

The Secret Mother

Victoria Delderfield

"Full of vibrant scenes of the realities of Chinese life, Victoria Delderfield's debut novel explores the complexities of growing up in a different culture with sensitivity and heart."

Deborah Swift

Blood

He hangs it by the ankles, its blue hands splayed, the small kidney-shape of its body crowned with my blood. I open my arms, but the *yīshēng* shakes his head.

“Look away, you hear? Look away.” He plunges my baby head first into a waiting bucket of water.

Pain roars in my haunches. I push hard, my womb emptying like a blanket thrown into the air. Between my legs...so much blood.

“Stop pushing, another one’s coming,” he bawls and discards the limp newborn beside the bucket. He pulls at the second head – half in, half out – and it slips from me, screaming.

A girl.

He grabs a knife from his work block and hacks at the knotty cord that binds her to me. I snatch her. Rock, rock, rock...

“Sshhh, little one.”

Her lips quiver. Birth has rippled the puddle of her features; a child that has lived ten lives already.

“Here, take her as well.” He picks my firstborn from the mat and thrusts her onto me. She seems almost to be choking. I tap her back and she spews up water. Her chest heaves with life. How neatly she is packed in skin!

But the *yīshēng* returns. In his hand, a syringe. “Straight to the brain. They won’t feel a thing,” he says.

My heels dig into the mat. “Get away from us!” I seize some rags and the envelope containing Manager He’s money. “I’ll kill you, I swear. Get away from my babies.”

“Women here never keep their babies.”

I smell his empty breath and gag. His laugh is sour. I scramble to my feet and stagger towards the door, the cords still swinging from inside.

He catches me by the shoulder, ripping my birth gown and pins me to the wall. The liquid in his syringe drips over my babies. I try to push him off.

“What the hell was He-Chuan thinking? Sending me a mad woman? Those little maggots don’t stand a chance. The placenta’s still inside. It has double *qi*. I must have it! Now give me the money. Give me – the killing money.” He squeezes my wrists until I drop the envelope.

I knee him with all my strength and the *yīshēng* crumples, spewing the bucket across the floor.

“Come back,” he groans.

But I am already half way down the wooden staircase that leads to the back door. Outside, the clinic’s sign clacks on its hinges, rain runs down the alley.

“You’ll never survive,” he cries from an upstairs window. “You’ll all be dead by dawn.” His pallid, scale-marked face is yellow in the streetlight; a gloating man in the moon.

I swaddle my babies and lurch into the rain. A few of the streetlights blink and flicker. The night sky grumbles.

Where to?

I claw my way to the end of the alley where a flooded street opens out in front of me – Shengli Road. The rain bites my face. My firstborn gnaws at the night air, wailing. She is pale, barely there. I put my face to hers. Maybe he is right, maybe we won’t survive?

Be brave, little ones. For Mama.

Then suddenly I see him up ahead, in the deserted street. A solitary figure. His head is cocked low, shoulders hunched, collar up. He runs and walks, stops, then runs again. He peers at me through the rain as if looking at the ghost of some long-dead relative. I turn tail. He lopes after me, with a briefcase for a makeshift umbrella.

The pain is searing, far worse than my period cramps. *Got to hold on tight, got to protect...* Suddenly a doorway. I slump onto its hard ledge. Rock, rock, rock my babies.

Hong ching-ting...

Ching ching ting...

Shui shang ching ching ting...

Feel drowsy. Singing or dreaming or drowning, it is all the same. The man with the briefcase is pulling on my arm.

“Get up, get up!” He shouts something about a hospital. *Hospital. Hospital. Hospital.* The whites of his eyes are like halos.

“Leave me alone,” I mutter.

“I’ll not leave you,” he says. Then that word *hospital* again.

I cannot fight.

“It’s Yifan. Don’t you recognise me?”

“What?”

He hunkers in the doorway. The rain hisses and dances along the guttering, slanting into rivulets across his back, his hair, his face. His fingers press against my neck. He stares at the crimson puddle on the doorstep.

“We don’t have long. Can you make it to the square?”

In the distance, lasers jitter over the Uprising Monument. As the colours change, so do my thoughts – as mechanical as the factory line. I expect to hear the klaxon. The sooty rain tastes bitter. Blue neon shop signs blink.

“I want to tell you a story,” Yifan garbles, “about double happiness – do you remember it? The student gets sick on the way to his finals. A herbalist and his daughter look after him. The girl is beautiful – they fall in love. She writes down half a couplet...”

Yifan clutches my arm to steady me. My mind wanders around his story, only half understanding.

“The student comes top in the exam. The Emperor is delighted and sets a greater challenge. He writes down half a couplet for the student to complete. Straight away, he knows what to write: the words of his true love.”

Yifan’s voice is in the faraway. I hear the beginnings and ends of his sentences. I glimpse two babies wrapped in a bundle and wonder who they belong to? Where am I going with this man? He is telling me about his marriage. He is a student, a minister in the Emperor’s court. Or is that the student?

“...And that’s why we put *happiness* couplets on the door at Spring Festival,” says Yifan.

I double over in pain. “Why?”

It is the last thing I remember saying to the man with halo eyes.

Nancy barely noticed the faint pulse of an ambulance as it turned uphill towards the Fairweather Golf Club. The first she knew about the accident was when a receptionist tapped her on the shoulder.

“Excuse me, Mrs Milne. I’m sorry to interrupt your celebrations, but I need you to come with me, there’s been an accident.”

“Accident? What kind of accident?”

“The Chinese lady that was here earlier – she’s been hit, by a car.”

May had been in the garden. Her mood strange, morose and yet excitable, garbling about Jen and what a talented student she was, how she could go far if she wanted to pursue her Chinese. But Nancy knew that already.

“Mrs Milne, she’s in the ambulance now. She’s asking for you.”

Jen hurried to her side, “Shit, Mum, you’d better go.”

“I’ve been looking for you – where’s Stuart?”

“Mrs Milne, I think you ought to come straight away.”

“She’s right, Mum. Should I come too?”

Jen’s cheeks were flushed with...guilt! It was that darn boy again.

“Mrs Milne, please, if you don’t come now...”

“Alright. Alright.”

The ambulance was parked further down the golf club driveway, past the poplar trees. The back door was open, she could see two paramedics: one putting a splint on May’s leg, another holding an oxygen mask in place.

“May!”

“Are you Mrs Milne?”

She nodded.

“Get in, love.”

Nancy perched on the fold-down chair inside the ambulance and watched as the paramedic gave May an injection.

She groaned, her face drained of colour, her head held rigid by a neck brace.

“Don’t worry, this will help take the edge off her pain.”

She turned to Nancy. “She’s had a nasty bump to her head. We think her leg’s fractured. We’re taking her to A & E, they’ll see to her properly.”

A graze on May’s forehead was studded with grit. Her eyes were open, but unfocused. She mumbled in Chinese.

“I’m here, don’t worry, you’re going to be fine,” said Nancy. “We’ll get you to hospital.” She searched for May’s hand beneath the blue emergency blanket.

“Best not touch her, love,” said the male paramedic.

The ambulance pulled away, siren warping. Through the darkened glass of the ambulance doors Nancy saw her twins, Ricki and Jen, and some of the guests on the driveway, looking like characters from a Cluedo set. She scanned the crowd for Iain, but the faces of friends and family grew blurry. Her daughters’ birthday ruined. Her sixtieth too!

It felt unreal – grown-up – to be in the ambulance as the paramedics talked in that *everything is going to be alright* voice. The same voice people used the day her mother walked into the sea and didn’t come out alive. A memory of the emergency crew wrapping her mother’s water-logged body like a FedEx package made Nancy feel light-headed. She gnawed at her thumb nail from its wick.

May croaked from beneath her oxygen mask. Something that sounded like “case”.

Nancy didn’t dare lean in too close. “What is it, May? What do you want?”

“Keys,” she said again, more clearly. “Take keys.”

The paramedic reached into her overalls and handed Nancy a set of house keys that belonged to May. “If you could let her relatives know? Are you in contact?”

May had talked about her family, about her fiancé – what was his name? Yifan? “Her family are all in China. I’ll search for an address book, there’s bound to be one at her place.”

The paramedic checked May’s oxygen mask. “That would be best.”

May held out a hand. “Please, forgive me Mrs Milne,” she said weakly.

“Sssh, now. Save your strength. We’re nearly there,” Nancy replied.

“That’s right, keep breathing steady. You’re doing really well,” said the female paramedic.

At Hope Hospital, Nancy waited in the foyer and sipped on a cup of weak vending machine coffee. It tasted empty and burnt her lips. Two and a half hours had passed since the nurses wheeled May through the swing doors at the end of the corridor. She wished Iain were there; he would be worried. As she rummaged in her handbag for her mobile, a nurse called out her name.

“That’s me,” said Nancy.

“Would you like to come with me?” The nurse looked reassuringly robust, yet spoke softly. “My name’s Alison, I’m one of the team taking care of May. I understand you’re her next of kin?”

“Friend, actually. She teaches my daughter.”

Alison ushered her into a nearby room. “It’s more private in here.”

This wasn’t good: the Family Room, Kleenex on the coffee table, a hush that went on for centuries. Nancy’s lips throbbled where she’d burnt them on the coffee.

“She’s dead, isn’t she?”

Alison sat down tentatively as if she might hurt the chair. “No. But I’m afraid she is very poorly... May sustained a severe injury to her head and bleeding into her brain, which is causing the pressure in her skull to increase.”

“Oh God.”

“We’ve done some CT and MRI scans that show widespread swelling and nerve damage.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means we’re taking her up to theatre now for an operation to try and relieve some of the pressure.”

“Can I see her?”

“I’m afraid the medical team need to be alone with her.”

“But she needs me – please...”

“She’s in good hands, Mrs Milne. The doctors are doing everything they can.”

“How long will it take?”

“It could be some time. The best thing would be for you to go home and get some rest. We’ll contact you as soon as she’s out of theatre.”

Nancy couldn’t believe it. A few hours ago, May was explaining how to make Chinese wantons to a bunch of their friends at the buffet table. Now her brain was swelling out of her skull. How could she tell that to May’s fiancé? And where was the fucking driver who’d done it?

“Will she be alright?”

The nurse gave a non-committal smile. “We’ll let you know as soon as there’s any news. I know it’s hard, but try not to worry.”

The black cab smelt sickly and Nancy covered her nose with a silk scarf.

“D’you say Burden Road, love?”

“No, Burton. Ninety-two *Burton* Road.”

“Sorry, it’s your accent, couldn’t quite catch it. Which part are you from? The Big Apple?”

“Long Island.”

She wiped away the condensation, enough to see out. She’d never been to May’s house. May always insisted on coming to theirs for Jen’s Chinese lessons. Nancy closed her eyes and imagined floating in a clear lagoon, as Michael her T’ai Chi instructor had taught her. She breathed in through her nose and, as she exhaled, visualised cooling down from an

anxious red to orange, yellow, pale green and eventually blue, but not blue like the ocean. The air flowed out through the ends of her fingertips.

Slow and steady, slow and steady.

When she opened her eyes, there was a ramshackle end-terrace with metal bars over the ground floor windows. The frames were rotten, and one window was covered in sheets of faded newspaper. A skull had been graffitied on the front wall. Nancy checked the house number. Perhaps the cab driver had the wrong street? She wavered by the door, and then rang the bell.

An ancient eye peered through the jamb.

“What do you want?”

“I’m a friend of May’s.”

“She’s not in.”

“I know. She’s been in an accident. She was taken to hospital this afternoon. The paramedics gave me her keys.” She held them up for the woman to see. “I just need to collect some of May’s belongings.”

There was a pause before the old woman slipped the latch. “Better come in then.”

The house smelled of cigarette smoke, there was also the lingering, fusty odour of dry rot. One corner of the hallway was taken up with a cheap motel reception desk where a vase of red plastic roses gathered dust. *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire* blared from an open door.

The woman stood barring the way to the stairs. “Upstairs on your left,” she said, “May’s number six.”

“I won’t be long; I just need her fiancé’s telephone number.”

“Fiancé? I didn’t know she had a fella.”

Nancy edged past her.

“Don’t go making a din up there. I can’t afford any complaints.”

The staircase was steep. Nancy’s hands shook as she fumbled May’s key into the stiff lock. She put a knee against the door and gave a firm push. Something on the other side prevented it from opening fully. She crouched in the dark and dislodged a shoe. It was black and petite and fitted perfectly into her hand.

Inside the room was a spartan ten feet by ten. The pink lampshade gave off a garish glow and the air felt grubby. Saliva, skin, semen... it was easy to imagine the residue of previous occupants soaked into the bed and carpet; their hair and toe nails lurking beneath the fringes of the candlewick quilt. Instinctively, Nancy wiped her hands on her skirt. Surely May wouldn’t sleep here? But May’s clothes hung on the wardrobe door, her slippers sat neatly paired at the end of the bed, her notebook lay open on the scuffed desk.

Brayn food, it said in the left hand margin. Nancy leafed through.

British loving animals

Thick as pig shit

Rat arsd

Rabbiting on

Barking!

Ducky (Mrs Eva)

Raining is dogs and cats - or is it cats and dogs???

Not good idea mention dog food in England. British thinking cruelty to animals in China :(RSPCA like police for dogs & cats.

She placed it back on the desk, as carefully as if it were May's fractured skull, then turned to the task in hand: Yifan's number.

Inside the top drawer of May's desk were a Collins Dictionary and some biros, a ruler, calculator, some receipts from ASDA and what seemed to be a high school certificate with a photo of a startled looking May pinned to the top corner. The next drawer down was crammed with teaching materials: a GCSE Mandarin syllabus, past exam papers, Post-it notes spidery with May's erratic writing. She came across one of Jen's essays entitled *Me and My Family*, followed by her Chinese translation. Nancy skimmed it for mention of Jen's adoption, then slipped it into her handbag to read later.

Another drawer was full of old photographs. She recognised May from the distinctive sickle-shaped scar on her cheekbone. Her features used to be more angular and her rough-cut fringe looked androgynous. May hugged two of her girlfriends. It was night time, a funfair. A ferris wheel loomed in the background. The Chinese loved that sort of thing; she remembered riding one like it in Nanchang. *Tallest in the world!* Iain thought it would help take their mind off the waiting – waiting for news of their babies.

Nancy flopped onto the foot of the soft bed, it absorbed her without resistance. Something sharp dug into her backside. She lifted the edge of the quilt. May had tucked her sheet in tightly at the corners, like a hospital bed. Beneath the quilt, was a wooden figurine, small enough to fit in Nancy's palm. A young waitress at The Bluewater Hotel had given the twins one just like it. She said it would bring them happiness, some sort of Chinese talisman. The waitress had been quite a fusspot, cooing in Chinese as they ate breakfast, even offering to take care of the twins while Iain and Nancy napped. Nancy kept the figurine and later made it into a necklace, fearing the twins might choke on it. Turning it over in her hand, Nancy wondered how to break the news to Yifan.

You don't know me but...

I'm so sorry, Yifan. May's been in an accident...

The only place left to search for his number was the closet. It smelled musty, like a long vacant holiday home.

May didn't own many clothes: the few dresses she wore for teaching, jeans and a neat pile of sweaters folded on the top shelf. There was nothing glamorous or sexy, nothing bold or unruly – only what was necessary. May didn't wear hats, or keep outfits that didn't fit her; there were no flowery smocks or tie-dye, no high heels or power suits – apart from an old skirt and blazer which looked a decade out of date. She hadn't imagined May to live so frugally.

A tin box was her last hope; tucked at the bottom of the closet, behind a mud-crust pair of trainers, its lid emblazoned with a Chinese logo.

She paused, then opened the lid.

A photograph of Jen on the beach in Nice! Nancy had spent the best part of a week searching for this photo, hoping to stitch it into a memory quilt for her daughters' sixteenth birthday. What was May doing with it? As she lifted it to the light, Nancy uncovered photos of Jen riding her bike. Jen on summer camp in the Lake District. Jen in the school play. Jen eating ice-cream under the plum tree. She flicked faster through. Every single one was of her daughter. And not only Jen. There were photographs of Ricki on family holidays, birthdays, days out...What the hell were they doing in May's closet? The rational part of Nancy said they had something to do with Jen's studies. A project on the family. Yes, Jen's essay was on that very subject.

"Stop being a ninny," Nancy said out loud.

But why had Jen never asked to take the photographs? She knew they were Nancy's treasured possessions. And why hadn't May mentioned them? It was practically the twins' entire childhood.

She knelt amongst the scattered pictures of her girls and held one up to the garish light. Immediately, she wished she hadn't. It was the photograph of the twins in the People's Park hours after their arrival. In the original, Nancy and Iain's faces were like sunshine – delighted to be parents after years of waiting. But someone had cut them out, leaving two holes, two dismembered bodies.

She stumbled to the sink, fearing she might wretch.

Did May know about the mutilated photograph lurking in the bottom of her closet? No – no – she couldn't believe it of her. It must have found its way there by mistake. But how could a whole album find its way into someone else's closet by accident?

What if...Oh God...what if May was a psychopath? A pervert? A child molester? She'd been coming to the house

every week to teach Jen. What if she'd been preening her in secret or...

Nancy lunged towards the desk, flung open the middle drawer and scrutinised the photograph of the ferris wheel. She'd missed it at first: a sign in bold neon letters, *Welcome to Nanchang*, suspended across the centre of the wheel. May had lived there – Nanchang – the very place her daughters were abandoned. Why, in all the years they'd known each other, had May never mentioned that fact?

She stood in the centre of May's small, dingy bedsit, sweat rings seeping through the underarms of her silk blouse. That's when the feeling started – beginning in Nancy's guts and rising. Six years...six years! May had taught Jen Mandarin; six years she'd fetched tureens of Chinese food to the house, treating Jen with respect, admiration, encouragement. All along...lies.

Nancy gaped around her in panic.

Could it really be May's fingerprints over her precious babies? May's Chinese blood pumping in their veins? Her Chinese hair on their heads? Her Chinese eyes staring Nancy in the face every day? Mocking her.

Yes, answered her intuition.

Why else would she steal photographs from the twins' adoption album, or take such an interest in their lives? Or lie about never having been to Nanchang? May was no child molester. She was only five feet nothing in her faded, raggedy heels.

Nancy laughed in horrified hysteria. She had always dreaded this moment. The twins' past pouncing up on her, devouring the bonds she'd worked so hard to make, the Milne family unit. May the birth mother, the tummy mummy – the person she never wanted to meet.

The sound of her mobile made Nancy jump. Her hand shook so badly she could hardly pick up.

"Nancy?"

"Iain. What do you want?"

"Where are you?"

"May's place."

"Are you with anyone?"

"No."

"Are you sitting down?"

"Look, Iain, now is not a good time. Phone back later can't you?" Nancy fumbled to disconnect the call.

"Wait," said Iain, his voice flat and inert.

"What?"

"It's..."

"What is it?"

"It's May, darling. You'd better get over here."

Wooden figurines

A different kind of girl to the one I was back then – a girl like Cousin Zhi – might have seen it coming. A different kind of mother to my own, a kind and gentle mother, might have warned me childhood was about to end.

Yes, sixteen is an important age for young women like Jen and Ricki. I attend their dreadful birthday party to mark their passing into womanhood, their shedding of years; but my arms come burdened by the past, as well as gifts. Sixteen is an age I cannot easily forget.

I was swilling out the skillet in the yard when I caught sight of Father, making his way home through the rice fields. His head was bowed as if listening to his own whispers. He was early and there were no other workers to share his flask of tea or cigarettes. He bustled past, his cheeks reddened by the wind.

“Don’t stand like a gatepost, Mai Ling, come inside and help your mother. Everything must go to plan.”

I wanted to ask Mother about the plan, but she was busy chopping half moons of garlic. A fresh pot of smoked pork and spices rested on the side. The plan likely concerned Cousin Zhi, who was due to arrive home for Spring Festival. She worked at a car factory in the city and had grown used to luxuries. My parents were keen not to lose face in front of her or Auntie.

I took my place beside Mother and began peeling the ginger. The work was harder when I couldn’t feel my fingers and I nicked my fingertip with the knife. A sliver of blood rose up instantly. I brought it to my mouth, a small pleasure in the taste. My belly growled with hunger. Outside, the pig scratched the earth for something more nutritious than stones and frosted mud.

The sound of their voices in the yard caused Father to leap up from the table and hurry to the door. There on our doorstep stood the town’s most prestigious coffin maker, Gao Quifang and his wife, both empty-handed, bringing only the cold winter draft into our home. It was to be a short visit.

Father bowed and ushered the Quifangs through our dark, smoke-blackened kitchen to the fireside, where three stools had been arranged. I wiped my hands on my trousers and followed Mother, who carried a bowl of dates and peanut candies. The room seemed suddenly too small for us all and I wondered if we still owed them for Grandmother’s funeral.

Mr Quifang's skin was pallid, his eyes serious. I remembered how gently he'd laid Grandmother out, arranging her white burial robes so as to disguise the thinness of her frame. The same couldn't be said of his son and apprentice, Li Quifang, who teased the old women of the village by pretending to be their husbands back from the dead.

Father instructed me to sit next to Madam Quifang who squinted in my direction and then kicked the chicken pecking by her feet until it flapped away.

"Is this the girl?" she asked abruptly.

Father bowed again. "Yes, Madam, this is our daughter Mai Ling."

"She looks reasonably fed and not altogether ugly, a little unfinished, but is she strong?"

"Yes, very strong; she works with my wife."

"So you can cook?" asked Mr Quifang.

I was unsure whether or not to speak. Father had not yet introduced us.

"She cooks well and knows many local dishes; she can also grow vegetables and understands how to care for animals," Mother said, proffering candies.

Mr Quifang took one and rolled it slowly, thoughtfully, around his mouth.

"Well I hope the pig I can smell cooking is better than the skeletal beast you have squealing outside," declared Madam Quifang.

I began to fidget with a loose thread on my cuff. Father filled some cups of baijiu.

"A toast! Let's make a toast to warm us."

"I'm afraid that my wife does not drink."

"Surely a little on such an important day?"

"No."

"But it is so cold out there," added Mother.

"No."

"Perhaps you would prefer wine?" Father fussed.

"I am allergic to both baijiu and wine."

"Please – do not ask my wife again."

I gulped back the fragrant, honeyed liquor and hoped they would soon go. Mother had laid out our finest bowls – the hand-painted ones with blue jasmine flowers along the inner rim. They had belonged to Grandmother, who kept them hidden in the ground during the Cultural Revolution.

"Your wife should not have gone to so much effort," said Mr Quifang.

Madam Quifang shuffled her stool closer to mine, so that our knees brushed.

"We cannot stay long, winter is a very busy time. Besides, we have not come for a banquet." She nodded in my direction. "Girl, I will start with your feet; take off your boots."

Mother gave a solemn, approving nod.

“Come now,” said Madam Quifang, “no need for shyness, it is important we make doubly sure.”

A sudden wind brayed at the door as if *Nian*, the beast, had come early. I unlaced my boots and removed the newly darned socks. My toes were the colour of frosted violets and I recoiled as her icy fingers prodded the bones in my outstretched foot.

“Hm, as I feared.”

“What is it?” Mother asked.

Madam Quifang stiffened. “The girl’s feet are broad. A narrow foot shows wealth, a broad foot is... I cannot allow a peasant’s foot to rest under my table. I’m sorry husband, but our family doors must be of equal size.”

She sat up quickly and jerked my head to one side so that I yelped. “Here, look at this nose! How can I trust my wealth to a girl with such a nose?”

Mother stooped to tend the fire. “But Madam Quifang, you’re overlooking something important.” She nudged a large log in the grate with the poker. “Surely the matchmaker told you?”

Madam Quifang let go of my chin and I felt the blood return. “Told me what?”

“About my daughter’s forehead; see for yourself how high her brow is, how good she is at hard labour? Surely this is what’s required of a daughter-in-law?”

Daughter-in-law!

“Stand up, girl, I can’t inspect you sitting down.”

My legs felt weak. Madam Quifang clapped her hands across my apron and pawed at the place where babies grow – the place Mother called an ‘infant’s palace’. Recoiling, I realised she was assessing its proportion to my hips; my potential to produce a grandson.

The soup bubbled noisily on the stove – wild garlic and ginger. It reminded me of the woods above the farm where I liked to play with Little Brother. It was four o’clock, he was late home from school – where was he? I wanted to give him the family of figurines I had finished that morning. Had he been instructed to stay away?

Mr Quifang signalled for his wife to stop. “Child, I want you to answer me this: what is your opinion of marriage?”

What was I supposed to say? My daydreams of falling in love were the fairytale my life could never be.

Mother’s hand pecked behind my back for the correct answer.

“An affectionate couple cannot live together to the end of their lives,” I blurted.

“Do you mean to say that a man and wife should not be affectionate?” said Mr Quifang.

I nodded unconvincingly.

Madam Quifang clapped. "It is a wise child that knows marriage is a duty."

"Our daughter has been raised correctly," said Father.

"She will bring your family honour," praised Mother.

As they talked I withdrew to the sink with the empty baijiu cups and stared into the thickening snow.

Mr Quifang followed, wanting a light for his cigarette. "I see some of the logs are set aside," he said. "Why is this?"

I lit his cigarette from the stove and passed it to him. "I save the smaller logs for Spring Festival," I said.

"For fuel?"

"No. Little Brother and I make figurines. I make up stories for him."

"Stories about dutiful marriages?"

I slipped my hand inside my pocket and clenched the figurines. I wouldn't let him take them away.

Mr Quifang's tobacco smelt rich and smooth compared to Father's. "Child, my son needs a sincere and loving wife if he's to become an honourable man. So many girls have left to work in the city. They know nothing of its dangers, nor do they understand they will be tricked into brothels and never heard of again. You are one of the wise girls to have stayed home, and we do not want a bare branch on the Quifang family tree."

I shuddered. What would it be like marrying a coffin maker? I imagined Li Quifang's hands would smell of embalming fluid as he touched me, the smell of rotting flowers. A tight bud of desperation formed in my throat.

Madam Quifang unfolded a large sheet of paper over Grandmother's bowls on the table. "It is time to consult the astrology chart – let us see what *Gaotang* says of the union," she said.

My name was scrawled next to Li Quifang's. The matchmaker's calligraphy was rushed and had smudged.

Madam Quifang ran a neat, clean finger down the chart. "Let's see...here we have it... the Goddess of Love predicts the marriage should fall after the Spring Festival, on the second day of the second month in the lunar year and not a moment later. It is all here. She is to come to me."

Mother nodded.

"It is so," said Father.

"Mai Ling?" said Mr Quifang. "Do you accept the will of your mother and father, the will of my son and of our family?"

"Speak child," said Madam Quifang. "To marry my son is the greatest opportunity of your life."

But I could no more speak than marry their awful son. I pushed past Madam Quifang and rushed out of the kitchen, brimming with tears.

Outside, the sky was a shiver of ivory. I ran past the old sow tethered miserably to her post, her husband dead in the deep pit upstairs, and down the frozen path which led out of the gate. *No, no, no* my heart beat out. The astrology chart is wrong; the matchmaker is a silly crow. I could never love Li Quifang or live in a house of souls. I would run to the woods where the garlic grows and when I reached the clearing – keep on running.