

Chapter One

AT THE AGE OF TWENTY-TWO, I became a woman. Yan took my virginity. He was my first lover, a married man.

“Meimei, I want to hold you.”

But you are, I thought, gasping for air under Yan’s compact body. He had been lying on top of me for at least two hours like a mountain. His hip bones pressed and ground my abdomen with a slow, determined motion that made me feel that he wouldn’t let me go until I was crushed and ground into dust. My stomach felt numb, as if I had been pressed under a nether millstone for days and nights. Where did he get this weight?

He was small, only two inches taller than I, with thin hairy legs, narrow hips, the ribs lined up on his chest like my grandma’s washing board. When I asked him about this, he would point to his huge head with an ear-to-ear smile. I only needed to take a look at his black hair whirling around on the top in all directions and his chin always pointing to the sky, and I would burst out laughing. His most distinguished facial features, however, were his bony, hooked nose, which took up a third of his face, and underneath, his red, watery lips that hung like a new moon between his ears. Sometimes I teased him that his nose must weigh a pound. Yan argued that it was all his brain, which was at least twice as

large and wrinkled as a normal person's brain. True. His round head looked so huge on top of his little neck that sometimes I imagined if I just flicked my fingers at his scalp, the blue veins that stood up along the neck would explode and his head would break off and roll on the ground. When Yan took my hand and put it inside his pants, I grasped something hot and sticky, trembling like a bloody newborn rabbit. What alarmed me the most was that this thing was expanding rapidly, and soon my fingers could no longer wrap around it. Was he going to penetrate me with this gigantic monster, thicker than my wrist, harder than my grandma's washing stick, and hotter than a red iron rod? The thought threw me into a panic and I withdrew my hand quickly.

"Meimei, my delicious Meimei, Gege wants to hold you and eat you up, little by little," Yan moaned as he pressed down harder, wrapping me with his long arms and legs like an octopus. I felt his heart thumping against my chest as he sucked my already-swollen lips deep into his mouth and cupped my breasts firmly with his hands.

Finally. I'm going to lose my virginity tonight, I said to myself. Why not tonight? It would have to happen, just a matter of time. If I tried to put it off again, he would be really mad at me. My roommate Wang Ying had left earlier in the afternoon to visit her aunt. It was now past eleven. She had missed the last bus back to school for the night. The door was locked. I had checked it twice before Yan pushed me down on the bed. No one must see what we were doing. To fool around with a man before marriage was bad enough. To fall in love with a married man could ruin both of us. Yan was leading my hand into his open fly again. At the touch of my cold fingers, the thing twitched like a live fish in a sizzling pan.

"I want you, Meimei, I want you," Yan murmured repeatedly as he chewed my ears and cheeks, his saliva dribbling all over my face. "I can't take it anymore. I'm going insane if I don't hold you tonight. You'll let me, Meimei, won't you, my sweet meimei?" His whisper smelled of garlic and fish. The thing in my hand was moving up and down, the way my father pounded garlic in a

mortar with a stone pestle. My father ate garlic every day, either mashed or whole, always raw.

What did it look like? I had never seen a penis in my life. Not true. I did see one at a bus stop in the suburb of Shanghai when I was nine. It was a drizzling afternoon. The waiting shed had only three people—my mom, a bald old man, and me. My mother went to the bathroom. I took out *The Western Journey* to read. The Monkey King had transformed himself into a fly and entered the Iron-Fan Princess's stomach. The old man said, "Hey!"

I looked up. He had something red and rubbery sticking out through his open fly. *Why did he insert a rubber pipe between his legs?* I thought. *To suck out all the extra fat and water from his round tummy?* He circled his hand around it and began to pull and push it so hard that he made strange, painful noises, and his face was all contorted. Was he trying to peel the skin off the pipe? If it hurt so much, why did he do it? Suddenly, he bent over. White liquid gushed out from the tip of the red pipe and made an arc in the air before it fell on the ground. At this moment, something clicked in my mind. I blushed heavily but did not turn my back to him. By the time my mother returned, he had already buttoned up. I pointed at his back to my mother. "What?" she said. But the old man turned his face. His look scared me. I shook my head and ran to the other side of the waiting shed. My mother's voice chased me like a whip. "Why are you so red? Damn, who spit on the floor again? People are such pigs!"

"WHY ARE YOU so stiff? Relax, Meimei. Gege wants to know you, and you want the same thing, don't you? The only way to do it is to go inside you. This will be our true union. No one can separate us again. Meimei, please breathe with me. Now, inhale, exhale. Again . . ."

I breathed deeply, in, out, in, out, but I just wanted to laugh. This was too much like having a baby. I saw my mother giving birth to my little sister at home. The nurse told her to breathe

exactly like this. Instead of relaxing, I began to feel the cramps in my stomach. Funny that it always happened this way. I spent many sleepless nights in my dormitory bed, calling Yan's name in silence. I wanted him to come inside and make me die. But when he humped me with his swollen loins, I got all tight and crampy. Although I called his name in my bed, the images that answered my call were all different men. None of them had Yan's face. Maybe he was too ugly? Maybe I regarded him too much as my brother, father, and teacher?

About a month and a half ago, Yan called me *meimei*, sister, for the first time, while we were waiting for the beginning of 1980. He sat on Wang Ying's bed, me on my own, our fingers intertwined over the desk between us. We had just reached an agreement. I was going to take the 1980 college entrance exams in June and Yan would tutor me. He made a schedule for my daily study: 4:00–7:30 A.M.—Chinese and history; 5:30–11:00 P.M.—geometry and political science. I had to teach from 8:30–4:00 P.M. In the next five months, I had to catch up with all the junior high and high school courses I had missed during the Cultural Revolution.

"What you learned during those years is useless for the exams," Yan commented with a sneer when I told him I was a top student in high school. He was right. Because the Cultural Revolution began when I was in the third grade, I had spent most of my school years working in the countryside and factories, reading Mao's red book, and writing papers to criticize myself or others. "Don't you worry a bit about it," Yan said. "I'll help you from the very beginning. We'll make it, I'm sure." He waved his fist in the air, his Adam's apple rolling up and down along his neck. Yan was really excited.

He's helping me to realize my lifelong dream, I thought. What can I do for him? If I really pass the exams, not only will I give him everything I have for the rest of my life, but also in my next life I'll become an ox or a horse to serve him.

"What are you thinking about?" He squeezed my hand. Before

I could answer, the radio solemnly announced the arrival of the New Year. When the clock stroked the twelfth time, Yan stood up dramatically and embraced me across the desk. "Meimei, my little meimei, what am I going to do?" he moaned, his cheek burning like a hot wok against mine. Suddenly, he dropped my arms, stepped back, stared at me without seeing. "What am I doing? Oh, god, what am I doing?" In a second, he ran out of the room, leaving me totally bewildered.

The next day, he came back but refused to enter my room. "I come here to apologize for my behavior last night," he announced in a high-pitched voice, his manner still so dramatic but touched with melancholy.

"I don't get it, Yan Hua. Why did you run away like that?"

"I can't. I'm a married man, you know. You're still a virgin. I don't want to ruin your future."

"I don't have a future without you," I said, astonished at what I was saying and the way I said it. Yan's dramatic manner was influential. But what I was telling him came from the deep well of my body. The feeling had never surfaced before, even though we had been seeing each other every day for the past three months. But now words just poured out like spring water. "I don't care whether I'm a virgin or not. But I do care that you're married. I don't want to ruin your family. So let's be brother and sister, since you don't have a meimei, and I don't have a gege."

His eyes lit up. "You forgave me, Meimei? Oh, I'm so happy I'm going to die. All my life I've been longing for a little sister like you." He took me into his arms.

I rested my face against his green military jacket and realized how much my future depended on him.

YAN HAD PULLED DOWN MY PANTS. "Meimei," he whispered into my ear, "I'm going to come inside you now. It hurts a little, but if you relax, it won't be too bad. You'll open your door for your brother, won't you?"

Yes, I wanted more than anything else to let him in, to make him happy. But my door was tightly closed. Yan was drilling between my legs. *Gege, have mercy. You're cutting me into pieces. It's no use. The lock on my door has been rusted too long. Maybe I'm a shinu, a stone girl, whose hymen can never be broken. Don't poke me so hard, Gege. I'm going to scream.*

"I can't, I just can't." I pushed him away, shouting. "Why do we have to do this? I'm happy the way it was, *gege* and *meimei*."

Yan buttoned his fly and walked to the door without looking at me. I watched his slightly hunched back, my stomach twitching into a knot. The green silk lamp he gave me last year was shedding a soft light on the desk. This was the first birthday gift I'd ever received. Not that no one remembered my birthday. My paternal grandma Nainai always made her three best dishes that day. But instead of letting me eat them, she placed them under the elm tree in the yard, burned incense, and folded paper into the shape of money. She did all this, of course, at midnight, when everyone in the navy compound was asleep. On that day, June 14th, all the adults in my family—Nainai, Father, and Mother—treated me with silence and politeness. Even my two sisters stopped bugging me like flies. No one looked at me or talked to me, as if I were a ghost or a devil. In the beginning, I was delighted for getting away from the endless chores in the house, but soon I just wished that Nainai and Mother would curse and order me around as usual. Their politeness toward me did not come out of care but out of fear. It terrified me and sent me into endless daydreams and trances.

"Gege," I called.

"I'm afraid I won't be able to be your *gege* for long," he said, his hand on the lock.

I put my chin on my drawn-up knees. My head was buzzing with that familiar noise, as if an overwound clock was about to shatter at any moment, and time, instead of ticking forward, would slide backward in a bottomless tunnel at a dizzying speed. I'd been in that tunnel too many times. It was not fun at all.

Gege, give me your hand. Do not let me fall.

"Have you ever seen brothers and sisters live together forever?"

"What should we do?" my eyes asked in despair.

"We have to become lovers. We have to become husband and wife. I don't want to hurt you, Meimei, but this is the only way to keep us together. I'm not doing this for fun but for the plan I've been thinking about. I've made up my mind. I'm going to leave her and be with you for the rest of my life."

How are you going to do this? I said to myself. This society won't allow you to divorce her. You're a college student and she's only a factory worker on a small island. If you abandon her, you'll be cursed forever as a Chen Shimei, the legendary figure who abandoned his wife after he passed the official exams and had a government appointment, and you'll fall back to the place where you started. You'll never do that, Gege, because you're ambitious. You want a high place in this world.

"Once I break your virginity, I'll be your man forever. I'll have no retreat. Do you understand, Meimei?"

No, I don't understand, I thought. You mean if I were not a virgin, I would be less valuable to you? What about your responsibility to your wife? Didn't you take her virginity? But I do understand your point, Gege. The chance for an unmarried nonvirgin to find a husband is small. So you're burning the bridge for me. Take me if it makes you feel more secure. I'll endure the pain, no matter how bad it is. Have I told you I'll give you anything I have, no condition attached, because I love you?

"Say something, Meimei, please." Yan returned to the bed and held my head cautiously, as if holding a flower. "I never know what's going on inside your head. Your silence sometimes scares me, sometimes pisses me off. But maybe that's why I'm so crazy about you. I don't know."

I held his hand and still couldn't say a word. Everyone seemed to hate or fear silence. I couldn't even remember how many times my grandmas, mother, and teachers had cursed or punished me for not speaking and refusing to answer questions. *Either she is*

retarded or very bad-tempered for behaving like that, they often commented. I grew up with different nicknames: *iron lips*, *wooden melon*, *mute mud*, *dead ghost*. I didn't give a shit about what they called me. Silence was the only way to keep one's dignity in this world, and I treasured the sacredness of sound and words more than anything else. Sounds should always be used to make things beautiful, like music, songs, poetry, expressions of emotions, making up and telling stories. The noises children made when they were playing could be beautiful even though they had no meaning. The sounds of sobbing or cursing, if they were done with true emotion and purpose, could also be beautiful. It was a crime to waste sounds, and worse, to pollute the earth with babbling nonsense and poisonous words. When adults got together, they immediately started chatting or arguing, as if they would be possessed by ghosts if they remained silent for a minute. I guarded my sounds and words like a miser except when I told stories, made up or real. To me, there was a very thin line between the two. How did we know what was real, what was made up? Most of the time it depended on our perception. The only person who didn't mind my quietness was my father. We could sit in one room, hike in the mountains, ride bicycles for hours without saying one word, and still feel comfortable. But those moments were too rare. Most of the time, he was away at sea. When he came home, he was besieged by Nainai, Mother, and my two sisters.

"MEIMEI, WHAT are you thinking about?" Yan's voice sounded distant and annoyed.

I gave him an apologetic look. This would be a crucial moment in my life. I would no longer be a girl after tonight. I must not let my mind wander too much. I removed my shoes, then my pants, which Yan had already pulled down below my knees. The idea of making love with clothing on made me feel cheap. People could say whatever they wanted about us—immoral morons, adulterers—but my feeling toward Yan was not cheap or light.

Wang Ying wouldn't come back tonight. It was not necessary to take precautions.

"Hold me, Gege," I said.

I had gone through all kinds of pain: my mother's whipping of bamboo sticks and belts, Nainai's pinching on the inner thighs, the hitting of washing sticks and rolling pins, and the burning of swollen knees and ankles from arthritis, but I had never experienced the pain of being sawed and drilled. Once he broke through my rusty door, would he pierce my womb, my stomach, and come out through my scalp? Like the Chinese baby on the bayonet of a Japanese soldier in one of those war movies? When I masturbated as a kid, all I felt was the dizzying pleasure mingled with shame and terror. Never had I imagined this kind of agony. Yan made weird noises through his clenched teeth, the kind of noise he made when he was having a hard time in the bathroom. It was funny, but I couldn't laugh. My stomach was turned upside down. Sweat poured down my face and arms, soaking the sheet underneath.

That weird ticking and buzzing in my ears again. Oh Mama, when will this end? Do not push me into the tunnel. Let me out. I can't breathe. It's dark and stuffy here. This time, I won't be able to come out alive. Who is the woman hung on a post at the entrance of the market? Her naked body is written all over with the character jian, adultery. It is in fact branded on her with a hot iron seal. Below her stands a donkey. A huge wooden block in the shape of a penis tied to the back of the donkey points up at the woman from between her legs. Two people come up and pull her legs apart. Then the person lets go of the rope that has been hoisting the woman in the air. She falls with a thud on the back of the donkey, the penis disappearing between her thighs. Blood spurts from the top of her scalp onto the heads of the staring crowd.

"I GOT IT, Meimei, I'm inside you," Yan shouted. The tearing pain pulled me out of the bloody pool, the tunnel, and sent me back to reality. Yan was thrashing on top of me, hurting me inside. *I'd rather die than go through this torment*, I cried to myself. *I don't want*

to be awakened. Suddenly Yan shouted again: "Oh, I can't bear it anymore." He collapsed, his gripping hands and head now drooping like overcooked noodles.

I sat up slowly, my legs beneath me, my hand trying to cover my nakedness. How could I cool the burning between my legs? I inhaled and exhaled, my teeth still grinding against one another.

Yan wiped himself with my towel and knelt on the floor next to me, his arms clasped around my knees. He remained silent for a long time. I realized he was staring at something in the bed. I looked. On the white sheet, there was a dark spot. In the moonlight, it looked like an ink stain. Then I realized it was blood, my virgin blood.

"Meimei, Meimei," Yan cried passionately, burying his face in the sheet. "You're mine forever."