



MADWOMAN ON THE BRIDGE AND OTHER STORIES

SU TONG

TRANSWORLD
BOOKS

About the Book

The mad woman on the bridge wears a historical gown which she refuses to take off. In the height of summer, to the derision of the townspeople, she stands madly on the bridge. Until a young female doctor, bewitched by the beauty of the mad woman's dress, plots to take it from her, with tragic consequences.

Set during the fall-out of the Cultural Revolution, these bizarre and delicate stories capture magnificently the collision of the old China of vanished dynasties, with communism and today's tiger economy.

From the folklorist who becomes the victim of his own rural research, to the doctor whose infertility treatment brings about the birth of a monster child, to a young thief who steals a red train only to have it stolen from him, Su Tong's stories are a scorching look at humanity.

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Madwoman on the Bridge

Su Tong

TRANSLATED FROM THE CHINESE BY JOSH STENBERG

Madwoman on the Bridge

The madwoman was wearing a white velvet cheongsam, and in her hand she held a sandalwood fan. Standing on the bridge, she revelled in her own elegance. For those who knew her this was not at all surprising, but other passersby assumed she was an actress here to shoot some footage. She gazed around her and raised her fan to wave at the children going past, but they ignored her. The boys stuck out their tongues and grimaced, hoping to frighten her, while the girls pointed at her cheongsam and, whispering confidentially, paid no further attention to her.

They were like lively clouds, floating one by one across the bridge, only to disperse at the slightest puff of wind. The madwoman's constant companion was a pot of chrysanthemums, which stood watch over the bridge with her. November chrysanthemums: from a distance, they seemed still to be in bloom, but up close you could see how they dropped. Just like the madwoman. At first glance she seemed beautiful, but closer scrutiny revealed that she was as faded as her flowers.

The madwoman on the bridge appeared very lonely, unbearably so in fact, for she kept twisting her head and body this way and that, looking from side to side. Her brow furrowed as she glanced over at Mahogany Street, on the near side of the bridge, then mumbled something which

sounded like a complaint. What was she complaining about? Or whom? No one cared.

Besides the pot of chrysanthemums, her intimacy extended only to the sandalwood fan. All those who knew her were familiar with this article: it was dark yellow, threaded with gold and had green tassels hanging from the handle. You could smell its fragrance from far away. Although the season for using sandalwood fans was already long past, the madwoman clutched hers whenever she went out. She spread the fan so it shaded her brow; golden strips of sunlight slatted her pale countenance. At times it looked like dazzling make-up, at others like terrible scars.

Occasionally, when the figure of an acquaintance floated towards her over the bridge, the madwoman's dim eyes would glint suddenly, and her whole body would set itself in motion to strike a seductive pose. She would wave at them with her fan, slowly undulating her svelte waist in greeting. Then she would poke playfully at their hands with her fan and say, 'Oh, the heat. I'm just burning up.' At this point, whoever she addressed would avert their face and glance towards the bridge. They wore impatient expressions, for they were normal people, and normal people pay no attention to madwomen. They just waved her away unfeelingly and hurried from the bridge. To be honest, there weren't very many people on our street who embodied the warm-hearted spirit of revolutionary humanitarianism. I don't know whether the old woman from Shaoxing was one of these or not, and it doesn't much matter now either way, but I do know that the Shaoxing woman stayed on the bridge that afternoon to talk to the madwoman; she stayed for quite a long time.

The old Shaoxing woman had bound feet, but still undertook to deliver milk to the whole of Mahogany Street. Since feet were bound for aesthetic delight rather than

practicality, the Shaoxing woman had trouble walking, and had to pause every few metres as she pushed her little cart. She shouted rhythmically as she walked to keep her spirits up. Her afternoon was devoted to collecting the empty bottles, and as she hobbled along, she groaned for people to bring them out. Today the Shaoxing woman had about thirty bottles as she tottered onto the bridge.

As usual, the madwoman remarked, 'Oh, the heat. I'm just burning up.'

The Shaoxing woman took a handkerchief from her bosom to wipe away the sweat and replied nonchalantly, 'Yes, I'm sweating like a pig.' Suddenly she realized who she was speaking to and cried out in surprise, 'Oh, what are you doing here? Why aren't you at home like you should be? What did you come here for?'

The madwoman opened her fan and wafted it a few times, saying, 'It was so hot, I came to the bridge for the breeze.'

The Shaoxing woman gave her a hard look and, sizing up the situation in an instant, said, 'I don't think so. It looks more like you were worried your cheongsam might go mouldy in its chest, so you thought you'd come here to show yourself off. Do you know what season this is? You must think it's still summer, coming out here wearing your cheongsam and waving that fan around. Winter's coming on, you know!'

The madwoman seemed unconvinced; she looked up at the sky, then reached out one hand to pass it over the chrysanthemums. 'Summer's over? But the chrysanthemums are still blooming. How could summer be over?' she mumbled to herself. Then, suddenly, her eyes lit up as she asked, 'When will winter start? When it does, I should wear my fox-fur coat.'

The Shaoxing woman gave a startled sound and replied, 'How can you still bother yourself with things like that? Haven't you been through enough already? Look at you, all dressed up and looking like a fright. That's what made them terrorize you in the first place – and that's what made you ill. Don't you understand?'

The madwoman did not, and remarked, 'With the fox-fur coat I'd have to wear matching boots . . . What a shame they stole my lambskin boots.'

The thought of her lost finery caused a mournful expression to appear on her face. She walked a melancholy circle around the Shaoxing woman's cart, then another. 'No more high-heeled shoes,' she said with a glance at her feet. 'No more jade bracelets,' she said with a glance at her wrists. 'No silk stockings either,' she said, stroking her knees.

The Shaoxing woman couldn't suppress a cry of protest, 'They're gone, and rightly so! Otherwise you'd probably be dead by now! Don't you understand?'

The madwoman did not and lowered her head to study the milk bottles in the cart, or more specifically the multicoloured silk threads wound around the empty mouths of the bottles. 'Look how pretty those threads are,' she said. 'Won't you give them to me so I can weave Susu an egg cosy? At mid-autumn festival next year we can hang salted eggs in it.'

But the Shaoxing woman protested. 'You're not going to make a fool of me again. Last year I washed all those threads and gave them to you, and what happened? Before you even got home, you'd given them all away. Susu didn't get a single one, poor thing. What a shame such a sensible girl is saddled with a mother like you!'

The Shaoxing woman was old and her vision fading. She hadn't noticed at first that the madwoman was wearing a brooch. But when she bent down to put the milk bottles in order and looked up again at the madwoman, she caught sight of something on her chest: something sparkling, glistening in the sun. It was quite dazzling, and the Shaoxing woman gazed at it vacantly for a moment in disbelief. 'Oh, no! Whatever possessed you to go out with that on? A treasure like that . . . it cost your grandmother a bar of gold. Quick, take it off!'

It had taken a moment for the Shaoxing woman to realize what she was seeing. Now she rushed towards the madwoman and clutched her by shoulders. The madwoman raised her sandalwood fan and tried to fend her off, cheongsam rustling as she swayed this way and that to evade those grubby, gnarled hands. The fan was beautiful but impractical as a weapon, and the slippery white velvet cheongsam even less threatening. In the end the madwoman was no match for the Shaoxing woman, and she stood with her arms by her sides and suffered the brooch to be removed.

It was a remnant of a bygone era, a butterfly-shaped brooch executed with exquisite craftsmanship. The butterfly's wings were outlined in blue enamel and inlaid with several gemstones shaped like grains of rice. Its precious wings dominated the front of the cheongsam, secured at the back by a clasp, skilfully designed to prevent theft. No matter how hard she tried, the Shaoxing woman was unable to undo it.

'Who made this? They must have made it so difficult to undo on purpose,' she complained, then she went on to complain about the madwoman: 'And what can I say about you? I don't care how vain you are, or how much you love to wear your cheongsam, you mustn't ever wear this

brooch when you go out. I know just about every stick your family owns, and the only valuable thing left is this brooch. If you lose it, it'll be too late to start wailing. Now help me take it off. I'm not going to swipe it, I'll just take care of it for you and give it to Susu tomorrow.'

Still the madwoman didn't cooperate, and the Shaoxing woman practically had to force the brooch off. Finally she tore some sealing paper off a milk bottle, wrapped the brooch in it, and concealed it in her bosom. 'There are lots of bad people about, looking to prey on people like you. Don't you understand?' The Shaoxing woman peered vigilantly all around and, finding no bad people in sight, gave a sigh of relief. Brusquely she nudged the madwoman towards the end of the bridge with the cart, saying, 'On a chilly day like this, you shouldn't stand out here and freeze. Go home now, go home.'

But the madwoman obdurately refused, saying, 'I've lost my key. I'm going to wait here for Susu and go home with her.'

The Shaoxing woman frowned at her. 'Even if you're ill, how can you just forget from one day to the next how to do the simplest things? What does it matter if you don't have the key, just go next door to Li Sannian's, and climb in through your window from their courtyard.'

But the madwoman shook her head, and said, 'I won't go to Li Sannian's. They won't let me. His wife says, "The troll! The troll's coming!" as soon as she sees me, and their youngest son starts crying and throws things at me.'

It took a moment before the Shaoxing woman understood this, but then she remarked levelly, 'You can't really blame them, not when you get yourself all dolled up like that. If a child ran into you in the dark, of course he'd think you were a troll. But grown-ups shouldn't say these things; it's wrong

to bully someone like you. I'll take you home. We'll go through Li Sannian's together, and see if she dares swear at you then.'

But the madwoman persisted shaking her head, saying, 'I won't go through her house. I can't climb through the window. I'm wearing my cheongsam; I can't get through the window.'

'Well, *that's* true enough. A thing like that is no good for anything but making an exhibition of yourself.' The Shaoxing woman glared disapprovingly at the madwoman's cheongsam. She fingered the neckline for a moment and patted the waist. Then she asked, 'Can it be comfortable to wear it that tight? It's really more than just ordinary vanity with you, isn't it? I was just remembering how, when you were young, you used to wear a cheongsam even when you went to measure out the rice. Wiggling along, carrying the rice in a straw bag.'

The madwoman objected, 'It wasn't a straw bag. It was a woven craft bag. They were made for export, but I got one surplus.'

'A straw bag for export is still a straw bag – don't try and impress me with your fancy foreign garbage,' the Shaoxing woman retorted harshly, 'The reason you've had such hard luck is that your thinking is rotten through and through. If you think wrong, you act wrong, you rub people up the wrong way. It's not all your own fault that you're ill, though, half of it is your own problem and half is other people's. If I were your mother-in-law,' the Shaoxing woman ran on, lifting one hand as if to hit her, 'I would beat you. I'd beat you every day, and when I was tired I'd get my son to beat you. I might beat you half to death, but at least I'd make sure you knew how to be a good wife!'

The madwoman reacted instinctively to the Shaoxing woman's hostile tone and gesture, retreating and raising one hand as if to shield herself. The Shaoxing woman was usually so kind: why would she want to hit her? The madwoman could not distinguish between rhetoric and reality. Bewildered, she backed away from the cart, and the hem of her cheongsam caught under one of its wheels. The madwoman cried out loudly and freed the hem, craning her neck to examine it for grime. Just then, a bespectacled man was passing by. He jumped off his bicycle and eyed her for a moment, then he grinned, straddled his bike again and rode off.

When the madwoman noticed the man, her eyes kindled and she waved vigorously after his retreating figure: 'Mr Zhang! A real scorcher, isn't it?' It distracted him and he made as if to stop, then decided against it, the hesitation nearly causing him to fall off. He had to put his foot down hurriedly, coming to a stop by the end of the bridge. The madwoman and the Shaoxing woman both looked at the man, or rather at his back. He was clad in khaki trousers and a tunic, with sagging shoulders. The strange, sunken-looking figure hesitated for a long moment on the bridge before glancing back with undisguised interest, but in the end he kept silent and rode hurriedly away.

'Do you know him? And if you don't, why did you call him Mr Zhang?' the Shaoxing woman asked, looking after his receding figure reproachfully. Then she turned back to the madwoman. 'See how you're always accosting people? No wonder they say you act badly. You're indecent, that's what you are.'

The madwoman exclaimed, 'Who's indecent? You're the indecent one. I know him. Mr Zhang - he was the make-up man for the ensemble. He used to do my make-up.'

‘Make-up, make-up! Is that all you can talk about?’ All the time, the Shaoxing woman was nudging the madwoman towards the end of the bridge, saying, ‘You have a nerve, calling a woman *my* age indecent. Still, your mind’s gone soft, and I’m not going to quibble with you. You doll yourself up like that and stand on the bridge if you want to. What do you think you look like? A painting? That would be all right – a painting for people to look at – but why is this painting looking back at *them*? Do you have any idea how people think these days? There are so many bad sorts. If they gang up on you, you won’t be able to report them, and even if you did, they’d ignore you. Why don’t you go home?’

At first the madwoman dodged her, then the Shaoxing woman caught her by her cheongsam and started tugging at it. The madwoman’s heart bled for her beloved cheongsam and she began to resist, swatting the Shaoxing woman’s hands as if they were flies. But they were strong and persistent, and the madwoman grew flustered. She raised her sandalwood fan and struck out at the Shaoxing woman’s arms once, then twice, but when she saw the anger in the Shaoxing woman’s eyes she didn’t dare continue. Instead she forcibly thrust the old woman away. The Shaoxing woman staggered back, features twisting into a ghastly expression. She stamped her bound feet, gave her clattering milk cart a shove towards the end of the bridge, and said sharply, ‘Fine. Don’t listen to me then. Hit me with your fan. Just stand there like a peacock flaunting your feathers. No wonder people are cruel to you. You reap what you sow. Even a peacock doesn’t spread his tail for just anyone.’

* * *

On that autumn afternoon, the madwoman stood on the bridge waiting for her daughter Susu. She would leave school and come home only in the early-evening, at about

five o'clock, but the madwoman was standing on the bridge by a little after two. Perhaps she had nowhere else to go; perhaps she had already lost any sense of time passing. Everyone knew that something had gone wrong with her mind last spring. I suppose what happened next was pure coincidence, but it's often the case that if you wait for blossoms to open, you are rewarded with a bee sting. For Susu did not come, Cui Wenqin did.

Cui Wenqin came . . .

Forgive me for interpolating a few explanatory sentences at this point. Wenqin was the youngest doctor in the clinic on Mahogany Road, as well as one of the most famous women on the north side of town. She was extraordinarily beautiful, and she gave injections; it was therefore only natural that some people were given to unwholesome flights of fantasy about her. Apparently there were even a few who, although perfectly healthy, were so obsessed by her that they submitted themselves to injections just so they could be in her company. What they hoped to gain by this you can probably guess without my telling you.

Wenqin had in fact administered injections to the madwoman, but they had turned out to be ineffective for her illness, and were discontinued, so although the madwoman had no recollection of the doctor who had treated her, Wenqin remembered her clearly. The shocking sight of a beautiful woman in a state of mental collapse had touched her, and she kept pointing at her as if she were a painting, gasping in admiration. An intelligent woman openly admiring another woman's appearance is unusual enough, but since the latter's mind had gone, Wenqin's gasps were genuinely heartfelt. Some people wondered if this admiration might simply be a form of pity, though the madwoman provoked no similar feeling in others. Instead, the women who took their children to the clinic for

inoculations would try to curry favour with Wenqin by saying, 'Look how pretty auntie is. Look how simple her clothes are. And it doesn't hurt at all when she gives you your injections.'

But Wenqin liked to talk to people about the madwoman's illness, appearance and clothes – especially when it came to her startling, beautiful clothes, Wenqin's praise was unstinting. She would say, 'There's nothing she daren't wear, and she looks good in it all. Have you seen her cheongsam? A white velvet cheongsam! Except for people in movies, I've never seen anyone look as good in a cheongsam as she does.' A colleague, although disapproving, hit the nail on the head when he said, 'You would look good in it, too. Too bad there's nothing wrong with your head! Because even if you did have a cheongsam like that, you'd never dare put it on.'

Wenqin walked past the bridge and spotted the madwoman at a glance – or rather her white velvet cheongsam. You could tell that she approached the madwoman only in order to be closer to that cheongsam. And though she exclaimed, 'Why ma'am, fancy meeting you here!' in her voice, so filled with pleased surprise, there was a quite different greeting, 'Why, white velvet cheongsam, fancy meeting *you* here!' Anyone could see that Wenqin was madly in love with that cheongsam, and that it was a love that ran bone deep, though at the moment it burned white hot as well.

People had only ever seen her in the tailored-to-fit military uniform she always wore; never in a cheongsam. It wasn't that she wouldn't give cheongsams a chance, rather that cheongsams hadn't given her one. She was Wenqin, after all; she wasn't the madwoman, though at that moment who could have said which one of them loved the cheongsam more? Wenqin's eyes betrayed her secret though; the way

she gazed at that white velvet cheongsam was like a famished bee discovering a flower garden. She stopped in her tracks and began talking to the madwoman, although really she was talking to the cheongsam.

‘What soft material. And tailored so snugly. And aren’t the fastenings beautiful. Are these called lute frogs? How are they made, I wonder?’ At first, when Wenqin touched the white velvet, she did so reverently, with utmost care, so as not to damage it, but gradually the movement became more rapacious, almost abandoned, her hand stroking in circles about the madwoman’s waist. It was as if she were surveying something with a caliper, the result of which always remained unclear and had to be repeated constantly. When her hands slipped down to the madwoman’s buttocks, she realized she had gone too far and immediately slid them up to her back. But she was not yet sated and clutched once again at the madwoman’s shoulders.

‘How unbelievably well it fits!’ Wenqin exclaimed. ‘I’ll bet it was the one you used when you were MC in the performance troupe, wasn’t it? You couldn’t find another one like it in the whole world now. This kind of velvet – you can’t buy material like it any more, even in Shanghai.’

The madwoman gave her a charming smile, and at the same time inspected the cheongsam. Wenqin’s fulsome praise gratified her, though she was a little concerned there might be wrinkles where Wenqin had touched it. She arranged her fingers in the orchid position to act like an iron, and flattened out the tiny creases. Wenqin was a little insulted by this and remarked, ‘You really take care of this cheongsam, don’t you? It won’t hurt it just to touch it. Still, no wonder. You only have this one, don’t you? I saw you wear it in the summer, too.’

Stung, the madwoman replied, 'Who says I have only one? I have six cheongsams: this white velvet one, then there's the red velvet, two of silk – they're patterned – and two that are cotton but look good anyway. So altogether I have six cheongsams, only my husband cut up the other five so this is the only one left.'

Wenqin was looking at her sideways, listening somewhat doubtfully. Abruptly, she interrupted the madwoman, asking, 'Red velvet? Can you make cheongsams from red velvet?'

The madwoman replied, 'Naturally. They all say my red velvet cheongsam is the one I look best in.'

Wenqin's eyes lit up. 'They *do* sell red velvet in the fabric shop. And I won't even need coupons – the clinic bought some so we could make cloth flowers!'

Wenqin lingered on the bridge a moment longer. She had now stopped staring at the madwoman and her cheongsam, and instead she was looking around herself, deep in calculation. She clapped her hands, reaching a decision, and said, 'I'll go and buy it right now.' With that, she turned round and walked off the bridge.

At first, the madwoman didn't realize what Wenqin had gone to do; she was just waiting for Susu, but instead of her daughter, once again it was Wenqin who appeared. The madwoman watched her as she crossed the bridge with a bolt of red velvet clasped in her arms. As she approached, the madwoman asked, 'What have you bought all that red velvet for?'

Wenqin grasped her by the arm and said, 'Do me a favour. Come with me for a moment to the tailor's. I need you to lend me your cheongsam so Mr Li can make a pattern from it.' Strangely, whenever it was anything to do with clothing

or make-up, the madwoman cottoned on right away. She stared at Wenqin, her eyes widening, and protested, 'No, I'm not going. I don't want him to make a pattern from my cheongsam.'

But Wenqin had clearly prepared for this. She caught the madwoman's hand tighter in her grasp. 'Don't be so petty. I'm only borrowing it to make a pattern. It's not as if anything bad will happen to it. Besides, yours is white velvet, mine is red - they're different, don't you see?'

But the madwoman kept trying to free her hand, and said, 'I don't have time to go with you to the tailor's. I have to wait here for Susu; Susu's about to leave school.'

Wenqin looked at her wristwatch, 'Oh, nonsense. It's only three thirty now; much too early to leave school. Don't run away. People will think that I'm dragging you off to do something awful.' Still trying to subdue the madwoman and protect herself from her flailing hands, Wenqin finally managed to catch her tightly by the elbow. In desperation, she grasped at straws and told the madwoman, 'I don't mean to be unfair. If you do me this favour, I'll give you my black scarf with the golden flowers. When you came for your injection, didn't you keep saying how you admired it?'

This one sentence carried more weight than the dozens preceding it. Wenqin felt the madwoman's resistance fade away as soon as she finished speaking. A silk scarf had conquered her. Her eyes glazed over for a moment, as if she were trying to picture the scarf she had just been promised. Then she laughed. 'My cheongsam, with a black silk scarf. A black silk scarf! Wouldn't they look smart together?' She smiled at Wenqin, then said abruptly, 'Fine. I'll hold you to that. And don't tell me you regret it later or I'll think you're a welcher.'

Now that it was already too late to take back her promise, Wenqin was a little discomfited. Frowning, she said, 'Who says you're soft in the head? You earn a silk scarf just for lending me your cheongsam – seems to me you're shrewder than anyone else I know.'

At half past three in the afternoon, the madwoman was seen following Wenqin off the bridge. With one hand she gingerly held the hem of her cheongsam while the other hand was clasped tightly in Wenqin's. They walked towards The East is Red Street. From the back, they could have been two women of equal intellect, their steps imbued with a similar grace. They looked like sisters out for a walk.

Li the tailor had a hunched back. On his head he wore an army cap, and a tape measure hung around his neck. He was drowning in the shop's disorder, the clothes and cloth piled and hanging everywhere. The shop didn't seem to belong to the same era as the spotless street outside, and Li's apologetic expression acknowledged this. Whenever a female customer entered, Li would rise obsequiously from behind his sewing machine, like someone from a grass-roots unit welcoming an important leader for a visit. But it was different when Wenqin came; with her he somehow achieved a surprising role reversal. As soon as she arrived, he began acting like a spoiled woman himself. At first he acted deliberately coy, tilting his head to see who was standing behind her, and when he saw that it was another woman, he heaved a sigh of relief and asked, 'So you've brought along another customer for me today? That's nice.'

Wenqin had brought not only a roll of red velvet, but also a woman in a white velvet cheongsam. She prodded the madwoman towards Li, and told him, somewhat incoherently, 'Make me a cheongsam . . . a cheongsam! I've talked to you about it before – the white velvet cheongsam. I've even brought her along!'

‘A person is a person, a cheongsam is a cheongsam. Tell me exactly what you want.’ First, though, the tailor took a look at the strange woman: she was in her thirties and pretty at first glance. But she did not bear close examination well: at second glance she looked strained, and yet a third revealed a kind of torpor in her. The tailor’s eyes lit up, but she was not looking at him, instead she was fanning herself and having a look about the shop, casually criticizing all the clothes: ‘You call this clothing? So ugly!’

The light in the tailor’s eyes faded and he stared hard at her cheongsam. ‘I’m not dreaming, am I? Is history going backwards now? I didn’t think anyone still showed themselves in public looking like that!’

Wenqin, standing behind the madwoman, gestured to her head, which the tailor misinterpreted. ‘Hard to deal with, eh? What, you or her? I’m not afraid of difficult customers – that’s for other people. You know all about the quality of my work.’ Wenqin gave up, and without further explanation threw the bolt of red velvet onto the sewing table. Prodding the madwoman again, she said, ‘Take this as the pattern. Make me one like hers.’

‘What’s got into you? You want to have a cheongsam made now? Well, I won’t do it. Even if I did, you’d never dare wear it.’ The tailor seemed to want to keep her in suspense. ‘Last time I made you bell-bottoms, but I haven’t seen you wearing them.’

‘How do you know I haven’t worn them? I don’t wear them for *you*,’ she started in a bullying tone, then suddenly switched back to sweetness and light. ‘Oh, what does it matter anyway? First, you’re not my boss, and second, you’re not my husband. You’re my tailor, so your place is just to do the job. Besides, where is it written that if I have clothing made I have to wear it outside the house?’

‘I make clothes for you, and then you’re too scared to wear them? I suppose you want to be named a model worker, afraid of being criticized by your superiors?’ the tailor said. ‘You mean you’ll only wear it at home? Just for your husband? What a waste!’

‘You dirty old hunchback! What business is it of yours who I wear it for?’ Wenqin picked up a piece of chalk and threw it at him. ‘Let me tell you something: a lot of the clothes I’ve ordered are stored in my chest. Even if I don’t wear them, I can still take them out and look at them. They make me feel better.’

‘After all the work I put into that clothing, you let it rot away in a chest? When I think how demanding you were when I was making it: if the end of a thread was too coarse you kicked up such a fuss! And then you take it all home to stick in a box?’ The tailor looked as if he couldn’t quite bring himself to laugh. He stared at Wenqin, and suddenly his face hardened. ‘Well, I won’t make clothes for you, not any more. The money I earn off you is like a traitor’s reward: I end up holding myself in contempt.’

‘Oh, yes? Or maybe you don’t even know how to make a cheongsam!’ Wenqin was clearly irritated. She held it in check for a moment, and then went on baiting him. ‘And here was I thinking you were the best tailor in the city! Best tailor my arse, if you can’t even make a cheongsam.’

‘I never said I was the best in the city, did I? In a profession like this, it doesn’t matter who says they’re the best; it’s the clothing that does the talking in the end.’ After clowning about, the tailor grew more serious. Avoiding Wenqin’s eyes, he squinted sideways at the madwoman, sizing her up as she stood by the shop window. ‘Has the lady comrade come here to stroll around? Why doesn’t she take a seat?’ Still the madwoman stood by the window,

stretching one of her hands into the window display to fondle something.

‘Never mind her,’ said Wenqin, ‘she can’t sit still. Just tell me how we should go about taking the measurements.’

‘You’re a little fuller than she is. Chest, waist and hips will all be different. What choice do we have? Get her to take her cheongsam off and put it on yourself. That’s the only way to do it if you want accurate measurements.’

The madwoman raised her head and walked daintily around, pointing at the clothing hanging on the racks with her sandalwood fan. She pointed at a tawny army uniform and said, ‘The People’s Liberation Army.’ Then she pointed at a white shirt and said, ‘Red Guards.’ Then it was blue trousers: ‘Junior Red Guards.’ A black skirt: ‘Old women.’ In the course of pointing at all the clothes she reached a dress with blue polka dots that reminded her of her daughter, Susu. She turned around and asked Wenqin, ‘What time is it? Shouldn’t Susu be on her way home?’

Wenqin glanced at her wristwatch and said, ‘No rush, no rush.’ But her body tensed, and with a glare at the tailor she said, ‘I’m not in any mood to chatter the day away here. Hurry up and get started. I have a million things to do at home and I must get back.’

The tailor chortled and said, ‘You want me to get started? On whom? Shall I help you undress?’

Wenqin raised one finger and tapped herself on the forehead. ‘Tricked me again! Every time I come here I’m swept up in your chatter. You flirt away without my even noticing.’

Wenqin lured the madwoman behind a printed curtain, into what passed for the tailor’s bedroom. There was a wooden-framed single bed and a portrait of the heroine

from *Azalea Mountain*¹ was pasted on the wall over its head; her eyes stared fiercely, while the position of her hands suggested cool calculation. Underneath the bed was a spittoon that hadn't been emptied in several days and emitted a sour, noxious odour. Wenqin had changed in there before and immediately took care to pull the curtain shut behind her before fastening both ends with iron clips. Despite her precautions, the madwoman was far from reassured and cried out in alarm, 'What kind of place is this? I want to go out. I don't want to change here.'

'You're driving me mad,' Wenqin replied. 'You're not the MC for the cultural ensemble any more. There aren't any dressing rooms: the women who come to the tailor's all change here. There's a curtain. What are you afraid of? Do you think Mr Li's some kind of pervert?'

On the other side of the curtain, Mr Li was indeed behaving well. First he went to pour himself some tea and glugged the aromatic liquid down, then he hummed something from a revolutionary opera: 'Rosy aurora-aha, mirrored in Yangcheng Lake's waters-a-ah-a.'² In his bedroom, all was not so harmonious. The madwoman refused to strip and Wenqin was too impatient. After much twisting and turning the struggle died down, and all the tailor heard was the light swishing of cloth against cloth and the sound of rubbing hands. After a moment, Wenqin lifted up the curtain and walked out of the bedroom clad in the white velvet cheongsam. She stretched both hands out to the tailor, then made a half turn. She modelled the clothing in a bashful yet confident manner, as if to ask, 'How does it suit me?'

The tailor called out, 'Ooh-la-la!' and clapping his hands as he advanced on her, he grabbed her by the waist and said, 'It looks great. Even better than it did on her.'

As the tailor took Wenqin's measurements, he forgot the madwoman even existed, and after some overzealous measuring, Wenqin suddenly gave him a resounding slap, saying, 'Nasty hunchback! I'm in a good mood today so I've been letting you get away with it, but you'd better keep your mind on this cheongsam. If you do a bad job, don't think I'll let it go lightly.'

'If I were going to make a mess of it, I wouldn't have taken the job,' he assured her. 'Even if I were ten times braver, I wouldn't dare put anything less into it than you deserve.'

The two of them suddenly became aware that the madwoman had begun to pace restlessly behind the curtain. 'What time is it?' she muttered. 'The time? Oh, no - it's totally dark outside already. Susu must have left school a long time ago.' The curtain suddenly bulged - the madwoman had thrust her face against it and was saying, 'It's dark outside. Why don't you let me go home? Give me my cheongsam back and let me go home!'

Wenqin assured her, 'It's all right, all right. There's nothing wrong. What are you screaming about? Are you scared of the dark? There's no light on in there, so it *is* a little dark. If you're afraid, I'll get Mr Li to turn on the light for you.'

For some reason the tailor smirked as he went to turn it on. As soon as he lit it, the silhouette of the madwoman was clearly visible through the curtain. The sudden appearance of the shadow frightened the madwoman and she shouted, 'Oh!' The shadow giving a little jump.

Wenqin saw immediately that the light wasn't helping and rushed to turn it off. Then she turned back to rebuke the tailor. 'I should have known. No sense in trying to stop a dog from eating shit, is there, you wretch?'