

*A HORSEMAN'S SON AND A BAD GIRL*

A Dialogue with Paul Engle, from

*THREE LIVES*

Hualing Nieh Engle

January, 1989. The wild deer were coming into our backyard out of the woods as they did everyday. Their coats had turned a dark brown-grey, the color of tree bark. The raccoons had been hibernating in their hollow trees since late autumn. The great oak tree on the hill where our house stood was rounded as if by the biting wind. Winter sun turned the deep snow whiter. Ice on the curving Iowa River below us glittered. Back in our living room, the fireplace flared with flame from oak logs Paul sawed himself from the woods in the summer. Paul and Hualing were talking in front of the fireplace, Paul having Chinese tea and Hualing having French roast coffee. Both drinks were very strong.

*Paul*---I was a lucky child. I was born in the last great decades of the horse. We were terribly poor. But I didn't know it. We had beautiful horses and no money. Long before the time of the plane, my first air-borne experience was flying through the air as I was thrown off the back of an unbroken horse. My father yelled at me: "Paul! Get Up!" I got up. And I have gotten up ever since.

My father, at the age of sixteen, went to work for a horse barn in Marion, Iowa, run by a man named Oxley. Then he drove race horses. Then he ran his own horse barn in Cedar Rapids, Iowa. He rented his horses out to people to ride in good weather, but all the year round he rented out rigs to the telephone company. They were specially equipped with holders for huge spools of copper wire, with ladders. Later he bought a stone barn. He had saddle horses. He taught horseback riding. He rented horses, and boarded horses for private individuals. He watered and fed them twice everyday, and put down fresh bedding of shining oat straw.

I would be out at the horse barn. We had an oval cinder track in front. We would go round and round, training horses on their gaits. The first thing you have to do when you learn to ride a horse is to train your hands. I would stand halfway around the oval which was

where the horse moved the fastest. If a horse has been skittish and needs to calm down, you don't jerk the steel bit and ruin the horse's mouth, but take full control keeping the pressure on, not hard but steady. Then my father would come along; he would talk to the horse very softly. I never heard him talking that way to the children or to his wife. Sometimes no words, just soft voice. By the time the horse came around the oval the second time, it was calmed down.

My father was a sort of horse himself, strong, active, determined, stubborn, but if he liked you, he would give you the world if he had it. He was absolutely devoted to the family, but he would never tell you. He did what he could for the family until his death, by working harder than anyone I know today. You could stick a pin in his hand, he wouldn't feel it, the callouses were so deep from using a pitchfork or a shovel all his life. He had a very loud voice. At the dinner table, we would be only two or three feet apart, he would yell, "Pass the spuds!" There was a saying in our family: the reason Tom Engle was such a tough old horse guy, so unwilling to communicate to anybody, was because his mother and father were cousins. And the saying in our family was, "Poor Tom, he got a double dose of Engle. Nobody can take that."

*Hualing*----What a different childhood I had from yours! My family had immense farmland, and twenty two houses in the best residential districts, the foreign concessions, of Wuhan. We had cars, chauffeurs, servants, maids, a live-in tailor, a superb cook and armed bodyguards for my father who was a high-ranking military officer in Hubei Province.

My father had two wives, and thus two groups of children, altogether eleven. All of us lived with my grandfather and grandmother in the same western-style house in the Japanese concession. Grandpa was the patriarch. Even my father didn't dare to say no to him. Once he ran after my father threatening to beat him with his heavy wooden stick. With such a dominating father and two bickering wives, my father took refuge in meditation and calligraphy. He was very distant. I have few memories of him. I remember him eating Quaker Oats cooked in turtle soup...

*Paul*, laughing----Quaker Oats? From Cedar Rapids, Iowa! We had it everyday! It was the cheapest breakfast food. But not in turtle soup. My God! Quaker Oats in turtle soup! Are you sure?

*Hualing*----Yes. It was supposed to be especially good for men. No good for us children, we were told. The fact was that both Quaker Oats and turtle were too expensive

for us children to eat. We watched Father eating this luxurious delicacy, yearning for it. I did believe Quaker Oats were only for men, because on the box there was a picture of a strong man in a long coat...

*Paul*, laughing----That's Benjamin Franklin!

*Hualing*, laughing----He did a good job for the men in the Nieh family. I also remember Father writing ancient Chinese calligraphy at his huge rosewood desk with many tiny drawers, or meditating on the red, round cushion in his study...

*Paul*---Was he a Buddhist?.

*Hualing*----No. It's a way of purging your mind of everything, everybody, you are totally out of the real world, then you will find serenity.

*Paul*---Not with two wives! Not even with one! I don't understand why your father wanted two wives.

*Hualing*----Grandpa ordered him to have two wives because he wanted many grandsons to carry on the family name. My mother was the second wife, much younger than my father. The marriage was arranged by the matchmaker. They never met until their wedding. It was in the traditional Chinese style, with much kowtowing to Heaven, to the wooden plaque with ancestors' names, to their parents. My mother didn't know my father had been married and had two sons until I was born. At that time, most upper-class Chinese men had concubines. One of my father's friends had a wife and seven concubines. My mother was not a concubine, because she was formally married. But being the second wife was still a great disgrace to her and her family. She was going to commit suicide, but at that moment she found me, the baby, smiling at her in her arms. That stopped her. She endured.

*Paul*---My mother endured, too, but in a different way. She was born on the farm. She handled cattle and work horses. At the same time, she was an extremely bright woman. At high school, her grades were almost one hundred for every course. She married when she was sixteen. My father had handsome curls on his head. After the marriage, she discovered he had curled his hair. She submitted to a life she hated, because it was her husband's life. She loathed horse talk, very rough, very obscene. She loathed the smell of manure but lived with it. She had lived on the farm and was accustomed to manure, but not in the home. She had to wash my father's stinking clothes. His clothing was so permeated with the odor of horse manure that a normal amount of washing would not get it out. Even after my mother washed it by hand in a tub in the basement which had a dirt floor, it still smelled. She had to

hang it outdoors even when the weather was so cold it sometimes froze, because she didn't want it in the house. My mother never complained. She combined gentleness with strength...

*Hualing*---My mother too! The two mothers could have become good friends! After my mother decided she had to submit to a life she loathed, she did her best to be a dutiful daughter-in-law, a loving mother, a devoted, although sometimes bitter, wife. She was an attractive, smart woman with sense of humor. I don't think she loved my father very much. He seemed boring. Maybe that's why she went out to play mahjong so often. I followed her wherever she went and watched her playing mahjong with her friends. That's how I learned playing it. I just loved it. I found every excuse of replacing her at the mahjong table. I was just eight or nine years old.

*Paul*---Did your grandfather have two wives?

*Hualing*---He had mistresses. We children didn't know it. Nobody talked about it. He respected Grandma, though. He cried when she died. The only time I found him crying. The patriarch of the family! Grandma was a wonderful traditional Chinese lady with bound feet. I used to watch her take off a very, very long piece of cloth from her feet. For her, it was relief. For me, it was fun. I was fascinated and eager to see her bound feet. Tiny, warped, all the toes bent and forced against the soles of the feet. Three-inch golden lotus, that was what people called them. I asked Grandma, "Do they hurt?" "No. I'm used to it," she sounded so casual as if it were a natural thing. "Do you want to have your feet bound?" Grandma said. "No! Never!" I yelled. "Then you will never find a husband," Grandma said, smiling.

*Paul*---Your Grandma would be shocked to find you have a foreign-devil husband.

*Hualing*---How about your parents? Would they be shocked to find you have a Chinese wife?

*Paul*---My father, maybe. But not my mother. She would love you. I was very close to her. I was with her a very great deal. I would help her with dishes, with cooking. We always baked our own bread. Who could afford to pay a nickel for a loaf of bread? I loved the smell of it. Even the next day, her apron would smell of fresh bread.

Mother had silky long hair down to the waist. I would watch her combing it. She had a little comb, very fine. She would first brush the hair, then she would use a large comb, then the tiny comb. Then she would braid it and put it up on her head. All women had long hair until about the 1920's when they began to cut it. It was called bobbed hair. Aunt Lydia was the first in our family to cut her hair. My father came home from the barn, Lydia was in the

house for dinner. Father took one look at her and said, "I don't want you in the house. You looked like a bobbed-hair bandit. People are going to talk!" For a woman to have her hair cut, when I was a little kid, was as if she took her dress off.

Mother sewed almost all our clothes. After the First World War, there were army surplus stores all over the country. She would go down to buy khaki army blankets and cut them up. She would make jackets for children and blankets for horses. The sewing machine had no power except her foot. She had to use her leg to pump the needle. To sew the thick blanket with heavy thread on the foot-operated machine was terribly difficult. She also did crocheting by hand. She had an amazing sense of style and taste. Everything she made was good-looking.

She had a wonderful little rocking chair. It had a drawer below the seat. In the drawer, there were spindles, on each would be a pool of different colored thread. These fascinated me; they were the colors I knew. There were cushions in which she stuck her needles, safety pins, bias tape, elastic tape, buttons, hooks, snaps, little tiny scissors, standard cutting scissors, pinking scissors, thimbles. Watching clothes being made was a great part of my childhood. I loved to sit and watch her. While sewing, she would sing, or hum, or talk to me. Sometimes, she would say, "Paul, Alice isn't here, I'm just about done. You have got to try it on." Alice was my older sister. I would stand there, a little boy wearing this older girl's clothing.

*Hualing*----When I was small, our live-in tailor made all our clothes. I was very difficult...

*Paul*---You still are!

*Hualing*, laughing----You're lucky: that bad girl was "remolded," as the Chinese said in their Cultural Revolution.

*Paul*---How?

*Hualing*----Wars, deaths, revolutions, loss of homeland, flight from the Japanese, flight from the Communists. Before that, I **really** was a bad girl. My mother would take me to the most elegant fabric shop in Wuhan and let me choose whatever I liked no matter how expensive. Usually I would buy several pieces. Then the tailor did his best to please me about the style, the tailoring. No altering was allowed. If the dress was one inch too short or too wide, I would throw it away. The tailor had to make another one. I was difficult about everything. I love fish. There must be a fish dish at dinner everyday. The cook always kept

live fish in a huge ceramic pot filled with running water in our courtyard. You know, Wuhan is famous for Yangzi River fish. Mao Zedong wrote a poem about it.

*Paul*---No wonder your fish is one of your best dishes!

*Hualing*---Yes. My family suffered my bad temper. Now you enjoy my good cooking. I never cooked, but I acquired a good taste from eating so much good food. My parents had a busy social life and entertained a lot at home. Our cook was famous in Wuhan. Everybody loved to come to dinner at our house.

*Paul*---My parents had no social life. My mother had several friends in the neighborhood. They met once in a while. They would go to each other's house for coffee. That was my mother's social life. But she didn't dare to invite them when my father was home. He would not tolerate having people in the house, except relatives. The result was that we had a strong family life. The Reinheimer uncles and aunts on my mother's side came all the time. On holidays we went to Uncle Charlie's farm...

*Hualing*---Was he the uncle you liked so much?

*Paul*---Yes. He was a marvelous man. He had natural curls which I envied very much. I thought, oh, God, if I could just have curly hair...

*Hualing*, laughing---No! I'm glad you don't!

*Paul*---Uncle Charlie had a poor sandy farm on the slope of a hill. I used to collect sweet apples from the orchard there. Every autumn, a group of Indians, on their way south, would camp in the hickory grove at the bottom of his farm. Uncle Charlie's cornfields ran right up to the grove. He knew that every night the Indians would take ears of corn and roast them in the camp fire. I could see the camp fire made from fallen hickory limbs in the grove. Uncle Charlie became a friend of the chief of the small band of Indians. He would go down, he and the chief would wrestle. After that, they would get up off the ground, slap their pants, slap their chests, slap each other on the back, shake hands and go to eat together.

*Hualing*---It sounds like a western to me. I was a city girl. My early life was full of people. You had a simple life; I had a life of human complexities. Maybe that's why you write poetry and I write fiction.

*Paul*---True. I had a hard, happy life. I just loved to go to Uncle Charlie's little one-story house on the farm. They had a root cellar under the house. It contained vegetables, like carrots, cabbages, beets, turnips, potatoes. It had a dirt floor and dirt walls. The root cellar had a wonderful smell, the smell of ploughed dirt. In the afternoon, Uncle Charlie had

always to go, as he did seven days a week, to water and feed the horses, the dairy cattle, the pigs, the chickens. I would go with him. When I was a little kid, I couldn't go up to the haymow alone, because there was a hay chute in the floor. I got old enough finally, so Uncle Charlie would give me a pitchfork, which was a very dangerous thing to carry up the ladder. I would climb up to the haymow and pitch the loose hay down the chute. As I opened the hay up, its odor filled the barn. It was a wonderful smell in the winter because it reminded me of the autumn. Then the barn would be closed up to keep in the heat for the animals. It strengthened the mingled odor of the manure from the cows, pigs, horses...

*Hualing*, making a face----I wouldn't like it. Did you really like it?

*Paul*----I could use a whiff right now!

*Hualing*----No! Not for me!

*Paul*----It's healthy.

*Hualing*----Healthy? It stinks.

*Paul*----There was the barn smell that I have never forgotten. Off to one side of the barn, there was the silo. It comes from a Latin word meaning a place to store food underground...

*Hualing*----Now, Latin again. You always explain to me what Latin word this or that comes from. Even when you talk about a farmer's barn, or horse manure. That's you. The natural and the intellectual, the physical and the emotional. I don't care about Latin, Paul. I want to know about your uncle and his barn.

*Paul*, laughing----The silo would be filled by Uncle Charlie every fall with silage, made of fodder, related to the German word, *futter*--animal food...

*Hualing*, laughing----Now comes your German. Doctor Engle, would you please concentrate on your uncle's silo?

*Paul*, laughing----Let's go back to Uncle Charlie's silo. The silage was made of chopped corn stalks, some hay, some straw. Uncle Charlie might even throw in some corn cobs and molasses. All got mixed up together. Then it would age, ferment. People didn't dare to fall in a silo. The odor could kill them.

*Hualing*----You liked that odor?

*Paul*----Oh, so rich. My first smells were not ordinary house smells. They were horse manure smell, silage smell. I just thought everybody's house smelled like horse manure. I also remember waking in the morning in the cold autumn and smelling the rich brown odor of

buckwheat batter on the griddle in the kitchen where my mother cooked buckwheat pan cakes and fresh sausage flavored with sage from the farm. Those smells came up the hallway to my bed. I smelled them before I got up. These smells remain forever. With you, the first smell was perfume, I suppose?

*Hualing*---No! No! My first smell was opium. I still love the smell. Grandpa used to smoke it. Opium, poetry, mistresses. That was the life style of the upper-class men in old China. Grandpa was not addicted to opium. He entertained friends with it. An elegant way to entertain. Like XO cognac to entertain friends in America. He was a poet, writing classical poetry. He passed the examinations in the imperial court for an official post. He was carried in a sedan chair by four men on his way to the place where he would serve as the magistrate. But the revolutionaries led by Sun Yat-sun overthrew the Ching Dynasty, the last imperial dynasty of China. Grandpa had to turn around halfway and go back home. It was in 1911. He was bitter about it for the rest of his life. He often had his friends at home, reciting poetry, smoking opium, drinking wine, laughing and talking. My good nose smelled an odor, sweet with a touch of tanginess. I peeped through the keyhole of the door to Grandpa's room. He and one of his friends would recline on a pile of embroidered quilts on the bed. Between them, a tiny oil lamp and tiny bronze cups on a tray. One of them would pick up some brown paste with a very thin wire, like a skewer, from a cup, bake it over the little lamp. When the paste became a brown ball, he would keep rolling it on a finger. Then he would insert the brown ball into the bowl of a long pipe with ivory mouthpiece, smoke it over the lamp. I just loved the odor of the opium and the sight of the blinking light of the glass oil lamp.

*Paul*---Did you smoke it?

*Hualing*---Yes.

*Paul*--You smoked opium!

*Hualing*, laughing---Don't worry! We children were not allowed to smoke opium. I was just curious. I would charm Grandpa into letting me have a puff of it. Opium could be used as medicine. When a child got sick, Mother would take a puff and blow it into the child's mouth. I loved the smell, but didn't like the taste.

*Paul*---Did it really help?

*Hualing*---It didn't really cure, but it made me feel better. Another first smell of mine was blood.

*Paul*---Blood! Human blood?

*Hualing*---Yes. To me, the blood smells life or death. Mother had eight children. She gave birth to a baby almost every winter or autumn. The midwife would come to the house to receive the baby. The maids and female relatives would help, rushing in and out my mother's room. No man was allowed in the room. Not even my father. Because anything coming out of a woman's body was regarded as evil and dirty, except the baby.... .

*Paul*---But the man loves her body.

*Hualing*, laughing---That's the man's problem. Would you please listen to me telling my story?

*Paul*---I am listening.

*Hualing*---You are not a listener. You are a talker. I was so amused when you were bored with Nelson Algren talking and acting out what he was talking about.

*Paul*, laughing---He talked too much. Go on with your story.

*Hualing*---No interrupting.

*Paul*---No.

*Hualing*---Alright. I was excited about having a new baby and hung around outside Mother's room. I would hear Mother cry in agony. The moment I smelled the blood, I knew a new life was coming into the world. Then the cry of the baby. One of the women would rush out the room to announce the arrival of the baby. If it was a boy, Grandpa would immediately go to the hall where the ancestors were worshipped. He would burn incense and big red candles in front of the plaque with the ancestors' names, kowtow to them and thank them for giving the family another male descendant. If it was a girl, no response. Girls didn't count. The girl was waste water to be poured out of the house someday.

Blood also smells death to me. I smelled it when I was two or three. It was in the late twenties when the Nationalists led by Chiang Kai-shek cracked down on the Communists. Father was one of the chief officers of the Wuhan government. They arrested many men and women suspected of being Communists. Some were executed. One day when I was crying for something, a servant tried to calm me down and carried me on his back. "Let's go to watch the execution," he said. I didn't know what it meant until I heard the gun and smelled the blood. There was such a huge crowd to watch it that I couldn't see anything. Only the smell of blood. I started to cry hard. From then on, even a drop of blood would make me tremble.

Another first smell: incense. It smells both life and death to me....

*Paul*---What a life you had!

*Hualing*, ignoring Paul's remark---I just told you Grandpa would burn incense if Mother gave birth to a boy. When somebody died, I also smelled burning incense. Grandma died when I was six. The funeral was fun. Gongs, trumpets, drums, cymbals, Buddhist monks holding burning incense and singing prayers accompanied with the beats of the wooden fish. The whole courtyard was decorated in white cloth and white wreaths. Poems written on white cloth mourning Grandma's death hung all over the walls of the hall, where Grandma's coffin stayed. White is the color of mourning in China. Whenever a guest came to express their condolences, the band would make very loud music to announce the guest's arrival. Mother and the female relatives would start to wail by Grandma's coffin. It was a ritual to wail at a guest's arrival. They would tell stories in wailing about wonderful Grandma. The stories were interesting. But the wailing sounded funny. Watching them wailing, I would giggle. When one of them stopped, all the others would at once as if they had agreed to stop at the same moment, and as soon as possible. They might immediately have food and eat with gusto. Wailing made them hungry.

*Paul*, pointing out the window at the backyard----Look! The deer are back. Eight. My crippled Littlee is there. Poor little thing. They don't have enough to eat. I must put out more corn.

Paul goes out. The deer run into the woods.

*Hualing*, picking up Paul's Chinese goose-down jacket from the Chinese lacquered chair in the living room, running to the back door---Paul! You must wear your jacket! It's snowing!

Paul, calling to the deer hiding in the woods----Corn--corn--! Corn--corn--! Corn--corn--!

Paul, carrying the empty pan, walks towards the house. The deer immediately come out of the woods, one after another, slowly, gracefully. *Hualing* and Paul go back to the living room and continue to talk, looking at the deer in the whiteness of the backyard which ends abruptly in the grey of the deep woods. The line between the yard and the woods is absolute. Every tree stands alone.