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### Ballad of the Bell Flowers

Zhonghe's heart was thumping as he put down the phone, his hands numb. At the second pull he managed to draw a tissue from its box, to wipe the tears in his eyes.

He fished out a new shirt from the wardrobe and got a pin prick on his finger while removing the packaging. The thick drop of blood looked like a tiny red pea. The fold lines of the new shirt were really conspicuous and the starched collar pressed into the back of his neck, so he took it off and changed back into an old, everyday one. He bent down to put on his shoes in such a hurried movement that his head started swimming and his vision went a little dark. "Take it easy, take it easy!" he warned himself, leaning on the wall as he slowly straightened up.

Chunji was not at home. After retirement, she had formed a mahjong group with a few ladies in the neighborhood, taking turns to play in each other's homes for three or four hours every day. When the group came to her home, Chunji always treated her friends to a meal – cold noodles, wild herb soup, or dumplings. She would urge them eat this dish, press them to try that, with the greatest enthusiasm. It was as if even a mere dish of shredded potato, once stir-fried by her own hand, had been transformed into a rare and exotic delicacy.

Zhonghe could no longer envisage what Xiucha looked like. Back in the days they lived in Chaoyangchuan, his home and Xiucha's had been close to each other. There were dozens of pear trees around the houses. During the couple of weeks every year when they were in full flower, the pear trees would be covered in a heavy snow which the sun could not melt, and after dark he would look out of his window towards Xiucha's room. Sometimes she appeared like a fairy in the kingdom of snow, while at others the light in a lantern. Forty years had passed, his waist was many sizes larger, and his hair had turned gray. Fortunately, his back was still straight, thanks to many decades of exercising, walking for an hour every day.

At the entrance to the waiting room of the train station, amid the din, the indescribable smell and whirl of colors, Zhonghe spotted Xiucha even before he got out of the taxi. She was wearing a darkish purple suit, as slim as before, and her skin was still as white as bean curd. Her wrinkles had not made her ugly; rather, they made her look soft and natural, like old wrinkled linen. Zhonghe felt a weight pressing on his chest, like a millstone, the kind his family had owned in the courtyard at Chaoyangchuan. At dawn or at dusk, he and Xiucha used to sit beside it doing their homework. Even after they graduated from senior high school, they kept on reading there. Mostly they read novels borrowed from the county library, the content of which he had long ago forgotten, but he still remembered the song she liked to hum while she read:

Oh, white bell flowers and purple bell flowers.  
Standing below the slope,  
We see an ocean of flowers flowing down from heaven,  
Covering the hills and wild lands.  
We gaze transfixed,  
Oh, white bell flowers and purple bell flowers.

“Zhonghe -”

Her smile was right in front of him, but it was soon submerged in a lake of tears. Zhonghe wiped his tears, and Xiucha’s eyes also misted over.

Xiucha had joined the Sunset Glow Art Troupe of the city where she lived, and she had 29 travel companions in Waiting Room Four. “We’re on our way back from a trip to Changbai Mountain and have to change trains here.”

They only had just over an hour.

Zhonghe took her to a cafe adjacent to the waiting room, but the only coffee they served there was the instant coffee sachet variety. He summoned the waiter and ordered two cups of expensive *tieguanyin* tea, in addition to dried beef, dried squid slices and preserved plum. “This tea is too hard-tasting. Do eat something, or your stomach will play up.”

Xiucha smiled, “So you’re still that careful.”

“How did you find me?” he asked.

“You can always find someone if you try,” said she.

He felt rueful. He had never tried to find her. But nor had he ever forgotten her. For quite a few years, every night he had massaged his mother’s arms, shoulders and legs for an hour before she went to bed. Time and again, the old lady would recall old anecdotes of Chaoyangchuan, and Zhonghe could see Xiucha in every incident and behind every person that mother mentioned. “Are you tired?” the old lady used to ask before he left. “You come to massage me day in day out, and have to listen to my chattering. You must be sick to death of it, eh?”

“I’d be happy to keep massaging you till you’re a hundred,” said Zhonghe. And he meant it from the bottom of his heart; this was how he got time with Xiucha, how could he get tired or fed up with it?

Zhonghe seldom lost his temper, except when Chunji scolded their daughter. Whenever she had been at the receiving end of a tirade from Chunji and turned to her dad in tears, what he saw was little Xiucha’s grievances, and would respond to Chunji with a dirty look. He would then take the girl out to eat and buy her a present.

“I used to hate you when I was little,” his son once told him. It was as if you loved little sister so much you wanted to eat her, but I was something you wanted to spit out.”

“But you have to indulge girls a bit. It’s only natural,” he replied.

Right from childhood he had got accustomed to being nice to girls. When he went to school with Xiucha, if they came across a muddy section of road he would always give her a piggy-back across the difficult section. Up there, holding on to his back, she

reminded him of a bird with folded wings. In springtime, he used to weave cricket cages for her. When splitting the dried cornstalks into thin strips, he cut his fingers many times and would grimace in pain when washing his hands. On one Dragon Boat Festival, he was bitten by a snake while gathering Chinese lantern plants for coloring her fingernails. Fortunately, it was only a grass snake, so not very poisonous. His mother was horrified; she held his leg and sucked out the venom until her lips swelled right up. Xiucha's parents just looked on flapping their hands, completely helpless. They blushed at what his mother did when her child was in danger.

A widow at the age of 21, Zhonghe's mother had raised him on her own and supported him until he graduated from senior high school. The boy's clothing was always spotless. Even though he had only one set of clothes, it was washed and aired dry overnight so he could leave home clean and tidy in the morning.

The one and only requirement the old lady ever had for her son was this: Marry Chunji.

"I like her big face. It means good luck," she said. "And she's got good hips for childbearing."

True to the old lady's words, Chunji gave birth to two healthy children. During the course of their growing up, Chunji grew rounder and plumper, like a mound of rising noodle dough; in her sleep she would snore, snore and snore, so he often dreamed he was standing in the autumn rice fields hearing the wind blowing the rice waves into booming surf; he was a straw scarecrow, dressed in rags with outspread arms, able to see Xiucha leaving along the field embankment, but unable to utter a sound.

In the first few months since his retirement last year, Zhonghe had started obsessing like one possessed about the soymilk Xiucha's family used to make. He thought back to that old dimly-lit bean curd room, where the newly churned curd was still trembling in its sack above the wet ground. The soymilk was contained in a coarse china basin. Every day he and Xiucha would sprinkle in a few grains of saccharin and drink their fill before going to school. When he hiccupped he got the taste of the soy again. Zhonghe had done the rounds of every shop in town that sold soymilk but that fresh, soft flavor was never to be found again.

"How's she doing, my sister-in-law?"

At Chunji and Zhonghe's wedding, Xiucha acting in the capacity of his younger sister had held a wooden dipper toward the bride across the wedding table – every inch of which was crammed. On it were a pair of wooden mandarin ducks (thought to be the most faithful lovers that never part with each other – *ed.* ), a cooked rooster and hen couple biting a whole red pepper (signifying a wish to the newly weds to have a happy life – *ed.* ), various candies, fruit, fresh flowers and a dozen varieties of cakes and cookies. The bride threw in a big handful of candies too. Later, Zhonghe heard that Xiucha had gone off into the woods and eaten every one of them. She had ironed out the wrappers and made an *origami* mandarin duck to display on her windowsill.

When Xiucha got married, Zhonghe rose before daybreak and beat rice cakes – a communal effort with a few other young guys. The glutinous rice was steamed hot and translucent, glistening like teardrops. Their wooden mallets weighed four pounds apiece, and they had to beat thousands of times to turn the teardrops into an inert solid mass.

Xiucha had married a Mr. Yin, a demobilized army officer, who, despite his youth, had a natural air of authority about him. Zhonghe had been at their engagement banquet too. The gentlemen were drinking away, but the ladies' tables were set near the bean curd room. During the banquet, Xiucha was summoned by her father to propose a toast to the guests. She bent her head low, her eyelashes like curtains, and trembled as she raised her cup. Never had Zhonghe drunk anything so hard to get down his throat; every cup of it had felt like the bite of a saw, inflicting pain with every gulp.

Xiucha told him that her husband, Mr. Yin, had had a stroke five years earlier, but that thanks to the prompt treatment he received, his ability to walk and so on had not been affected. Her son had hired a full-time nurse to help her.

"His name is Wanyu," she said.

"I've been out to meet up with Xiucha."

Zhonghe changed into his indoor slippers and went into his own room – they had slept in separate bedrooms since the children had set up their own homes. On the wall was a photo of his mother, taken on her 60th birthday. She wore a white Korean-style dress, the collar and sleeves trimmed with white satin and an immaculately tied butterfly bow at her bosom. Not one hair on her head was out of place. It was held together with a hairpin, which had taken him a whole week to fashion out of a wooden chopstick – carving it, rubbing it down, painting it, and rubbing it down again.

The old lady's deep eyes looked out at Zhonghe from the picture.

In the two years before she died, she liked to sit in the cane chair on the balcony, gazing at the long river in the distance through narrowed eyes. At sunset, the sunlight spread over the river like a splashed egg yolk, being consumed one mouthful at a time by that giant snake of a river until it swallowed up the sun in its entirety.

Zhonghe used to sit by his old mum watching the sun going down. It reminded him of a time long, long ago with Xiucha sitting beside him on a slope dotted with red physalis. With a thin straw she poked into the plant through a hole the size of a millet seed, so as to extract the fiber and seeds. The resulting empty husk, as thin as a cicada's wing, she placed on her tongue. She blew air into it, causing it to swell up like a little lantern, then squeezed the air out again with her teeth; then she repeated the process. She did one for him too. That lantern-like husk fell on the tip of his tongue, a bitter taste mixed with sour and sweet. He kept on blowing it up until he had no breath left at all.

"You've been out to meet up with Xiucha?"

Chunji was still standing at the door. Zhonghe turned his head toward her and she threw what she happened to be carrying at him with great force, but being light, it just kind of floated and fell to the ground way short of its target.

"I thought you got hit by a car. Had a heart attack, or a stroke! And you've been meeting up with Xiucha? Why didn't you call me? Or leave me a note?"

He looked at Chunji; her face was flushed and tear stained. But her rage did not touch him any more than the cloth bag she'd just thrown at him that had floated to the floor. Just like in the cab ride home, when the driver had kept on chatting, it took him an age to reply:

"I'm back now, aren't I?"

“You’re back?” Chunji sneered. “Where’s your soul then? Gone off with Xiucha?”

She was right. Xiucha’s words had stolen away his soul like a dog with a bone.

Zhonghe did not want to quarrel with Chunji. There had never been any violence in the language between the two of them. Living with his mom for all these years, he felt all the more embarrassed if he scolded anyone. Besides, Chunji was also a good-natured woman. It was over a month since they last had words, when she served up barbecued beef to her friends, and the smell had lingered for hours. He had gone into the kitchen to boil water and really lost his temper when he found the kettle coated with a film of smelly oil.

At supper, Chunji cooked braised whole small potatoes and soybean sprouts in sauce, adding pine kernels, walnuts, sesame seeds and red beans in with the rice, which she steamed in a stone pot. As soon as the lid came off, a fresh sweet smell came his way and his anger evaporated at the first whiff.

Their children called: first one and then the other. Though Chunji was in the sitting room, the phone kept ringing so long he had to pick up on the extension, “Where were you? Mom was worried sick.”

Once they’d talked with him they wanted to speak to mom. Zhonghe went into the sitting room to call her to the phone, but she just kept her eyes fixed on the TV, refusing to take the phone from him.

“Mom’s still cross,” Zhonghe told the children.

“Then you’d better find a way to make amends and get back into her good books,” they laughed and hung up.

The local TV station showed three episodes of Korean soap operas every evening. The titles were different but the plots were much of a muchness: two brothers in love with the same girl; two sisters in love with the same guy; or two brothers in love with two sisters. These ridiculous stories easily moved her to tears.

“How old are you, blubbing at stuff like this?” Zhonghe laughed at her.

“What do you know?” she retorted.

Indeed, what did he know? And what about her? After leaving Chaoyangchuan, she had now and then contacted people back there but he had resolutely severed all connections with the place.

Even when the soap operas were over, Chunji did not go to bed; the light in the sitting room remained on, shining out under the door.

When Zhonghe went to the bathroom, he saw her take out of the fridge the fresh ladybell roots someone had given her the other day. They had knotty thick skin much like that of a crocodile, which had to be cut away bit by bit with a knife. As he was coming out of the bathroom she suddenly blurted out the question, “Has Xiucha gotten old too?”

“With eyes like hers, with age, her lids will droop and cover half the eyes.”

Chunji was quite kindhearted, and Zhonghe knew he could cool her down by choosing words that would please his wife. Yet, this was Xiucha they were talking about! “She’s quite good looking even now.”

“She’s too good looking, that’s the problem,” said Chunji. “That’s why your mom was against her as a daughter-in-law. She said you could tell from what someone was like at the age of three what they would be like when they got old. And that Xiucha’s looks

and figure wouldn't bring her good fortune."

"And she also said you were a kind and honest girl."

"And what's that tone supposed to mean?" Chunji looked up at him. He had sharpened her knife a couple of days before, so that its cutting edge felt like a shard of ice. "Did I spoke ill of Xiucha?"

"I didn't say you spoke ill of her."

"Anyway, things didn't go that well for Xiucha," said Chunji. "Her husband was always beating her up, until she had a miscarriage. He gave her a broken rib once and she had to convalesce at her parents' place for two months until it healed. "

Zhonghe felt as if had just drunk a big bowl of steaming hot chili soup, but he was shivering as if from cold. He tried to stare the lie out of her, so that she would retract her words, but she stared right back at him.

"Don't you believe me? Everyone back in Chaoyangchuan knows it."

Everybody knew; but not him. But what would he have done if he had known? Would he have had the guts to take Xiucha away from that guy? When she got beaten up had she expected his arrival? Since even Chunji knew about what had happened to Xiucha, Xiucha must surely have assumed he knew about her situation.

"They rowed for years and years until they went to court and got a divorce. After the divorce Yin started drinking every day and on top of losing his leadership position he went on to lose the job he got demoted to. Then he had a stroke. But for some unknown reason, Xiucha went back to nurse the man rather than enjoying her quiet life!"

He doubted whether Chunji and Xiucha had been speaking about the same man. Today, Xiucha had talked about Old Mr. Yin as a cute, obedient boy, she had said their son would use his free time to take them to the zoo, the aquarium, the fun fair, and indulge them like children.

"Xiucha's son..., "his mouth was so dry each word came out like a spark. "His name's Wanyu, isn't it?"

Chunji looked up, and they stared at each other, each one seeing something more.

"You could be right," Chunji looked down and started peeling again.

Zhonghe went back to his room and made straight for the balcony, where it was chilly. Many new apartment buildings had been developed on the bank of the big river. When they had first moved here, there had been stone embankments, with wild grass growing between the stones, but now those had been replaced by concrete dams and lines of lilac trees. As spring turned to summer, the lilacs came into bloom, creating banks of pink and white clouds that reminded him of the bell flowers covering every hill and valley at Chaoyangchuan. But nothing was visible now. In the pitch dark, surrounded by emptiness, the wind was feeling at his body, first a light touch, now a heavy one.

"Why did Xiucha go looking for you?" Chunji asked, having followed him over.

He was happy they were standing in darkness; it made it easier for him to speak. "Wanyu is getting married next month. Xiucha has invited us to the wedding."

"She didn't come to our children's weddings," said Chunji. "But she expects a return gift from us at her son's wedding?"

Chunji had had her daughter find her a famous beauty saloon for a perm. It cost

several hundred yuan but even so she had it cut again within days, leaving only a few curls.

“Wasn’t that a waste of money?” he asked.

Chunji said it was the normal course of events. She stood back to give him a better view. “This hairstyle makes me look slimmer, doesn’t it?”

He could see nothing, but replied with conviction, “Much slimmer.”

Chunji also had her daughter buy a pile of facemasks, to be applied every evening while she watched the Korean soap operas. Her whole face was covered with a whitish mask, with holes for the eyes, nose and mouth. The first time he saw it he got a shock.

“Are you crazy or something?”

Chunji gave him a dirty look from under her mask.

She had also bought clothes, shoes, and several sets of under-wear even. “Dad, just how beautiful was your first love? Look at the state mum’s got herself into.” In came their daughter; she threw down several paper bags, lunged for the sofa and sprawled out, spread-eagled, “The old lady plays the young shopaholic!”

“I’ve spent all my performance bonus for this month - ”

“Is it really such a pain to take your mother shopping?” Zhonghe said. “Lip service alone is no way to repay our efforts in raising you.”

That said, he thought Chunji was taking things too far. She was skipping proper meals, just eating one apple a day, chewed very slowly. And since she wasn’t eating her meals, she cooked perfunctorily for him. In one week all she fed him was three meals of fried rice with kimchi and shredded pork. She even suggested that Zhonghe drink salted water with an apple just like her.

“Your stomach and intestines also need a good cleansing,” she told him.

The day before they left, she dyed her hair. The name of the color on the box was “Sweet Caramel.” He complained that the smell of molten wax on her hair had destroyed his appetite.

“More likely because you’re nervous about seeing Wanyu, eh?” she said.

These days of frenetic activity seemed to have changed Chunji into another person – not only did she look different, the way she spoke and acted was different too.

“It’s your hair I’m talking about! What’s it got to do with Wanyu?”

“You don’t like me?” she pulled a long face. “I won’t go then.”

She banged the door shut behind her.

“I didn’t say anything,” Zhonghe pushed it open. “Why lose your temper?”

“It makes me mad to think about it,” she started getting difficult. “You two had a good thing going back then, and now 40 years later you put it out on public display. Am I supposed to come and lead the clapping?”

He was just opening his mouth to reply when she roared back, “I’ve never been so humiliated!”

There was nothing for it but call in their son and daughter, who talked with her behind closed doors for two hours. The son came out first, telling him in a low voice, “Agreed to go.”

“I’ll drive you both there tomorrow,” he added.

They sat on the sofa for a while and the son suddenly burst out laughing. Zhonghe

looked at him, "What's so funny?"

"Nothing."

Another half hour passed; the daughter came out, her eyes all red, "I'm coming tomorrow as well."

She went home with her brother. As Zhonghe was seeing them off at the door, she turned to look at him and whispered in his ear, "I can't wait to see this elder brother of ours."

She referred to him to naturally it hit Zhonghe like a thunderbolt, and his eyes moistened.

They set off early the next day, Zhonghe and his son sitting in the front and the women in the back. First his daughter praised mom from top to toe, like she was a movie star. Then she added that it was just like a spring outing, the four of them not having been out together on their own for ages.

"A fall outing, you mean," the son corrected her.

"Who cares whether it's spring, summer, fall or winter?" she took care of everything on the way there, what to eat and what to drink. She said that the morning mist rolling in the wild looked like cotton fiber, and suddenly pointed at a maple tree bathed in the sunlight, yelling, "Look at that tree, it's like it's on fire!"

"Don't be such an excitable child. You're a mother," Chunji admonished her. These were the first words Zhonghe had heard from her since the children had left the night before.

They went straight to the restaurant. The men got out first, while the daughter helped Chunji fix her make-up.

"Who's the older of us, him or me?" asked his son.

"You are, by a few months."

They took the elevator up, where even the daughter fell quiet. As soon as the doors opened, Zhonghe spotted Xiucha being led into the hall on the arm of a lady. Glimpsing them out of the corner of her eye, she stopped still on the instant. Chunji's face turned pale at the sight of Xiucha.

Xiucha came scurrying towards them. Her traditional Korean dress with its full skirt and trailing ribbons made her look as if she was treading on clouds. While still far away she stretched out her hands toward Chunji. The two women, with a combined age of over 120, hugged and cried like little girls.

The lady who had just been helping Xiucha came over, puzzled, "What's all the crying about? It's time to start. Come along in."

Xiucha ignored her, wiping Chunji's tears with a tissue. Glancing past Zhonghe, her eyes fell on his son and daughter. "You are so grown up."

Together they bowed to her in polite greeting.

Xiucha pulled them up, tears gushing again.

The lady pulled at Xiucha, "They're all waiting."

"We'll all go in together," Xiucha held onto Chunji and ushered them into the hall. At the entrance, they saw the bride and groom hand in hand.

Zhonghe felt dry-mouthed and a little shaky. Wanyu was quite tall, dressed in a dark

suit and white shirt, with a pink rose pinned to his chest. He had single-fold eyelids, a high-bridged nose and thick lips – the very image of Zhonghe. When he caught sight of Zhonghe, his expression froze. Totally absorbed in giving Wanyu the once over, Chunji trod on Xiucha's skirt, nearly causing her to trip and fall.

“Hurry up,” the lady kept on urging, pushing the whole group inside. Xiucha showed them to the reserved VIP seats, before sitting in her own seat at the table in the middle of the hall reserved for the parents of the bridal couple. Zhonghe saw Old Mr. Yin, sitting in a wheelchair alongside Xiucha's seat. His hair was cut short and he was clean-shaven. He wore a dark suit, white shirt, and a handsome tie. One half of his body was completely immobile, while the other half trembled constantly. His eyes stared in a fixed direction, and his lips quivered. Zhonghe doubted whether he could get out a whole sentence.

The master of ceremonies announced that the auspicious moment for the wedding had arrived and the guests stood up to greet the new couple. The music started, a medley of Korean folk ballads rather than the usual Wedding March. The guests clapped along with the M.C. as they watched the new couple slowly progressing along the rosepetal-strewn carpet and up onto the stage.

The M.C. introduced the bride; his commentary was accompanied by photographs, projected onto a big screen behind him, showing the bride at every stage of her life, from infancy to as she appeared before them today. She was a teacher of dance at the art college, she was 28, she was the apple of her parents' eye, she was clever and sensible too, she'd had people chasing after her since the age of five, she had broken the hearts of at least a thousand gentlemen for the sake of Wanyu... His words triggered wave upon wave of clapping, with frequent cheering from those tables where the young people were grouped. Then the groom was introduced: Wanyu was exceptionally intelligent as a child – Zhonghe stared at the images on the screen. The little boy was thin and frail-looking, staring at the lens in panic. After five or six, he no longer seemed as afraid of having his picture taken; in one shot he looked exactly like Zhonghe as a young boy. At seven or eight, he looked melancholy, positively taciturn. By his teens, sorrow and restraint had become permanent fixtures of his expression. At around 20, he became a man, with something cold and composed about his eyes. He was admitted to Beijing Textile University thanks his excellent exam scores, 10 years ago, he opened his own company, which now employed 600-700 full-time workers, their products did not just sell in China: they had gradually established a market presence in Korea, Japan and even Southeast Asia. “Why have you left it so late to get married?” The M.C. stuck the mike toward Wanyu.

“Originally I wasn't reckoning on getting married,” Wanyu said, smiling to his bride. “But one moment of carelessness and I was caught.”

The banquet continued for a very long time.

Wanyu brought over his bride to raise a toast to Zhonghe and Chunji. The bride looked prettier close up, and she toasted them in very graceful fashion, addressing them in the sweetest of tones as “uncle” and “auntie.” After mingling with the other guests for a while, Xiucha came over, pushing Old Yin's wheelchair. Zhonghe shook Yin by the hand, a hand more forceful than he had imagined. Then the nurse came to take the old man home ahead of the rest.

The young people switched on the stereo and began singing and dancing whilst continuing to eat and drink.

While talking about Zhonghe's late mother, Xiucha and Chunji came to tears. Zhonghe heard for the first time that Xiucha almost died while giving birth to Wanyu. It was his mother who had purchased bear gall and sent someone to deliver it.

"You take after your granny," Xiucha sighed with emotion, taking the hand of Zhonghe's daughter.

Zhonghe went to the bathroom, where Wanyu was washing his hands. Their eyes met in the mirror, and Zhonghe nodded to him. Inside the cubicle, he trembled violently as he unbuckled. It took him twice as long as usual. He groped around inside his belt, and found the envelope containing 20,000 *yuan* which he had withdrawn from the bank – all of his private savings. In addition, Chunji carried with her 3,000 *yuan* gift money. He knew Wanyu was not short of money, but he didn't know how else to express his emotions, other than with cash.

As he came out, Wanyu was drying his hands on a paper towel, and pulled out two pieces for Zhonghe. They came out of the bathroom together, and Wanyu fished out a pack of cigarettes. He took one out and proffered it respectfully to Zhonghe in both hands, then lit it for him with his lighter.

"Sorry." Zhonghe took a pull on the cigarette. But as he started to talk he began coughing, so he doubted whether Wanyu had heard a thing he said.

Zhonghe touched the money inside his pants, was just about to take it out when someone, his face flushed with drink, grabbed hold of Wanyu and pulled him back into the hall. Wanyu only had time to turn his head toward Zhonghe and nod.

Back inside, Zhonghe saw a woman singing into a mike. She was standing on a round platform, around which dancers were swirling on three levels, first to the song *My Dear Lover*, then to *Bell Flowers*:

Oh, white bell flowers and purple bell flowers.  
 Standing below the slope,  
 We see a ocean of flowers flowing down from heaven.  
 Covering the hills and wild lands,  
 We gaze transfixed...

Zhonghe returned to his table. Xiucha and Chunji, now red with wine, were singing along: "Oh, white bell flowers and purple bell flowers." After that, they hugged, and whispered into each other's ears. Chunji laughingly pointed to the cups and told her daughter, "Fill them right up."

The daughter poured out wine for them, and grimaced to Zhonghe, "They've agreed on 50 plans: to pay homage at Granny's tomb, to make bean curd back in the bean curd room in Chaoyangchuan, to pick pears, to go and view pear blossoms next spring..."

## The Courtesan

When the people of Nanyuan prefecture mention me, they always call me “Miss Spring Fragrance of Lady Fragrance’s family.”

My mother, Lady Fragrance, worked in an age-old profession. She sold her body to support herself. This was a conspicuous profession, with risks and also with unexpected consequences.

Some splendid, imposing carriages frequently stopped outside the Fragrant Pavilion. They were brass, and golden tassels hung from the carriage roofs. The people in the carriages had all come to see Lady Fragrance and had nothing to do with me. I was eighteen years old that year and had never been involved with a man.

The previous year’s Dragon Boat Festival had been the first time I had shown myself in public. I had worn a plain-colored dress and a white hat made of gauze netting to protect my face—and, to the best of my ability, I remained calm and collected. But because I had bathed with a fresh-flower perfume throughout the year, my body had its own fragrance, even when the wind was still, and the bees and butterflies circled around me; it looked suspect. The one who had accompanied me was my maid Xiang Dan. Her delicate beauty had drawn the attentive gazes of many men, and so Xiang Dan was a little conceited.

She urged me to swing.

I sat on the swing and swung, with Xiang Dan pushing. The more the swing swung, the higher it went, and the bees and the butterflies took flight. As I hovered in the air, I saw the “changcheng” towering in the foothills of the mountain to the north. They were wooden statues of a man and a woman with their deformities exaggerated, and they were painted with fresh colors. It is said that if a youth tied a strip of cloth written with his lover’s name onto this statue, his love would be requited. I flew higher and higher, and saw more and more structures and woodlands, concealed in the places where they existed. I started to feel dizzy, but Xiang Dan clearly had no thought of stopping. Finally, the tip of my toe kicked the little golden bell marking the highest spot on the swing. When the crowd’s cheers below reached my ears, the voices had already been thinned and diminished by the wind. I was afraid ---not just because of the swing’s height, but also because of Xiang Dan’s murderous intentions. Ten years ago, when she had been sold to the Fragrant Pavilion, Xiang Dan was extremely ugly, but now, she firmly believed that if it weren’t for me, she would have been the most beautiful woman in this city. What ended this risky game was that the straw hat I had been wearing was plucked by the wind from my head, and it drifted with the wind to Xiang Dan’s feet. Only then did Xiang Dan stop pushing.

When the swing slowed and I was back on the ground, my legs were like jelly. I was sitting on the swing, which was surrounded by people. With wide eyes, they stared at me. They were curious about my face, but their attention annoyed me. When Xiang Dan picked up the hat and returned it to me, I saw that its edges were muddy. I threw that hat away. When I had my “land” legs again, I squeezed through the crowds of people who had left only a narrow path for me. The people behind me were all talking about “Miss

Spring Fragrance of Lady Fragrance's family.”

My mother once had been the most beautiful woman of Nanyuan prefecture. When she was 16, she had given herself to the magistrate of Nanyuan prefecture, and she had become pregnant. If she had given birth to a boy, perhaps it would have been possible for her to become the prefectural magistrate's concubine, but the baby she gave birth to was me. I became the pretext, and my mother was rejected and cast out of the prefectural magistrate's home. This was how my mother became Lady Fragrance, and later on her fame grew much greater than that of the prefectural magistrate. Many high officials and aristocrats came to admire her, and they easily drowned out the logs that the magistrate's high position had left lodged in Lady Fragrance's heart. Now, he became nothing but an example showing that women had to pay with pain when they were climbing in society.

When I was growing up, Lady Fragrance's work and leisure times were totally reversed. She couldn't get up before it was time to light the oil lamp. Her skin was as smooth as silk and satin, and her face as bright and clear as moonlight. There were two nights when I stood in the garden, and peeped at her through the open window in the enclosing wall. At night, Lady Fragrance wore only a pale-colored blouse and a long skirt. At the back of her head, her hair was done up in a bun. Apart from a single, silver hairpin inlaid with a single pearl, she wore no other jewelry. Those two evenings, no men came to see her. Sitting beside her was the musician she liked best. The musician was playing the *jiaye qin*.

(1)

As I was gazing at Lady Fragrance, my eyes were like a well --- filling up with water.

Lady Fragrance had given the sunny days of her life to me and had given herself to the black night; yet, she was still so calm. I greatly rejoiced that I was her daughter and not her mother.

This spring, the cobbler Cui En was called to the Fragrant Pavilion. He was an attractive and charming young fellow, who was also very shy. As soon as I saw him, I fell in love with him instantly. But he almost never looked directly at me. When he measured my feet, he held the soles of my feet with the palm of his hand. Our bodies had touched.(2) The palm of Cui En's hand and the sole of my foot were the same length. I was looking directly at him, and I wished he would look up and glance at me just once. With that glance, I could let him see my thoughts. But Cui En didn't look up. He placed my foot back into my shoe.

When I left his cobbler's workshop, I was in the brilliant sunshine, and yet I was in a miserable mood. Xiang Dan sat down on the chair I had just sat on, and thrust her foot into Cui En's chest. That night, she also went to Cui En's house.

I couldn't sleep. My stomach was empty. I went to the kitchen to find something to eat--one bowl of cold noodles, one small dish of cake, one plate of sushi, a small dish of sliced, fresh fish steeped in vinegar, and a few biscuits. I ate without stopping, but by morning, I still hadn't been able to kill myself by overeating.

Xiang Dan's face was radiant. As she swept the room, she told me about Cui En. Finally, she said that Cui En, “no matter how often one says it, it is no more than a craftsman of humble origins.”

I threw and broke a porcelain bowl I used daily for drinking tea, and while Xiang Dan was clearing away the broken pieces, she accidentally cut and hurt her hand.

On that day of the Dragon Boat Festival, I ran into Li Menglong. I was wearing a pair of new shoes. When Cui En had made the soles of the shoes for me, he had used the material of ox horn. He had intentionally raised the heels and carefully carved a cluster of rose-of-Sharon flowers. The city's best embroidery worker had then embroidered white rose-of-Sharon flowers on the light pink silk instep.

When I walked with Xiang Dan, she was very unhappy. She was dissatisfied with the soles Cui En had cut for her from cork. In her dreams she always wanted to have a better pair of soles than mine, but she failed to get her wish. The day before, Cui En had left the Fragrant Pavilion, his work concluded. His and Xiang Dan's love had also ended.

When Xiang Dan and I walked to the edge of an old temple, the clatter of horse's hoofs came from behind. As I was dragging Xiang Dan into the old temple to hide, in our hurry, one shoe dropped onto the road.

This shoe held Li Menglong up.

First, he let the horse circle around my shoe twice, and then he leaned down from the horse. He picked up my shoe and juggled it. He liked it so much that he wouldn't let it out of his hands, just as all men with a fetish for women's belongings.

"Tell me, which young woman dropped this shoe?" Li Menglong was looking at the old temple. Although experienced in life, he still had an innocent face. I sent Xiang Dan out to retrieve my shoe.

She approached Li Menglong bashfully, and asked him for the shoe.

Li Menglong was staring at Xiang Dan's face, and he suddenly bent over and lifted up her skirt.

Xiang Dan screamed.

"You're wearing your shoes. This isn't your shoe," Li Menglong said triumphantly. "Tell your young mistress to come out herself to get the shoe."

Li Menglong's action of lifting the skirt had moved me, so I walked out of the rundown temple. As soon as I went out, Li Menglong's gaze was frozen. Neither his body nor his hands moved in the slightest. I took the shoe easily from his hand and put it on my foot.

I was walking in the direction of the Fragrant Pavilion. This year, I didn't have to swing again. A man already loved me.

That evening, Li Menglong came to the Fragrant Pavilion. Inadvertently, he walked into the garden and arrived at Lady Fragrance's place. Lady Fragrance had already arranged for a maid to be at the entrance to point out the right direction, so that he would find my quarters without a problem.

Li Menglong and I could dismiss the formalities of betrothal gifts and introductions, choosing a wedding day and inviting guests. That evening, he stayed in my room.

Li Menglong paced. He tapped the honey-colored porcelain vase with lilies in it. He touched the thin strips of ox horn decorating the corners of my wardrobe. When he saw

the pure gold hinges on my quilt cupboard, his eyes sparkled. Finally, Li Menglong turned his attention to me. By then, my romantic feelings were already flowing powerfully like a river.

As he approached me, his hands began to disrobe me. He wanted to remove my dress. I took a sword out from my waistband and pressed it against his heart.

Without taking the slightest offense, he smiled at me, "In the past, three princesses and eight young ladies also tried this cheap trick on me. This is very amusing. Women can't use swords to resist men."

The sword shifted from my hands to his. He pulled out the sword, and rubbed the edge of it with one finger. After a while, a red line appeared on his finger. Blood flowed, and nothing could stem it. I bandaged his hand with a white silk handkerchief that I had originally prepared for my own use.

Li Menglong turned me into a real woman. In that moment, my mind was floating and filled with Lady Fragrance's image, for I was infinitely excited. I felt as though I was taking the same path as Lady Fragrance. In losing the years of love, we weren't one man's woman, but, rather, we became the women in the dreams of many men. This kind of good luck wasn't something that every woman could chance upon. This was like our appearance----it wasn't something one could plan for one's self.

Beginning with the evening of the Dragon Boat Festival, Li Menglong stayed in the Fragrant Pavilion for more than a month. One day, someone brought a letter from the capital city, which was written personally by Li Menglong's father, the prince. The prince first cursed him as one who was always pursuing petty pleasures that thwarted lofty goals, and he followed that up by pressing him to go to the capital to sit for the imperial examinations.

"Although it is said that if people aren't unrestrained in spirit and behavior they waste their youth, still you can't----just because of love----miss out on what you should be doing." Li Menglong's father was instructing his son in the letter. He probably hadn't imagined that his son would let me read the letter, because there was another sentence, "I hear that Miss Spring Fragrance of Lady Fragrance's family is a woman of peerless beauty. If the rumors are true, you are really a lucky man in your way with women."

Li Menglong was dizzy with success: "If a man can be envied by his own father, is there anything in the world that people would feel is more glorious? What do you say?"

Pretending to be embarrassed, I answered softly, "Of course there isn't."

That day, when Li Menglong left, the bright sun shone high in the boundless expanse of blue sky. I coiled my hair in a tidy bun, and saw my first man off. Li Menglong was the gate directly into the kind of life toward which I was heading. After passing through this gate, I showed my first glimmer of happiness.

Li Menglong took a step and stopped. He was heavy-hearted. He was afraid other men would take his place in the Fragrant Pavilion, for he knew what I was thinking of doing. "Spring Fragrance, I will come back in the shortest possible time," he told me repeatedly.

I must say that Li Menglong's words were sincere, but it was also true that as soon as he turned around he would forget me.

Just then, Lady Fragrance ---- accompanied by her maid ---- came out to see Li Menglong off. This was the first time in more than three years that I had seen her in the sunlight. Her face was as white as daylight, and her dress as black as the evening. Li Menglong was also subdued by her bearing, and he couldn't say anything.

After Lady Fragrance appraised up Li Menglong, she softly but firmly said, "Spring Fragrance will wait until you are on the list of the successful candidates in the imperial examinations, then choose a day for the wedding."

Li Menglong stared blankly for a moment, and after deeply bowing to Lady Fragrance, he got into the carriage.

Lady Fragrance's and my eyes saw Li Menglong off, and I muttered to myself, "I can't marry him."

"Women always want to get married," Lady Fragrance said, and turned around and walked into her room.

I shouted at her: "Lady Fragrance..."

Lady Fragrance stopped in her steps, but she hadn't yet turned her body to me. Viewed from the back, she was so slender and attractive ---- just like a young girl. There was no way I could call this kind of woman "Mother."

"I am very grateful to you for bringing me up all these years. Starting today, please take it easy. I want to take care of you with the same methods you used to rear me."

Lady Fragrance turned around, waves of light rippling in her eyes, and with a faint smile on her lips, she said, "You want to make a life taking my place. You're not nearly good enough."

"I'm already a real woman."

"That's just on the surface. It's still a long way away from the essence of life," Lady Fragrance said scornfully.

I had thought that seeing Li Menglong off was the same as pushing the gate open to a happy life, but now, Lady Fragrance had begun to play the role of gatekeeper.

"But I want to try a new life."

"I don't oppose this at all." With a flick of her sleeves, Lady Fragrance left me alone to dry under the shining white sun.

I was waiting for a new man to come into my life, but only after two months did someone come looking for me.

He had just come here to take up the post of prefectural magistrate. The first time His Honor the prefectural magistrate came to call, his official robes were tidy and his attitude was modest and courteous. When he introduced himself, he said he had come out of admiration. This was a very interesting man.

When His Honor the prefectural magistrate approached me, I dodged him. Even though all along I had wanted to possess other men besides Li Menglong, one with a body odor had definitely not been part of my plan.

"Excuse me, I am unable to accept your kindness."

His Honor the prefectural magistrate, surprised by my rejection, asked, “Why?”

I could only say, “Because I love the prince Li Menglong.”

His Honor the prefectural magistrate went away, but he left twelve soldiers to surround my quarters, putting me under house arrest.

“Whenever you forget Li Menglong, I’ll release you.”

At night, Lady Fragrance secretly came to see me. She wanted to know why I had refused His Honor the prefectural official.

I gave her the facts. She doubled over with laughter, and, as if lost in thought, she said, “So then ...”

I didn’t mind about the prefectural magistrate putting me under house arrest. In the past I had never gone out the main entrance anyway, nor did I step out of the inner gate. With twelve men surrounding my quarters, life had changed and began to liven up. When I was bored with nothing to do, I listened to Xiang Dan fooling around and bantering with the men as they flirted with her. As they exchanged banter, life filled with sound and color. Occasionally, His Honor the prefectural magistrate sent someone with gifts, and at the same time asked for my verbal response. I always took the gifts first, and then responded that I wouldn’t do that.

Lady Fragrance bribed a few of Nanyuan prefecture’s most outstanding vagabond singers. They jointly wrote a story that would make people weep, and they also wrote a poem in my name:

*Brocade-beautiful spring scene ---- colorful as ever,  
Silks and fragrant grasses until this spring.  
After my heavenly lover leaves ---- no word.  
West of the pass: a song overflowing with tears.*

Miss Spring Fragrance of Lady Fragrance’s family: Her love for prince Li Menglong moved heaven and earth. It was soul – stirring.

The story spread by word of mouth and reached the capital city.

Li Menglong was at the top of the list of names posted for passing the civil examinations. He got an official position as an undercover imperial envoy, and was betrothed to the daughter of another prince. When the daughter heard my story and learned that Li Menglong and I had had an intimate relationship, she decisively broke off the engagement.

“The thing doesn’t matter in and of itself, but it has to do with the issue of face. We can’t let the prince’s status slip.”

The undercover imperial envoy Li Menglong expressed his understanding.

The prince’s daughter had a large, white, round face. In the two groups of aristocrats’ children, her wild reputation was known to everyone. Her father was concerned that there was no way out.

When the prince heard my story, he called his son into his study, sized him up for a long

time, and finally said, “You aren’t the least bit like me. Why does that Spring Fragrance reject the local prefectural magistrate for you? There is really no rhyme or reason to it.”

“To tell you the truth, I’m also baffled,” Li Menglong said.

“Even the emperor knows about your romance. It seems you can only marry her and bring her home.” The prince released a long sigh.

Disguised as a beggar, Li Menglong went back to the Fragrant Pavilion. First he saw Lady Fragrance, who guided him from the small gate to evade the ears and eyes of the soldiers and brought him to my quarters.

Like a beggar, Li Menglong was able to talk of superstitious sects. He went on to say he had failed in the imperial examinations, his family’s financial situation had declined, he had no face to see anyone, and so on. Lady Fragrance and I understood implicitly. As before, Li Menglong’s face was delicate and fair, and his fingernails were clean. Exuding from under his beggar’s clothes was a faint smell of expensive perfume. While he was telling his story, I covered the lower half of my face with my sleeve and laughed until I cried.

“Spring Fragrance, I’m surprised you’re so sad ...,” Li Menglong stopped pouring out his steady stream of words.

“Human affairs are hard to anticipate.” Lady Fragrance sighed with emotion as she said this and, behind Li Menglong’s back, she was staring at me severely.

I straightened my clothing, sat properly and whispered softly to Li Menglong, “Spring Fragrance doesn’t seek high position and great wealth. Living, she belongs to Li Menglong. Dead, she is a ghost belonging to Li Menglong.”

Li Menglong’s expression hardened, like that first time he had seen me on the road. When he left the Fragrant Pavilion, he took the main entrance. The soldiers placed there by His Honor the prefectural magistrate seized him and took him to the prefectural magistrate’s official residence with his hands tied behind his back and a rope around his neck.

His Honor the prefectural magistrate was miserable, and was just drinking alone to drown his sorrows. He asked Li Menglong what his name was.

Li Menglong said, “I am the Li Menglong whom Miss Spring Fragrance loves.”

His Honor the prefectural magistrate stared wide-eyed and sized Li Menglong up for as long a time as the prince had, and finally he said, “What does Spring Fragrance see in you?”

Li Menglong said, “I’d like to know that, too.”

The Nanyuan prefectural magistrate told the soldier attending him to first slap Li Menglong’s face until it was swollen.

Li Menglong knew that the time was appropriate to reveal his own true status, and he took out the official seal that he had on him, and gave it to His Honor the prefectural magistrate to consider.

After His Honor the prefectural magistrate had seen it, he nodded his head: “No wonder Spring Fragrance took a fancy to you. You’re His Honor the undercover imperial envoy.”

He gave his seat to Li Menglong, and he went to stand at the side.

Li Menglong sat on the chair, and ordered the soldier to first slap His Honor the prefectural magistrate's face until it was swollen.

He then ordered His Honor the prefectural magistrate to come before him, and with a heavy heart he said, "Do you think a woman's love can be depended upon?"

His Honor the prefectural magistrate spat out two teeth that had been broken.

Li Menglong's and my wedding ceremony was expensive and enormous. The ostentation and extravagance rivaled those of the imperial house. It was one of the most famous weddings of the Li Dynasty. Among the rich, multicolored decorations, Lady Fragrance was smiling and lovely, but I felt particularly desolate. I knew that in serving as a model of a loyal, chaste woman for this dynasty, I had forever lost my chance to live a happy life like Lady Fragrance's.

*Translated by Karen Gernant*

(1) This is a plucked, stringed instrument used by Koreans.

(2) This contravened the Confucian morality of the time, which dictated that men and women not have physical contact with each other.