

MY LUCKY FACE: A NOVEL

Chapter 1: The Virtues of My Flying Pigeon

I've often thought if not for my Flying Pigeon, I would surely have gone mad. Sure, it wasn't the most fashionable brand anymore, sturdy with thick steel pipes when light and sleek was in style, black instead of bright pink or red like the lucky money envelopes only children used to covet. These things mattered so much, it seemed--color, style, brands, auspicious names like Forever or Phoenix, even an Eagle or a cheap Swan were better than the Pigeon in some people's eyes. Small people.

But my bike was strong, durable. My stalwart ally, when the silence of my apartment became too much to bear, the walls too close, even for me, so strong usually.

We'd ridden enough miles to have crossed the country by now, if such a thing were possible by bicycle. Perhaps a foreigner will do it one of these days. There was always one of them in the news accomplishing yet another strange first--first to skateboard on the Great Wall, first to kayak on the Yellow River, first to hang glide off Mount Tai. Why not ride across China on a bicycle? If you had the time.

I had plenty of good times with my Pigeon. I didn't mean to complain. During my engagement, as I rode side by side with Shao Hong at midnight, steering with one hand, holding his hand with the other, my black Pigeon truly flew through the night air. During my pregnancy, the two of us mastered the potholes together, slowly. We fixed a special child's seat on the crossbar, perfect for my son, and before he left for school, I used to take him on long rides through my city, pointing out the sights.

But lately, in the last few years of my marriage, it seemed I depended on my Pigeon more and more often to get me through the rough times, the sad and lonely times, when I took to riding at night, when I should have been at home. I'd roll through the cool streets, part of the stream of night riders. There were lovers, lonely students, workers racing each other home or perhaps to a job, foreigners, sometimes whole families on one bike--the father pumping away, wife on the back package rack, child on a seat rigged before the handlebars, and I felt very alone, calm. I could think.

I loved to watch the lights in the windows of the buildings I passed, imagining the families, the flickering flame-like colors of a television reflecting off the glass windowpanes, the yellow glow of a reading lamp, the blue light of a gas stove. It was a pity winter came so quickly. Winter, when it would be much too cold for my rides, the rains would come, sleet, and I would be trapped inside again. But I didn't waste the last of my autumn worrying like that. So long as I could still ride with only my wool sweater and a hat for warmth--and after a number of blocks, I needed to unbutton the sweater--I could escape.

Shops were beginning to stay open later, I noticed as the years passed. The free markets were lighted with strings of colored bulbs, the clothes hanging in the stalls looked as though they were covered in jewels. I saw large parties entering restaurants, weddings on every other block, it seemed. I liked the feeling that I was invisible, gliding silently on the dark streets, as I watched the lights around me.

I couldn't bear to be trapped inside our apartment. And yet if I had tried to explain to anyone a year ago, even six months ago, they would've called me crazy. With Bao-bao gone for the most part, and Shao Hong in his study, I had the dining room to myself. I could listen to the radio, I could read, I could correct my papers uninterrupted. Many teachers I knew would have traded their hectic, cramped lives for

mine gladly. But I could have choked on the silence.

We didn't talk much, my husband and I. Hadn't for a long time. I used to tell myself, it's because Bao-bao's gone. We never had to be alone so much, just the two of us. Early on in our marriage, we spent all our time thinking about the baby, preparing for him, buying his bed, furniture for his room--it was so hard back then, shopping. We needed to make so many connections to buy the simplest things. An extra nice quilt, the crib. Money wasn't enough. Now, of course, all the stores had so many things to buy. . . if you had the money. My last major purchase, a new winter coat for Bao-bao, cost a third of my month's wages.

What did we used to talk about before Bao-bao was born? Well, we talked about the future, what the baby would be like, what he or she would need. I became pregnant six months after we were married. The first six months we just thought of places we could make love.

We were waiting for an apartment to ourselves. I lived with my roommates at the dorm for unmarried teachers and he lived with his parents. We made love at his parents' apartment once. They'd gone for a walk after dinner and we said we'd stay and do the dishes and as soon as they were out the door, Shao Hong held on to me and pulled me over to the couch and we kissed and then, it was frantic, really very funny, we didn't bother to undress all the way, just a few buttons. I remember he had one arm out of his shirt, it looked so naked, pale, the other completely clothed, and I tried to unbutton his cuff as he lifted up my blouse. We were so hot and cramped on their tiny sofa, Shao Hong kept sliding off. He had to prop himself up with one leg on the floor. I wanted to laugh. He put his palm gently against my mouth. "Sssh," he whispered, very serious, as if someone might hear. How sweet.

Then there were times we would seek out movie theaters, watch any awful kung

fu or Hong Kong cop film just so that we could hold hands in the dark. I remember feeling the pressure of his knee against mine, so slight and yet soon that was all I could think about, the sharp point of his kneecap. I pressed against him a little more, a nudge, and his knee was firm against mine. I felt warm, and I turned towards him and I would have kissed him. I wanted to lean my entire body against him, but he held himself straight and squeezed my hand, pushing me away a little subtly, and when I still leaned closer, he stared straight ahead at the screen and whispered, "Wait, not here. People can see." It's true, the theaters are never quite dark enough, although that doesn't stop young couples nowadays. They are quite bold, kissing in the back rows, holding hands on the sidewalks. I pass them on my bicycle. They're walking together at night, arm in arm, sometimes riding side by side on their bicycles, holding hands still. No one's ashamed now. It's funny to think how we all were back then, but part of me is pleased with this memory, when our love was a secret we hid, revealing it only to ourselves when it was so hot and pure we could not wait anymore.

Even the middle-school students are more open. Of course it's still against the rules to have a boyfriend or girlfriend. Secretary Wang urged us to report any errant student. "Be vigilant," she said, in her shrill voice. (Like a yapping dog, Chen Hua said.) "Spiritual pollution from Western bourgeois influences is poisoning our students' minds." She meant they thought about sex and love, boys and girls discovering each other and their hormones. Of course, we teachers were always interested in our students' love lives; was it so terrible to gossip about them? They were adorable--the shy glances, the awkward conversations in the school yard while the rest of their classmates ran out the gate, not understanding, urging them to "Hurry up! Come on!"

Chen Hua and I liked to compare notes. Our classes overlapped for the

second-year students, fifteen- and sixteen-year-olds. But we had to be careful when we talked in the cafeteria. Most of us didn't care about the Secretary's warnings, but Mr. Hong, the math teacher, watched and listened with the intensity of a cat stalking a mouse. A bitter man with a dry pinched face, he'd report his students. He might have already.

I heard the funniest story recently. Someone reported a senior who had a girlfriend, on year behind him. They called in the boy's parents to criticize him, sat in the conference room on the first floor, formal stuffed chairs facing each other, tea cups that nobody drinks from.

"We'll have to expel your son if he doesn't correct his behavior," Secretary Wang admonished. She took herself very seriously. "He could be a bad influence on the entire school."

But far from being polite, the boy's father leapt out of his chair and pointed at the Party Secretary's nose. "How dare you say my son has a girlfriend! My son is a good boy! I won't let him come to your school anymore! You're a bad influence on him!"

And of course the Secretary was very angry and very alarmed and they yelled at each other for some time.

"Your son does have a girlfriend!"

"You can't prove it! You're making it up!"

Afterwards, everyone admitted that they'd never seen such a thing, a parent yelling like this. We have no authority, Ms. Yu said, shaking her head. It's hard being a teacher, parents don't respect us, the students don't respect us. You can make more money selling tea eggs on the street! she said.

But I couldn't help laughing when I heard the story at lunch when the older

teachers gossip over mah-jongg. I could imagine the Secretary's face growing as red as her new French eyeglasses.

I heard that everything's all right now. The school sent the boy's father a gift, maybe some oranges and a sack of fine white rice. And the parents sent the Secretary a very nice picture of cranes flying over a mountain, framed with glass. She hung it in her office. I saw it one day as I was walking by, so I think this story must have been true. And anyway, the boy no longer talked to this particular girl, so it wasn't important anymore.

The foreign teacher was very upset when we told her during our first class with her in September. "We're supposed to *report* our students? That's terrible! This is *repressive!*" She paced back and forth in her office, her hair flying about her head, she waved her arms.

"We know in America all young people have boyfriends and girlfriends," said Ms. Yu. "And it is all right for them to have babies in school too, yes? But we can't afford this in China."

"What?" Cynthia put her hands on her hips. "Who told you that?"

"We read it in the paper."

"No, no, no. You don't understand. It's not all right to have babies in school, it's a problem."

"Yes, I think so, too," said Ms. Yu, pointedly.

"Teen pregnancy is a major social problem in the United States. Okay. But just because you're dating doesn't mean you're going to have children! I mean, it's more complicated than that." Cynthia was very frustrated, but restrained. She paced with her arms folded. "I mean, it's natural to want to have a boyfriend or a girlfriend in high school."

“Yes, even in China there are students who have babies,” I said, trying to make peace.

“Sssh,” said one of the older teachers.

“Yes, yes!” said Ms. Yu. “This is what I mean.”

I sighed and looked up at Cynthia and we both laughed at the same time.

I knew she would understand more about China as time went on. Sometimes rules seemed very arbitrary, even “repressive,” but not everyone obeyed them. The important thing was to learn how to live around them.

Sometimes on my bike rides I’d see one of my students or two. I only waved if they waved first, I didn’t want to embarrass them. Love is a precarious thing.