

Songping Jin

THE TWIN BRONZE MIRRORS

Last summer I received a letter from my youngest brother, from the town near Shanghai where we were born. It surprised me, as I had received no correspondence from him since I left my ancestor's residence for Hong Kong fifty-two years ago. I think my brother must now be sixty or so, as I will be seventy-one this coming September. My brother and I had never been close. To be honest, the only thing about him that still stands out clearly in my memory is the age gap between us. By contrast, my memories of my parents and their residence are like the lines carved on a tortoise shell that has survived the erosion of time.

My parents, whom I called Da and Niang, were not my real parents. Da was the younger brother of my birth father, who with his two wives produced altogether seven children. They lived in the same residence, a big compound inherited from an ancestor who was for a time a Mandarin in the Empress Dowager's Court. By convention or for convenience, people who knew the family called my real father's mansion the First House, and my uncle's the Second. The mansions sat only half a mile away from the Fen River, where a weatherbeaten wooden bridge ran across it, and where my uncle Da was drowned. Da never knew, when he was alive, that one day he would become my father. It was not until after his death that he started to father me.

My uncle Da was a Christian when Christians in China were as rare as pandas. How pious he was, no one could really tell. He went to church on Sundays and attended Mass by the street corner where the priest released firecrackers instead of tossing a bell to attract crowds. In China, the firecracker was part of life. Neither celebration nor mourning would be complete without firecrackers. Da liked firecrackers more than anything else. He would appear for any occasion which started or ended with them. Apart from that, he liked to wear a crucifix around his neck, the way a Chinese child today wears a necklace hung with a front door key, although he might not know his way home.

When Da reached twenty, he was going to marry a girl from an equally wealthy family in Canton, but the girl's father insisted that Da could not marry his daughter unless the wedding was arranged in the traditional Chinese way and all the old rituals were exactly followed. The bride had to wear the traditional wedding costume—the phoenix coronet and the rainbow dress made of silk. A wedding according to the religion of a "foreign devil" was out of the question, he said. How was my uncle persuaded? I have no clue. But I

heard that one day he dashed out to the bridge across the Fen River and without even looking back threw his crucifix into the water. I remember that not long afterwards the rich girl in silk stepped down from her sedan-chair and became my aunt.

Six months after his wedding, Da died. What happened was so simple that one might call it mysterious. One moon-lit night, when he passed the bridge across the Fen River, he fell into the water and never came up again. His corpse was found in the river—near the spot where he had thrown in the crucifix! But this part of the story I would rather hurry through.

My uncle's wife was a strapping figure, with broad shoulders but a rather flat chest. The movement of her deep-socketed eyes often reminded you of some sort of mysterious palp. Her accent was soft and a little husky. Everyone who knew her admitted that she was attractive except that her cheekbones were a little too high by Chinese standards. When she smiled, the line of her cheekbone curved up a little.

My uncle had left behind no offspring, and this caused a crisis for the big family. My grandmother and the whole family were frightened and devastated by the realization that no one would carry on the name of the Second House. In no time, a rescue scheme was produced: since my father, Master of the First House, had seven children, any of them except the oldest was expendable. I, the fourth son, at the age of fourteen was rushed to be adopted by my dead uncle. That was how I became the Master of the Second House, and why I called Da's widow Niang (Mum). This left, finally, only one pestering worry for the whole family, in particular for my grandmother, who had suffered toothache since Da's death: Would Niang stay? For how long? In those days everyone was fully aware that nothing could be more scandalous than for a widow to leave or remarry. Respectable families like ours would of course not tolerate such a thing.

However, to everyone's relief, there was not even the slightest sign in the following year that Niang was planning to abandon the home. It seemed Niang was no more affected by the death of Da than anyone else in the family. She kept herself busy with drawing her eyebrows, watering flowers, doing embroidery and feeding birds in the courtyard just as she had done when her husband was alive. The only difference that one might notice was that she seemed to be more drawn to my father's younger sister, Aunt Yun, who became Niang's everyday companion. Grandmother said that Niang might be too lonely, and it was nice to have Aunt Yun around. Aunt Yun was then sixteen years old, and she was more than happy to keep Niang company.

Niang did not spend much time with me. But she could not do without Aunt Yun. They did anything and everything together. They strolled together, and were never tired. They sat talking for hours, hands on each other's knee. They read something to each other, giggling with hands covering their mouths. In the mornings we often saw Niang being very much engrossed in drawing Aunt Yun's eyebrows. Aunt Yun's eyebrows curved so smoothly like black silkworms, or like crescents drawn in bluish ink on rice paper. Niang helped to apply lipstick on Aunt Yun's lips. Niang's right forefinger with painted nail gently pressed on Yun's lips, slowly moving as if a crimson-shell snail passed along the river edge leaving behind a half transparent trace. Aunt Yun's eyes were half closed, her mouth slightly open, and its curve almost ethereal.

Aunt Yun had firm and fully blossomed breasts which had become increasingly a concern of the family members. Her breasts needed a little binding, my grandmother one day decided, as if she were commenting on her own bound feet. At that time over-sized breasts and natural sized feet were regarded as vulgar and uncivilised. Fortunately, Aunt Yun had only one of these two crucial tasks yet unaccomplished. Aunt Yun started to bind her breasts with a piece of cloth. Often it was Niang who did this for her. She would take time doing it, to fold and unfold the bandages; to draw herself backward several steps, head to one side, and then stepped forward; then they started all over again. Aunt Yun would spin around, as if they were practising complicated movements in a kind of ballet. What puzzled me then was that Aunt Yun obviously loathed the result of binding, but she seemed to indulge in the process, and so did Niang.

When the sun shone, they would sit in the garden for hours. Niang sometimes dyed Aunt Yun's finger nails with the crimson pulp squashed from a kind of wild flower; Niang would ask Aunt Yun to do up her hair, and make a stylish coil at the nape. Aunt Yun combed her hair with a crescent-shaped comb which had pine-needle-like teeth, running it through her black locks, scratching it over her scalp. The comb teeth were thin, but dense and hard. The scratching on the scalp made her groan with pleasure, as if the sensitive points of her brain or nerve roots on her head were affected by pressure. They did up each other's hair, and oiled each other's hair with sesame oil till it shone like a bank of black clouds. Niang liked to tuck a white jasmine flower behind her left ear after her hair was done. Sometimes I saw Niang sitting there, Aunt Yun bent over from behind to nibble at her left ear and say something under her breath. Niang's face, and the nape of her neck, flushed against the shades of the porcelain-white petals.

They became hopelessly inseparable. They walked, hand in hand around the courtyard, and talked tirelessly, hands on each other's knee, slender fingers pulsing like ripples. They washed their feet at the same time in the same water.

They accompanied each other day and night, as if they lived on a planet of just two, in a newly created universe.

When Niang came to this house, she brought with her, as part of her dowry, a pair of ancient bronze mirrors which had been passed down to her by her ancestors. Every one of my family would tell you that these bronze mirrors dated to the thirteenth century or even earlier. The pair of round mirrors were identical. Their surfaces were smooth and crystal clear. When you looked in one mirror, you forgot the image you cast was merely a reflection, what you saw was a reality of "yourself" concentrated. Niang's mirrors were those called Light Penetration, of which the earliest ones were made in China three or four centuries before Christ. When a light is shone on a mirror, it reflects the relief design on its back onto a surface in front of it, as if the light had penetrated the mirror. It was long believed that the quality of light and clarity of these mirrors could be achieved by nothing but grinding and polishing the twin with the other. Niang and Aunt Yun ground the mirrors, polishing the exquisite curvature, the light-shot convex, and the thicker outer ring.

The twin bronze mirrors polished each other, curve touching curve, face against face, the flower petals unfurling in circular motions, the soft-feathered wings folding, and the sinews of the waves twitching in rhythm.

Two years after my uncle's death, Niang and Aunt Yun made an expedition to a monastery to seek divination of dreams. Liao Monastery was a hundred miles away from our home. With a reputation for divination and interpretation of dreams, it attracted endless pilgrims all the year round. Visitors who sought fortune-telling dreams paid for the incense and lighted it in a bronze burner on a marble base in front of a colossal Golden Buddha. They spent a night on the floor in the hall. The next morning the Nun would interpret the dreams they had had during the night.

Niang had a dream. Aunt Yun did not, or rather she could not recall anything. Niang dreamt that she sat in a wedding sedan-chair amidst the noise of drums and gongs. The Nun's face dimmed at hearing this. "A wedding sedan-chair for a once married woman is nothing but a coffin. Everything is a transformation." With these words she closed her eyes, chanting under her breath, "Amitabha, the infinite light of revelation. May Buddha have mercy," without talking to Niang any more.

One month after the expedition, a sedan-chair arrived for Aunt Yun. The marriage had been arranged by her parents when she was only seven. Aunt

Yun sobbed. Niang did not. Her broad shoulders were a silent mountain, under which a tremor was tumbling. White jasmine petals fell from her left ear like the precursor of the coming snow. Aunt Yun was going to the cold North, thousands of miles away from where Niang lived.

While the whole family were celebrating the occasion, preparing banquets and dowry and letting off firecrackers, Niang and Aunt Yun sat polishing the bronze mirrors for the last time. The ancient sun slanted over gossamer.

Aunt Yun was sent away. Niang looked very calm and did not shed a tear. Several days later, Niang told my grandmother that her father was ill, and she had to pay a brief visit to her parents' home far in the South. She left in a hurry. Three months passed, but she did not return. My grandmother sent a letter to accuse the in-laws' family of keeping Niang there for so long. A few weeks later, a letter written by Niang's father arrived, in which he said Niang had died of a heart-attack. Dead or alive, however, she remained by law and tradition an asset of our family. No family like ours could survive the scandal of an estraying daughter-in-law. The corpse must be returned to the husband's home. Niang's dead body must rest with my long-dead uncle in the grass-sealed tomb.

The coffin in which Niang lay travelled thousands of miles on water to arrive at the bridge where my uncle had fallen. Dressed up as a "filial son" in white hemp, I knelt down and kowtowed to Niang, my mother. My grandmother walked to the coffin, and a corner of the cover was lifted a little for her to identify the corpse. Was it because of the repulsive smell or was it the sight of the corrupted body? I saw Grandmother falter a little and her face turn pale. She quickly waved to the carpenter to seal the coffin at once. Firecrackers were set off; bugles, flutes, and two-stringed violins, drums and gongs, accompanied by chanting, wailing and howling, triumphantly publicised the news that the Mistress of the Second House, the graceful daughter-in-law and lawfully-bound wife and mother, had returned home. Niang's coffin was carried like a wedding sedan-chair to my uncle Da's tomb.

In the years that followed, Grandmother died peacefully. Aunt Yun never returned home, I grew up, went to Liao Monastery and had a dream.

I dreamt of a bridge. A bridge with a round mirror-shadow under its arch, where a greenish-brown flow like a kind of melted metal suddenly tumbled out, sweeping across the river banks and rushing towards the mansion of the Second House. The torrents swirled around the mansion, snaked up to the windows like vines, reached the red crest of the roof and the shining black tiles, and finally sealed the whole mansion. I was trying to escape from the house. I screamed and struggled, but I could not move my legs, which had become as

heavy as bronze. I was so terrified that I woke up to find my whole body covered with sweat, a greenish, moist shine against the pale candle light beside the bronze incense-burner.

The Nun said nothing for a moment. She laid her hand gently on my shoulder, "Child, leave the house and go away as far as you can. You will understand all this one day when the time comes. The house is but a shadow of a coffin, and the coffin a transient bridge. What lies under the green patina is the true life against time." With these words, she paused, looking vacantly somewhere beyond me.

Confused, I left home. *And I never returned.*

This would have been the end of the story had I not received the letter from my youngest brother of the First House. My brother wrote:

Have you ever heard that Niang had a pair of priceless antique bronze mirrors? Have you seen them at all? The rumours of the existence of such a treasure at the Second House have been around for ages. Last year, part of Niang's and Da's tomb was damaged by flood. We looked around in the tomb and no treasure was found. But, when I collected the bones—you are not going to believe what I saw! One of the skeletons was very, very short. You'll bet it was not Niang's. It was only the size of a child!