

married, it will become a challenge to this kind of consciousness. Some people will say that you have a psychological problem, or that you have some shameful private matters you want to hide, or that you have some political problems, or that you are sly and capricious, contemptuous of common people. Since you do not respect social customs that have been passed down for thousands of years, you must be an evil person who deviates from the classic norms and rebels against tradition. . . . Anyhow, they would think up all kinds of vulgar tricks to ruin you. Therefore, you would reluctantly comply with the pressure of this kind of consciousness, casually marry, and harness your own neck to that unbearable chain that separates marriage and love. Then, in days to come, you would suffer for the rest of your life from this unbreakable chain.

I really want to shout: "Don't worry about the pettiness of others! Let us patiently wait—wait for the person who calls us. Even if we never get one, we should not unthinkingly marry! Don't worry about this single life turning into a horrible disaster. One should realize this may just be a sign that society is advancing in the realms of culture, cultivation, taste. . . ."

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The Corner Forsaken by Love

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I

Even though it was the last year of the seventies in the twentieth century, love—in the eyes of the young people of Tiantang Commune—was a strange and mysterious word, embarrassing to mention. That was why, when the new Youth League secretary pronounced the word during a meeting in the commune hall to oppose the "buying and selling of marriages," the entire audience was startled. The young fellows winked mischievously at each other and broke into loud laughter, while the girls, hastily lowering their heads, blushed, giggled, and exchanged bashful glances.

But the delicate young woman, Shen Huangmei, sitting in the corner by the window—the party Youth League group leader of the Ninth Team, Tiantang Brigade—did not smile. Her face was pale. Her large, melancholy eyes gazed aimlessly out the window. She acted as if she heard nothing, as if nothing concerned her. Suddenly, however, her eyelashes quivered, exerting themselves to shake off the crystal-like things that wet them. "Love"—the word she could not under-

stand—was at that moment strongly stirring the heart of this nineteen-year-old girl. She felt humiliated, sad, inexplicably fearful. She thought of her elder sister Cunni, whom she missed terribly, yet would always blame. Ah, if only there had been no Xiao Baozi; if that incident hadn't happened, everything would have been fine! Her sister would have sat beside her, laughing heartily like a boy. After the meeting, her sister would have pulled her along with her strong arms, and together they would have picked out two bundles of orange thread in the commune cooperative and returned home to embroider their pillows. . . .

Of the five sisters, Cunni was the most fortunate. She had come into the world immediately after the bumper harvest of 1955. When she was a month old, her family could easily afford a banquet table.* The young father, Shen Shanwang, held up the precious little bundle wrapped in a patterned quilt and said in high spirits:

“. . . I took Linghua to the midwives' station and then went off for a moment to deposit some money in the credit cooperative. When I came back, the baby had been born! Nobody could believe that the delivery had been so smooth the first time! Some said that we should name her Shunni [Smooth Girl]. I thought, 'For poor farmers like us, it was a miracle that we had money to deposit in a bank!' Having had her at this time, we thought we should call her Cunni [Deposit Girl]. Wait till she grows up; we'll have even better days!"

The happiness that flowed from his heart was infectious; it spread to everyone who came to congratulate the new parents. At the time, he was the deputy leader of Kaoshanzhuang Cooperative.† Optimistic, competent, he radiated courage and strength. The pear trees he had grafted in the orchard over the hill had produced a bumper harvest the first year they bore fruit. And, as for wheat and corn, they had more than enough, even after taxes. In the little village of twenty-odd households, everyone was as happy as he. Just like him, they confidently looked forward to a bright future.

When Huangmei was born five years later, conditions were very different. Kaoshanzhuang Cooperative had been incorporated into Tiantang Commune as the Ninth Team of Tiantang Brigade. The fine name Tiantang [paradise] had been given to the brigade personally by the party secretary at the county level, who had reasoned, "Communism is paradise, and the people's commune is the bridge." At the time, all the commune members, including team leader Shen

* In China, when a child is one month old, parents who can afford to throw a banquet, the size of which is measured by the number of tables of guests. Very few farmers are able to afford even one table. The fact that this banquet was given for a girl baby shows that her father is very progressive.

† Literally, the Cooperative at the Side of the Mountain.

Shanwang, firmly believed that paradise was only a few feet away. All they had to do was wholeheartedly cut down all the collectively owned pear trees together with all the ginkgo nut and chestnut trees around the houses,* and with the greatest haste deliver the wood to the backyard furnace operated by the commune†—as if, as soon as that marvelous puffing stove ejected bright, beautiful flowers of steel, they would easily stroll across the “bridge” and enter communism. But aside from a pile of iron that occupied cultivated fields and turned tons of trees into ashes, there was no other effect. Moreover, due to a drought, they couldn't even collect seedlings for the wheat and corn.

The taro roots that replaced the pear trees were as thin as the tips of Cunni's fingers. When Linghua, who was big with child, returned after begging for food at a nearby village, Shen Shanwang had already been dismissed from his post because he had “attacked the great effort to process steel.” When his second daughter was born—a weak little baby—Shen Shanwang gazed at her with a bitter smile on his swollen face and sighed, “Who told her to arrive in this lean year? What a Huangmeizi [Lean Little Sister]!”

Perhaps because her mother had been well-nourished when she was born and nursed, Cunni grew and thrived. She could grow just by eating leaves, and generate energy just by drinking cold water! Before her sixteenth birthday, she had already developed into a healthy, robust young woman. With a wooden pole,‡ she replaced her sickly mother who had given birth to three more sisters, and helped her father shoulder the responsibility of the family. In the most strenuous activity of the year—carrying lumber down the mountain to the state lumber farm—she ranked third highest in work points among the women workers. She left for the fields before dawn, and returned under the starlit sky. After gulping down a large bowl of taro or cornmeal, she would fall off to sleep without a thought. Even when, at the annual distribution of income, the figure for the family's overspend-

* The nut trees around the houses would have been privately owned.

† This refers to the attempt to make steel in backyard furnaces during the Great Leap Forward, the campaign begun by Mao in 1958 to catapult China into communism and the position of a major industrial power. Central features of this campaign were the formation of people's communes from agricultural cooperatives that had been established in the early years of the Republic and an emphasis on economic development through “self-reliance” as well as greater collectivization. During the Great Leap Forward, communes were told to produce steel in backyard furnaces, and massive construction and land reclamation projects requiring the labor of vast numbers of peasants were undertaken. For a variety of reasons—among them severe droughts and poor central planning based on inflated reports by local officials—the program was not a success. Today the official view of the Great Leap Forward is that it was overly ambitious.

‡ For carrying baskets of things, or lumber.

ing was greater than ever and they could not get a cent of cash, she was still just as optimistic as ever, not knowing what worry was. On the spur of the moment, she would put her arm around Huangmei, pressing her full breast tightly against her sister's frail body and lightly hum an old folk song that had been popular in her mother's day.

There are often strange things in life that happen only once in a great while and yet have obvious origins. They take people by surprise, yet they are not really anything extraordinary. Take deformities, for example. Whatever strange forms they take, there is always a physiological reason for them. People are surprised by them just because their occurrence is so rare. What happened between Cunni and Xiao Biaozi was just that.

Xiao Baozi was the only son of Uncle Jiagui at the east end of the village. His real name was Xiao Bao, and he was the same age as Cunni. This strong young man worked with fearful energy. One time, when he was carrying lumber, a cold rain began. Aunt Jiagui slipped and fell in front of him and broke her pole. Xiao Bao helped his mother to her feet. Then he tied the two piles of wood together over his bare shoulder, and—gritting his teeth and panting and puffing—carried the wood all the way down the mountain. The wood weighed in at three hundred and five cattles. People were amazed. They said, "That Xiao Bao is really something—just like a little leopard! So that is how Xiao Baozi [Little Leopard] became his nickname.

In the early spring of 1974, the team cadres went off to the commune early one morning to criticize Confucius* while the strong labor power† went to work at the reservoir. Caretaker Grandpa Xianger kept Cunni behind to help him put the storage room in order. The old man directed the young woman's work, nagging and complaining all the while.

"The cadres come around once and point their fingers: 'There!' We busy ourselves the whole year cutting through mountains and chipping away at rocks and then a flash flood comes along and whoosh! Everything is washed away! Next year, the cadres come again and point their fingers: 'There!' They have no regard for the harmony of wind, water, and earth."

"Isn't that like 'the foolish old man who moved the mountain?' "‡ Cunni asked, disinterestedly continuing the conversation.

"As if moving a mountain will fill bellies! . . . Come, first sieve this pile—slowly—don't spill it! . . . Look at this corn grown over

* This took place during the height of the anti-Lin Biao, anti-Confucius campaign.

† All strong, able-bodied adults.

‡ A story that was often quoted by Mao to illustrate that with the right motivation and effort, anything can be accomplished.

the roots of the pear. It is so lean, who knows whether it will sprout?" The old man complained about the corn seedlings.

"Isn't that 'taking grain as the basis?'"* the young woman answered, still distracted. Her heart wandered. Though putting the storage room in order was light work, it was a great deal more fun to carry soil with the young men at the reservoir.

At that moment, a sturdy figure appeared in front of the storage room. "Let me do some work, Grandpa Xianger."

"Xiao Baozi!" Cunni cried out happily, "Didn't you sprain your leg carrying stones yesterday?"

Grandpa Xianger said, "Go back home and rest!"

"I can't stand lying around," Xiao Baozi smiled earnestly. "So long as I don't carry heavy loads, a little light work won't hurt!" While he spoke, he picked up the winnowing spade to help Cunni with the sieving.

Grandpa Xianger happily squatted on the side and smoked a cigarette. Then, remembering that he needed to ask the carpenter to come and repair the plow, he gave a few orders and left. Activities like cleaning out the storage room and sieving seedlings were really no tasks at all in the hands of two such quick and diligent nineteen-year-olds. In a very short while, the seedlings had been packed, and the taro spread out to dry. Xiao Baozi said, "Let's rest awhile!" He spread his cotton jacket out on top of a full sack, and lay down on top of it.

Cunni wiped her sweat and sat down on a sack facing him. She had taken off her cotton jacket a long time ago, and was wearing a dark green sweater that had been part of her mother's dowry. Though it had been taken apart and washed many times and patched with several different colors of yarn, and though it was getting too short and too tight for her body, in the eyes of the young women in the Ninth Team, the sweater was still an enviable luxury.

Xiao Baozi stared at her healthy face reddened by the sun; he stared at her full bosom. A strange, itching feeling that he had never experienced before arose in his heart. It excited him, but made him apprehensive. So, distractedly, he tried to make conversation.

"The day before yesterday Wuzhuang showed a movie. Didn't you go?"

"Of course I didn't go. It was too far away!" Trying to avoid his burning stare, she lowered her head and began pulling at the loose ends on her sweater sleeves.

Wuzhuang is a brigade in Linxian County. To get there, you have to go over two big hills. Even young fellows like Xiao Baozi had to

* A party line, meaning that self-sufficiency in grain should be given priority.

walk more than an hour to reach it. It was not regarded as a rich team; the value of ten work points the previous year had been only thirty-eight fen. But this was enough for the members of Tiantang Commune to cluck their tongues in envy. What attracted the young men most was the train station thirty kilometers west of Wuzhuang. Last spring festival, Xiao Baozi had gotten together with a few fellow workers to go there to see the train. The round trip had taken half a day, and they had waited at the station for two hours. When they had finally seen the dark green passenger train zoom past the station, they were satisfied. Members of the Ninth Team rarely had such an opportunity. As to actually boarding the train, only the commune accountant, "Xu the Blind,"* would have had that enviable experience.

"I didn't want to go anyway," said Cunni. "*Tunnel Warfare, Mine Warfare, The Battle from North to South*—I've seen them eight hundred times! I can recite every word in the scripts. . . ."

Xiao Baozi stretched and sighed, "If you don't go, what else is there to do? The playing cards are already in shreds. I tried asking a friend to go through the back door at the commune supply cooperative, but he still hasn't been able to get more."

Apart from going to the movies and playing cards, the young people had nothing to do after work. The team subscribed to a provincial paper, but it only came into service when Xu the Blind held a meeting.† And even he would always mispronounce "Confucius says" as "Confucius days." Of course, nobody would correct the only intellectual in the team. In the past, it had been popular to sing folk songs about love, but now these were considered "immoral" and forbidden.

Suddenly, Xiao Baozi excitedly sat up, "Hey, Xu the Blind says that in foreign movies he has seen . . . Huh! That was really something!" He clucked his tongue and snickered. "There are. . . ."

"What?" Cunni could not help asking, seeing the amused look on his face.

"Hee, hee, hee . . . I can't say it." Blushing, Xiao Paozi kept laughing to himself.

"What is it? Come on!"

"Okay, I'll tell, but don't you scold me!"

"Come on! Say it!"

"There are—" He stifled his laughter until he was doubled over.

Cunni already anticipated the terrible thing he was going to tell. She picked up a clod of soil.

Sure enough, Xiao Baozi gathered up his courage and proclaimed: "There are men and women hugging and kissing! Hee, hee, hee. . . ."

* A nickname—he wasn't really blind.

† Because most of the team members were illiterate.

"Yich, disgusting!" Cunni blushed and quickly threw the clod of soil at him.

"It's true! Xu the Blind said so himself!" Xiao Baozi dodged the attack.

"Shameless!" Another clod of soil. The earth, mixed with particles of corn, fell on his shoulders and down his neck. He retaliated. A handful of soil dropped down Cunni's open collar. The young woman pretended she was cross. "Damn you!"

Xiao Baozi smiled, embarrassed. He took off his shirt and wiped his muscular chest with it. Cunni stiffened her mouth to show her annoyance, and began to take off her sweater, intending to shake off the particles of soil sticking to her chest. . . . That instant, Xiao Baozi froze as if electrified. He stared blankly, his breath stopped, and a gush of warm blood rushed to his head. It was because when the young woman took off her sweater, her shirt was pulled up, exposing half of a pale, full, and bouncing breast.

Like a leopard springing from its cave, Xiao Baozi leaped forward. He embraced her tightly as if he had completely lost his senses. Startled, the young woman tried to lift her arm to block him. But when his burning, quivering lips touched her own moist lips, she was overcome with a mysterious dizziness. Her eyes closed and her outstretched arms were paralyzed. All her intentions to resist disappeared instantly. A kind of primitive reflex burned like a fierce flame in the blood of this pair of materially poor, spiritually barren, but physically robust young people. Traditional morality, rational dignity, the danger of breaking the law, the shame in a young woman's heart—all of these, everything, in a moment were burnt to ashes.

II

The lean-looking corn sprouted few shoots. After the first hoeing, fourteen-year-old Huangmei began to notice that her sister had changed. She no longer laughed with the same carelessness, and she always sat by herself on the edge of the bed, lost in thought. When you talked to her, it was as if she hadn't heard a sentence. At times she saw her with pale face and lowered head, wiping away tears, but at other times she would be blushing and laughing to herself. . . . The strangest thing of all was the night Huangmei suddenly woke up to discover that, beside her, her sister's bed was empty. The next morning, when Huangmei asked her about it, Cunni became so anxious; her face turned red, then white; she even insisted that Huangmei had been dreaming.

Just around that time, Mother came down with a kidney disease. Father was busy going to their uncle's place at Wuzhuang to borrow

money in order to get a doctor. The house was in a state of confusion. Nobody had the time to pay attention to the changes in Cunni. Only Huangmei, in her sensitive young heart, had a subtle premonition that some horrible trouble was about to descend on her sister.

When indeed the trouble inevitably came, it was far more horrible than anything Huangmei could have imagined.

That was the season when the corn grew to about half a person's height. After working a whole day, the commune members gathered after dinner at the team's headquarters to listen to Xu the Blind recite "Confucius days" in front of the oil lamp. Huangmei did not wait for the meeting to finish; she slipped back home, and after putting her three younger sisters to bed, went to bed herself. But after only a little while she was awakened with a start by a blast of noise and commotion; yelling, bursts of laughter, hitting and scolding, crying and swearing, were mixed up with the barking of almost all the village dogs and echoes from the hills. She had never heard such a clamor. Frightened, Huangmei lit the lamp. The horrible noise came closer and closer, until it was right outside the door. Suddenly, her sister rushed headlong through the doorway, and, clothes disheveled and hair all over her face, fell heavily on the bed wailing. And then, with his back bared and both hands tied behind him, Xiao Baozi was ushered into the house by the captain of the local militia. Under the light of several torches, Huangmei saw that his body bore bloody marks where he had been beaten with branches. He knelt down stiffly, intense shame and remorse on his face, and let Huangmei's pale-faced father slap him across the mouth. Mother was already paralyzed in a chair, covering her face and whimpering. Outside the door, crowded around in a solid mass, were nearly all the adults and children of the entire village, each contributing to the chatter, scolding, ridicule, insults, and stirred-up feelings. Huangmei, terrified, finally understood: her older sister had committed the most shameful thing in the world! Suddenly she broke down and cried. She felt utter shame, disgrace, hate, and anger. Her dearest sister had brought disaster to the whole family and had brought upon herself misfortune that could not be washed away. The beginnings of womanly self-respect had not yet formed in her young heart, and therefore she was particularly sensitive and easily hurt. Huangmei cried and cried tears of sorrow that gushed forth like a river bursting its dike. At the same time, she was muttering in a muffled voice even she could not hear clearly, "Shame! Disgraced the whole family! . . . Shame! Disgraced the whole team! . . . Shame! Shame! . . ."

The commotion lasted till midnight.

Afterwards, in a faint, she fell asleep. Half asleep, she heard the sound of the team leader driving away the crowd, the sound of Uncle

and Auntie Jiagui sincerely apologizing to her parents, the sound of Grandpa Xianger consoling and reminding them, "Don't make it difficult for the child. Be careful! She may not be able to take it!" Mother's scolding gradually subsided into a low, consoling murmur. Huangmei finally fell asleep on the tear-soaked pillow, only to be continually frightened out of her sleep by nightmares. During the last nightmare, she suddenly heard shouts in the distance: "Help, someone! Help, someone! . . ."

Huangmei sat up sharply. The east was already bright. Sister Cunni was not in bed, and her mother had also gone. She quickly scrambled up and ran outside with bare feet, following the shadowy figures in front of her running to San Mu Pond at the edge of the village. Her sister had already been clumsily dragged out of the water and was stiffly lying there. So quickly, so easily had she died!

Mother, holding her daughter in her arms, was sobbing hoarsely, crying out as if she were mad. Time after time, she was dragged to her feet by her fellow villagers and relatives, only to fall paralyzed to the ground again. Father sat motionless at the edge of the pond, distractedly staring at the calm surface of the water, totally motionless, as if he were part of a withered tree stump.

The rosy morning light was reflected on Cunni's wet face, restoring color to her pale cheeks. Her expression was very calm, very peaceful, and showed not the slightest bit of pain, protest, complaint or sense of having been wronged. She had paid the highest price for her own blind burst of energy. Now she had already washed clean her shame and her crime. Of course, her death was a waste. But for her, was there anything in life worth cherishing anymore? Before she leaped into the abyss of death, she had even had time to think of another matter: that was, to take off the torn, palm-green sweater she wore and hang it on a tree. The only property that had been given to her by the human world she left to her sister; it still carried her the warmth of her body and the fragrance of youth. . . .

The matter did not end there. After about two weeks had passed, the sounds of weeping could be heard at the house of Uncle Jiagui: two public security officers had taken away Xiao Baozi. Again the whole village became the scene of a commotion. The villagers ran from the fields and stood, frightened, along the road, silently staring at the pair of shining things on Xiao Baozi's wrists. Only the Jiaguis, tearful and sniffing, followed behind their only son.

"Comrade, Comrade!" Shen Shanwang put down his hoe and ran forward. This team leader of the fifties had seen a bit of the world. Though the death of his daughter had added ten years to his age, and he had cooled toward life, at this moment his sense of responsibility

kept him from remaining silent. He said to the public security officer: "Comrade, we have not made any accusations against him!"

The public security officer gave him a fierce stare, and said contemptuously: "Go, get out of here! What is this nonsense about accusations or no accusations! A rapist and a criminal who caused a death! What is this nonsense about no accusation!"

Xiao Baozi remained very calm. He lifted his head, and his eyes stared aimlessly around. Suddenly, he slowed his pace a bit, and then, with a burst of energy, started running toward the deserted hill opposite.

"Stop! Where are you going!" the public security officers yelled, immediately taking off after him.

But Xiao Baozi ran recklessly on, stumbling as he trod on the wild grass and scrub. At last, he threw himself, sobbing, on Cunni's new grave, his hands frantically scratching, his fingers digging deeply into the wet yellow earth. Not until the public security officers ran over and shouted at him did he stop his tears. And then, stiffly kneeling before the grave, he respectfully kowtowed three times.

III

After the meeting, Huangmei went out of the commune hall with a heavy heart. Tientang Commune occupies a corner of the county, and Tientang's Ninth Team occupies a corner of this corner. She took a look at the setting sun hanging low in the pine woods to the west, worrying that she wouldn't make it home before dark. Abruptly, she gave up her plan to take a look at the supply and marketing cooperative, and from the back street went right through the wheat fields, climbing the hilly path with quick steps.

"Shen Huangmei, wait! Let's go together!" the voice of the Youth branch secretary, Xu Rongshu, called out from behind her. He lived with the Eighth Team, which was separated from the Ninth Team only by San Mu Pond. Huangmei had hoped very much to have someone to walk with on this part of the long mountain path. In the winter dusk, the flat areas between the hills were very desolate. But she did not wish her fellow traveler to be a young man, and she particularly did not wish him to be Xu Rongshu. Therefore, after hesitating a little, she quickened her steps. At the end of the wheat fields, when Xu Rongshu caught up with her, she cautiously moved away, making sure that there remained more than four paces between them.

The death of her sister Cunni had not only left her the palm-green sweater, it had left in her heart an unshakable shame and fear as well. She had taken over her sister's wood pole prematurely; her frail

body was weighed down with having taken on the responsibility for her family, and her frail young heart was weighed down with a heaviness of spirit. She was afraid of, and hated, all young men. When she saw them, she would never strike up a conversation, and she avoided them by keeping her distance. She even despised her girl friends who did not fear or hate young men. She had become an unapproachable, eccentric girl.

But somehow, irresistibly, adolescence arrived. The yellowish cast of her face had faded, revealing a rosy, tender blush; her eyebrows had grown thick; her eyes had become clear black and white, moist and shiny. She felt her breasts swell, her shoulders and back gradually fill out. When she wore her sister's palm-green sweater, it already felt tight. In the depths of her heart there often arose a fresh, subtle kind of pleasure. When she saw flowers in bloom, she felt that the flowers were so beautiful, she could not help picking one to put in her hair. When she heard birds sing, she felt that the birds' song was so pleasing to the ear that she could not help standing still to listen for awhile. Everything had become so beautiful—leaves, fields, wild grass, drops of water on the grass. . . . Everything around her stirred her. Often, in front of her mother's broken mirror, she secretly checked herself over, and, even when she was getting water at the edge of the pond, she could not help casting a satisfied smile on the slender shadow of her figure. She began to go around with her girl friends. During festivals, she let them hold her hands for a look around the commune's supply and marketing cooperative. Even though she remained cautious with young men, gradually she came to feel that they were not really that disgusting. . . . At this moment, Xu Rongshu appeared in her life.

She had met Xu Rongshu when she was still very young. It had happened when she was attending first grade at the primary school established by the Eighth Team. The boys were bullying her. A classmate from a higher grade who was about the same age as her sister Cunni, came over to defend her, and even used his sleeves to wipe away her tears. Afterwards, because her mother had given birth to her youngest sister, she left school, not even finishing the second grade. Whenever Rongshu saw her carrying her younger sister on her back, cutting grass for the pigs near San Mu Pond, he would secretly leave his friends, snatch the sickle from her hands, and quickly cut a huge pile of grass. After throwing this in her basket, he would leave hurriedly. Not long after, the sounds of gongs and drums could be heard coming from the Eighth Team. Huangmei took her sister over to watch, only to see Rongshu along the path at the edge of San Mu Pond wearing a red flower and a new military uniform that was too big for him. He was going off to be a soldier.

She didn't see him again until last year during a meeting of the local branch of the Communist Youth League. He had just returned from service a few days previous. Entering through the doorway of the brigade's meeting room, he shyly glanced around and, just as Huangmei and the others who had newly joined the Youth League had done, quietly sat down in a corner. At that moment, several of the more active members who knew him came over, and insisted that he talk about military life. He blushed furiously with embarrassment and shyly declined, saying: "I was a peacetime soldier. I never saw any action, so what is there to talk about! . . ." He was entirely without the kind of majesty and pomp that went with a young person's image of a revolutionary soldier. She didn't understand why, but this aroused in Huangmei a good feeling toward him. When a vote was taken for committee members of the local Youth League and Xu Rongshu's name was read, she bravely raised her hand straight up in the air, expressing her genuine desire.

During the next Youth League activity, the newly elected branch secretary, Xu Rongshu, made an unusual suggestion that displeased the branch deputy secretary, who had been the captain of the militia. In the past, except for meetings, there had been only one content to the activities of Tiantang Commune's Youth League: labor. They would organize heavy labor such as gathering manure and moving stones beforehand. First they would have a meeting; then they would work. This type of unpaid labor was often conducted until very late, and was called "the model example of members of the Communist Party Youth League." But Rongshu broke this rule, saying: "Young people have their own special characteristics. I suggest that tonight we see a movie!"

When they heard this, everyone was dumbfounded. And then, laughing loudly, they began to clap. He had been so considerate and efficient, he had already booked the tickets beforehand in a factory near the commune. He had a friend there, a fellow soldier who, after the service, had gone to work at that factory. After a short meeting, he led everyone out. Young men and women walked happily in threes and fives amid much laughter—some boldly humming mountain love songs. It was just like a festival. This was the first time in her life that Huangmei had sat in a chair with a back and handrest and comfortably watched a movie. And that evening, also for the first time in her life, a young man entered her dreams. He looked like the male character in the movie who had led the young people in repairing the reservoir, and even more like her party Youth League secretary. Laughing in a goodnatured way, he said something very close to her. When she woke up, the moonlight shone on the edge of the bed, soft, bright, and clean. For the first time in her life, her heart overflowed

with a range of sweet, tender emotions. But then she immediately became fearful. "What is going on?" Vexed, she thought: Oh, Oh! Thank goodness, it was just a dream! . . .

Nevertheless, after she became Youth League group leader,* Rongshu came around often, looking for her. As usual, Huangmei's attitude was solemn and cold. She never invited him into the house; one stayed outside the door, one inside, maintaining a distance of more than four feet. They talked about nothing but matters like announcements of meetings, one asking, the other answering—strictly official business. After the conversations Rongshu would leave. Huangmei always pretended she was busy with something, and then would go outside secretly to watch him go. How she longed for him to stay and chat a bit more, to come in and sit for awhile and talk about something else; yet she was afraid for him to do this. When their contact with each other increased, the contradictory feelings grew.

One day, she returned home later than usual, and her eleven-year-old sister said to her, "Brother Rongshu dropped by!"

Her mother had also returned, and now she quickly asked, "What was he coming here for?"

Father said, "He came to see me to ask me about transplanting mountain pear trees: How many years would they bear fruit? About how much money does a mut of hilly ground cost? I said, 'Is that not a capitalist road?' He said, 'This is not called capitalism, it said so in the papers!' That boy!"†‡

Father shook his head disapprovingly, but Huangmei observed that he liked this young man, and secretly she was delighted. But her mother was not pleased. She knit her brows, saying: "He is acting out of place!"

Huangmei had long heard that Rongshu, because of a matter about limiting the commune members' raising of ducks, had quarreled with the leader of the Eighth Team (his uncle). Some people said that he was wild, that he wouldn't obey the leaders, et cetera, et cetera, but she never paid any attention to these remarks. Now, when her mother said this, she became annoyed. She wanted to argue and say a few words in his defense, but observing her mother's suspicious glance focused on herself, she could only remain silent, lower her head to

* The party group corresponds to the team level of the commune. The party branch corresponds to the brigade level.

† A *mu* is one-sixth of an acre.

‡ Under the rule of the Gang of Four, each commune was to be as self-sufficient as possible; the growing of fruit as a cash crop was considered capitalist and was therefore taboo. After the fall of the Gang of Four, the government policy on cash crops changed.

eat, and pretend unconcern. After dinner, her mother began mumbling in the next room. Through the crack in the door, she heard: "There's already been gossip! We must be careful that she doesn't follow in Cunni's footsteps!"

Huangmei felt as if her heart had been pierced with a knife; she threw herself onto her bed crying. She resented her sister for having done such a shameful, unforgivable thing and resented her mother, who did not understand her daughter's heart. And she hated herself. How could she really like a young man? It was unthinkable, shameful! Shameless! Liking a man! . . . Shameless! Reluctantly, she scolded herself, burying her face deep inside the blankets, not letting her sad cries be heard.

She made up her mind, from that day on, not to take any more notice of him. If there was any matter to be discussed, let him look for the deputy group leader! Would he feel strange to be treated so unjustly? Let him do what he wanted! Who had asked him to be a man!

After a while, she truly began to hate Rongshu. That was because she had accidentally heard Xu the Blind at the team's headquarters saying, "This boy Rongshu does not really know what's what. Again he has quarreled with the deputy secretary of the brigade!" Someone asked, "What about?" Xu the Blind said; "Ha! He wanted to seek justice for Xiao Baozi!"

"What?" Startled, Huangmei nearly cried out. Xiao Baozi's sentence was due to his own deeds; he deserved what he had gotten for his crime. It had not been any kind of misjudgment or false case. It could not be reversed. This seemed to be the view most people held. Huangmei could not have held any different view. Because of her sister's death, she only felt toward Xiao Baozi more of a share of hate. But how could Rongshu, a Communist Party member, a Youth League branch secretary whom she respected, speak up for the kind of bad person Xiao Baozi was? Was he sympathetic to Xiao Baozi? Or had he received some favors from the Jiaguis? . . . She was shaking with anger, and wanted to confront Rongshu. But when, at the edge of San Mu Pond, she saw Rongshu smiling and goodnatureedly walking toward her, her gust of courage disappeared. How could she mention that matter? Really, how could she say it to him? So she hurriedly turned around, pretending that she was heading elsewhere. She took the long way around to go home. Then she began to regret that she had. . . .

So it was like this: she was angry with him; she hated him; she wouldn't acknowledge him; she feared him; yet she couldn't stop thinking about him. . . . She kept going back and forth, contradict-

ing herself. Such was the heart of this nineteen-year-old country girl.

If we call this love, then, for those young men and women living in other places, it may be difficult to understand. But Huangmei is in Tiantang's Ninth Team, this corner of the county's corner. Of the young women here who are Huangmei's age, more than half have also had Rongshu and Huangmei's kind of subtle, secretive love, contradictions, and pain. But usually, before too long, the problem disappears, and all is calm. A relative or somebody comes with a palm-green or rosy red wool sweater as a gift, proceeds with what looks like haggling over prices, and reaches an agreement. Then, one day, accompanied by this relative or someone else, the young fellow comes. This pair, who had not even dared to look at each other, then go together to Wuzhuang or somewhere and take a picture together. By the agreed upon date, she leaves her parents and departs from this corner. . . .

This is a road that people here are used to and often consider publicly proper, but in today's meeting the person giving the report was talking about it as "the buying and selling of marriages." She even said something like "love!" Sister and Xiao Baozi, that was called "love?" No, no! That was shameful, illegal! But then, was there really another way? Huangmei felt confused, and could not help thinking of Rongshu. At this moment, he was right behind her, her silent companion. Her girl friends who had come to the meeting had all gone to the supply and marketing cooperative. On the quiet mountain path, there were only the two of them. She heard her own pounding heartbeats. . . .

Suddenly, Rongshu stopped, looked all around, and in a smooth, deep voice began to sing: "I love this blue sea, Our mother country's ocean frontiers are so vast! . . ."

Huangmei was startled. But as she listened, the warm, passionate song affected her. Unconsciously she turned her head, revealing an approving smile.

"Looking at this spread of pine forest on the hill, I think of the ocean! The days on the ship! . . ." As if talking to himself, he said smilingly, "Your heart swells when you see the sea. If only our fellow villagers and relatives could have a look at the ocean."

Huangmei listened smiling. Her caution was quietly disappearing.

"Huangmei, have you been to the main street? In the market, people are selling eggs and vegetables and nobody is driving them away!* Did you know? Rural policy is to be changed! Hilly land must be taken out of grain production and planted with pear trees. The

* Under the Gang of Four, private marketing was branded as capitalism and suppressed. Around 1977, the policy began to change, and private trading activities were allowed.

good cadre Uncle Shanwang will again be useful! First you must grow young trees on your family's private plot!" He was making his points in a jumbled way, he was so excited. "Aunty Shanwang's health is not good, so she can cut some weeds to weave baskets at home, to exchange for some petty cash. Your next oldest sister can start working next year, right? The two younger ones can take care of a few lambs! I have an army friend who is a cadre in the commune, and he told me that the central government will issue a document in the very near future to let the peasants get rich. Really! You don't believe it?"

His eyes twinkled with optimism; his voice sounded like the water in a stream, sincere and moving. Huangmei did not believe this talk. As to getting rich, she had never hoped for it; she had never even thought of it. Ever since she was old enough to understand things, any talk of getting rich and prosperous had always been linked with capitalism as something to be criticized and struggled against. What shook her was that Rongshu knew so clearly the conditions of her family, and was so caring. He was using this way to answer her coldness, her caution, and reluctance. She was ashamed and felt her face burning.

"Yes, if you can't get rich and prosperous, if you live poorly all your life, then there is nothing to be proud of!" Shaking his head as if he had a lot in his heart, he said, "Take the case of Xiao Baozi. Can you blame him? Poor, backward, ignorant, foolish! Put those together with the old feudalism and an honest young man is dragged off to jail! Your sister was treated even more unjustly! . . ."

On hearing him mention this, the young girl instantly felt humiliated. Angrily, she gave him a severe look and shouted: "I will not allow you to mention that subject! I will not allow you to speak of my sister! . . ."

Desperately, she tried to hold back the tears in her eyes; then she abruptly rushed up the hill, and with long steps ran downhill, leaving Rongshu bewildered.

IV

By the time she reached the door of the house, it had already become completely dark, and she had calmed down. Her little sister called to her from inside and came rushing to meet her. Right behind her, Mother, her face wreathed in a happy smile, also came running. This made Huangmei feel strange. Her poor, hardworking, sickly mother had aged prematurely. Particularly after the death of her sister, her face wore a blank expression when it wasn't showing sadness. What had happened that had made her so happy?

"Quick, quick, go have a look at your bed!" Mother nearly broke into a laugh.

On the bed lay a brand-new, sky-blue sweater. Under the faint oil lamp, it radiated a gentle, tempting glow.

Huangmei took it in her hands, but before she had even felt its softness and warmth, she instantly, as if having received an electric shock, threw it away. Startled she asked, "Who is that for?"

"It's yours!" Mother was just pouring out steaming hot corn soup from the pot. Excited, she gave her a meaningful glance, "Your Second Aunt^y* brought it over. . . ."

"Second Aunt^y?" Huangmei shivered. Her legs felt weak, and she collapsed onto the edge of the bed, stunned. Second Aunt^y had come over a short while ago, and had spent half a day muttering with her mother, all the time looking her over from head to toe. At the time she had been very aware of that stare; there had been something very secretive about it. And now here she had presented her with the sweater! . . .

Mother sat down beside her, and in an unusually gentle voice said: "He is in Second Uncle's Third Team in Wuzhuang, and he is three years older than you. His brother is a worker at the Beiguan train station, getting more than fifty a month! . . ."

Huangmei felt ice-cold sweat crawl slowly down her back. She was shaking all over, her ears were ringing, and she could no longer hear anything clearly.

"I don't want it!" she cried, struggling. "No, I don't want it!"

She threw the sweater at her mother, but her mother still held onto her, smiling: "No one is demanding that you be married off immediately! During the Dragon Boat Festival, he will come to meet you and give you clothes. Sixteen suits! . . . Then when you get engaged he will give five hundred yuan in cash!"

"No, no, no!" A feeling of humiliation rose up in Huangmei's heart. She felt a choking horror. She did not know what to do; tears at having been wronged quickly flowed. She could only angrily throw aside her mother's comforting arm and run outside.

At the doorstep stood her father, weighed down with a heavy heart, and three young sisters who blankly stared at her. She covered her face, rushed out the door and stood in the yard, crying loudly and resting against the half a wall that remained around the crumbling pigsty. "What is the matter? What is the matter?" Her mother hurriedly followed her outside, taking her hand, "Huangmei, you are a mature child. What do we have in the family? Your mother is sick, your three young sisters only know how to open their mouths when

* The wife of the mother's second oldest brother.

they want to eat. There is no feed for the pigs. After we fed them for over half a year, we can't even get our costs back! Somehow I manage to gather a few eggs to sell in the streets, but I am driven back and forth by people and am as fearful as if I were a thief. Last year at distribution time we overspent again and were left without a bit of cash in our hands. I'd like to buy a pair of socks for you, but. . . ."

Mother was also sobbing as she calculated: "Your older sister did not live up to our expectations, so who can this family rely on? We must repair the roof on the house. We are in debt. Where will we find the money? Second Aunt said as soon as they can lay hands on the five hundred yuan, then. . . ."

"Money, money!" the young woman cried, shaking. "You use your daughter as if she were something to sell!"

Mother instantly began to choke. Feeling weak all over, she held onto the mud wall and slowly collapsed to the ground. "Use your daughter as if she were something to sell!" How this statement stabbed her, how familiar it sounded! Who, at about her daughter's age, with the same anger, had cried out the same thing? Oh, no one but she herself!

That was the winter after the land reform team had come to Wuzhuang. Linghua had gone to see the musical play *The White-Haired Girl* that evening, where she met an honest, handsome young farm worker named Shun Shanwang. From that moment on, she understood the meaning of the word "lover" in the mountain love songs they used to sing. Nineteen-year-old Linghua was not only bravely participating in the mass meeting to struggle against the landlords, she was also bravely meeting her lover at night in the corn fields. However, she was already engaged, by the decision of her parents, to the young owner of a general store in Beiguan Market Town. The man's family heard the gossip and presented her family with fifty silver coins, insisting that the wedding take place within the year. Linghua cried and made a scene, which was contrary to her usual manners, and publicly admitted that she had set her heart on a poor fellow in the village near the hills. She announced that she would follow him to the hills to face a harsh life, and would never return to the "old feudal" home of her birth. This shocked her parents; they shut her up inside and scolded and beat her. She cried, making a row, rolling back and forth on the ground, scattering the silver coins all over the floor. Angrily she screamed, "You are trying to use your daughter as something to sell!"

That was the time of the antifeudal flame, the era that had already burnt "parents' orders and words of go-betweens" along with landlords' contracts and debtor's i.o.u.'s. A poster publicizing the Marriage Law hung on the wall at the doorway of the rural adminis-

trative office. Liu Qiaor* on the stage and the village's child daughter-in-law† served as models for Linghua. Honest, handsome Shen Shanwang—holding out a beautiful, happy future—awaited her. What Linghua had was the courage to break out of the prison of feudalism!

"They want to sell their daughter as if she were a thing!" The following day, in the newly painted rural administrative office, not needing anything else but this statement from Ninghua, the land reform work team, with encouraging smiles, issued both her and Shanwang a marriage certificate with Mao's picture on it.

Never had she expected that today, after a lapse of thirty years, her daughter would actually use the same words to scold her!

What is it all about? How have those days come back? Shocked and fearful, she slowly lifted her head, looking at the late winter evening sky. Several cold stars emitted a sad, plain, dim light, mocking her with their blinking. She shivered as if she had suddenly received a revelation, and broke into loud cries, all the while muttering to herself: "Retribution! Retribution! This is called retribution!"

Out of her shriveled eyes flowed thick tears. Inside, in the depths of her heart, she was filled with sorrowful hatred. She hated Huangmei; she hated Cunni; she hated their father. She hated that her life had been fated to be harsh, hated this piece of land to which she had brought her youth and happy visions of the future, this land to which she had given more than half a life of hard labor, for which she had received nothing in return except sorrow and worry!

In contrast, Huangmei had become calm, and was trying to console her mother, saying: "Mother, on the main street of the commune, those who sell eggs and vegetables are no longer driven away. You can cut some weeds to weave into baskets to sell. Younger sister can herd sheep. The fields on the hill will be converted to fruit orchards, and Father is the one who knows the best methods! . . . They'll let us peasants become rich and prosperous! Rongshu said so, the central government has issued a document! . . ."

"Documents, documents! Today this, tomorrow that! I've seen many! I've seen enough! Aren't we still poor! Huangmei, your mother does not want you to live the life she has had to live" Mother was sobbing, but she had also gradually become calm, "Child, you are a mature young girl. Mother can see that Rongshu loves you, and you

* In a story based on a true incident, this was the name of a child bride who defied tradition and claimed for herself the right to marry whom she chose. The story was circulated among Communist-occupied areas before the Revolution and was also performed as a play.

† Child daughters-in-law, married into a family at a very early age, were seen as the most oppressed victims of the traditional Chinese marriage system.

him. But think, without a full stomach, all of this is empty! Your mother should not have done what she did." She sighed. "Now she's reaping her reward!"

The wind stopped. Her mother's weak body lay against Huangmei. Mother and daughter silently sat without stirring, each immersed in her own thoughts.

"Mother, you go back in!" Huangmei said in a low voice. Her eyes swept the village houses of the Eighth Team, looking for one of them. "I still have some business to do!"

Then, she stubbornly walked in the direction of San Mu Pond. What had just happened had suddenly made her wise, experienced. All the things she had been against, including the matter of seeking justice for Xiao Baozi that had so upset her, now seemed reasonable. She believed that Rongshu could give his reasons. Then, too, he knew a great deal; he even knew about the sea! Why should Huangmei doubt the document about letting the peasants get rich that he firmly believed in? He would certainly be able to give her the best suggestion, to tell her what to do!

Across the surface of San Mu Pond, a gentle, warm breeze blew, the very first sign of spring returning. Silently it caressed the withered grasses at the side of the pond; quietly it dried the tears of the young girl rushing by. Had spring really come, come to this corner forsaken by love?

from *Shanghai Wenxue (Shanghai Literature)*
January, 1980

Longing

SHU TING

A hanging scroll in a swirl of colors, lacking line
An algebraic formula, simple but unsolvable
A one-stringed lute, strumming a rosary of raindrops from the eaves
A pair of oars that never reach the opposite shore

Silently waiting, like a swelling bud
Distantly gazing, like the setting sun
Somewhere, perhaps, a vast ocean lurks
But only two tears trickle out

O in the vistas of the heart
In the depths of the soul

from *Wenhui Yuebao (Wenhui Monthly)*
February, 1981