

XU Zechen

## Plum Rain

1

I spent the fourteenth year of my life in a state of befuddlement. When I wasn't attending secondary school two and a half kilometers away, I stayed at home all the time or sat on the Stone Wharf. A great many boats passed by on the Grand Canal but I took no notice of them. I didn't know what I wanted to do. My mind was always in a muddle and always sprouting a motley tangle of weeds and grasses. I was incapable of doing anything and had no wish to do anything. I no longer rode a bike to and from school. I either trotted or walked alone and absorbed in my thoughts. I liked the feeling of being soaked in perspiration as I got to school or came home. I felt as though I'd gained freedom as though my whole person was no longer confined by my clothing but had come in closer touch with the whole world. So fully in touch that every part of my body became activated. I perspired as I ran or walked quickly, even on rainy days. As I remember it the rainy season was exceptionally long that year, with downpours or drizzles drenching the land nearly half the time. I sweated even when I was wet from the rain. Mildew grew on everyone's clothing and bedding.

Flower Street saw few changes that year except for the appearance of a woman. She arrived in Flower Street the day before the "plum rain" season began and died just before it ended. The story I want to tell has to do with her.

Older people used to say, "Don't stare at the canal, the water devil will come to snatch young children!" But I was no longer a young child. I'd grown up. Or that's what everybody said—Dongxiang Wubai, my schoolmates. Once after class I'd gone, schoolbag slung over my shoulder, to the school latrine for one last pee. A row of boys was standing in front of the urinals swaying backward and forward. Dongxiang bent down, stretched out his neck, peered around me and then suddenly shouted "He's grown hair! He's grown hair!" Only when the group of boys clustered around me did I know he was referring to me. Dongliang was leering and Wubai and the others yelled and jeered "He's a man now!" "They were talking about me. I tensed up abruptly and pulled up my pants even before I'd finished peeing so the crotch of my pants got wet. My face flushed like that of a thief caught in the act. My whole body may have turned scarlet. All of them were shouting and hollering. I knew for a fact that all of them had grown hair since they discussed it in private. But why did they all affect such surprise and excitement over me as though they themselves were clean and innocent? Yet as I frantically pulled up my pants I actually felt as though I was the only shameful one. When all the shameful people gang up against you it seems they all become clean and innocent and you're the only shamed one. That afternoon during the year I was

fourteen I understood this for the first time; and for many years thereafter, time and again I would feel that shame although in reality I might have been cleaner and more innocent than everyone else. As I ran out of the washroom they followed me and kept on shouting and shouted all the more vociferously when they saw girl students I thought "I'm sunk! If one girl knows about this all of them will know" I ran—ran as though possessed and without stopping to catch my breath—all the two and half kilometers to the Stone Wharf. I seated myself on the stone steps my heart thumping in my throat with tears and sweat trickling down my face. The old people say, "Don't stare at the canal, the water devil comes to snatch young children." But that had nothing to do with me now I sat there as though my buttocks had put out roots. I gazed fixedly at the expanse of water and the boats my eyes empty I didn't even make way for passersby.

My feeling wasn't one of pain or anger I don't know what it was. If it had to be given a name one might say "emptiness" It was like a large stretch of water on which no boats sailed

The wind dried me out The weather was still very warm The sun had gone halfway down and the wharf was getting busy. Half of the Grand Canal lay in a reddish purple glow while the other half was dark and a mist was rising in the distance A boat accosted the wharf, ringing its bell and inserting itself among a row of boats moored side by side there A woman came ashore lugging an enormous suitcase She was also holding a bulky sack in her left hand About thirty years old? I didn't know I've never been good at guessing people's ages She came to a halt on the second step and then stood primly by the water's edge twisting her willowy body to look back at the boatman who was counting money

As she turned slowly toward Flower Street the evening light enveloped her like warm silk and I was mesmerized by the soft curve of her cheek I thought I must have seen at face somewhere before. I turned to stare at her, clearly sensing the salt crystals left on my neck from evaporated perspiration With the pinkie of her right hand she hooked a strand of hair that hung before her eyes and moved it behind an ear Her right ear looked translucent I had seen her somewhere Or perhaps it was that someone had said to me some time in the past that I shouldn't stand next to a bad woman beside the canal Why bad? I had no idea

Her expression was cool and detached When she saw me she parted her lips in a smile revealing white teeth Then the teeth vanished. I quickly averted my eyes The smile had shown we were not acquainted and that we had never met before It was a smile for strangers or one might say an adjustment of facial expressions and I just happened to be sitting there I was disappointed but not disturbed I often came up against such situations where for some unknown reason I would feel that the current experience had previously taken place or something else exactly like it Like some dream I'd dreamed before So I guessed I must have had innumerable dreams over the past thirteen years that I don't remember now.

The woman tripped as she walked past me The last step she had to climb was a bit too steep for her large suitcase I helped her steady the suitcase but didn't get up from where I sat I was in her way I saw a little magnolia on the left side of

her blouse and then caught a faint whiff of magnolia perfume

“Thank you ”she said “Is this Flower Street?”

I couldn't tell from her accent where she was from but I decided she hadn't come from too far away I nodded and pointed behind myself .The lane going up right next to the wharf restaurant was Flower Street. I almost asked her who she was looking for since I knew practically everyone on that street But I ended up holding my tongue I was too shy to say anything, and I also felt a bit intimidated

I sat there until suppertime before going home Father was doing acupuncture on a patient He ran a private clinic at home and people came to him for treatment from Flower Street East Street West Street and even farther away Apparently he was a pretty good physician proficient in both traditional Chinese and Western medicine and it seemed he also had some exceptionally effective skills and prescriptions I myself was no expert but I did know a remedy or two, and could prescribe them for headaches and fevers That was my job when Father wasn't at home since those everyday remedies wouldn't kill anyone even if they didn't cure them Father was in the habit of scrubbing his fingers with cotton balls soaked in alcohol. This and his impeccably combed hair, made up my basic impression of male physicians an impression that stuck with me for many years to come Father called me over to watch him doing acupuncture but I turned around and went into another room The sight of the patient's scrawny back put shivers in me as though winter had come before its time

Mother who was cooking started to scold me as soon I showed up. Scolding was merely a maternal habit, and she couldn't resist saying a few words when I came home late Even if it was only to mutter under her breath “You wander around like a homeless ghost!” I told her I'd only been watching the boats at the Stone Wharf and hadn't gotten into any gang fights She snorted and said “You never give me any peace of mind just like that Papa of yours. “She was filled with a lasting hatred for my father And would throw me in for good measure And if I'd had a younger or older brother, or if my grandfather were still alive they'd be in the same shoes-- men were always up to no good All the women on Flower Street were of the same opinion That's why she was always bickering with my father We'd be getting along fine at the dinner table, but in the time it took me to go and get another helping of rice a fight would start At such times Mother would say, “Flower Street! This damned Flower Street!”

And Father would alter her words and whisper in my ear “Men! These damned men!”

So Flower Street was interchangeable with men I never got the logic of it at the time

Mother wanted me to help her out at home “What's there to look at around boats? So you think you're a cadre with the canal administration eh?”

“A woman landed today ”

“Another one! They're nothing but trouble! This damned Flower Street! Why don't the higher-ups just get a bulldozer and raze this place?”

## 2

Mother said "another one" because many women frequented Flower Street Haven't I told you that Flower Street is a bona fide "street of flowers?" No? Then you must have forgotten Let me tell you once more

This street was once called Waterside Street That was its name many years ago Because it lay next to the Stone Wharf, boat merchants stopped here for short breaks All were men who spent most of the year on the canal and the sight of women gave them leaden feet Since that was the case women who wanted money would open their doors and wait for them to come in with their money Business was good and everyone came Men from other places came and so did women The Women would rent a small courtyard and wait for the men to come And so Waterside street became "the street of flowers "and as time went by it became known as such and its original name Waterside Street, was forgotten. That's how it became Flower Street Though, of course, not all the women on the street were in that business If you happened to walk along the street at the time I was fourteen all the courtyards that had little lanterns hanging from their arched doorways would contain a soft welcoming body You would then take down the little lantern and lantern in hand knock at the door, leaving the arched doorway dark You would go in and later you'd come out. And if the woman wished to make more money the lantern would be hung out again Of course not all of these women were willing to hang up little lanterns as they all didn't want everyone to know In that case you'd have to find out through other ways. Don't get me wrong I'm not talking about you Thinking back however it didn't really matter if lanterns were hung up or not If a man wanted to he could unerringly find such women In this respect men have noses that are handier than a dog's I heard a woman in one of the courtyards say this as I was walking through Flower Street one day Things of course have changed now. Fewer and fewer little lanterns are being hung up now In their place are the glitzy barbershops and hair salons where girls with bare arms and legs sit at the glass doors and dare to beckon to you in broad daylight. Again I'm not talking about you

But this was about the year I was fourteen

The rainy season went on without end that year It started just as the month of June began the day after that woman arrived I remember that day, because I nearly knocked her down

The weather changed in the middle of the afternoon and the sun vanished by the time classes were over. It was raining hard as I left school. I hadn't brought an umbrella I plunged into the rain and ran homeward and was soaked when I reached Flower Street The street appeared even bleaker because of the rain The wet flagstones glistened and puddles of water lay here and there The sound of raindrops hitting the road reverberated between the high walls on both sides. Damp moss crept halfway up those walls In those days many of the houses on Flower Street were old buildings tall and rickety They stood alone under the rain

like decrepit old-timers in oversized clothes struggling to lift their upswept eaves Their walls, once white were stained with mildew, their tiles grayish black while their corrugated roofs and ridges sprouted clumps of weeds They looked cold and glum in the rain So I never liked walking through Flower Street in rainy weather unless it was to buy something The street was lined with shop fronts—the Lin Family Tailor Shop Pockmarked Lan's Beancurd Shop, Old Wai's Grocery, Meng Wanwan's Grain Store Midnight Feng's Dog—meat Shop as well as shops selling funereal garments along with taverns and clothing establishments. These and the arched doorways jostled with one another for space

A woman suddenly stepped out of the arched doorway between a grocery store and a grain store I could not stop in time and collided with her She gave a little cry, and a basin of water splashed onto the street the metal basin clanging and rotating several times on the flagstones She would have fallen together with the basin if she hadn't leaned back against the doorjamb I looked at her with surprise—she was the woman I'd seen on the Stone Wharf the day before She had changed her clothes and coiled her hair in a bun held in place with what looked like a chopstick instead of a hairpin. I hemmed and hawed a couple of times and hurried off without offering an apology Panic-stricken I hurried as though running away I heard her shout Something Maybe my shoes had splashed some rainwater on her

She had rented a house here That was it No question She was more distant compared with the day before She no longer was the facial profile I had somehow gotten to know She was now a strange woman renting a house on Flower Street Yet I hadn't changed I was the same as before Suddenly I felt angry I stamped violently on the rain—covered road and ran home without looking back

After changing my clothes I sat by the window and watched two sparrows fighting under a tree behind the house Under the heavy foliage of the old locust tree was a circle of relatively dry ground. After seeing a patient Father came in and asked me to recite a rhyme he had taught me a couple of days ago□ it was about the symptoms of hemorrhagic fever With great effort I recalled two lines□ “Bloody spots on the dermal membranes□ nausea vomiting and albuminuria ”For the life of me I couldn't remember the rest Once again Father voiced his disappointment He was accustomed to that and so was I Father had always hoped I would become a famous physician like Bian Que or Li Shizhen that my name would gain lasting fame And since he was my father his name would remain on the lips of succeeding generations But I didn't have the makings and my performance at school was just so-so This year in particular, he clearly stated that my IQ seemed to be deteriorating, as evident from my everyday speech and behavior My reactions had slowed and my movements were more sluggish which seemed to be the problem with infants born in abnormal positions True I had entered this world feet first

Father walked out shaking his glass of water I could never get the head and I poured myself a angle of the glass right when I drank, and the water would spill out all over my neck It was as though I didn't know the width of my own mouth

That also made me cross. Sulking I let the water run down my neck The two sparrows were still fighting, so I took a slingshot out of the drawer and some stones I'd carefully chosen from those on the bank of the Grand Canal. I let fly just once and a sparrow lay motionless on the ground. It was undoubtedly dead I was quite sure of my skill with the slingshot Those years the slingshot was my most important toy Other people used fish spears to A fish had only to show its head catch fish I used my slingshot above the water once and I could make it float forevermore on the surface The other sparrow hopped to one side and then came closer again and pranced around its dead friend chirping raucously As it hopped it kept on pecking at its own feathers plucking them out one by one It treated them as garments it wanted to take off It didn't think of flying away.

I put down the slingshot and removed the second stone I'd already loaded I shushed at the five sparrow, but could not drive it away Then I began to sneeze Three times in a row, I had caught a cold.

### 3

Lying sick in bed is a big bore I tried to get up But the medicine had the effect of making me feel weak all over and the slightest movement made both my flesh and my bones ache I don't know what Father had given me He had gone to the school to ask for sick leave on my behalf then fixed a prescription for me He said these reactions were normal and had come on so violently because I had not had a cold for six years already. Six Years Which meant I last had a cold when I was eight years old I couldn't imagine what kind of child I was then and even questioned how I had lived those eight years At least I couldn't see any marks left on me from those eight years Father said however that all of Flower street knew me as a clever and lovable child when I was eight that my school performance had been topnotch and that I had assimilated everything I learned I didn't believe it because the term "lovable" was repugnant to me It was like the words used by the elderly foreign women I saw on television when they held the hands of little girls I didn't want myself to be "lovable" during those eight years that I couldn't visualize

Have you ever lain in bed for three days without moving? Oh you haven't Let's just say it's more boring than being dead

I stared all day at the cobwebs on the ceiling as the drumming of the rain outside the window waxed and waned intermittently I even thought time had stopped moving How could one bear to live a whole lifetime if even a single day lasted so long? I asked Mother to hang the antediluvian Flying Horse wall clock on the wall facing my bed as I wanted to see it go forward Actually, the cool weather was just right for snoozing without regard for the time of the day, but I just could not fall asleep I watched the clock's pendulum swinging listlessly in the humid air and I was reminded of those strange men who frequented Flower Street They would stride into Flower Street with hurried steps Most of them

showed up ,of course, at night but some of them also came by day And when they left they staggered away as listlessly as the pendulum of that old clock I imagined myself as one of those man I would certainly be wearing a windbreaker with an upturned collar and a fedora like those stone-faced efficient underground Party members However what would an underground Party member be doing on Flower Street? Mother adamantly refused to let me gad about on Flower Street after nine o'clock at night

“What's there to see on that damned Flower Street!” she always said

I would still Bare been lying in bed if it weren't for that woman Father had gone to see a patient on West Street and Mother was at the glass works where her job was to examine piles of bottles and pick out those with flaws Mother's dissatisfaction with me and Father was probably an occupational disease for she never let up on anything that contained flaws Then the woman knocked at the door of our house so I had to get out of bed

“So it's you!” She was holding her hand against a spot behind her right ear. “Are you the doctor's son? Ow, I have a headache.”

I nodded My legs felt weak My body was like a hardened clump of clay, and as I nodded I could almost hear the labored creaking of rusty screws Her right ear Was no longer translucent Her umbrella with its tiny white flowers against a blue background stood outside the doorsill Rainwater trickled from the tip of the umbrella into a large puddle She wore plastic sandals her toenails pink on very white feet She still seemed to retain the fragrance of magnolias and another magnolia graced her swelling bosom

“I have a headache ”she said again

I quickly raised my eyes summoned whatever energy I possessed and said quite irrelevantly, “I've got a cold ”I smiled awkwardly If I'd looked into a mirror, I would have seen that my smile was one that made others also feel awkward

She laughed. In that laugh I noticed for the first time a slight nasal quality that I had missed when she spoke earlier

I was able to use the smattering of medical knowledge you already know about I knew a little about treating headaches and migraines and just a handful of prescriptions I wasn't angry any more. I was quite happy I carefully explained to her all I knew about headaches and about these prescriptions About a fifth of the reformation I gave her was made up on the spur of the moment I was also familiar with the prices of the medicines I had to charge her for them As she left she praised me saying I was very capable and patently the son of a physician She unfurled her umbrella and walked off, skirting puddles of water and flashing the white soles of her feet I switched to another angle to look at her profile I felt a bit excited but I didn't catch sight of the glow and the curve of her cheek I'd observed the other afternoon They were both gone She was a stranger

My illness went away after I got out of bed Maybe I'd recovered long ago and only needed to get back on my feet I began to go to school again to run or walk to frequent Flower Street To sit on Stone Wharf in the intervals when no rain fell There was no end to the rain The whole world was wet

Her headache did not get any better and she came again to my home two days later I'd only given her enough medicine for two days

Father and Mother were both at home over the weekend I discovered that the dead sparrow under the locust tree had disappeared There were a lot of stray cats and one of them might have dragged it away I recognized the woman's nasal voice the moment she came in Father was quite courteous In fact he showed more courtesy to all patients than he did to me He showed her in and asked Mother to make her a cup of tea Then they talked about headaches and maybe about some other ailments In any case the nasal voice kept saying she did not feel well Father said he was sorry the medicine I had given her hadn't been efficacious She said it hadn't been completely ineffective only not very thorough Treatments for illnesses must be thorough I stood in the next room listening attentively to every word I watched the clock's pendulum swinging back and forth It must have been bored with its unvarying routine

Father wrote out a prescription He made precise records of all the patients he treated These were the premises for his being a good physician as he could use them to explain the whys and wherefores of his patients' ailments I saw the woman's name on that prescription—Gao Mian. A striking and sensuous name for a striking and sensuous woman

Another quarrel took place at dinnertime Mother said "There's a 'peachy' look about that woman One can tell at first glance that she isn't respectable "

"How does it concern me that she looks peachy?" replied Father "Even if a whole peach tree came to me all what I'd do is to examine it for worms "

"If it is not your concern why did you ask her all those questions? Your eyeballs almost popped out from behind your glasses "

"That was merely conversation between neighbors "

Mother snorted "Making up to her weren't you? What did she say about herself? I bet she didn't tell you anything!"

"So what if she didn't? Do you really think I wish to know who she is and where she's from?"

Mother was silent for a moment and then terminated the quarrel with her pet observation "That Flower Street should die! All come here seeking death "

"Seeking money," said Father "Nobody wants to die "

I puzzled several days over the term "peachy look "It Wasn't in the dictionary I asked a good friend at school but he didn't understand it either So he went home to ask his parents and got raked over the coals "I wouldn't have asked if I'd known they'd bawl me out," he said "They said young children had no business asking about such things "I consoled him with a bag of melon seeds

No one knew anything about Gao Mian's origins Father even said she might be using a false name Few of the women renting houses on Flower Street used their real names and they would all move away after a few years Some left within a couple of months They'd go under any old name while on Flower Street, names that were patently phony But so what if they were phony? Those were merely aliases Didn't Old Wai of the general store call his dog "Columbus?" He



even knew about Columbus

What were they doing on Flower Street? Hunting for money. The thought that Gao Mian was also hunting for money somehow distressed me Why should she too be after money? I began to go out in the evenings on the excuse that I had to buy a ruler or a pair of compasses or a notebook and I would wander along Flower Street

The rain was always falling on such evenings or had just stopped It made no difference Flower Street was always wet Its flagstones glistening with sheets of water By nine o'clock it would be dark and Flower Street would have quieted down More moisture having accumulated the moss was creeping upward exuberantly The soggy grass on the roofs leaned over even though there was no wind Sometimes a motorized boat would pass by on the Grand Canal and by the grunting of its powerful diesel engine it might have twenty-five barges tethered behind it That was the maximum number I'd ever seen a boat towing The squishing of my footsteps would be echoed by the stones the walls and the water and it seemed that a lot of people were walking on Flower Street When you have a load on your mind you don't walk like a nice person Don't laugh I was only fourteen at the time Like a fourteen-year-old John? Ha ha That's really funny Actually at fourteen I was still very ignorant But you're not mistaken I was looking for a lantern

By nine o'clock all the lanterns that were to be hung out would be hung out One by one they would begin to gleam in the gloomy street I felt as though I were walking in an eerie street of ghosts I paced up and down Flower Street from the grocery store to the grain store and back from the grain store to the grocery store but I didn't see any lantern at the small arched doorway Several evenings I'd even peeked through the crack in the door of the main wing of the house It was either dark or brightly lit but I never heard that enigmatic voice I couldn't guess what she was doing

#### 4

Basically I never saw Gao Mian except when she stood under her arched gateway She no longer came to the clinic at our house Maybe she had recovered from her illness Nor did I see her at the wharf. It seemed she never went there. There was almost no one on the whole street who didn't go there If it interested you you could spend the whole day sitting on the spacious wharf and just looking Women went there to buy fish and vegetables from the many little boats that docked at the wharf to do some petty trading But what did she eat if she didn't buy anything? Walking to and from school I always passed through Flower Street when in fact I could very well have taken another route which would have been nearer Nor could I figure out Why my mind was filled with tense and exciting feelings when I came close to her arched doorway, and why all those sensations all at once left me when I saw the door tightly shut My body would feel

empty, vastly empty empty and I would let out my breath Was I trying to rediscover that soft Sunlit curve of her cheek?

But when I did happen to see her under the arched doorway, I would forget all about that curve I didn't even have the courage to look up at her and would stumble past her pretending to be searching for a coin I'd dropped All I could see was a pair of sandal-shod feet neat and firm and dazzlingly white Once I saw her smiling at me but I hurriedly lowered my head and forgot to respond After that didn't have the occasion even to see her smile as I would self-consciously lower my head when still at a distance The street in front of her arched doorway was paved with nine flagstones on which lay six large puddles and three small puddles Don't laugh These things stick in your mind when you look at them a great deal

One night I had a dream and it was raining too in that dream The whole sky was filled with a drizzling rain and it seemed I had been told by someone that this was a rain of utter grief I'd never known utter grief, so this rain was quite abstract as far as I was concerned I saw Gao Mian appear in the rain and the glow was gone from her face which was now overcast clammy, stiff, lackluster She intercepted me on the wharf and said "Speak to me and I will glow again "They were like words spoken by a sick person I puzzled over them even after I woke up It was still raining outside my window, a translucent rain in the black night yet I couldn't see the translucency

I decided to say something to her no matter what

The next day I sat absentmindedly in class and devised no less than a dozen plans After school I trotted all the way back but when I got to the arched doorway I found that none of the plans were feasible. I first had to solve the problem of how to get to see Gao Mian—like by knocking on her door But I could only keep walking The rain lifted and the wharf became a scene of bustling activity I edged forward I saw many people buying fish flesh fish .My just caught in the Grand Canal and not expensive Suddenly making up my mind I hurried to Gao Mian's door and knocked

She came out one hand on her hip She looked exhausted as though aroused halfway through a dream She looked at me "They're selling fish at the wharf," I said "They're saying you should also buy some "

"I don't like fish "she said forcing a smile I felt she was smiling merely to humor me There was no light in her face She didn't glow Even though she was now smiling it was a cold stiff smile The magnolia was still on her blouse but its fragrance was gone The whole of the rainy season was in her face "Is that all?" She made an effort to keep smiling until she'd completed the sentence and then started to shut the door

I turned and ran The rain was pattering down again The raindrops scalded my face I heard the door being shut I paused stabbed my left hand into the moss on the wall and then continued to run A fiery numbness arose in my fingertips at first a sharp pain then a dull pain then a burning pain When I'd come to the end of Flower Street blood started to well out from four of my filthy fingertips Then a more massive pain took over, I ran to edge of the waterway and plunged my hand

into the water The feeling was like quenching red—hot iron The blood melted in the canal and together with the rainwater, diffused until it was no longer visible and until the bleeding stopped Only then did I take my hand out My left hand pale from its soaking, looked no different from a good hand except for the scraped skin and flesh.

I took a different route to and from school as I didn't want to pass the grocery-store and grain store I would refuse to go to any store unless it was located south of the grocery store Sometimes I would remember that soft curve in the sunlight, but I only gave it a passing thought After all there was no point in thinking about half a face was there?

At home on a weekend I decided to take apart and examine the wall clock I felt it was running slow, certainly slower than the passage of time It was raining outside The rain had started at suppertime the day before and up to now had not paused for a single minute One minute was the time it took the pendulum of the Flying Horse clock to Swing fifty times and as I'd said it was swinging too slowly Father had gone out to see a patient and had been away half an hour Mother came back from a friend's house on west Street

"Who did your Pa go to see?"

"I don't know "

"Which way did he go?"

"I didn't see him "

"What a child!" Mother exclaimed "Why've you taken the clock apart?"

It was already too late for her to rescue it I'd already dismembered it "The cogs have come loose," I said handing these to Mother so she could take a look I knew she didn't understand the first thing about such things

"What if you've ruined it?"

"If it's ruined it's no more than an old clock "

"I told you to memorize where each thing should go "

"Don't worry," I said "They won't fit in any other place "

I thought I had memorized everything where each part should go But strangely enough when each place had a part in it and the clock looked exactly as it had looked before being disassembled why was there this one extraneous part? I took the clock apart again and reassembled it and this time there were two extra parts The third time the one part was still extraneous I looked everywhere but couldn't find a place for it It had to be abandoned I tossed it into a drawer Placed uptight the clock remained as silent as a dead person Shucks Mother was right! In desperation I prodded the pendulum It began to swing! The tick-took clear and strong was as exhilarating as a heartbeat It had actually come to life again I checked it against an electronic watch After losing one of its parts the Flying Horse clock was finally running in synch with time

Because I was happy, I began to sense the muggy heat, the kind of steamy heat particular to "plum rain" seasons The sky was quite a bit brighter and I thought the sun was coming out Although the rain had stopped however, the sun wasn't showing itself I thought of Gao Mian's half a face It was already a month

since I'd seen the sun

Then Mother came in again and asked "Are you sure you didn't see where your Pa went?"

"I didn't "

"He didn't go to that woman did he?"

"What woman?"

"That Gao Mian or whatever her name is "

"Didn't she recover?"

"They say it's some other illness I don't quite know what "said Mother "Your Pa's been there quite a number of times Dammit! What illness is there that can't be treated by coming to the clinic!"

"What difference does it make where an illness is treated?"

"What do you understand! You men are all birds of the same feather! This damned Flower Street! Sooner or later it will be flooded and struck by lightning!"

I walked nonchalantly out of the door saying I had to buy an eraser Mother said "You must be eating erasers you must learn very little to be writing so many wrong words!"

It was the first time in many days that I was approaching that little arched gateway The courtyard door was shut After buying an eraser I slowly headed back, and caught sight of Father walking out of the courtyard door with the medicine case he used for house calls Out of habit he cleared his throat and straightened his hair and clothing He did that every time after seeing a patient I followed him from a distance and when I got home Father was busy explaining to Mother

"I went to East Street Ask our son if you don't believe me "said Father pointing at me "I told him where I was going when I went out Right, son?"

"Right, "I said I felt a sudden violent spasm somewhere in my belly, as though someone had wrenched my intestines

"Why didn't you say so before? "Mother was furious

"I forgot Only just remembered "Another wrench in my intestines

My father? No He never apologized to me or thanked me Who knows? Maybe he really did go to East Street Nor did I know why I didn't expose the lie I didn't want him to thank me for that but neither could I say whether I despised him After all anyone had the right to come out of Gao Mian's courtyard Or to come out of anyone's courtyard if they so wished But from that time on I had no desire to talk much with Father In any case I wasn't a talkative person especially that year

However I began to take note of many things For example Father's remarks about Gao Mian or the times he came out of her arched doorway, or even the times he merely passed by that doorway To tell the truth after that day I only saw Father come out of her arched doorway on one occasion and that being on the day she died He had hurried into that courtyard with his house- call medicine case and later came out crestfallen He had not saved Gao Mian Death had defeated Gao Mian as it had defeated Father When I had occasionally seen him walk up to that little arched gateway, my heart always gave a thump and stop beating and

then resumed beating after he had walked past Luckily for me he merely walked past each time I saw him

In addition to damning the rain of that “plum rain” season before Gao Mian died Mother had maintained that Gao Mian was just as much to be damned as Flower Street She had frequently quarreled with Father She had heard rumors that she chose to believe even though there was nothing to substantiate them She felt Father went to Gao Mian's little courtyard more often than Was warranted and that the neighbors were talking because they could not put up with such behavior And so Father would explain He was always explaining when he and Mother quarreled Like he was passing judgment or correcting homework

Father would say, “See here I'm a physician and I can't look on with folded arms when someone is ill even if it's only a cat ”

“Stray cats are always running around with stiff tails up in the air I haven't seen you do anything about them ”

“They haven't called for me Besides I don't know that stiff tails on cats is any sort of illness ”

“That woman called for you ”Mother snorted derisively “Don't you know what sort of illness she has□ ”

“If I knew, I'd have cured her long ago□ ”

Sometimes I felt they were merely practicing tongue-twisters After all those years Of bickering both had become highly articulate. That was quite probably the reason why they believed I was becoming less and less good for increasingly taciturn and not at all like anything I was getting to be their child Yet Mother would only quarrel. She could never bring herself to follow Father around or to go to the woman and confront her Perhaps Father had seen through her on that point which was why he kept glossing things over.

I'll say something that may disappoint you To this day I don't know whether Father and Gao Mian ever... Well you know what I mean My parents were slowly going through the second half of their lives and I didn't know if they might make an issue of Gao Mian. As their son I couldn't ask either of them Even though Mother may have had a pretty good idea of what was going on About Gao Mian I still don't know any more than when I was fourteen

Father delved almost every day through the voluminous books in his clinic Those were day when rain and drizzle fell intermittently and one's body felt clammy even when it didn't rain When Father didn't have any patient he would unbutton His shirt and scratch himself on the chest and back as he pored through his books. He said he had not yet succeeded in diagnosing Gao Mian's illness. None of the famed ancient physicians Bian Que or Zhang Zhongjing, or even Li Shizhen had ever come across it Father crouched over his books his hair disheveled.

Furniture and cotton quilts on Flower Street had become mildewed while clothing that never dried out had taken on a strange disagreeable odor That day both my parents had been out and as I was sitting on our doorstep staring listlessly at the moss on the wall across the street Gao Mian walked in I had not

heard her footsteps but I whiffed the faint odor of magnolias She was already in front of me as I nervously looked around She was clad in a blouse I'd never seen before but she had the usual sprig of magnolias on her bosom When I had tried to get up she placed her hand on my head and smiled Because of her hand I stood half-crouched and Straightened up only after she'd stepped over the threshold and into my home She then headed directly for the room that served as the clinic She was wearing sandals and a pair of lavender-colored socks I followed her in She Was already taking medicines out of the medicine cabinet One little bottle after another "What medicines are you looking for?" I asked

Turning to look at me she said "I know what I want "

She took five bottles and then started to leave I sensed something was not quite right so I hurried after her and asked "What do you want these for?"

"To take "she said and smiled again I thought the odor of magnolias came from her dimples "Don't tell your Pa Don't tell anyone "

I asked once more "What do you want those medicines for?"

She had freed one hand and touched my ear and all at once I felt myself tense up My ear grew hot and gradually translucent She was already out in the street I felt my ear forgetting whether her face had glowed just now

I had seated myself on the threshold and fallen asleep It started to rain A hubbub had arisen on Flower Street when Father ran through the door Five o'clock The flying Horse wall clock vigorously chiming five times Father shouting incoherently, "Where's the medicine case? Where's the medicine case?" A clattering in the clinic Father running out and almost tripping on the threshold his glasses falling to the ground only one lens left when he picked up Father putting on the glasses with only one lens and racing off I had never seen Father in such a dither I followed and saw Father vanish through the little arched doorway Many people were running in that direction My head exploded and I too ran lickety-split in the same direction

Gao Mian died an ugly death Gobs of froth on her lips the magnolia on her blouse soiled her body convulsed With five little bottles lying next to it She had thought the medicines would allow her to die peacefully and with dignity Father had used all the emergency measures he knew of, but Gao Mian's body remained twisted already grown stiff Her face was gray under the fluorescent lamp in the room The fragrance of magnolias was gone Father kneeled dejectedly by the corpse the lamplight falling on his glasses one eye glistening emptily

No one knew where Gao Mian's home was located so there was no way of notifying her family And since the body would not keep for long in this type of weather, the heads of the Flower Street neighborhood and the police substation took over and cremated her the same night Early the next morning her remains were buried in the public cemetery on the other bank of the canal I didn't go to the interment I lay in bed and had nightmares all night long my bones aching from exhaustion The weather in all the nightmares was overcast and either wet or windy.

After coming back from school two evenings later, I randomly untied a boat by

the canal and rowed over to the other bank A drizzling rain was drifting down Gao Mian's grave was very small merely a new little mound of earth A slip of wood served in the stead of a gravestone Someone had clumsily written two characters on it "Gao Mian "Not even "Here rests "

Very soon the rainy season ended and the sun came out filling the world with spectacular sunshine You're guessed right I never told anyone that those five bottles of medicine were from Father's clinic Except you No one was interested in that anyway, since those medicines are readily available at any pharmacy, and no one can prevent anyone who wants to from committing suicide I don't know whether Father ever discovered that some of his medicines were missing I've never heard him mention it

I still remained the same Studying Living Sitting at home or on the wharf and staring blankly Unable to talk as I watched the ever-brightening sunshine Mother believed I would sooner or later turn into a dumb person if things went on like this Father said he was determined to quickly develop a medicine that could cure dumb people to prevent me from becoming one They continued to bicker the one bringing up problems and the other passing judgments and making corrections Together they celebrated the conclusion of the long "plum rain" season

In October I happened to pass by that little arched doorway and found the courtyard gate unbolted I pushed it open and went in and walked up a small path paved with broken bricks to the central room Slowly I opened the door and looked in I saw two persons on the bed one on top of the other The one on top was dark the one underneath was fair A leg hanging over the side of the bed was also fair They were moving and chanting something in unison I spun around and ran my feet flying The deluge of sunlight was whiter than white and my feet flew

That last time I went to the public cemetery on the other bank of the canal Gao Mian's grave was overgrown with rank weeds which had completely submerged the small low grave mound If you didn't know that someone was buried here you would never have noticed the grave The wooden slip lay supine in the grass and the two brush-written characters had faded almost entirely away Like they had never existed

That's all You're nodding off, aren't you? Sorry That's all there is to Gao Mian's story. It concerns only me and no one else So perhaps I should not have told it Sorry

*Translated from the Chinese by Wang Huimin*