

*Page 34 Intellectual Youth:* city youth who had made it past middle school. They were sent to the countryside to teach the peasants and to learn from them.

*Page 46 Erhu:* a two-stringed violinlike instrument played with a bow, typically used in Chinese classical music and Chinese opera.

*Page 51 Famous dancers:* during this period, culture was under the sway of Mao's wife Jiang Qing who permitted only a small number of "model revolutionary operas," such as *The White-Haired Girl*, to be performed. Only a small number of ballet dancers who enjoyed her official favor were allowed to perform in them.

*Page 51 Shan-shan:* typical nickname for a girl with the "shan" character for coral as part of her given name. *Sun Jie*, literally "Elder Sister Sun," would be a normal and proper way for a younger woman to address Sun Likun.

*Page 51 Liberation:* the takeover of mainland China by the Communists in 1949.

*Page 57 Open laughter:* East Asian tradition discourages women from laughing or even showing their teeth.

*Page 61 "Egg"* is a common way in Chinese to refer to a despicable person.

*Page 61 Her great secret:* lesbian activity is illegal in China and can result in official punishment as well as social ostracism.

## 天浴 Celestial Bath

TRANSLATOR'S NOTE: *This story is set in the grasslands of China's Sichuan Province at the border of Tibet in the mid-1970s, during the waning years of the Cultural Revolution, when many young people from the cities who had been sent to the countryside to do various types of labor and "learn from the masses" started to make their way back to the cities. The teenaged girl in this story is learning how to raise horses for the army, even though—unbeknownst to her—its cavalry units have long since been disbanded.*

The clouds brushed over the sharp blades of grass. The shafts, heavy with seed, undulated, each wave bowing before the next.

Wen Xiu sat on the slope watching Lao Jin run downhill, becoming small as a prairie dog. Wen Xiu had been chosen by Lao Jin from among the Intellectual Youth to learn how to herd horses. The day she had followed Lao Jin to the herding site, she saw there was only one yurt-like, round military tent and realized she would have to share it with Lao Jin. Before she had come out, the Livestock Bureau had told Wen Xiu that there was no need for concern about Lao Jin: his thing had been lopped off long ago. Some decades before, there had been a blood feud out here. The opposing clan had grabbed Lao Jin, then eighteen years old, and run a knife between his legs. Since then he had been bereft of his manhood. There had already been six,

maybe seven, girls among the Intellectual Youth who had learned how to herd horses with him, and none had ever come back carrying Lao Jin's foal. The feuding war party had definitely scraped him clean.

Nonetheless, Wen Xiu detested Lao Jin. If it weren't for Lao Jin's choosing her, she would still be together with several hundred other Intellectual Youth back at the powdered milk plant. One time she asked Lao Jin why it was he had selected her, of all people, to herd horses. Lao Jin replied, "You have a horse's face."

Wen Xiu was not considered ugly; back in middle school in Chengdu, she certainly wasn't. She was just a little short and skinny. Her body was like a wasp's, her waist only two hand clasps in circumference, making it look like she had two segments. When she mounted or dismounted a horse, Lao Jin would run up to her with both hands taut and outstretched and say, "Up we go!" or "Down we go!" He would hold her, supporting her buttocks with one hand and using the other to lift her by the underarm. Wen Xiu sensed that Lao Jin's hands really wanted to do something else. She hadn't been on the prairie for long before several men tried to feel her up, and it was usually done under the guise of teaching her how to mount or dismount a horse. Afterward, Wen Xiu herself would surreptitiously touch the parts that the men had touched, as if by doing so she could restore them. The Livestock Bureau put on outdoor movies. When the movie was over, as soon as the generator was shut off, ten or more Intellectual Youth girls would yelp, "Bastard! Damn your ancestors!" They had all been felt up. At that moment several dozen flashlights would intersect their beams, their shafts of light piercing the night sky like spears planted helter-skelter. That was just how the guys here got their jollies.

Since she had started herding with Lao Jin, she had not been to see a movie. In order to go, she would have had to sit behind Lao Jin on a horse, hanging on to his waist for twenty or thirty kilometers. The last thing Wen Xiu wanted to do was to hug Lao Jin's waist, and if that meant no movies, then so be it.

Around ten kilometers from the tent, at the foot of a slope, there was a shallow stream. The only way Lao Jin could collect water was

by dragging a leather pouch flat along the stream's bottom. Yet any time that Wen Xiu complained of itchiness, Lao Jin would tell her there was a way to take a bath. She would hear him singing as he drew water and knew that he was singing for her ears only. Lao Jin was a first-rate singer. His singing had the music on the loudspeakers of the Livestock Bureau beat hands down! Sometimes his song sounded like a horse whinnying, other times like a sheep laughing. When she heard it, Wen Xiu felt like tumbling down the grassy slope, even though Lao Jin seemed to be singing about his troubled heart and his inexpressible dreams.

Lao Jin was singing his way back from the stream. His singing came closer. As he climbed up the grassy slope, she could already smell the horse scent on his body.

He smiled at her. His beard was withered, and his chin was barren. Sometimes, when he was idle, he would fumble with the remnants, seeking out dead bristle, then rooting it out.

She looked at him with one eye shut to avoid the bright sunlight. "Hey, Lao Jin! Why'd you stop singing?"

"Got work to do."

"But you sing so well!" It was the truth. There were times when she hated him. Hated herding horses with him. Hated sharing a tent with him. At times she wished Lao Jin would just die — but not the song. The song should follow her, even when she left this place.

"Gotta stop singing," Lao Jin said, smiling bashfully.

Wen Xiu hated his gold front tooth, which ruined a perfectly good smile. If it weren't for that, he would not have looked nearly so fierce and frightening.

Lao Jin's full name was Jin something-something, four syllables long. If you were walking behind a band of Tibetans and called out that name, at least ten of them would turn around in response. Wen Xiu didn't bother to remember the name. Lao Jin, Lao Jin—much easier for everybody. Lao Jin was forty-something years old, but he looked older than that. Tibetans don't keep track of their birthdays, so you couldn't be sure if he was still in his thirties or had already reached fifty. Unlike other old herdsmen in the Livestock Bureau, Lao

Jin had not accumulated any personal property. He owned neither a wristwatch nor a fountain pen. His most valuable possession was his gold tooth, and even this he had inherited from his mother. She had told Lao Jin to knock it out as soon as she died, so the man who performed the sky burial couldn't take it. He later had the knifsmith inlay his own tooth with the gold. The knifsmith knew how to inlay any bone-handled knife, and he used the same technique to inlay Lao Jin's tooth.

The water-filled leather saddlebags dangled on both sides of the horse's rump. Lao Jin lightly whipped the horse's round buttocks with his palm, and the horse hauled the water up the slope. The horse's belly, stuffed pendulously round from grazing, crooked off to the left, then to the right. Lao Jin followed its gait, his stocky muscular shoulders dipping and angling down this way, then that way.

If you didn't know his story, you couldn't tell that Lao Jin lacked anything that other men had. Especially when Lao Jin lassoed a horse. His whole body formed one unbroken arc with the rope, taut as a bowstring. Once the horse straightened its legs to run, Lao Jin had him. In these prairies there wasn't another man for hundreds of miles around who had such a deft and powerful hand.

Lao Jin poured the two big leather saddlebags full of water into the oblong ditch he had dug at the summit of the slope. The ditch was rather shallow. A little deeper and one could just fit a coffin in it. The ditch was lined with a sheet of black plastic from a torn-up bag of horse fodder.

Wen Xiu sat downhill from the ditch, her body facing down the slope, her head turned back toward Lao Jin. After watching him for a while, she asked, "What are you doing?"

"You'll see," Lao Jin replied.

He peeled off his shirt. It had been soaked with sweat and dried by the sun, so it was pasted to his back like a medicinal compress. When it came off, it made a "ssslah!" sound, and a puff of vapor blew out. As he poured out the contents of the saddlebags, the water in the little pool rose. It was over half full.

Wen Xiu's neck was sore from turning her head back to look.

"What are you up to now?" she persisted.

"Just wait and see," Lao Jin replied in a low growl. Every time Wen Xiu got on or off a horse and didn't want Lao Jin to help her, his lips would part over that gold tooth while he growled like that. The sound contained a womanly pique completely inconsistent with Lao Jin's massive trunk and wide prairie face. There was also a sort of beastlike affection in it.

Wen Xiu stared blankly down the slope toward the horses. Lao Jin took a seat on the ground not far from her, pulled out a tobacco pouch, rubbed the tobacco leaves on his thigh and rolled himself a fat thick cheroot. Then he stuck it in his mouth and began lighting it all the way around. Wen Xiu heard the crude matches skittering, heard them breaking, and looked at Lao Jin as he fumbled with his makeshift cheroot, giving him a narrow-eyed smirk of "serves you right." Only after ten or so matches had been broken or extinguished in the wind did he succeed in lighting the cheroot, which protruded sideways out his mouth like some kind of artillery cannon. Under the bright noonday sun, you couldn't see the lit end of the cheroot and you couldn't see the smoke, just stringlike shadows swirling about Lao Jin's face. The smoke stank: as the cheroot burned shorter, the stench grew worse.

Smoke was also rising off the little pool. Inside its vapor, the transparent air warped and shimmered. The sunlight was absorbed by the black plastic, heating the water. And all in less time than it took Lao Jin to enjoy his cheroot.

Curious, Wen Xiu walked up the slope toward the pool at the summit. She tested the water with her hand and cried out, "It's scalding hot!"

"You can bathe in it now," Lao Jin replied.

"How about you?"

"Go ahead, you bathe. Pretty soon it will be too hot to bear."

She knew Lao Jin didn't bathe. The first time he had held Wen Xiu dismounting from a horse, she realized that this was a man who had never taken a bath in his life.

"I'm going to take my clothes off now," Wen Xiu said.

"Go ahead," Lao Jin replied, continuing to stare.

Wen Xiu pointed down the slope toward the herd. "You go round up the horses. Some of them look like they're about to stampepe."

Lao Jin, a little put out, slowly turned his head away from her. "I'm not going to watch you."

Wen Xiu squatted on the ground. "But I can't bathe with you here!"

Lao Jin didn't move. He knew she wouldn't pass up the chance of bathing. She loved to bathe. The first night she'd ladled out a basin of water and put it at the foot of her straw bedroll and blown out the lamp. Just as she had stripped off her panties, she heard the rustling sound of Lao Jin's straw bedroll stirring.

As she had squatted, straddling the basin of water, carefully dipping the towel in the water so as not to make a sound, Lao Jin had become deathly quiet. She felt as if Lao Jin's ear hairs were standing on end.

"Bathing?" Lao Jin had finally said in an intimate tone.

She had paid no attention to him but splashed temperamentally with her hands, making the water sound like a flock of ducks landing on a pond.

Lao Jin had then taken the initiative to break the embarrassing silence, saying, "Heh, heh! You Chengdu girls just can't get along without bathing."

It was from that time that her hatred for Lao Jin had begun. The next day she had slapped together a canvas partition to wall off the corner with her cot and bedroll from the rest of the tent.

By now, Wen Xiu was almost completely undressed. "You mustn't turn your head," she warned.

Lao Jin had his back toward Wen Xiu. He raised his head to look at the sky and remarked, "The clouds are coming this way."

Wen Xiu, now completely naked, said, "You're not allowed to turn your head!"

Then she stepped into the pool. First she let the hot water roll over her and hissed with relief as she soaked in it. It made her feel so good that she gave out a silly giggle. She knelt in the pool and used

the hand-sized washcloth to scoop up water onto her body.

Lao Jin sat rigidly immobile without turning his head. The place where he sat was lower down on the slope. If he turned his head, he could not see Wen Xiu completely. Wen Xiu, however, kept staring vigilantly at the back of his neck while she rubbed her body with scented soap. Before she picked up the soap, she first shook her hand dry. If her hands were too wet, it would waste soap. That's what her mother had taught her. Wen Xiu's father was a tailor and knew how to save customers' cloth. In all the years her parents had been married, Wen Xiu's mother had never had to buy her own cloth.

"Lao Jin, sing another song!" Wen Xiu requested, now finished with washing and enjoying a good soak.

"The clouds are moving this way." Lao Jin shifted his gaze from one end of the sky to the other, as if watching the clouds move, then deliberately turned his head toward where Wen Xiu was. He saw her flour white shoulders with a dark-burnt face perched on top. The whiteness of her body in the pool appeared a blur, like moonlight stroked and ruffled on troubled waters.

Wen Xiu cried out shrilly, "Damn you, Lao Jin!" and she splashed soapy water at him.

Lao Jin quickly turned his face back around, sat down again properly and wiped the water off his face with his green cotton Mao cap.

"May your eyes rot out!" Wen Xiu cursed.

"I didn't see anything," Lao Jin protested, still wiping water off the tip of his nose and lips.

"If you did see anything, may your eyes rot out!"

"I saw nothing."

After a while Wen Xiu was ready to get dressed again. At the bottom of the slope, two men came by, each astride a yak. They were driving a herd of yaks to the slaughterhouse. Both of them were quite familiar with Lao Jin and called out, "Lao Jin! Lao Jin! What are you doing squatting up there?"

"Don't come up!" Lao Jin growled back.

"What are you doing? Squatting to take a piss, huh?" Having said

this, the man at the front yanked the reins of the yak he was riding and circled around the back of the slope, heading for the summit.

"Don't come up!" Lao Jin quickly turned his head toward Wen Xiu and barked, "Get dressed."

By now the men had discovered Wen Xiu cowering there, covering up her body, but they still pretended they had come up to give Lao Jin a hard time. "Lao Jin, everyone says you've got to squat like a woman to take a piss. Today we caught you in the act. We want to watch!"

Lao Jin dragged his rifle off the ground and looked through the sights, carefully sizing up the two of them. When the pair tried to proceed forward, the rifle sounded. One of the yaks reared up into the air, then turned its head and careened down the slope diagonally, its body in profile. It was now shorn of one horn and had lost all sense of balance and direction.

The man who had been bucked off the yak, called, "How dare you shoot at us, Lao Jin, you son of a bitch!"

Lao Jin dribbled some spittle onto the rifle barrel and wiped off the gunpowder stain with the corner of his jacket. He made no sound and showed no expression, but just acted as if nothing had happened. Then he loaded another bullet into the rifle's belly and said to the other man, who was still sitting dumbfounded on his yak not knowing whether to advance or retreat, "You want one, too?"

The man hastily pulled the yak's head around. From its back he yelled, "Just you wait, Lao Jin, you son of a bitch!"

"Wait for what? For you to come and bite my balls? I ain't even got my tool no more!" Lao Jin yelled. With both hands he slapped his crotch, whacking it powerfully, pounding a fair amount of dust out of his trousers.

Wen Xiu burst out laughing. She felt Lao Jin's fearlessness was genuine: without that thing to determine his fate, no one could threaten his life.

By a certain evening in October, Wen Xiu had been herding horses with Lao Jin for exactly half a year. That is to say, she had graduated. She could now lead a platoon of Intellectual Youth girls in herding horses. In the morning she woke up early, stuck her head out from behind her canvas partition and asked Lao Jin, "Do you think they'll come today to take me back to the Livestock Bureau?"

Lao Jin had just entered the tent, cradling in the crook of his arm a load of firewood wrapped in a layer of white frost. "Huh?" he replied.

"It's been six months already. They said after six months I could return to the Livestock Bureau. It's been one hundred and eighty days. I've counted them."

Lao Jin relaxed his grip, and the firewood came rolling out onto the ground. He was wearing a military fur coat with his own alterations. Both the sleeves had been removed, exposing his long apelike arms from the shoulder, which gave him the appearance of being both dexterous and clumsy. He was looking at Wen Xiu.

"You're leaving?"

"Leaving?" she replied. "It's my turn to leave." She gaily tilted her sharp little chin as she drew her head back behind the canvas curtain.

She started laying out clothes, deciding what to wear. From two identical old outfits she pulled out one, held it up to the light and looked at how many tiny holes had been shot through it by sparks from the fire pit. No, that wouldn't do. She looked at the other outfit, but it wasn't much better. With a sigh, she finally put it on. With a gauze scarf and her hair combed nicely, she wouldn't look too messy. When she stepped out of her enclosure, Lao Jin had already brought the butter tea to a noisy boil.

Making conversation, Wen Xiu asked, "Have you eaten yet?"

"Cooking," Lao Jin replied, pointing to the fire.

Seeing her nicely dressed and made up, his eyes followed her, his hands mechanically snapping off twigs. Then she took a piece of mirror broken in a triangular shape and handed it to him. Immediately he stood up and held it for her. She didn't need to say a word.

He would raise and lower it according to her unspoken wishes.

Wen Xiu spent a week in this manner, arranging her gauze scarf and braiding her hair. The person who should have come from the Livestock Bureau to take her back had not come. On the eighth day, Lao Jin said, "We've got to break camp and move on from here. The heavy rains have changed the course of the stream. There won't be any water for the horses to drink, and there won't be any for us either."

Immediately Wen Xiu started to protest loudly. "Move again? Move again? When the Livestock Bureau sends someone for me, we'll be even harder to find." She glared at Lao Jin, her small round eyes quivering out two accusatory teardrops—the Livestock Bureau must've all died off, seven days without seeing hide or hair of them, and all of this is your fault, Lao Jin!

As the days passed, Lao Jin did not bring up the matter of moving camp any more. Every day he took the horses farther afield to find grass that was not too parched. Wen Xiu no longer herded horses with him. She spent each day waiting at the entrance of the tent.

One day someone arrived. It was a peddler with an ox cart selling goods to all the various herding camps. He asked Wen Xiu if he could come in for some buttered tea. As they sat on the floor and talked, he told Wen Xiu that over the past half year, the Intellectual Youth had begun to be withdrawn from the herding camps and were returning to the city. The first to go were those whose families had clout. Next were those with good connections at the Livestock Bureau. Almost all the girls among the Intellectual Youth had gone: they had all established a "good connection" to the Livestock Bureau.

When Wen Xiu heard this, she stood there with her mouth gaping.

"Why haven't you left?" the peddler asked, as if prying at some shameful secret of hers.

"They've all gone, and I'll go, too . . . when I feel like it . . . go back to Chengdu." Both the peddler's knees pressed against Wen Xiu's knees.

Wen Xiu stared at him blankly. The peddler was apparently a for-

mer soldier. He had a pair of eyes that had seen it all. All the good jobs out here went to ex-soldiers.

"For a girl like you," the peddler said, "getting good connections at the Livestock Bureau should be no problem at all!" He laughed and spoke no more. Then his lips went to Wen Xiu's face, neck, between her breasts . . .

The peddler lay on top of Wen Xiu groping and rolling, crushing the straw in the bedroll. Wen Xiu wanted to go back to Chengdu. Her mother and father couldn't help her. She could only rely on herself to find a way out. The peddler was the first way out that she found.

As the day was approaching evening and Lao Jin walked back into the tent, he heard the rustling of straw behind Wen Xiu's canvas curtain. Under the curtain, Lao Jin could see a pair of men's cloth shoes tossed on the ground, soles facing upward. Lao Jin didn't realize that he had been standing in the tent, immobile, for over an hour, until everything was pitch black both inside and outside the tent.

The peddler came out from behind the canvas partition wearing the cloth shoes, the backs crushed flat. He didn't see Lao Jin. The peddler went straight to the opening of the tent, lit up by the rising moon. The ox harnessed to the cart woke from its slumber as the peddler climbed in. He turned on a transistor radio and rode off, singing as he went.

From Wen Xiu's bed came not a hint of human sound. She was still alive; she just lay there as if dead, turning her eyeballs back and forth awkwardly in the darkness. "Lao Jin? Lao Jin, is that you?"

"Uhn," Lao Jin grunted in reply, shuffling his footsteps around to signify that everything was normal.

"Lao Jin, is there any water?"

Lao Jin brought over a cup of butter tea. Wen Xiu's head popped out from under the canvas curtain. Just then, the moonlight shone on it, and Lao Jin saw that her head and face were soaked with sweat, wet like a newborn lamb. She drew her mouth closer to drink. Lao Jin leaned forward and supported her head. She frowned slightly, as if to

extricate herself from the palm of Lao Jin's hand.

"No water, huh?" she said in an accusatory tone.

"Uhn," Lao Jin grunted once more and dashed out of the tent. He dragged over his riding horse. Swinging his leg over its back, he gave it a vicious kick with his heels.

Lao Jin rode the ten kilometers to the little brook at the foot of the hill, the one where he had drawn water for Wen Xiu to bathe in that day under the hot sun. He took two military canteens and filled them until they could hold no more. By the time he got back, the moon was already high in the sky. Wen Xiu was still inside her canvas enclosure in the corner of the tent.

"Come have a drink! Water's here!" Lao Jin called out, almost gaily.

He passed a canteen through to Wen Xiu. Very soon he heard an "oo-too! oo-too! oo-too!" sound as she poured it into the metal basin. After a while, Wen Xiu stuck her hand out again, beckoning for the second canteen.

"I brought it for you to drink," Lao Jin protested.

Saying nothing, she just snatched the strap of the canteen and dragged it inside her canvas enclosure. Once again he heard the sound of water. She was bathing again. She just couldn't get along without bathing, Lao Jin thought—especially today. After a while, she threw some clothes on and walked out, carrying the basin of water with both hands. She walked out of the tent and went a considerable distance before she finally threw out the water.

To Lao Jin, the way she walked was no longer very becoming.

"Lao Jin," she said, handing him one of the canteens deferentially, "there's still a little water left. Would you like a drink?"

"You drink it," Lao Jin replied.

Insisting no more, she took an apple out of her pocket and carefully aimed the spout of the canteen at it. The water came out in a thin stream. She turned the apple evenly with her other hand, washing it on all sides. She raised her eyes and saw that Lao Jin was looking at her. She smiled briefly and then began, "ka-chaw, ka-chaw!" to gnaw on the apple. The peddler had given it to her. She held it with

both hands while she gnawed on it. There was really no need to use both hands, however: it was quite small.

Wen Xiu continued to stay in the tent all day while Lao Jin went out to herd horses. Every night when Lao Jin returned, he would see a big pair of men's shoes under the canvas curtain. One time a shoe had been tossed a couple of meters outside the curtain, almost to the edge of the fire pit in the middle of the tent. Lao Jin picked up the fire tongs in one hand. He looked at the shoe as it lay there, sizing it up. Then he grasped the shoe with the fire tongs and dropped it into the fire. The shoe's leather roasted until it sizzled and small beads of oil began to seep out. Then it started to twist and puff out cloying clouds of smoke which gradually turned to ashen white. Its stench filled the whole tent.

Lao Jin recognized this shoe. Few people in the grasslands could afford to strut about in a shoe like this. There was one pair in the Communist Party Committee of the Livestock Bureau, two in the Livestock Bureau's Personnel Department. Only these three.

A few days before, Wen Xiu had told Lao Jin, "These people coming to see me are important people, you know."

"How important?" Lao Jin had asked.

"Extremely important. They all have the power to approve documents. To go back to Chengdu, without some important people to approve some documents and stamp their seals on them, there is no way out." She looked at Lao Jin, but it was hard to say where her gaze was focused. Her tone of voice was a low monotone, just as when Lao Jin was bored and frustrated and went outside to pour out his heart quietly to his horses.

For his part, Lao Jin looked at her with a dazed expression, like an animal that understands emotions but doesn't understand human language. She hadn't been out herding for some days now, and a layer of skin on her face, scorched by the intense sun, had started to peel off. Through the cracks of the burnt surface, pinkish tender flesh

had begun to appear. While she was talking, her nails would fly quickly over the skin on her face, scraping lightly. Her sharp fine nails gradually picked open a fissure; then a spot of new flesh about the size of a wild broadbean flower began to emerge.

"I'm too late—all the other Intellectual Youth girls did this years ago to get the Livestock Bureau to send them home. By now they've probably all found jobs in Chengdu. Think of it, a girl with no money and no connections, isn't this the only asset she's got left?" As she spoke, she lifted up her eyes, as if to express her justification. She also told him it wouldn't work if she slept with one without sleeping with the others. Those you didn't sleep with would block your way.

Lao Jin nodded his head as he rolled a stronger than usual cheroot on his thigh. Wen Xiu had told him everything. She didn't tell him because she particularly cared about his opinion. Just the opposite—it was because he couldn't possibly have an opinion. After all, what kind of opinions could livestock have?

The canvas curtain rustled for a bit. The man was looking for his second shoe. He kept groaning "son of a bitch." Lao Jin sat with his spine turned toward the curtain, smoking his cheroot, puffing vigorously, flattening out his lungs.

The man was in a tight spot. He couldn't allow Lao Jin to see him under the kerosene lamp and make a one hundred percent positive identification. He was much too important a person in the Livestock Bureau for that, and terribly busy. When he had arrived, he hadn't even bothered to exchange a polite greeting with Wen Xiu; he just went straight to what he had come for. Since her lamp had been dark the whole time, he didn't have any idea what Wen Xiu looked like.

The man's predicament caused Wen Xiu to confront Lao Jin. "Lao Jin, did you see a leather shoe anywhere?"

"Whose shoe?" Lao Jin answered.

"What do you care? Did you see it?" Wen Xiu said, raising her voice. She walked over to stand directly in front of him. Her hair hung disheveled on both sides of her face. Her body was enveloped

in a green military overcoat, revealing a slice of breast at the top, a shaft of thigh at the bottom. The light from the fire pit danced on her face, which had become so thin that it looked hollow, and her sunken eye sockets looked like a pair of caves.

"I asked you a question!" she said even louder, both pleading and demanding.

Lao Jin only paid attention to his smoking, inhaling until his chest cavity was taut, then flattening it out like a bellows.

"What are you, a yak? Don't you understand people-talk. . .?" Wen Xiu huffed as she squatted down on the ground in front of him, the bottom of the overcoat parting, revealing both that which may be exposed and that which may not be. It was as if in front of livestock there was nothing to be ashamed of, as if human modesty were superfluous.

Lao Jin heard the important person slip out behind his back, half-shod.

Wen Xiu was still wrapped in her overcoat, pacing back and forth bare-legged through the tent. She picked up a canteen and rattled it. Empty. The other one, also empty. They had been camped out on this bone-dry stretch for over a month now. Every day Lao Jin had had to ride the ten kilometers to fetch two canteens of water. From that day on, her water supply was cut off.

For five days there was no water. To drink, there was only milk and buttered tea. No longer did just one man a day come to see Wen Xiu; sometimes there were two, even three. At night, no sooner would Lao Jin hear one leave than the next would come in practically on his heels. The path to the door of the tent had been trodden smooth. Lao Jin hung a piece of dry thornbush in the doorway, hoping to scratch somebody's eyes out with it. But they all stealthily tiptoed around it. Now, the most important precaution they took before climbing into Wen Xiu's bed was carefully to hide their shoes.

At dawn of the fifth day, Wen Xiu was practically at her wits' end. She hadn't slept all night and couldn't figure out who the men were

that she had been with. After the very last one had left, she finally crawled out of bed. Lao Jin watched from his own bed as she dragged her footsteps over toward his bedroll and declared to him, "Lao Jin, for days there hasn't been a single drop of water!"

Lao Jin looked into her two wild eyes and saw that they were bloodshot. He also got wind of a not-to-be-reasoned-with type of odor emanating from her body. With the loss of her water supply, she seemed to have lost her last shred of dignity and rationality.

Lao Jin slowly, in a stately manner, started putting on his clothes, muttering as he dressed. His pants, spotted with sweat stains and permeated with dust, had become so stiff that they almost stood up by themselves at his bedside. He pulled them over and began to put them on, though it wasn't clear whether he was wearing them or they were wearing him.

Wen Xiu walked over to the extinguished fire pit, her eyes scrutinizing the strip of twisted and burnt shoe sole, not registering what it was. She yelled at Lao Jin at the top of her voice, "What the hell are you doing, dressing so slow?"

Lao Jin immediately stopped his movements.

Wen Xiu, sensing something less than wonderful on its way, mouthed an even worse rebuke and glared at him.

Lao Jin walked up to her. "You're prostituting yourself, don't you know?"

Wen Xiu was still glaring at him. Then she gave him a sidelong glance and a coquettish little sneer. "What did you say?"

"You're a whore," he said.

"Not for you," she answered.

By *Li Dong*, the Beginning of Winter, Wen Xiu lay in the infirmary. She had just had an abortion. Her bare legs lay on a two-inch-thick sheet of grainy brown blotting paper to absorb the flow of blood. Lao Jin kept a vigil outside her room, waiting for someone to call him in. But no one ever did. The nurses all openly referred to Wen Xiu as "Worn-out Shoe" and "the wild nymphet." It was just

like that Intellectual Youth boy in the surgery ward whom people openly referred to as "Zhang Three-Toes." Supposedly his rifle had misfired and shot off three of his toes. After his wounds had healed, Zhang Three-Toes was headed back to Chengdu. He was trading all his possessions for caterpillar grass. Once he got to Chengdu, it would fetch a good price at any reputable herbal medicine shop, and besides, it was light to carry. Everybody knew that he had purposefully taken aim at his foot and sheared off his toes, crippling himself. Once he could no longer ride a horse, all they could do was send him back to Chengdu.

On the third day of Lao Jin's vigil for Wen Xiu, Zhang Three-Toes walked by and sat next to him on the same bench. He gave Lao Jin a cigarette, then entered Wen Xiu's hospital room.

It was only after he had smoked the cigarette halfway down that Lao Jin felt something was wrong. Suddenly he stood up and pushed on the door of the room. It was locked from the inside. Lao Jin extended his legs and took a stance, then sent his bronze-tipped boots flying and flashing against the door. His roars of "You animal! You beast!" caused the whole shift of nurses to come running. Soon all the beds in the ward were empty as well. Even the paraplegic patients rolled their wheelchairs down the hall to gawk at the commotion at Wen Xiu's door.

Several nurses restrained Lao Jin from kicking the door, but he kept yelling "Beast! Beast!" His cries grew progressively hoarser.

Zhang Three-Toes walked out of Wen Xiu's door, and everyone cleared a path for him. He tossed back his greasy head of hair with the devil-may-care attitude of a proud hoodlum. Addressing the crowd, he said, "What are you doing? What's the fuss? If you want in, get in line!" He pointed at Wen Xiu's door, then pointed at Lao Jin. "Lao Jin's first in line, I'll vouch for that!"

Lao Jin lifted up one of his bronze-tipped boots and stamped it down on Zhang Three-Toes's remaining toes. Zhang Three-Toes neighed like a horse.

The nurses yelled at the crowd to disperse. Then they had a loud discussion among themselves.

"It wouldn't matter to her if it were a stud donkey!"

"The bleeding just stopped and already she's luring guys into her bed."

Lao Jin returned to his place on the wooden bench.

In the middle of the night, a blizzard started. Lao Jin was awakened by the cold. He saw that Wen Xiu's door was open, but her bed was empty. He waited a while; she did not return. Lao Jin went outside to search for her, shivering with panic. He found her at the side of the road, fallen to the ground. The snow had coated her hair white. She said she had gone out to get some water. She really missed water; she wanted to take a nice, refreshing bath.

Lao Jin picked her up and embraced her, her body flush against his own. Her face was swollen to the point of transparency, but it was still pretty. Her little wasplike body was pitifully small, shivering and trembling inside the palms of Lao Jin's enormous hands. Lao Jin held Wen Xiu for a while, standing in the blizzard. He did not take her back to the infirmary. He carried her toward the stables where his horse was kept. Each time the wind came up, he would turn his spine toward it, walking backward. Wen Xiu drifted in and out of consciousness. At one point, she felt something warm dropping on her face, and she was astonished. She never thought that he might be able to cry, or that he would shed tears for her.

The next day, the sky had cleared. The grass on the prairie was covered in mournful white. The scrub was bereft of its leaves; on its tightly interlaced twigs hung bright crystalline icicles.

Lao Jin was sitting under a scrub tree, watching Wen Xiu a short distance away fumbling with the rifle. She had already told him that today was the day she wanted to carry out her plan. She had learned something from Zhang Three-Toes. Lao Jin's cheroot dangled from his mouth, long since extinguished. He waited for the rifle to sound.

The shadow of Wen Xiu's ravaged body was delicate and small,

and one of her braids had come undone. For some reason, she turned her head to look at him.

He said nothing and showed no expression; the extinguished cannonlike cheroot between his lips made no motion.

She smiled at him briefly. Then she placed the rifle on the ground.

"I'm afraid I won't aim right," she said. "It's hard to shoot yourself. I just can't bear to do it." Her voice was quavering.

She smiled again and put the mouth of the rifle on her foot, raised her chin and closed her eyes, like a child not daring to face its pain. "That's better. Hey, just as soon as I fall over, you'll take me right to the clinic, won't you?"

"I will," Lao Jin replied.

"I'm going to shoot now—hey, you'll tell them that I was carrying my rifle and it accidentally went off, won't you?"

"Of course I will," Lao Jin replied again.

Her face was white as snow, her lips chewed blue. The rifle still did not sound. She spoke to Lao Jin again. "Lao Jin, turn your head away. Don't look at me."

Lao Jin pulled his green Mao cap straight down to his chin, confining his face inside it. For a while, outside his hat, it was eerily quiet. He lifted his hat to take a look and saw her on the snowy ground, rolled up into a little ball, the rifle lying on the ground one pace away.

Her face full of tears, she said to Lao Jin, "Lao Jin, I beg you, please help me. I just can't bear to shoot myself . . ."

Lao Jin looked at her.

"Lao Jin, I'm begging you, if you get one good shot off, I can go back to Chengdu. Winter's coming. There's nothing I hate more than the winters here! None of them would help me. You help me, please! You're the only one who can help me now . . .!" Suddenly she rushed over, hugged Lao Jin tightly and pressed her mouth against his lips, dry and acrid with years of accumulated tobacco smoke.

Lao Jin extricated himself from her embrace and went to pick up the rifle. She gazed at him like one who is rescued, with a look of complete trust.

Lao Jin held the rifle across his body and retreated a few paces. Then he retreated a few more.

Wen Xiu stood up straight, looking directly toward the rifle barrel.

Suddenly, she asked Lao Jin to wait. She carefully plaited the braid which had come undone. Her eyes kept looking at Lao Jin. She smiled again wanly.

Instantly he understood. From her poise and her unperturbed manner, he understood the detachment, the transcendence of a farewell. He suddenly knew what she wanted him to do.

Lao Jin set the rifle to his shoulder. Gradually he raised the rifle barrel higher. She remained motionless, as if about to have her picture taken.

The rifle sounded. Wen Xiu swooned and fluttered to the ground, her mouth emitting the groan of a woman at her moment of peak satisfaction. Lao Jin put down the rifle; he knew there would be no need for a second shot.

When the sun had reached the middle of the sky, Lao Jin placed Wen Xiu's pure, pure white body into the shallow rectangular pool. It had been filled with snowy slush which Lao Jin had now heated to the temperature that had always made her feel most comfortable.

Her eyes were closed, and in the vapor her body looked like the image of an Immortal on a temple fresco.

Lao Jin now removed his own clothes. He studied carefully his own body's incompleteness, then looked at the peaceful Wen Xiu. He turned the rifle barrel around, aiming it at his own breast. One end of a rope was tied to the trigger, the other end to a stone. Then he kicked the stone, and as the stone rolled down the slope, a shot rang out, and hot blood gushed out of his chest.

Lao Jin crawled toward Wen Xiu and submerged himself in the pool. He held Wen Xiu. In a little while, the snow would cover them both completely.

### Notes to "Celestial Bath"

Page 65 **Wen Xiu**: pronounced "wen shyoo," this is a simple, commonplace name. Xiu means "elegant."

Page 65 **Lao Jin**: the word Lao, literally "old" or "venerable," is commonly used in China along with the surname of a senior co-worker as an informal but respectful form of address.

Page 66 **Chengdu**: capital city of Sichuan Province.

Page 68 **Sky burial**: a traditional Tibetan ritual through which the remains of the dead are returned to the elements. The body of the deceased is taken to a deserted place and, after the appropriate preparations and prayers, placed on an elevated platform and left to the birds to devour.

Page 81 **Caterpillar grass**: this type of grass, which when dried resembles a bunch of caterpillars, is used in Chinese herbal medicine as a tonic.

Page 82 **Mournful white**: white, rather than black, is the traditional color of mourning in China.

Page 84 **Immortal**: sometimes translated "fairies," the Immortals are the popular saints and demigods of Taoist folk religion.