

Whirlpool

I

From the windows of the second floor conference room of the Qinglongguan Hotel one has a panoramic view of the farm land and a ribbon of road shimmering under the July sun. On the highway, a small car moved along like a shiny beetle.

Zhou Zhaolu had finished speaking. The air-conditioner hummed in the silence that followed. Someone at the back of the room coughed. In fact the coughing had punctuated the reading of his paper. By the time he was reaching the end, Zhou's throat was tickling too.

"Thank you!" Zhou croaked. His voice was giving out.

A desultory spatter of applause followed him. As he left the platform he tripped on the microphone cord. The audience came alive with a short burst of clapping that quickly died.

"Thank you," he said again. He was not embarrassed.

He nodded calmly as he made his way back to his seat. Only when the audience's attention was once more diverted did his face redden, and the corners of his mouth drooped.

There was not a familiar face in the crowd. They

were mostly elderly chemists and factory managers full of airs and graces. He expected higher standards. The treatise which he was so proud of went right over their heads. He had been casting pearls before swine. The conference was a waste of time.

The speaker that followed was an old chemist from the venerable Beijing firm of Tong Ren Tang, manufacturer of herbal medicines. The old man spoke in Beijing vernacular, regaling the audience with the misadventures of his apprentice days, evoking peals of laughter. Zhou Zhaolu felt abused. Still his hands came together to join in the applause. He was not arrogant.

Until a brief letter a fortnight ago informed him that he had been elected to its board of directors, Zhou Zhaolu did not know a municipal Society of Chinese Medicine existed. Soon afterwards a hasty phone call invited him to deliver a paper on Chinese Medicines. If he did not have a suitable treatise on hand he would have refused. At one time invitations to speak flattered his ego. But the novelty wore off. He came to realize that his position as a researcher of the Chinese Medical Research Institute was being used as window dressing for a handful of societies no one had ever heard of. He was already a member of the Qigong Society, The Sino-Western Medical Exchange Society, and a half dozen other societies. This was one more. If he did not watch himself, he would soon be lassoed into every nondescript society that popped up. He was accommodating. Nevertheless he resented being used. The only title he valued was member of the National Chinese Medical Society; the only title that opened doors when career opportunities arose. Though such opportunities were rare, he constantly reminded himself to be prepared

to leap at the right moment. At forty-four years of age, the door of opportunity was not yet closed. The trick was to be alert to the possibilities hidden behind events.

He clapped and smiled, though he had not been listening. He lifted the lid from his cup, and emptied the dirty looking, yellow jasmine tea on to a bit of waste paper and replaced it with black tea which he carried in an envelope in his vest pocket. He only drank black tea. The tea had come from his mother who lived in Fujian Province. The hillsides near his village were covered with tea plantations. When he walked to school along the winding footpaths as a child, his belly was always warm with cups of black tea. It was the only part of those early years he had not shucked off. He could not be without his black tea. He was not like his wife who followed the fad of drinking coffee. She was from Shanghai, but led a simple life. However, in matters of food, she had an instinctive yearning to be fashionable. He did not consider it a fault. She was a kind and gentle woman, and he loved her. It was not difficult for a man of his placid nature to fasten his affections on one woman for life. He saw it as a duty. And he had been dutiful for the almost twenty years of their marriage. He was a good husband. Everyone said so.

A voice rumbling at the edges of his consciousness was expounding the latest advances in the manufacture of herbal medicines. Zhou Zhaolu's mind wandered. The sun was low on the horizon. A stream of traffic sped along the highway. He followed them out of sight. The road was empty for a while, until another lot appeared like metal beetles out of nowhere. He took a mouthful of tea.

"Delicious ... " his daughter's voice sounded in

his mind.

It was Xiao Ling's favorite word. She had picked it up from television commercials. He hated commercials, but he loved every word she uttered. He had a son too. Xiao Lei was in grade five at primary school. Although he did not do as well as his older sister, he was more mature.

"Sister don't be a copy cat!"

"What do you know?!"

"Look, mum and dad, she's mad because I hit a nerve!"

He told himself early maturity was nothing to worry about. He was proud of his children. He loved them. Yes, he loved his family. Nothing could ever change that. Nor did he want it changed.

Finally the meeting was over. Zhou Zhaolu got heavily to his feet. He found the convener and made his excuses. He would not be able to attend the banquet, he said, as he was expected at home. He felt a twinge of conscience even as he spoke. It was the second time he lied that day. The first time was to his wife in the morning. He had told her not to expect him for dinner as he was going to a meeting that was likely to drag on. He wondered whether his expression betrayed anything. Even if it had his wife would not have noticed. She was not the suspicious kind.

He was a good husband.

In the corridor someone stopped him, wanting a copy of his treatise. He hesitated, groping for an excuse. Finally he said, "It needs some more work. There are bits that are not quite clear...I can't possibly give it out as it is...."

"We need your support," the editor of the municipi-

pal medical journal said earnestly.

"We'll see...."

It's all very well to be mindful of other people's needs. But one has to protect the fruits of one's labour as well.

"I'm not sure I can do a good job on it. I'm not an expert of pharmacology and it would be a disaster if there are mistakes...." Actually Zhou Zhaolu was thinking the treatise should be published in a national journal.

Zhou Zhaolu extricated himself by asking for the man's address and promising to keep in touch. The other was disappointed. Zhou looked sincere, and did his best to make the editor believe this was the opportunity he was longing for. He did not want to be misunderstood, but he also needed to hide his true feelings in a place so deep and secret that even he would not discover them. He hoped that in the eyes of his older colleagues, he would appear compliant and diffident. He had learnt in university that people preferred that type to the brilliant but hard-nosed.

The editor was placated. Zhou Zhaolu seldom upset anyone. He was an old hand at smoothing things over. The two men parted happily. But the minute the man was gone, Zhou's face fell.

He went into the washroom, and while he was relieving himself, took a neatly folded slip of paper from his wallet. His hand trembled so much that he could not get it unfolded. He had already read the message many times over. Still it disturbed him. Lights dimmed and flashed before his eyes. He had never before encountered anything to equal its effect on him. He discovered the note the day before in the drawer of

his desk. The drawer had been locked, but there was a crack wide enough for a work permit to slip through. He resented the invasion of privacy as much as the mental disturbance it caused.

The row of neat characters at the end of the message were quite clearly etched on his mind: Saturday night, 7 o'clock, on the south-west corner of Dong Dan cross road, under the Monkey King's staff. I'll be waiting. He had noticed the billboard from the bus. Some Japanese electronics firm had used the Monkey King to break into the Chinese market. Now the Monkey King was invading his private life. He disliked advertisements.

He pondered the message a long time, and decided to test the invader with a gentle reaction. He was merely testing the water, not surrendering.

He left the Qinglongguan Hotel and took a suburban bus to the edge of the city. From there he went to Desheng Men and then to Zhongshan Park and finally to Dong Dan. He was caught in the after office rush. Getting off and on buses took an hour. It was six thirty by the time he reached the billboard.

The sun was low in the west, peering at the endless stream of traffic hurrying along Chang'an Street. The sidewalks were jammed with people. Now and then the svelte body of a young girl flashed through the crowd wrapped in some gauzy material. His eyes roamed wherever he pleased, followed whomever interested him. No one knew him. He was free and just a little wicked. The person he expected had not yet appeared, and there was nothing but iron railing beneath the Monkey King.

He bought a sweet roll from a street vendor, crossed

the street at the pedestrian crossing and stood beside the door of a tailor's shop munching it. He faced the showcase. He ate methodically. Customers passed him but no one took any notice. Suddenly he looked up and his own reflection startled him.

"Is that really me?"

He looked young. He was of medium height. His stomach was flat. His hair and eyebrows were jet black, and his skin was fair. His face was long and narrow; the features, regular. His wife particularly liked his nose. It was not the typical flat nose of the southerner, but delicately chiselled. However, the eyes were southern, large and lustrous. At the moment the eyes were fixed on the wrapper around the bun.

He seldom looked at himself. He had been a handsome young man when he was at university. But that was a long time ago. Looking at himself in the glass he wondered whether the mirror had some diabolical power that drew customers off the straight and narrow. He turned away from the mirror, but even as he stepped through the door he could not resist a backward glance. In the mirror he saw a worried, middle aged man. He was at a loss as to what he should do. He felt he was becoming degenerate. Just how low he would sink, he had no way of knowing.

The sun had set but the sky was still light. He stuffed the bun wrapper in a trash can, and when he looked up there she was. She wore a pale green frock fastened at the waist and white leather high-heel pumps. A white leather shoulder bag no bigger than a book was slung over one shoulder. A dark curl fell across her brow. She had a pair of long shapely legs. She was right on time.

He stepped off the curb and started across the street, absently dodging the traffic, muttering to himself and shivering. A cyclist yelled at him, but he was only conscious of a smile that sped toward him from under the billboard like a fatal dart. Escape was impossible.

"She's beautiful...." he groaned.

II

They shook hands stiffly. Her hand was small, hard and bony. His was soft and sweaty.

"Have you eaten?" he asked coldly.

"Yes. And you?"

"I have too."

They walked apart, heading south along the sidewalk. They drifted toward the east gate of Dongdan Park. They slowed and looked at each other. He wondered what sort of impression he was making. He had decided on this bland attitude in the split second before they shook hands. He felt he had no choice. Meeting surreptitiously was repugnant to him.

"Shall we go in?" she asked.

"Alright."

Most of the park benches were unoccupied. The ones that were contained young lovers tangled in each others arms, or sad and lonely old people. They had nothing to do with either. They circled the park. There did not seem a spot they could stop. Zhou Zhaolu picked a bench that was close to the street and near the gate where there were lots of passersby. Instinctively he guessed she would prefer a more secluded spot.

"It's cool today ..." she said.

"Yes, the breeze is pleasant."

"How was the conference?"

"Nothing special."

"What was the reaction to your treatise?"

"Just so-so. I don't think it quite hit the mark with that crowd."

A strange note had brought them to this spot, yet neither was willing to mention it. Zhou Zhaolu stared at the pair of long, smooth, slender legs beside his and his spine tingled. But he forced himself to be calm.

He had known her for some time. They worked in the same department. He was the Deputy Director, and she was one of the staff. She usually addressed him with the formal "nin" instead of "ni", or by his title. But now and then in a more playful mood she would call him "Lao Zhou" or "Master Zhou." She was vivacious, and witty, and her sombreness troubled him. He liked her, as many others did. The difference was that none of the others tried to understand her. Still she was a mystery; perhaps a trap. The question was would he be snared.

Actually it did not begin with the note. Two months ago she had come to see him about the thesis for her Master's Degree and he had given her some suggestions. Perhaps he had helped too much, but he enjoyed it. Anyway it was the last time, before her dissertation. There was no one else in the office. Old Mr. Qian Tongkui was on long sick leave and he alone occupied the room. She stood beside him, one arm draped across the back of the chair, and the other hand resting casually on his desk. Her closeness made him nervous. But there was no sound of movement in

the corridor, and he did not object to her familiarity. Afterwards the thought his silence might have been taken as encouragement. Her body brushed his, and his spine tingled. He could not lift his head. He moved aside, unable to meet her eyes, suffering until she left the room. That day he stayed late in the office, brooding and feeling guilty. He waited till all the others had left, then slipped out like a thief. The next day he was more taciturn than usual. However, in the dining hall she was laughing and gay as usual. Her attitude was a reminder that he was overreacting. Nevertheless he could not force himself to be jolly. Then there was the incident on the bus from Beiyuan soon afterwards. By chance they sat next to one another. It was a bumpy ride. Under cover of her shoulder bag she reached for his hand. It was really too much. Though he did not object, he shot her a pleading glance. She answered with a smile that was half triumph and half teasing. He did not know what she wanted, or why she pursued him so brazenly.

The lights came on. There were shadows everywhere. The flower beds became dark masses. Somewhere in the depths of the park a fiddle whined and a tremulous old voice practised scales. A streetcar rumbled by. The cry of a popsicle vendor sounded forlorn.

Zhou Zhaolu sighed. They had been talking about children, but the conversation petered out. He knew her husband was an instructor at the Iron and Steel Institute, but she never spoke of him. If there was a problem between them, he preferred to let her bring it up. He did not want to pry. Somehow the conversation kept circling back to children.

She had an eight-year-old son whom she seemed

fond of.

"Xiao Hong is a clever kid, but unfortunately he's inherited his father's jutting lower jaw."

"At least he's clever."

"I saw your daughter at the spring picnic. She's a pretty little thing. Looks a lot like you."

"But she's a bit spoilt. I often scold her."

"Scold? My husband gives a hiding. A boy needs a good father."

"That ... is only...."

"I'm very unhappy. I wish I could cry, but there aren't any tears left. My heart is dead."

"You're still young."

"I'm thirty-six. My youth is wasted.... Life is meaningless."

"You're quite optimistic!"

"I try! I pretend!"

"I don't believe that. You're an optimist. Since we're here, and we are colleagues who get along well, we might as well talk. I'm a bit older, maybe I...."

"No. Don't say another word...."

She cut him short. She sounded tense. In the dark he could not see her clearly. Her small, chiselled nose was grey, and her lips were black in the half-light. Her small mouth was as vulnerable as a young girl's. Suddenly she took his hand and laid it on her rounded knee. She bent over and pressed her face into his palm. Where the tip of her nose touched it tingled.

"I just want you to be with me for a little while. We needn't pretend. You're a man and I'm a woman. I like you.... That's all. I know you won't refuse...."

"I have no way of knowing your misery.... What I mean to say is...."

"Please don't move. Just be still for a while."

His palm was moist. He was not sure whether it was sweat. He did not move; nor did he want to. A current rippled through their bodies. He was amazed how simple it was. It was not as he imagined. He did not have a heart attack. Instead he was serene. He stroked her hair with his free hand. His fingers strayed to the nape of her neck; the smooth round neck that he had looked at so often before, and his mouth went dry.

"This ... is not ... right."

"Tell me what is?"

She was wilful but tender. Her lips traveled slowly upward from his wrist. Their lips sought each other instinctively, yet they dodged and parried putting off the inevitable. When they met he kissed her deeply, searchingly.

People crossed the lawn, and passed into the distance. Others came and went, their footfalls fading along the path. No one disturbed them. They were ageless, without identity. They were male and female. Zhou Zhaolu wondered how someone else in his place would react? The summer night was full of reasons for him to kiss a beautiful woman.

"I'm so happy! Are you?" she spoke in a small voice.

".... I don't know...."

"Then say nothing."

"I don't feel quite right."

"Where...."

"In my heart."

"Why?"

"I'm not sure."

"Guilt?"

".... What came over us? I didn't think we could behave like kids.... Forgive me...."

She smiled, and her row of small white teeth glowed in the dark. She snuggled against him. She was all movement now. Actions spoke louder than words. Words bred confusion, but actions brought gratification. They were busy. At least she seemed to be. He sensed she was beyond misery. She was too hungry, and desire shattered the fragile aura of romance. She was soft, rounded and sensual. And he responded to her every whim. Her lips parted like the petals of a night blooming flower beneath his. They kissed till his mouth ached. She had slid onto his lap and he was awkward under her weight. Her hands were everywhere. He was amazed at his own response to the strange innocence of her body. Perhaps she felt she had gone too far, for suddenly she snatched her hand away. She felt his forehead, and dabbed at his face with a handkerchief. She leaped from his lap and stood on the footpath studying him, her head tilted to one side. She was silhouetted against the street light, with her face in shadows.

"Lets get a cold drink."

"A cold drink?"

Zhou Zhaolu took her arm and they left the park. She shrugged free of him reluctantly. It was quite natural and he did not mind. He could find nothing to say. But the silence was not oppressive. What he wanted to say and what he felt contradicted each other anyway.

They crossed Chang'an Street, and at the north end of the over-pass almost under its metal skeleton they found a cafe. He ordered a crabapple drink for himself and a pineapple soda for her. The lights were very bright. There were a few people waiting for seats. They glanced at each other casually. There was a soft tender glow in her eyes. He could lose himself in those eyes as if he were plunging down a bottomless well. Even so it was possible to climb back up un-noticed. Life is full of awkward situations, he thought. But they pass. One must brazen it out, without shirking or forgetting one's priorities. He fervently hoped this little interlude would pass as quickly as it began. Right now there was just a bitter-sweet after-taste to savour.

At nine o'clock they parted at the trolley stop on the west side of the street.

"I'm responsible for what happened...." he said carefully.

"We're both responsible."

"It was too sudden. In future we mustn't...."

"I know what we must do."

"... I don't understand you enough ... I just want you to be happy."

"I think you're unhappy."

"I...."

"I have no regrets, so there's nothing to worry about."

"You're so naive."

"You're not blaming me, are you? You see, when I decide on something, I do it. I'm never sorry afterwards."

"We're both married...."

"It won't harm our families. If families could be de-

stroyed so easily everything would be simple! Don't look so crestfallen. Nobody was at fault."

"The trolley's coming."

"Don't torment yourself. Nothing's changed." She got on the trolley, turned and waved. "See you Monday!"

Her home was at Dongsu Liutiao. In less than half an hour she would be home. She was coquettish. He could imagine her sensuousness in that setting going through the door with the scent of another man on her. It would be the same for him. Nothing had changed, yet he was a different person from the man who left home that morning. The new sensations he experienced had made him despicable. However dishonour is a state of mind, that can only exist if he allowed it to. And dishonour can be disguised.

Zhou Zhaolu lingered in the streets beset by bitter-sweet memories that were more poignant than the evening had been. How could a proper gentleman who had spent half a lifetime cultivating a persona slip from grace so quickly and completely? Perhaps the seeds of sinful pleasure were buried in his bones all along, waiting for her touch to bring them to the surface. He had become a caricature of himself.

He went home to the apartment at Sanlihe. He stood outside in the corridor hesitating to knock. The slip of paper was still in his pocket.

"I am miserable and need a friend to talk to. I think of you and only you. You already know the place you occupy in my heart. I have told you. I am going to try something that may shock you. I am prepared for the consequences, including the possibility of your rejection."

He did not reject her. He had become her accomplice. But until that moment the contents of the note still evoked all that had been inconceivable.

He read the note one more time before tearing it into tiny pieces, and throwing it down the iron maw of the garbage chute from which swarmed a cloud of mosquitoes and the stench of rotting tomatoes.

He knocked, and for some reason, or no reason at all he thought of the white smoothness of her neck.

His wife was waiting for him. She was already in her shapeless pyjamas. Her face was lined and the skin was dull. She seemed to have aged since morning.

"You're late," she said in a soft querulous voice.

"The conference dragged on."

He forced a smile, but she had already turned away to fix his coffee, her soft, padding footsteps were a slap across the face. He ducked into the bathroom.

III

Hua Naiqian finally earned her Master's Degree. The title of her thesis was "The Study of Arterial Innoculants and Their Effects on Circulation." The rather cumbersome title had been Zhou Zhaolu's suggestion. He felt her original title was inadequate. Hua Naiqian had some difficulties defending her paper. Some of the examiners felt the fact that all eight case histories cited were males made the outcome questionable. The objections almost shook the credibility of the thesis. Hua Naiqian did not have sufficient mental preparation beforehand. Had she appeared less confident the panel might have gone easier on her, or even given her a helping hand at crucial moments.

Zhou Zhaolu was ready to leap to her defence everytime she turned a pleading glance his way. But he held back, forcing himself to be detached, waiting for someone else to make the first move. He did not want to be involved. At the crucial moment, Liu the assistant dean of Research into the Diseases of the Alimentary System launched a surprise attack. He had probably picked up Zhou's scent in the title of the thesis. And he never let an opportunity to snipe at Zhou go by.

"The fact that the case histories used all involved men makes the outcome inconclusive. That cannot be denied. It may be overlooked in view of Hua Naiqian's inexperience. However, the thoroughness of research must also be considered...."

The audience was quite large. Many had come from the out patient ward of the affiliated hospitals, and were still in their white smocks. He guessed that a good number had come out of curiosity to see just how much water this decorative vase of the institute could hold.

Zhou Zhaolu could not remain silent any longer.

"The sex of the case histories does not have any bearing on the conclusions of the thesis. That will be apparent when the paper has been read through."

The statement was short and to the point, not open to discussion. The older researchers in the front row nodded sagely as he sat down.

"For the time being we can assume it does not influence the conclusion, but can we be sure? I feel the effect could be negative...."

"Research is always hampered by restrictions. And all conclusions are subjective. Hua Naiqian's selection

of material was limited by the case histories themselves. The fault was not hers if the records are inadequate. The fault lies with the department, and we are all responsible. It has nothing to do with the thesis...."

"I agree."

Liu's spectacles flashed malignantly, but he backed down. Zhou Zhaolu was sickened by his performance. It was clear that Liu's intention was to embarrass the whole department. But why take it out on the woman? Still he smiled and nodded kindly. He could afford to be generous. His opponent had exposed himself shamelessly. At least eighty percent of those present supported the woman.

"You can't win over me!" Zhou Zhaolu thought grimly.

Old Liu graduated from Beijing Medical College at the top of the class of 62. He was ahead of Zhou by two years. They were the two stars of the institute, and rivals from the start. They followed each other into the Party, and soon afterwards both became assistant deans. But Zhou was made a Researcher before Liu. At that time there was only one vacancy. The criteria for the selection of candidates were vague. Liu was sensitive and indiscreet. He had as many enemies as friends. On the other hand Zhou Zhaolu had a smile for everyone. Also his ability to translate English and Japanese put him several notches above Liu. In the end the decision was based on personality, and Zhou was selected. However, the two men had been friends for a short while during the Cultural Revolution, when Zhou was cooking and Liu was scrubbing toilets. Circumstances threw them together. But things changed afterwards. With rehabilitation, Liu re-

entered medicine like a ravenous wolf. Zhou Zhaolu felt menaced at first but he was resolved not to be left behind. He always considered himself the better man.

The defence of the thesis was over. Liu was surrounded by his jabbering coterie. Zhou was a bit uneasy as he edged his way out of the crowd and headed for the stairs. Liu sidled after him. Something was on his mind. Liu's skinny frame was bent like a shrimp, and the spectacles perched precariously on the bridge of his nose seemed in imminent danger of sliding off.

"I'd like to consult you on a question."

"What is it?"

"I believe Beijing Medical College's graduate studies program ended last year." "That's right. Three of the graduates were posted to our Institute. Hua Naiqian was one. She's been with us a year." Zhou Zhaolu smiled. How he would enjoy smashing his fist into that ugly face. Liu was obviously trying to create problems for the laboratory.

"Aren't some of the case histories Hua Naiqian used more than a year old?" Old Liu shrugged.

"Some...."

"How many?"

"Three ... maybe four...."

"But as a separate research project...."

"That's perfectly normal. The case histories are in the public domain and anyone can use them."

"You misunderstand me. At least two of the case histories have been used by you in the past. How did they fall into Hua Naiqian's hands? Were you aware of it?"

"I helped her select them."

"That's it. She made no mention of it in her bibli-

ography. That detracts from the seriousness of the thesis. She should have acknowledged the original researcher...."

"Why didn't you bring it up earlier?"

"There was no need. I felt sorry for her. Her standards are deplorable but she is pretty. I suppose we can consider ourselves lucky that way. I mustn't keep you."

"Not at all...."

Liu was out to embarrass him. Perhaps he sensed something between him and Hua Naiqian. But Zhou dismissed that thought. There was no proof. There couldn't be. He was the head of the laboratory and she was one of the staff, and it was his job to supervise her work. No one could fault him on that. Though he tried to convince himself that everything was alright, he quaked. He might fool others, but he could not fool himself. From now on he had to be on his guard.

Hua Naiqian was waiting in his office. She was flushed and her mouth was drawn in a tight straight line, on the verge of tears. Her confidence was badly shaken. In the last phase of defending her thesis, her voice became that of a timid child. Watching her Zhou Zhaolu had the strange impulse of wanting to stroke her head and comfort her. Now she seemed about to throw herself in his arms. He deliberately left the door ajar. It was the right thing to do, for it prevented them from doing anything stupid. Still he desperately wanted to take her in his arms.

"Better get back to your office."

"I'm so ashamed." She was depressed.

"There was nothing out of the ordinary. The reac-

tion was good as a whole. There's nothing to worry about."

"I didn't think they would be so picky."

"It had nothing to do with you. These little things aren't worth worrying about. In the future ... you have to be careful...."

"I understand. Thank you...."

"Better go now. And be happy. Naiqian I like it when you smile...."

She shot him a hurried glance, touched the back of his hand quickly and was gone. He caught a glimpse of her smooth, rounded calves as she went through the door. He was fascinated by her every move, whether on the bus to work or in the cafeteria. He found himself thinking constantly about the look in her eyes. He had no defences. He was like an adolescent again in the throes of puppy love. In his second year of university he had fallen in love with a girl who was a year ahead of him whom he never got up enough nerve to speak to. The pain of unrequited love stayed with him a long time after she graduated. Though it had been buried a long time ago, it haunted him now. The pain he was experiencing was the same although it was Hua Naiqian who started the affair. He was caught in a whirlpool of emotions. He was as afraid of the present as he was of the future. He was lonely. They had met a second time the Saturday following their first assignation. They had slipped away separately from a meeting of the Public Health Ministry and spent the afternoon in a secluded spot in the park around the Temple of Heaven. He thought he had a firm grip on himself, instead he had said a lot of things that made him blush afterwards. It was so

unlike him. It was as though he was possessed.

"Qian," he had called her. Coming from a middle-aged man, it sounded incredibly callow. He had a clear, sharp notion that he would someday possess all she had to give. He desired her warm, soft body. She had tempted him, and she was a lovely woman. There was no romance in it.

"I'm finished," Zhou Zhaolu muttered to himself.

A vision of her rounded naked body danced before his eyes. He was a lost soul trapped in an empty tomb. He left the office in search of the elder researchers determined to finalise Hua Naiqian's thesis as soon as possible. He was using his concern for the department as a camouflage for other motives. It was all he could do for the time being.

He went home listlessly. Home had become distasteful. Once he crossed the threshold of the comfortable three-roomed apartment he assumed the guise of a good husband and father again. He helped his wife with the house work, cracking the odd joke that brought peals of laughter from everyone. He supervised his son's homework, giving him an encouraging pat on the head when he needed it. He chatted with his daughter. Even when she was obnoxious he smiled, never changing the timbre of his voice. He was the centre of a loving family. When they settled down to watch television, he would read, or work on an article for some medical journal. Or he would pore over the fine points of a research paper. His wife would quietly put a cup of coffee at the corner of the desk, and he would pat her hand absently.

"Don't stay up too late," she said.

"Go on to bed," he said gently.

On the surface nothing changed. His wife was not aware that he could make no sense of what he read, or put words effectively to paper. He sat there torturing himself with thoughts of him and her. None of it made sense. A vision of Hua Naiqian shimmered in the lamplight, while his wife's soft, even breathing sounded in his ears. A wistful smile congealed on his face. He was reluctant to get into the bed he had shared with his wife for twenty years. Another woman's body lay between them, urgent, and tender. He burned with desire and he longed for respite.

His wife did not have a strong sex drive. Still she noticed his disinterest and it troubled her.

"You've been very tired lately."

"I've been busy. There's always someone wanting something. It can't be helped."

"Why not cut down on social engagements. You're a researcher not a politician."

"It's expected."

"You've lost weight. You must take care of yourself...."

His wife's hand glided down his chest. Her familiar touch set his flesh tingling. He seized her hand and drew her into his arms. Afterwards the smell of guilt that clung to him made him want to weep. But there were no tears. Instead he quickly fell asleep.

IV

The general office announced the second list of personnel due for rest and recreation leave. Among the instructions was a rather comical item: bring enough toilet paper for ten days. Rumour was rife that toilet paper

could not be had for love or money in Beidaihe. But there were all sorts of rumours these days. People dying from food poisoning after eating crabs, and drowning, and being robbed on secluded beaches. Rest and recreation was becoming an adventure.

Hua Naiqian was not on the list. Although she had applied, she cancelled at the last minute saying her child was sick, and asked to go with the last group instead. Zhou Zhaolu was listed on the last group.

When Zhou Zhaolu saw the name list he could not decide whether to cancel his trip. There were plenty of excuses. For instance he had been invited to a number of conferences, and the invitations were still lying on his desk. Besides he suspected that Hua Naiqian's child was not ill at all. She was merely creating an opportunity, without considering the effect it might have on him. The other day, he woke from a nap on his office sofa to find the door locked from the inside, and Hua Naiqian sitting in his chair. He broke into a cold sweat.

"What if somebody comes?"

"Keep quiet and they'll think you're out."

"..... Be reasonable...."

"I just wanted to watch you sleep."

"That's ridiculous...."

She kissed him searchingly, and stole from the room. His nerves were stretched taut. He strained for sounds from the corridor, but there was nothing. There was something lewd in the way she kissed, and he was afraid.

We are all monsters behind the masks we wear for faces, he thought. Ugly instincts hide behind labels like "emotion" and "reason" that are nothing