was careful, neither client would know of her duplicity.

My room was on the north side of the east wing, and being close to the main corridor, it enabled me to hear the gossip of the four maids who stood just around the corner from my window while awaiting orders to bring tea, fruit, or hot towels and such. As they served the courtesan, they were privy to how well she was succeeding with a new admirer. It always puzzled me why the courtesans assumed the maids were deaf.

*"You should have seen her face when the necklace he showed her was worth less than half what she had hoped for. I wasn't surprised."*

*"Her situation is dire. Within a month, she'll be gone. Ai-ya, poor girl. She's too good for this kind of fate."*

In the early evening, at least one Cloud Beauty would lead her

patron to the larger courtyard below for romantic talk about nature. I stood on the walkway and listened to those rehearsed murmurings so often that I could recite them as wistfully as the courtesans. The moon was a topic they brought up often.

*I should be happy seeing the full moon, my love. But I feel sick, because I'm reminded my debts are waxing and your ardor is waning. Why else have you not given me a gift lately? Should my devotion be rewarded with poverty?*

It did not matter how generous the patron was. The beauty would press him for more. And often, the long-suffering patron would sigh and tell his courtesan to not cry anymore. He would agree to whatever formula of happiness would quench the girl's complaints.

That was usually how it worked. But one night, I heard with glee as a patron said: "If you had your way, there would be a full moon every day. Don't harangue me with this moon nonsense ever again."

In the late morning, I would hear the girls talking in the courtyard among themselves.

"The cheapskate pretended to be deaf."

"Just like that, he agreed. I should have asked months ago."

"His love is genuine. He told me I'm not like other flower beauties."

By the light of day, they saw different meanings in the sky. How changeable those clouds were, just like fate. They saw ominous signs in wispy streaks high in the sky, noting that they were so far away. They rejoiced when the clouds were as fat as babies' bottoms, and they were fearful when those babies turned over, showing underbellies that were black. So many Cloud Beauties before them had seen their fates change in one day. They had been warned by the older flower sisters that popularity was as lasting as a fashionable hat. But as their reputations grew, most would forget the warning. They believed they would be the exception.

On cold nights, I cracked open the window and listened to the maids. On warm nights, I opened wide the window and stood quietly in the dark behind my lattice screen shutters. Carlotta sat on my shoul-

der, and together we listened to the maids talk about what was happening in the rooms of the courtesans. Sometimes they said words I had heard the Cloud Beauties use among themselves: Threading the Needle, Entering the Pavilion, Rousing the Warrior, and many other expressions that made them laugh.

How could a child not be curious about the source of that laughter? I satisfied that curiosity the summer I was seven. An opportunity arose when three maids and a courtesan were wretchedly ill from eating rotted food. The remaining maid was called away, to tend to the vomiting courtesan. I saw Rosy Cloud and her suitor walk past my window and toward her boudoir. After a few minutes, I darted to the west wing and crouched under her window. I was not tall enough to see into the room, and most of what I heard was tedious pleasantries.

*You're looking well and happy. Business must be good. I imagine your wife singing like a joyful bird.*

Just when I was about to give up and return to my room, I heard a sharp gasp of surprise, and then Rosy Cloud's voice quivered as she thanked her suitor for his gift. A short while later, I heard grunts and the same gasp of surprise, repeated many times.

The next night, I was glad to learn that sickness still prevailed. I had come up with the idea of standing on an overturned basin, which made me just tall enough to peek into the room. By lamplight, I saw the dark shapes of Rosy Cloud and her suitor behind the thin silk curtains of the bed. They were busily moving like a shadow puppet play. Two small, silhouetted feet appeared to sprout from the man's head, and all at once, the feet kicked open the curtains. The man was naked and bouncing on her with such violence they fell off the bed. I could not help but give out a shriek of laughter.

Rosy Cloud complained to Golden Dove the next day that I had been spying and that my laughter had nearly caused her suitor to lose interest. Golden Dove told my mother, and Mother in turn said to me very quietly that I should give the beauties their privacy

and to not disturb their business. I took this to mean I should be more careful to not be noticed the next time.

When another opportunity arose, I took it. At that age, I did not find what I saw to be titillating in a sexual way. It was more the thrill of doing what I knew would have embarrassed my victims had they known. I had been wicked in other ways: spying on a man as he was pissing into a chamber pot, putting a greasy smear on the costume of a courtesan who had snapped at me, and a few pranks. One time, I substituted metal cans for the silver bells that hung on the marriage bed, and as the man bounced fast and the bed shook, the couple heard clanking instead of clinking. With each transgression, I knew I was doing wrong, but I also felt brave and thus excited while committing my ill deeds. I also knew what the Cloud Beauties really felt about their suitors and patrons. And that knowledge gave me a secret power—one of no particular use, but it was power nonetheless, as valuable as any trinket in my treasure box.

As mischievous as I was, I had no desire to watch my mother and her lovers. It repulsed me to even imagine that she would allow a man to see her without her beautiful clothes. With the flower beauties, I had less hesitation. I watched them writhing on the divan. I saw men stare between their legs. I saw courtesans on their knees, kowtowing to a client's penis. One night I saw a heavyset man come into Billowy Cloud's room. His name was Prosper Yang and he had several factories, some that made sewing machines and others that put women and children to work on those machines. He kissed her tenderly and she trembled and acted shy. He spoke soft words, and her eyes grew wide and tearful as she removed her clothes. He moved his great mass and hovered over her like a dark cloud and she wore a grimace of fear, as if she were about to be crushed to death. He pressed himself against her, and their bodies moved like thrashing fish. She struggled against him and sobbed in a tragic voice. And then their limbs coiled around each other like snakes. He uttered harsh animal sounds. She cried like a little shrieking bird. He leapt astride her backside and

rode her as if she were a trotting pony until he fell off. He left her lying motionless on her side. As the moon shone through the window, her body gleamed white, and I thought she was dead. I watched for almost an hour until she finally awoke from near death with a yawn and an outstretched arm.

That morning, in the courtyard, I heard Billowy Cloud tell another flower sister that Prosper Yang had told her that he cherished her and would be her patron, and that one day he might even make her his wife.

What I had been watching suddenly became dangerous and sickening. Mother and Golden Dove had mentioned several times that I might marry one day. I had always viewed marriage as one of my many American privileges, and unlike the courtesans, I could assume it would be mine. I had never considered that my marriage would include a lot of bouncing on me like what I had witnessed with Billowy Cloud and her suitor. Now I could not stop recalling those scenes. They came to me unwanted and gave me an ill feeling. For several nights, I had shocking dreams. In each, I had taken Billowy Cloud's place, and lay on my stomach, waiting. The dark shape of a man appeared against the translucent curtains and a moment later he burst in—Prosper Yang—and he jumped on my back and rode me like a pony, crushing my bones one by one. When he was done, I lay still, cold as marble. I waited to move, as Billowy Cloud had. Instead I grew colder and colder, because I was dead.

I did not spy on the Cloud Beauties after that.

THE FLOWER SISTER I liked most was Magic Cloud. That was the reason I spied on her and her patron only once. She made me laugh by boasting about the rareness of her furnishings in outlandish ways. The wooden marriage bed, she said, was carved out of the trunk of a single hardwood tree as thick as the entire house. I found seams. The gold brocade on the opium bed was a gift from one of the impe-

rial concubines, who she claimed was her half sister. She pretended to be insulted when I said I did not believe her. The batting of her quilt was made of silk clouds and floated up with the smallest sigh. I sighed and sighed to show her that they did not move. She also had a simple Ming table holding scholar treasures, the accoutrements of the literati, which every client appreciated, even if he had never been able to reach the echelons of those who were excessively educated. These pieces, she told me, had belonged to the Poet Ghost. No one else had dared take them. I did not believe in ghosts, and yet I was nervous when she insisted I inspect the objects: an inkstone of purple *duan*, brushes with the softest sheep hair, and inksticks carved with garden scenes of a scholar's house. She held up the scrolls of paper and said they absorbed just the right amount of ink and reflected the exact quality of light. I asked if she could write poetry, and she said, "Of course! Why else would I have all these things?"

I knew that she, like most courtesans, could read and write only poorly. Golden Dove had required the courtesans to have scholar objects in their room. They enhanced the reputation of the house, set it above others. Magic Cloud told me that the Poet Ghost especially appreciated her scholar treasures more than those in the other boudoirs.

"I know what he likes because he was my husband in a past life," Magic Cloud said, "and I was his favorite concubine. When he died, I killed myself so I could be with him. But even in heaven, society separated us. His wife would not allow me to see him, and she arranged for him to be reincarnated before me."

I did not believe in ghosts, yet I grew nervous listening to Magic Cloud's crazy talk.

"He came to me the first night I moved here. I felt cool breath blow over my cheek and I knew the Poet Ghost had arrived. In the past, I would have jumped out of my skin and run off without it. This time, instead of my teeth chattering with fear, I felt a wonderful warmth pour through my veins. I felt love more strongly than I have

ever given or received from anyone. That night, I dreamed of our past life and I awoke the happiest I have ever been.”

The Poet Ghost visited her at least once a day, she said. She sensed him when she went into the former painting studio, or while sitting in the garden by his stele. No matter how sad or hopeless or angry she had just been, she immediately felt light and happy.

When the Cloud Beauties learned of her phantom lover, they were afraid and angry that she had unleashed the ghost. But they could not criticize her too much, lest her ghost lover, the former owner of the mansion, retaliate against those who had maligned his beloved.

“Can you see him? Can you smell him?” the flower sisters would ask whenever they caught Magic Cloud looking pleased for no apparent reason.

“Today, just before dusk,” she answered, “I saw his shadow and felt it sweep gently over me.” She drew two fingers up her arm.

And then I, too, saw a shadow and felt a cool sensation sweep across my skin.

“Ah, you feel him, too,” Magic Cloud said.

“No I didn’t. I don’t believe in ghosts.”

“Then why are you scared?”

“I’m not scared. Why should I be? Ghosts don’t exist.” And as if to counter the lie, my fear grew. I recalled Mother telling me that ghosts were manifestations of people’s fear. Why else do these supposed ghosts plague only Chinese people? Despite my mother’s logic, I believed the Poet Ghost still lived in our house. Sudden fear was a sign that he had arrived. But why would he visit me?

The Poet Ghost was at the mock marriage between Billowy Cloud and Prosper Yang, who had signed a contract for three seasons. I learned that Billowy Cloud was sixteen and he was fifty or so. Golden Dove consoled her, saying he would be quite generous, as old men tended to be. And Billowy Cloud said that Prosper Yang loved her and she felt lucky.

My mother was renowned for holding the best weddings of all

the courtesan houses. They were Western in style, as opposed to the traditional Chinese weddings for virgin brides, a category to which courtesans could never belong. The courtesan brides even wore a Western white wedding gown, and my mother had a variety the Cloud Beauties could use. The style was clearly Yankee—with low bodices and voluminous skirts, wrapped in glossy gathered silk, and trimmed in lace, embroidery, and seed pearls. Those dresses never would have been confused with the Chinese mourning clothes of rough white sackcloth.

A Western wedding had its advantages, as I had already learned from having attended a Chinese version for a courtesan at another house. For one thing, it did not involve honoring ancestors, who certainly would have disavowed a courtesan as his descendant. So there were no boring rituals or kneeling and endless bowing. The ceremony was short. The prayers were omitted. The bride said “I do” and the groom said “I do.” Then it was time to eat. The banquet food at a Western wedding was also remarkable because all the dishes looked Western but they tasted Chinese.

For different fees, patrons could choose music from among several styles. Yankee music played by a marching band was the most expensive and suitable only during good weather. A Yankee violinist was a cheaper choice. Then there was a choice of music. It was important to not be fooled by the title of a song. One of the courtesans had asked the violinist to play “O Promise Me,” thinking the length of the song would strengthen her patron’s fidelity and perhaps increase the length of the contract. But the song went on for so long that guests lost interest and talked about other matters until the song ended. That was the reason the contract was not renewed, the flower sisters later said. Everyone liked “Auld Lang Syne,” played with the aching power of a Chinese instrument that looked like a miniature two-stringed cello. Even though the tune was sung on sad occasions, such as funerals and farewells, it was still popular. There were only a few English words to learn, and everyone loved to sing them to prove

they could speak English. My mother changed the words to reflect a promise of monogamy. If a courtesan broke that promise, it would lead to the end of the contract, as well as a bad reputation that would be hard to overcome. If, however, the patron was the one who broke the promise, the courtesan would feel humiliated. Why had he dishonored her? There must have been a reason.

Prosper, who fancied he was a Chinese Caruso, sang with gusto.

*“Should old lovers be forgot,  
And never brought to mind!  
Should old lovers be forgot,  
For a long, long time.  
Clang bowls again, my dear old friends,  
Clang bowls one more time.  
Should old lovers be forgot,  
And never come to mind!”*

In the middle of the song, I saw Magic Cloud turn her eyes toward the archway. She touched her arm lightly, looked up again, and smiled. A moment later, I felt the familiar coolness blow over my arm and down my spine. I shivered and went to my mother.

Prosper bellowed out the last note and let the clapping go on for too long, and then he called for the gifts to be brought to Billowy Cloud. First came the traditional gift every courtesan received: a silver bracelet and a bolt of silk—a toast to that! The guests raised their cups, tipped their heads back, and downed the wine in one swallow. Next came a Western settee upholstered in pink sateen—two toasts for that! More gifts came. Finally Prosper handed Billowy Cloud what she wanted most, an envelope of money, the first of her monthly stipend. She saw the amount, gasped, and fell speechless as tears streamed down her face. We would not know until later if her tears were because she received more than she had expected or less. Another toast was raised. Billowy Cloud insisted she could not drink

another. Her face wore splotches of red and she said she felt the ceiling lurching one way and the floor the other. But Prosper grabbed her chin and forced down the wine, followed immediately by another as his friends egged him on. All at once, Billowy Cloud gurgled and vomited before she collapsed to the floor. Golden Dove quickly signaled the musician for a final song to hurry the guests out of the room, and Prosper left with them, without a glance toward Billowy Cloud, who lay on the floor, babbling apology. Magic Cloud tried to sit her up, but the senseless girl flopped backward like a dead fish. "Bastards," Golden Dove said. "Put her in a tub and make sure she doesn't drown."

I saw many weddings. The younger beauties had contracts one after another, with hardly a week in between. But as they grew older and their eyes sparkled less, there were no more weddings for them. And then came the day when Golden Dove told a beauty she had to "take the sedan," which was a polite way of saying she was being evicted. I remembered the day that Rosy Cloud was given the bad news. Mother and Golden Dove had her come to the office. I was studying in Boulevard, the room on the other side of the glass French doors. I heard Rosy Cloud's voice growing louder. Golden Dove was citing figures of money, declining bookings. Why was I able to hear this so clearly? I went to the door and saw that it was not completely closed. There was a half-inch opening. I heard Rosy Cloud beg quietly to stay longer, citing that a certain suitor was on the brink of offering to be her patron. But they held firm and were without sympathy. They suggested another house she might join. Rosy Cloud became loud and angry. They were insulting her, she said, as if she were a common whore. She ran out. A few minutes later I heard her howl in the same way Carlotta did when her foot was caught in the doorjamb, as if her voice was coming from both her bowels and her heart. The sound of it sickened me.

I told Magic Cloud what had happened to Rosy Cloud.

"This will happen to all of us. One day fate brings us here," she

said. “Another day it takes us away. Maybe her next life will be better. Suffer more now, suffer less later.”

“She shouldn’t suffer at all,” I said.

Within three days, a courtesan named Puffy Cloud was in Rosy Cloud’s quarters. She knew nothing of what had gone on in that room—not the bouncing, the sighs, the tears, or the howls.

A few weeks later, I was in Magic Cloud’s boudoir in the late afternoon. Mother had been too busy to eat her late-midday meal with me. She had to dash off to some unknown place to meet an unnamed person. Magic Cloud was putting powder on her face, preparing for a long night—three parties, one at Hidden Jade Path, the other two at houses several blocks away.

I was full of questions. “Are those real pearls?” “Who gave them to you?” “Who will you see tonight?” “Will you bring him to your room?”

She told me that the pearls were the teeth of dragons and a duke had given them to her. He was honoring her tonight, and naturally she would bring him to her room for tea and conversation. I laughed, and she pretended to be offended that I did not believe her.

The next morning she was not in her room. I knew something was wrong because her scholar treasures and silk quilt were missing. I peered into her wardrobe closet. It was empty. Mother was still asleep, as were the courtesans and Golden Dove. So I went to Cracked Egg, the gatekeeper, and he said that he saw her leave but did not know where she had gone. I learned the answer when I overheard two maids talking:

*“She was at least five or six years older than she said she was. What house would take an old flower with a ghost stuck inside her?”*

*“I overheard Lulu Mimi telling the patron it was just superstitious nonsense. He said it didn’t matter if it was a ghost or a living man, it was infidelity and he wanted the contract money back.”*

I raced into my mother’s office and found her talking to Golden Dove.

“I know what she did and she’s sorry. You have to let her come back,” I said. Mother said there was nothing more to be done. Everyone knew the rules, and if she made an exception for Magic Cloud, all the beauties might think they could do the same without penalty. She and Golden Dove went back to discussing plans for a large party and how many extra courtesans would be needed.

“Mother, please,” I begged. She ignored me. I burst into tears and shouted: “She was my only friend! If you don’t bring her back, I will have no one who likes me.”

She came to me and drew me close, caressing my head. “Nonsense. You have many friends here. Snowy Cloud—”

“Snowy Cloud doesn’t let me come into her room the way Magic Cloud did.”

“Mrs. Petty’s daughter—”

“She’s silly and boring.”

“You have Carlotta.”

“She’s a cat. She doesn’t talk to me or answer questions.”

She mentioned the names of more girls who were the daughters of her friends, all of whom I now claimed I disliked—and who despised me, which was partially true. I carried on about my friendless state and the danger of my permanent unhappiness. And then I heard her speak in a cold unyielding tone: “Stop this, Violet. I did not remove her for small reasons. She nearly ruined our business. It was a matter of necessity.”

“What did she do?”

“By thinking only of herself, she betrayed us.”

I did not know what *betrayed* meant. I simply sputtered in frustration: “Who cares if she betrayed us?”

“Your very mother before you cares.”

“Then I will always betray you,” I cried.

She regarded me with an odd expression, and I believed she was about to give in. So I pushed again with my bravado. “I’ll betray you,” I warned.

Her face contorted. “Stop this, Violet, please.”

But I could not stop, even though I knew that I was unleashing an unknown danger. “I’ll always betray you,” I said once more and immediately saw a shadow fall over my mother’s face.

Her hands were shaking and her face was so stiff she appeared to be a different person. She said nothing. The longer the silence grew, the more frightened I became. I would have backed down if I had known what to say or do. So I waited.

At last she turned, and as she walked away, she said in a bitter voice, “If you ever betray me, I shall have nothing to do with you. I promise you that.”

MY MOTHER HAD a certain phrase she used with every guest, Chinese or Western. She would walk hurriedly to a certain man and whisper excitedly, “You’re just the one I hoped to see.” Then followed the dip of her head toward the man’s ear to whisper some secret, which caused the man to nod vigorously. Some kissed her hand. This repeated phrase distressed me. I had noticed that she was often too busy to pay any attention to me. She no longer played the guessing games or sent me on treasure hunts. We no longer lay in her bed cuddled next to each other as she read the newspaper. She was too busy for that. Her gaiety and smiles were now reserved for the men at her parties. They were the ones she had hoped to see.

One night, as I crossed the salon with Carlotta in my arms, I heard Mother call out: “Violet! You’re here. You’re just the one I hoped to see.”

At last! I had been chosen. She gave profuse apologies to the man she had been conversing with, citing that her daughter required her urgent attention. What was so urgent? It did not matter. I was excited to hear the secret she had saved for me. “Let’s go over there,” Mother said, nudging me toward a dark corner of the room. She took my arm in hers, and we were off at a brisk pace. I was telling her

about Carlotta's latest antics, something to amuse her, when she let go of my arm, and said, "Thank you, darling." She walked over to a man in the corner of the room and said, "Fairweather, my dear. I'm sorry I was delayed." Her dark-haired lover stepped out of the shadows and kissed her hand with fake gallantry. She returned a crinkle-eyed smile I had never seen her give to me.

I could not breathe, crushed by my short-lived happiness. She had used me as her pawn! Worse, she had done so for Fairweather, a man who had visited her from time to time, and whom I had always disliked. I had once believed I was the most important person in her life. But in recent months, that was disproved. Our special closeness had become unmoored. She was always too busy to spend time chatting with me during her midday meals. Instead she and Golden Dove used that hour to discuss the evening plans. She seldom asked me about my lessons or what I was reading. She called me "darling," but she said the same to many men. She kissed my cheek in the morning and my forehead at night. But she kissed many men, and some on the mouth. She said she loved me, but I did not see any particular sign of that. I could not feel anything in my heart but the loss of her love. She had changed toward me, and I was certain that it had started the day when I threatened to betray her. Bit by bit, she was having nothing to do with me.

Golden Dove found me crying one day in Boulevard. "Mother does not love me anymore."

"Nonsense. Your mother loves you a great deal. Why else does she let you go unpunished for all the naughty things you do? Just the other day, you broke a clock by moving its hands backward. You ruined a pair of her stockings by using it as a mouse for Carlotta to chase."

"That's not love," I said. "She didn't get mad because she doesn't care about those things. If she truly loved me, she would prove it."

"How?" Golden Dove asked. "What is there to prove?"

I was thrown into mute confusion. I did not know what love was.

All I knew was a gnawing need for her attention and assurances. I wanted to feel without worry that I was more important than anyone else in her life. When I thought about it further, I realized she had given more attention to the beauties than to me. She had spent more time with Golden Dove. She had risen before noon to have lunch with her friends, the bosomy opera singer, the traveling widow, and the French lady spy. She had devoted much more attention to her customers than to anybody else. What love had they received that she had not given me?

That night I overheard a maid in the corridor telling another that she was worried sick because her three-year-old daughter had a high fever. The next night, she announced happily that her daughter had recovered. In the afternoon of the next day, the woman's screams reverberated in the courtyard. A relative had come to say her child had died. She wailed, "How can that be? I held her this morning. I combed her hair." In between her sobs, she described her daughter's big eyes, the way she always turned her head to listen to her, how musical her laughter was. She babbled that she was saving money to buy her a jacket, that she had bought a turnip for a healthy soup. Later she moaned that she wanted to die to be with her daughter. Who else did she have to live for? I cried secretly as I listened to her grief. If I died, would Mother feel the same about me? I cried harder, knowing she would not.

A week after Mother had tricked me, she came into the room where I was studying with my tutor. It was only eleven, an hour before she usually rose from bed. I gave her my sullen face. She asked if I would like to have lunch with her at the new French restaurant on Great Western Road. I was wary. I asked her who else would be there.

"Just the two of us," she replied. "It's your birthday."

I had forgotten. No one celebrated birthdays in the house. It was not a Chinese custom, and Mother had not made it hers. My birthday usually occurred near the Chinese New Year, and that was what we celebrated, with everyone. I tried to not be too excited, but a surge

of joy went through me. I went to my room to put on a nice day dress, one that had not been snagged by Carlotta's claws. I selected a blue coat and a hat of a similar color. I put on a grown-up pair of walking shoes of shiny leather that laced up to my ankles. I saw myself in the long oval mirror. I looked different, nervous, and worried. I was now eight, no longer the innocent little girl who trusted her feelings. I had once expected happiness and lately had received only disappointments, one after the other. I now expected disappointment and prayed to be proven wrong.

When I went to Mother's study, I found that Golden Dove and she were laying out the tasks for the day. She was walking back and forth in her wrapper, her hair unbound.

"The old tax collector is coming tonight," Mother was saying. "He promises that some extra attention may make him inattentive to my tax bill. We'll see if the old dog fart is telling the truth this time."

"I'll send a call chit to Crimson," Golden Dove said, "the courtesan at the Hall of Verdant Peace. She'll take any kind of business these days. I'll advise her to wear dark colors, dark blue. Pink is unflattering on someone well past youth. She should know better. I'll also tell the cook to make the fish you like, but not with the American flavors. I know he wants to please you, but it never comes out right, and we all suffer."

"Do you have the list for tonight's guests?" Mother said. "I don't want the importer from Smythe and Dixon to come anymore. None of his information has been reliable. He's been sniffing around to get something for nothing. We'll give his name to Cracked Egg so he does not get past the gate . . ."

By the time she and Golden Dove finished, it was nearly one. She left me in the office and went to her room to change into a dress. I wandered around her office, and Carlotta followed me, rubbing against my legs wherever I stood. A round table was cluttered with knickknacks, the sorts of gifts some of her admirers gave her, not knowing she preferred money. Golden Dove sold the knickknacks she

did not want. I picked up each object, and Carlotta jumped up and sniffed. An amber egg with a bug inside—that one would certainly go. An amethyst-and-jade bird—she might keep that. A glass display case of butterflies from different lands—she must hate that one. A painting of a green parrot—I liked it, but the only paintings Mother put on the walls were nude Greek gods and goddesses. I turned the pages of an illustrated book called *The World of the Sea* and saw illustrations of hideous creatures. I used a nearby magnifying glass to enlarge the titles of books in the bookcase: *The Religions of India*, *Travels to Japan and China*, *China in Convulsion*. I came across a red-covered book embossed with the black silhouette of a boy in uniform shooting a rifle. *Under the Allied Flags: A Boxer Story*. A note was stuck in the middle of the pages. It was written in the careful script of a schoolboy.

*My dear Miss Minturn,*

*If ever you need an American lad who knows how to obey orders, will you consider using me as volunteer aide? I'd like to make myself as useful as you desire.*

*Your faithful servant,*

*Ned Peaver*

Had Mother accepted his offer to be her faithful servant? I read the page where the note had been inserted. It was about a soldier named Ned Peaver—aha!—during the Boxer Rebellion. After a quick glance at the page, I concluded Ned was a dull, prissy boy, who always followed orders. I had always disliked anything to do with the Boxer Rebellion. I was two years old in 1900 when the worst of the rebellion took place, and I believed I could have died in the violence. I had read a book about young men who swore themselves into the brotherhood of Boxers when millions of peasants in the middle of China were starving due to a flood one year, and a drought the next. When they heard rumors that foreigners were going to be given their land, they killed about two hundred white missionaries and their chil-

dren. By one account, a brave little girl sang sweetly as her parents watched her being sent by the whack of a sword to heaven. Whenever I pictured it, I touched my soft throat and swallowed hard.

I looked at the clock. Its newly repaired hands said it was now two o'clock. I had been waiting nearly three hours since she announced we would have lunch. All at once, my head and heart exploded. I ripped up Ned Peaver's letter. I went to the table with my mother's plunder and hurled the case of butterflies onto the floor. Carlotta ran off. I threw down the amethyst bird, the magnifying glass, the amber egg. I tore off the cover of *The World of the Sea*. Golden Dove ran in and looked at the mess, horrified. "Why do you hurt her?" she said mournfully. "Why is your temper so bad?"

"It's two o'clock. She said she was taking me to a restaurant for my birthday. Now she's not coming. She didn't remember. She always forgets I'm even here." My eyes were blurry with tears. "She doesn't love me. She loves all those men."

Golden Dove picked up the amber egg and magnifying glass. "These were your gifts."

"Those are things that men gave her and she doesn't want."

"How can you think that? She chose them just for you."

"Why didn't she come back to take me to lunch?"

"*Ai-ya!* You did this because you're hungry? All you had to do was ask the maid to bring you something to eat."

I did not know how to explain what the outing to the restaurant had meant to me. I blurted a jumble of wounds: "She tells the men that they are the ones she wants to see. She told me the same, but it was a trick. She doesn't worry anymore when I'm sad or lonely . . ."

Golden Dove frowned. "Your mother spoils you, and this is the result. You have no gratitude, only a temper when you do not get your way."

"She didn't keep her promise and she didn't say she was sorry."

"She was upset. She got a letter—"

"She gets many letters." I kicked at the confetti of Ned's note.

“This letter was different.” She stared at me in an odd way. “It was about your father. He’s dead.”

I did not understand what she had said at first. My father. What did that mean? I was five when I first asked Mother where my father was. Everyone had one, I learned, even the courtesans whose fathers had sold them. Mother told me that I had no father. When I pressed her, she said that he had died before I was born. Over the next three years, I pressed Mother from time to time to tell me who my father was.

“What does it matter?” she always said. “He’s dead, and it was so very long ago I’ve even forgotten his name and what he looked like.”

How could she have forgotten his name? Would she forget mine if I died? I pestered her for answers. When she grew quiet and frowned, I sensed it was dangerous to continue.

But now the truth was out. He was alive! Or he had been. My confusion gave way to a shaky anger. Mother had been lying all this time when he was alive. He may have loved me, and by not telling me that he was alive, she had stolen him from me. Now he was truly dead and it was too late.

I ran into my mother’s office, shrieking, “He was never dead. You kept him from me.” I blubbered every accusation that went through my head. She did not tell me the truth about anything that mattered to me. She lied when she told me I was just the one she hoped to see. She lied about lunch . . . Mother was speechless.

Golden Dove rushed in. “I told her that you had received a letter announcing her father had just died.”

Mother stared hard at her. Was she angry? Would she dismiss us both, as she did those who displeased her? She put down the terrible letter. She led me to the sofa and sat me next to her. And then she did what she had not done in a long time: She petted my head and whispered soothing words, which made me cry even harder. “Violet, dearest, I truly thought he was dead all these years. I found it too painful to think about him, to say anything about him. And now, to

receive this letter . . ." The rims of her eyes were shiny, but the dam of her emotions held.

When I could breathe again, I asked her question after question, and to each she nodded and said yes. Was he nice? Was he rich? Did everyone like him? Was he older than she was? Did he ever love me? Did he ever play with me? Did he say my name? Mother continued to stroke my hair and rub my shoulders. I felt so sad and did not want her to stop comforting me. I continued to ask questions until my mind was exhausted. By then, I was weak from hunger. Golden Dove called for a servant to bring my lunch to Boulevard. "Your mother needs to be by herself now." Mother gave me a kiss and went to her bedroom.

As I ate, Golden Dove told me how hard my mother had to struggle without a husband. "All her work has been for you, Little Violet," she said. "Be grateful, be nice to your mother." Before she left, she suggested I study and become smart to show my mother how much I appreciated her. Instead of studying, however, I lay on the bed in Boulevard to think about my newly deceased father. I began to put together a picture of him: His hair was brown; his eyes were green, just like mine. I soon fell asleep.

I was still drowsy and thickheaded when I heard someone arguing. I realized I was not in my own room but still in Boulevard. I went to the window and looked out onto the hallway to see the cause of the commotion. The sky was dark gray, at that suspended time between night and morning. The hallways were empty. The windows across the courtyard were black. I turned around and saw a warm sliver of light coming through a small opening of the curtains over the glass French doors. The angry voice was my mother's. I looked through the curtain opening and saw the back of her head. She had loosened her hair and was seated on the sofa. She had come back from the party. Was anyone else in the room? I put my ear to the glass. She was cursing in a strange low voice that sounded like Carlotta's deep-throated growl. "*You're spineless . . . a dancing monkey . . . as much character as a*

*filthy thief* . . .” She threw down a folded piece of paper. It landed near the unlit fireplace. Was it the letter she had received? She went to her desk and sat down, seized a sheet of stationery, then slashed at it with her dripping pen. She crumpled the half-written page and threw it onto the floor. “I wish you really were dead!” she shouted.

My father was alive! She had lied again! I was about to rush in and demand to know where my father was. But then she looked up and I nearly cried out in fright. Her eyes had changed. The green irises had turned inside out, and the backs of them were as dull as sand. She had the eyes of dead beggars I had seen lying in gutters. She abruptly stood up, turned down the lamps, and went to her bedroom. I had to see the letter. I opened the French doors carefully. It was dark and I had to move forward blindly, sweeping my hands to avoid bumping into the furniture. I went to my knees. Suddenly I felt someone touch me, and I gasped. It was Carlotta. She pushed her head against me, purring. I could now feel the tiles of the fireplace. I patted the hearth. Nothing. I found the legs of the desk, and raised myself slowly. My eyes had adjusted to the dark, but I saw no sign of anything that resembled a letter. I crept out of the room, bitterly disappointed.

The next day, Mother acted as she always had—brisk and clear-headed as she laid out the tasks. She was charming and talkative in the evening, smiling as always at her guests. While she and Golden Dove were busy during the party, I sneaked into Boulevard, opened the French doors just wide enough to push through the curtains and into my mother’s office. I turned on one gas lamp. I opened desk drawers, and one was filled with letters whose envelopes had embossed names of companies. I looked under her pillow, in the little cabinet next to her bed. I lifted the lid of her trunk at the foot of her bed. The smell of turpentine flew out. The source was two rolled-up paintings. I unfurled one and was astonished to see a portrait of Mother as a young girl. I placed it on the floor and smoothed it out. She was staring straight ahead, as if she were looking at me.

Over her chest, she held a maroon cloth. Her pale back glowed like the cold warmth of the moon. Who painted this? Why had she been so scantily dressed?

I was about to look at the other painting when I was startled by the approaching laughter of Puffy Cloud. The door to Boulevard opened. I jumped to the side of the office, where she would not be able to see me. She cooed to a client to make himself comfortable. Of all nights for her to be overly popular! Puffy Cloud pulled the French doors closed. I hurriedly put the paintings back in the trunk and was about to turn down the lamp and leave when Golden Dove came into the room.

We both gasped at the same time. Before she could speak, I asked if she had seen Carlotta. As if she had heard me, Carlotta let out a loud wail behind the doors of Boulevard. Puffy Cloud cursed, "I thought that damn cat was a headless ghost!" I went to the French doors and opened them slightly, and Carlotta darted in.

With Carlotta in my arms, I quickly went downstairs to the party, thinking I might spot my father lurking among the guests. But then I realized my father would not have dared show his face there. My mother would have scratched his eyes out. I looked at the guests and played a game of pretend—imagining one man after another was my father. I picked out the traits I liked—the ones who laughed easily, who wore the best clothes, who received the most respect, who winked at me. And then my eye landed on a man with a pinched and unfriendly expression, and another whose face was so pink he looked like he was about to explode.

In bed, before falling asleep each night, I imagined different versions of my father: handsome or ugly, well respected or loathed by all. I imagined he had loved me very much. I imagined he never had.

A MONTH AFTER my eighth birthday, I entered the common room to have breakfast with the Cloud Beauties and their attendants. I

went to sit in my usual spot at the table. But I found that the newest courtesan, Misty Cloud, had placed her bottom on my chair. I glowered, and she returned a glance of indifference. She had miniature features set in a plump, round face, which men found attractive for some reason. To me, she had the ugly face of a baby pasted onto the yellow moon.

“This is my chair,” I said.

“*Oyo!* Your chair? Is it carved with your name? Is there an official decree?” She pretended to inspect the arms and legs. “I don’t see your name seal. All the chairs are the same.”

My temples were beating hard. “It’s my chair.”

“*Anh?* What makes you think you’re the only one who can sit here?”

“Lulu Mimi is my mother,” I added, “and I’m an American like her.”

“Since when do half-breed American bastards have the same rights?”

I was shocked. Rage was rising from my throat. Two of the beauties put their palms to their mouths. Snowy Cloud, whom I had liked more than the others, told us to calm down. She suggested we take turns sitting in the chair. I had hoped she would have taken my side.

I sputtered to Misty Cloud, “You’re a worm in a dead fish ass.” The maids burst into laughter.

“*Wah!* The half-breed has such a foul mouth,” Misty Cloud said. She looked around the table to the others. “If she’s not a half-breed, how is it that she looks Chinese?”

“How dare you say that!” I cried. “I’m American. There’s nothing Chinese about me.”

“Then why are you speaking Chinese?”

I could not answer at first, because if I did, I would be speaking in Chinese again and give her the upper hand. Misty Cloud picked up a small oily peanut with her thin pointed chopsticks. “Do any of

you know who her Chinese father is?" She popped the peanut into her mouth.

My hands were shaking with anger, and I was incensed to see how calmly she was eating. "My mother will punish you for saying that."

She repeated what I said in a mocking tone, then popped a pickled radish in her mouth and crunched it, without bothering to cover her mouth. "If you are pure white, then all of us must be, too. Isn't that right, my sisters?" The other beauties and their attendants tried halfheartedly to silence her.

"You're a dirty hole!" I said.

She frowned. "What's the matter, little brat? Are you so ashamed to be Chinese that you can't recognize your face in a mirror?"

The others looked down. Two made sideways glances to each other. Billowy Cloud put her hand on Misty Cloud's arm and beseeched her to stop. "She's too young for you to speak of this."

Why was Billowy Cloud acting so charitably toward me? Did that mean she believed what Misty Cloud had said? I fell into a cauldron of rage and I pushed Misty Cloud out of the chair. She was too dumbfounded to move for a moment, then grabbed my ankles and pulled me down. I pounded my fists on her shoulders. She grabbed my hair and flung me away from her.

"Half-breed crazy little bastard girl. You're no better than any of us!"

I hurled myself at her and banged the heel of my hand on her nose. Blood gushed from one of her nostrils, and when she wiped at it and she saw her crimson fingers, she threw herself on top of me again and smeared blood across my face. I was screaming epithets and bit her hand. She screamed, and her eyes looked as if they were going to pop out of her sockets. She grabbed me by the neck and was choking me. I struggled to breathe, and in my panic to escape, I punched her in the eye. She jumped up and cried out in horror. I had delivered one of the worst things that could happen to a girl: a black eye. She

would not be able to appear at parties for as long as the bruise was visible. Misty Cloud shrieked and lunged at me and slapped my face, vowing she would kill me. The other girls and attendants screamed for us to stop. The menservants rushed in and pulled us apart.

All at once, everyone fell silent, and the only sounds were Misty Cloud's curses. It was my mother and Golden Dove. I thought Mother had come to rescue me. But a moment later, I noticed her eyes had gone as gray as knives.

Misty Cloud cried in a fake way: "She damaged my eye—"

I put my hand to my neck, as if it hurt. "She almost choked me to death!"

"I want money for my eye!" Misty Cloud shouted. "I was making more money for you than the others, and if I can't work until my eye is better, I want the money I would have earned."

My mother stared at her. "If I do not give it to you, then what will you do?"

"I'll leave and tell everyone that this brat is a half-breed."

"Well, we can't have you going around telling lies simply because you're angry. Violet, tell her you're sorry."

Misty Cloud gave me a sneer of victory. "What about my money?" she said to my mother.

Mother turned and left the room without answering her. I followed, puzzled that she had not stood up for me. When we reached her room, I cried, "She called me a half-breed bastard."

Mother cursed under her breath. Usually she laughed at people's insults. But this time, her silence frightened me. I wanted her to quell my fears.

"Is it true? Am I half-Chinese? Do I have a Chinese father?"

She turned around and said in a dangerous voice: "Your father is dead. I told you that. Do not talk about this again, not to anyone."

I was terrified by the deadness in her voice, by the many fears it put in my heart. What was true? Which was worse?

The next day, Misty Cloud was gone. She was kicked out, the

others said. I felt no victory now, only queasiness that I had inflicted greater harm than I had intended. I knew the reason she was gone. She had spilled the truth. Would she now spread it wherever she went?

I asked the gatekeeper if he knew where Misty Cloud had gone.

Cracked Egg was scraping a rusty bolt. "She was too busy spitting insults at your mother to stop on her way out and give me the address of her new house. With that black eye, she might not have anywhere to go for a while."

"Did you hear what she called me?" I was anxious for the answer that would tell me how far the lie had spread.

"*Ai-ya*. Don't listen to her. She's the one who has mixed blood," he said. "She thinks the white part of her makes her as good as you."

White? Misty Cloud had dark eyes and dark hair. No one would mistake her for being anything but pure Chinese.

"Do you think I look half-Chinese?" I asked him quietly.

He looked at me and laughed. "You look nothing like her." He went back to scraping the bolt.

I was relieved.

And then he said, "Certainly not half. Maybe just a few drops."

A cold fear ran from scalp to toes.

"Eh, I was only joking." He said it in a soft tone, one that was too comforting.

"Her mother was half-Swedish," I later heard Cracked Egg tell an attendant, "married to a Shanghainese, who soon died and left her all alone with a baby. Her husband's family refused to recognize her as his widow, and since she had no family of her own, she had no choice but to turn tricks on the streets. And then, when she saw men asking for Misty Cloud when she was only eleven, she sold her to a first-class courtesan house, where she would at least have some chance at a better life than hers. That's what I heard from the gatekeeper at the House of Li where Misty Cloud worked before she came here. If she had not thrown a fit at the madam there, she might have been able to come back."

Later, in my room, I sat on my bed for an hour, holding a looking glass in my lap, unable to bring it to my face. And when I finally did, I saw my green eyes and brown hair and sighed with relief. I put down the mirror. The worry soon returned. I pulled my hair back and tied it with a ribbon so that I could see my face fully. I held my breath and picked up the mirror. Again, I saw nothing Chinese. I smiled, and as soon as I did, my plump cheeks tilted my eyes at the outer corners, and this instant change sent my heart pounding. I recognized too clearly the signs of my unknown father: my slightly rounded nose, the tipped-up nostrils, the fat below my eyebrows, the smooth roundness of my forehead, the plump cheeks and lips. My mother had none of these features.

What was happening to me? I wanted to run and leave behind this new face. My limbs were heavy. I looked in the mirror again and again, hoping my face would change back to what I used to see. So this was why my mother had no special affection for me anymore. The Chinese part of my Chinese father was spreading across my face like a stain. If she hated him enough to wish he did not exist, she must feel the same about me. I unbundled my hair and shook it so it fell like a dark curtain over my face.

A cool breeze swept over my arms. The Poet Ghost had arrived to tell me that he had known all along I was Chinese.

I USED A spyglass to observe every Chinese man who came to Hidden Jade Path. They were the educated, the wealthy, and the powerful men of the city. Were any of them my father? I watched to see if my mother showed greater affection or anger toward any of them. But, as usual, she appeared to be as interested in one as in another. She gave them her special smile, her intimate laugh, her well-acted sincere and special words meant only for each and every one of them.

I was aware of only one Chinese man whom she treated with genuine honesty and respect: Cracked Egg, the gatekeeper. She saw

him every day and even took tea with him downstairs. He knew the latest gossip about the men on the guest list. The gatekeepers of all the houses saw and heard everything and shared it among themselves. My mother often remarked to Golden Dove about Cracked Egg's loyalty and sharp mind.

How Cracked Egg got his name I could not imagine. He was hardly stupid. Whatever my mother told him about those businesses, he was able to keep in his head. He could neither read nor write more than a few words, but he could read people's character. He had sharp eyes for recognizing which guest should be welcomed, and what their social standing was. He spotted the faces of their sons who stood awkwardly at the gate, and he made them especially welcome, knowing this visit would be their initiation into the world of male pleasures. He memorized the names of all the wealthy and the powerful who had not yet visited the house. From the particular type of eagerness that a man displayed upon presenting himself at the gate, Cracked Egg could determine what the man intended to do that night—whether to court a Cloud Beauty or a business partner—which he then reported to my mother. He noted the man's appearance—from the grooming of his hair to the heels of his shoes, the tailored details of his clothes and his comfort in wearing them. He knew the hallmarks of long-standing prestige that might separate the man from those who had more recently acquired it. On his rare days off, Cracked Egg dressed in a fine suit, a castoff left by a client. From years of observation, he could imitate the manners of a gentleman, even in his speech. He always kept himself groomed; his hair was barbered, his fingernails were clean. After Cracked Egg said I had drops of Chinese blood, I considered he might be the one who was my father. Even though I liked him, I would be ashamed if he was. And if he was, perhaps my mother was too ashamed to tell me. But how could she have taken him as a lover? He was not cultivated, nor handsome like her other lovers. His face was long, his nose too fleshy, and his eyes were far apart. He was older than my mother, perhaps forty. Next to my mother, he

appeared slight of frame. What's more, thankfully, I did not resemble him in any way.

But what if he was my father? His character was good, that's what mattered. He was always kind. To those men on the list who came to the gate and did not meet his standards, he would be apologetic that there was an excessive number of guests who had arrived unexpectedly for a large party. To the young students and foreign sailors, he gave an uncle's advice: "Cross Beaten Dog Bridge and try the opium flower house called Silver Bells. A great old gal named Plume will let you have a go at her once you've bought a few pipefuls."

Cracked Egg had a special fondness for Plume, who had once worked at Hidden Jade Path until she was too old. She's like a daughter, he'd say. He was protective of all the girls, and they often expressed their gratitude by telling stories to others about his efforts to protect them. Cracked Egg feigned he was not listening, and the girls would call out every now and then, "Isn't that what you did?" He would give them his most baffled look.

If my father was indeed Chinese, I would want him to be someone like Cracked Egg. But then I heard Snowy Cloud tell a story a month after the debacle with Misty Cloud. We were having breakfast in the common room.

"Yesterday a drunk came to the gate," she said. "I was sitting in the front garden, just out of view. I could tell by the cheap and shiny clothes that he was one of those overnight successes, no meat to his words, just yellow fat floating in cold broth. He was not an invited guest and would not have been allowed one step over the threshold. But you know how polite Cracked Egg is with everyone.

"This man asked, Hey, are your whores good at acrobatic feats? He patted a fat purse. Cracked Egg put on his sorry face and told him that all the girls in Hidden Jade Path used a technique called 'stiff corpse.' He went on to demonstrate that our limbs were locked in one position by rigor mortis and our mouths were frozen into a grimace. For that, he told the man, they charge three times as much as

the loose-limbed girls in the Hall of Singing Swallows on Tranquility Lane. So the man happily toddled off to that low-class brothel, which I heard has just had an outbreak of syphilis.”

Everyone laughed uproariously.

“Plume told me he came by last week and smoked a few pipes,” she added. “He told her not to cry, that she was still lovely. She wept in his arms. He always shows her his concern and generosity. Every time they have sex, she said, he insists on paying her twice the usual amount.”

*Every time they have sex.* I imagined Cracked Egg crawling over my body, his long face looking at my scared one. He was not my father. He was the gatekeeper.

I ASKED MY mother if we could visit an orphanage for abandoned half-breed girls. She did not hesitate in agreeing it was a good idea. My heart beat in alarm. She gathered up some of my old dresses and toys. At the orphanage, I carried them into a large room crowded with girls of all ages. Some looked entirely Chinese, and others purely white—until they smiled and their eyes tilted upward at a slant.

Now, whenever Mother was too busy to see me, I took this as evidence that she had never wanted me. I was her half-American, half-hated child, and I guessed the reason she could not tell me the truth: She would have to admit that she did not love me. I was always on the verge of asking her about my father, but the question remained lodged in my throat. This new knowledge now sharpened my mind. Whenever the courtesans or servants looked at me, I detected sneers. When visitors gave me more than a passing glance, I suspected they were wondering why I looked half-Chinese. The older I became, the more this side of me would show, and I feared that over time, I would no longer be treated like an American, but as no better than other Chinese girls. And thus I sought to rid myself of whatever might suggest I was a half-breed.

I no longer spoke Chinese to the Cloud Beauties or to the servants. I used only pidgin. If they talked to me in Chinese, I pretended I did not understand them. I told them again and again that I was an American. I wanted them to recognize we were not the same. I wanted them to hate me, because this would be proof that I did not belong to their world. And a few of them did come to hate me. Cracked Egg, however, laughed at me and said he had had both Chinese and foreigners treat him worse. He continued to speak to me in Shanghainese and I had to acknowledge that I understood, because he was the one who told me when Mother had returned, or that she wanted to speak to me, or that she had asked that the carriage be brought around to take us to a new restaurant for lunch.

No matter what I did, I feared the stranger-father within my blood. Would his character also emerge and make me even more Chinese? And if that came to pass, where would I belong? What would I be allowed to do? Would anyone love a half-hated girl?