Chapter 7

Flat All Around Brings Forth an Upright Official
An Enterprising Young Man Tells of His Conquests

"Flat All Around" was the name of a town, the town where Uncle Zhou lived. It was still in the northeast, a day's journey westward by train from Dewy Spring.

"How can it be called 'Flat All Around'," asked Weilin as they rode in the train, "if the northeast is all mountains?"

"Sometimes places are named for peculiarities," explained Mother. "Well, in the northeast it's peculiar for a place to be flat all around."

Uncle Zhou seemed to be even less promising than Auntie An. He was a decent man but very poor, living in one of the low, dark hovels behind the railroad shunting yards in Flat All Around, near the center of the town. His daughter and her husband lived with him, and their two children, sickly urchins with scabby, snotty faces. The whole family—three adults and two children (Uncle Zhou's wife had died during the great famine in '61)—lived together in a single room, divided at night by a soiled white curtain, so that the married couple could have at least the illusion of privacy. The sanitary arrangements were even worse than in the teachers' dormitory at Seven Kill Stele. The Zhous shared an outhouse with eight other families. Water came from a pump at the end of the street, fifty muddy meters away.

"We manage all right," said Uncle Zhou, who was a philosopher. "There are plenty worse off than us. But I really don't see how we can take in two more."

There was not even any place for Mother and Weilin to sleep. At each end of the room where the family lived was a narrow *kang*, the raised brick-built bed people used in the northeast, heated in winter-time by burning straw in flues underneath. Uncle Zhou slept on one *kang* with the children; his daughter and son-in-law had the other. Weilin and Mother spent their first night on the floor, covered with the curtain, which the family sacrificed for this purpose. The floor was earth, but beaten hard as stone from generations of being lived on. Weilin could barely sleep, what with the shuffling and scuffling of the family on every side, Uncle Zhou coughing, one of the children sneezing with a cold, and the hard floor, the drafts from the doors and windows not yet taped up for the winter.

"You'll have to settle things before the winter comes," said Uncle Zhou. "Being in the south so long, I dare say you've forgotten our northeastern winters. And the laddie has never experienced one at all." (Turning to Weilin.) "Forty below! Spit freezes before it hits the ground! *Ting-ting!*"

Weilin thought they would surely have to go back to Seven Kill Stele, and wondered how they would be able to pay the fare. With no work unit to appeal to, and no place to live, their situation was perfectly hopeless. But Mother did not weep at all that night on the hard cold floor. At breakfast, as they shared some thin millet gruel with Uncle Zhou and his daughter, Mother announced in a voice stronger than Weilin had heard from her throat for more than a year that she would go to the Revolutionary Committee of Flat All Around and ask them for help. Uncle Zhou's daughter shook her head in disbelief—as if officials would be any help in such a situation!—and Uncle Zhou said nothing, only looking down into his gruel, embarrassed at Mother's naivety, or at his own incapacity to be of help to her, or both.

Mother went anyway, taking Weilin with her. The Revolutionary Committee was in a fine square old Japanese-style building right at the center of town. Before being the home of the Revolutionary Committee it had been Party Headquarters, before that very briefly the Corps HQ of the

General Du Yuming's Nationalist army, before that the Civil Affairs Office of the Japanese occupation government. The townspeople of Flat All Around, who were of a conservative inclination, just called it the *yamen*, using the term current in Imperial times for the center of local administration.

Mother didn't say anything to the officials about having been married to a black element. Her file was still on its way to Dewy Spring, so it was not likely anyone here would know about that for months. She just said her husband had died and her transfer had fallen through. The first officials they saw were brusque or frankly abusive, telling her she would have to go back to the southwest, and that her old unit there would have to pay for the ticket. She persisted, however, sitting for long hours in the dim waiting-room, just doggedly refusing to be dismissed. The floorboards of the place—Weilin came to know them very intimately—were worn down into long shallow depressions from decades of use. There was a dado of black grime round the interior walls at shoulder height where generations of citizens had leaned, waiting for the resolution of their cases. Light seeped in from outside through small, high, filthy windows. At last, when even that little light was beginning to fail, when they had been in the building all day with no lunch, been shunted up four levels of the Party hierarchy with no word of sympathy or hope, they got an interview with Secretary Tang.

Secretary Tang's office was up a flight of worn wooden stairs, with fine carved banisters and roundels on the posts. Secretary Tang himself was fortyish, a large handsome man still wearing a short-sleeve white summer shirt. He listened to Mother's tale, asked about her relatives, shook his head.

"Not really our responsibility," said Secretary Tang. "But we'll consider, we'll consider. Come here tomorrow."

He wrote something on a sheet of paper and gave it to Mother, so that she wouldn't have to begin the bureaucratic board game again from the beginning next day. He was somewhat warmer in his manner than the other officials had been, as if he really wished to do something for them; but Weilin dared not hope, and Mother said nothing as they trekked back to Uncle Zhou's. Secretary Tang came through, though. They climbed the fine dark wooden stairs again next day, and Secretary Tang informed

them that one of the rural production brigades outside the town would take Mother as an assistant in the kindergarten, and even give her a room. It was a gift from Heaven. Mother wept when she heard it. She took Secretary Tang's hand in both of hers and would not let it go, calling down blessings on him as an upright official and a true friend of the common people, until the scene was enveloped in such a cloud of embarrassment Weilin felt he could hardly breathe. The most mother had hoped for (she told him going back to Uncle Zhou's) was some arrangement for a loan to pay her way back to Seven Kill Stele.

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Love Socialism! Production Brigade was a bus ride to the end of town, then a long walk on broad unpaved tracks. They had had several years of good harvests (this was the first thing everyone told them) and so were well off by the standards of the northeast, itself one of the nation's more prosperous regions. The brigade offices were set up in neat square brick-built buildings in a compound surrounded by a wall. The front stretch of the wall, facing and parallel to the road into Flat All Around, was made of brick, and had a gateway in it (though no actual gate), over which was a semicircular metal framework bearing the name of the brigade: LOVE SOCIALISM! in six characters stamped from metal and painted red, with a big red star in the center, three characters on each side of the star. The wall at the other three sides of the brigade office compound was made of dried mud, with gaps in it for the paths leading to the several villages that made up the brigade.

The kindergarten shared some low buildings behind the main compound with the brigade's elementary school. It was for the children of the peasants and the workers at the brigade offices. Most of the peasants who had toddlers sent them to the kindergarten in care of older children (who had nothing to do all day, the elementary school having been closed by the Cultural Revolution), to get them out from under foot and free both parents for work. The room Weilin and his mother had been given was one in a row built against the back wall. It had a *kang*, and a window, and a door, and a floor of actual concrete, and nothing else at all, but Mother

was radiant with pride when the Branch Secretary responsible for the school showed them it.

"We had them built last year, same time as the new boiler house," explained the Branch Secretary in her slurred northeast dialect. "So many kids now! We Chinese, we know how to make babies all right! So we figured we'd add a kindergarten to the school. But the teacher who lived here had a situation, and she was sent off."

Mother said nothing to this. Weilin could sense that *having a situation* and *being sent off* were not good things, but no-one seemed to want to elaborate. That evening Mother acquired two salted eggs from somewhere, and they ate them with millet gruel from a common kitchen area at the end of the row.

Weilin thought the northeast very pleasant. He didn't understand why it should have been so easy for Mother to get a transfer. The air was clear and bracing, if somewhat cooler than the south, and they had been given this wonderful new brick-built room for the asking. There were no actual shortages of food, though of course one could never have enough food; and while rice was impossible to get, sorghum and millet were plentiful, and corn merely a treat, not a luxury. The local people were good-natured and frank-speaking, and there seemed to have been little fighting—certainly nothing as savage as in the south. Flat All Around was run by a family, or a clique, called the Dongs, about whom Weilin knew nothing except that everyone seemed to approve of them, and that, as he overheard some workers in the brigade administrative building say, they had kept the lid on the Red Guards.

There were no Red Guards to be seen, though everyone spoke of them having passed through the place. They had, indeed, left their footprints on the town. On the road in from Love Socialism! was an old temple they had visited, the porcelain tiles of the roof and door lintel all splintered, the statues decapitated, the place all boarded up and covered with peeling big-character posters whose characters, where sheltered from the rain, could still be made out: DOWN WITH THE FOUR OLDS! and SMASH THE DONG ELEMENTS AND THEIR RUNNING DOGS! But the Dongs were unsmashed and the Red Guards had moved on, and Flat All Around vegetated quietly in its modest prosperity.

Then came winter.

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As October passed into November the air cooled to what Weilin thought a winter should be; cooler than it ever was in the southwest, but not intolerable if he put an extra shirt on under the light winter jacket he had brought from the south. "Better get some cotton-padded clothing," the locals all said, smiling, beginning to appear in theirs. Mother said the brigade would give them coupons for the clothing, but there was some mix-up and they were not yet eligible.

Suddenly it was cold, a terrible icy cold keening down from Siberia, a wind that seemed to pass clean through the body, penetrating every membrane. A lazy wind, said the locals, who had a pawky style of humor—too lazy to go round you, so it went through you. The single-layer brick of their dwelling offered almost no protection at all, and Weilin noticed now how thick were the earth walls of the peasant's houses, and how their roofs were insulated with layer upon layer of straw. He and Mother's little room, exposed outside the compound to the wind sweeping across the fields, the room which Mother had thought a gift from heaven, looked set fair to carry them both down to hell, frozen to death.

Following the instructions of the brigade workers, he and Mother sealed up their window-frame with pasted-on strips of newspaper, but of course they could not paste up the door. Mother had lost, and Weilin had never acquired, the art of keeping a *kang* warm. They put burning straw into the flue underneath; but either it went out in three or four minutes, or else it burned up too fast instead of smoldering in the proper fashion, or else it blocked the flue somehow, filling the room with rancid smoke. Uncle Zhou came out from the town to give them lessons in *kang* management, but still they could not get it right. Mother took to using the straw as night-time insulation instead, heaping it on top of them where they lay, then covering themselves and it with their single inadequate quilt.

Weilin thought they would die of cold before the cotton coupons arrived. The prosperity of the brigade apparently did not extend to cotton-padded garments; everybody had one set, and that was that. In desperation, Mother went back to Uncle Zhou. With some help from him,

some cannibalizing of their spare clothes, and some scrounging from the workers and peasants at the brigade, she got enough material and cotton to make a suit for Weilin—padded pants, padded jacket, padded hat. Weilin knew he ought to say *Make clothes for yourself, Mother. I'm younger and stronger than you, it's you who should have the padded clothes.* He knew he should say it, he wanted to say it, but he did not say it. Instead he took the jacket and pants and hat gratefully, and wore them day and night, giving his summer jacket, which now looked so flimsy, to Mother in exchange. Mother (he rationalized) was in the school all day, except when she was shepherding the kids to and from their little refectory for meals. The school was heated, or at any rate had a big *kang* that was kept warm for the little ones to sleep on.

The coupons arrived in late December, and Mother at once acquired a suit of cotton-padded clothes from a seamstress in the town. The excess coupons—since Weilin had the suit she had made herself—she traded for food. By this time, however, it had been severely cold for a month and Mother had developed bronchitis. She coughed all night. Hearing her, Weilin felt terrible that he had let her dress him before herself. He thought that he could have got through to the point where the coupons arrived without developing health problems; only it had been so *cold*. He lay at night twisting with guilt, listening to Mother's cough.

Almost worse than the cold, Weilin began to think, as 1967 turned to 1968, was the boredom. Though the Cultural Revolution had fallen fairly gently on Flat All Around, the national policies arising from it applied here as much as elsewhere. In particular, the schools were all closed, so that Weilin had no legitimate occupation. On being assigned to the brigade he had vaguely supposed he might have to work as a peasant, but in fact the peasants did no work in the long northeastern winter months, only sat on their *kangs* playing cards, smoking and gossiping. And drinking. The northeast had been one of the last regions of China to be populated, so that the soil was very fertile, but until Liberation there had been a shortage of roads and canals. In times of plenty the only economic way for the peasants to transport the grain they produced in such abundance had been to first transform it into liquor. This tradition had continued into the modern age, and every production brigade had its still. Love

Socialism!, somewhat larger than the average brigade, had two, both out in the villages somewhere. In the long winter idleness it was not uncommon to come across peasants oblivious from drink, something Weilin had never seen in the southwest.

Weilin could not drink liquor, of course. Mother would not have allowed it, even if they had had money to pay for it, which they had not. He occupied himself with long walks out into the countryside around; then, when the vistas of mud-built peasant huts and frozen fields palled, into the town itself on long, aimless wanderings through the grimy streets, stopping sometimes at Uncle Zhou's for a bowl of gruel and half a batterstick. From Uncle Zhou he learned the history of the place, such as it was. There had been a trading station here since the Manchus allowed Chinese people into the northeast. It had had a wall around it, like all Chinese towns in the old times, made of dried mud, some sections of which could still be seen. Then after the Sino-Japanese War seventy years before, the Manchu government had begun to fear Japanese power, and arranged with Russia to allow an arm of the Trans-Siberian railroad to cut through the northeast to Vladivostok. When Russia in turn was defeated by Japan, the Japanese had taken over the railroad. They had built another one at right angles to it, running from Korea west into Mongolia. Where the two railroads crossed, there was Flat All Around.

"You should have seen this place in the Korean War," said Uncle Zhou, nodding his head in slow remembrance. "Soldiers going through every day, ten thousands and ten thousands. And coming the other way—empty trains, or trains full of cripples. Nobody knows how many of our young lads died fighting the Imperialists. In those days, if they shipped you to Flat All Around with a ticket east—*suan wanle ba!*" [You could consider yourself done for.]

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The current railroad station had been built by the Japanese when they held Manchuria in the thirties, and had the solid, graceless functionalism of Japanese imperial architecture. In front of it was a huge open square, with small stores, restaurants and hotels set around the other three sides,

and some of the lesser sort of government offices. Such vitality as the town possessed was on display here in the railroad plaza. There were peddlers here selling fruit, eggs and peanuts, herbal medicines, small cooked delicacies, dried jujubes and candied apple pieces on sticks. Sometimes there was a show; some patent-medicine salesmen hawking their wares, doing conjuring tricks to attract a crowd. Three or four mad people had made the square their home (the Red Guards had declared psychiatric medicine to be counter-revolutionary and had opened the doors of the county asylum). One was a woman, incredibly ragged and filthy, who was always absorbed in an endless slow dance, to enhance which she sometimes broke into discordant song. The exquisite grace with which she danced was made ludicrous by her grimy rags; but she seemed oblivious to this, and to the kids who gathered round to throw stones at her, and even to the Siberian wind cutting through the great rents in her clothing to the dirt-blackened bare flesh beneath. Another lunatic, a middle-aged man with the look of a college professor, delivered long earnest speeches about electricity, the proper application of which, he urged, would induce levitation and personal immortality.

But the strongest attraction for Weilin, when the novelty of these other wonders had worn off, was the penny library. This was run by a boy a few years older than himself—fifteen perhaps; a local boy with a coarse round face and a cap with padded ear-warmers. The boy supervised a rickety old table stacked with books, any one of which you could sit and read for a penny an hour. He would sell you the books, too, for forty or fifty cents, but that was beyond Weilin's means. The books were a perfectly random collection: farmer's almanacs, engineering handbooks, poetry anthologies, children's primers, adventure stories, the old classic novels, occasionally a translation of some western book.

"Got 'em from the Red Guards," explained the boy quite openly, when, after four or five visits, he considered Weilin a sufficiently close acquaintance. "They went round confiscating books from all the intellectuals. Stored 'em all in the old temple on Victory Avenue. Then the Red Guards were chased out, but the intellectuals were too shit-scared to go and get their books back, so I took 'em. I got a million books."

The boy's name was Asan, which means "number three", he having been the third son in his household. The first two had, apparently, exhausted the entire onomastic resources of his parents. He was an odd person to be in charge of a book stall, being next to illiterate. He seemed to have a keen sense of business, though. As well as being proprietor of the book stall, he was a middle-man for several of the fruit vendors in the square, one of his relatives being headman of a production brigade in Liaoning with extensive orchards. He could get medicines, too, both herbal and western-style, at a rate much lower than the clinics charged; but he would not divulge his source of supply for the medicines.

"If I told you that you'd be as wise as I am, wouldn't you?" he laughed when Weilin asked him about the medicines.

Weilin spent many hours sitting on the kerb reading adventure stories from Asan's stock. The older boy seemed to take a liking to him. No doubt noticing Weilin's makeshift winter clothes, he often took a reduced fee, letting Weilin read all day for two pennies. Sometimes he seemed to forget the fee altogether. If Weilin was there at lunch-time he would send him to one of the restaurants for millet gruel and batter-sticks or the steamed sorghum-flour buns called *mantou*, and share what he had. If business was really good he would order a beer, and it was sitting on the kerb by Asan's book stall in the railroad plaza of Flat All Around that Weilin first tasted beer.

"Main thing," Asan said, "is to keep ahead of the *tiaozi*."

The *tiaozi*—the sticks—were Flat All Around's constabulary. They operated on the usual third-world principle: let things run along quietly for a few months, then launch a sweep and round up anyone you can find who is doing, or looks as if he might be capable of doing, anything that might be construed as unlawful, or inconvenient to the authorities. Give them a beating, extract a fine from their families, let them go, and leave things alone for another few months. Since street trading was theoretically illegal, Asan was vulnerable to these tactics. However, his vulnerability did not seem to cause him much loss of sleep. When the sticks made their sweep, one bitter freezing day in January, he was not in the plaza at all.

"A little bird told me," he said the next week, when he was back in business. "I got friends." He nodded gravely and tapped the flange of his right nostril to indicate the potency of his friendships.

Actually most of Asan's friends seemed to be local youths very much like himself. They used to stop by at the book stall from time to time. All were coarse-looking and ill-educated. All smoked cigarettes, when they could get them—and all in the same style, holding the cigarette between thumb and forefinger, lit end outward, expelling the smoke through their nostrils. None of them paid the least attention to Weilin, but he came to know the most frequent callers by overhearing their talk. There was Red Wang, so styled for having been a Red Guard, apparently; a thin fellow with a hatchet face and exceptionally long, yellow teeth. Red Wang was an easy-going type with a cheerful laugh. His father worked for the railroad, and Weilin gathered that most of his visits were concerned with another of Asan's sideline businesses: obtaining railroad tickets outside the normal channels. Red Wang often traveled with Donkey, a short plump boy, almost perfectly spherical in his padded winter clothing, whose main activity in life seemed to be cadging cigarettes.

Weilin was a little scared of these visitors, though Asan was quite at ease with them all. There was one called Big Meng, a Mongolian with one of those ironed-flat faces Mongolians have. He was older than the generality of Asan's friends—seventeen or eighteen, perhaps—and fully-grown, square and muscular as a horse. One day Asan sent Weilin to a restaurant to get some lunch. When Weilin came back, Big Meng was standing talking to Asan. Still talking, Asan tipped some of his millet gruel into the mess tin Weilin now carried for just this purpose, and gave him half a *mantou*. Big Meng watched this transaction with hungry eyes.

"Wouldn't mind some of that myself," he said as Weilin was stepping away. Weilin thought he could feel Big Meng's eyes on his back as he sat down on the kerb to eat.

"You want some, fucking buy it yourself," said Asan, not at all intimidated by the older boy.

"Who's that then?" asked Big Meng. "Your little bit of butt cake, is it?"

"He's a friend of mine, a good kid," replied Asan. "You got a problem with that?"

"He can pull on mine, if he likes." Big Meng laughed, sticking to his train of thought.

"He's not even old enough to pull on his own," said Asan. "So mind your own fucking business."

Weilin liked this, was thrilled by it—the way Asan stood up for him, even against hulking Big Meng. It was not only the words themselves, it was also the very timbre of Asan's voice—deep, confident and rounded. Hearing Asan's voice, Weilin sometimes experienced a shiver of excitement he could not account for, related somehow to the electric thrill he had felt in the swimming pool at Seven Kill Stele, when Yuezhu had grabbed his arm. Weilin thought at that moment (and the thought never quite left him) that he would do anything for Asan.

The remarks about pulling were, of course, over his head, though he guessed they had some filthy connotation. Quite a lot of the talk that passed between Asan and his friends was filthy. They seemed to know several girls with whom they did filthy things; but none of these girls ever showed up at the book stall, and Weilin wondered why, if the girls were willing to do the filthy things (whatever they were) they were not willing to come and pass the time of day with Asan in the railroad station plaza, as his male friends did. Perhaps (he reflected) they were ashamed because of the filthy things. Some of Asan's customers were girls, of course, but Asan showed them no particular favor, treated them indeed with some diffidence, certainly never with as much consideration as he showed to Weilin. If you had not heard Asan's stories you might even think he was shy with girls.

By spring time, when Weilin had been going to the book stall two or three times a week for three months, Asan felt sufficiently intimate with him to share some of the filthy talk. Weilin could never quite follow what was supposed to have happened in these brief narratives, but he listened attentively and chuckled at what seemed like the right place, just to please Asan.

"I had great pussy last night," Asan would say. "Wet and hairy. One of the girls from the bottling plant. I fucked her up against the wall in Serve The People! Street. Boy, I served her all right!"

Or: "Me and Red Wang fucked Little Plum last night." (Little Plum was a frequent player in Asan's stories, gifted—according to Asan—with sensational qualities of hairiness and wetness.) "One after the other, over in the old brickyard. I fucked her first, to get her juices going, then Red Wang had the sloppy seconds. Oh, she squealed like a cat when I shoved it in!"

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Asan left town for the summer, to go to stay with his relative in Liaoning—the one whose brigade had the fruit orchards. By this time Weilin had got so used to him, to his cheerfulness and rough courtesies and incomprehensible salacities, he missed him terribly. There seemed no point in going into the town now, and Weilin developed an actual aversion to going in, though Mother sent him once a week for supplementary provisions.

The countryside, by contrast, came alive with the warming air. Sorghum, millet and corn were shooting up, ducks and geese were under foot everywhere, around every cluster of buildings could be heard the grunting of swine. Weilin went out on long expeditions through the brigade and into those surrounding it. At the furthest extremity of his journeyings, an hour and a half away by foot, was a little river, a distant tributary of the mighty Liao, the water muddy and cold but clean enough for swimming. The country was still flat here, the current sluggish. Weilin could swim upriver for an hour or more, then turn and float on his back, allowing the current to return him to his starting-point. He loved this: the clean rhythmic effort of the swim, then the leisurely floating, gazing up at the sky, hearing voices of children splashing in the shallows by the bank, allowing the river to bring into his head whatever idle thought it would. Floating so serenely like that, even the bad thoughts did not seem so very disturbing. He could think of Father, even of Han Yuezhu, without the pain that came at other times. Something about the brightness and cleanness of the sky seemed to leach out everything vile from those memories; though, when they came to him at home, in the darkness, trying to

sleep, listening to Mother coughing the cough he had given her, they were as bitter as ever.

Nor were the Liangs allowed to forget those evil things. In July Mother's file finally arrived at Love Socialism! Production Brigade; or perhaps it had arrived before, but no-one had bothered to look into it. The two of them were called in together to see Secretary Duo, the head of the brigade's Revolutionary Committee. Secretary Duo was coarse and ignorant, a real peasant, but Weilin had never heard anything bad of him. He was sitting at his desk when they went in, smoking a cigarette—not one of the smart manufactured ones that Asan and his friends affected, when they could get them, but a crude cone of newspaper stuffed with black shag.

"Eh, Comrade Liang, mother and son . . . Sit down, sit down." Secretary Duo's desk had a brown paper folder on it. Mother's file! It was an unusual thing, to actually see one's file. Mother (he noticed) could not take her eyes off it.

"Before you came here you were on the staff of a college in, ah, yes, Hibiscus Slope, way down south."

"Yes," said Mother. ("Hibiscus Slope" was the official name of Seven Kill Stele.)

"It seems there was a situation there. Accusations of counter-revolutionary activity."

"It was all nonsense!" said Mother with sudden vehemence. "The Red Guards . . . ."

"Oh, is that who it was?" Secretary Duo was squinting at the folder, picking out characters with his finger. "'Ad Hoc People's Red Revolutionary Organization Committee of Inspection'? Fuck me, they like to think up grand names for themselves, don't they?"

"My husband was accused unjustly. He was beaten by the Red Guards, then he died. Nothing was proved against him."

The fact that the relevant entries in her file had been made by Red Guards seemed to have settled things for Secretary Duo. He waved his cigarette hand to dismiss the matter.

"Many improper things were done when the Red Guards were running wild. Now we have Clean Up the Class Ranks" (the name of a na-

tionwide movement that had started that spring to reign in the Red Guards once and for all). "I don't think you come under the scope. It's all a Party matter."

Secretary Duo leaned over and spat on the floor, rubbing it in with his foot. He was a Party member, of course. Mother was not.

"There won't be any difficulty for you here. It's only that you should have come clean with us first off. Old Tang really went out of his way to help you, just out of *renqingwei* [the milk of human kindness], knowing you were a northeasterner yourself trying to settle back in the home region. He won't be pleased if he knows about this. If he asks me I'll have to tell him, of course. But if nothing is asked, nothing will be said. We'll keep it in the file."

Mother cheered up a lot after that. The bronchitic cough that had lingered with her since winter-time now dwindled to an occasional asthmatic rasp. Weilin cherished the hope that she might be persuaded to play card games with him again. In the long summer evenings, before going to bed, he took to playing solitaire on the *kang,* hoping to draw Mother in; but still she only sat sewing or preparing vegetables, lost in her thoughts.