Under Fishbone Clouds

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THE YEAR OF THE DOG

Beginnings are always difficult, especially when you have lived as long as I have. I could start by telling you that this is a simple story about two hearts and the way they are intertwined. But that won't do. The Jade Emperor would not like that at all. I think I will have to go a little further back.

In a small border town huddled at the furthest reaches of a northern province, there was an old teahouse. It was winter there, thousands of years ago. And inside was the owner, his face flushed despite the frost that had turned his windows into rivers of curdled milk. He bolted the door at the end of the night and ran a wet rag through his hands. As he moved, sweat slipped between the folds of his shirt. He had been pacing between the tables since morning. Lukewarm tea sat in a squat clay cup on one of the dark wooden tables, the leaves sunk to the bottom like broken lilies given up on light.

The teahouse was situated at the end of a long, narrow street that looked as though it had been sculpted out of ice. It was one of the last buildings before the city trailed off into tracks darkened by the reach of the mountain's misshapen shadow. Since winter began, the owner had not had enough customers to afford to keep his tattered lanterns lit. Even so, he had not become accustomed to waiting. Instead, his eyes had taken on a furtive quality, as though at any second he would be ready to reach for the taper and strike the small room into life. He sat and sipped his drink, almost dropping it when he heard the timid taps at his door.

On the other side he found an old man who appeared to be at least a head shorter than himself, although this might have been due to the way he stooped and held his body at an angle, looking like his left side was weighing his right side down. He looked to be at least double the owner's own age. The owner ushered the man inside,

anxious to keep the cold wind from sneaking in, and guided him to a chair. He turned to light two of the thinner lanterns, which hissed at him as the oil caught. The old man's face was sunburnt and as lined as if it had been whittled from oak; his beard was like a bird's nest flaked with ash. One of the mountain people, the owner muttered to himself as he heated some water. Definitely from the mountain – probably hadn't even set eyes on a coin in years.

Seeing no need for the swan-necked pot perched proudly in the centre of the room, the owner filled two cups straight from the pan, adding a stingy pinch of dried leaves to each. He sat down at the same table as the old man, and both of them clasped their hands round the cups.

'From the mountain?' the owner asked.

The old man nodded slowly, not taking his eyes from the steam rising off the tea in front of him.

'Bet it's cold up there this time of year. Streams must be frozen up.'

The old man nodded again. They sat in silence for a few minutes. As the owner rose from the table, the old man spoke. 'Do you have anything to eat?'

The owner looked back at the old man for a moment, considering the scraps in the kitchen. He was embarrassed with himself, but he asked anyway, 'Can you pay?'

The old man traced his hands across his grubby jacket and shook his head.

'It's all right,' the owner sighed. 'I'm about to eat anyway. Just some rice.'

Soon he returned from the kitchen with two bowls. They ate. By the time they pushed the bowls away darkness had settled like dust between the tables. Yet before the owner had time to suggest setting up a makeshift bed in the back, the old man had got up from the table.

'Thank you, but I must keep moving. I've still got a long way to go.'

The owner did not try to dissuade him. Old men can be stubborn.

However, instead of heading for the door, the old man tottered toward the opposite wall. He ran his hands across it, as though it was a giant page of Braille, and then fumbled in his pockets. The owner watched him with the strange impatience of those who

have nothing better to do. The old man pulled out a grubby piece of cloth and unwrapped it to reveal a small lump of charcoal, which he raised to the wall. He began with a small arc, which became a beak, and from there the rest of the bird was born: a dark smudge of an eye; ruffles of soot above the brow; feathers; and, finally, long slender legs ending in water. Neither of them had any idea how long he sketched for, as the minutes had become tangled and lost in the movement of his hands. By the time his arm dropped there were five proud cranes sketched on the wall. He folded the cloth back around the stub of coal, then wiped his hands on his trousers.

The owner inched closer to inspect the parade of birds lined up on the main wall of his teahouse, unsure of what to say.

'Cranes,' the old man said. 'No one seems to agree on the strange paths their flight follows, or the distances they cover. In all my studies, I have never found a common consensus on this matter. They are my thanks. For the tea, and the food.'

He bowed his head and walked to the door. The owner opened his mouth, but was still uncertain of how to speak to the stooped man.

'Have a good journey, old uncle.'

The old man started down the street without looking back. The owner watched him leave. It seemed that it was the distance moving to meet him, rather than his slow and awkward steps, that gave him motion. The owner bolted his door for the final time that evening. On his way to bed he looked at the cranes staring down at him and shook his head. I would like to say that he dreamed of scores of graceful journeying birds, or the top of the nearby mountain that he had never ventured up, but the past is one thing, and dreams are quite another, so we will have to leave those to him.

The next afternoon three tables were full – the most since the evenings had begun stalking back into the days. One, a musician, was a regular; since the owner was in a good mood because of the increase in trade, he urged him to play. The musician gently waved his hand in front of his face. It hardly seemed worth it. The owner tilted the swan-necked pot, refilling the musician's cup to the brim. The musician exaggerated a sigh and bent down, pulling the rectangular box up from between his feet. He took out the *zheng* and gently placed it on the table, running his hands across the bamboo before suspending his fingers over the silk strings that travelled across its raised bridge. It was unclear whether he paused

for dramatic effect or because he was searching the corners of his memory for the beginning of a certain tune. He must have imagined himself a magician, his left hand bending the strings while his right began to pluck and swim between them, drawing up notes as if from some invisible depth.

For a few seconds as he started to play the other customers fell silent and listened, only to resume their conversations moments later, and it was a while before anyone looked at the wall. Then they saw it. Only the musician, halfway through the song and humming along as he picked, did not turn with the gasps. The charcoal cranes were moving across the wall, in time with the music. They had begun with slowly dipped and nodding heads, then the raised arch of tentative steps, and, as the tempo increased, the birds unfurled their wings. A shiver of feathers seemed to shake the whole room as the cranes started to bob and strut. The owner looked at them, scratched his head and smiled nervously. In the muddle of clapping hands, whoops and singing, the dark lines of water shifted into splashes, the wooden frames of the windows rattled to the tap of swaying beaks, and chairs and tables groaned like weary beasts as they were nudged across the floor toward the boisterous mural.

By evening the next day customers were crammed in two to a chair, with others squatting on the floor. The owner barely had room to move between the babbling crowd, so the long neck of his teapot preceded him around the room. Despite the snow piling up outside, the teahouse bristled with heat as the gathered musicians bustled and sweated, each trying to outplay each other with increasingly wild flourishes. Everyone was watching the birds dancing and darting for fish where the flaking wall met the sloping floorboards. They drove ripples across the water and sent shudders through the finely etched lilies as they shifted from leg to leg. It seemed that the birds could do anything but stop moving. The thudding music was drowned out by shouts as one launched itself upward in flight. It pushed itself higher with frantically fluttering wings, and then it began to soar: tucking its legs under its plump form as it flew across corners and looped over window frames and above doors, conquering the whole circumference of the crowded room.

The owner soon had more coins than could fit under the wonky floorboard in his small bedroom. As he drifted to sleep that night his face was lit by a broad grin, which did not disappear despite the cold

winds creeping under the door to interrupt his dreams. Was it that he believed the world could be changed by a single act of kindness? With hindsight he would consider himself naïve, and curse himself for investing meaning in possibilities that usually belonged only to stories told by old ghosts like me. One thing was certain: he did not question what had happened. Why would he? His pockets were full and his arms sore from brewing, stirring and pouring. If the birds did dance as he slept, to the unschooled music of wind-rattled cups and creaking chairs, then he was happily unaware.

Months passed, and every night was the same, with locals as well as people from distant villages huddled in the now famous teahouse to watch the dancing cranes. Late one night, as he was mopping up small streams of spillages, the owner heard someone banging on his bolted door. He opened it, half expecting to see the old man returned, but instead found himself face to face with two of the city guards. They were stocky men, proud of the uniform they were always dressed in as well as the power that went with it.

'As of today this establishment has been requisitioned by the city government,' one of them said.

His eyes scurried over their hands, looking for an official document, then above their shoulders, searching for the local magistrate. He saw neither.

'You have two hours to vacate the property. We'll be waiting here.'

'But why?' he stammered. 'I don't understand. I've paid the taxes. I …'

His words trailed off. The guards stood silently in his doorway. He understood, and slouched, deflated, towards the backroom. Once there he took his bedsheet and lay it on the floor. Within an hour he had filled it with his things – his winter fur, a rice bowl, the precious swan-necked pot and the handful of coins he had managed to stealthily extract from under the floorboard. He bundled it up and hauled it over his shoulder. I should have been expecting this, he thought. There was no point waiting around. He did not consider fighting, bribing or pleading with the impassive guards as he slunk past them onto the street. Neither did he yet believe, as he would come to years later, that the teahouse walls were skin peeled from his back, rubbed raw beneath the weight of his possessions as he wandered further from the city, into the winter.

The governor was a pot-bellied man not much given to smiling.

He appointed his gangly nephew as manager of the newly acquired teahouse, and, after dismissing the guards, sat and pushed the wooden beads of his tall abacus from end to end, attempting to solve an impossible equation in which the variables continually shifted shape to elude him. His nephew arranged for posters to be hung up around the city, depicting in bright colours the fabulous dancing cranes.

On opening night a trail of lanterns led to the freshly painted door. The gangly manager welcomed all the new patrons to the refurbished teahouse, bowing to his uncle who sat sullenly in the corner flanked by two visiting mandarins, a specially summoned court musician and a local general. Thin and tanned waiting boys poured jasmine tea, and coins began to clink. The musician played. The cranes seemed for a moment to be staring back at the expectant faces studying them. The water at their feet dimpled, and they raised themselves up, their proud necks extending and their feathers a blur as, one by one, they pushed forward and flew. From their slender throats calls burst out, spurring each other on as they ascended. The new customers cheered, and even the restrained mandarins laughed and clapped.

It was the governor who first noticed that they were shrinking. His mouth opened but he did not speak. Everyone began pushing toward the wall, and in the crush the musician dropped his instrument. The music splintered into the sound of broken strings and reproachful shouts. The cranes got smaller and smaller as they glided toward the horizon line, the brink of sight at the top of the wall. They were scribbles, then thumbprint smudges, and then they were gone. For a while nothing happened. Soon, however, the teahouse was empty except for the governor and his tearful nephew, who sat listening to the mumbles of the crowd as they filed down the street. Neither of them moved, nor gave voice to their doubts and recriminations. Outside the cold wind blew a blank poster onto the roof and whipped the door closed. They did not bother to bolt it.

Bian Yuying had been thinking about the story of the dancing cranes all morning – how so much can turn upon a single act of kindness, how so much might depend upon the whims of history. How nothing is ever as you expect it. She thought of her husband

lying in the hospital, then picked up her bags and started moving again. Cranes are a symbol of fidelity, she thought; they mate for life. She could not recall how many times she had heard the story of the dancing cranes, half sung by storytellers in teahouses to the rhythm of squat drums when she was a child, then in the confines of the stone-walled bedroom where her husband had told it to their children, and later their grandchildren. Each time, the story changed a little, though this had never bothered her. It was in the differences that she located the tale's restless heart, which, like the cranes, would not allow itself to remain still. The cranes represented karma, the delicate balancing act of the universe that rewards good acts with rewards and evil acts with punishment. Everyone gets what they deserve in the end. Yet after all she had been through, Yuying was not sure that life was ever that simple.

Her back ached from leaning against the wall for so long. She enjoyed wandering through the older, narrow streets, on her way back from the hospital. They reminded her of the house she had been born in seventy years before, the house where she was married, the house she fled from and returned to, the house where her father died, the house her mother was thrown out of after the revolution. A house of hopes and hopelessness. She always had to remind herself to turn left towards the main road, to head back to her daughter's third-floor flat near the massage alley instead of wandering on towards the courtyards and houses guarded by stone lions, deeper into the past. Yuying soon came to the bridge over the murky river which sliced the city in two. It looked to her like the discarded skin of a huge water snake, shimmering where the light fell with the flow. She was nearly there.

Climbing the stairs was a slow and precise operation, and when Yuying first reached the apartment her hands were shuddering too much to direct the keys into the lock. Finally in, she sat down on her grandson's bed and stared out of the window. She pulled open the wooden drawer, and, from beneath her neatly folded winter layers, extracted a small album. It fitted perfectly in her lap. Only a couple of hours to kill, and then she would return to the hospital, with a plastic box of fresh dumplings, to resume the bedside vigil. She pushed the door closed and flitted quickly through the album to the penultimate page, on which there was a black-and-white print no bigger that her palm.

Around three thousand years ago, the Shang kings turned to their dead ancestors for help at times like these. The dead, they believed, were powerful. Evidence of this was all around them – storms gathered from frothy clouds, drooping and meagre crops, victories in vicious frontier wars: all could be attributed to the unpredictable justice of the dead, moving between the seen and the unseen. To appease their ancestors, the kings offered sacrifices, slaughtering scores of convicts and slaves, and transforming fields of oxen into seas of cloying blood and wild flies. Yet this did not always solve their problems, and, when rains continued, battles stalled and queens became barren, they sought to commune more directly with the dead, to ask them how much sacrifice was enough. They turned to animal bones in order to learn how to tame the future. Their questions, for which one of the first written examples of Chinese was created, were inscribed on these oracle bones and were answered by the cracks that appeared in the bones after they had passed through fire – for everyone knows that the dead do not speak the same language as the living. These writings have survived them, and so another exchange with the dead has been achieved, though even today it's impossible to fathom answers to their dark and blood-soaked questions.

Hou Jinyi, his cropped mass of curly black hair plied into a messy side-parting over his horsy face, scrubbed up and shaved and dressed and smiling especially for this, his first visit to a photographer, stared up at Yuying. She traced a finger over that familiar lopsided smile. She too talked to those who could no longer answer, though she did not expect a reply. This is how she wanted to remember him, not as the wrinkled thing wheezing fitfully in the busy ward. She leaned forward to study the small portrait, and slowly let her memories carry her back to where she always travelled when she was alone, to the summer of 1946.

By now you may be wondering who it is telling this story, who has been listening in on this old woman's thoughts. So let me get the introductions out of the way. I have lived a long time amidst woks and greasy chopsticks, beside chicken feathers and plump dough ready to be fisted down into dumplings. In short, I am a god.

But not the storm-bringing, death-doling type – rather a common household deity: the Kitchen God.

The truth is, however, that being immortal has its drawbacks. The almost infinite pleasures of the many heavens begin to lose their appeal after the first millennium or two, and no matter how much they try to resist, most gods find themselves creeping back down to earth whenever they get the chance. We cannot help ourselves. I am not alone in returning time and time again, although I have not as yet disguised myself as a white bull or a swan, or started whispering in the ears of would-be prophets. My powers do not stretch much further than being able to dip into people's thoughts as easily as you might trail your fingers through the lazy flow of a river. And until lately I was doing this as much as possible. In fact, I could have been star-bathing by the bright rapids of the Milky Way or attending the most lavish of celestial soirées over the last fifty years, and yet instead I followed Bian Yuying and Hou Jinyi, trying to understand what it is that enabled their love to survive the separations, the famine, the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, and even death.

It would be easy to say that I did this simply to win a bet I made with the Jade Emperor about the workings of the human heart. However, that would not be quite true. As soon as you glance into a person's thoughts, you're trapped. If I stayed with these two people for so long, it is because I once had a heart myself, although I never learnt how to keep it from destroying me. But we will come to that later – once again, I seem to be getting sidetracked. After all, this is not my story: it's theirs.

'Bian Chunzu – come here! Quick! I have something for you.'

She heard her father's shout rumbling through the house. She was sixteen, and he was the only person who still called her Chunzu. Everyone else called her Yuying, the name her Japanese teacher had given her and which she had recently decided to take in place of her own. Chunzu – 'spring bamboo' – was too pretty, too artifical, too delicate. When I am an adult, she thought to herself, I will be a suave Japanese translator and no one will think me delicate. Her Japanese teacher was a petite woman whose every word she had hung on to for the last few years; the last time Yuying saw

her, however, she had been placed in a wooden cage after the other Japanese had left, and the locals were shouting about revenge for the occupation. Yuying tried not to dwell on this image.

Her father called again, and his hoarse voice rattled through the large house. It was the type of place where echoes were still heard days after the words were first uttered, slowly winding through the cold stone corridors. She fought the urge to shout back. I am not that type of daughter, she told herself as she placed her pen in the book to save her place. By the time she would return to her bedroom, a dribble of ink would have spread from the stunted nib and blotted out an intricate point of advanced Japanese grammar. As she passed her servant outside her door she blushed, knowing that she too had heard the shout.

Yuying had once overheard the two younger servants whispering about her father's nocturnal journeys to visit one of his many other women in the city. They had giggled as they recounted how they had heard him slipping past their rooms late at night. Now, when she could not sleep, Yuying's imagination conjured up the sound of padded slippers gently slapping against the stone hallway, the bamboo in the courtyard rustled by the breeze his creeping form created.

As she reached her father, she pushed these thoughts from her mind and chastised herself. She loved her family more than anything she could imagine.

'Father.'

'Sit down. I have found a way to grant both our wishes, Chunzu.'

She stole a glance directly at her father as she sat. He looked exhausted. Below his pug nose, his thin moustache twitched like the bristly mane of a regal dragon, and, when she dared to raise her head to look more closely, she saw that his pupils had melted to eclipse the rest of his eyes. She had no doubt as to where he had spent most of the day: the Golden Phoenix, the priciest opium lounge in the city.

'Come on then. Take a look.' He let his hand fall to the slim bundle of papers on the table between them. 'I have made most of the arrangements already. The rest should be simple enough,' he said as she slowly furrowed through the bundle to find a small grey photograph within a milk-white frame. It showed a wild-haired young man.

'In a little under one month, this will be your husband.'

She felt her throat tighten.

'He has agreed to let you continue your studies. You will both live here, of course, and so our family need not be broken. He will even take our name. Well?'

She tried to stop the tears slipping down her face. Her father banged his fist on the table.

'Ungrateful daughter! Everyone told me that educating a girl was the most foolish thing a father could do, but did I listen? No, I heard only your pleas. And now I have worked so hard to find a suitable match, and you do not even give me thanks! Get your tears out now, then, but be sure your eyes are not red in one month, when we will have a joyous wedding. Do not bring shame on your family, Bian Chunzu!'

She sniffed and nodded.

'Leave me now. Go tell your sisters.' He waved his hand towards the door.

She stood, hesitating. For months she had looked over photos of prospective grooms, sending messages through matchmakers and her father. Yet their unusual demands had meant that the family had already turned down a large number of young men. If one finally agrees to everything, her father had reasoned, there will be nothing else to consider. She would soon be seventeen, and no one would want to marry an old woman.

'Can I keep it?'

He said nothing, but stared across at where dust swirled in the solitary slice of sun falling in from the window. He tapped his fingers lightly on his temples.

'Thank you, Father.'

Yuying left him studying a fly that had found a way into the room but not yet a way back out. She was never quite sure what he was thinking. She stepped over the mute's large black dog dozing in the hallway, and tried to concentrate on the dizzying image of a swelling red wedding dress snug against her skin, suddenly transforming her into someone else. She did not dare look at the photo again, but instead held it tight against her side.

Yuying could already see her life forming, fluttering out from this photograph. Her mother, in her more bitter moments, had told her that a woman is a receptacle into which a man pours his dreams and

his desires. Yuying did what she did whenever the world seemed at odds with her own hopes – made herself small, made herself a stone that rivers might rush over without uprooting. I wish I could have told her that although it is easy to make yourself stone, it is difficult to turn back. But us gods have a policy about interfering with humans, so there was not much I could do.

Let me tell you a little more about Yuying in the summer of 1946. Already others mistook her shyness for superiority. Already she had begun to bite her bottom lip when the world seemed to veer beyond her control. Already she had picked up her father's stubbornness, and her mother's superstition that if others talk about you too much you will become the person others think you are. Already she had learnt the one thing that would keep her alive in the years to come – that sometimes silence is a kind of love.

Yuying's room was in the east wing with her siblings, though after she married she would move to the north wing, to the large empty room just before the mute's chamber and the servants' quarters, to have some space with her new husband. She shuddered at the thought. Yuying had never considered it strange that her mother slept in the east wing while her father usually stayed in his study in the central compound, next to the entrance hall and small shrine, so that he could hear people coming and going (or, as the servants whispered, sneak in and out himself more stealthily).

She stopped, hearing laughter. Inside the next room her two younger sisters, Chunlan and Chunxiang, were playing *weiqi*, although they had learnt to call it Go, just as the Japanese did. Each had a handful of slate and clamshell pieces, tar-black and dirty white, and were stretched out over the floorboards, leaning down to surround each others' imaginary army. As they threw down the pieces, tactically trying to trap each in ever increasing circles and squares, Yuying could not help but picture the armies that until recently had swooped through the city, outside the schools, through the restaurants and around the park. Every little victory for one of her sisters made it harder for her to open her mouth. She hung back in the hallway to watch them play. Within an hour everyone in the house will know anyway, she thought.

By the time of Confucius, Go was considered an art form, ranked alongside painting, poetry and music. Old stories said that an ancient emperor invented it over four thousand years ago to

educate his dull son. In the newly unified Japan of the seventeenth century, four Go houses were set up and subsidised by the government, schooling students in the strange and divergent probabilities of its play. Since the careful strategies implicit in the game ensure that the occurrence of two identical matches is a virtual impossibility, the game took on an intellectual aspect to complement its martial application. Scholars debated its relation to cosmology, physics, consciousness and infinity, sipping blossom tea while watching stubbornly long matches. The idea of infinitely changeable empires, conquered, reclaimed, conquered again and continually swept clean, must have appealed to the warlords of the early twentieth century, who might have recognised in the game's shifting patterns the possibility of rewriting whole maps according to the formation of different colours. When the Japanese invaded the north of China to proclaim the state of Manchuria, how many people spotted the first throws of a handful of black pebbles?

'Hey, little devils, come here. Guess what?'

Her sisters scrabbled to their feet and ran to her. The middle one, Chunlan, was bony and sharp, right down to her fierce eyes and her pursed lips that were always ready to sting. The younger one, Chunxiang, was tall and awkward, with a spirit-level fringe and thick black-rimmed glasses, her round face always breaking into blushes, her shoulders slouching to try and hide her height.

'I'm getting married.'

They made twittery noises, like morning birds.

'Who is he, Yu? Where did he come from? No, I mean, what's he like?'

She held out the picture hesitantly. They huddled close to study it.

'Well, he's kind of handsome …' Chunxiang ventured.

'When's it going to be?' Chunlan asked.

'I'm not sure. Soon. Pa has arranged it all, I think.'

'Wow. Just imagine it, Yu. I bet we'll have pig's trotters, and goose eggs, and spicy pork, and well, of course, more dumplings than you've ever seen!'

'Do you always have to think with your stomach, Xiang? It won't be like that. It'll be romantic, and we'll be too busy looking beautiful in Ma's best jewellery and new silk dresses to want to go too near all the food,' Chunlan chided her sister.

'So, you'll be leaving, Yu?' Chunxiang asked.

'No. Pa said he'll come to live here. And I can keep going to college.'

'Well, it's great you get to keep your precious books, but when I get married, we'll live in a big place that's all our own, and I'll be the lady of the house, and everything will be different to here. We'll visit, of course. Come and see you and your husband and your pile of papers.' Chunlan giggled to herself.

Yuying pursed her lips. She didn't have the energy to argue with her sister, not now. 'I'll be able to finish my degree, and then I'll be able to do anything I choose,' she said.

'So, who is he? Is he from the city? Did a matchmaker find him?' Chunxiang asked, cutting through the tension between her two sisters.

'I don't know,' Yuying conceded. 'He could be anyone.'

'But he's not. He's your husband.'

Her sister could not know how, in the years to come, those words would catch like swallowed bugs at the back of Yuying's throat, struggling and beating wings to draw back the dark. Her youngest sister – who would disappear into the smoke of the steelworks and iron forges that dotted the frosty plains of the furthest north – stared at her and grinned.

'There's so much to think about,' Yuying said, and, though for a moment the sentence seemed serious, the three girls suddenly burst out laughing.

'At least you know he won't be old and ugly. Remember what happened to Meiling from down the road? Her new husband looked like he'd been hanging around since the last dynasty. If only he'd had half as many teeth left as he had bars of gold stashed away! And what about Ting from school – do you remember how her lanky husband stuttered his way through the ceremony?' Chunlan set them laughing again.

A shadow poured through the open doorway. It sloped up into Peipei, their auntie, holding a single finger up to her lips. She was not really their auntie, though as she had nursed each one and calmed them through countless night terrors, they did not think to lose that familiar term of address.

'Sshh. Your father is working,' Peipei said. 'Do something useful, like some needlework.' Peipei still believed, despite their schooling, that the girls should not bother themselves with too much

thinking. Educating girls is like washing little boys: all well and good, but they only get dirty again, she told anyone who would listen. 'Come on, you know what your mother said.'

'Where is Ma?'

'She's resting.' All four of them knew that this was not true – they had never known their mother to be anything but busy. Peipei scowled, pulling her trio of hairy moles further down her face. She then shooed them from the room, Yuying to her Japanese and Chunlan to her etiquette essay. Chunxiang was left to sweep up the Go pebbles and pile them into the two boxes. She didn't bother to separate the colours, and in the quickly brokered armistice the armies became inseparable.

As she passed the study, Yuying peered in through the half-open door to see her father throwing three silver coins to the floor. She knew his temper well enough to realise that she should not stay and risk being caught. Yet she longed to see what he would find out, for she was sure that he was asking about her wedding. He would count up the number of heads and tails and convert them into either a straight line or a broken line (old or young, yin or yang). When he had done this six times, he would have a hexagram with which to divine the future. He would find the corresponding hexagram in his private, battered copy of the *I Ching* and read from the obscure explanations first set down more than two and a half millennia ago. He would then change each of the lines in the hexagram to its opposite and read the verse that described the resulting hexagram – for there are two sides to everything, and always at least two ways to see the world. The book describes everything and nothing: it is a little universe which you must immerse yourself in to find any kind of sense from the answer it gives. Yuying carried on back to her room as her father finished tossing the coins. Who knows what he found?

Yuying opened her Japanese grammar book and discovered the ink stain, which she dabbed at with the back of her hand. The rest of the day was blotted out like this. At dinner her mother's exhausted eyes stared for a while at the birthmark-like blotch that the ink had mapped onto Yuying's hand, but instead of speaking she only arched a carefully tweezered eyebrow.

With the news of the wedding, everything seemed suddenly different to Yuying – the lazy Susan's slow orbit, her sisters' chopsticks pecking at the plates like hungry beaks scrapping in the sawdust of the yard, the servant girl's awkward manner when bringing the dishes; even her own sluggish chewing and swallowing seemed out of place. She looked up to see her mother staring at her. Will I still be your daughter, when my husband comes? she wondered. She imagined her home turned upside down. Will you still visit me, or will it be my children everyone comes to fuss over?

Yuying watched her mother, and wondered when it was that she had been young. She looked old, older than her forty-something years. Her husband, Yuying's father, had already reached forty before he was pestered to take a young wife from outside the city. Her cheeks sagged under the weight of her eyes. Not enough pigment left to call them anything but black, her daughter noted. They were darker even than her chopstick-knotted hair. She was shorter than her daughters, with tiny shoes and terrible looks that could stop vines growing and silence anyone in the city – even her husband, though he sometimes pretended not to notice.

Old Bian did not often eat with them, and today was no exception. More than once, in barely audible whispers, the sisters had joked that he might be a ghost, neither eating nor moving much till night welled up, though they would never have said this if they thought anyone might have heard them.

'Listen, girls. Tomorrow you can start preparing for the wedding. The three of you can begin by sewing the pillows. Oh, Yuying, remember: a smile makes you ten years younger. It will be the happiest day of your life. Your father has found you a wonderful husband.'

'When will we be meeting his family?'

Her mother's tongue skirted over her front teeth, like a pianist's hands grazing the ivory. The girls recognised the movement – she always did this when she did not know how to answer.

'There's no need to worry about the details. You girls just make sure you're prepared, and your father will do the rest.'

Her puzzling dismissal clouded the table. Yuying suppressed a shudder. A few picked-through scraps sat between the four of them. She looked at her sisters looking down at their laps, and knew she must ask.

'Ma,' she said, 'have *you* met him?'

Before her mother could reply, they were interrupted by the sound of the mute's dog barking, signalling his return from the restaurant. The nervous servant girl jumped, and their mother quickly rose from the table. She bent down and kissed her eldest daughter, her lips like breeze-borne embers, almost branding Yuying's cheek.

'Of course I have. Now, best to get some rest,' she whispered. Although her steps were small and stunted, as she rocked forward tentatively on the balls of her feet, she still gave the impression of retaining an untouchable grace. After she left, the girls wandered to their separate rooms, the youngest two no longer daring to tease Yuying.

Yuying flopped down on the hard wooden bed, which would soon be given up to her youngest sister. It was now that she should have retreated to the loft to mourn her separation from her family and curse the go-between who had arranged the union which would usually prise apart a family. She should have been singing strange laments with her sisters for the things she could not know that she would lose. She had not learnt these songs, had not yet heard the music of departure and its bittersweet arguments that bubble and blister on the tongue. All her friends had drifted into different stories, scrabbling new beginnings from little rooms. But she was going nowhere. She imagined herself aged a hundred, moving from corner to corner of that same house, sharing space with spiders' webs and her precious retinue of books, with their perfectly cracked spines and pages whose reek of must and ink rubbed off on her eager fingers. Yet, in the years to come, when the books were stoked up in the fire or buried beyond the back of the garden, she would not even shrug.

Unable to rest, Yuying got up to look once more at the photo her father had given her earlier that day. Just as she never imagined that the Japanese, present on every corner since she was a toddler, would ever leave, she could not imagine being a married woman. The world was becoming alien to her. The streets seemed empty without the Japanese soldiers, and the wild celebrations of the end of the occupation had quickly faded into more local squabbles. And now a wedding. She did not dare to consider the half-lit rooms in which her father might have found him. The photo slipped out of her fingers.

She slumped down amid the piles of copious and useless notes

for which her sisters mocked her so unremittingly. The declensions and tenses and equations would be replaced by tea-making and babies as soon as her four years of college were finished. Trying to think any further than this seemed to cause the future to retreat and contract to a hazy vanishing point. She flicked through a couple of books, knowing she would not read them now. In the tinny light of dusk the brush-strokes floated from the open pages, a sea cast over by shadows. Her head thumped like a kitchen orchestra of pot-and-pan percussion.

These were the last things she remembered of that day more than half a century ago: silver streaks sneaking in under the door, snoring and moonlight and tiptoeing footsteps at the threshold of sense as the whole house slipped toward sleep.

Did she dream about the future? Don't ask me – I've already told you, dreams are off-limits. Did she dream about how her heart would be forged in the furnace of her marriage, and come out welded to another, hot and heavy and inseparable? Or did she dream about me, scuttling along behind her and Hou Jinyi, trying to figure out why they kept going?

Let me tell you a secret. Even us gods have trouble predicting the future, let alone dreaming it. Look around at the city of Yuying's birth if you want proof. Who could have guessed that the sun-starched plains attacked by plough and hoe and ox would give way to squat apartment blocks and offices littering the landscape like insatiable insects? Would anyone in Old Bian's household have had the imagination to predict that Fushun would sprawl outwards from those few ancestral courtyard homes into skyscrapers and chimneys churning out smoke that would leave the sky the colour of scratched metal? That old men who ought to be revered and welcomed in each house, as custom dictated, might end up foraging through the bins in search of plastic bottles and cola cans which could be sold at factory doors for a handful of change?

Anyone who had said as much in the summer of 1946 would have been laughed out of the room, and their sanity called into question. So let's leave dreams and predictions to those that want to make fools of themselves, and get back to the wedding preparations.