

**CHUN SUE****Extract from the novel *Beijing Doll* (2002)****13, Born to Be a Pilot**

I hated school more and more each day. I didn't want to study that stuff anymore, I didn't want to waste any more time there. I'd had about all I could take of the place. I was bored to tears with that laughable, useless school. Just the thought of two more years there drove me up the wall. Thoughts of my final exam, plus exams on clerical work, shorthand, P & F, computer, made my head swell. I looked up at the mother hen standing at the front of the room (our principal) and wondered what he'd come here for . . . I wanted to go to college, I wanted to go to college, I wanted to be alone, I wanted to be alone. If I stuck it out at this school, would there be anything left of me? Assigned a job, going to work, entrance exams . . . I'd die of exhaustion. The only subjects that interested me were language and politics. My history teacher also taught second-year photography, so there'd be no history class my second semester. My life was like a unguided missile, and I figured that sooner or later I'd crash land and be smashed to pieces. Teacher Wang wrote in my journal, "Why must you always disparage the qualities and abilities of people your own age?" There was a carping, haughty tone to her question. Not true, I didn't do that, it's just that I felt that high-school students lacked unity.

I hated my school but liked the class I was assigned to. To be more precise, I liked the sluggish, decadent, somewhat sugary atmosphere and I liked some of my classmates and teachers, at least those I got along with. I was grateful to the class monitor, Teacher Wang, for making so many things easy for me. In that harsh environment, I was relatively free, thanks to her. That was hard to come by and I was touched! Despite the fact that I was no longer easily moved. I think she must have understood and appreciated me.

The prelude to the first song in the "Lonely Mountain Village" segment of the TV program "Campus Songs" sounded familiar; it was, in fact, Zheng Jun's "Inaction," a song I'd often heard during my final year of middle school. Then the emcee read a bunch of letters that all sounded alike.

I knew I could never enter those letter writers' mood. I was lonely, too, but how could my voice resonate with theirs? They were college students, with their feelings of happiness, anger, sadness, and joy, while I was just a gloomy first year student in a vocational high school.

I had no one to converse with but myself, even though I was no help to myself. I could communicate with writers, because they're tolerant and generous, egalitarian and more interesting than other people. I liked that. Toward the end of my fifteenth year, during Beijing's abnormal, rotten spring, I bumped into painful reality time and again as I chased my dreams. I knew that my thoughts were all over the place, but they never lacked clarity. I knew exactly what I wanted and what I was doing.

What I needed now was to take care of myself.

I needed room to do what I wanted without interfering with anybody. Free to do as I pleased. Wu Jiaqi was so cool, his *International Music and Film* magazine was so cool, and I felt incredibly lucky and comfortable to be one of its readers.

I got to know a band from Kaifeng. They called themselves "SpermOva." The members of SpermOva sent me some black-and-white publicity photos, all featuring Jia Jia. The pictures were shot at a school, in condemned buildings, on Kaifeng streets, and in front of their homes. The band consisted of Bai Jianqiu (bass), Wei Ruixian (guitar), Jia Jia (lead singer, guitar), and Li Zhanwu (drums).

"Come to Kaifeng," they said. "We're here waiting for you."

Sometimes in class I couldn't keep from laughing out loud.

I really, really loved that band. I dreamed of walking down the streets of Kaifeng! I wanted to go to Kaifeng, I wanted to go there, I wanted to break out of this school, I wanted to go see them in Kaifeng, where we'd have a million things to talk about. My mind was made up. I was going to Kaifeng.

My mother found a guidance counselor for me, and wanted me to go see him on Saturday or Sunday. I was defiant. There's nothing wrong with my head, why should I see a shrink? But then I thought, why not? If the "psychiatrist" could figure me out, who knows, he might talk my mother into letting me go to Kaifeng. He was located in the counseling section of the high school attached to Qinghua University.

We wore short sleeves and hats on the blistering hot summer day we went to see the guidance counselor to take care of my "head" problem. After getting off the 375 bus, we had a long walk to the Qinghua University High School. Some of the dorm students hadn't yet left, and we were treated to the sight of hot-blooded youngsters running around happily. We went to the third floor mental health office in a small building, where we were greeted by a teacher with long hair. After we timidly took the seats offered us, she poured some hot water. We chatted awhile, then she asked us to wait while she attended a meeting.

Mother and I sipped our water on the sofa, I flipped through a stack of *Beijing Youth*. The green canopies of poplars bent in the wind and brushed against the window, and I could hear the shouts and laughter of students downstairs. I had a funny feeling: When had I lost my student's sense of innocence?

About an hour later, the teacher returned and said with an embarrassed smile, "Sorry to keep you waiting." "No problem." "Let's go into the other room," she said. The new room was much cozier than the first, and better furnished. "Would you like some coffee?" she asked. "No, thanks, water is fine," I said. I liked her right off; she had a considerate, warm quality that earned a "patient's" immediate trust. I told her about wanting to go to Kaifeng to see the band SpermOva, and she thought that was a good idea. Could I wait till summer vacation? I said I couldn't even wait another day. My heart had already flown on ahead of me. Actually, she was on my side, but she tried to get me to compromise. It didn't work. Oh, I knew she was right, that she was just being practical, that waiting for summer vacation was the sensible thing to do. And it couldn't do any harm, since I wouldn't have to miss classes. My mother even chipped in with the suggestion that they could come to Beijing during summer vacation, at my parents' expense.

She reminded me how upset I would be if I went to Kaifeng and SpermOva turned out to be a disappointment, nothing like I'd expected.

I said I'd be prepared for that.

She smiled at Mother and just shrugged her shoulders.

I left Qinghua University High reluctantly. It impressed me as a terrific school. Big, beautiful, a great campus, lots of hot-blooded students, and kind teachers. Really terrific. Just what I thought a high school ought to be.

Birds flew noisily over the campus grounds. The sky was a deep blue.

#### **14, Kaifeng, The Night Is Still Young**

Mother and I went to buy train tickets. My backpack was filled with CDs and newspapers for the trip. It seemed as if we'd traveled to Hell and back before the train finally reached Shangqiu Station, just before Kaifeng. Almost to Kaifeng. Hurry, won't you? The waiting's killing me!

Just before we arrived in Kaifeng, the setting sun sent down beautiful golden rays of sunshine from the edge of the sky, reminding me of the lines "A solitary plume of smoke in the desert/The rounded sun setting over the Yangtze." I went back to an empty car and sat down by myself, letting the sunbeams wash over my body, my face, and the cocoon of joy all around me, body and soul.

After stepping down off of the train, my heart seemed about to burst out of my chest! I wondered where they might be waiting for me. "SpermOva!" I shouted.

No one answered in the night darkness. Mother and I walked out of the station, where we spotted four people at the foot of the steps (I'd lost my glasses the day before we left). I rushed over. "Are you Jiafu?" one of them asked. I nodded and reached out to shake hands. That took him by surprise, but he stuck out his hand. I later learned that he was the bass player, Jianqiu. After my I.D. was checked, Jia Jia came up and

hugged me, appearing emotional and a little wary at the same time, maybe because my mother was there with me.

First we went to the home of Li Zhanwu, the drummer. Not a bad place, if you ask me. In some respects, an improvement over comparable apartments in Beijing. Li's mother was a typical middle-class urbanite. She spoke *putonghua* quite well. I think she went a little overboard in welcoming us, which made me sort of uneasy. We all sat down to dinner. It was about nine o'clock. As you know by now, there was a lot I wanted to say, and I finally got the okay to spend the night with SpermOva in Li Zhanwu's apartment. We all went downstairs together. Kaifeng's streets are narrow and dark, and as I walked along I suddenly felt that something was wrong. This was the city I'd dreamed about and fought to visit for so long, so why wasn't I just about passing out from excitement? So I shouted—Wow, here I am in Kaifeng! This is Kaifeng! To get to Li Zhanwu's place we had to cross some railroad tracks. The scene was new and magnificent, with trains passing through town and airplanes flying so low you could see their red lights.

It was an aging but well-equipped apartment: a bed (including blankets and pillows), a balcony, a water heater, a toilet, even an old radio. As soon as I got there, I dumped all my CDs and newspapers on the bed, but that wasn't met with the pleasant surprise I'd expected. Here's how I wanted it to be: All of us lying in bed, arms around each other as we listened to rock music in the dark and talked about all sorts of things. That was the sort of intimacy I'd always yearned for. But it's not how things turned out. I was sleepy, but they were still in high spirits, so they turned on all the lights and played loud music, each doing one thing or another, leaving me as the lone outsider. I was bushed, but I didn't feel like sleeping. What I wanted was lie with my arms around Jia Jia or, for that matter, any of my friends. I really needed that feeling. A warm feeling. I touched Jia Jia's hand. "I want to hold your hand," I said. My mood was exactly like that in the Beatles' song. He was unmoved. And that created a sense of regret and humiliation in me. Did they really need me? I had my doubts!

*Parasol trees bloom outside my window/Swaying/The decadent beauty of the supermarket flows through the air/Ah, how this resembles my/Lethargy/My eyes are a bit tired/I must close/My eyes and sleep/I want to embrace something/Hope sparkles/Reliability and warmth/Clutch my heart.*

To hell with being rational! All I wanted was to follow my emotions. I understood that letting my emotions run free wasn't a good idea, that it could only mess things up. That was clear as day, even then. But they were hard to control. Too hard, in fact. My heart was so spongy it sapped my energy. I was powerless.

By about two in the morning everyone was tired. Time to get some sleep. Li Zhanwu and Bai Jianqiu took the sofa. Jia Jia, Wei Ruixian, Jin Zhiheng, and I slept on the bed. The lights were turned off. Just what I'd hoped for (my loneliness has no place to run to when the lights are too bright). Before we went to sleep, the lead guitarist (the most straight-arrow one of the group), Wei Ruixian, told a bunch of dirty jokes, and we all laughed. I held Jia Jia's hand, hoping to feel something warm and dependable. He let me put it wherever I wanted (of course, I didn't *want* it anywhere), displaying no emotion at all. For me that was sheer misery! Was it possible that in a life and death relationship (I'd have gladly jumped off a building for them) there could be no mutual trust or encouragement? Was it possible that one insignificant girl who rebelled against regular society in her pursuit of true **punk** was incapable of breaking free of social conventions? The only possible explanation was that he (or they) had no feelings for me at all. God, what an idiot I was! Why was I always so sure of myself? Why were my feelings never appreciated? Why am I always the one who gets hurt? But we were true comrades, comrades-in-arms! Caught up in that mood, I drifted off into an uneasy sleep. The moment my eyes opened in the morning, I'm not exaggerating when I say that all I wanted was to get back to Beijing as soon as humanly possible. Just take off. But I knew that was out of the question. I felt like screaming, but I was in somebody else's goddamn apartment. If I'd been back in Beijing, I could have chilled out by myself. "Ah!"

I couldn't keep from heaving a sigh. I felt like going up to Jia Jia and asking him, Do you consider me a friend?

### 15, A Flash

The next day felt even longer. Soon after I got up in the morning, Mother and Aunty Li (Li Zhanwu's mother) came over, and that was pretty awkward. We ate oil fritters, which made me thirsty. Bummer. Jia Jia slept like a dead man, like there was no waking him. I was thinking . . .

That morning I went out onto the balcony to take in the view. Thick, tall parasol trees grew there, the air smelled like tofu. Li Zhanwu later told me there was a pharmaceutical plant nearby.

Li, the drummer, and I got along great. The second night I stayed at his place, where I slept like a baby, like I was in my own bed. He said his mother might send him to Kaifeng University in a few months to study computers. I gave him a ten-RMB Luo Dayou CD.

I hit it off with Bai Jiaqiu too. And yet I was still in a funk. Maybe I was seeking the unity, purity, and infatuation you expect with a true comrade. They couldn't give me that. How I yearned to talk openly about the tough issues of life, music, and ideals, or anything else, with people.

I wondered how I'd have managed my time if I'd carried out my insistent plan of staying with them for a month. Luckily I only hung around Kaifeng for a few days. Lucky me.

Before coming, every thought of them had made me happy, had made me smile; now there was only fright and a sense of danger. How could it have turned out like this? It was real. My prior happiness was real, but so was my present distress.

That day they took me to see their school, a vocational high school in a white building. The athletic field and the roof were covered with green moss, and both were a lot bigger than West X High. Students on the athletic field were in summer uniforms; the boys were playing soccer, the girls were just talking in groups. They were all so lively, so full of youth. The sun was bright as I walked up to their classroom and, plucking up my courage, stepped inside. Some of the girls acted surprised when they saw me, probably wondering who this new girl was, since they'd never seen her before. Well, you won't be seeing me again, either, I was thinking.

A few minutes later, Bai Jianqiu came in with a fair-skinned, long-haired girl in a long skirt with shoulder straps. "Let me introduce you to someone, Gu Lingling. This is Jiafu. Jiafu, this is my girlfriend." I looked at her. "I've heard him talk about you," I said.

"I've heard him talk about you, too," she said with a smile as she twirled the jade bracelet on her arm.

I had to smile. She was cute, but certainly no pushover. Her reactions were quick. She answered my smile with one of her own. I liked her immediately.

Their love was typical of middle-class boys and girls in any average sized city—genuine and guileless.

Jia Jia and Bai Jianqui took seats in the last row, off to the right. I sat down in front of Jianqiu. By myself. It was politics, one of my favorite classes back in Beijing. I hadn't taken a politics course for a very long time, and was itching to get started. Deep down I hoped the teacher—a man, I expected—would raise some interesting topics for discussion, and that would give me a chance to display my talents, give them all a bit of a "shock."

Well, class started—the teacher was, in fact, a woman—and instead of a lecture, she told them to review their lesson. What a bummer! I turned and looked behind me. Bai Jianqiu was asleep, head down on his desk. That had become a habit with him, like me, except that most of the time I didn't have the opportunity. And Jia Jia? He was wrapped up in a book I'd given them called *Introduction to Sex*, and wasn't even aware I was looking at him.

I sprawled out on my desk top and began memorizing words in an English textbook. This was so incredible.

Later on, while talking with Jia Jia, I wrote, “How come you’re so nice to me? Is it because I’m really that cute, or is it because I’ve got the head of an idiot on my shoulders?”

He seemed puzzled by my strange mood, and I think he said something to try and make me feel better.

Bai Jianqiu also chatted with me for a while.

After class, I went over to the school snack shop, where I tried a bottle of Kaifeng yogurt. Not bad, and cheap, only ninety cents. I also bought some chewing gum to give to them. The woman who ran the shop said that Kaifeng residents are all poor, so the cost of living is lower.

When school was out, Bai Jianqiu invited me over to his place. He and his family lived in a casual, densely populated neighborhood of small apartment buildings. I met his father, a dark, skinny man who greeted me in the local dialect. Jianqiu’s room was neat and clean, with a xylophone in one corner; some of his own paintings and some homemade posters of the band hung on the walls. “I’m going to buy my own bass guitar this year,” he said. He and Gu Lingling liked each other a lot, and goofed around quite a bit.

“I’ll give you a jade ornament, she said with a smile, “and you and I can be sisters.”

“Sounds too good to be true,” I replied.

She took a tiny jade lock out of her purse. “I have a little jade key for this,” she said. “They’re a set. One for you and one for me. Starting today, you and I are sisters.”

“They’re real jade,” Jianqiu said.

She pulled out a strand of hair to test it. It was real jade, all right.

“See, I told you.” Jianqiu smiled proudly.

I didn’t stay in Kaifeng a month, as I’d planned. My visit lasted all of three days.

I spent part of the afternoon at Li Zhanwu’s apartment, then he took me to see the sights around town. First we went to a music store, where he told me it was where he used to buy copies of *Music and Video World* and *Punk Age*. It was the only music store in Kaifeng where you could buy rock magazines. They also sold audio tapes and pirated CDs. I did some window shopping for clothes and checked out a Xinhua Bookstore. Then I looked at some watches, stationery, and other stuff.

The sun baked down on us. I was wearing a red T-shirt, a black-and-white checked skirt, and red sneakers—dazzling youth. He took me to a district where there was an abandoned auditorium; we climbed the cement steps to the top and sat down to talk. I bought a beer, and he told me he never drank, but the two of us finished off that bottle of beer.

As evening fell, Li Zhanwu said we ought to get something to eat—his treat. At a bustling marketplace we ate some ice cream and had a couple of soft drinks. I said things here are really cheap! “That’s right,” he teased. “So are the workers’ wages.”

We went back after dark and got the other members of the band to go out on the town. We looked at some clothes and some knick-knacks. Gu Lingling bought me some red silk thread for the jade lock. She strung it herself and draped it around my neck, and I made a silent vow not to ever take it off except in the shower.

The next day I went back to their school. We hadn’t been there an hour when I told them (all except the drummer, Li Zhanwu) that I’d be leaving soon. “Where are you going?” Bai Jianqiu asked me. “Home.” “Where?” He knew what I’d said, but he asked anyway. And I knew I’d rather not answer again, but I did. “Home.” He just nodded absently. I turned to look at Jia Jia, who hadn’t stopped shooting baskets. No, he didn’t realize I was leaving. But he’d know soon enough.

I went to find my mother at a guesthouse near the train station. After our first night in Kaifeng, when she’d stayed at Li Zhanwu’s, she insisted on moving into the guesthouse. When I got there, she was drinking water and combing her hair; she seemed happy to me, maybe because she knew we were heading back to Beijing that night, that I no longer insisted on spending a month in Kaifeng, and maybe she was feeling happy that this trip to Kaifeng had gone off without incident. Who knows? Whatever the reason, seeing her happy like that made me pretty happy too.

Jianqiu and Li Zhanwu went with us to the train station.

They watched our train pull out of the station. But before we left, Li Zhanwu took a cross from around his neck and put it around mine.

### 16, Lonely High-Heeled Shoes

Back to school.

My absence from school to visit Kaifeng greatly disappointed Teacher Wang. At night, when we walked home along the western section of Third Loop, we often ran into her, and it was awkward. When that proved unbearable, I finally made the following entry in my weekly journal:

A hypothesis:

*Shall we continue to understand and support one another like good friends, or give one another the silent treatment?*

*If the former, why don't we pick a time and talk this out? If the latter, then there's nothing I can say except that I'm guilty of a bonehead decision.*

When the journals were returned, I found these lines at the bottom:

*You want to talk it out? That's fine if you're willing to open up and speak honestly. I don't feel as if I was deceived as much as I don't think you've treated me as a true friend. There are simply some things you should talk to me about before you do them.*

*If you still want to talk, pick a time.*

But the mutual esteem Teacher Wang and I had enjoyed was gone forever; we now kept each other at arm's length, not your ordinary student-teacher relationship.

Four students in our class left as a group for another school, one that specialized in teaching English. After completing the seven-year program, the students graduated with the equivalent of a college degree. The tuition was reputed to be exceptionally high. The four students were Yuan Lingzi, Li Sha, Kitten, and Lotus Beauty. Yuan Lingzi and Li Sha were best friends, Kitten was the only girl in the class who was prettier than Du Yuan, and Lotus Beauty was Cui Xiaoti's best friend. The four girls all got along well.

They were lucky, breaking out of this insane asylum of a school. None of us doubted that any school would be better than ours.

They had escaped. I, on the other hand, the one most desperate to leave, was still there.

Last night I had a horrible nightmare.

The whole thing was filled with hopeless love, hopeless yearnings, hopeless flight, hopeless hopes. The nightmare seemed to vanish the second I opened my eyes, and I couldn't retrieve it, no matter how hard I tried. (Recollections are always difficult; at this moment I can almost smell the tofu odor of the pharmaceutical plant, the parasol trees, the steps, the buildings.)

In my dream someone I've always liked gives one of my young aunts a black liquid. "Don't drink that!" I scream. "Don't drink it!"

That is followed by flight and more flight, running madly, and when I finally awoke, I was overcome by a fear of death, a fear of freezing loneliness and of cold, and the understanding that no matter whether it's life or death, everything is controlled by something unknowable and mysterious. I was tied to a nightmarish feeling I couldn't shake, a mystery I could never solve.

Passion comes quickly, and leaves just as quickly.

A few days after returning to Beijing, I went silent, no longer chattering on and on about SpermOva. And I began asking a bunch of childish questions: Do you have any true friends? Do you believe in love? Some of the people shook their heads, some nodded. When they asked me the same questions, I didn't have a clue.

“Do you have any true friends?” I asked Chen Xu.

She shook her head decisively.

“How about you?” she asked.

“I used to.”

Who I really wanted to see were the Bored Soldiers. What they could give me were a natural passion, rebellion, and fervor that had long been imprisoned. I wished I could see them right away. I believed that one day I'd live like they did. About that time I saw in the *Beijing Evening News* a story about some local residents complaining that a motorcycle gang was making sleep impossible in a neighborhood near Wudaokou, and I laughed to myself, with secret understanding. That's because I knew who they were. Like the song says: Take off your lonely high-heeled shoes and walk barefoot on the steps of the world's parks. My dreams are not of Paris, or Tokyo, or New York. My loneliness and I will meet in the quiet and stillness of midnight . . .

*Translated from the Chinese by Howard Goldblatt  
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