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The Gymnast

Like any mother, I was initially pleased by Quan's development. A baby stands for the first time, we applaud. We are proud. Quan, of course, was upright very early; at five months she was balanced on sturdy legs, holding the edge of a chair. A month later she was walking. That was when I began to worry.

I recalled my mother's descriptions of my own infancy: I, too, had crawled, walked, and run precociously. We are gifted women. My own talents had been both a burden and a curse. At two and a half I could do a cartwheel and swing with alternating hands from bar to bar on the playground apparatus. Other mothers would praise my mother for her good luck; my athletic prowess almost made up for the fact that I was born female. At three I could do a backbend kickover, frontward and backward walkovers, and four consecutive forward rolls. I was introduced to the uneven bars, the beam, the mat, and the vault that year, joining a class of girls three years older than I. Within a month I was the best in our gym. I won my first invitational meet when I was four. My prize: a bouquet of peonies, some chalk, and a coupon from a state bookstore. Our neighborhood work unit newsletter came and wrote a story about me, quoting my mother as saying, "In today's China, a girl can dream to become anything she wants," which didn't sound like my mother at all.

I don't remember when the visits started, the short, stout men in Western-style clothes who would sit down with my mother, ostensibly to talk about me but actually appraising her, asking how tall my father and grandmother were, trying to predict from this data my eventual height. They would leave us with vouchers that we could exchange at state stores for extra kilograms of pork and chicken. These men would also show up at the gym—we practiced in the out-of-bounds area of a basketball court, the space jammed with mats and equipment. We used to move each apparatus into place when we switched routines, the instructors lining us up and urging us all to push at the same time, little girls straining against the old wooden and iron vault and bars. After I won another meet, I was allowed to sit out these little press-gangs—the first clear indication to me that I

was different—and I would perch on a chair, where I would retape my hands and ankles for the next exercise. I would find out later that these men who visited us, all of them short, had been gymnasts themselves, Olympians even. They scoured the province for promising athletes. I was at the very top of their list.

What pleased all of them was my combination of athletic ability and discipline. For a five-year-old, I was poised and hardworking. And I believe it is true that we like what we are good at, and so I took to the schedule of leaving school after lunch and riding the bus across the city to the new gym where I would have private instruction for two hours before the rest of the girls arrived. I was promoted so that I was competing against girls five years older than I and still winning most of my events. I had been given more perfect tens than any girl in the history of our city. On the day I achieved this distinction, my mother was given a coupon that entitled us each to a new winter coat from the Springtime department store. I chose a violet parka filled with synthetic feathers.

Later, I would wonder what my mother thought of all this: of why she allowed a very small girl to spend six hours a day doing gymnastics, of how the stress of competition and the pressure to excel would affect a five-year-old. Perhaps if my father had been alive, she would have had the confidence to ask more questions, but as it was, she was grateful for the perks that accompanied my success, and I never complained.

I remember how disappointed everyone was when I had a growth spurt. They urged my mother to feed me less, to deny me the roast pork and sticky rice that I loved. I was to eat millet and summer spinach, and all of us girls were urged to eat a sour combination of tea leaves, mustard greens, and radish that I later found out was intended as a laxative so that we would purge our meals as quickly as possible, gaining vital nutrients but not centimeters. We were to stay tiny.

At that point, because I was competing against much older girls, I didn't notice that I was growing so quickly. Remember, these girls were all diminutive, rows of leotard-wearing dolls with their hair pulled back into tight buns, their arms and legs as thin as celery stalks. But we were measured weekly, our height and weight and the size and radius of our hips, shoulders, arms, legs, and feet all carefully noted.

"Ah, Xiao, how much fat did you eat this week?" the instructor would say as she slid the weights down the scale. "You will break the beam."

I think my mother felt for me then, as she would ladle tiny portions of pork and rice into my bowl and I would be so hungry after six hours at the gym, after a

hundred perfect dismounts and another hundred Level 10s. I would try to eat my food slowly, but it was impossible.

"Chew," my mother would urge.

But I gobbled it down.

We moved to a larger apartment in a new *danwei*, my mother securing a better work unit in the headquarters office of a local truck company. We had a real kitchen with a two-burner stove, a small refrigerator, and our own television. A few other gymnasts from the Dongfeng Motor Works Athletic Club also lived in this building and it was understood that we were all competing against each other but could not say this to one another. I was the youngest and already the most accomplished and I took some pride in this, refusing to even acknowledge the girls who I knew had already aged out of having any chance of a call up to junior nationals. I was careful to be polite to those girls who I saw as rivals. My mother and I had studied my competition and knew each of their weaknesses: This girl was bad on floor, this one unsteady on beam. None of them were any threat to me in all-around, though there were a few who were strong in specific exercises. That advantage, I knew, would erode with age. Girls became better on bar, for example, as they grew older and developed more upper arm strength. So I knew that while one or two girls might be a little better at one or two events, none of them were three years better than I.

Older girls, even girls as old as fourteen, sometimes remained in the *danwei* even though they were no longer competing for the athletic club. But eventually the girls and their families would be asked to leave so that new, promising girls could move in and join the team. I watched these families go, plastic suitcases stuffed with clothes and wrapped with elastic belts. I know my mother watched them and shuddered; she did not want to leave.

It was winter when I was called up to junior nationals. It wasn't the men in the suits who came to tell me, it was my mother, who rushed to the gym in her new leather and rabbit fur overcoat. I was practicing a forward kickover to salto to dismount from the beam, a complicated move that my coach was making me execute as a sequence at full extension to focus my mind. It was grueling. If I slipped, I fell awkwardly so that it was hard to break my fall and I took the full impact on my ankles and feet. After twenty minutes I was sore. I took a break to chalk my hands, and that's when I saw my mother, beaming, her face pink inside the fur lining of her hood. It was so cold in the gym I could see her breath as she waved me over. I looked at Coach to see if it was all right, and he nodded.

"You've been promoted," she said.

At first I was confused, thinking that I had been elevated yet another age group, which didn't make sense because I was already competing against girls six years older than I and the next highest age group was actually a step down, because it was understood that those girls, already with breasts and womanly hips at fifteen, were washed up.

"Junior nationals!" She was so proud of me. She put her hand on my cheek and held it there.

"Xiao!" I heard my coach shouting.

I ran back to practice and tried not to think about what my mother had said.

For the next five years, I would see my mother for a total of eighteen days.

My body betrayed me. I starved myself, yet I grew. I took the medicines they gave me to delay my menstruation, yet I developed. I eschewed meat, tofu, even seafood, yet I gained. I soon understood too well why when we younger girls were brought into the Complex, the older girls had regarded us with such contempt. It had been fear, I realized, that another class of younger, tinier girls was arriving and with each year, these older girls would find it harder and harder to hide their own size. It is impossible to conceal yourself, not when you are always in skimpy leotards with arms and legs exposed. Your bust is your enemy. Your hips are your enemy. You are hungry and your breath is sour from denying yourself even water because they are weighing today and water makes you heavy, so you are dizzy to the point of passing out and still, you feel shame that you are too big. These new girls, a fresh crop, they possess the gift of diminutiveness. Nothing you can do will make you smaller again. We were all carefully scrutinized, our genealogies appraised, our parents and grandparents questioned, our growth trajectory predicted, but it was inevitable that most of us would grow and so would soon be purged from the Complex. Small girls, with low centers of gravity, short legs, and long arms, performed best. I knew the shape we all yearned for, like a summer wheat cake but with a smaller head. Our bodies betrayed most of us.

So we were hungry every day, suspicious of our associates, homesick for our parents, starved of anything like love, and wary of being cast out, lest our families lose the privileges secured by our presence here. We were the best in our nation, and our nation was preparing for yet another Olympiad, this one in Europe. We had all been transfixed by our nation's performance in the previous Olympiad, in Korea, where our gymnasts had won over the crowds with their unique combination

of childlike adorability and assassin-like execution. I had watched those games with my mother on our new television, and had cried of happiness when our men won a silver medal for team. And our women had been in medal contention throughout. The next day, our coach had told us we should be ashamed of silver, we should never accept silver, that we would win gold from now on. When the Olympians came back, they were heroes at first. But soon I noticed that two of the Olympic girls were now working in the Complex's dressing room, handing us our towels and picking up discarded tape.

When we were competing before audiences composed primarily of schoolchildren, as we walked in our mincing, stiff, toes-folded walk from routine to routine, I would imagine us as these little girls saw us—I say little, but they were almost always bigger than us even though they were younger. We were like beautiful little playthings, toys almost, that you could wind up and make leap, jump, vault, spring, flip, turn. They saw us and believed that we wore bright leotards, lipstick, eye shadow, and sparkle dust all day, preening in front of mirrors until we were told to perform our effortless-seeming tricks. What they could never imagine was the drab hunger of our days. We lived in dormitories, eight girls to a narrow, four-meter-by-two-meter room lined with two bunks on each side. Clotheslines hung at every angle, our hand-washed wraps and leotards drying everywhere. Our rooms were inspected every night, coaches checking for contraband food. If they found so much as a bean cake you were denied rice for three days and had to run eight kilometers; a second infraction and you were sent home. Of course, we knew how to hide our shameful little morsels—honey-tea cough drops and other hard candy were like currency to us. Full of sugar and easy to conceal—in emergencies, we learned how to secure them in our vaginas.

We always knew which girls were on top, which were faltering, which would soon be purged from the Complex. The top girls were not only the best athletes, they were the smartest, toughest, and meanest. When they looked at you it was as if they were looking at your recent scores. They listened to the coaches, gathered in what was useful information, and then went out and applied their knowledge. For me, it was harder; I was gifted, but I struggled to perfect the minutiae of turning each move so that it would score higher—toes had to be curled down and back for the full-turn wolf jump, arms had to be symmetrically swept back on the full Shushunova. My routines, it soon became obvious, would never be as technically virtuosic as the top girls', though my natural athleticism allowed me to stick them.

This imperfection was more glaring because my window was seen to be closing. I was either going to compete in the next Olympics or I was finished. I was disappointingly large, already nearly four foot six, and with the very first development of my breasts, I knew that if I didn't make the national team, then I was out.

I missed my mother. I thought of fleeing the Complex, taking the train home. Here, every time I was touched it was with some purpose: to measure me, to guide me, to position me on beam or bar. No one ever just put a hand to my cheek from fondness or love. I thought often about what would happen if I went home. What would my mother do? Would she send me back?

The other paths open to us, circus performers, members of touring troupes of acrobats, were always mentioned as somehow shameful, the girls who had aged into these professions not good enough for the national team and somehow too impure to represent the people. I came to see them as little more than midget courtesans, sent to please lascivious foreigners.

Soon, we were divided into teams, the top two teams sent on the road, to learn to compete in unfamiliar settings. There were no other girls in the country as talented as we, so these same two teams faced each other in Chengdu, Nanjin, Guangzhou, and Tianjin, the same girls and judges wandering the country in reserved railcars. When we would disembark at a station, forty of us in our white and red sweat suits, the coaches in their white jackets, other travelers would turn and stare at us, occasionally asking if we were going to the Olympics. We were careful then not to show our competitiveness, our suspicion of our teammates, our jealousy of the top girls. We all felt we lived one bad tumbling pass from being sent back home in shame. But as we marshaled on the rail platform, our duffel bags over our shoulders, we seemed as casual and easygoing as young girls anywhere. More so, perhaps, because we were so accustomed to being observed everywhere we went. We marched everywhere according to height, the shortest girls in front and the tallest in the back. I had by now grown so that I was the second to last girl in our procession, and as we marched through the train station I felt embarrassed at my size. I hated my body, my large feet, my thick arms. I felt like a farmer mingling with ballerinas.

My mother wrote me letters, brief notes urging me to try my hardest and to listen to my coaches. As long as I was at the Complex, my mother would be taken care of. The local authorities were so proud of my success, and so desperate to have one of their girls make the national team, that they made sure my mother

lacked for nothing. She even had a telephone and a motor scooter. She told me that a few of the girls in our building had painted a mural of me on the concrete walls, and below it, written, "We are so proud of Xiao!" But I had done the math, knew how many spots remained. There were seventeen spots, and ten seemed already filled by the top girls. That left thirty-three of us competing for seven spots. I knew I wasn't among the top seven remaining girls, and carried around my own disappointing body, too large in the hips, too long in the legs, my center of gravity shifted upward so that I couldn't control my tumbles with the precision required for perfect tens.

I was turning fifteen. My best years as a gymnast were behind me.

I learned to hope despite being without hope. It was an unpleasant self-deception, a dream that something would intervene, would save me, that there would be a paper-work snafu, a scoring error, a wave of sicknesses, and suddenly I would be elevated. But I knew, with each day, that it would take such a miracle. It was a particular kind of crestfall to come up short in the one area where for so long, for a decade, I had always succeeded. Maybe I didn't have the character: I didn't induce myself to vomit the night before weigh-ins. I never swallowed the pink and white tablets that some girls ate so that they would stay energetic through six-hour practice sessions. We all had to take the medication that was supposed to delay puberty; they measured our hands, they X-rayed our palms to see the size and development of our tubular bones and epiphyseal plates. There was nothing more shameful than menstruation. When it happened to a girl, if she wasn't already on nationals, then you knew she was finished.

I don't know why but one morning, when my pills were handed to me, I popped them into my mouth, swigged a glass of water, and then went to the bathroom and spit the tablets into my hand. I threw them down into the slit toilet, careful to make sure they couldn't be found. I never took the pills again.

I noticed the blood on my bed a few mornings later. My roommates heard my laughter and when they saw why, they became frightened and quickly gathered their wraps and duffels and scurried out. I don't know who I was waiting for, but I imagined that someone would come for an inspection and I would be sent from the Complex. But no one came and no one mentioned it until a few days later, when I was called to a meeting of the senior coaches, where a female coach named Dao who rarely spoke to us told me that the people were proud of my efforts and what I had accomplished, but that my service to the people was finished for now. Oh, I would still serve the people, but not as a gymnast.

"If not as a gymnast, then as what?" I asked.

"In today's China, a girl can dream to become anything she wants."

Of course, I had seen this day coming, but I hadn't correctly predicted how ashamed I would be. I had only imagined leaving the Complex, not what I would do, where I would go. I decided to go home. But when I was at the station, the ticket back to our city in my hand, I changed my mind. I didn't want to face my mother. Instead, I cashed in my train ticket, paid a few *kwai* extra, and bought a ticket for Shanghai.

I told myself I would go home in a few days. I had never been on my own before; in fact, for the last ten years I had never gone more than eighteen hours without being in a leotard with wraps and chalk on my hands and ankles, hadn't gone anywhere in street clothes since arriving at the Complex. I relished for those first few hours the sensation of being one of the crowd. I found in everyone's indifference and self-centeredness a relief after the intense scrutiny of the Complex. My companions in the hard-seat third-class car, smoking their cigarettes, chewing watermelon seeds and spitting the husks, drinking their thermoses of tea, they paid no more mind to each other than they did the gray factories and then skin-colored loesses outside their windows. I relished my invisibility. I was just another girl, small perhaps, but they didn't know my age. I could go anywhere I wanted, I realized, and never have to do another salto or Level 10.

I bought a can of potato chips, a Coca-Cola, and some spicy peanuts from the vendor cart, eating all of it in such a loud outburst of chewing and swallowing that one of my seatmates looked at me, surprised. I smiled back, burped, and he turned away. I would have bought more snacks, emptied the cart of rice cakes and canned porridge and dried squid, but I was already almost out of money and thought I needed to save a few *kwai* for Shanghai.

It was when I was in the city, walking through Huangpu, along Nanjing Road, past the new cultural museum and the fancy Japanese department stores and coffee shops, wending between the masses of pedestrians and bicycles, the taxis and lorries, that I began to feel terribly lonely. I didn't expect I would miss the girls at the Complex. But at various times that first day, I found myself imagining what they were doing that moment: lining up for weigh-in or walking through their tumbling passes to the accompanying music while the coaches clapped the rhythm, trying to block the routine to precisely forty-five seconds and show the required flourish and joy. (We had been accused, in the last Olympiad, of being

too mechanical, robotic, and every coach at the Complex was grimly working to ensure we appear joyful.) I saw a poster of the national team tacked up inside a glass newspaper case, most of them girls I knew, and thought warmly of even the most cruel of my former colleagues. I actually imagined seeing them on the street, here, in front of Suzhou Creek, and how we would embrace and I would be allowed to rejoin the team.

This was all nonsense, of course, just the daydreams of a lonely, frightened girl.

I slept that first night in a park near the river. The benches were occupied, so I lay down on the pavement near a tallow tree, my head on my duffel bag and my knees folded, the soles of my feet flat against the pavement. There was a steady procession of pedestrians for most of the evening, and even a few fishermen casting lines in the muddy water. A band of raggedy orphans kept going from promenading couple to couple, begging for money. They spoke among themselves in a dialect I couldn't understand, a language rich in harsh consonants and phlegmy sounds. The leader seemed to be the second tallest boy, a buzz-cut teenager wearing a relatively new collarless cotton jacket who smoked cigarettes in between begging excursions. I watched them with interest, trying to calculate how much money they made, but couldn't keep track, and after a while, the gang wandered off, shouting loudly to each other. After midnight, the crowd thinned so that my only company were a few drunks and an occasional bicyclist. I suppose years of training had given me great confidence in my strength; I was not afraid sleeping outdoors for the first time. Years later, sleeping rough like this would be a more terrifying prospect: Our nation has become more dangerous as it has become wealthier. Back then, most people minded their own business, paying no more attention to me than they would any orphan or street kid. But it was impossible to get more than a few minutes' rest; the streetlight's flickering was distracting, and when that shut off for the night, the darkness finally made me nervous and I gathered my duffel and started walking again, back to Nanjing Road where I decided I would spend the last of my money on a bowl of congee and some tea. It was cruel that after years of denying myself treats and snacks, here I was, wandering through a city where virtually every type of delicacy was available and I had no weigh-in to worry about or coach to please, yet I couldn't eat as much as I liked because I had no money.

After my small meal, I wandered back down the main avenue, to the new plaza in front of the art museum. Morning light was now washing down the still sparsely

trafficked boulevard, a few bicyclists and pedestrians casting blue gray shadows. Sleepy-looking men and women in padded jackets were emerging from the metro entrance, lugging bulky packages and overstuffed baskets. At some predetermined patch of concrete, they set down their loads to set up tables and unpack their goods. I slid to the pavement near the smooth concrete walls of the subway stairwell, my back on the cold cement, and lay my head against my duffel and dozed. By the time I woke up, the plaza was crowded again with tour groups making their way into the art museum, cotton-jacket-clad civil servants waiting in line behind placard-bearing tour guides dressed in blue pantsuits and caps. Pedestrians were threading their way between these groups, and in the center of the square, crowds had gathered where the merchants had set up little stalls selling fresh vegetables, sweet rolls, and fried dough, sharpening knives, repairing shoes, copying keys, reading letters and official documents for the illiterate, and writing the responses to them. I walked amidst this little market for a while, listening to the different accents, the Uighur, the Miao, the Fukkinese, trying to understand what I could.

Then I saw a beautiful boy, dressed in T-shirt and red shorts, flying above the crowd for a few seconds, his form a perfect arabesque into tuck, his expression focused and determined. He reached the same elevation as the muscular bronze statue of a man wielding a hammer, and then descended. He had sharp features, wide fish-shaped eyes, and narrow lips pouted in concentration. I was drawn to him as anyone is to what is familiar. He was a gymnast, I was certain, and a crowd had formed around him. I crouched and fought my way between legs and around hips until I saw the troupe of acrobats performing on a straw mat, the crowd watching in silence. The boys all wore the same pristine clothing, the T-shirts and shorts, but only two of them seemed to me to be properly trained, their handstands steady and straight, toes pointed, their tumbles as automatic and natural as the roll of a wheel on an axle. Even their walk, the way their feet touched the ground toes first, even on this pavement, reminded me of where I had been. There was the boy I had seen soaring over the crowd, who seemed to be the star of the show and who would perform the climax by leaping from a two-standing-atop-three pyramid formed by five of his colleagues into a double backflip and sticking it without wincing, the straw mat providing barely any break to his fall. I could only imagine the damage he was doing to his feet and ankles.

The crowd, which had grown considerably since I had stopped to watch, burst into applause, and then a man I hadn't noticed before, short, body like a former gymnast, suddenly appeared, placing cardboard boxes in the front and back of the

circle, and imprecated the crowd to donate a few *kwai* to help the boys, who were still taking their bows. Most of the crowd immediately turned away, but a few stepped forward to donate. The short man thanked them profusely while the boys gathered in the shadow of the statue, where they passed around a plastic jug of water. Only the lead boy, the soaring boy, sat down and rubbed his feet and undid his wraps. I could see now that he was not really a boy at all, but a young man, thick in the chest and upper arms and thighs, possessed of a man's strength.

I spent the day there in the plaza next to the museum, where I saw the boys do two more performances. I was used to denying myself food, but I now found myself as hungry as I could remember being, perhaps because I didn't have the medications anymore, the appetite suppression tablets. I finally summoned up the courage to say hello to the performers in the late afternoon, when they cleared up their straw mats and began eating rice and vegetables from Styrofoam containers. I didn't know who to address, so I spoke with the short man in street clothes who seemed to be the manager. He had black hair bluntly cut around his face and rising to a slight cowlick at the back of his scalp. His eyes were wide and round, and I wondered if he was some sort of minority himself. His nose was small, his lips, which he frequently grimaced when he was thinking, as he was now, thin and lost in his fleshy cheeks. He had that slightly gone-to-seed quality that some coaches have. Fit, but used to be fitter, the body carrying with it some air of better days.

"Do you do this every day?" I asked.

He nodded.

"I'm a gymnast," I said.

He looked me up and down. Perhaps he spotted something.

"Where do you train?"

I told him that I had been at the Complex.

A few of the boys, overhearing us, became quiet.

"What's your name?" he asked.

I told him.

He nodded. "I've heard of you."

Though I had never been among the top girls, I had been competing regularly at the provincial and national levels for the last five years. We were a small community; most of the athletes knew of each other.

"What are you doing here?"

"I've been sent home," I said.

"You don't have a Shanghai accent." He then seemed to notice my duffel bag for the first time.

"I'm not from here."

"How do I know you are who you say you are?" he asked.

Without hesitation, I set down my bag and, after waiting a few seconds for an opening between pedestrians, launched into a full tumbling pass, front flip, then triple front, turned, swung my arms up and out, smiled to the boys as if they were judges, and did a return pass to roundoff back handspring, back handspring, rebound, and stuck my landing. On concrete. In my street clothes and plimsolls. It was virtuosic. A tour group was gaping at me with their hands over their mouths. Performing in front of crowds didn't unnerve me. I had been trained well.

The boys had all stopped eating.

He asked me where I was staying. I told him I had nowhere and he said I could stay with him. I asked where the team stayed and he said that most of them still lived with their parents. Zhao, the best boy, the boy who had first caught my eye, lived on his own in a small apartment.

"I'm Li," he said. Then he told me he had trained with the men's national team until he was fifteen. He had been injured, badly torn cartilage in both knees. He'd undergone a botched surgery at sixteen, and worked at the men's Complex for a year before being sent home.

We rode the metro two stops, Li paid for me, and as the rest of the boys peeled off to go to their respective homes, each taking with him a share of their earnings, I found myself becoming nervous. I was by now dizzy from hunger, but this anxiousness was different. Our lives had been so sheltered at the Complex that this was the first time I had walked alone with a man in my entire life. I didn't know how to talk and had to resist the impulse to perform some sort of roundoff or kickover, to communicate with movement rather than words.

In his two-room apartment in a subdivided French Concession house with brown mold creeping up the stone walls, Li made us rice, tofu, shredded cabbage, and peppers, and even added a few grams of ground pork. It was delicious, and we washed it down with an earthy tea that Li said came from his village. While we were eating, he asked me questions about my routines, what I could do, at one point taking out a notebook and writing down my answers.

"Tomorrow," he said, "you'll do the middle part of the show. We'll give Zhao a break and have you do floor."

I didn't realize it then, but I had joined his team.

Li unfolded a foam pad so that I would be sleeping with my legs and feet in the kitchen. I was anticipating that Li would try to have intercourse with me, but he showed no interest in me that way, which I found both a relief and a little disappointing. The whole day had been so exciting and confusing that I didn't understand what I wanted or didn't want. I was not afraid, was merely nervous. He asked me if I had my period yet. I reluctantly told him yes, worried that he would cast me out as my coaches had. He just nodded.

We moved around the city, from the art museum to the train station to the Bund and even out to Pudong. After a few days I got the hang of doing the leaps onto hard concrete from atop the shoulders of my teammates. Occasionally, the police or security guards would ask us for lucky money and Li would quickly hand over whatever we had. Those days, we would skip dinner and he would send the boys home early, promising that tomorrow we would make even more.

I didn't speak to the boys very much. I saw Zhao as my competitor, and the rest of the boys as just strong bodies who did the lifting, the occasional cartwheel on or off the mat. Zhao told me he was twenty-four, which I found unfathomably old. He had performed in the Asian Games and had traveled to Europe as part of an acrobat troupe before he had his passport confiscated. He dreamed of going abroad again, of finding work in another troupe and getting away from China. He was the hardest working and most talented of the boys, but he was so grim about his gymnastics that I wondered what pleasure he took in it anymore. It was all a job to him, while for me, it had never been a job, it had been a life. What we were doing now? These little tumbles and flips for tourists? This was a joke.

Zhao probably felt the same way about me as I felt about him. As I said, we were competitors. Zhao and Li had known each other since their time together on the national team. They weren't friends, but I sensed that they had once been much closer than they were today. They had even lived together at one point. Now they coexisted for practical reasons. Neither man had a *hukou* for Shanghai, and so the only commercial avenue open to them was either manual labor or street acrobatics. Zhao did everything apart from the rest of us; he ate his own meals, drank from his own jug of water, even walked apart from us when we were finished for the day. If we had both been females, then we would have had a real rivalry going, but as it was, because I was the only girl, the spectators seemed more willing to give during my routines than his. But it was Zhao who did the hardest work, the leaps, spins, and vaults that were so punishing on the body.

"How did we do?" he would ask Li as he untaped his hands.

"Better than average," Li would respond, shuffling through the tattered green and red currency. He would always give Zhao his cut first.

I became friends with Li: He was the first male I had ever spoken to about any subject other than gymnastics. I asked him why he didn't go back to his village; he asked, "Why didn't you go back to yours?" We listened to the radio, to the new love songs from Taiwan that were becoming popular, especially the one about a boy who comes to the city in pursuit of his love, only to find she has taken up with a rich and powerful man. The song ended with the boy returning to Gaoxiong, but it hinted darkly that he would kill himself. We argued about whether such a thing would happen, would a boy kill himself over a girl. I found the notion preposterous, but Li told me, in a serious tone, that it was true.

He said he had once been so in love that he thought about killing himself.

I didn't know anything about love. I had once loved my mother, but now I felt just a memory of that love. I had been without her for so long that I no longer needed her. I sometimes thought about her, back in her apartment with her television and washing machine, or had they moved her to another *danwei*? Had I disappointed her yet again? Was my failing pulling down even my mother? I was too frightened to find out.

"Do you miss your mother?" Li had asked me early one evening as we were walking to the corner where the noodle maker had set up a television in front of his shop. Most evenings, we gathered there with a few neighbors to watch the Barcelona Olympics. I didn't tell any of the spectators around us that I knew the girls performing in the gymnastics competition.

I said I did miss her when I actually didn't. "Do you miss anyone?" I asked.

Li nodded. "Zhao."

I laughed because he had just seen Zhao a few hours ago. How could he miss him? But then I saw that he was serious, that his expression was pained. Then I understood: They had once been lovers. This was the hurt that Li carried around with him. I then began to hate Zhao, for he was both my competitor and had hurt my only friend.

We were all rapt as we watched the Olympiad. Our nation had taken its place among the athletic elite and we were infected by a kind of childish patriotism. Even I cheered for our girls. But it was strange that I didn't feel more disappointed that I wasn't among the nine girls who were becoming national heroes. There were posters of them on the walls and even a new pop song about the "beautiful spry

stars." What I thought as I watched them was, Why? Why did their mothers give their daughters away?

If Li had to make a call he went down to a storefront that had five phone booths with a chair and plywood table in each. This same storefront took messages for him. It was upon returning one of these messages that Li found out the Southern China Acrobatics Revue wanted to see Zhao perform, but in a gymnasium, not on straw mats. The revue had seen old videotape of Zhao and wondered if he had kept fit.

Li told me that this could win Zhao a new passport, another trip abroad.

"I want to audition too!" I blurted out.

Li looked at me and smiled. He couldn't afford to lose both me and Zhao. He shook his head. "One or the other, not both."

For the first time, I became angry with Li. I refused to go and watch the Olympic closing ceremony with him, and during the day, I performed my floor routine with a sullen pout on my face that cost us a few hundred *kwai* in lost tips.

"Look," I threatened him, "if you don't let me audition, then I'll just go home to my mother."

He would smile. "You'll never go home."

"I will."

But he wouldn't budge.

I was surprised by my competitive spirit. Apparently, it could not be extinguished. I had spent so much of my life preparing psychologically and physically for meets that I couldn't break the habit. I wanted to be the best, even as a homeless sixteen-year-old sleeping on a cot in a failed gymnast's flat. Yet I no longer had any avenue in which to try to be the best. Among these Nangpo Stars, I would always shine, but what was that worth? I now hated my mother all over again, for making me this way, for making me driven and judgmental and able to see exactly where and how I rated. It had been the great disappointment of my life, I now had to accept, to have been asked to leave the Complex. Though I had plainly seen I was not among the top girls, I was very good, perhaps even a little bit great. I saw those girls, felt their coldness, could sense their calculating minds and rigid discipline. I had assumed, during my time at the Complex, that I wasn't like them. But now, now that I was among regular people with normal drives and ambitions, I saw that I was more like those top girls than I had previously admitted. I wanted to be the best, but at what?

As I watched Zhao go through his motions, I found myself noticing ever more flaws and imperfections in his handstands and tumbles. He was an above-average gymnast, that's all. Why should I be denied the same chance he was getting?

I was standing by the metro wall, back at the art museum again, taking my break after my floor routine while Zhao did his leaps and aerial arabesques. His landing didn't look that awkward at first, but I saw something in the way he rebounded that told me he had injured himself.

I am so cruel that I had to restrain myself from smiling.

I turned to Li. "Okay?"

"What?" he asked.

"Zhao is hurt," I told him. "Let me audition."

Li looked at me strangely, then looked back to Zhao. He couldn't see it. But I already could.

Li surprised me when he said we could both go. Zhao knew he didn't have a chance with his ankle sprain. The ankle was swollen to twice its usual size, and he winced as he walked. We met in a local sports-club gymnasium with rickety apparatus and worn-thin mats. The manager of the revue immediately appeared interested when he heard my name and background. He leaned forward during my floor routine, my bars, my vault. I hadn't worked on these apparatus in months but after a few practice routines, and by avoiding the most difficult combinations, I was able to recover enough of my old form to win them over. Then the manager surprised me by adding that he wished I had a bigger bust, larger hips, that the leading ladies in his revue needed to be more womanly, rather than less.

"I can eat more," I promised, "I can be more womanly."

How old was I? he asked.

I lied and told him I was eighteen.

He called Li over and the two of them spoke quietly for a few minutes before Li came back to me and said, "He likes you."

Zhao sat on a wooden bench, unwrapping tape from his ankles. And I saw that he was familiar with this feeling of defeat.

We stayed in a crowded apartment in the tenth arrondissement, six girls, two to a room. That first night, I gazed out the window at the Vietnamese restaurant across the street and observed the pedestrians. There were several men with turbans, a few woman in jellabas, Africans even blacker than the Nigerians I had seen in

Shanghai, and plenty of Asians. I was disappointed by the absence of French-looking people. I expected blond hair, blue eyes, long noses. But when I asked my roommate, a Cantonese girl who spoke strangely accented Mandarin, where all the French people were, she sighed and continued flipping through her Hong Kong movie star magazine.

She had already told me not to act like I was so special because I had been at the Complex. She made a point of saying that she could have trained there as well, but her parents didn't want to send her so far away when she was so young, so she had studied at a local gym instead. Don't think that this is like doing a floor routine or a salto on beam, she would warn me. This is entertainment.

I shrugged. This was already feeling familiar to my old life: catty teammates, competition for primacy of place, and unspoken jealousy of the girls who were the stars of the show, the beautiful girls in spangled thong, tasseled bra, and glittered hair who appeared on the marquee.

We had spent just four days in Shanghai learning a series of tumbles and trampoline moves, all of which were easier than their equivalent in competitive gymnastics, the triple front on trampoline being an idiot's version of the actual move on mat, the leap to land on your partner's shoulders much easier than sticking your vault. In these kinds of acrobatics, all that mattered was completing the move. There was no scoring, no deductions for a slip or untucked arm.

Mr. Jun worked with me for a day or two before turning me over to one of his coaches. The act was divided into three parts: tumbling and floor, trapeze, and rope. The new skills I had to learn consisted of performing various contortions on a taut rope, and also of wrapping myself around a thick silk ribbon that hung from a ceiling and using it as a kind of fulcrum for a series of twists and balletlike poses. It all looked much harder than it really was, and Mr. Jun had known from watching me try out that I had the strength and dexterity to master these circus-like acts.

I believed I had lucked into a great opportunity. I would be able to travel, to support myself, and my competitive spirit could again thrive at the prospect of taking on these other girls and establishing myself as the top girl. I had failed to do so at the Complex, but I had learned a great deal about myself and my self-discipline. I would not make these mistakes again.

I found out the day we were leaving for France that we were to perform topless.

* * *

There were two shows a night, both in a nightclub in Pigalle, just down the block from the Crazy Horse. Busloads of German and Dutch tourists were deposited in front of the marquee bearing the provocative photos of two of the girls both hanging from the twisted silk cord. The stage was round, with the audience seated at cabaret tables surrounding the performers. Before our act began, the theatergoers were cajoled into buying expensive bottles of sparkling wine while they sat through a revue of high-kicking, topless Eastern European women. I never understood why our audiences were comprised equally of men and women. Or, for that matter, why so many people were so eager to see third-rate gymnastics performed by small-breasted women.

I have to admit that when I was told we would be exposing ourselves, I was more puzzled than upset. Why would anyone want to see my breasts? They had been a source of embarrassment at the Complex and no man had ever taken much interest in them. But if that was what they wanted then that was acceptable to me. The revue was providing me with a small salary, passport, plane ticket, and two pairs of new blue jeans to wear on the plane and when I arrived in Paris.

That first night, I watched from the back of the hall, near the curtained entrance. There were six girls in the troupe, four of us Chinese, one Korean, and one American Chinese girl. The star of the show was a Chinese girl. Mae had been at the Complex a few years before me and had briefly made the national team but had never performed in an Olympiad. She had large and round breasts that passed along their centrifugal force to her tassels as she performed her tumbling passes, and these same breasts fell toward her shoulders as she hung upside down from the silk rope. She had surprisingly thin legs for how athletic she was, and that combination, slender yet stronger than almost anyone in the room, made her a powerful and exciting performer. She could slide up and down the rope effortlessly, suspend herself horizontally or vertically, and even dismount to a double back.

The men wore black leotards and served primarily to lift, throw, and catch the girls, taking center stage themselves for a series of strength contortions and extensions, similar to the more traditional moves they would do on the pommel horse.

I fell into the routine of the show easily, my tumbling pass to double front to landing on the shoulders of one of the male teammates and my rope routines which were not nearly as demanding as they looked. I had enough time to spend my days exploring the city if I had any money or could speak any French. As it was, I couldn't even say hello or order a cup of tea. Still, the other girls showed me

where the Laundromat was, how to ride the metro to Pigalle, where we could buy rice, cabbage, soy sauce, and chilies. I took to wandering around Pigalle before our show, climbing the steep stairs to Montmartre, watching the African sellers of mechanical birds and handbags made in China. I couldn't talk to anyone, but one day, I fell in with a group of Taiwanese tourists and listened to their guide explain the history of the church and the neighborhood. The nuns here had once made wine, I learned, and then many artists had convened in the surrounding quarter. How exciting the guide made it all seem! I wished I could speak with the people I was passing on the street.

We were always too tired in the evenings after the shows to do anything but return to our hotel and sleep. In the mornings, we would eat congee prepared with the electric kettle and then run our errands, pick up laundry, shop. A few of the girls would write letters home. Mae, the star of the show, even had a boyfriend, a cute Chinese boy who worked in a restaurant and brought her flowers and pastries. She would order her roommate to vacate for an hour so she could have intercourse with him. I was jealous of the two of them. We were paid a thousand francs every two weeks, with money deducted when we needed new underwear or tape or leggings, and I would take my meager salary and go to a café and sit and watch people, imagining that someone would take a fancy to me and then I, too, could have intercourse. But the language barrier seemed too great. Occasionally, a Frenchman would say hello to me and I would smile back, too embarrassed to put my mouth around these foreign words, though by now I knew a few of them.

The revue was regularly purging old members and importing new ones. Boys would become homesick and return to China or fall in love with a visiting tourist and return with her to the Netherlands or Czech Republic. Girls would meet a Spanish or African boy and take up with him. Mr. Jun had no choice but to keep up his regular journeys to China to audition new boys and girls. He had made the mistake in the past of bringing over boys and girls who he hadn't seen before—hence his rigorous auditions, his careful screening of talent so that he didn't end up with a gimpy acrobat.

I was surprised to see Zhao again but for some reason not entirely disappointed. He arrived after I'd been there a few months and I had settled into the routine of the revue, the two shows a night, the close quarters, my gradual rise up the billing so that I was now promised a place on the marquee. (Though Mr. Jun made the point of telling us that these *gweilo* couldn't tell one Chinese girl from another.)

It was strange, but after being rivals back in Shanghai, Zhao and I were suddenly fond of each other. As if we were close friends reunited. The first night he was there, I took him to a cheap restaurant where they had a hot pot dish with real *huajiao* peppercorns. He told me that Li had been paid a three-thousand-*kwai* bonus by Mr. Jun for finding me. Li had bought himself a mobile phone. Zhao's injury had prevented him from appearing in the Stars anymore, forcing Li to find another boy, younger, not as talented, but able to learn.

Zhao had moved back in with Li after I left. Li nursed Zhao's injury, and when Zhao was fully recovered, he auditioned for Mr. Jun again.

"I was accepted," he said with a smile as we drank beer to cool the hot numbness of the peppers.

Walking back from the restaurant, we bumped playfully into each other, and at one point, he ran up a bus station bench and did a full front onto the pavement, I followed him, and then we both did forward kickovers, then roundoffs, and then we walked on our hands for an entire block, shouting to each other in Chinese as pedestrians laughed and applauded. I joked that we should put out a bucket.

When we returned to my hotel room, my roommate was out and Zhao made us tea in the electric kettle and I opened up some butter biscuits and strawberry jam. We ate the biscuits and preserves seated on my bed and when Zhao kissed me, I fully expected it, but I still had to ask the question.

"I thought you liked men," I said.

He shrugged. "Sometimes."

I nodded and kissed him again, so excited was I by the physical proximity, the sensation of another person's skin against my lips, the liberty that I could take in exploring his muscular chest and arms. All of these feelings were both novel and exciting but also reassuring, as if my body had been craving this kind of contact, his desire and exploration of my body socketing my desire. This was the first time a man had touched me who wasn't attempting to improve my gymnastics, the first time anyone had touched me this tenderly since my mother those many years ago.

This was also my first intercourse.

Zhao took his place in the revue as one of the men in black and silver leotards and black masks who caught the women, tossed us about, and did their own rope sequence to kill time before we emerged topless and in tassels. I became very fond of him, and imagined us staying together as a couple; I saw him as my first boyfriend, my first love. Zhao's first few evenings in Paris were spent in my company,

talking about Li, about the Nangpo Stars, about the revue and the rest of the cast. I massaged his ankle and provided ice for him when he was sore after a show. We never spoke about our feelings, and I did notice that he ignored me when we were with our fellow cast members, but I knew very little about men and took all of Zhao's behavior to be my introduction to love.

I now believe I confused the temporary cessation of my loneliness for more than it was.

Should I have been surprised when he took up with another male, a half-French, half-Chinese boy whose language abilities made him a good partner? Zhao never told me he didn't want to have intercourse with me anymore. He simply stopped talking to me. After the great fondness of our first days and nights together it was very difficult to go back to being alone. What had changed? I wondered. My Cantonese roommate mocked me for having fallen for a homosexual. She said the men in the revue were all that way. I tried to act as if her comments didn't hurt me, that Zhao's losing interest in me didn't sadden me. It was difficult maintaining my spirit in the company of the other girls in the revue, and my performances were beginning to become less focused around the same time I noticed I had stopped getting my period.

I knew enough to know what this meant and told Mr. Jun I wanted a pregnancy test, which he purchased for me and made me take in the hotel bathroom while he waited outside the door. Two pastel pink lines meant I would have a baby.

Mr. Jun showed me my employment contract, my promise not to become pregnant during my membership in the revue. He explained that I would be sent home.

Where was that?

I had my baby back in my provincial city, in my mother's small apartment. She didn't seem interested in my little Quan until she saw she was as gifted as I. Another natural gymnast, another chance.

I was observing my daughter at the playground, watching as she propelled herself in simian fashion along the monkey bars. She hung by one curved arm for an extended period and gazed at me with a big smile on her face, anticipating my praise. Children delight in what they are good at, and little Quan was no exception. She swung back and forth, alternating hands, and finally kicked her feet up so that she was hanging with her knees pivoting around the metal bar. I helped her down and she immediately scrambled back up, somehow snaking her way up

the pole to reach the too-high first crossbar. Other parents couldn't help but gaze at her and another mother even asked me the name of my daughter's teacher.

My daughter made her way over to a low hanging pull-up bar, where she was managing a rudimentary back uprise by herself. I had never seen a child—other than myself—younger than five do this.

I had taken my seat on a bench when I saw a brick that had loosened from the path around the playground. I gathered the brick and put it in my shopping basket.

My baby would wail horribly when I smashed her calf with the brick. She would never do a roundoff in her life. Why had I done this? she would ask if she already had words, looking up at me with uncomprehending eyes thick with tears. Why?

To save you, I would tell her even though she would never understand, to save you.