

SINGAPORE **E** CLASSICS

THREE SISTERS OF SZE  
TAN KOK SENG



TAN KOK SENG is the well known author of a trilogy of books based on his life: *Son of Singapore*, *Man of Malaysia* and *Eye on the World*. His fourth book was originally published as *Three Sisters of Sz* by Heinemann Asia in 1979. It is his first novel.

Tan's books had all been written first in Mandarin and afterwards 'rendered into English' in a collaborative effort with his former employer, Austin Coates, for whom Tan worked as a driver in Hong Kong. All his four books had been reprinted several times since their first publication, but they have been out-of-print for many years since.

Tan now resides in Singapore with his family.

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# THREE SISTERS OF SIZE

TAN KOK SENG

Rendered into English in collaboration  
with Austin Coates



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To  
Tan Swee Lain  
and  
Tan Wei Ee Beverly

## Introduction

### THE MAN OF SECRETS

Singapore author Tan Kok Seng made his literary debut in 1972 when *Son of Singapore* was published by Heinemann Educational Books (Asia) Ltd. This book covered the early years of his life: growing up on a farm in Singapore, working as a coolie in Orchard Road, and finally moving to Kuala Lumpur to work as a driver.

From the very beginning, *Son of Singapore* was well received. On 30 December 1972, the front page of the local newspaper, *New Nation*, even featured Tan Kok Seng as one of their Men of the Year. Since then, the book has been reprinted a number of times, and translated into Chinese, Japanese and Sinhalese. Kok Seng followed up with two more books—*Man of Malaysia* and *Eye on the World*—that together make up his autobiographical trilogy. A significant achievement.

*Three Sisters of Sz* is Kok Seng's fourth and last book. It was first published by Heinemann Asia in 1979, and then reprinted in 1984 and 1989. His first three books were filled with philosophical anecdotes about his personal path to manhood. But this fourth book focuses instead on the private

lives of three sisters growing up in Penang—Sze Ee Lan, Sze Hsiang Lan and Sze Pai Lan, daughters of a respected rubber merchant named Sze Chung Shih.

The main events take place around the time that the Duke of Edinburgh's visit to Queenstown Housing Estate in Singapore—which happened in 1965—was still talked about by the residents with much pride. But this novel doesn't focus on royalty or national history. Instead, it contemplates the fate of the sisters, their dramatic twists and turns through states of love and loneliness, passion and pain, sex and shame.

One night, in a moment of sadness, Sze Chung Shih makes a startling promise to his daughter.

“Hsiang Lan,” he said in the same deeper tone of voice he had used a moment before, “one day I'm going to tell you one of my secrets. In this house you're the only one I can trust with it, and you're the only one who will understand me.” (19)

What dark secrets does he hide? The reader is thus lured into the unfolding of the narrative.

#### SEX, SHAME AND SINGAPORE

The book starts off with a deceptively idyllic description of Penang:

Pai Lan's family lived on a small and beautiful island with exceptional views—as the saying goes, “bright mountain, clear water”—known to people outside the island as Eastern Garden.

The population of the island was about half a million, and three races lived there harmoniously—Malay, Indian and Chinese. (5)

The setting of this story and the personalities of the main characters are established through wry comments about local history, family rituals and personal idiosyncrasies. Many parts read like domestic fiction, vaguely Jane Austen-ish, applied to life in the Straits Settlements and in modern times, with a concern for women who desperately desire to feel alive and transcend their inner burden of feeling, caring, loving and knowing.

But for the women in this story, it is hard to find choices that bring lasting fulfilment and joy. Some get lured into escapist imaginings, “reading love stories” and “dress and beauty magazines”. Some are infatuated with “gangster-type boys” on motorcycles, and live to “play and eat, and dance to all that noise”. Some develop an addiction to mahjong, and are consumed by this obsession to the extent that they abandon their duties and turn bitter towards their loved ones. Others seek sexual distractions, whether as a result of too much alcohol or of unbridled teenage lust.

For Hsiang Lan, the central character in this book, the quest for fulfilment is finally expressed through her decision to get married and settle down. She wishes with all the wisdom in her heart for a good husband. It seems commendable at first. But things turn bleak when her search takes her out of Penang to an urban nightmare named Singapore:

She took one rather pulverised look. Facing her was a very large television set, next to it a very large refrigerator. The way the sofas and chairs were arranged made it feel slightly like walking into a cinema on a very small scale. Everything faced the television screen. On the right hand side, near the wall, was a record player with an amplifier and two loudspeakers spread out some distance away on either side. It was the first time she had ever been into a flat. Quite apart from the fact that it seemed almost suffocatingly small, there was something else, a sense of unreality. There was no front garden, no lawn, no orchids, no chickens. (187-188)

For her, there is no greater horror.

#### BROTHERS IN CHARM

The narrative material in *Three Sisters of Sze* is well suited for creating a primetime soap opera. Which might make one wonder about the creative genius behind this. Or, in this case, the two of them.

In Tan Kok Seng's four books, he is credited as the author on the title page, always with a standard notice following this: "Rendered into English in collaboration with Austin Coates". What exactly does this mean? Kok Seng explained it to me.

He was once based in Hong Kong as a driver for a British diplomat named Austin Coates. Kok Seng was about thirty years old, a married man with a son and a daughter. He had tried to settle his children into an international school there,

but he and his wife eventually decided to send them back to Singapore for their education.

Kok Seng stayed on at his job while his family returned to Singapore. But his thoughts were with them. In the evenings he would hide away and scribble in a book, lost in his own urgent endeavour to share his life story with his children, and convey his ideas about life.

Like any parent would be, Kok Seng was anxious about his children's future. What kind of people would they grow up to be? What kind of values would they have? How would they face the inevitable hardships, challenges and setbacks in life?

Kok Seng started to write his life story in Chinese, hoping to keep it aside until his children were old enough to appreciate it. But Coates, his employer, got curious. One day he confronted Kok Seng, "Hey, what are you up to, always hiding away like that?" Kok Seng assured his employer that he was not up to any mischief. He offered to read from the humble manuscript and was surprised when Coates said, "This is too good to just set aside for your children. It must be published. In English!"

Kok Seng was horrified at first. But they worked together for six months, an hour or so every evening, Kok Seng reading from the manuscript, Coates helping to translate it into English, frequently debating over the choice of words and phrases that would best convey the essence of Kok Seng's simple but purposeful story.

Through these sessions, reminiscing after dinner in the company of an appreciative friend, a narrative style naturally emerged, warm and conversational, one that many readers have found easy to relate to, even decades later. This was the start of Kok Seng's literary education, his artistic apprenticeship. *Son of Singapore* was the first book to be completed in this manner, and with this method they went on to finish three more books.

Compared with the earlier titles, *Three Sisters of Sze* shows a remarkable refinement in characterisation, expression and narrative development. These pages bring to life a forgotten era. Personalities are portrayed, emotions are explored, destinies are deliberated, all with a sense of ease and economy.

Readers are thus entertained, and rewarded for their attention.

#### LAST WORDS

"Hsiang Lan," he said in the same deeper tone of voice he had used a moment before, "one day I'm going to tell you one of my secrets."

What is Sze Chung Shih's great secret? How will his daughter Hsiang Lan react? What on earth is at stake? It is time for you to find out.

Happy reading!

Don Bosco, August 2012

Don Bosco has worked as a writer, lecturer and technologist. He currently publishes fantasy stories, which are set in Asia, for young readers. He lives in Singapore. His website is [www.SuperCoolBooks.com](http://www.SuperCoolBooks.com).



THREE SISTERS  
OF SIZE

## 13 Sze Lane

THE CHINESE HAVE a saying that to bring up the young is a provision for old age. This saying exists no more.

One beautiful morning, the sun just above the tops of the coconut trees, pushing out strong energy, his light penetrating the whole wide world, in the Sze family house they were playing mahjong, Mrs. Sze and three other women sitting round the square table in the dining room, In the midst of the game Mrs. Sze called out to her youngest daughter—"Pai Lan!"—and continued her game. A little while later she called out again—"Pai Lan!"—this time a bit louder. Still no response.

"Ee Lan!" Mrs. Sze called, still at her game, though in a different tone of voice, a resigned tone. "Go and see where Pai Lan is."

Ee Lan, in her bedroom, in her very light voice, exquisitely modulated, uttered a sweet call.

"Rosie! Mother wants you."

Ee Lan was Pai Lan's eldest sister, also called Molly.

Pai Lan at this moment was in the hall—the main room of

the house—with the record-player on, dancing to music in a new style of dance, shaking and jumping without steps. Dancing, she was sweating from head to foot. Every now and then, she swept her hand across her forehead to stop the sweat getting in her eyes.

Ee Lan called her sister several times without reply.

She came out from her bedroom into the hall. She came out lightly and silently, her movements as exquisite as her voice. Big, shining eyes, new moon eyebrows with melon-seed face and smooth, soft skin, with peach mouth and a well-built body, wearing a white sports sweatshirt and a blue flowered miniskirt with a white base, her height about one-and-a-half metres, beautiful long legs... everyone who saw her fell in love with her.

Coming into the hall, she found her sister dancing away, not having heard either her mother or herself.

“Rosie,” she said quietly in her light voice. “Mother is calling you. Didn’t you hear?”

Pai Lan ran angrily to the record-player, and roughly turned it off. She rounded on her sister.

“I was just dancing happily!” she snapped. “Why didn’t you go and call Hsiang Lan?”

Hsiang Lan was Pai Lan’s second sister.

Ee Lan was not angry at being shouted at by her younger sister.

“Mother wants you,” she told the wild Pai Lan in her soft voice. “I was in my room, and heard her call you several times,

and I didn’t hear you answer. I was goodhearted enough to come and tell you. Hsiang Lan is preparing our lunch, and your stomach is going to get hungry too, just like all of us.”

Pai Lan exploded. “You—!”

But she got no further. Ee Lan at once continued. “Rosie, how can you be angry with me? Next time I’d rather not care about you. Let Mother scold you.”

With this she turned and went back to her bedroom. Pai Lan did not wait for her sister to finish. In a run and a jump she was with her mother. She saw her seated in her high-back chair with the three ladies at the square table, playing mahjong. The three ladies were about the same age as her mother, all in their forties. Pai Lan ran up to her mother.

“Mother!” she asked in a hurry. “You wanted me to do something...”

Her mother was at the moment concentrating on the three ladies and the mahjong bricks they were banging down on the table, her eyes fixed on each lady in turn. On her round face, her eyes were open, round and big. She was concentrating—and tense. She waited and waited.

Seeing her mother in this situation, Pai Lan stamped her foot.

“Mother!” she cried out angrily. “Do you really want me to do something? Will you please hurry up and say, otherwise...”

Her mother did not even turn her head. It was as if she could not hear her daughter’s voice. Her hearing seemed to have gone. Actually, Pai Lan thought, her hearing was quite

all right. Why should she suddenly have gone deaf? Pai Lan saw too that her mother could hear what the other ladies were saying. With them her hearing was quite all right. She was too tense. Her bricks were too good. She did not have even a second to talk to her daughter.

Pai Lan became more and more angry. Her mouth hooked up. At this moment her mother suddenly shouted out, "*Pung! Pung! Hung chung pung!*"

In her excitement she frightened her daughter. Pai Lan jumped, and was furious.

"Mother!" she screamed. "My good mother! What do you want me for?"

She spoke in a rough way, her eyebrows knitted together, staring at her mother.

The mother did not notice her daughter's reaction at all. She looked only at the table. After her "*Pung! Hung chung pung!*" she laid out her entire hand to show the other ladies, then turned to her daughter with a smile.

"Pai Lan, Mum's got *da san yuan*, full house. Will you get a dollar from your elder sister? Go to the mouth of the lane, and buy me a packet of cigarettes from that Indian mobile stall."

Pai Lan did not wait a second. She didn't care in the least if her mother had full house. She simply knew her mother wanted cigarettes. She raced to her elder sister's bedroom door.

"Molly!" she called out loudly. "Mother's asking you to give me a dollar to buy her cigarettes. Quick! Hurry up!"

Ee Lan, hearing her quick-tempered sister shouting, moved out from her room with a light step, her right hand holding a red handbag.

She leaned delicately against the door, raised the handbag, slowly opened it, and with the other hand carefully took out a small leather purse. Using two elegant fingers, she drew from the purse a one-dollar note folded exactly square, then opened it out to examine it.

Pai Lan couldn't stand this any longer. She gripped the note, still only half unfolded, snatched it from her sister, and made a monkey face.

"Molly, my elder sister, if I find two notes folded together, I will give you back one. But," she added, "with a person like you, how could two notes ever be folded together?"

So saying, she ran out of the house, sped through the garden, and disappeared into the lane. Ee Lan shook her head exquisitely, and went back to her room.

Pai Lan's family lived on a small and beautiful island with exceptional views—as the saying goes, "bright mountain, clear water"—known to people outside the island as Eastern Garden. The population of the island was about half a million, and three races lived there harmoniously—Malay, Indian and Chinese. In the town most people were Chinese—businessmen and others. A great number of the Malays were originally immigrants from Sumatra, the Indians were from South India, and the Chinese from the sea coast of South-east China.

The town was founded in 1786 by an Englishman named Francis Light. People there could find all kinds of ways of making a living, whether as planter or merchant, fisherman or builder. The plantations were of rice, vegetables, spices, rubber and fruit. The fruit was for local consumption, the spices and rubber for export. The island was a free port. From all over the country, people sent their tin, timber and rubber to the port, whence ships bore it all over the world.

The lane in which the family lived—Sze Lane—was quiet and pleasant, quite short and bordered with tall, straight, slender *pinang* trees—betel-nut trees. The island was named Penang after the tree. Also it was said—though not authenticated—that when the first outsiders came to the island and asked the local people what its name was, the latter were chewing betel, and with the language problem they thought the strangers were asking what they were chewing, and thus said, “*Pinang*”.

The family house was eight kilometres from the city centre, in the garden zone of the town. The lane was named after a Kapitan China of the nineteenth century, known to Malays as Kapitan China Sze. Pai Lan’s father’s surname was also Sze, his personal name Chung Shih. He was a rubber broker, and people in the business world called him Tuan Rubber Sze Muda. His father was an immigrant from Fukien province in China, and Malays had called him Tuan Rubber Sze. So naturally the son, pursuing the same business as his father, bore his father’s name, and people simply added Muda—the

Younger—to indicate which was father and which was son.

Sad to relate, the Sze family was not connected with the family of Kapitan China Sze, and the lane was not named after them. Still—a Sze family living in Sze Lane—it might have been, thereby conferring a certain air of distinction. Sze, incidentally, means ‘think’, and though thinking was not exactly the first impression gained on entering the home of the Sze family of Sze Lane, it was a kind of emblem of what they were expected to live up to. Finally, there were four major languages used in the island, and Tuan Rubber Sze Muda incorporated three of these in his name—in one shot, as it were—suggesting a confluence of the nation almost as good as a parliament.

The Muda’s wife, Chen Mei Wah, was a short, fat, round-faced woman, only one-and-a-half-metres tall. Her husband was a fine, solidly-built man, considerably taller than his wife. He had a long rectangular face, high nose, and rather unusual eyebrows which seemed to make the Chinese character for ‘one’. He had a wide mouth, and when he spoke he did so loud and clear, always with a humorous touch which fascinated women and young girls. He was a good husband and a good father too. In commercial circles he was known as an exceptionally sound businessman.

His wife, though short and plump, was a nice-looking woman, her face always with a slightly pink look, her skin soft and smooth. Tuan Rubber Sze Muda had three daughters. The eldest was Ee Lan, who went to a Christian school and

had a Christian name, Molly. Number Two was Hsiang Lan who, being in a Buddhist school, was simply Hsiang Lan. Number Three, Pai Lan, was in her elder sister's school, and her school name was Rosie.

The family lived in the last house in Sze Lane. On a moonless night, there being no lamp posts, it was too dark to see even three metres. There were only thirteen houses in the lane, all owned by Chinese, all of them with ancestors from the same group of villages in Fukien province. Since the eighteenth century, there were already Chinese on the island, and many of the thirteen families had been there for more than a hundred years, living in various parts of town. All in Sze Lane were Chinese, and everyone of them spoke fluent Malay. Being the last of the thirteen houses, the Sze family's house was Number 13. Many Christian families had been unwilling to buy and live in this house, but as the Sze family was Buddhist, naturally their superstitions were not the same.

All the houses in the lane had been built by the same architect, and were the same in style, size and appearance, outside and in, all exactly the same. But luckily each house had its own colour scheme, to suit the owner's taste. Some were pink, some cream, and some a very light green. The Sze family's house was very bright in colour, the outer walls pink, the windows and doors white, the roof green-tiled. Inside, all was white save for the window frames, which were light grey. All the furniture—even the beds and kitchen chairs—was of

blackwood, most of it inlaid with mother-of-pearl. Outside, the ground was covered with very soft Taiwan grass, like a huge green carpet lying over the garden, giving a very cool feeling, suited to the hot climate. In front of the house were some rather ordinary orchids, but they were lively and pretty, and at the two corners of the garden were two coconut trees, neither of them more than a man's height, but well-weighted with yellow fruits.

At the back of the house there were two dark-leaved rambutan trees. At this time they were just flowering, the flowers small and white. When they bloomed, it was as if the green tree had been infected by a disease, becoming more and more white. As the flowers came, butterflies and honeybees came too, to surround the tree, the butterflies showing off in dancing style, like young girls performing on the stage wearing multi-coloured dresses, the honeybees—those unemotional creatures—coming to the tree and launching a continuous attack on the small flowers, holding tight each flower and deep kissing it, sucking out the flower's very heart.

Beneath one of the rambutan trees was a bamboo cage containing some ten small chicks of a special type with snow-white feathers, their beaks and feet so black they looked as if they were painted. Actually, they had beautifully fine white feathers, but when the wind blew the feathers the wrong way it could be seen that the chickens' skins, like their beaks and feet, were black. Known as *chu szu chi*, meaning bamboo string

chickens, they were like African girls in winter wearing white mohair furs, as when going out to a dance party.

These chicks jumped and cried all day long, making the Sze family hate the little creatures. Ee Lan in particular hated the chicks.

“They make the whole house stink,” she said.

Hsiang Lan, on the other hand, looked upon the chicks as her own precious treasure. It was she who fed them, and sometimes she would go under the tree and play with them. She seemed to understand each chick’s different character, while the chicks on their part seemed to understand what she said to them. Hsiang Lan wove her own world around herself. The family could not understand her. When the chicks called in a certain way, she knew at once they were hungry, and would go and feed them. At other times they would be quarrelling among themselves. Hsiang Lan would give them a special cluck-cluck of her own and they would all stop. They were rather like Primary One children when the teacher was late, and the entire class ended up like a marketplace. At the sound of the teacher’s step near the door, there was sudden dead silence. The kids and the chicks were the same.

## 2

### Sze Muda Confides in His Second Daughter

IT REALLY WAS a beautiful day. It was a Sunday, and the wall clock had just struck eleven. Pai Lan had gone to buy cigarettes for her mother. Father had just woken up. Emerging from his bedroom, he saw his wife and the three tai-tai playing mahjong. He took a look around. Ee Lan was very quiet in her room, which was on the right. On the left, from Pai Lan’s and Hsiang Lan’s room there was no sound at all. He walked through the dining room, smiling at the tai-tai, and went to the kitchen. As he passed the tai-tai, no one noticed him, all of them concentrated on the game, the three tai-tai equally worried lest Mrs. Sze get another full house. Apart from their bricks, nothing mattered. The sky could collapse, the earth tremble...

Hsiang Lan was in the kitchen, preparing lunch. Head down and concentrated, she was carefully cleaning vegetables. At the sound of her father’s familiar footsteps, she looked up and said “Good morning”, left the unfinished vegetables, and

walked to the kitchen table as usual to give him a cup of coffee.

“I don’t want any breakfast today, Hsiang Lan,” he said. “Just coffee.”

Before he had finished speaking, his daughter had brought him his daily-used dragon cup fragrant with fresh coffee, and presented it to him with both hands.

“Are you staying for lunch today?” she asked. “I’ve got your favourite dish—beef and broccoli.”

He smiled at her.

“Actually, I always try to be in for meals on Sunday, as you know,” he said, “but yesterday a few friends of mine already decided to go to the restaurant for lunch to discuss business.”

At this moment Pai Lan, like a boy, running and singing before she reached the house, drew near, singing a song with words invented by herself.

“Love—oo-la-la! Love—oo-la-la!

Mother-love, father-love,

Brother-love and sister-love,

But nothing, nothing, nothing

Can be sweeter

Than lover-love!”

She was so happy coming back from the street because she had met her boyfriend, who was going to the same stall. No wonder she sang that song.

Michael Ma was a very tall, fair, slim boy. Two years older than Pai Lan, he studied at one of the English schools. His

father was a tin-mine owner, always travelling between Penang and Ipoh, the tin-mine town, and he had several wives and many children.

Michael Ma’s mother was Number Three wife, and lived in Penang. Michael’s father never had time to look after any of his children. Michael often asked money of his father. After he got it, he would go to his mother and ask for some more. He always had quite a lot of money in his pocket.

When he’d got money, he would go to take girlfriends out to coffee or the cinema. Pai Lan was one of his girlfriends. He liked to show off to his girls, taking them to very expensive and high-class coffeehouses. Compared with a coffeeshop, the price of a cup of coffee in a coffeehouse was three or four times more.

He had dated her for coffee when they met at the Indian mobile stall, making her very happy. After throwing the cigarettes in front of her mother, she asked in a happy voice, “Have you seen if Father’s woken up yet?”

Her mother neither heard nor answered. Picking up the cigarettes, she peeled off the wrapper, and offered a cigarette to each tai-tai. She then took one herself, put it between her lips, but her eyes concentrated on the bricks on the table, she did not even have time to light it. It was her turn to pick up another brick.

Pai Lan, seeing all this, did not wait for her mother to reply. She ran into the kitchen.



"Hsiang Lan, has Papa woken up yet?" she cried out in her loud voice.

She had not noticed, but her father was already seated in one of the mother-of-pearl chairs, drinking his coffee.

"You're not a baby anymore, Pai Lan," he said sternly. "Don't go jumping and shouting, as if you were a boy. Remember you're a girl of sixteen. If outsiders see you, they'll say you've had no parental teaching. You look as though you've run wild."

For Pai Lan, this went in one ear and out the other. "Daddy!" she said. "Tonight I want to go to Lucy's birthday party. Could you give me ten dollars? I want to buy her a present."

Lucy was a school friend.

Her father looked displeased.

"Why do you want so much?" he asked. But he could not even finish.

"Daddy! Daddy! When Lucy asks her father, she never opens her mouth for less than twenty or thirty. I've never asked you in my life for that much, I think about you," she said winsomely. "And Lucy's mother is even better. When Lucy has no money to spend, her mother always gives her three or five dollars without being asked. But every time I ask for money, you always ask why. You see, Lucy's parents never ask anything. I've seen it with my own eyes many times."

Her father could not put up with this.

"Pai Lan," he said angrily. "You are *you!* Don't learn from other people. If you say one more word about Lucy, I won't

give you one cent." And he turned to his second daughter, "Hsiang Lan, when you've finished your work, go to your father's chest of drawers, and get five dollars for your sister."

"Daddy! Daddy!" Pai Lan begged. "Ask Hsiang Lan to give me ten!"

Her father stared at her without a word. Pai Lan said nothing. She feared now she was not going to get the ten dollars, yet she had the spirit to go on.

"Daddy!" she begged. "Five dollars isn't enough!"

This only made her father more angry. He slammed his hand down on the table.

"Don't behave so wildly!" he shouted. "A girl should behave like a girl. I don't want you to be all day long nothing but money, money, party, party. Good things you never learn, and bad things you learn all too quickly. Good friends don't reckon you by the price of your presents."

But Pai Lan was determined to get the money.

"Daddy, if you don't give me ten dollars, I'm going to ask Mother," she threatened.

Faced with such obstinacy, the father did not know what to say. He turned to Hsiang Lan, and looked at her for some time.

"This is all your mother's fault," he said softly.

He spoke very simply, but his tone was hopeless. "Hsiang Lan, when you are free, give her ten dollars. Don't let her worry your mother. I understand your mother very well. When she's gambling, she doesn't like anyone to ask her for money.

It's better to avoid unhappiness in the house."

Hsiang Lan nodded.

"Yes, Papa," she said.

Pai Lan was now very happy.

"Daddy, thank you very much!" she cried out loudly. "I'll go and get it myself. Don't trouble, Sister."

"Not allowed!" the father shouted with sudden fury.

Pai Lan, who had never seen her father so angry before, dared not open her mouth. But she knew she had won. She turned to her sister.

"Hsiang Lan, don't forget my ten dollars. Bye-bye now!"

She dashed out of the kitchen, and off somewhere. Hsiang Lan heard the sound of a motorcycle in the street. She knew the sound. Michael Ma had come to take her younger sister out. But Hsiang Lan dared not let her father know she knew, afraid of her father being angry. She also knew that Pai Lan and Michael liked to play and gad about. Their schoolwork never had good results.

After she'd gone, Hsiang Lan turned back to her father. To her surprise he sighed helplessly, and expressed her own thoughts as she could not have done herself.

"In this house, luckily we have you here, Hsiang Lan," he said, "otherwise I don't know what it would be like. Your mother sitting day and night at the mahjong table, your eldest sister all day long reading love stories or going through dress and beauty magazines, and apart from this criticising every

boy she meets—either his mouth is too wide, or he's too thin, or he's too short, or he's too fat, no one is perfect enough for her—and your younger sister all day long buying sweets or going to parties here and there, and always saying you're like a village girl, not modern enough, and she herself thinks she's very Westernised—this really worries me. That type which just likes to play and eat, and dance to all that noise, and thinks this is modern...!" He made a grimace, and thought for a moment. "A few days ago, her headmistress phoned me at the office, and said she hoped I wouldn't let Rosie get mixed up with gangster-type boys. She said that though boys like that don't understand much, they can create a great deal of trouble. She also asked me to stop Rosie turning up at school with painted fingernails. She said she hoped the parents would cooperate with the school."

He spoke with an air of sadness.

"Your mother and I cannot discuss anything together anymore. She's not interested in anything except mahjong, and I myself need to look after the business."

The more he spoke, the more upset he seemed. At last he rose. But after only two steps he halted, still full of things he wanted to tell his daughter.

"Hsiang Lan," he said in a deeper voice, "one day, when you've left this home, I may never come back."

It was so quiet, sudden and unexpected it almost took her breath away. She stared at him, not understanding what he meant.

"Papa, I'm your daughter," she said. "Who should say I'll go away from you?"

"Yes," he replied. "It's because you're my daughter that I'm afraid. Sooner or later you'll get married."

The two looked at each other in silence for quite a time. Then Hsiang Lan, not saying anything, went back to her unfinished vegetables, and resumed her work.

"Papa," she suddenly said very softly, "supposing I get married, I can still come and look after you. Mother likes her mahjong. But one day she'll get tired of it. Then she'll look after you again."

Her father shook his head with a sigh.

"Your mother's been drugged by mahjong for over ten years. This is not a short time. Before, I too used to think like you—and I told her several times. But she just ignored it, and I understood. For more than ten years I've tasted this experience. Many years ago, I'd already changed in my attitudes. I'm not like I was before, loving all of you so much. Now my only responsibility is to provide money to keep the household going, so that you people can live in a comfortable way, like others. You know very well, between your mother and me, all emotion has dried up and died."

Distressed at hearing her father talk in such a way, Hsiang Lan quickly changed the subject.

"Papa," she said, "you told me you're going to the restaurant to have lunch with friends. You're going to be late. Which suit

are you going to wear? May I go in and get it out for you?"

The father still had much pent up inside him which he wished to tell her. He knitted his eyebrows, and did not answer her question.

"Hsiang Lan," he said in the same deeper tone of voice he had used a moment before, "one day I'm going to tell you one of my secrets. In this house you're the only one I can trust with it, and you're the only one who will understand me."

He stretched his arms in the air and straightened his back. He smiled, and looked more cheerful.

"Papa doesn't need a suit today," he told her. "It's just ordinary friends."

He walked away, then unexpectedly stopped and turned back.

"Oh yes," he said. "I nearly forgot again. I've wanted to ask you for some time, and I always forget. Where's that boyfriend of yours? I haven't seen him here for a long time. I rather like him. He has man's look. But I can't understand why it is, your mother and your sisters don't like him. Also I can't understand why the family say you're too Chinese in your ways. I know what they say about your boyfriend, that his father used to be too much connected with the communists. But that's his father's mistake; it's nothing to do with him."

He had reached these words when he noticed his daughter was in tears. He swallowed the rest of what he wanted to say.

"Don't wait for Papa to come back for dinner," he added quickly. "Yesterday, Uncle Lim asked me to go to his house,

and I'm sure he'll ask me to stay for dinner."

With this, Hsiang Lan woke up from inside her own thoughts.

"You're not against my being friendly with Kang Chia Sheng?" she asked excitedly. "He went down to Singapore, and has taken a job."

Her father came back two steps towards her and put his hands on her shoulders.

"I have nothing against him," he said in a very quiet tone of voice. "As I told you, I rather like him. It's only your mother and sisters. They say he's too old-fashioned, too like the old Chinese. They think they're so modern, and you're so old-fashioned. Never mind. Things for you will be all right."

With a smile to her, he left the kitchen.

She watched him go, after which she stood there for a moment lost in thought. Then she went on with her unfinished work, preparing the lunch.

Meanwhile she was thinking about her boyfriend. Kang Chia Sheng's father was at one time connected with the Malayan Communist Party, meaning that Chia Sheng was regarded as a communist's son, and many of Hsiang Lan's friends and schoolmates had warned her not to be too friendly with him because of this. She had paid no attention. "His father may have been a communist," she always replied. "But when the parents do something wrong, how can you blame the children? Also you people must realise that when a person makes a

mistake, and has the courage to recognise it's a mistake, he has already changed, and one should accept this and forgive him." But whenever she talked like this, she always received the same simple reply, "You're Chia Sheng's friend, so of course you stand up for him."

Chia Sheng, in fact, was clever and ambitious. He and Hsiang Lan first met through basketball, when Hsiang Lan, in Secondary Two, went with her team to play at another school whose girls' team's coach was Chia Sheng. Introduced by the students, they discovered they had the same interests, and from that time onwards became friends, exchanging knowledge in their studies at the same level. Within a year they were in love. For a boy and girl of that age at school, love was a dangerous development, capable of destroying all study and education. But these two had the courage to put their hearts into their studies. Discussing their respective problems and difficulties in different subjects, they never threw their study hours away. When the final term came, Hsiang Lan's results were better than the year before. Her teacher, who knew she was in love, did not say anything to her.

Chia Sheng left school after completing Secondary Three. His father had once again lost his job. The reason for this was the usual one. He had been with the communists long ago, and his boss had found this out. The father knew by now the full depth of the mistake he had made in joining the communists. Since leaving them, he had never succeeded in holding down a

regular job. Somehow he was always kicked out, and this was not just destiny. His record was there, and he could never escape from it. He could never, like other men, get regular employment. All he could hope for was odd jobs here and there.

Chia Sheng, after leaving school, hunted each day for a job, to help support his family. Whenever someone considered him suitable to employ, and then found out the family background, he dared not engage the boy. It was not easy for the son of a former communist to find a job anywhere on the island. He did not give up, however. After several months he got a job as a delivery boy in a sundry goods shop. The work was hard and lowly paid. On it he could earn very little to help his family. He continued working there for ten months. Then one day a friend introduced him to a job in shipbuilding in Singapore.

It was the tough job of a welder's mate, working in the full heat of the sun, standing on plates of steel sending up heat even hotter than that of the sun, and consisted of helping the skilled welders in the movement of these burning hot steel plates in conditions of terrible heat.

Hsiang Lan had up till now always been comforted by the fact that her boyfriend had the ambition and determination to do such a tough job, and when a few moments earlier her father had said Chia Sheng had 'a man's look', it made her extremely happy.

On the other hand, she thought of the sadness in her father's words about the family. He was such a kind man, she could not

understand how the situation could have come about—as it had—to cause him to speak with such bitterness. Looking far back into her memory, the family had been harmonious and sweet. She could see it all, as it was in those times. When she was only four, a very little girl, her parents were an affectionate couple. In her mind she could never forget those times. One day she specially remembered.

"I was four years old that day," she thought to herself as she tended the lunch—she kept a diary, and often thought to herself in the first person—"and Father was holding my hand, and Mother was holding Ee Lan's, we all went to the Cathay cinema. That day they were showing a Western shadow-picture, and in those times I could not understand the story of a picture. I was not even interested in looking at it. So I was running here and there, and my Papa chased me and carried me back to our seats, and Mother gave me a big slap, and I cried. Papa pointed out the screen to me, and told me to look at it. Just at that very moment, a strong man walked towards a golden-haired girl, held her tight, and kissed her. I saw that girl bullied by that man, and no one came to help her. I looked at this for some time, and then the man and the girl had gone, and I wasn't interested in looking at anymore. I fell asleep.

"Towards the end I was shaken awake by Papa. I opened my eyes to look at the screen again, and once more there was that man holding the girl tight and bullying her. Then the theatre doors opened, and we went back.

“When we got home, Ee Lan went straight to bed. I shared a room with her. I changed into pyjamas, sat on the bed, and was thinking. Why should that man so bully that girl, and no one help her? I could not understand it. I thought I would go and ask Papa to explain the shadow-picture to me.

“I had just stepped out from the bedroom door. There in the hall were my father and mother holding each other tight, just as in the picture, mouth to mouth. It made me jump. I shrank back, quickly climbed up on to the bed, and went to sleep next to Ee Lan.

“Next day I woke up very early. I ran to Papa, and asked, ‘Papa, last night, in that picture, why did that man bully that girl; and he held her so tight, and their mouths were touching.’

“Father, hearing this, said slowly and gently, ‘Because they were good friends, loving each other. He was not bullying her.’ With this he lifted me up in his arms, and kissed me on the forehead. ‘This shows how Papa loves you,’ he said.

“I laughed. ‘But they were so big,’ I protested, ‘and they were not like you kissing my forehead.’

“‘Hsiang Lan,’ he replied, ‘you are still young. When you grow up, you’ll understand.’”

Thinking of it, she laughed aloud, facing only the cooking pots and dishes.

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