

SHANGHAI GIRLS

A Novel

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BEAUTIFUL GIRLS

“Our daughter looks like a South China peasant with those red cheeks,” my father complains, pointedly ignoring the soup before him. “Can’t you do something about them?”

Mama stares at Baba, but what can she say? My face is pretty enough—some might even say lovely—but not as luminescent as the pearl I’m named for. I tend to blush easily. Beyond that, my cheeks capture the sun. When I turned five, my mother began rubbing my face and arms with pearl creams, and mixing ground pearls into my morning *jook*—rice porridge—hoping the white essence would permeate my skin. It hasn’t worked. Now my cheeks burn red—exactly what my father hates. I shrink down into my chair. I always slump when I’m near him, but I slump even more on those occasions when Baba takes his eyes off my sister to look at me. I’m taller than my father, which he loathes. We live in Shanghai, where the tallest car, the tallest wall, or the tallest building sends a clear and unwavering message that the owner is a person of great importance. I am not a person of importance. “She thinks she’s smart,” Baba goes on. He wears a Western- style suit of good cut. His hair shows just a few strands of gray. He’s been anxious lately, but tonight his mood is darker than usual. Perhaps his favorite horse didn’t win or the dice refused to land his way. “But one thing she isn’t is clever.”

This is another of my father’s standard criticisms and one he picked up from Confucius, who wrote, “An educated woman is a worthless woman.” People call me bookish, which even in 1937 is not considered a good thing. But as smart as I am, I don’t know how to protect myself from my father’s words.

Most families eat at a round dining table, so they will always be whole and connected, with no sharp edges. We have a square teakwood table, and we always sit in the exact same places: my father next to May on one side of the table, with my mother directly across from her so that my parents can share my sister equally. Every meal—day after day, year after year—is a reminder that I’m not the favorite and never will be. As my father continues to pick at my faults, I shut him out and pretend an interest in our dining room. On the wall adjoining the kitchen, four scrolls depicting the four seasons usually hang. Tonight they’ve been removed, leaving shadow outlines on the wall. They aren’t the only things missing. We used to have an overhead fan, but this past year Baba thought it would be more luxurious to have servants fan us while we ate. They aren’t here tonight and the room is sweltering. Ordinarily an art deco chandelier and matching wall sconces of etched yellow-and-rosetinted glass illuminate the room. These are missing as well. I don’t give any of this much thought, assuming that the scrolls have been put away to prevent their silken edges from curling in the humidity, that Baba has given the servants a night off to celebrate a wedding or birthday with their own families, and that the lighting fixtures have been temporarily taken down for cleaning.

Cook—who has no wife and children of his own—removes our soup bowls and brings out dishes of shrimp with water chestnuts, pork stewed in soy sauce with dried vegetables and bamboo shoots, steamed eel, an eight- treasures vegetable dish, and rice, but the heat swallows my hunger. I would prefer a few sips of chilled sour plum juice, cold mint flavored sweet green bean soup, or sweet almond broth.

When Mama says, “The basket repairer charged too much today,” I relax. If my father is predictable in his criticisms of me, then it’s equally predictable that my mother will recite her daily woes. She looks elegant, as always. Amber pins hold the bun at the back of her neck perfectly in place. Her gown, a *cheongsam* made of midnight blue silk with midlength sleeves, has been expertly tailored to fit her age and status. A bracelet carved from a single piece of good jade hangs from her wrist. The *thump* of it when it hits the table edge is comforting and familiar. She has bound feet, and some of her ways are just as antiquated. She questions our dreams, weighing the meaning of the presence of water, shoes, or teeth as good or bad omens. She believes in astrology, blaming or praising May and me for one thing or another because we were born in the Year of the Sheep and the Year of the Dragon, respectively.

Mama has a lucky life. Her arranged marriage to our father seems relatively peaceful. She reads Buddhist sutras in the morning, takes a rickshaw to visit friends for lunch, plays mah-jongg until late in the day, and commiserates with wives of similar station about the weather, the indolence of servants, and the ineffectiveness of the latest remedies for their hiccups, gout, or hemorrhoids. She has nothing to fret about, but her quiet bitterness and persistent worry infuse every story she tells us. “There are no happy endings,” she often recites. Still, she’s beautiful, and her lily gait is as delicate as the swaying of young bamboo in a spring breeze.

“That lazy servant next door was sloppy with the Tso family’s nightstool and stunk up the street with their nightsoil,” Mama says. “And Cook!” She allows herself a low hiss of disapproval. “Cook has served us shrimp so old that the smell has made me lose my appetite.”

We don’t contradict her, but the odor suffocating us comes not from spilled nightsoil or day-old shrimp but from her. Since we don’t have our servants to keep the air moving in the room, the smell that rises from the blood and pus that seep through the bandages holding Mama’s feet in their tiny shape clings to the back of my throat.

Mama is still filling the air with her grievances when Baba interrupts. “You girls can’t go out tonight. I need to talk to you.”

He speaks to May, who looks at him and smiles in that beautiful way of hers. We aren’t bad girls, but we have plans tonight, and being lectured by Baba about how much water we waste in our baths or the fact that we don’t eat every grain of rice in our bowls isn’t part of them. Usually Baba reacts to May’s charm by smiling back at her and forgetting his concerns, but this time he blinks a few times and shifts his black eyes to me. Again, I sink in my chair. Sometimes I think this is my only real form of filial piety, making myself small before my father. I consider myself to be a modern Shanghai girl. I don’t want to believe in all that obey, obey, obey stuff girls were taught in the past. But the truth is, May—as much as they adore her—and I are just girls. No one will carry on the family name, and no one will worship our parents as ancestors when the time comes. My sister and I are the end of the Chin line. When we were very young, our lack of value meant our parents had little interest in controlling us. We weren’t worth the trouble or effort. Later, something strange happened: my parents fell in love—total, besotted love—with their younger daughter. This allowed us to retain a certain amount of liberty, with

the result that my sister's spoiled ways are often ignored, as is our sometimes flagrant disregard for respect and duty. What others might call unfilial and disrespectful, we call modern and unbound.

"You aren't worth a single copper coin," Baba says to me, his tone sharp. "I don't know how I'm ever going to—"

"Oh, Ba, stop picking on Pearl. You're lucky to have a daughter like her. I'm luckier still to have her as my sister."

We all turn to May. She's like that. When she speaks, you can't help listening to her. When she's in the room, you can't help looking at her. Everyone loves her—our parents, the rickshaw boys who work for my father, the missionaries who taught us in school, the artists, revolutionaries, and foreigners whom we've come to know these last few years.

"Aren't you going to ask me what I did today?" May asks, her demand as light and breezy as a bird's wings in flight.

With that, I disappear from my parents' vision. I'm the older sister, but in so many ways May takes care of me.

"I went to see a movie at the Metropole and then I went to Avenue Joffre to buy shoes," she continues. "From there it wasn't far to Madame Garnet's shop in the Cathay Hotel to pick up my new dress." May lets a touch of reproach creep into her voice. "She said she won't let me have it until you come to call."

"A girl doesn't need a new dress every week," Mama says gently. "You could be more like your sister in this regard. A Dragon doesn't need frills, lace, and bows. Pearl's too practical for all that." "Baba can afford it," May retorts.

My father's jaw tightens. Is it something May said, or is he getting ready to criticize me again? He opens his mouth to speak, but my sister cuts him off.

"Here we are in the seventh month and already the heat is unbearable. Baba, when are you sending us to Kuling? You don't want Mama and me to get sick, do you? Summer brings such unpleasantness to the city, and we're always happier in the mountains at this time of year."

May has tactfully left me out of her questions. I prefer to be an afterthought. But all her chattering is really just a way to distract our parents. My sister catches my eye, nods almost imperceptibly, and quickly stands.

"Come, Pearl. Let's get ready."

I push back my chair, grateful to be saved from my father's disapproval.

"No!" Baba pounds his fist on the table. The dishes rattle. Mama shivers in surprise. I freeze in place. People on our street admire my father for his business acumen. He's lived the dream of every native-born Shanghainese, as well as every Shanghailander—those foreigners who've come here from around the world to find their fortunes. He started with nothing and turned himself and his family into something. Before I was born, he ran a rickshaw business in Canton, not as an owner but as a subcontractor, who rented

rickshaws at seventy cents a day and then rented them to a minor subcontractor at ninety cents a day before they were rented to the rickshaw pullers at a dollar a day. After he made enough money, he moved us to Shanghai and opened his own rickshaw business. “Better opportunities,” he—and probably a million others in the city—likes to say. Baba has never told us how he became so wealthy or how he earned those opportunities, and I don’t have the courage to ask. Everyone agrees—even in families—that it’s better not to inquire about the past, because everyone in Shanghai has come here to get away from something or has something to hide.

May doesn’t care about any of that. I look at her and know exactly what she wants to say: I don’t want to hear you tell us you don’t like our hair. *I don’t want to hear that you don’t want us to show our bare arms or too much of our legs. No, we don’t want to get “regular full-time jobs.” You may be my father, but for all your noise you’re a weak man and I don’t want to listen to you.* Instead, she just tilts her head and looks down at my father in such a way that he’s powerless before her. She learned this trick as a toddler and has perfected it as she’s gotten older. Her ease, her effortlessness, melts everyone. A slight smile comes to her lips. She pats his shoulder, and his eyes are drawn to her fingernails, which, like mine, have been painted and stained red by applying layers of red balsam blossom juice. Touching—even in families—isn’t completely taboo, but it certainly isn’t accepted. A good and proper family offer no kisses, no hugs, no pats of affection. So May knows exactly what she’s doing when she touches our father. In his distraction and repulsion, she spins away, and I hurry after her. We’ve taken a few steps when Baba calls out.

“Please don’t go.”

But May, in her usual way, just laughs. “We’re working tonight. Don’t wait up.”

I follow her up the stairs, our parents’ voices accompanying us in a kind of discordant song. Mama carries the melody: “I pity your husbands. ‘I need shoes.’ ‘I want a new dress.’ ‘Will you buy us tickets to the opera?’ ” Baba, in his deeper voice, beats out the bass: “Come back here. Please come back. I need to tell you something.” May ignores them, and I try to, admiring the way she closes her ears to their words and insistence. We’re opposites in this and so many things.

Whenever you have two sisters—or siblings of any number or either sex—comparisons are made. May and I were born in Yin Bo Village, less than a half day’s walk from Canton. We’re only three years apart, but we couldn’t be more different. She’s funny; I’m criticized for being too somber. She’s tiny and has an adorable fleshiness to her; I’m tall and thin. May, who just graduated from high school, has no interest in reading anything beyond the gossip columns; I graduated from college five weeks ago.

My first language was Sze Yup, the dialect spoken in the Four Districts in Kwangtung province, where our ancestral home is located. I’ve had American and British teachers since I was five, so my English is close to perfect. I consider myself fluent in four languages—British English, American English, the Sze Yup dialect (one of many Cantonese dialects), and the Wu dialect (a unique version of Mandarin spoken only in Shanghai). I live in an international city, so I use English words for Chinese cities and places like Canton, Chungking, and Yunnan; I use the Cantonese *cheongsam* instead of

the Mandarin *ch'i pao* for our Chinese dresses; I say *boot* instead of *trunk*; I use the Mandarin *fan gwaytze* —foreign devils—and the Cantonese *lo fan*—white ghosts—interchangeably when speaking about foreigners; and I use the Cantonese word for *little sister*—*moy moy*—instead of the Mandarin—*mei mei*—to talk about May. My sister has no facility with languages. We moved to Shanghai when May was a baby, and she never learned Sze Yup beyond words for certain dishes and ingredients. May knows only English and the Wu dialect. Leaving the peculiarities of dialects aside, Mandarin and Cantonese have about as much in common as English and German—related but unintelligible to nonspeakers. Because of this, my parents and I sometimes take advantage of May's ignorance, using Sze Yup to trick and deceive her.

Mama insists May and I couldn't change who we are even if we tried. May is supposed to be as complacent and content as the Sheep in whose year she was born. The Sheep is the most feminine of the signs, Mama says. It's fashionable, artistic, and compassionate. The Sheep needs someone to take care of her, so she'll always be sure to have food, shelter, and clothing. At the same time, the Sheep is known to smother others with affection. Good fortune smiles on the Sheep because of its peaceful nature and kind heart, but—and it's a big but, according to Mama—the Sheep sometimes thinks only of itself and its own comforts.

I have a Dragon's striving desire, which can never be properly filled. "There's nowhere you can't go with your big flapping feet," Mama frequently tells me. However, a Dragon, the most powerful of the signs, also has its drawbacks. "A Dragon is loyal, demanding, responsible, a tamer of the fates," Mama has told me, "but you, my Pearl, will always be hampered by the vapors that come from your mouth."

Am I jealous of my sister? How can I be jealous when even I adore her? We share *Long*—Dragon—as our generational name. I am Pearl Dragon, and May is Beautiful Dragon. She's taken the Western spelling of her name, but in Mandarin *mei* is one of the words for *beautiful*, and she is that. My duty as May's elder sister is to protect her, make sure she follows the right path, and indulge her for the preciousness of her existence and place of love in our family. Yes, sometimes I get angry with her: for example, when she wore my favorite pink silk Italian high heels without permission and they were ruined in the rain. But here's the thing: my sister loves me. I'm her *jie jie*—her elder sister. In the hierarchy of the Chinese family, I will always and forever be above her, even if my family doesn't love me as much as they love her.

By the time I get to our room, May has already pulled off her dress, leaving it in a limp heap on the floor. I shut the door behind me, enclosing us in our beautiful- girl world. We have matching four- poster twin beds with white linen canopies edged in blue and embroidered in a wisteria design. Most bedrooms in Shanghai have a beautiful- girl poster or calendar, but we have several. We model for beautiful- girl artists, and we've chosen our favorite images to hang on our walls: May seated on a sofa in a lime green silk jacket, holding a Hatamen cigarette in an ivory cigarette holder; me wrapped in ermine, my knees tucked up under my chin, staring at the viewer from a framed colonnade before a mythical lake selling Dr. Williams's pink pills for pale people (who better to sell those pills than someone who has a naturally pink complexion?); and the two of us perched together in a stylish boudoir, each holding a fat baby son—the symbol

of wealth and prosperity—and selling powdered baby milk to show we are modern mothers who use the best modern inventions for our modern offspring.

I cross the room and join May at the closet. This is when our day actually begins. Tonight we'll sit for Z.G. Li, the best of the artists who specialize in beautiful- girl calendars, posters, and advertisements. Most families would be scandalized to have daughters who pose for artists and often stay out all night, and at first my parents were. But once we started making money, they didn't mind. Baba took our earnings and invested them, saying that, when we meet our husbands, fall in love, and decide to get married, we'll go to our husbands' homes with money of our own.

We select complementary *cheongsams* to show harmony and style, while sending the message of freshness and ease that promises to bring spring happiness to all who use whatever product we'll be selling. I choose a *cheongsam* of peach- colored silk with red piping. The dress is tailored so close to my body that the dressmaker cut the side slit daringly high to allow me to walk. Frogs fashioned from the same red piping fasten the dress at my neck, across my breasts, under my armpit, and down my right side. May pours herself into a *cheongsam* of pale yellow silk patterned in subtle white blossoms with red centers. Her piping and frogs are the same deep red as mine. Her stiff mandarin collar rises so high it touches her ears; short sleeves accentuate the slimness of her arms. While May draws her eyebrows into the shape of young willow leaves—long, thin, and sleek—I dab white rice powder on my face to hide my rosy cheeks. Then we slip on red high heels and paint our lips red to match.

Recently we cut our long hair and got permanents. May now parts my hair down the middle and then slicks the curls behind my ears, where they puff out like black- petaled peonies. Then I comb her hair, letting the curls frame her face. We add pink crystal drop earrings, jade rings, and gold bracelets to complete our outfits. Our eyes meet in the mirror. From the posters on the walls, multiple images of us join May and me in the reflection. We hold that for a moment, taking in how pretty we look. We are twenty- one and eighteen. We are young, we are beautiful, and we live in the Paris of Asia.

We clatter back downstairs, call out hasty good- byes, and step into the Shanghai night. Our home is in the Hongkew district, just across Soochow Creek. We aren't part of the official International Settlement, but we're close enough to believe we'll be protected from possible foreign invaders. We aren't terribly rich, but then isn't that always a matter of comparison? We're just getting by, according to British, American, or Japanese measures, but we have a fortune by Chinese standards, although some of our countrymen in the city are wealthier than many foreigners combined. We are *kaoteng Huajen*—superior Chinese—who follow the religion of *ch'ung yang*: worshipping all things foreign, from the Westernization of our names to the love of movies, bacon, and cheese. As members of the *bu- er- ch'iao- ya*—bourgeois class—our family is prosperous enough that our seven servants take turns eating their meals on the front steps, letting the rickshaw pullers and beggars who pass know that those who work for the Chins have regular food to eat and a reliable roof over their heads.

We walk to the corner and bargain with several shirtless and shoeless rickshaw boys before settling on a good price. We climb in and sit side by side.

“Take us to the French Concession,” May orders.

The boy’s muscles contract with the effort of getting the rickshaw rolling. Soon he hits a comfortable trot and the momentum of the rickshaw eases the strain on his shoulders and back. There he is, pulling us like a beast of burden, but all I feel is freedom. During the day I use a parasol when I go shopping, visiting, or to tutor English. But at night I don’t have to worry about my skin. I sit up tall and take a deep breath. I glance at May. She’s so carefree that she recklessly lets her *cheongsam* flap in the breeze and open all the way up her thigh. She’s flirtatious, and she simply couldn’t live in a better city than Shanghai to exercise her skills, her laughter, her beautiful skin, her charming conversation.

We cross a bridge over Soochow Creek and then turn right, away from the Whangpoo River and its dank odors of oil, seaweed, coal, and sewage. I love Shanghai. It isn’t like other places in China. Instead of swallowtail roofs and glazed tiles, we have *mo t’ien talou*—magical big buildings—that reach into the sky. Instead of moon gates, spirit screens, intricate latticework windows, and red lacquer pillars, we have neoclassical edifices in granite decorated with art deco ironwork, geometric designs, and etched glass. Instead of bamboo groves gracing streams or willows draping their tendrils into ponds, we have European villas with clean façades, elegant balconies, rows of cypress, and cleanly cut lawns lined with immaculate flower beds. The Old Chinese City still has temples and gardens, but the rest of Shanghai kneels before the gods of trade, wealth, industry, and sin. The city has godowns where goods are loaded and unloaded, courses for greyhound and horse racing, countless movie palaces, and clubs for dancing, drinking, and having sex. Shanghai is home to millionaires and beggars, gangsters and gamblers, patriots and revolutionaries, artists and warlords, and the Chin family.

Our puller takes us down alleys just wide enough for pedestrians, rickshaws, and wheelbarrows outfitted with benches for transporting paying customers, before turning onto Bubbling Well Road. He trots onto the elegant boulevard, unafraid of the purring Chevrolets, Daimlers, and Isotta- Fraschinis that hurtle past. At a stoplight, beggar children shoot into the traffic to surround our rickshaw and pull at our clothes. Each block brings us the smells of death and decay, ginger and roast duck, French perfume and incense. The loud voices of native Shanghainese, the steady *click- click* of the abacus, and the rattle of rickshaws rolling through the streets are the background sounds that tell me this is home.

At the border between the International Settlement and the French Concession, the rickshaw boy stops. We pay him, cross the street, step around a dead baby left on the sidewalk, find another rickshaw puller who has a license for the French Concession, and tell him Z.G.’s address off the Avenue Lafayette.

This puller is even dirtier and sweatier than the last. His tattered shirt barely hides the skeletal protuberances that have become his body. He hesitates before daring his way onto Avenue Joffre. It’s a French name, but the street is the center of life for White Russians. Signs in Cyrillic hang overhead. We breathe in the smells of fresh bread and cakes from the Russian bakeries. Already the sounds of music and dancing pour from clubs. As we near Z.G.’s apartment, the neighborhood changes yet again. We pass Seeking Happiness Lane, home to more than 150 brothels. From this street many of

Shanghai's Famous Flowers—the city's most talented prostitutes—are elected and featured on the covers of magazines each year.

Our puller lets us out, and we pay him. As we walk up the rickety stairs to the third floor of Z.G.'s apartment building, I pouf the curls around my ears with my fingertips, run my lips together to smooth my lipstick, and adjust my *cheongsam* so that the bias-cut silk falls perfectly over my hips. When he opens the door, I'm struck again by how handsome Z.G. is: a thick mop of unruly black hair, a slight frame, big, round wire-rimmed glasses, and an intensity to his gaze and demeanor that speaks of late nights, artistic temperament, and political fervor. I may be tall, but he's taller still. It's one of the many things I love about him.

"What you're wearing is perfect," he enthuses. "Come! Come!"

We never know exactly what he has planned for our sitting. Young women getting ready to dive into a pool, play mini golf, or pull back a bow to send an arrow across the sky have been extremely popular lately. Being fit and healthy is an ideal. Who best to raise China's sons? The answer: a woman who can play tennis, drive a car, smoke a cigarette, and still look as approachable, sophisticated, and beddable as possible. Will Z.G. ask us to pretend we're about to go out for an afternoon of tea dancing? Or will he compose something entirely fictional, requiring us to change into rented costumes? Will May be Mulan, the great woman warrior, brought back to life to promote Parrot wine? Will I be painted as the fictional maiden Du Liniang from *The Peony Pavilion* to extol the merits of Lux toilet soap?

He leads us to a scene he's set up: a cozy corner with an overstuffed chair, an intricately carved Chinese screen, and a ceramic pot decorated in a never-ending knot pattern from which some sprigs of blooming plum give the illusion of outdoor freshness.

"Today we're selling My Dear cigarettes," Z.G. announces. "May, I'd like you in the chair." Once she sits down, he stands back and stares at her intently. I love Z.G. for the gentleness and sensitivity he shows my sister. She's young after all, and what we're doing isn't exactly something most well-bred girls do. "More relaxed," he directs, "like you've been out all night and want to share a secret with your friend."

After positioning May, he calls me over. He puts his hands on my hips and twists my body until I perch on the backrest of May's chair.

"I love your long lines and the length of your limbs," he says, as he brings my arm forward so that my weight rests on my hand while I balance over May. His fingers spread mine, separating the pinkie from the rest. His hand lingers for a moment, and then he edges back to look at his composition. Satisfied, he gives us cigarettes. "Now, Pearl, lean toward May as though you just lit your cigarette from the tip of hers."

I do as I'm told. He steps forward one last time to move a tendril of hair from May's cheek and tilt her chin so that the light will dance on her cheekbones. I may be the one Z.G. likes to paint and touch—and how forbidden that feels—but May's face sells everything from matches to carburetors.

Z.G. moves behind his easel. He doesn't like us to speak or move when he paints, but he keeps us entertained by playing music on the phonograph and talking to us about this and that.

"Pearl, are we here to make money or have fun?" He doesn't wait for my answer. He doesn't want one. "Is it to tarnish or burnish our reputations? I say neither. We're doing something else. Shanghai is the center of beauty and modernity. A wealthy Chinese can buy whatever he or she sees on one of our calendars. Those who have less money can aspire to have these things. The poor? They can only dream."

"Lu Hsün thinks differently," May says.

I sigh impatiently. Everyone admires Lu Hsün, the great writer who died last year, but that doesn't mean May should be talking about him during our sitting. I keep quiet and hold my pose.

"He wanted China to be modern," May continues. "He wanted us to get rid of the *lo fan* and their influence. He was critical of beautiful girls." "I know, I know," Z.G. responds evenly, but I'm surprised by my sister's knowledge. She's not a reader; she never has been. She must be trying to impress Z.G., and it's working. "I was there the night he gave that speech. You would have laughed, May. You too, Pearl. He held up a calendar that just happened to be of the two of you."

"Which one?" I ask, breaking my silence.

"I didn't paint it, but it showed the two of you dancing the tango together.

Pearl, you were dipping May back. It was very—"

"I remember that one! Mama was so upset when she saw it. Remember, Pearl?"

I remember all right. Mama was given the poster from the store on Nanking Road where she buys napkins for the monthly visit from the little red sister. She cried and railed and yelled that we were embarrassing the Chin family by looking and acting like White Russian taxi dancers. We tried to explain that beautiful-girl calendars actually express filial piety and traditional values. They are given away at Chinese and Western New Years as incentives, special promotions, or gifts to favored clients. From those good homes, they trickle down to street vendors, who sell them for a few coppers to the poor. We told Mama that a calendar is the most important thing in life for every Chinese, even though we didn't believe it ourselves. Whether rich or poor, people regulate their lives by the sun, the moon, the stars, and, in Shanghai, by the tide of the Whangpoo. They refuse to enter into a business deal, set a wedding date, or plant a crop without considering the auspiciousness of *feng shui*. All this can be found in the borders of most beautiful-girl calendars, which is why they serve as almanacs for everything good or potentially dangerous in the year to come. At the same time, they are cheap decorations for even the lowest home.

"We're making people's lives more beautiful," May explained to Mama. "That's why we're called beautiful girls." But Mama only calmed down after May pointed out that the advertisement was for cod-liver oil. "We're keeping children healthy," May said. "You should be proud of us!"

In the end, Mama hung the calendar in the kitchen next to the phone so she could write important numbers—for the soy- milk vendor, the electrician, Madame Garnet, and the birth dates for all our servants—on our exposed, pale legs and arms. Still, after that incident, we were careful about which posters we brought home and worried about which ones might be given to her by one of the neighborhood tradesmen.

“Lu Hsün said that calendar posters are depraved and disgusting,” May picks up, barely moving her lips so she can keep her smile in place. “He said that the women who pose for them are sick. He said this kind of sickness doesn’t come from society—”

“It comes from the painters,” Z.G. finishes for her. “He considered what we’re doing decadent and said it won’t help the revolution. But tell me, little May, how will the revolution happen without us? Don’t answer. Just sit and be quiet. Otherwise, we’ll be here all night.”

I’m grateful for the silence. In the days before the Republic, I would have already been sent sight unseen to my husband’s home in a red lacquer sedan chair. By now I would have given birth to several children, sons hopefully. But I was born in 1916, the fourth year of the Republic. Footbinding was banned and women’s lives changed. People in Shanghai now consider arranged marriages backward. Everyone wants to marry for love. In the meantime, we believe in free love. Not that I’ve given it freely. I haven’t given it yet at all, but I would if Z.G. asked me to.

He’d positioned me so that my face would be angled to May’s, but he wanted me to look at him. I hold my pose, stare at him, and dream of our future together. Free love is one thing, but I want us to get married. Every night as he paints, I draw on the great festivities I’ve been to and imagine the wedding my father will host for Z.G. and me.

At close to ten, we hear the wonton soup peddler call, “Hot soup to bring sweat, cool the skin and the night.”

Z.G. holds his brush in midair, pretending to consider where next to apply paint, while watching to see which of us will break our pose first. When the wonton man is just below the window, May jumps up and squeals, “I can’t wait any longer!” She rushes to the window, calls down our usual order, and then lowers a bowl attached to a rope that we’ve made by tying several pairs of our silk stockings together. The wonton man sends up bowl after bowl of soup, which we eat with relish. Then we retake our places and get back to work.

Not long after midnight, Z.G. sets down his brush. “We’re done for tonight,” he says. “I’ll work on the background until the next time you sit for me. Now, let’s go out!”

While he changes into a pin- striped suit, tie, and fedora, May and I stretch to loosen the stiffness from our bodies. We touch up our makeup and run combs through our hair. And then we’re back out on the streets, the three of us linking arms, laughing, and striding down the block, as food vendors call out their special treats.

“Hand- burning hot ginkgo nuts. Every one popped! Every one big!” “Stewed plums besprinkled with licorice powder. Ah, sweet! Only ten coppers a package!”

We pass watermelon hawkers on nearly every corner, each with his own call, each promising the best, sweetest, juiciest, coldest melon in the city. As tempting as the

watermelon sellers are, we ignore them. Too many of them try to make their melons sound heavier by injecting them with water from the river or one of the creeks. Even a single bite could result in dysentery, typhoid, or cholera.

We arrive at the Casanova, where friends will be meeting us later. May and I are recognized as beautiful girls and shown a good table near the dance floor. We order champagne, and Z.G. asks me to dance. I love the way he holds me as we spin across the floor. After a couple of songs, I glance back at our table and see May sitting alone.

“Maybe you should dance with my sister,” I say.

“If you’d like me to,” he answers.

We twirl back to our table. Z.G. takes May’s hand. The orchestra begins a slow tune. May rests her head on his chest as though listening to his heart. Z.G. moves May gracefully through the other couples. Once he catches my eye and smiles. My thoughts are so girlish: our wedding night, our married life together, the children we’ll have.

“Here you are!” I feel a peck on my cheek and look up to see my school friend Betsy Howell. “Have you been waiting long?”

“We just got here. Sit down. Where’s the waiter? We’re going to need more champagne. Have you eaten yet?”

Betsy and I sit shoulder to shoulder, touch glasses, and sip our champagne.

Betsy’s an American. Her father works for the State Department. I like her mother and father because they like me and don’t try to prevent Betsy from socializing with Chinese as so many other foreign parents do. Betsy and I got to know each other at the Methodist mission, where she was sent to help the heathens and I’d been sent to learn Western ways. Are we best friends? Not really. May is my best friend. Betsy is a distant second.

“You look nice tonight,” I say. “I love your dress.”

“You should! You helped me buy it. I’d look like an old cow if it weren’t for you.”

Betsy’s a bit on the chunky side, and she’s burdened by one of those practical American mothers who know almost nothing about fashion, so I took Betsy to a seamstress to have some decent clothes made. Tonight she looks quite pretty in a sheath of vermilion satin with a diamond- and sapphire brooch pinned above her left breast. Blond curls bubble loose on her freckled shoulders.

“Look how sweet they are,” Betsy says, nodding to Z.G. and May.

We watch them dance while we gossip about school friends. When the song ends, Z.G. and May come back to the table. He’s lucky to have three women in his company tonight, and he does the right thing by dancing with one after the other of us. At close to one o’clock, Tommy Hu arrives. Glowing warmth comes to May’s cheeks when she sees him. Mama has played mah-jongg with his mother for years, and they have always hoped for a match between our families. Mama will be thrilled to hear about this encounter.

At two in the morning, we burst back out onto the street. It’s July, hot and humid. Everyone’s still awake, even children, even the old. It’s time for a snack.

“Will you come with us?” I ask Betsy.

“I don’t know. Where are you going?”

We all look to Z.G. He names a café in the French Concession known as a hangout for intellectuals, artists, and Communists.

Betsy doesn’t hesitate. “Come on then. Let’s take my dad’s car.”

The Shanghai I love is a fluid place, where the most interesting people mingle. Some days Betsy takes me out for American coffee, toast, and butter; sometimes I take Betsy into alleys for *hsiao ch’ih*—little eats, dumplings of glutinous rice wrapped in reed leaves or cakes made from cassia petals and sugar. Betsy’s adventurous when she’s with me; once she accompanied me into the Old Chinese City to buy cheap holiday gifts. Sometimes I’m nervous about entering parks in the International Settlement, which until I turned ten were prohibited to Chinese other than amahs with foreign children or gardeners who tended the grounds. But I’m never scared or nervous when I’m with Betsy, who’s gone into those parks her whole life.

The café is smoky and dark, but we don’t feel out of place in our fancy clothes. We join a group of Z.G.’s friends. Tommy and May push their chairs away from the table so they can talk quietly together and avoid a heated argument about who “owns” our city—the British, Americans, French, or Japanese? We hugely outnumber foreigners, even in the International Settlement, yet we have no rights. May and I don’t worry about things like whether we can testify in court against a foreigner or if they’ll let us into one of their clubs, but Betsy comes from another world.

“By the end of the year,” she says, her eyes clear and impassioned, “over twenty thousand corpses will have been picked up from the International Settlement’s streets. We step over those bodies every day, but I don’t see any of you doing anything about it.”

Betsy believes in the need for change. The question, I suppose, is why does she tolerate May and me when we so deliberately ignore what happens around us?

“Are you asking if we love our country?” Z.G. asks. “There are two kinds of love, wouldn’t you say? *Ai kuo* is the love we feel for our country and our people. *Ai jen* is what I might feel for my lover. One is patriotic, the other romantic.” He glances at me, and I blush. “Can’t we have both?”

We leave the café at close to five in the morning. Betsy waves, gets in her father’s car, and is driven away. We say good night—or good morning—to Z.G. and Tommy, and hail a rickshaw. Once again, we change rickshaws at the border between the French Concession and the International Settlement, and then we clatter down the cobblestones the rest of the way home.

The city, like a great sea, has never gone to sleep. The night ebbs, and now the morning cycles and rhythms begin to flow. Nightsoil men push their carts down the alleyways, calling “Empty your nightstool! Here comes the nightsoil man! Empty your nightstool!” Shanghai may have been one of the first cities to have electricity, gas, telephones, and

running water, but we lag behind in sewage removal. Nevertheless, farmers around the country pay premium prices for our nightsoil because it's known to be rich from our diets. The nightsoil men will be followed by the morning food vendors with their porridges made from the seeds of Job's tears, apricot kernels, and lotus seeds, their steamed rice cakes made with rugosa rose and white sugar, and their eggs stewed in tea leaves and five spice.

We reach home and pay the rickshaw boy. We lift the latch to the gate and make our way up the path to the front door. The lingering night dampness magnifies the scent of the flowers, shrubs, and trees, making us drunk on the jasmine, magnolia, and dwarf pines our gardener raises. We climb the stone steps and pass under a carved wooden screen that prevents evil spirits from entering the house—in deference to Mama's superstitions. Our heels sound loud as they hit the parquet floor in the entry. A light is on in the salon to the left. Baba is awake and waiting for us.

"Sit down and don't speak," he says, motioning to the settee directly across from him.

I do as I'm told, then fold my hands in my lap and cross my ankles. If we're in trouble, looking demure will help. The anxious look he's been wearing these past few weeks has turned into something hard and immobile. The words he next speaks change my life forever. "I've arranged marriages for the two of you," he says. "The ceremony will take place the day after tomorrow."

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